

**Roland Barthes, 1947-1960: Journalism, sociology  
and the popular theatre.**

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This thesis situates the writings of Roland Barthes in the immediate postwar period. Whilst Barthes's thought has generally been appreciated for its theoretical innovations, this study identifies the historical and cultural influences behind his theories. His first permanent job in 1960, at the age of forty-five, ended a decade of career and financial uncertainties, during which he had been, above all, a journalist. His most famous book, *Mythologies*, consists of articles which were originally part of a monthly column appearing in the left-wing journal *Les Lettres nouvelles* between 1954 and 1956; this column helped to inflect the journal's attitude towards events such as decolonization. At the same time, he was active in the popular theatre movement, writing for *Théâtre populaire* and defending Brechtian theatre. Barthes was also a pioneer of analytical tools in the social sciences. An avid reader of Michelet's attempts to 'resurrect' those who had been excluded by traditional historical narratives, Barthes valued the new history-writing of the *Annales*. He suggested a historical materialist analysis which, underlining the voluntarist nature of history, tried to resolve two historiographical dilemmas. Firstly, how could historical representation incorporate both continuity and change? Secondly, could a scientific, objective description of reality be reconciled with its partisan, subjective explanation? Undermining his earlier voluntarist view of history, the first dilemma was resolved by semiology: change and continuity were reconciled by showing forms functioning in a system. In the second the committed sociologist and critic could use the 'dialectique d'amour' to denounce and explain the alienation caused by bourgeois myths. However, whilst developing his semiological analysis, Barthes also concluded that a representation of both subjective and objective reality led to the exclusion of the committed critic. Finally, this thesis will suggest how Barthes's experiences and theoretical developments can be linked to his political views in this immediate postwar period.

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## INTRODUCTION

After the recent publication of the first volume of Roland Barthes's *Oeuvres complètes*, Didier Eribon questioned the appropriateness of this publication and asserted that Barthes was, in fact, 'passé'; in an interview for the same Italian newspaper, Umberto Eco suggested that, now that he was dead, Barthes's writing had lost its polemic and he had become 'respectable'.<sup>1</sup>

Such attitudes towards Barthes and his writing do not, however, reflect the reality of contemporary interest in him. The number of colloquia in France and in the Anglo-American world given over, solely, to Barthes is the most immediate example.<sup>2</sup> The spate of books in English on Barthes in the 1990s testify further to the persistence of interest, as does the popularity of his theories within Cultural Studies and Critical Theory.

However, the idea that Barthes has lost his polemical impact still remains. This is due, in part, to the unevenness with which his popularity has grown since his death. For some years in the mid-1980s there was a relative silence around him in the Francophone world. From 1982 to 1986 no book was published in French on Barthes.<sup>3</sup> Though this may be attributed to the dramatic decline in the social and political prominence of the French intellectual during this period, Barthes's standing seemed to suffer more than most.

It was Philippe Roger's important study, published in 1986, which rekindled interest in France.<sup>4</sup> It was as if French writers and publishers wanted to take stock of Barthes's importance or otherwise, waiting patiently to see if the world was interested in Barthesian theories. The Anglophone market for Barthes's ideas provided the response.

Precisely between 1981 and 1985 Barthes became intellectual currency in Britain and the United States. The view that, once dead, Barthes became 'passé' has not at all been reflected in the Anglophone world. During his lifetime, Barthes had been relatively ignored in English-speaking circles.



Philip Thody's (somewhat unfavourable) study in 1977 was the only complete book in English devoted to Barthes before his death. Much had been written on his theories in periodicals and in sections of books. But no-one in the English world, except Thody, had considered him worthy of a complete book before the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

It was not until 1982 that Annette Lavers' account of Barthes' structuralism brought wide attention to his writings, particularly in Britain, as did George Wassermann's introduction in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag's edited translation of Barthes' important writings in 1982 continued the trend.<sup>7</sup> This culminated in Britain in a speedy and significant canonization by Jonathan Culler: Barthes was very quickly a 'Modern Master'.<sup>8</sup> This was followed by the publication of a comprehensive guide to all of Barthes' writings and relevant secondary material.<sup>9</sup> Steven Ungar's important study of Barthes' main concerns and Roland Champagne's appraisal of Barthes' attempt at a literary history quickly followed.<sup>10</sup> This praise was such that Philip Thody's 1977 questioning of the significance of Barthes' theories had to be edited and republished as a less blasé account.<sup>11</sup>

This deluge in the Anglophone world was undoubtedly related to the tardiness with which literary and critical theory entered the academic world, and managed to breach the intellectual 'customs' at Dover. However, this meant that the theoretical brilliance and persuasive argument typical of Barthes' writing took precedence over interest in his own (personal) political trajectory. Barthesian studies' thus ignored the polemical, personal effect of Barthes' activities: his theoretical innovations were considered more important than his own intellectual and political evolution.

The euphoria of liberation wrought by post-structuralism throughout the Eighties on university campuses in both Britain and the United States, a euphoria from which Barthes' standing certainly benefited, has however given way to a more sober and patient account of his writings and theories. This has



led to the publication of a number of important studies by British and Anglophone commentators. Mary Wiseman attempted to summarize Barthes's philosophical enterprise.<sup>12</sup> Michael Moriarty's introduction to Barthes's writing provided a clear account of his critical and theoretical career, broadening knowledge of Barthes's writing to those uninitiated into French and/or literary theory. Almost simultaneously Andrew Brown's study of rhetorical and stylistic figures in Barthes's writing appeared, which saw 'drift' as a central theme and writing strategy.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, these last two books tried to relate Barthes's theoretical innovations to outside political and intellectual influences. As the vogue for denial of the importance of authorial authority swept across literary studies at the end of the Eighties in the Anglophone world, Barthes's theoretical innovations obscured his own intellectual and political genealogy; it was considered inappropriate, if not academically bankrupt, to look for the *origins* of Barthes's ideas.

If this tendency was broken in Anglophone studies tentatively by Moriarty and Brown, in France Louis-Jean Calvet's second book on Barthes was an important event in Barthesian studies. That event was Calvet's biography which helped to shake a tight orthodoxy centred around Barthes's literary executors at Les Éditions du Seuil. As a study of Barthes's life and a tacit assertion of his importance within French intellectual life and critical theory, it risked contemporary critical opprobrium by trying to find the author behind the texts, some of which had tried to deny specifically the significance and authority of all authors.<sup>14</sup>

The orthodoxy which has surrounded Barthesian studies in France has refused to allow Calvet entry. Indeed, Seuil denied Calvet permission to cite directly Barthes's voluminous correspondence. It would require a lengthy study to explain the origins and ironies of the arguments over Barthes's literary and personal estate. In terms of Barthes's popularity and contemporary relevance, it has meant that a gap has appeared between Calvet's account of Barthes's life



and the full truth guarded by the orthodoxy. This has served only to stifle information and debate and, doubtless, to inspire certain critics to consider that very little of interest remains to be said about Barthes. This thesis will set out to fill this gap in Barthesian studies, or at least a small part thereof, by assessing the importance of a part of Barthes's life in relation to his writing.

Calvet's insistence on the relevance of biography to Barthesian studies is necessary to this project.<sup>15</sup> His thorough research has opened up the possibility of placing Barthes's early work within its historical framework. Indeed, as this thesis will attempt to show, Barthes's early career showed him to be fascinated, if not obsessed, by the need to recreate the past, especially the life and 'humeurs' of Jules Michelet. Furthermore, this interest was informed by a methodology dependent on the historical period through which Barthes was living.

In his attempt to objectify Barthes's life, Calvet discovered that a life-long friend, Philippe Rebeyrol, had received a regular correspondence from Barthes, to which he was able to gain access and on which his biography is largely based. This biography confronted, even demystified, the dandy and literary figure which Philippe Roger's 1986 study had tried to impose.<sup>16</sup> Though a linguist influenced by the semiological revolution in France, Calvet moved his interest in Barthes from theory to biography and acknowledged this in his introduction.<sup>17</sup> In so doing, he has pointed to the political, personal and intellectual influences on Barthes hitherto ignored in Barthesian studies.<sup>18</sup>

Calvet's biography has opened up an important area where silence has reigned: the man behind the writing. It is perhaps possible now to suggest important historical and political influences on Barthes's fascination with semiology and structuralism. This aim of this thesis is to do just that .

There is a sense, of course, in which biography contradicts the spirit of Barthes's own theories.<sup>19</sup> However, I have used one of Barthes's own theoretical dilemmas with which to approach the difficult area of biography. In



December 1954, he published his second ‘petite mythologie du mois’ in *Les Lettres nouvelles*. The last of seven studies of recent mythological events, ‘Phénomène ou mythe?’ defended a recent study of Rimbaud by René Etiemble which had been criticised for concentrating on the poet’s mythological, rather than literary, status. For Barthes, the manner in which Rimbaud was being consumed in 1954 (his ‘mythe’) was infinitely more important than a tiresome account of his poetic genius (Rimbaud as ‘phénomène’). To concentrate on the ‘myth’ of Rimbaud was to place oneself squarely in the contemporary historical moment, to become linked ‘généreusement’ to society, said Barthes.

It is possible, in my opinion, to collapse Barthes’s distinction between a mythical and a ‘phenomenal’ account of a writer from the past, by placing Barthes himself and his writing in history. Thus Barthes was consumed and treated in a particular way during the 1950s (the beginning of his own ‘mythe’), and he was also a ‘phénomène’ who acted on the historical events and theories which emerged in the 1950s. This thesis will aim to ignore post-structuralist biographical critique and establish Barthes’s contemporary theoretical popularity within a politico-intellectual framework. Sunil Khilnani’s recent pioneering study of the political significance of the postwar French intellectual (as epitomized by Sartre and Althusser) has carried on the periodisation of critical intellectual thought and tried to place this within a political framework.<sup>20</sup> Just as his book was not intended as an exposition of their views, but as an account of what these two figures ‘were *doing* in their political arguments’, so this thesis will not set out Barthes’s theories but look at their historical significance.<sup>21</sup>

However, concentrating on Barthes as a product of his age does not mean ignoring his production. My aim is to redress the balance between agency and determination: though constrained by a political and historical juncture, Barthes did indeed effect changes: he had a praxis to accompany his theoretical innovations. His mythological studies contributed to a politicisation of *Les*



*Lettres nouvelles* around a campaign against the Algerian War, a campaign which involved altercations with Jean Paulhan at the rival *Nouvelle nouvelle revue française*; his theatre criticisms and editorials were a considerable influence on a significant polarisation in the popular theatre movement over political and Brechtian theatre; he was crucial in gaining wide dramatic acceptance of Brechtian theatre and theories in France.

Chapter 1 will look at how Barthes can be considered a ‘phenomenon’ of the Fourth Republic; and Chapter 2 will examine the manner in which he was ‘consumed’, treated in a mythical way, following his journalism and publication of selected sections of this in *Mythologies*. When published in 1957, *Mythologies* was the subject of a number of critical and political controversies. If it is one of Barthes’s most-read books today, this is due, in part, to the polemic it raised in 1957; a study of the *reception* of *Mythologies*, itself principally a study of critical practices of the bourgeois press, is part of an account of influences on Barthes’s theoretical developments in this early period. But it also represents an attempt by Barthes to construct a theoretical framework within which to analyse the operations of mythological and ideological control in Western and (particularly) French society. ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’, as a postface, was written *after* the writing of the original essays contained in the first half of the book; what did Barthes do to the original texts in order to prepare the ground for this theoretical conclusion? Which mythological studies were omitted and which were annotated in order for the postface to theorize coherently the ideological data collected? How did the reception of the original mythologies affect his editing decisions in preparing the book for publication?

It was as a journalist that many of Barthes’s theories came to be formulated; up until 1960 his intellectual activity was dominated by his relationship to particular journals and publishers of journals. Despite temporary employment at the ‘Ministère des affaires étrangères’, and two brief periods of



poorly-paid research for the CNRS, Barthes's income, up until his nomination to an academic post, came from writing for journals and newspapers, and sales of books. Furthermore, the three books published in this period, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, *Michelet par lui-même* and *Mythologies* had all, to differing degrees, appeared in journals prior to publication in book form. This applies, above all, to *Mythologies* whose contents were drawn largely from a four-year period of intense journalistic activity for left-wing journals.<sup>22</sup>

This biohistorical approach concentrating on Barthes as a journalist has led me to research an area of his writing and life which has been singularly ignored by biographer and critical theorist alike: the theatre, or, more importantly, the popular theatre.<sup>23</sup> Not only was he a central figure in the running of *Théâtre populaire*, he was also actively contributing to the construction of a radical popular theatre movement. This intense activity in the popular theatre will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The first three chapters of this thesis will thus try to show that Barthes was a typical intellectual of the period in that he considered a left-wing political praxis for the intellectual to be best performed in writing journalism.

A further aim of this thesis is to show the conditions in which Barthes moved from journalist to academic. It is perhaps no coincidence that he ended his regular journalism for *Les Lettres nouvelles* and *Théâtre populaire* and activities in the popular theatre movement just as he gained his post in the sixth section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE) in 1960.

As an intellectual journalist Barthes had an ambivalent relationship to French academic inquiry. Throughout the 1950s he maintained an uneasy relationship with French academic institutions. François Dosse has shown how the early Structuralists in France set themselves up in contrast to the stifling orthodoxy and methodological complacency of the French academic system, typified by the Sorbonne.<sup>24</sup> This scepticism was evident in Barthes's writing of the 1950s, above all in his attitude towards the popular theatre. In his 1954



review of the book *Théâtre et Collectivité* which came from a conference on theatre and leisure, Barthes criticised the ‘allure académique’ of the book, which prevented a real knowledge of the contemporary sociological importance and role of theatre; why, he wondered, having provided an impressive ‘spectroscopie sociale’ of crowds in ancient Greek theatre, could not ‘l’académisme’ provide a similar analysis ‘pour *notre* temps, *notre* société, *nos* théâtres?’.<sup>25</sup> Suggesting a better way of analysing contemporary sociological reality in the theatre, Barthes’s review displayed a strong suspicion of academic institutions. Doubtless, this was related to the abrupt manner in which illness had excluded him from academic success in the thirties and forties; it was also a reflection of his experience of working to build the popular theatre movement, which, though generally funded by the State, was beyond academic control. Barthes reflected this contradictory status in 1955, when, in a report on a conference on the Franco-German novel, held in the Black Forest and attended by French and German novelists, he considered himself, implicitly at least, to be a sociologist, at a time when he was not part of a Sociology department.<sup>26</sup> Barthes’s importance for the new discipline of sociology, pursued to a large extent outside of academic circles, will be treated in Chapter 4. However, it is far beyond the remit of this thesis to study in detail the linguistic and strictly semiological developments in Barthes’s thought in this period.

Yet by the early 1960s Barthes had joined this ‘académisme’; his first full-time post in 1960 was as ‘chef de travaux’ at the VIth section of the EPHE in ‘Sciences économiques et sociales’. Though Pierre Bourdieu has shown how Barthes occupied a marginal position in the French academic institution, he soon became, nevertheless, an important part of it. Two years after his appointment, he became ‘directeur d’études’ in the ‘Sociologie des signes, symboles et représentations’. That Bourdieu’s account of the Picard/Barthes argument stressed the need to understand the different institutions in which the two were working showed that Barthes was at one pole of academic study.<sup>27</sup>



There is a problem, however, with Bourdieu's analysis. His synchronic account of the space and limits of French academics ignores, perhaps inevitably, the diachronic aspect of Barthes's entry and the effect of this on his future positions. Bourdieu noted in the preface to the English edition of *Homo Academicus* that, due to the marginal position of Barthes (and others, such as Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault) in the academic world, such marginal intellectual academic figures had 'strong connections with the intellectual world, and especially with the avant-garde reviews (*Critique*, *Tel Quel*, etc.) and with journalism (especially the *Nouvel-Observateur*)'.<sup>28</sup>

Though undoubtedly correct in relation to Barthes (he continued to publish in such publications throughout his academic career), Bourdieu's assertion paints only half of the picture. If Barthes relied upon non-academic publications throughout his academic career, this was explained not only by his marginalized place in the academy but also by his earlier journalistic career. To see Barthes simply as a minor, but nevertheless integral, part of 'Homo academicus', as Bourdieu does, is to ignore his earlier activities, and to misunderstand the reasons for his subsequent entry into the academic sphere. Thus Barthes relied on non-academic, avant-garde and intellectual journals, throughout the sixties and seventies, precisely because he had been a journalist in the 1950s.

In his haste to set out the relational and structural activities of people in universities, Bourdieu ignores, in the case of Barthes at least, the historical dimension to his academic practices: Barthes the academic was a product of the 1950s intellectual, cultural and political milieu, outside of the academy. The crucial question for a more comprehensive explanation of Barthes's subsequent actions and views is why move from intellectual journalist and popular theatre activist to academic theorist?

Part of this attempt is an explanation of the growth of sociology in the post-war period. Barthes had been an 'attaché de recherche' at the 'Sociologie'



section of the CNRS between 1956 and 1959; François Dosse has noted that in 1960 there were only 56 ‘chercheurs’ in sociology at the CNRS; by 1964 there were 90.<sup>29</sup> If Barthes was part of the 60 or so researchers before the start of the sixties, he was part of the earlier expansion of sociology in France.

The backwardness of sociological thought, particularly in relation to popular culture and popular ideology in France (a subject ignored by the sociologists who did exist) did not mean that no sociological analysis of mass culture had been attempted in France outside of academic institutions. The most famous attempt in France before the War to establish the importance of mass sociology was the ‘Collège de Sociologie’ formed in 1937 out of the collapse of Surrealism by (amongst others) Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris and Pierre Klossowski, and which invited the Hegelian Alexandre Kojève and Jean Paulhan to give lectures. The central aspect of the college was the belief in the importance of the ‘vécu’. Following on from Surrealism, it insisted on the sacred nature of social but also subjective experience, contained in Bataille’s praise of Existentialism.

However, despite his criticism of the ‘milieu académique’ in 1954, academic theories were still an important aspect of Barthes’s interest in the *Annales* and developing a social theory. That he increasingly looked to academic as opposed to political explanations can be seen in his explanation and account of racism. In 1950 he had reviewed and praised highly the anti-racist studies by Marxist libertarian Daniel Guérin and by Michel Leiris, the former for its historical materialist explanation of racism.<sup>30</sup> By 1955, however, these two works by political activists had been replaced in Barthes’s mind by more academic attempts to undermine racial ideology, in the work of Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss and Leroi-Gourhan.<sup>31</sup> In order to establish the manner in which his non-academic sociology became academic, we must look at the origins of Barthes’s sociological thought.

It would be possible to show how his thought developed in parallel to



this school, was part of the ‘historical revolution’ that the *Annales* was leading. François Dosse has characterized the gradual shift of emphasis of the school across the 1950s towards the explanatory predominance of a notion of ‘structure’, the main figure in the school’s development through the 1950s being Fernand Braudel.<sup>32</sup> Braudel’s specific aim was to use the newer sciences to explain social history, to understand gradual change over a long period of time and in relation to structural social realities. Some familiarity with these developments is required to understand Barthes’s ambivalent relationship to the academy.

Indeed, to recontextualize Barthes and his early writings means therefore looking for and suggesting influences. Barthes himself has suggested various stages of influence: in this early period, Sartre, Marx and Brecht.<sup>33</sup> Yet Michelet’s influence on Barthes’s academic career is surprisingly absent from this list.<sup>34</sup> Even his own writing style has been considered Micheletian.<sup>35</sup> Annette Lavers has underlined Barthes’s ‘formalism’ with regard to Michelet, but, though she correctly suggests a rapidly developing formalistic conception of history, her division of form and content does not help us to explain his original interest in Michelet: there must have been a reason why Barthes wanted to ‘resurrect’ the nineteenth-century historian.<sup>36</sup>

Typical of many of his acts of criticism in this period, Barthes’s study of Michelet was modestly called a ‘pré-critique’. A number of critics have tried to relate his study to an interest in phenomenological research.<sup>37</sup> As Culler points out, this misunderstands the importance of Michelet for Barthes (though it would be hard to deny that Barthes’s methodology was similar to other writers in the ‘par lui-même’ series). Culler has stressed Barthes’s interest in explaining the body as culturally constructed, rather than natural; whilst this gets away from the phenomenal account of the book that Thody constructs, it poses Barthes as a myth: that of the great producer of thought, barely constrained by historical, political and contemporary issues: Barthes, the great theorist of the



body.

My aim is to provide a different account of his view of Michelet, in which he was free and constrained by a coincidence of complex factors. To do this we must, firstly, try to establish why he admired Michelet's writing, and then whether this had an effect on his own writing and perception. If he was fascinated by Michelet's writing of history, how did this fit with his political and epistemological interest in Marxism? This will be treated in Chapter 5. If Barthes was an avid reader of the writings of Jean Jaurès in the Thirties and a 'centrist' Republican in the early Forties, how can we describe his political position(s) in the Fifties?<sup>38</sup> This last question will require further research and time, but will be helped, it is hoped, by answering the previous questions.

A crucial influence in this area was Michelet. Michelet's importance to Barthes had always been both political and academic. When offered a post in Bucharest by Rebeyrol, Barthes had planned to write a thesis on Michelet.<sup>39</sup> His fascination with Michelet had occurred towards the end of his time in sanatoria, at the same time as his initiation into Marxism in 1946.<sup>40</sup> His obsession was such that this historian was the only author Barthes claimed to have read in full.<sup>41</sup> In Alexandria in 1949, without a suitable library, however, and lacking a form of analysis, Barthes was experiencing doubts. According to Calvet, he began to describe his research as an 'essai' only, for he thought that it would lack the necessary theoretical validity to be a research project.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, there are other influences. Letters written to Philippe Rebeyrol suggest further influences. Sidney Hook, the American Marxist philosopher, and André Malraux emerge in different areas of Barthes's thought.<sup>43</sup> So, if it is possible to assess the impact and historical and political import of Barthes's early writings, it is possible also to suggest, within his 'tutelle d'un grand système (Marx, Sartre, Brecht)', the other components in his interest in and use of 'system'.<sup>44</sup>

This thesis will aim to contextualize Barthes's early writings and



theories, by replacing them in their original form and their significance within the journal concerned. If *Mythologies* abstracted from the original texts their historical import, sometimes effacing names, dates and contemporary references, the first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes* has performed a similar operation: in collecting Barthes's writings it has taken them out of their original context. Furthermore, except in the case of some of the articles on popular theatre, the Collected Works fails to signal the editing performed by Barthes. My research has concentrated then on looking at original places of publication. My conclusion will suggest reasons why Barthes published *Mythologies* in the manner of a timeless account of myth and ideology; this will be linked to his experience in the popular theatre movement and to the changes in his political and sociological viewpoint.

My research has led me to discussions with Philippe Rebeyrol and given me the opportunity to consult the voluminous correspondence from Barthes. I have also consulted (thanks to Jean-Louis Boyer at Les Éditions de L'Arche) letters sent by Barthes to Robert Voisin, the director of *Théâtre populaire* and Barthes's employer between 1954 and 1956. I have however been unable to trace Voisin for an interview. This, unfortunately, was the case also with Edgar Morin and Jean Duvignaud. However, Maurice Nadeau, Jacqueline Fournié, Bernard Dort and Denis Bablet made themselves available to answer questions and were helpful interlocutors.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See R. Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes, tome 1, 1942-1965* (Paris, Seuil, 1993, edited by E. Marty), henceforth referred to as *OC*. See Elena Guicciardi, 'Barthes, scrittore in protesto', in *La Repubblica*, 25 November 1993, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the 'colloque international' at the University of Pau in November 1990, which considered Barthes as an 'actualité en questions' and the spate of conferences on Barthes and photography in Paris and the French provinces in 1993 testify to the French interest. The conference at the University of Bristol, in November 1992, as well as the Seminar at the ICA in October 1994, both devoted to Barthes, suggest Barthes's academic and cultural importance in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Even French journals were relatively silent after the initial surprise at his death; after *Poétique* (47, 4th term 1981), *Communications* (36, 1982) and *Critique* (July 1982), few journals in French were given over to Barthes until the end of the decade (with the exception



of *Textuel*, no.15, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> P. Roger *Roland Barthes, roman* (Paris, Grasset, 1986); Roger noted the 'silence' around Barthes after (as well as just before) his death (p.154); see also Vincent Jouve's *La Littérature selon Barthes* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1986), R. Bensmaïa, *Barthes à l'essai: introduction au texte réfléchissant* (Tübingen, 1986), A. de La Croix, *Barthes: pour une éthique des signes* (Bruxelles, 1988), M. Melkonian, *Le Corps couché de Roland Barthes* (Paris, Séguier, 1989). This revival of interest gave rise to the humorous 1987 study by René Pommier, *Roland Barthes, ras le bol!* (Paris, Roblot, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Heath's important 1974 study, *Vertige du déplacement: lecture de Barthes* (Paris, Fayard, 1974) was written in French. Barthes's writing had nonetheless begun to be available in English since the translation by Richard Howard of *Sur Racine* in 1964.

<sup>6</sup> A. Lavers, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After* (London, Methuen/Harvard University Press, 1982); G. Wassermann, *Roland Barthes* (Boston, Twayne, 1981); see also the American journal *L'Esprit créateur* (22, Spring 1982) dedicated to a study of Barthes.

<sup>7</sup> S. Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (London/New York, Cape/Hill and Wang, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> J. Culler, *Roland Barthes* (London/New York, Fontana/Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> S. Freedman & C. A. Taylor, *Roland Barthes: A Bibliographical Reader's Guide* (New York/London, Garland, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> S. Ungar, *Roland Barthes: The Professor of Desire* (Lincoln/London, University of Nebraska Press, 1983); R. Champagne, *Literary history in the wake of Roland Barthes* (Boston, Twayne, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> P. Thody, *Roland Barthes: A Conservative estimate* (London, Methuen, first edition 1977, second edition 1985).

<sup>12</sup> M. Wiseman, *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes* (London, Routledge, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> M. Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge/Oxford, Polity/Blackwell, 1991); A. Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> L.-J. Calvet, *Roland Barthes 1915-1980* (Paris, Flammarion, 1990). Indeed, the importance of this book can be gauged by the fact that this is the only study of Barthes to have been translated into English (*Roland Barthes: a biography*, translation by Sarah Wykes, Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/Polity, 1994). The most overt criticism of Calvet's book from within the orthodoxy is Eric Marty's paper given at the 1990 conference in Pau published in Coquio, *Barthes après Barthes*, pp.235-245.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Mauriès's short enigmatic account of Barthes as tutor, published in 1992, could be considered, in some sense, to be 'biographical'; see P.Mauriès, *Roland Barthes* (Paris, Gallimard, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Though the subject of considerable legal and inheritance arguments, Calvet's book was undoubtedly instrumental in encouraging Seuil to collect Barthes's scattered writings into the *Oeuvres complètes*.

<sup>17</sup> See the Avant-Propos, 'Le Silence Généalogique', pp.13-17.

<sup>18</sup> This is not out of step with a minor trend of the end of the Eighties and early Nineties, that of historicising the structuralist and post-structuralist period, to show how its conclusions were linked to political viewpoints; see F. Dosse, *L'histoire en miettes* (Paris, La Découverte, 1987) and *Histoire du Structuralisme*, 2 vols. (Paris, La Découverte 1991 and 1992); A. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/Polity, 1989), L. Ferry and A. Renaut, *La Pensée 68* (Paris, Gallimard, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Moriarty has addressed the dangers of summarising and appreciating Barthes's life and *oeuvre* in the introduction to his study of Barthes's work; see pp.2-14.

<sup>20</sup> S. Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> In the preface to the 1970 edition, Barthes stated that the 'textes' had been written between 1954 and 1956 (OC 563). Though largely true, this ignored the fact that 'Le monde où l'on catche' had appeared first in *Esprit* in October 1952, and 'L'acteur d'Harcourt' in the same journal in July 1953 as part of 'Visages et figures'.

<sup>23</sup> Moriarty's book contains a general account of Barthes's dramatico-aesthetic theories; see Chapter 3.

<sup>24</sup> François Dosse has set out the clash of traditional Sorbonne thought with the academically



unorthodox theories, particularly Structuralist and Marxist, emerging in the 1950s; see *Histoire du Structuralisme 1*, Chapter 22, 'La Sorbonne contestée: la querelle des anciens et des modernes', pp.237-250.

<sup>25</sup> 'Théâtre et collectivité', *Théâtre populaire*, January/February 1954, pp.98-100 (OC 387-388).

<sup>26</sup> 'Rencontre en Forêt noire' (*France-Observateur*, 27 January 1955, p.23, OC 449-451); having set out the division of the 'rencontre' as between theorists and novelists, rather than between French and Germans, he summed up the differences: 'D'une manière générale, les sociologues pensaient que les romanciers sont contraints d'écrire pour des publics; le romancier croit, lui, qu'il écrit pour un public; pour les premiers, le monde c'est les autres; pour le second, le monde, c'est autrui' (ibid, OC 450).

<sup>27</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984); according to Bourdieu, Barthes's academic position at the EPHE was 'mineure' in relation to the French academy as a whole (p.145, note 43); nevertheless, he asserts, Barthes's position was crucial in explaining his strong views in the Picard debate (ibid, p.151).

<sup>28</sup> See *Homo Academicus* (translation by Peter Collier, Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/Polity, 1988), pp.xviii-xix. Bourdieu considered Barthes the 'peak of the class of essayists', who, without postgraduate qualifications, was forced to 'float with the tides of the external and internal forces which wrack the milieu, notably through journalism'; and compared this floating Barthes to Théophile Gautier; ibid, p.xxii.

<sup>29</sup> Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, p.100.

<sup>30</sup> See 'Humanisme sans paroles', *Combat*, 30 August 1951, p.4 (OC 105-106).

<sup>31</sup> In 1955 he commended contemporary anthropology (in the work of Levi-Strauss and Leroi-Gourhan), as well as Mauss's earlier studies, for their 'probité intellectuelle' in undermining the 'scientific' theories of racism; see 'Bichon chez les nègres' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1955, p.475, OC 602).

<sup>32</sup> See Dosse, *L'histoire en miettes*, part 2.

<sup>33</sup> See *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), p.148.

<sup>34</sup> See Calvet, pp.133-136. Edmund Wilson has noted that in 1824 Michelet had the project of a study of 'the character of peoples as revealed by their vocabularies', a project very similar to Barthes's proposed thesis subject; see *To the Finland Station* (London, Collins/Fontana, 1974), p.10.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes's use of 'le voilà' in 'Le monde objet' was, suggested Michel Butor, Micheletian in style; see *La Fascinatrice IV* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1974), pp.382-383.

<sup>36</sup> See *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After*, pp.49-50.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Thody, *Barthes: a Conservative estimate*, pp.23-26.

<sup>38</sup> Calvet, pp.81-82.

<sup>39</sup> But, according to Calvet (p.100), uncertainties plagued him about whether he had anything interesting to say about this historian. Eventually René Pintard, a professor at the Sorbonne and expert in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literature and libertinage, agreed to supervise Barthes's research.

<sup>40</sup> Calvet, p.72, pp.83-84.

<sup>41</sup> Calvet, p.112.

<sup>42</sup> ibid, p.125; this 'essai' nevertheless was considered worthy to appear in *Esprit* in April 1951, under the title 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort' (pp.497-510, OC 91-102).

<sup>43</sup> Hegel's view that 'la liberté est la reconnaissance de la nécessité' was quoted by Barthes in a letter to Rebeyrol dated 31 May 1947; yet in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, a questioning of the intellectual significance of never having read Hegel seemed to contradict this (p.104); conversely, in an interview for *Tel Quel* in 1971, Barthes stressed his Trotskyist initiation to Marxism via Georges Fournié and cited Trotsky (as well as Lenin and Marx) as a major influence in his theory of the *degré zéro* of literature; see *Tel Quel* 47 (1971), pp.92-

3.

<sup>44</sup> *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, p.106.



## CHAPTER ONE : BARTHES, *JOURNALISTE*

### Introduction

In many ways, Barthes holds an ambiguous position amongst the generations of postwar French intellectuals. Due to illness and lengthy stays in sanatoria, undergoing treatment and cures for tuberculosis between 1934 and 1946, Barthes did not have a typical rise to intellectual prominence.<sup>1</sup> Born in 1915 soon after archetypal postwar French intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, he belongs nevertheless, as Philippe Roger has pointed out, to a later generation of intellectuals and writers; though of a similar age to these important intellectual figures, Barthes did not publish a book until nearly two decades later than these contemporaries. Sartre, older by ten years, had written numerous philosophical and political pieces as well as novels and plays by the time of publication of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* in 1953; De Beauvoir, born in 1908, had published numerous books by the mid-nineteen fifties; Camus, only two years his senior, had written, as well as articles in newspapers during the Thirties and the Occupation, a number of major literary, philosophical and political works by 1953.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, their publications had won them a near-celebrity status at the time Barthes began writing for *Combat* in 1947. As early as the Liberation period, Camus, De Beauvoir and Sartre had become prominent intellectual figures on the editorial boards of *Combat* and *Les Temps Modernes*. A lesser intellectual figure, Maurice Nadeau, and another contemporary of Barthes's (born in 1911), was himself editing the literary section of Camus' newspaper at the beginning of the Fourth Republic and had already published a book on Surrealism.<sup>3</sup>



Nor, however, can we consider Barthes part of the Louis Althusser generation of academic intellectuals - at least not during the time of the Fourth Republic. Though born only three years after Barthes, Althusser had published very little before 1965, whereas Barthes had achieved prominence in 1957 with *Mythologies* and with the acrimonious debate with Sorbonne professor Raymond Picard in 1963.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, these two major interventions by Barthes could be suggested as important influences on Althusser's thought. The differences with Althusser go further: until 1960, Barthes had a very minor relationship to the French academy; as researcher at the CNRS he was unconnected with prestigious institutions such as the Ecole Normale Supérieure, which, in the 1960s, would provide Althusser with the space to expound his structuralist version of Marxism.

Though Barthes in the Fifties can be considered part neither of the existentialist generation nor of the Althusser/ENS milieu, he has been nevertheless associated with these two intellectual circles. By his own admission he was 'sartrien' in 1945; and he is often cited as the 'figure mère' of structuralism.<sup>5</sup> He could, therefore, be considered as a bridge between these two generations.

Sunil Khilnani's important study of postwar French intellectuals has taken Sartre and Althusser as the epitomes of postwar French intellectuals and tried to show how Sartre's philosophy of action gave way to Althusser's theoretical praxis.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, François Dosse's introductory chapter to his comprehensive history of structuralism, called 'L'éclipse d'une étoile: Jean-Paul Sartre', saw Sartre as losing intellectual ground as early as 1952, with his turn, in the midst of the Cold War, towards the Communist Party; the succession was all but completed a full eight years later, according to Dosse, in the 'joute oratoire' at the ENS between Althusser and Sartre, by the victory of the former.<sup>7</sup> Sartre's turn towards the Communist Party (his 'volontarisme ultrabolcheviste') split him from other intellectual figures such as Maurice



Merleau-Ponty in Summer 1952, and Claude Lefort in 1953; this had an effect also on Barthes's admiration for Sartre.

If Barthes was 'sartrien' at the Liberation, by 1952 he was no longer. On 30 September 1952 he wrote to his friend Philippe Rebeyrol to explain how he was 'las de voir tous les intellectuels malades du communisme'. The recent 'sortie de Sartre contre les bourgeois' was, he complained, 'tellement facile et inutile'. Though he considered himself 'un de ceux-là' and without an 'idée précise', he told his friend that the 'problème' had been 'mal posé', because it was 'si insoluble'; what bothered him was that this led to an 'impuissance des intellectuels de gauche'.<sup>8</sup>

This pushed Barthes to define a new role for the intellectual. In March 1953, extolling the analytical virtues of a recently translated book on Brazilian culture, he concluded that to introduce 'l'explication dans le mythe' was 'pour l'intellectuel la seule façon efficace de militer'.<sup>9</sup> The revelations of the Gulag and in Stalin's Soviet Union, as well as his own Trotskyist initiation into Marxism, meant that Barthes, as with many ex-Communist Party intellectuals such as Maurice Nadeau, Pierre Naville, Edgar Morin, Jean Duvignaud, and Dionys Mascolo, was highly sceptical of Sartre's orientation towards Stalinism.

If the 'éclipse' of Sartre meant that the intellectual had to assume a modified role, was Barthes instrumental in redefining the role of the left-wing intellectual? Working with Jean Duvignaud, Guy Dumur and Bernard Dort at *Théâtre populaire* between 1953 and 1958, Barthes, senior by at least five years, played the central role on the editorial board of this journal.<sup>10</sup> In 1953 he wrote for Nadeau's *Les Lettres nouvelles*; in 1956, he worked with Edgar Morin on the editorial team of *Arguments*, having researched together in the sociology section of the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), then on *Communications* after their almost simultaneous appointments to the EPHE in 1960. Can we speak, therefore, of an intermediary postwar



intellectual ‘generation’ between those exemplified by Sartre and then Althusser in Khilnani’s account, between 1952 and 1960, of which Barthes was an important part? To begin to be able to answer this, we must first look at how Barthes’s definition worked in relation to his own intellectual activism and militancy, including an assessment of his financial and career status during this period.

Returning to Paris in 1946, Barthes was not only without a career, he had also not participated in the crucial events of French political and intellectual life since 1941. Though watching from afar, writing in student and sanatorium journals, he was absent from the events of the Occupation; though he had helped to form an anti-fascist group at school, by 1945 he could barely be considered, politically, part of the Sartre/Camus/De Beauvoir generation.<sup>11</sup>

Academically, too, his trajectory had been unusual. Illness in 1935 had prevented him joining his schoolfriend, Philippe Rebeyrol at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the Rue d’Ulm. He had also not managed, because of illness, to complete a thesis nor the agrégation; even his ‘licence’ in Classics had had to be taken in two parts. Nor did he benefit from a wealthy background; as a ‘pupille de la nation’ he had been supported, up until leaving the sanatoria, by the State, since his widowed mother, an impoverished bookbinder, could not support her son on her own. Indeed, Calvet’s biography stresses the penury Barthes experienced in the decade immediately after the Liberation.

The temporary nature of employment continued throughout the Fourth Republic, whilst he considered a late academic career, until nomination in 1960 to the post at the EHPE at the age of forty-five. He made a number of attempts to write a thesis (first on Michelet, then on nineteenth-century social language); he held short teaching and administrative posts in Rumania and Egypt between 1947 and 1950, thanks to Philippe Rebeyrol whose illustrious career in the Ministère des Affaires étrangères, was a point of comparison for



Barthes. In short, in 1947 Barthes was politically, academically and intellectually unknown; financially, he was obliged to take any work he could find. It was within this context that journalism became edifying both financially and intellectually.

Writing for newspapers and journals was, above all, a way in which he could supplement his meagre income; but he could also begin to make a name for himself as a writer. Before we look at the places in which Barthes's articles were published, we can try to establish the importance, financially or otherwise, of his writing in this period.

We will look also at how Barthes can be considered as an intellectual whose praxis was that of introducing explanation into myth, and how writing for the popular theatre movement fitted into this militant activity. However, it must be recognized that his writing in *Les Lettres nouvelles* and in *Théâtre populaire* (as well as other journals, to a lesser extent) was influenced by the objective reality of his need to earn money by writing. Did this contradictory journalistic situation affect the manner in which he wrote?

### **(i) Journalist or researcher?**

Barthes's early journalistic career, that period before his nomination to a permanent post in 1960, displayed a level of activity which was both uneven and sporadic. These first eighteen years of his writing in journals and newspapers saw the most prolific and the most sparse periods of journalism in his whole career and life.

Between 1942 and 1952, his published articles were relatively low in number; he wrote fewer than thirty articles in this ten-year period; during the Occupation, whilst in a sanatorium for tuberculosis in Saint-Hilaire-du-



Touvet, he had published short pieces in student journals; on his return to Paris this was followed by a series of articles and book reviews in the intellectual and ex-Resistance daily newspaper *Combat* between 1947 and 1951.

It was the period 1953-1956, however, which saw his most prolific output. In three years he published over one hundred and thirty pieces; compared to the first decade of publishing, he wrote, in one third of the time, five times as many articles. This dramatic increase in his journalistic output was, it seems, a direct reflection of his change in status at the end of 1952.

Having worked in an office at the 'Direction générale des relations culturelles du ministère des Affaires étrangères' since his return from Egypt in 1950, he had found the work tedious.<sup>12</sup> His attempt to win a research post in lexicology at the CNRS, with the help of Julien Greimas and Charles Bruneau, finally succeeded: in November 1952, he left the security and (relative) affluence of an office job for the temporary and poorly-remunerated post of 'stagiaire de recherches' and began researching the commercial and social language of 1830 in the Bibliothèque nationale.

Despite the fact that Barthes's intense period of journalistic activity coincided with his leaving secure employment in 1952, it is difficult to assess the extent of the penury which Calvet has detected. It was not simply that Barthes was a 'stagiaire' at the CNRS for most of the period up until 1960. It appears that he held various part-time and low-paid positions throughout the fifties. Between 1954 and 1956 he acted as a part-time literary consultant at the Editions de l'Arche; comments in his letters to Rebeyrol suggest that he was being formally employed by L'Arche.<sup>13</sup> He was unable to visit his friend in Egypt at Easter 1955, for example: 'L'Arche fait un effort exceptionnel pour m'assurer une mensualité régulière', he declared to Rebeyrol in January 1955; he could not expect the publishing house to give him a paid holiday. Indeed, it seems that between 1954 and 1956 he was fully employed; in the



morning, according to Calvet, he would write his 'petite sociologie de la vie' for *Les Lettres nouvelles*, in the afternoon he would prepare *Théâtre populaire* for the printers'.<sup>14</sup> Then, in early 1956 he was offered a second post at the CNRS, this time as an 'attaché de recherches' in the 'Sociologie' section. So, though his journalism was clearly an important source of income, it was not at any stage the only source.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, he was receiving royalties for his books. 1953 saw the publication of his first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. In this period, he was also preparing the publication of his second book, *Michelet par lui-même*, for the 'Ecrivain de toujours' series. Both books were received with reasonable success, the first more than the second.<sup>16</sup> The sales of these books would have contributed to his income in a significant way. Neither, however, was to have the impact of *Mythologies* in 1957.<sup>17</sup>

The success of *Mythologies* seemed to be reflected in Barthes's financial concerns. Between 1957 and his appointment to a permanent post in 1960, there was a marked decrease in his journalistic output. In this three-year period, he produced fewer than half the number of articles than in the period 1953-1956. What was also striking about these fifty or so articles was the diversity of the publications in which they appeared. Whereas one hundred and thirty articles had appeared in fourteen publications between 1953 and 1956, fifty appeared in twenty-one different publications in this second half of the decade. This variety of publications was, it seems, a reflection of the increased popularity and success of his writing and theories after the publication of the *Mythologies*: such was his reputation that he could afford, in financial terms and intellectual status, to write much less journalism for a wider readership.

So, although Barthes was not a professional journalist, perhaps more a part-time free-lance writer, journalism had nevertheless affected his career. Indeed, his journalistic activity seemed to dominate his activities and plans. After 1952, he became hesitant about making any more moves away from



Paris; Calvet has underlined his indecision with regard to his future career before receiving the grant from the CNRS.<sup>18</sup> This journalism seemed to take precedence over his academic career.

Between 1952 and 1954, he quickly lost interest in his area of research for the CNRS; by January 1954 he had to give up his research post because of lack of progress.<sup>19</sup> If 1953 saw the publication of over a dozen articles, some very lengthy, in a number of journals, this had contributed to his losing his 'stagiaire' post at the CNRS, had discouraged him from completing a thesis; in short, his journalism had stunted, if only briefly, an academic career. It was above all in this two-year period of no grant from the CNRS, between January 1954 and the beginning of 1956, that he published regularly and his output hit its peak - an article every month without fail in this twenty-eight month period, if not twice monthly at some stages.

If his journalism did impede his research for the CNRS to the point that he had to abandon his post, and kept Barthes out of full-time academic work, it allowed him to pursue intellectual concerns away from the old-fashioned and traditional academy in France. Though it would difficult to establish his prime motivations before and during this prolific period of journalistic production, 1953-1956, we will see that this was crucial in establishing his intellectual image.

It was not, however, simply that Barthes was torn between research and journalism; he had also devoted time to publishing two books between 1953 and 1956. However, as Calvet points out, Barthes spent nearly ten years studying minutely Michelet's writing, only to produce a book containing fewer than a hundred pages of his own writing.<sup>20</sup> Nor was *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* particularly long, and most of the material had been written and published between 1947 and 1951 in *Combat*. Clearly, Barthes was spending most of his time writing and working for journals.

So, we can conclude on the one hand that, though spending most of



his energy writing journalism between 1953 and 1956, this activity was certainly not his only source of income; on the other hand, that his academic career was relegated, if only temporarily, by his journalism and his other publication interests. His writing for various left-wing publications could earn him extra money, but it also gave him a wider audience for his ideas, could earn him a wider public profile. This strategy by which to become known was not to last, and perhaps was not needed, beyond the middle of 1956.

In that year, Barthes had managed to secure a second research post at the CNRS; this time, it seems, he wanted to take the research more seriously; this is confirmed by a letter he wrote to Rebeyrol dated 2 April 1956. He explained at length his recent change of attitude towards writing articles for publications. He had finished his 'petite mythologie du mois' the same month, and he explained to Rebeyrol that he wanted to stop writing for others, and write more for himself; more time was needed if he was to write a long preface to the collection of the 'mythologies' which Seuil had commissioned for the Autumn of 1956. This important task was, he wrote, to mark 'un tournant de mon petit itinéraire personnel'. Coupled with this was a rekindled interest in academic research with the CNRS: he wanted now 'ne plus être trop, du moins un temps, un intellectuel, mais seulement un chercheur'.

This decision to leave the intellectual limelight was reflected in the frequency of publications after April 1956. Not only ending his 'petite mythologie du mois' in April 1956, but also reducing his commitment to the popular theatre movement, and to *Théâtre populaire* in particular, Barthes began his 'tournant'. 1955 had been the height of his intense period of journalism, numerically at least: he had published that year over seventy articles, many on theatre, particularly in *Théâtre populaire*. Yet, in 1956, he wrote only twenty-three articles, a third of the total for 1955. This was a result of his ending his regular monthly column of mythologies, but it also indicated a reduction in his commitment to the popular theatre journal: of the



ten articles on theatre in 1956 only four appeared in the pages of *Théâtre populaire*. Whereas 1955 had seen fifteen articles in the popular theatre journal, including four editorials, in 1956 his articles on theatre were more numerous and substantial for *France-Observateur* than for *Théâtre populaire*; and nor did this meagre involvement consist of any editorials in 1956.

This move away from activity in the popular theatre in general and from *Théâtre populaire* was explained to Voisin in a letter dated 3 September 1961. He had now finished his study of 'la Mode', wrote Barthes, as an apology to Voisin; now he had the time to consider that which he had let slip because of his 'initiation "formaliste"' into fashion. Despite his 'éclipse' from the popular theatre movement and *Théâtre populaire*, he had always intended, he explained, to return to this. This letter not only represented an apology, but also underlined the decrease in Barthes's interest in the popular theatre.

What he did not state was the effect of receiving the CNRS grant in 1956. This five-year study of fashion and of the appropriate methodology of its study was to become his 'doctorat' and an important factor in his move away from the popular theatre and towards academic researcher (rather than intellectual) status. His first article for Lucien Febvre's *Annales* history journal, a lengthy and scholarly account of the history of the study of fashion, published in the summer of 1957, was the result of his turn towards research and away from the popular theatre.<sup>21</sup> Despite the implication of brevity in the subtitle of the article, this was an impressive and well-researched study of the history of methodology in explanations of fashion forms; Barthes's turn towards academic study was underlined by the fact that the article was signed 'Roland Barthes (C.N.R.S)'.<sup>22</sup>

This assumption of academic status was not without financial risk however. In line with his 'tournant' towards academic research, Barthes had begun in 1956 an intense study of Saussurian linguistics (see his use of Saussure in this important article on fashion for *Annales*). The research for



this was performed before the publication and financial success of *Mythologies* in Spring 1957; his financial precariousness during this period of research between mid-1956 and mid-1957 is reflected in his doubts expressed to Rebeyrol in a letter dated August 1956. Here he regretted his move away from 'la critique littéraire'; firstly, because he was now finding his research into fashion tedious; secondly, because criticism was 'si facile - et plus rentable'. This showed clearly that Barthes's journalism was, to some extent, financially motivated. However, it is also fair to say that his writings appeared, almost without fail, in distinctly left-wing publications: it is between the desire to have a political commitment and the constraints of financial expediency that Barthes's journalism must be analysed.

This status up until 1956 of intellectual, both journalist and writer, and not an intellectual in the academy, was precisely the status of Camus, Sartre, De Beauvoir, Nadeau and others. If Barthes was a classic intellectual of the 1950s - in that he lived, by and large, on income from writing, and was not part of the French academy - then the places of publication of this writing, in left-wing publications of the period, help to confirm this classic intellectual status. It is the manner in which Barthes moved in different circles which has most intrigued commentators.

Barthes's experience of illness and the sanatoria impeded his academic career, absented him from a crucial period in French politics (the Occupation and Liberation) and left him in a financially precarious situation. This experience was also, however, to have a positive outcome, of fundamental importance for his future career. Not only did illness and stays in sanatoria provide him with time to read, opportunities to begin writing, and a forum for discussion, his final stay in Leysin in Switzerland led to a fortuitous encounter with a fellow 'tubard'.



## (ii) Barthes's 'journalisme de gauche'

Georges Fournié (known as 'Philippe') had contracted tuberculosis in the Buchenwald concentration camp. As a militant anti-fascist in the 1930s and veteran of the POUM in the Spanish Civil War, he was a Marxist of Trotskyist persuasion. The encounter and subsequent friendship with Fournié had two important effects on Barthes's future career. Firstly, Barthes, in his own words, was 'séduit' by Fournié's Trotskyist version of Marxism.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, Fournié was to provide Barthes with crucial left-wing connections in Paris.

In his youth Barthes had been a fervent admirer of the Socialism of Jean Jaurès, used to read his speeches and had always been 'de gauche'.<sup>24</sup> Long discussions with Fournié in 1946 waiting for his cure to be complete offered an alternative view of Socialism. In the final chapter we will look at his reaction to Fournié's Marxist version of Socialism in letters written to Rebeyrol.

After Barthes's discharge from treatment and return to Paris, he met up with Fournié; Fournié introduced him to Maurice Nadeau.<sup>25</sup> Fournié and Nadeau had both been Trotskyists in the 1930s, active in anti-fascist movements. Interested not only in politics, Nadeau had spent much of his youth reading avant-garde works of art; during the Occupation, he had befriended various Surrealists. On the editorial board of the *Revue internationale* at the Liberation, Nadeau had conceded that the Communist Party had the upper-hand: Trotskyism had been temporarily defeated.<sup>26</sup> Working for *Combat* between 1945 and 1949 Nadeau had earned his own literary page by 1947; it was in this 'page culturelle' that Barthes's first article for a major national publication appeared.

Barthes had read and been inspired by Nadeau's articles in this ex-



Resistance newspaper - “Je suis un de vos lecteurs”, declared Barthes at their first meeting, and he applauded the role of *Combat* in the ‘affaire Miller’, which, led by Nadeau, had undermined French censorship of the American author; Barthes was pleased that this would lead to the ‘déroute des “moralisateurs”’.<sup>27</sup> Such was Nadeau’s influence on Barthes that, when he sent him the ‘choix des articles’ from *Combat*, soon to be published in book form, Barthes read these and said that he agreed entirely with Nadeau’s views on literature.<sup>28</sup> Nadeau has not hidden, however, Barthes’s influence on him.<sup>29</sup>

Thus a strong literary and political relationship was formed between the two: Barthes agreed with all of Nadeau’s attempts to have the newer, and often scandalous, experimental writers published and read; Nadeau, now a renowned literary critic, took the advice of Barthes. Their political outlook, too, was very similar: left-wing intellectuals, anti-Stalinist (particularly in its postwar promotion of Socialist Realism and concomitant denigration of avant-garde art) but also politically inactive. It was Nadeau who introduced Barthes to a circle of left-wing intellectuals in Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s and who gave this ‘inconnu’ the opportunity to publish.<sup>30</sup>

### *Combat*

Barthes had been recommended by Fournié to Nadeau for his knowledge of Michelet, and at their first meeting he was asked to write a piece on Michelet for the ex-Resistance newspaper, which was never published.<sup>31</sup> Barthes then offered another article: ‘Le degré zéro de l’écriture’.<sup>32</sup> Described by Barthes to Rebeyrol in a letter dated 16 May 1947, as a ‘texte sur la critique littéraire, sur des postulats matérialistes’, this first article generated, according to Nadeau, a flood of letters; ‘Faut-il tuer la grammaire?’, published seven weeks later, was Barthes’s reply to the voluminous correspondence sent to the newspaper.<sup>33</sup>

After his temporary posts in Rumania and Egypt, Barthes returned to



Paris at the end of the academic year 1949-50 and almost immediately wrote three book reviews for *Combat* in successive months.<sup>34</sup> This was followed by his five-part series of articles, given the title 'Pour un langage réel' by Nadeau, published in *Combat* between November and December 1950.<sup>35</sup> In 1951 Barthes wrote three more book reviews for *Combat*; each testified to Philippe Roger's recent assertion that Barthes in the 1950s was 'of Marxist persuasion'.<sup>36</sup> He praised two anti-racist publications by Michel Leiris and Daniel Guérin, and put forward a historical materialist explanation of racism, by relating it to the development of slavery and early Capitalism.<sup>37</sup> The attempt by the Vietnamese Communist, Tran Duc Thao, to marry phenomenological and dialectical materialist analyses drew Barthes's praise.<sup>38</sup> Finally, his disparaging review of Roger Caillois' account of the unmerited popularity of Marxism became a defence of a non-Muscovite, tacitly Trotskyist, version of Marxism.<sup>39</sup> Barthes also published in *Combat* in 1951 his two final articles on literary theory which were to form part of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*.<sup>40</sup>

During this period of writing for *Combat*, Barthes began to establish himself not only as a literary and cultural theorist, but also as a defender and theorist of a non-Stalinist version of Marxism. This fitted with the non-aligned 'marxisant' standing and role of *Combat*.

### *Esprit*

As well as writing for *Combat* in 1951, he had written two articles for Emmanuel Mounier's left-wing Catholic monthly journal, *Esprit*. The first, 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', a lengthy description of Michelet's relationship to history, was given the first place in the April number. Though the basis for his 1954 monograph, this impressive first article on Michelet displayed a different emphasis from that in the book published three years later, Albert Béguin has noted; in the former Barthes showed an 'eschatologie



marxiste', in the latter he was more interested in Michelet's 'fonction imaginante'.<sup>41</sup> It was Béguin, with poet and novelist Jean Cayrol, who had offered Barthes the chance to write in *Esprit*; having commended Cayrol's literary theories in the review for *Combat* in 1950, he had become good friends with this writer.

Barthes's friendship with this concentration camp survivor and interest in his theories of the novel were doubtless influenced by his earlier friendship with Fournié, also a survivor of the Nazi camps; Cayrol's writing was linked explicitly to his experience as a 'concentrationnaire' and this underpinned his view of 'littérature "lazaréenne"'.<sup>42</sup> This was the beginning of an important relationship with Cayrol, since with Albert Béguin, the chief editor of *Esprit*, Cayrol would urge his own publisher and the publisher of the journal, Les Editions du Seuil to publish *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*.<sup>43</sup> It was Seuil, of course, who would publish all of Barthes's books throughout his life.

The second article for *Esprit* in 1951 might have helped Gallimard to dislike Barthes. It was a (second) review article of a book by Gallimard dignitary, the sociologist Roger Caillois. His latest book, *Description du marxisme*, had already been reviewed by Barthes for *Combat* in June 1951 - the latter was, in fact, more disparaging than the second for *Esprit*.<sup>44</sup> In this review for *Esprit*, he continued his study of Michelet's writing and relationship to historical objects: Michelet's analogical and formalistic accounts of history had inspired Caillois to equate religion with Marxism, to deny the specific content of Marxism - in the same way that Barthes, in 'Les révolutions suivent-elle les lois?' in *Combat* a year before, had criticised the philosopher André Joussain for evacuating the specific content of revolution by equating, amongst others, Hitler's 'revolution' in Germany with the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Rejecting Michelet's solution to the historiographical conundrum of how to represent both historical change and social structure when writing history, he praised Marx's placing of the 'lutte des classes' at the



the 'racine des faits'. Above all, it was a sophisticated and lively review which, together with his lengthy and impressive article on 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans' four months later in *Esprit*, impressed the editorial board of the journal to such an extent that it offered him a regular 'chronique' on theatre.

In a letter to Rebeyrol dated 20 October 1952, Barthes explained triumphantly: 'j'ai une chronique dans *Esprit* tous les deux mois (sur les spectacles populo que j'aime bien spectroscoper)'. These 'spectacles populo' referred to his article 'Le monde où l'on catche' published in October 1952; however, his contract for an article every two months was not to transpire: his next article in *Esprit* did not appear until four months later. 'Folies-Bergère', published in the February 1953 number, was, as well as two months late, the end of his 'chronique' of popular 'spectacles' for *Esprit*.<sup>45</sup>

The lateness of this second article might be explained furthermore by his working at the 'ministère' and by his starting research for the CNRS in November 1952. The swift ending of this chronique might be explained by his invitation to write for a new journal on popular theatre, *Théâtre populaire*, which began in March 1953.

Nevertheless, writing three major articles and one review article for *Esprit* in 1951 and 1952, Barthes was beginning to become known. This period encouraged other journals newspapers to solicit his articles. This period was also the beginning of the end of *Combat*'s prominence for the Left intellectual; Camus and Pascal Pia had left in 1947, and a businessman, Henri Smadja, had taken over. After disagreements with Smadja, Claude Bourdet, the editor since Camus and Pia's departure in 1947, soon left the paper to establish a new left-wing weekly newspaper with two other left-wing journalists Roger Stéphane and Gilles Martinet, *L'Observateur politique, économique et littéraire*.<sup>46</sup>



### *L'Observateur*

Nadeau too left *Combat* when he found its new owner intolerable and joined *L'Observateur*.<sup>47</sup> Bourdet's new weekly newspaper had been planned as a small circulation newspaper, but its similarity to the highly popular British and American weekly press soon made the projected circulation of seven to eight thousand seem ridiculously small.<sup>48</sup>

It soon became the most important left-wing 'hebdomadaire' of the Fourth Republic. This was reflected in the team that joined the paper; Bourdet's resignation statement in *Combat* on 27 February 1950 encouraged fifteen other journalists to leave with him.<sup>49</sup> Nadeau followed a number of months after this and was quickly incorporated into its literary team. Barthes, however, continued publishing in *Combat* throughout 1951.

*L'Observateur* was soon considered 'militant' and aimed at left-wing intellectuals, who would have read *Combat*.<sup>50</sup> Like *Combat* it claimed to be neutral in the Cold War and declared no allegiance to a political party; but since it was clearly left-wing, it was considered a Trotskyist newspaper by the Communist Party.<sup>51</sup> Indeed its claim to a Cold War 'neutralité' was the subject of a number of debates.<sup>52</sup> In fact the position of 'neutralisme' helped a number of left-wing independent candidates in the 1951 elections who held sympathies with the Parti Socialiste Unifié and put forward a left-wing version of Mendès-France's politics.<sup>53</sup>

The 'neutrality' of the paper was reflected in the arts coverage. Once at *L'Observateur*, Nadeau had quickly received his own literary section and put forward his own left-wing, but non-partisan, view of art and literature. He was in charge of the 'supplémentaire littéraire', published once every two weeks, which published articles by the Surrealist Georges Limbour and cartoons by Maurice Henry.

Barthes was asked by Nadeau to help with a questionnaire on literature; together, at the end of 1952, they sent out a questionnaire on the



nature of left-wing literature to various French intellectuals and writers.<sup>54</sup> Their conclusion, contrary to the strictures of Socialist realism, was that literature, though a reflection of historical and material reality, was always a means of questioning rather than affirming. The conclusion underlined their view of the aesthetic and party-political neutrality of literature.

Barthes's views of this 'enquête' were mixed. Writing to Rebeyrol on the 28 November 1952, he suggested that the 'enquête' with Nadaud [sic] was useful to an 'élucidation des mots-mythes'. Two months later, however, he described the results of this 'enquête' as 'médiocres' in a letter to Rebeyrol (dated 10 January 1953). It would be possible, however, to show how the results of the questionnaire influenced his final draft of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*; a comparison of the original texts in *Combat* between 1947 and 1951 with the final book version would point to a discrepancy which the 'enquête' might have influenced, particularly with regard to Socialist Realism.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, it was easier for neutrality in *L'Observateur* to be maintained in literary and artistic matters than in politics and political affiliations.<sup>56</sup> If its claim to neutrality was henceforth based more on the Cold War than on domestic political affiliations, this was put to the test by its anti-colonial stance. Indeed, the most important political role of *L'Observateur* in the 1950s was its opposition to the 'sale guerre' in Indochina, which had begun in 1946. The 'opération de police' in May 1954 against *L'Express* for its criticism of French generals in Indo-China led the newspaper in June 1954 (by now called *France-Observateur*) to defend its rival against state intimidation. The anti-colonial stance of *France-Observateur* was promulgated precisely in the middle of Barthes's twice-monthly 'chronique' on popular theatre for *France-Observateur*. This stance undoubtedly influenced Barthes's disdain for colonial control, a stance which he would help to continue in *Les Lettres nouvelles* six months later against the Algerian War.



It was whilst at *France-Observateur* that Barthes made another important meeting. Edgar Morin was one who received a questionnaire on left-wing literature and was quoted by Barthes in the compte-rendu. Morin was to precede Barthes by one year in his appointment to the EPHE in 1959 and was central in setting up *Communications* with Barthes soon after. However, it was in 1956 that Morin and Barthes had first set up a journal.

### *Arguments*

In 1956 Barthes was invited by Edgar Morin, now a fellow researcher in the sociology section of the CNRS, to participate in a new journal of political ‘dégel’. This ‘dégel’ was based on the view in the non-Communist Left of the supposed reforms of the Soviet Union after Khrushchev’s accession to power. There is, it seems, conflicting evidence as to the importance of Barthes for *Arguments*. Though a sub-editor for the journal, and contributing an article to the first number, Barthes wrote very little for this publication. Though listed on the inside cover of the journal as a member of the editorial board, his next article to be published in it was not until the sixth number in February 1958.<sup>57</sup>

Franco Fortini, editor of the Italian journal *Ragionamenti*, which inspired Morin to create its equivalent in France, *Arguments*, has explained how he had brought the infamous Khrushchev speech to Paris in early 1956.<sup>58</sup> Both Morin and Barthes read the speech.<sup>59</sup> This inspired Morin to ask Barthes to help him to create the journal, to ‘renouveler la pensée de gauche’.<sup>60</sup> This implied that Barthes was central to the enterprise. Indeed, Calvet’s biography and Marc Poster’s study of postwar Marxism in France have considered Barthes a central figure.<sup>61</sup> Though Barthes stressed that he had been present only as ‘secondaire, mineur mais complémentaire’ to the ‘militants’ who had ‘une pensée politique mieux informée [et] plus active’, the fact that Barthes was interviewed in 1979 by Mariateresa Padova on the subject of *Arguments*



implied that his involvement had been substantial.<sup>62</sup>

Financially, however, *Arguments* was of little interest to Barthes.<sup>63</sup> Morin has stated that, with the cooperation of Jérôme Lindon, owner of Les Editions de Minuit, the journal was published without charge, but also that the 'comité de rédaction' was not paid, its members 'tous bénévoles'.<sup>64</sup> This was a new set of circumstances for Barthes; editorial involvement in *Arguments* was not remunerated, and, despite Calvet's assertion, Barthes failed to keep up with his commitments for the journal: unlike his editorial work for *Théâtre populaire* which had been tied up with his post as 'conseiller littéraire' to L'Arche, and regular columns (to differing degrees) in both *France-Observateur* and *Les Lettres nouvelles*, this was a political rather than financial involvement, and one which Barthes seemed to shun at the end of 1956.

If it is not easy to establish fully Barthes's attitude towards *Arguments*, two aspects are clear, however. Firstly, Barthes's limited involvement showed that as we saw, he no longer wanted to be this left-wing journalist and intellectual figure, but a researcher. Secondly, Morin had considered him appropriate to this political venture. Why, before the publication of *Mythologies*, might Morin invite Barthes to aid his setting up of *Arguments*?

Barthes's view in the 1979 interview with Maria Padova was that, although not a 'marxiste', he had nevertheless been 'imprégné par une certaine pensée marxiste', which, he implied, fitted the new open version of Marxism which Morin, recently expelled from the Communist Party, had wanted to initiate; and he stressed to Padova that his initiation into Marxism had been via 'des méditations de type trotskiste, trotskisant', above all 'pas staliniennes'.

Yet, according to Calvet, Morin has stressed that he did not consider Barthes ever to have had a 'culture marxiste'.<sup>65</sup> If this was the case, then Barthes had been invited by Morin to work on this new journal more for his editorial skills and for his perceived intellectual standing than his political,



Marxist credentials. This status was clearly important enough to inspire Morin: Barthes had earned a non-communist left-wing intellectual standing from the publication of his first two books, but also, from his journalistic activities up until 1956. One of these activities had been for *Théâtre populaire*.

Interestingly, Barthes had joined a theatre journal whose political orientation seemed inconsistent with his politico-artistic views.<sup>66</sup> If the account of 'l'écriture marxiste' in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* displayed Barthes's disdain in 1953 for the strictures of Communist Party literary doctrine, parodied in his description of André Stil and Roger Garaudy, it is perhaps odd that he agreed to write for a new popular theatre journal set up by a small publisher, Robert Voisin, described by Daniel Mortier as 'proche du Parti communiste français'.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, it had been on the basis of his anti-stalinist, trotskyist initiation to Marxism that Morin had sought Barthes's help. Nevertheless, it was in this popular theatre journal that many of Barthes's theoretical insights were made.

### (iii) Voisin and *Théâtre populaire*

In 1953 Robert Voisin, 'jeune éditeur "engagé"' and fellow traveller of the French Communist Party, invited Barthes to join the editorial board of a 'revue bimestrielle d'information sur le théâtre'. Published by Voisin's Les Editions de l'Arche, *Théâtre populaire* brought together Guy Dumur, Morvan Lebesque and Barthes on the 'comité de rédaction'; Voisin himself was 'directeur'. The journal reflected the postwar explosion of popular theatre in France. The post-war decentralisation of theatres and the success of drama festivals such as Avignon, begun in 1947, meant large crowds were visiting



festivals such as Avignon, begun in 1947, meant large crowds were visiting the theatre by 1953.<sup>68</sup>

The journal grew up around the efforts of actor and director Jean Vilar who, in 1951, had been appointed by Jeanne Laurent to run the Théâtre National Populaire (TNP). After a number of organisational hiccoughs (notably the United Nations taking many months to leave the projected site), the popular theatre was finally based at the Palais de Chaillot in the Trocadéro. The TNP was not, however, a new establishment; after the First World War, Firmin Gémier's efforts as director of the Théâtre National Populaire in 1920 in the old Trocadéro had been wracked by crises. After his death in 1933, a series of 'responsables' moved the TNP from the Trocadéro; but even the new Palais de Chaillot site failed to attract a mass audience. It was not until Vilar's nomination in 1951 that this mass, popular audience began to emerge.

Why was Barthes considered important for the new popular theatre journal in 1953? He had studied Classics at the Sorbonne, specialising for his 'diplôme d'études supérieures' in 'les incantations et les évocations dans la tragédie grecque'; and, having set up and participated in the theatre group 'le théâtre antique de la Sorbonne', acting in a production of *Les Perses*, he was an expert on Ancient Greek drama.<sup>69</sup> He would recommend many aspects of ancient drama to the contemporary popular theatre movement.<sup>70</sup>

Calvet has suggested that Barthes was spotted by Voisin thanks to his 'quelques articles' on theatre in *Les Lettres nouvelles*.<sup>71</sup> This is inaccurate for two reasons. Firstly, Barthes wrote only one article on theatre in *Les Lettres nouvelles* before the launch of *Théâtre populaire* in May/June 1953.<sup>72</sup> Secondly, though Voisin undoubtedly shared Barthes's enthusiasm for Vilar's production and conception of popular theatre, it seems unlikely that Barthes would be given a place on the editorial board of a journal on the basis of one article; therefore, the two-article series for *Esprit*, his only previous articles in



any way related to theatre, must have played an important role in impressing Voisin.

Indeed, these two articles were full of references to popular culture. In the first, Barthes had regretted that real wrestling, the amateur 'spectacle' rather than the 'faux catch qui se joue à grands frais avec les apparences inutiles d'un sport régulier', were being staged only in 'des salles de seconde zone'.<sup>73</sup> Barthes counterposed the professional sport of wrestling ('sans intérêt') to the amateur version where the 'le public s'accorde spontanément à la nature spectaculaire du combat', just like the audience at a 'cinéma de banlieue' (his example was the film version of Raymond Queneau's *Loin de Rueil*). There, the 'emphasis' of wrestling was nothing but the 'image populaire et ancestrale de l'intelligibilité parfaite du réel'.

Barthes's emphasis in this article was based on the reaction of the audience, of the popular masses. Using phrases such as 'Le public se moque', 'Ce public sait très bien', he was reflecting the growing popular theatre movement, of which Voisin was a part; and on a number of occasions during the article he quoted the audience.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the whole article was based on the (necessarily popular) audience's relationship to the show; within the notion of justice there was a subtext of transgression of laws, a popular Justice: 'le corps d'une transgression possible'.<sup>75</sup> He was also to stress the social nature of this popular wrestling event.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, if Voisin was busy publishing the first translated plays of Bertholt Brecht in 1953, Barthes's tentative definition of a popular aesthetic and culture was not unrelated for Voisin to Brecht's attempts to find an epic theatre for the people which encouraged a new form of participatory audience.

The second article for *Esprit* which must have impressed Voisin, 'Folies-Bergère', a somewhat fumbling and repetitive article, was an amusing and ironic critique of bourgeois theatre. Pretending to be a member of the bourgeoisie, Barthes reported his visit to see this 'spectacle'.<sup>77</sup> Here was a



theatre where 'l'Argent' ruled 'à la place du logos dramatique'.<sup>78</sup> A parody of bourgeois sentiments it told how the spectator felt 'assuré que le billet de mille francs' was going to 'rapporter pendant trois heures une fortune', for the cost of the ticket would be 'à proportion de sa beauté bien visible': all the money would be 'exposé sur la scène à mon intention'. His tone was, of course, highly ironic: this bourgeois theatre visitor knew that there was theatre 'des peuples' which, though 'dépeuplé à l'extrême', could reach 'au plus profond de la terreur'. Barthes's irony was a subtle reference to a popular theatre very different from the form of entertainment offered at the 'Folies'.

Barthes himself had indeed been brought up within this different theatre tradition. He had visited the Cartel productions during the early Thirties at the Mathurins and the Atelier theatres.<sup>79</sup> There are a number of explicit references to this in his writing, especially in the 1953 article on '*Le Prince de Hombourg*'.<sup>80</sup> Vilar's questioning of the stage meant, above all, that the actors took on a natural human size, no matter how far away the 'spectateur populaire'; and this 'prééminence' of space was perhaps a trait 'commun à tous les théâtres populaires'.<sup>81</sup>

Barthes's praise of Vilar combined with his interest in popular events and aesthetics meant that he was considered relevant to *Théâtre populaire* by Voisin; he was keen to promote a popular theatre whilst maintaining a critique of bourgeois theatres. Indeed, the first editorial resembled the analysis of exclusion of the popular masses that Barthes had analysed in relation to literary language in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. However, I am unable to ascertain whether Barthes wrote, or helped write, the first editorial of *Théâtre populaire*.<sup>82</sup>

The editorial explained that the journal's collaborators regretted the fate of the original attempt to found a Théâtre National Populaire.<sup>83</sup> At best, this attempt had fulfilled only one of its roles, and the easiest, that of offering 'à meilleur marché des spectacles identiques à ceux des autres théâtres'.



‘le souvenir de Firmin Gémier et quelques tentatives plus récentes, déjà tombées dans l’oubli’. But with the appointment of Vilar (and other ‘entreprises plus hardies et plus importantes, en France et à l’Étranger’) the words had become more precise, the popular theatre was coming nearer to its original social role, that of ‘un moyen d’expression essentiellement populaire’; in the time of Shakespeare, Aeschylus and Lope de Vega, the term ‘popular theatre’ would have been a pleonasm: the theatre at that time was, by definition, ‘populaire’. In the editorial’s view, the role of the journal in 1953 was to ‘rendre au Théâtre Populaire sa place prépondérante dans la vie publique’, in a society in which the ‘Théâtre’ had been relegated to the ‘rang de divertissement secondaire’.

Published in *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* at the beginning of 1953, Barthes’s account of the silencing and linguistic exclusion of the French people via the standardization of French as a result of absolutism and the centralization of the French state in the seventeenth century, resembled the attitude of the editorial towards the popular theatre’s demise. Having noted the relative failure of Gémier and Copeau to establish in the inter-war period a truly popular theatre, the editorial attributed the failure of the ‘élargissement’ of the theatre to the fact that ‘les conditions sociales n’étaient pas encore remplies’; as with the ‘degré zéro’ thesis in literature, a rising bourgeoisie had made the theatre, ‘l’art des foules, moyen d’expression populaire’ into a ‘simple divertissement’ for a privileged audience: this ‘transformation’ came ‘tout naturellement’ from the ‘transformation de la Société’:

Sous la règne d’une Bourgeoisie naissante, consciente de son pouvoir et de ses droits, le Théâtre, comme la Société dont il n’était que le reflet fidèle, se compartimenta en cloisons étanches, se retrancha de la masse et se claquemura dans les salles au plafond élevé permettant moins l’ordonnance du spectacle que l’ordonnance du Public. (2)



Just as Barthes's *Degré zéro* theory had seen literature and literary form as a reflection of social reality, so the first editorial of *Théâtre populaire* considered that the theatre had become a 'microcosme' of society, reflecting the stark division of society into classes, no longer 'une communion unanime', but 'une image rapetissée de la Société'.<sup>84</sup> The journal's role was now not to 'porter un jugement de valeur', but to contribute to the 'renouveau' of the theatre, by underlining how much it had lost both its 'unité' and the 'sens de sa grandeur' because of its control and consumption by certain 'catégories de spectateurs'.

Barthes's praise of Vilar's production, his placing of Vilar in the popular theatre tradition of Ancient Greece and the Cartel and his desire to find a popular audience (despite his view of the impossibility of this due to the 'déchirement' of society) was conducive to Voisin's enthusiasm for the popular theatre.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Barthes's view in the article on the TNP production of Kleist's play that the tradition of tragedy was the only truly popular aesthetic, because it made 'psychologie' peripheral to drama and dared to put 'le débat intérieur' into the 'extériorité admirable des situations', fitted with the 'grandeur' which the editorial considered crucial to a 'renouveau' of the theatre.<sup>86</sup>

His move from the 'chronique bimensuelle' at *Esprit* to the pages of Voisin's popular theatre journal was not necessarily a reflection of his attitude towards the Catholic journal, however. On the contrary, it seems that this period of early 1953 saw Barthes move closer to this journal. In a letter to Rebeyrol dated February 1953 he described a weekend 'congrès d'*Esprit*'; he had enjoyed the debates, both cultural and political, in which the young Catholic participants displayed a 'politesse intérieure', and were 'sensibles dans la dynamique des débats, tendue mais jamais agressive'. Regretting his difference in age, he appreciated, nevertheless, their commitment, especially when compared to other Catholics that he knew: two Roman Catholics



friends, whom he had met in Romania, were remarkably ‘innocent’ in comparison, since, he wrote, they were unconcerned that General Franco was also Catholic. His friendship with Jean Cayrol was also important at this point; in Easter 1953 they went on holiday to the Basque region of Spain together.

The question was not so much a choice between *Esprit* and *Théâtre populaire*, but whether, and to what extent, he wanted to help Nadeau with a new literary journal. Indeed, by mid-1953 Barthes’s journalistic activity was becoming dominated by his commitments to Nadeau’s new monthly journal; in the first number, as well as his review article of Vilar’s production of *Le Prince de Hombourg*, he also reviewed a translation of Gilberto Freyre’s study of Brazilian society and two months later a new collection of poetry by Jean Cayrol.<sup>87</sup> His decision to devote time to Nadeau’s new journal was such that, when excusing himself for not visiting Rebeyrol (working in Egypt), he cited his ‘engagements moraux’ to Nadeau’s journal as his reason.<sup>88</sup>

However, Barthes’s relationship to Nadeau’s journal seemed to be encouraged by personal, rather than ideological or aesthetic, considerations; in the same letter to Rebeyrol, he explained in parenthesis that this commitment was ‘plus pour Nadaud [sic] que pour la revue que je n’aime guère’; and Barthes contrasted Nadeau’s journal with *Esprit* ‘que j’estime beaucoup’. This preference was not to be reflected, however, by the frequency with which he published articles in the two journals. Between the first number of *Les Lettres nouvelles* (March 1953) and number 38 (May 1956), there were only eleven issues in which Barthes did not publish an article; in the same period, he published only three articles in *Esprit*. Did this mean that the financial stability of regular publications in Nadeau’s journal attracted Barthes, or was he simply wishing to help a friend, in which case was he, or did he consider himself, indispensable to Nadeau’s journal?



#### **(iv) Forging a popular theatre and analysing myths**

##### ***Les Lettres nouvelles: le Début***

Having read Nadeau's articles in *Combat* and *L'Observateur*, René Julliard, the publisher of *Les Temps Modernes*, offered him the possibility of editing a monthly literary journal; Nadeau agreed. It was, according to Nadeau, to be set up in contrast to other journals such as Paulhan's *Nouvelle nouvelle revue française*, the *Mercure de France*, Mauriac's *Table Ronde* and Jacques Laurent's *la Parisienne*, all either liberal or centre-right politically and generally conservative in literary and artistic coverage; it wanted also to escape the narrow strictures Sartrian thought had tried, somewhat unsuccessfully by 1953, to impose on left-wing authors.<sup>89</sup>

Launched in March 1953, *Les Lettres nouvelles* tried to fill the gap in the intellectual and literary market by walking a fine line between, on the one hand, traditional and (often) conservative literature and, on the other, the propagandism of Sartrian 'engagement' and Stalinist 'socialist realism'.<sup>90</sup> It was to present a left-wing cultural analysis which drew its inspiration from Leon Trotsky and Victor Serge, rather than from Joseph Stalin and Laurent Casanova.

The editorial of the first number stressed the need for a lively, non-dogmatic attitude to literature, a current of cultural thought which looked at 'la littérature en marche'. The contents of the first number testified to this attitude: previously unpublished poems by the avant-garde poet Henri Michaux and a short story by (then) unknown Dylan Thomas; in the second number, in April 1953, a short story by Henry Miller and 'inédits' by Franz Kafka and the Marquis de Sade. The journal gave space also to up-and-coming writers; the first number also carried an extract from Antonin Artaud's account of his visit to Mexico and an assessment of Jacques Prévert's books for children.



So *Les Lettres nouvelles* was predominantly literary, covering a wide range of international authors and theorists, either well-known foreign writers such as Miller and Kafka, or classics such as Sade and De Quincey. But it also gave space to those marginal writers such as Richard Wright, and the little-known Margu rite Duras and Eug ne Ionesco; indeed most of the works published in it were ‘in dits’. The international nature of its tastes was very much in the mould of *Th  tre populaire*’s subsequent interest in international drama (numbers were devoted to Brecht, the Peking Opera, Irish and Italian theatre amongst others).

But not only covering literature, *Les Lettres nouvelles* included pieces on more general cultural matters; for example, Maurice Saillet, Nadeau’s co-editor, wrote on plagiarism, Maurice Faure, the music arranger for the TNP, on atonalism in music, Edgar Morin on Romain Rolland’s First World War diaries; there was also an article on Zen Buddhism. A little later in the life of the journal there was a regular contribution from the cinema critic, Ado Kyrou (who also wrote for *Th  tre populaire*). Other colleagues from this theatre journal would also contribute articles - Jean Duvignaud, Guy Dumur, and Bernard Dort; therefore there was an overlap between the two journals; and it was Barthes, it seems, who provided this journalistic connection.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, in the first number of the *Les Lettres nouvelles*, there was a feature, which ran almost uninterrupted from the first number until Summer 1954, called ‘la gazette d’Adrienne Monnier’.<sup>92</sup> Before the War, Monnier had written the ‘Chroniques’ for the *Nouvelle Revue Fran aise* and in *le Figaro litt raire*. Her gazette for Nadeau’s journal covered various issues each month: the first included a criticism of Jean Paulhan, Gallimard editor, and of his decisions on juries conferring literary prizes; subsequent numbers were to carry a review of the latest production of Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*, and an assessment of the other rival journal, *la Parisienne*; Monnier also visited London, witnessing the Coronation of the Queen; assessed the acting of



Dullin, Barrault and Vilar, of Alec Guinness, and of Marlon Brando; and, long before Barthes, she wrote an ironic piece on the UFO madness sweeping across France. Though Nadeau has recently rejected the comparison, this 'gazette' did seem to play a similar role to that of Barthes's 'petite mythologie du mois', covering both day to day events and more refined cultural phenomena.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, starting in November 1954, three months after the last 'gazette', Barthes's 'petite mythologie' seemed to be taking over, in his own way of course, this role of the chronicler, so common in French literary journals.

From the beginning Nadeau's journal tried to situate itself in relation to other journals; thus in the 'Remarques' section, in the very first number, written by Saillet under a pseudonym, appeared another polemic against Jean Paulhan (under the pseudonym Jean Guérin), editor of the reformed (and renamed) journal *Nouvelle nouvelle revue française (NNRF)*. Relaunched by Paulhan at almost exactly the same time as Nadeau's, the *NNRF* had been banned since the Liberation because of its collaboration with the Nazis during the Occupation; as an intellectual and literary monthly journal in the centre-liberal position of the political spectrum, it was to become the main rival of Nadeau's.

Nadeau's attitude to the *NNRF* at the time was complex: he had considered it the best journal before the War; but when the Nazis had removed Paulhan in 1940 from the editorial team, and replaced him with Drieu la Rochelle, its collaborationist tendencies had jarred his admiration. It was not only he and Saillet who disliked the *NNRF* in 1953; Nadeau has noted that Barthes too had a grudge against Paulhan (and the rest of the Gallimard publishing house, especially Roger Caillois) for their refusing to publish his *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, despite the recommendation by Raymond Queneau.<sup>94</sup> So, after the publication of the very first number of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, containing both Saillet's and Monnier's criticisms of Paulhan and



the *NRRF*: the ‘combat’ with Paulhan’s journal was now ‘engagé’.<sup>95</sup>

At this stage of his journalistic career, then, Barthes was part of a network of left-wing intellectuals, linked by a number of journals and publishing houses in Paris; this period, 1953 to 1956, was to be the most active phase of his life in the world of journalism; between his first article in *Les Lettres nouvelles* in March 1953 and the last ‘petite mythologie’ in April 1956 he published over one hundred and twenty articles.<sup>96</sup> Chief editor of *Théâtre populaire* from 1954 to 1956, he conceived and wrote his ‘petite sociologie de la vie quotidienne’ for *Les Lettres nouvelles* during the same period.

If Nadeau’s journal was to become crucial in Barthes’s journalistic and intellectual career, this was not before his involvement in Voisin’s journal started to increase with his appointment as literary advisor to L’Arche in January 1954; his regular column for *Les Lettres nouvelles*, the ‘petite mythologie du mois’, did not begin until November 1954. This period in 1954 saw Barthes become, if only for a brief period, a professional free-lance full-time journalist; interestingly, this beginning period was outside of Nadeau’s journal and displayed a notable increase in his interest in the popular theatre.

### **Popular theatre before demystification**

During this six-month lull in his commitments to Nadeau’s journal, Barthes began, and fulfilled, a journalistic service for *France-Observateur*. In a letter to Rebeyrol, dated Spring 1954, he looked forward to his ‘chronique bi-mensuelle de spectacle’ for the ‘supplément littéraire de *l’Observateur*’. Unlike his contract for an article every two months for *Esprit* a year before, which he had barely managed to achieve, this two-weekly ‘chronique’, begun in the 15 April 1954 number of *France-Observateur*, ran uninterrupted until 22 July 1954, eight articles in total.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, the correspondence from Barthes to Voisin during this



period seemed to underline Barthes's importance for *Théâtre populaire* more than for Nadeau's journal, for which Barthes had to be reminded constantly by Nadeau for his monthly column.<sup>98</sup> Not only was Barthes literary advisor to L'Arche, he was also important in the day to day running of the journal. The letters from Barthes to Voisin at l'Arche show clearly that Barthes was of crucial importance to Voisin in making decisions about the contents of the journal. For example, writing to Barthes on 28 March 1954, Voisin entrusted the sixth number of the journal to Barthes whilst he went on holiday. Having suggested the contents of the number, he left it to Barthes to sort out the editorial (also to telephone the dramatist Ghelderolde to arrange an interview and to remind Duvignaud of his article on 'mythes du théâtre'). He added that it would be a good idea for Barthes, Paris and Duvignaud to think about the 'théâtre et les jours' section too. Barthes was quite clearly the deputy to Voisin. This did not mean, however, that Barthes made all the decisions. In a reply to Voisin's letter, dated 'Dimanche', Barthes wrote that he had encountered difficulties with the list of tasks given to him to finish number 6 for the printers'; he was unable to find the editorial written by Jean Paris on the Comédie-Française exchange with the Moscow Ballet. In any case, said Barthes, there were two major problems with it; firstly, he suggested to Voisin, they had to 'atténuer considérablement les jugements sur le Français'.<sup>99</sup> Secondly, they had to 'ne pas laisser passer à l'aube de quoi que ce soit qui ressemble à une attaque contre l'URSS'; this, he said, would be 'objectivement gratuite, dans l'état actuel de notre connaissance du dossier'. Instead, he suggested an editorial which, in spelling out the purely informal relationship between *Théâtre populaire* and the TNP, would set the record straight on the journal's relationship with Vilar: it was a 'bonne occasion de mettre fin à des manoeuvres latentes', to 'vider l'abcès Rouvet-Vilar non seulement sur le plan ATP mais aussi sur le plan Revue'.<sup>100</sup>

If we look at the journal Barthes did not get his way entirely: the



editorial of number 6 was, against his advice, finally given over to a critique of the theatre exchange between France and the USSR. Nevertheless, Barthes's second concern was respected and the overly critical account of the Russian Ballet was tempered in the editorial by an admission of ignorance about exactly what the 'Ballets russes' meant to the Soviet people; also the criticism of the Comédie-Française looked singularly like Barthes's article for *France-Observateur*. Did Barthes rewrite Paris's original editorial? Furthermore, Barthes's suggestion of a clarification of the relationship between the journal and Vilar's TNP would appear in the editorial of *Théâtre populaire* 7. Did Barthes write this denial of the journal's financial and political dependence on the TNP?<sup>101</sup>

Voisin's authority over Barthes was, nevertheless, in evidence in a letter written in 1958, in which Barthes complained about going to review Vilar's production of *Ubu* at the TNP: it was always he, rather than other colleagues, who went to Chaillot to write reviews of Vilar's productions. Not only was this indicative of Barthes's disenchantment in 1958 with Vilar's efforts at the TNP, it underlined the control that Voisin exerted, for we know that Barthes acquiesced and wrote the review.<sup>102</sup>

That Barthes played a fundamental role in running the popular theatre journal is clear from these letters; between 1954 and 1956, he was the most prolific contributor to *Théâtre populaire*.<sup>103</sup> However, it has been easy to underestimate the importance of Barthes's general role in the popular theatre movement; Calvet's biography, comprehensive in so many other areas, singularly neglects this aspect of Barthes's activities in the 1950s.<sup>104</sup> As well as writing for and organising *Théâtre populaire* he attended the TNP debates at the Palais de Chaillot.<sup>105</sup> He gave lectures on theatre: the article 'Les Maladies du costume de théâtre', published in *Théâtre populaire* in 1955, had originally been conceived as a lecture; in the 'Dialogue' with Denis Bablet discussing this article, Barthes reminded his interlocutor: 'N'oubliez pas qu'il



s'agissait d'une conférence'.<sup>106</sup> This lecture was advertised in the TNP bulletin, *Bref* on several occasions; in the January 1955 edition, Barthes's lecture was scheduled for 5 February in Amiens; in the October 1955 edition, a popular theatre activist from Amiens wrote that 'en février Roland Barthes traita la question du costume de théâtre'; another activist suggested a year later, in *Bref* February 1956, that there should be a lecture by Barthes in Geneva on costumes 'avec projection lumineuses'.<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, it seems that Barthes was considerably active in the popular theatre movement. In an article on the first Avignon winter festival, he began: 'Il y a peu de jours, j'étais en Avignon, où une section des "Amis du Théâtre populaire" est en train de se fonder'; clearly, he had visited Avignon to help with a new section of the Amis du théâtre populaire (ATP).<sup>108</sup> Indeed, he was a mouthpiece on occasions for the ATP. His talk in June 1954 in Avignon, reprinted briefly in *Publi 54* (a local advertising magazine for the Avignon area), was originally a speech to the ATP in Avignon.<sup>109</sup>

Barthes also went abroad to give lectures on popular theatre. Writing to Rebeyrol from a train station (a letter dated 20 November 1953), Barthes wrote that he was about to leave for Britain to give a series of lectures in Manchester, London and Edinburgh on the popular theatre and on the language of literature.<sup>110</sup> According to Nadeau, Barthes represented *Théâtre populaire* at an international conference on journals organized by Ignazio Silone in Zurich in 1957.<sup>111</sup> He attended a number of drama festivals, not only Avignon, but also Nîmes, Rouen, and Annecy.<sup>112</sup>

He also wrote in a number of other important theatre journals of the period. Before 1956 he had not written on theatre outside of *Théâtre populaire*, *Esprit*, *France-Observateur* or *Les Lettres nouvelles*; his first real intervention in the world of theatre, outside of these journals was a reply to a questionnaire on the political nature of the theatre in *Arts* in April 1956.<sup>113</sup> His influence was by 1956 obviously considerable enough for him to be asked to



write outside of his usual place of publication.

After this, he wrote for the TNP/ATP monthly journal, *Bref*, on two occasions.<sup>114</sup> In respect of his strong support for the ‘Festival international d’art dramatique de Paris’ since its first season three years before, he was considered an important figure on the international theatre scene.<sup>115</sup> He was asked to write a short piece in the first number of the journal which emerged from this festival, *Rendez-vous des théâtres des Nations*. Here he parodied Dullin’s famous saying ‘le théâtre est aussi une rencontre’ by calling his article ‘la rencontre est aussi un combat’.<sup>116</sup> Writing that his opinion was a ‘témoignage’ only if it was ‘assorti’ by other texts of the same genre, Barthes offered his ‘reconnaissance’ towards the Festival International de Paris for its revelation to him of the work of the *Berliner Ensemble*. Then, in a radio discussion on RTF on 8 February 1958 with Jean Dasté, play director at the Comédie de Saint-Etienne, and Paul-Louis Mignon, on Ancient Greek theatre, he was described as a ‘critique dramatique et fondateur du Groupe du Théâtre Antique de la Sorbonne’.<sup>117</sup> He wrote also for the prestigious theatre journal *Les Cahiers de la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault* (on the differences between the Brechtian and Marxian view of history in the theatre), as well as for the Belgian theatre journal *Théâtre d’aujourd’hui*.<sup>118</sup>

### **Promoting Epic theatre**

The invitations to Barthes after 1956 to write on theatre outside of *Théâtre populaire* were undoubtedly linked to the notoriety that he had received in his promotion of Brechtian theatre. If his role in popular theatre has been neglected, then this neglect is equal to the underestimation of his role in winning a wide knowledge of, and interest in, Brechtian theatre; Daniel Mortier has recognized Barthes’s fundamental importance in importing Brecht into France, an importance wider than simply in relation to the German dramatist.



Indeed, the theatre of Brecht had a profound effect on French theatre after the mid-fifties, especially on directors/writers such as Roger Planchon, Michel Vinaver and Savary; it went on to influence strongly theatre theory in France in the sixties and seventies. If Bernard Dort is considered the French expert on Brecht's theatre, this was based on his work with Barthes in the 1950s.

The importance of Barthes in bringing Brecht to the attention of the French drama establishment was later related to Barthes's theorisation of Brecht's theatre. As well as important in the development of the use of the camera in the theatre, his commentary on the Berliner Ensemble's second performance in Paris in 1957 of *Mère Courage*, with the photographer Pic who had taken pictures of the whole performance using a 'télé-objectif' began Barthes interest in the semiological and aesthetic aspect of Brechtian theatre; Pic's photos, said Barthes, would be the first 'véritable histoire photographiée' of Brecht's play; this, he thought, was a 'fait nouveau [...] dans la critique de théâtre, du moins en France' and these hundred photos would not be only 'beau' (since *Mère Courage* was a 'très belle histoire') they would also be 'très précieux' for those who wanted to 'réfléchir sur le théâtre'.<sup>119</sup> In Barthes's view, Pic's photos would help to 'éclairer' the Brechtian notion of 'distancement' which had 'tant irrité la critique'.<sup>120</sup> Barthes's subsequent commentary is a fascinating discovery of the 'l'intention profonde de la création', with references to Walter Benjamin and comments on aesthetic notions such as naturalism, formalism and realism.<sup>121</sup> Barthes had discovered Brecht's Epic theatre in 1954 thanks to the Berliner Ensemble production of *Mutter Courage* (in German). He had known Brecht's theatre, 'partiellement', thanks to the efforts of Vilar and Jean-Marie Serreau.<sup>122</sup> But he and the French drama scene knew little of Brecht's theories until 1955. With Barthes's help, this was to change dramatically. By the time Vilar left the TNP in 1963, Brecht's theatre was third only to Molière and Shakespeare in



the TNP record number of spectators, beating audience numbers for productions of Corneille plays and not far behind those numbers at productions of Shakespeare.<sup>123</sup>

Writing numerous articles on Brecht in this period of his journalism, Barthes was keen to win wider recognition for Brecht's theatre.<sup>124</sup> In 1955, he wrote: 'Notre seul but, pour le moment, est d'aider à une connaissance de Brecht'. By 1957, he could proclaim (with Dort) the relative success of the 'implantation' of Brecht: 'Brecht est maintenant bien connu en France', even if it was not 'encore d'une très bonne manière'.<sup>125</sup> Barthes did not give the credit for this to French directors however; despite the 'tentatives courageuses' of Serreau in Paris, of Vilar's TNP and of Planchon in Lyon, above all, it was, 'la troupe de Brecht' [sic] which had introduced Brecht 'au public français'.<sup>126</sup>

Barthes's 'brechtisme' was important in terms of his journalism and intellectual career because it suggested not only that he was visibly on the Marxist Left, but also that he felt that he had a political and theatrical mission. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Barthes was at the forefront in the split which took place around the question of Brecht and political theatre on the one hand, and avant-garde, experimental theatre on the other. Indeed, there is little doubt that Ionesco's 1956 play *L'Impromptu de l'Alma*, a satirical critique of 'le théâtre scientifique', was aimed at Brecht, *Théâtre populaire* and Barthes in particular. Ionesco, as Dort has suggested, was 'un des plus farouches adversaires' of Brecht.<sup>127</sup> Mortier has shown clearly how Ionesco's short play was aimed specifically at theatre critics and in particular at *Théâtre populaire* - it would be difficult to consider the three characters called Bartholoméus (I, II and III), and all 'docteurs' advising the character 'Ionesco' how to write a play, not to be a reference to Barthes.<sup>128</sup>

If Barthes became an important figure in the popular theatre movement, this began, above all, with his influence in the evolution of *Théâtre*



*populaire*. Contrary to the ‘image monolithique’, says Bernard Dort, there were three important stages in the history of this journal; if these stages were influenced by ‘facteurs personnels’ then ‘il faudrait parler longuement du rôle et de la présence de Roland Barthes’, who had an ‘importance décisive dans l’orientation et la rédaction’.<sup>129</sup> We will see this in the manner in which he was important in the politicisation of the journal in Chapter 3.

### Conclusion

The difficulty is to decide which was more important for Barthes: a Communist-influenced journal which promoted popular culture and Brecht’s ‘communist’ theatre; or an independent literary journal which decried the myths of contemporary society and advocated an avant-gardist attitude towards culture; or were they simply complementary? We will look at this in the next two chapters.

We can conclude, however, that Barthes was an active journalist. Indeed, as his journalistic output dramatically increased between 1954 and 1955, Barthes began to consider even that there was a proletarianization of the writer taking place. Written in 1954, ‘L’écrivain en vacances’, began to question the bourgeois representation of the writer.<sup>130</sup> Though this was clearly an ironic and humorous account of bourgeois ideology’s treatment of the writer, the idea of the writer’s ‘prolétarisation’ was one which reoccurred in Barthes’s more serious comments: that he was a writer and an intellectual, and therefore implicated in this (suggested) ‘proletarianization’ of the writer can be seen from his views at the conference in the Black Forest which took place in January 1955.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, with this view that the journalist (that is, himself) was being



exploited, Barthes's prolific journalistic activism could not be sustained. We will see in the next two chapters how his activism in the popular theatre fared alongside his rather ironic and more patient theorisation of French myths, how he slowly lost interest in the popular theatre.

First, we must look at the importance, in terms of career, of the publication of *Mythologies*, and their original place of publication: if Barthes's professional journalism began elsewhere, it was nevertheless in the pages of Nadeau's *Les Lettres nouvelles* that he was to achieve, perhaps, the most notoriety.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Calvet, chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Roger, pp.285-287. Roger points out that, though Barthes's reading culture was similar to that of these Left-bank intellectuals (all were brought up on Gide, Valéry, Proust, France), his own publishing record pushed him into a later period of French intellectuals; Roger cites the example of Alain Robbe-Grillet (seven years younger than Barthes) who published his first novel the same year as Barthes's first book, in 1953. Furthermore, born in November 1915, during the First World War, Barthes belonged to a (relatively) rare batch of French children.

<sup>3</sup> *Histoire du Surréalisme* (Paris, Seuil, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Althusser's *Manifestes philosophiques de Feuerbach* were published in 1960, but he became well-known only after publication of the collective study of Marxist philosophy *Lire le Capital* and his own *Pour Marx* in 1965; see Dosse, *Histoire du Structuralisme, t.1*, pp.353-354.

<sup>5</sup> See the interview 'Réponses' (*Tel Quel*, 47, 1971), p.92 and Dosse, *Histoire du Structuralisme 1*, pp.98-105.

<sup>6</sup> *Arguing Revolution*, pp.61-68.

<sup>7</sup> Dosse, *Histoire du Structuralisme*, pp.19-26.

<sup>8</sup> Barthes wanted a clear definition of attitudes towards the Communist Party: 'Qu'ils se délimitent [...] sur leur gauche, c'est là qu'ils pourraient nous aider'; and referring to the Merleau-Ponty/Sartre rift he added: 'je nage complètement de voir tant de gens bien d'avis contraires'.

<sup>9</sup> This was Barthes's conclusion to his review of Gilberto Freyre's sociological study of Brazilian culture; see 'Maîtres et esclaves', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1953, p.108.

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Vitez and Emile Copfermann have underlined the experience and seniority of Barthes on the editorial team of *Théâtre populaire*: 'Roland Barthes réunissait les jeunes collaborateurs inexpérimentés de la revue [...] dans un salon de thé, à l'angle de la rue Grégoire de Tours, près d'une crêperie bretonne'. A. Vitez and E. Copfermann, *De Chaillot à Chaillot* (Paris, Hachette, 1981) p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Calvet, pp.79-82.

<sup>12</sup> Calvet, p.128.

<sup>13</sup> According to Jean Duvignaud, Barthes was 'directeur de l'Arche' (see *Le Magazine littéraire*, October 1993, p.63). There is, however, little evidence for this; the only information I could find at L'Arche were assessments of manuscripts by Barthes on a number of theatre issues, such as projected books on Russian actors and on Sophocles. These confirm, only, Barthes's role as advisor to L'Arche.



<sup>14</sup> Calvet, p.148.

<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in Spring 1955 the inheritance from his wealthy grandmother became accessible to the Barthes family; *ibid*, p.148.

<sup>16</sup> Most critics welcomed Barthes's first book, whereas the book on Michelet was greeted with mixed feelings; see, for example, 'Michelet extravagant' (*Le Monde*, 10 April 1954, p.7) which thought that the book 'ne devrait pas être présenté au grand public'; compare this with Lucien Febvre's very favourable comments in 'Michelet pas mort' (*Combat*, 24 April 1954, p.1 and p.9) which considered Barthes's study 'un des plus vivants écrits qui aient été consacrés à Michelet' (p.9).

<sup>17</sup> This difference was reflected in the number and length of reviews dedicated to the three books; though both the literary history and the monograph of Michelet were reviewed in a number of journals (the former more than the latter, it seems), reviews of *Mythologies* went far beyond specialist and left-wing publications; reviews appeared in journals as diverse as *France-Catholique* and *République libre*; we will look at these in Chapter 2.

<sup>18</sup> Calvet, p.130.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, pp.144-5.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement. Quelques observations méthodologiques', *Annales*, 3 July/September 1957, pp.430-441 (OC 741-752).

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p.441.

<sup>23</sup> See 'Réponses', p.92.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Philippe Rebeyrol, 14 October 1992; Barthes was, according to Rebeyrol, 'socialiste, utopiste, humaniste'. See also Calvet, pp.42-43.

<sup>25</sup> Nadeau's memoirs, *Grâces leur soient rendues* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1990) devote a chapter to his first meeting with Barthes in 1947, 'Un souvenir de Montmorency: Roland Barthes' (pp.311-322).

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.64. Despite his departure from militant activity, Nadeau's political importance after the War should not be underestimated; for example, with Alfred Rosmer, he played a central role in the postwar publication in France of Trotsky's writings; see *ibid*, pp.266-268.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, pp.312-313.

<sup>28</sup> *La Littérature présente* (Paris, Corrêa, 1952). Nadeau has remembered Barthes's words: 'Pour moi ce livre m'a fait plaisir car, au fond, il n'y a pas un seul point où je ne sois de ton avis et j'éprouve sur tous ces auteurs les mêmes sentiments que toi' (Nadeau, *Grâces*, p.315).

<sup>29</sup> Having considered, in 1945, the role of critic as a minor journalistic and political occupation (which meant no more than challenging French state censorship, and helping to bring forward authors, such as Léautaud, Bataille, Artaud, Leiris, Michaux, Char, and Céline) Nadeau soon wanted to take the job of critic more seriously: it was Barthes who encouraged him to do so. Barthes apparently told him: 'la critique valait toute autre activité littéraire et se révélait comparable à celle du romancier ou du poète' (Nadeau, *Grâces*, p.187).

<sup>30</sup> This was the tone of Nadeau's introduction at the head of Barthes's first article for *Combat*; he hoped that the readers would not be annoyed by the fact that the article did not look like 'un article de journal', and that its 'pensée [...] dense' was 'sans pittoresque extérieur' (*Combat*, 1 August 1947, p.2).

<sup>31</sup> This, according to Nadeau, was eventually misplaced, its content now forgotten. Calvet has suggested that Nadeau had considered this article to be above the intellectual sophistication of *Combat*; Calvet, p.105.

<sup>32</sup> *Combat*, 1 August 1947, p.2. This first article is interesting for a number of reasons; Barthes makes reference to Viggo Brondal's 'terme zéro', not contained in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*; above all, this first article displays a lengthy and positive account of Sartre's literary achievement, also omitted from Barthes's first book.

<sup>33</sup> See Nadeau's introduction to this article which described the interest generated by Barthes's first article, *Combat*, 26 September 1947, p.2 (OC 79-81). Called originally 'Responsabilité de la grammaire' by Barthes it was published under Nadeau's chosen title. Nadeau's title seem to remove the reference to Sartrean responsibility; Sartre had recently published in *Les Temps Modernes* in May and June 1947 his series on 'Qu'est-ce que la



littérature?’.

<sup>34</sup> These were on a variety of topics. The first, ‘Les Révolutions, suivent-elles des lois ?’ (*Combat*, 20 July 1950, p.4) was a lengthy critique of a mechanical and formalist view of revolution; the second, ‘Bakounine et le panslavisme révolutionnaire’ (*Combat*, 10 August 1950, p.4) was a short, favourable review of a study of Bakunin’s influence on European anarchist ideas; the third, ‘Un prolongement de la littérature de l’absurde’ (*Combat*, 21 September 1950, p.4) was a praise of Jean Cayrol’s literary manifesto, *Lazare parmi nous*. See *OC*, pp.85-88.

<sup>35</sup> I: ‘Triomphe et rupture de l’écriture bourgeoise’ (*Combat*, 9 November 1950, p.4); II: ‘L’artisanat du style’ (*Combat*, 16 November 1950, p.7); III: ‘L’écriture et le silence’ (*Combat*, 23 November 1950, p.6); IV: ‘L’écriture et la parole’ (*Combat*, 7 December 1950, p.6); V: ‘Le sentiment tragique de la littérature’ (*Combat*, 14 December 1950, p.7).

<sup>36</sup> See Roger’s review of the first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*, ‘Intégrité de Barthes’ in *Critique*, December 1993, p.844. This represents a shift of opinion by Roger; in *Roland Barthes, roman*, published in 1986, Roger had wanted, it seems, to belittle Barthes’s knowledge of, and interest in, Marxism; see pp.298-299, and pp.313-314.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Humanisme sans paroles’ was published in *Combat*, 30 August (not 13 September as listed in Leguay’s bibliography) 1950, p.4 (*OC* 105-106).

<sup>38</sup> T.D. Thao, *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* (Editions M’nt-Tan, 1951), reviewed in *Combat*, 11 November 1951, p.7 (*OC* 107).

<sup>39</sup> “‘Scandale’ du marxisme?’, *Combat*, 21 June 1951, p.3 (*OC* 103-104), reviewing R. Caillois, *Description du marxisme* (Paris, Gallimard, 1950).

<sup>40</sup> ‘Le temps du récit’, *Combat*, 16 August 1951, p.4; ‘La troisième personne du roman’, *Combat*, 13 September 1951, p.4. He also wrote an article setting out the terms, professional stakes and ideological significance of the debate on the function of the pyramids in ancient Egyptian culture; see ‘La querelle des égyptologues’ *Combat*, 25 October 1951, pp.4-5 (*OC* 108-110).

<sup>41</sup> See ‘Précritique’ in *Créations et Destinées 1* (Paris, Seuil/Editions de la Baconnière, 1973), p.245.

<sup>42</sup> This literary aesthetic, according to Nadeau in 1963, talked of humanity in its ‘solitude’, ‘son absence du monde, de la dérélition, de la non-vie’; see Nadeau, *Le roman français depuis la guerre*, pp.37-38. Interestingly, Barthes’s lengthy study in *Esprit* of Cayrol’s novels stressed the opposite. ‘Jean Cayrol et ses romans’ (*Esprit*, March 1952, pp.482-499, *OC* 115-131) was a detailed analysis of Cayrol’s pioneering literary aesthetics in his trilogy, *Je vivrai l’amour des autres*, winner of the 1947 Prix Renaudot; Cayrol’s writing, wrote Barthes, emphasised the awakening of a social awareness in the individual, showed the main character objectified within a sociological realism. This 1952 article could be considered, certainly, as the origins of Barthes’s interest in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s writing and the ‘nouveau roman’, as well as the basis of his divergence with the subsequent indifferent attitude of Nadeau and *Les Lettres nouvelles* towards the ‘Nouveau Roman’.

<sup>43</sup> See Calvet, pp.133-4, and ‘Réponses’, p.92. Nadeau has revealed that, despite the efforts of Raymond Queneau, literary consultant at Gallimard, the *Degré zéro* manuscript had been turned down by Jean Paulhan and Roger Caillois (p.254).

<sup>44</sup> Compare “‘Scandale’ du marxisme?” with ‘A propos d’une métaphore’ (*Esprit*, November 1951, pp.677-678, *OC* 111-112). Concentrating on the political implications of the book in the first review and on philosophical and historiographical points in the second, Barthes seemed to tailor his views to the publication concerned; if the first was a defence of a version of Marxism not dominated by the ‘malfaçon’ of Soviet Union ideology, and the second a highbrow comparison of Caillois’ and Michelet’s use of analogical explanations, Barthes seemed to write according to the audience of the respective publications.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Le monde où l’on catche’, *Esprit*, October 1952, pp.409-419 (*OC* 569-576) and ‘Folies-Bergère’, *Esprit*, February 1953, pp.272-280 (*OC* 195-202).

<sup>46</sup> Four years later, following pressure from a journal with a similar name, *L’Observateur* changed its name on 15 April 1954 to *France-Observateur*; see Claude Estier, *La Gauche hebdomadaire* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1962) p.255 note 37.

<sup>47</sup> For an account of the adverse changes made to this famous left-wing newspaper by



Smadja. see Nadeau, p.192.

<sup>48</sup> According to Claude Estier (pp.168-170), it had 1,500 'abonnés' before its release.

<sup>49</sup> These included Jacques Armel, Maurice Laval and the cartoonist Maurice Henry; see Estier, p.170. Henry's cartoon had been published next to articles by Barthes in *Combat*; they subsequently appeared next to Barthes's pieces for *France-Observateur*.

<sup>50</sup> See L. Pinto, *L'Intelligence en action: le Nouvel Observateur* (Paris, Métailié, 1984) chapter one.

<sup>51</sup> According to Marc Poster, Edgar Morin had been excluded from the Communist Party, officially at least, for writing in this 'trotskyist' newspaper; see M. Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1975), p.217.

<sup>52</sup> See Estier, pp.174-178.

<sup>53</sup> Though it helped push Mendès-France to the forefront, Bourdet's weekly newspaper was not his main political channel (*L'Express* played this role); see Bourdet's mild criticism of Mendèsism in *L'Observateur*, 2 July 1953 (quoted in Estier, p.192).

<sup>54</sup> 'Écrivains de gauche ou littérature de gauche?', *L'Observateur*, 27 November 1952, pp.17-18; and 'Compte rendu d'une enquête sur la littérature et la gauche', *L'Observateur*, 15 January 1953, pp.17-18 these are the two articles listed by Barthes and Thierry Leguay in *Communications* (OC 132-133, 191-194); however, the second article (originally called 'Oui, il existe bien une littérature de gauche') merely summarises the replies published by Nadeau and Barthes in *L'Observateur* in the weeks between November 1952 and January 1953; see *L'Observateur* 11 December 1952, pp.16-17 (replies from Francis Jourdain and Jean Meckert), 18 December, pp.17-18 (from David Rousset, Michelle Esdet and a teacher/syndicaliste'), 25 December, pp.16-17 (from Georges Navel, André Bay and a 'militante', as well as an indirect account of Gide's views by Claude Gille), 1 December 1953, pp.16-17 (from Jean Cassou, Jean Guéhenno and Jean Cordelier) and 8 January, pp.19-20 (from André Dhôtel and Edgar Morin); all of these replies are briefly introduced and concluded by Barthes and Nadeau and signed 'R.B. et M.N.'; furthermore, after the final resumé (January 15, 1953), there is another article a week later (22 January, p.19) an unsigned 'postface', which quoted the view of Michel Zérafra (this not listed either in Barthes's repertoire).

<sup>55</sup> The question of Socialist Realism is entirely absent from the original newspaper versions of the *Degré zéro* thesis. We may conclude that the book's interest in 'l'écriture marxiste' was inspired, in part at least, by Barthes's and Nadeau's reactions to the answers they had posed; they described these answers as 'une littérature au service d'une philosophie, d'une éthique, d'une politique' ('Oui, il existe bien une littérature de gauche', p.17, OC 192); they had quoted two Communist Party-inspired replies one of which considered literature not using Socialist Realism to be 'une littérature réactionnaire, [...] de droite'; this seemed to encourage Barthes's subsequent critique of Communist literary doctrine in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, published only a few months after the article in *L'Observateur*.

<sup>56</sup> The failure in June 1951 elections of the candidates supported by *L'Observateur* did little to assuage its opponents' denials of its claims to 'neutralisme'; see Estier, pp.177-178.

<sup>57</sup> 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne', *Arguments* 1, December 1956/January 1957, pp.20-22 (OC 1227-1230); and 'Il n'y a pas d'école Robbe-Grillet' *Arguments*, 6, February 1958, pp.6-8 (OC 1241-1244).

<sup>58</sup> See the interview with Edgar Morin, Francis Fortini, Jean Duvignaud and Francis Fetjö in *Revue des Revues*, no.4, pp.12-14.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, p.13.

<sup>60</sup> Barthes's own writing seemed to be inspired by this speech; see his enthusiasm in 1956 for a new 'assentiment au monde' in Michel Vinaver's play *Aujourd'hui*, which was possible only then because of 'les changements intervenus en URSS depuis la mort de Staline' operated by 'la conversion de "langage" [...] de Khrouchtchev'; see 'Note sur "Aujourd'hui"', which, dated 9 April 1956, was republished in *Travail théâtral*, January/March 1978 pp.58-60 (OC 540-542). This article, in original and reprint, is omitted from both Barthes's own list of articles (in *Communications*) as well as Taylor/Freedman's bibliographical reader's guide. According to Eric Marty it was originally published in the same journal in April 1956, but I have not been able to consult



this number; see *OC* p.542.

<sup>61</sup> Calvet underlined the appropriateness of the journal's anti-stalinism and open Marxism to Barthes's political outlook (p.162); see also Poster, p.217.

<sup>62</sup> Interview conducted 3 May 1979 and published in 'Testimonianze su *Arguments*', *Studi francesi* 73, January-April 1981, pp.46-50.

<sup>63</sup> Morin's reply to Padova's interview noted that Barthes 'n'était pas très motivé' by the new journal; *ibid*, p.69.

<sup>64</sup> *Revue des Revues*, 4, p.14.

<sup>65</sup> Calvet, p.153.

<sup>66</sup> See Roger, p.313.

<sup>67</sup> Daniel Mortier, *Celui qui dit oui, celui qui dit non ou la Réception de Brecht en France (1945-56)* (Geneva, Champion-Slatkine, 1986), p.91.

<sup>68</sup> See D. Gontard, *La décentralisation théâtrale en France 1895-1952* (Paris, Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1973) and R. Abirached, *La Décentralisation Théâtrale 1: Le Premier Age, 1945-1958* (Avignon, Actes Sud-Papiers, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> See Calvet, pp.58-59; see also a letter from Barthes to the Groupe, 'Lettre au sujet du Groupe de théâtre antique', *Le Théâtre Antique à la Sorbonne* (Paris, L'Arche, 1962), pp.28-29 (*OC* 961-962).

<sup>70</sup> See 'Réponses', p.91. His prestige in this area is such that he was asked to write the 'Le théâtre grec' entry for the *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*'s 'Histoire du Spectacle' (Paris, Gallimard, 1965), pp.513-536 (*OC* 1541-1557). He did not, however, consider the ancient Greek theatre to be itself a truly popular theatre; after all, he pointed out, though the democratic system in Ancient Greece required, and functioned only with, the complete participation of its citizens, it was nevertheless an 'aristocratic' democracy, in which only one-tenth of the population were citizens, the rest slaves. The theatre which flourished at the same time, though civic in its integration into an active, democratic system, could not be considered the 'modèle même' of a popular theatre, only a 'théâtre de la cité responsable'; see pp.524-525 (*OC* 1549).

<sup>71</sup> Calvet, p.140.

<sup>72</sup> This was a favourable review of Vilar's TNP production of *Le Prince de Hombourg*; see *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1953, pp.90-97 (*OC* 203-209).

<sup>73</sup> 'Le monde où l'on catche', p.409 (*OC* 569).

<sup>74</sup> The popular spectators' 'régularité' (p.416, *OC* 573) and nuances of 'salaud' and ' salope' (p.417), interested Barthes; the latter were a 'geste oral de l'ultime dégradation', which displayed their disdain for a Littré-style grammar (p.411, *OC* 571).

<sup>75</sup> p.415 (*OC* 572). This transgression of traditional demarcation between spectacle and audience was relevant to an interest in avant-garde theatre (*En attendant Godot* had been first produced in Paris in 1951).

<sup>76</sup> Here he prefigured his article on the civic significance of ancient Greek theatre as liberator of public emotion, 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique' (*Théâtre populaire* 2, July/August 1953, pp.12-22, *OC* 216-223, especially the first four paragraphs): 'on n'a pas honte de sa douleur, on sait pleurer, on a le goût des larmes' (*Esprit*, p.410, *OC* 570).

<sup>77</sup> Barthes began the article: 'Il est huit heures du soir, je suis maquignon dans le pays d'Auge, commerçant à Bruxelles, ou marchand de chapeaux à l'Indépendance (Kansas), je me trouve à Paris et j'entre aux Folies-Bergère' (p.272, *OC* 195).

<sup>78</sup> p.273 (*OC* 195-196). This article prefigured many themes in *Mythologies* and much of his other writing, including a reference to the Japanese *Nô* theatre (p.279, *OC* 201).

<sup>79</sup> 'Réponses', p.81. In *Le Magazine littéraire* (October 1993) Jean Duvignaud described how the editorial team of *Théâtre populaire*, centred around Barthes, 'gardait encore, comme un bien précieux, le souvenir du Cartel et de ses complices, Dullin, Baty Jouvét, Barrault' (p.63).

<sup>80</sup> Vilar's TNP production of Kleist's play used an 'ouverture de la scène' like the 'transgression' of Cartel director, Charles Dullin, whose very project had been related to the 'sens tragique[...] [et] populaire' of the theatre (which, said Barthes, 'ne font qu'un'). Barthes distinguished the openness in Dullin's stage design from that of Gaston Baty, another Cartel member: making the stage into a 'conglomérat de cellules closes', Baty's stages were always prisons or lifts, in which 'l'essentiel était qu'on n'y arrivait ni qu'on en



sortît; on y était, et pour la vie' (p.91, *OC* 204). If 'clôture' was required for a scene, Vilar had made this closure come from the centre rather than the sides of the stage, a technique 'entièrement contradictoire aux procédés de Baty', in which space was never constructed 'à la façon d'une architecture' but was formed by the 'mouvement même qui le mesure'; see pp.91-92 (*OC* 204-205).

<sup>81</sup> It was the 'souplesse', the 'élasticité' of the 'matière théâtrale, à la fois légère et ferme, facile et volontaire' which impressed Barthes in 1953; *ibid*, p.94 (*OC* 206). He qualified, however, his enthusiasm for the possibilities of a truly popular theatre. Vilar's TNP and other theatres were not truly 'populaires', they could be only 'non bourgeois', wrote Barthes giving two reasons for his qualification; firstly, 'l'Histoire' disallowed any attempt to give 'un contenu constant à la notion de "peuple"', at least in terms of aesthetics: the 'peuple athénien' had 'aucun rapport avec le peuple du département de la Seine'; it was 'conforme à l'Histoire' that the 'normes esthétiques' of the "'peuple" français', made up of a 'grande majorité de classes moyennes', were 'petites-bourgeoises'; the theatres of Châtelet, l'Opéra, Folies-Bergère and the Gaité Lyrique all propagated 'toute cette esthétique de la clôture, de la machine et du simili' from which Vilar's theatre diverged 'essentiellement'; secondly, the 'déchirement' of society meant that Vilar's theatre could be 'populaire' only 'idéalement'; *ibid* p.96 (*OC* 207-208).

<sup>82</sup> The first number (May/June 1953) carried Barthes's name on the 'comité de rédaction', as well as his review of a production of Stravinsky's *Le Libertin* at the Opéra-Comique; see inside cover and pp.86-87 (*OC* 214-215).

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*, pp.1-6.

<sup>84</sup> The 'dizaine de classes sociales' from 'Prince du sang' to 'dernier prolétaire' reflected the ten categories of seats, from 'la loge d'honneur' to the 'rangs extrêmes de l'amphithéâtre' (p.3).

<sup>85</sup> Barthes's belief that a popular theatre with a truly popular audience was not possible because of the 'déchirement' of society, did not seem, however, to fit with the first editorial's belief in a gradual 'nivellement des classes' (p.5).

<sup>86</sup> See '*Le Prince de Hombourg*', p.97 (*OC* 209).

<sup>87</sup> '*Les mots sont aussi des demeures*', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, May 1953, pp.359-361 (*OC* 212-213).

<sup>88</sup> Letter dated April 1953. Nadeau has written in his memoirs that at the beginning of the new journal and only 'pour le moment' Barthes was in charge of the 'notes de lecture' (*Grâces*, p.234). If we look at the first number there is an unsigned collection of brief reviews of twelve recent publications called 'Pastilles' (pp.113-116); assessing, amongst others, Jean-Paul Clébert's novel *Paris Insolite*, the reviewer appeared highly Barthesian in describing Clébert's 'incertitudes d'écriture' (p.113).

<sup>89</sup> 'Elle sera la revue d'une littérature qui se cherche sous nos yeux et qui, dans cette après-guerre chaotique et tumultueuse, se fraie difficilement une voie entre "l'engagement" de Sartre et l'esthétisme des "nouveaux hussards".' (*Grâce*, p.232).

<sup>90</sup> The 'Présentation' of the new journal began: 'La revue [...] veut servir avant tout la littérature. Ecrasée sous les idéologies et les partis pris, arme de propagande ou échappatoire, assimilée le plus souvent à un discours pour ne rien dire, la littérature est pourtant autre chose qu'un souci d'esthète, qu'une forme plus ou moins distinguée de distraction, qu'un moyen inavouable pour des fins qui la ruinent' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1953, p.2).

<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, Duvignaud wrote theatre and book reviews regularly for the rival of Nadeau's journal, the *NNRF*, until the beginning of 1955, as did Dumur on occasions.

<sup>92</sup> It ran from the first number until number 8 (October 1953), and then from number 11 (January 1954) to number 17 (July 1954).

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Maurice Nadeau, 2 October 1992.

<sup>94</sup> *Grâces*, p.254.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid*, p.234.

<sup>96</sup> 'La Dame aux Camélias', though included in *Mythologies*, was, in its original form, no longer a 'petite mythologie', but one of a series of articles by various writers called 'Faits et commentaires du mois'; see *Les Lettres nouvelles* May 1956.

<sup>97</sup> Only one of these was not on theatre, 'Pré-romans', 24 June 1954, p.3. After the Summer



of 1954, Barthes continued the 'chronique' briefly in September and October, writing two articles; the first 'L'écrivain en vacances' (9 September 1954, pp.1-2) described the mythology of writers; the second, 'Comment s'en passer' (7 October 1954, p.3), vilified the *Figaro* theatre critic Jean-Jacques Gautier.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Maurice Nadeau.

<sup>99</sup> From Barthes, who had himself just written a damning critique of the Comédie-Française ('M. Perrichon à Moscou', *France-Observateur*, 29 April 1954, pp.1-2, OC 396-397), this was a bizarre suggestion.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Rouvet was 'administrateur' of the TNP; *Théâtre populaire* had been considered a mere mouthpiece for Vilar, by (amongst others) *Le Figaro*; see the unsigned article 'Réalisme et Poésie' in *Le Figaro*, 18 May 1954, p.10.

<sup>101</sup> Even as early as the second number of the journal (in July/August 1953) Voisin was listening to Barthes's advice. In a letter to Voisin (undated - but written before number 2 because Barthes mentioned that he had recently sent the 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique' article from Hendaye) Barthes replied to Voisin's letter (dated 19th July 1953 - Voisin had had to send his to Groningen in Holland, since Barthes was staying there at the time) recommending Adamov's *Professeur Taranne* for publication in the journal; and having expressed strong doubts about publication of a Jules Roy play Barthes accepted, somewhat reluctantly, the Adamov play; (indeed, this appeared in *Théâtre populaire* 2). It is interesting to compare Voisin's and Barthes's reasoning; the Jules Roy play was rejected by both of them but for very different reasons: Voisin, simply because he could not get in contact with colleague Morvan Lebesque; and Barthes, because he found Roy's recent plays very 'inquiétants' with their fascistic 'boy-scoutisme'. Was Barthes more politico-aesthetically minded than Voisin? For Voisin it seemed to be simply a question of organization, rather than content of the play concerned. Also Barthes seemed to have a very precise notion of what the journal's role should be in general: for example, Adamov had only a 'local' definition of popular theatre in Barthes's view.

<sup>102</sup> 'Ubu', *Théâtre populaire*, 30, May 1958, pp.80-83 (OC 775-778).

<sup>103</sup> In terms of quantity of articles, number 14 (July/August 1955) represented the pinnacle of Barthes's activities for the journal: he wrote the editorial, the main article (on critical reactions to Sartre's play *Nekrassov*), two reviews of plays and participated in a discussion with Denis Bablet (see OC 500-513). Then, in number 16 (January 1956) he wrote nothing, it seems; this was the first number to which he had not contributed since number 4 (November/December 1953). The editorial of *Théâtre populaire* 10 is not listed by Barthes, but is attributed to him by Freedman and Taylor, p.245. Judging by the style, I would say that it was not his hand.

<sup>104</sup> The Chapter VI, 'Les Années Théâtre' (pp.138-169), has little information on Barthes's experiences in the world of popular theatre.

<sup>105</sup> Impressed by the TNP's 1953 production of *Don Juan* (see 'Le silence de Don Juan', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1954, pp.264-267, OC 377-379 and 'Don Juan au T.N.P.', *Théâtre populaire*, 5, January/February 1954, pp.90-94, OC 384-386), Barthes attended one of the TNP Saturday 'colloques' which discussed productions with the audience - see his comments in 'Le théâtre populaire d'aujourd'hui' (in *Théâtre de France IV*, Publications de France, December 1954, pp.154-155, OC 442-445): 'J'ai assisté récemment à un colloque où étaient réunis quelques représentants typiques du public de Jean Vilar', such as 'un apprenti de bâtiment, un ouvrier qualifié, une employée des P.T.T., un étudiant'; 'eh bien', he commented, 'le spectacle du T.N.P., [*Don Juan*], a été véritablement plébiscité par les catégories sociales différentes' (p.155, OC 443).

<sup>106</sup> *Théâtre populaire*, 14, July/August 1955, p.110 (OC 513).

<sup>107</sup> See *Bref*, respectively, p.3, p.6, p.6. Indeed, the original article 'Les maladies du costume de théâtre', in *Théâtre populaire* 12, showed photographs of costumes, accompanied by comments by Barthes. The first showed an actor dressed realistically as an owl, by M. Dorival, the 'absurde vériste', whose 1910 production of *Chantecler* showed the 'acteur assassiné par le costume' (p.66), and the costume of Faisane (played by Mme Simone), covered in 'des tonnes de plumes', represented for Barthes 'la surindication' (pp.72-73); Gérard Philipe in Leon Gischia's outfit for the TNP production of *Lorenzaccio* - 'Le bon costume est un fait visuel global', commented Barthes (p.66), which succeeded in



achieving an 'accord du visage et du costume' (p.76); H. Kilger's costume for Helen Weigel when she is pulling the cart in the Berliner Ensemble's *Mutter Courage*, 'Le costume doit convaincre avant de séduire; la guerre interminable' (p.67); Mario Prassinis' costume for Vilar as Macbeth was the 'costume-substance' of 'laine et féodalité' (p.67); the Comédie-Française production of *Cinna* gave rise to the 'maladie esthétique: le grand drapé couturier' (p.70); the costumes for *Le Crépuscule des Dieux* performed in 'Baroque 1900' style at the Théâtre du Château-d'Eau, were the "Musée Dupuytren" of theatre costumes (p.71), in which the 'chemise de nuit wagnérienne' signified 'l'indigence' (pp.72-73); the 1901 production of *Les Barbares* with the outfit of 'raisins - bacchantes' had 'littéralité' (pp.72-73); the Folies-Bergère production of *Marie Stuart* had a 'déséquilibre', with a 'clarté exemplaire des formes' but a 'maniérisme des substances' (pp.72-73); and finally Barthes compared the costumes in *Le Cid* produced by the Comédie-Française and that by the TNP, Philippe's TNP costume showed 'Le Cid déifié', André Falcon at the Comédie-Française 'Le Cid déguisé' (p.73).

<sup>108</sup> 'Avignon, l'hiver', *France-Observateur*, 15 April 1954, pp.7-8 (OC 393-395). It was only 'en passant' that he had 'jeté un coup d'oeil' on the Palais des Papes and decided to write this article on Vilar's festival success (p.7, OC 393).

<sup>109</sup> 'Pour une définition du Théâtre Populaire', *Publi 54*, 23, July 1954, p.17 (OC 430-431). The three-point plan in this article was incorporated into an ATP editorial in *Bref* in 1956. It seems that he had given a lecture at the launch of the ATP in Geneva; in December 1955, *Bref* quoted an article in the Swiss daily newspaper, *Journal de Genève* (15 November 1955) by Eugène Fabre, who, having attended the talk given by Barthes, made a résumé of the 'débat' which followed; he noted particularly the comment from a 'militant syndicaliste' that traditional repertoires offered by most popular theatres were uninspiring (p.5). The ATP found this an inspiration to its three-point plan, to such an extent that the following ATP editorial in *Bref* in January 1956. Written the month after the editorial which quoted triumphantly the debate after Barthes's talk in Geneva, in which the Swiss 'syndicaliste' proclaimed the need for a more exciting repertoire, the January editorial was a reiteration of the three aims of the ATP, including precisely the 'repertoire de haute culture'; this (unsigned) restatement was none other than a slightly altered version of Barthes's 1954 article in *Publi 54*, in which he had set out the three-point policy of the ATP; using exactly the same vocabulary, this 1956 description of how 'la seule réunion' of the three points could be 'révolutionnaire' now added Brecht to the repertoire (p.6).

<sup>110</sup> This visit to England is the first of two, it seems, in this period; the second, mentioned in a letter, dated 'Printemps' only, mentions two short 'émissions' for the BBC.

<sup>111</sup> See Nadeau, *Grâces*, pp.179-180. A letter from Barthes in Zurich to Voisin, dated 28 September 1956, suggests that Nadeau has mistaken the exact year.

<sup>112</sup> See 'Jules César et Coriolan (au Ile festival de Nîmes)' (*Théâtre populaire*, 14, July/August 1955, pp.89-90, OC 507-508); and 'Propos sur *Cinna*' (*Théâtre populaire*, 7, May/June 1954, pp.103-104, not in OC) which contains his view of the TNP production of *Cinna* at the Rouen festival in June 1954. At the 'Ile Festival d'Annecy', he had seen an amateur production of *Ubu roi* ('*Ubu roi*', *Théâtre populaire*, 15, September/October 1955, pp.108-109, OC 522-523).

<sup>113</sup> 'Le théâtre est toujours engagé', *Arts*, 18-24 April 1956, p.3 (OC 545-546) Barthes wrote for this journal two years later, praising the work of the popular theatre director in Lyons, Roger Planchon, with its new name *Spectacles*; 'Situation de Roger Planchon', *Spectacles*, 1, March 1958, p.46 (OC 773-774).

<sup>114</sup> After his conference and article on theatre costumes, his first article for *Bref* was a review of the book by Hélène Parmelin on costume; see 'Cinq peintres de théâtre', *Bref*, April 1956, p.7 (OC 543-544); the second, a preview of the TNP production of Balzac's play *Le Faiseur*, see 'Vouloir nous brûle', *Bref*, February 1957, pp.4-5 (OC 1231-1234).

<sup>115</sup> The first year, 1954, included the (now legendary) Berliner Ensemble production of *Mutter Courage* - see '*Mutter Courage*', *Théâtre populaire*, 8, July/August 1954, pp.94-97 (OC 1200-1202); the second, the following year, the 'Opéra de Peking', the Berliner Ensemble's production of *Le Cercle de Craie caucasien* - '*Le Cercle de craie caucasien*', *Europe*, August/September 1955, pp.210-212 (OC 514- 516); and a production of *Oedipe-Roi* - '*Oedipe-Roi* (au théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt)', *Théâtre populaire*, 14, July/August 1955,



pp.98-99 (OC 509). At the Festival in 1956, he reviewed favourably Visconti's production of *La Locandiera* - see 'La Locandiera', *Théâtre populaire*, 20, September 1956, p.70-72 (OC 554-555).

<sup>116</sup> 'La rencontre est aussi un combat', *Rendez-vous des théâtres des Nations*, 1, April 1957, p.2 (OC 728-729).

<sup>117</sup> See the transcript of this discussion, 'Barthes et Dasté à la RTF (débat avec P.-L. Mignon)', in *Rendez-vous des théâtres des Nations*, 9, March 1958, p.12 (not in OC).

<sup>118</sup> 'Brecht, Marx et l'histoire', *Cahiers de la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault*, 21, December 1957, pp.21-25 (OC 753-756); and 'Le mythe de l'acteur possédé', *Théâtre d'aujourd'hui*, 6, March/April 1958, pp.23-24 (OC 770-772).

<sup>119</sup> See 'Sept photos-modèles de *Mère Courage*', *Théâtre populaire*, 35, 3e trimestre 1959, pp.17-32 (OC 833-847); and Barthes's preface to B. Brecht, *Mère Courage et ses enfants* (photographs by Pic), published by L'Arche in 1960 (OC 889-905).

<sup>120</sup> The importance of the development of this conjunction of close-up photos and commentaries is underlined by the fact that the *Théâtre populaire* coverage of the Berliner Ensemble's production of *La Mère* a year later was based on photographs taken of the production and a commentary by Maurice Regnaut on 'Naturalisme politique'; see *Théâtre populaire*, 39, 3e tr. 1960, pp.123-135 (this was followed by Barthes's review of the production).

<sup>121</sup> See B. Brecht/Pic/Barthes, p.216. In a letter to Voisin (undated), Barthes underlined the seriousness of the whole project; he wanted to spend time getting to know Brecht's text 'par coeur'; his commentary would not be simply a 'préface' but a work of 'complexité' and 'totalité'; he also set out his view of the terms of his, Pic's and L'Arche's remuneration.

<sup>122</sup> In 'Brecht "traduit"' (with Bernard Dort, in *Théâtre populaire*, March 1957, pp.1-8, OC 730-734) he suggested that he had seen (at least) the TNP version of *Mère Courage* in 1951. If, he said, we ignored the 1937 production of *Les Fusils de la Mère Carrar* in Paris (in German), then Brecht's career in France began with J.-M. Serreau's 1947 production of *L'exception et la règle* at the Noctambules theatre. The 1951 T.N.P. 'fut au début un échec de public (et aussi à notre avis un échec de mise en scène).' (pp.1-2, OC 730). According to Dort, Barthes had seen the TNP production of *Mère Courage* in 1951 (but Dort was unsure about Serreau's production); interview with Dort. Mortier has argued convincingly that, despite these performances, for various reasons, Brecht was little known in France before the 1954 visit of the Berliner Ensemble; see pp.17-70, especially pp.67-70.

<sup>123</sup> With 368,152 spectators for 309 performances; source: *Quid* (Robert Laffont 1993), p.450. Under the management of Georges Wilson, between 1963 and 1972, the TNP produced five Brecht's plays (227 performances); and Brecht's epic theatre attracted the most spectators in this period (488, 125 spectators); source: *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> In six years, between 1954 and 1960, the total is 16 articles specifically on Brecht. No other writer was the object of more than 16 articles in this period of six years. The number of articles which referred in part to, but showed significant influence by, Brecht would be numerous - 'Le pauvre et le prolétaire', 'Un ouvrier sympathique', 'Les maladies du costume de théâtre', to take only the most obvious examples.

<sup>125</sup> 'Brecht "traduit"', p.1, (OC 730).

<sup>126</sup> See 'Brecht et notre temps' (*l'Action laïque*, March 1958, p.18, OC 767-769) note 1 (OC 767n)

<sup>127</sup> 'Brecht en France' *Les Temps Modernes*, 171, June 1960, p.1867.

<sup>128</sup> Mortier, pp.170-187. Barthes seemed to acknowledge this, tacitly at least, in 1961. Describing the French avant-garde theatre, how it had attacked 'l'institution la plus sociale' of humanity, language, he listed the various languages which had come under fire, including the 'langage des intellectuels'; see 'Le théâtre français de l'avant-garde' (*Le français dans le monde*, 2, June/July 1961, p.13 (OC 917).

<sup>129</sup> B. Dort, 'La revue *Théâtre populaire*, le brechtisme et la décentralisation', in Abirached, p.128.

<sup>130</sup> *France-Observateur*, 9 September 1954, pp.1-2 (OC 580-582). The original version contains significant differences from the version in *Mythologies* and the *Oeuvres complètes*, which we will look at in the next chapter.

<sup>131</sup> One might want to contrast the humour of 'L'écrivain en vacances' with the more



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scientific account of the 'proletarian' experience of the writer in his paper given at this conference on Franco-German literature (published as 'Petite sociologie du roman français contemporain', in *Documents*, 2, February 1955, pp.193-200, *OC* 465-470); here, Barthes's second category of the 'caractères fondamentaux' of the 'économie littéraire' was the 'soumission du corps producteur (les romanciers) au corps distributeur'; and he concluded that '[l]es droits d'auteur sont le plus souvent un salariat déguisé' (p.193, *OC* 465). Indeed, René Wintzen's introduction to this conference, which preceded Barthes's article in *Documents*, quoted Barthes's view of the exploited, if not proto-proletarian, nature of the writer: '[L]e livre n'est plus qu'une marchandise soumise aux lois du commerce, l'écrivain, selon l'expression de Roland Barthes, est un salarié plus ou moins bien payé, qui fait des heures supplémentaires dans d'autres entreprises pour pouvoir vivre (journalisme, radiodiffusion, télévision, traductions, etc.)' (*ibid*, pp.178-179).



## CHAPTER TWO: THE ORIGINS AND RECEPTION OF *MYTHOLOGIES*

### Introduction

Barthes's most famous book from the Fourth Republic period is without doubt *Mythologies*. Not only has it been a successful book since the 1960s, it also made an impact at the time of publication in 1957; that it came second in the 1957 'Prix Sainte-Beuve' to E. M. Cioran's collection of philosophical essays, *La Tentation d'exister*, barely testified to its commercial success at the time. According to Jacques Bersani, it was 'the bedside book of many French students in the 1950s'.<sup>1</sup> The success of *Mythologies* was reflected in the widespread attention given to it in the press: more successful than Barthes's first two books, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* and *Michelet par lui-même*, *Mythologies* was reviewed in numerous publications across the political spectrum. Though attitudes towards the book were divided along political lines - it was reviewed favourably in the Left press and unfavourably on the Right - some reviews were more equivocal than others; this was most notable on the Left, which, despite broad support, was, at times, harshly critical. For *Mythologies* to have engendered such coverage in 1957, Barthes's analyses must have been highly polemical: the extremes of sympathy and antipathy that the book inspired were a tribute to its powerful effect, and particularly, as we shall see, to its political (as opposed to literary or philosophical) impact.

To understand the significance of *Mythologies* for Barthes in the 1950s we must look also at the manner in which he had written the original studies. Since all fifty-three 'mythologies' had appeared in journals (mainly Nadeau's *Les Lettres nouvelles*), and only the postface 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' had been written with the publication of a book in mind, this chapter will try to show the



extent to which this polemic was dependent on the original mythologies, as published in *Les Lettres nouvelles*; and that the important cultural event, publication and impact of *Mythologies*, was but a culmination of a journalistic and political intervention by Barthes earlier in the decade. We must therefore look at these original studies and place them in their relationship both to Nadeau's journal and to the cultural, political and ideological context in which they were published. This includes looking at the few, but significant, reactions which the original 'petites mythologies' generated.

Furthermore the publication of *Mythologies* was preceded by an editing of the material. This chapter will look also at the manner in which Barthes edited and, in some cases, omitted whole 'mythologies' in order to adapt the studies to the theoretical postface. In this way, we will be in a position to suggest the significance of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'. A detailed examination of some of the reviews of the book will show that they concentrated to a large extent on this postface.

### **(i) The impact of *Mythologies***

Many of the reactions to *Mythologies* underlined the political and polemical nature of Barthes's studies of 1950s France. The interplay of Barthes's book with the press of the period was unmistakable; a number of reviews, particularly on the Right, in the very act of criticising the book, actually confirmed some of the analyses of petty-bourgeois ideology that Barthes's book had put forward; other reviews pointed to the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of *Mythologies*.

Furthermore, a number of reviews propagated inaccurate, if not amusing, myths about the writer of *Mythologies* himself. Jean Cathelin's review in the scouts' and guides' journal *Demain* thought that Barthes's book's use of



linguistics testified to the fact that Barthes had spent ‘de longs mois d’isolement’ perfecting his ‘études phénoménologiques et sociologiques’ into a ‘création dialectique où se mêlent post-hégélianisme et néo-scholastique’.<sup>2</sup>

This, thought Cathelin, was typical of Barthes’s generation:

[C]elle des garçons qui atteignent la trentaine qui ne méprisent pas tant la forme que leurs prédécesseurs immédiats, qui ne croient pas excessivement au climat dans lequel ils sont placés, qui rient sous cape et sentent la nécessité urgente de prendre leurs distances avec éclat, comme les collégiens à la gymnastique. (p.14)

Cathelin was, it seems, aware neither of Barthes’s age in 1957 (forty-two), nor that Barthes’s ‘isolement’ in the sanatorium had occurred nearly a decade before his interest in myth and sociology.

Bernard Voyenne repeated this myth of Barthes’s youthfulness; writing in *Pensée française*, he decided that Barthes looked like the ‘bon élève monté en graine’, who, ‘[à] trente ans, peut-être, [...] a tout lu, tout vu, tout compris’; this ‘iconoclaste’, concluded Voyenne, ‘n’est finalement qu’un enfant de chœur’, and it was the myth of himself, he suggested, that Barthes had failed to study.<sup>3</sup>

If these two reviews showed that a number of myths already surrounded Barthes the writer, then reviews in the left-wing press encouraged a view of Barthes as part of the Left. Despite no claim in *Mythologies* to left-wing credentials, it was quickly praised by Marxists, ‘Gauchistes’ and ‘progressistes’ alike.

## The Left

Friends, colleagues and ex-colleagues in the world of left-wing journalism were all impressed by *Mythologies*. The review in the original place of publication, *Les Lettres nouvelles*, by Swiss novelist Yves Velan, underlined the ‘pouvoir détersif’ of Barthes’s studies; the *Mythologies* were so politically



and ideologically powerful that, suggested Velan, they should be made into a 'poche-revolver' format so that one could bring it out 'à tout propos'.<sup>4</sup>

Hailing the book's 'plaisir libérateur', Maurice Nadeau's review thought that *Mythologies* showed humans as 'victimes' of bourgeois society, via myths which not only oppressed people but also made them blind to their very status as victims; Barthes's study, he wrote, showed how bourgeois ideology used the contradictory economic status of the petty-bourgeoisie to persuade 'la midinette, l'employé de bureau, le vendeur de grand magasin, qui vivent péniblement au-dessus de leur moyens', that there was somewhere 'un monde parfait', and the book was a crucial step towards exposing this 'ruse de la bourgeoisie'.<sup>5</sup>

The reviewer of the newspaper which had helped to launch Barthes's journalistic career, Alain Bosquet in *Combat*, considered *Mythologies* to be 'peu confortable', but reassuring with its 'esprit fin, corrosif et mordant'.<sup>6</sup> Popular theatre enthusiast Claude Roy, writing a review for *Libération*, praising the accurate account of the French government's doublespeak in colonial war situations, described it as a 'livre vivifiant et tonique'.<sup>7</sup> An ex-colleague from *Théâtre populaire*, Morvan-Lebesque, underlined how Barthes's analysis of 'mana' words could be used to explain the most important 'Mana du jour' that of '*L'Algérie française*'.<sup>8</sup> Another contributor to the popular theatre journal, Michel Zérafra, writing in the one-time rival of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, Jacques Laurent's *La Parisienne*, praised Barthes's attempt to 'dénoncer les mystifications d'une classe par une autre'; though it lacked a definition of the relationship between bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, Barthes's book would displease both of these classes, 'les uns n'aimant pas la radiographie, les autres ne sachant pas ce que c'est'.<sup>9</sup>

It was not just friends and colleagues who underlined the impressive political charge of the studies. Indeed, calling *Mythologies* a 'critique engagée', in his review for the journal *Cinéma 57* ('le guide du spectateur'), René



Guyonnet underlined the political nature of the book by providing a definition of Barthes's view of 'politique' in *Mythologies*: 'Il faut naturellement entendre: POLITIQUE au sens profond, comme ensemble des rapports humains dans leur structure réelle, sociale, dans leur pouvoir de fabrication du monde'.<sup>10</sup> Jean Baumier, writing for the Communist-leaning *Europe*, called Barthes's mode of demystification 'nouveau et pénétrant'. In contrast to Zéraffa's view that it was a book for intellectuals, Baumier thought *Mythologies* could be popularised for the 'grand public'; to achieve this, he wrote, the study needed to show that bourgeois myths were not 'nées spontanément', but constructed 'd'une façon concertée par 'Citroën, Astra ou M. Prouvost'. Baumier's example was the profit-motive behind the 'valeurs morales' and 'la liberté et la dignité humaines' claimed in the Fiat motor company's 1956 annual report.<sup>11</sup>

In the same way, Nicole Vedrès used Barthes's studies to analyse further the oppressions and exploitations which bourgeois ideology and myth attempted to hide; apologizing to the *Mercure de France* for her praise of Barthes's 'ouvrage décapant', Vedrès defended Barthes's 'parfait petit manuel d'iconoclastie' against criticism from *France Catholique* of his attitude towards marriage (we will return to this Catholic journal in a moment). As Baumier had done with the rhetoric of companies such as Fiat, she 'completed' Barthes's analysis of women writers by underlining the manner in which women's magazines ignored the class privileges of mother novelists: rather than describing the lives of women novelists as 'Une Telle: deux enfants, trois enfants, une autre: un roman, deux enfants', if one wanted to 'parler Création et Ménage', suggested Vedrès, 'il aurait fallu donner plutôt l'information suivante: Une Telle, deux romans, une femme de ménage, Une Telle, trois romans, deux domestiques. Une Telle, deux recueils poétiques, une bonne à tout faire'; it was, she commented, not surprising that this aspect was absent from women's magazines, since their role was not to "informer une vaste clientèle", en partie impécunieuse', but to 'rassurer la clientèle aisée en lui



laissant croire que l'autre vit désormais sur le même plan'.<sup>12</sup>

A perceived critique of poverty and class differences in *Mythologies* was evident in André Marissel's review in *La Revue socialiste*; commenting on how 'L'Iconographie de L'Abbé Pierre' showed how poverty still existed, that 'rien n'a changé', except that one myth was substituted for another, Marissel's view was that Barthes was not suggesting anything new: 'l'argent est toujours dans les mêmes poches, la publicité dans les mêmes mains, les stars dans les mêmes films d'adultère ou de police, les écrivains-à-succès dans les mêmes vitrines'; however, Barthes's originality, he thought, was to have shown 'les procédés grâce auxquels d'adroits créateurs de mythes [...] réussissent à abuser de notre naïveté, tandis que les intellectuels, ceux qui *regardent* et apprennent à *voir* et à *comprendre* aux exploités sont, constamment, traînés aux gémonies'.<sup>13</sup>

As these reviews show, not only was the Left impressed by Barthes's studies of myth, it could use his insights for further political critique of the status quo (though we will see both a hostile and a constructive criticism from the Left in a moment).<sup>14</sup> If the Left generally welcomed *Mythologies*, then Marissel's view of the fate of left-wing intellectuals being 'traînés aux gémonies' is generally what happened to *Mythologies* when reviewed by the right-wing press.

### **The Right and Centre-Right**

The anonymous reviewer for the young person's publication *Pourquoi Pas?* considered Barthes an 'intellectuel de gauche, ou mieux encore: terriblement intellectuel et d'obéissance marxiste', and to be suffering from 'une prétention [...] un pédantisme insupportables', to such an extent that his 'parti pris politique' blinded him to social reality.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, H. Platelle in the *Croix du Nord* regretted Barthes's 'systématisme [...] irritant'; his Marxist analysis, wrote Platelle, was typical of those who wrote for (the Communist party



journal) *Les Lettres françaises*; in his eagerness to dismiss Barthes's Marxist analysis, the reviewer had been drawn into an amusing, if not ironic, confusion: it was, of course, *Les Lettres nouvelles* which had published most of the 'mythologies'.<sup>16</sup>

The little-known *Vigie marocaine* published a lengthy review by Claude Jannoud; characterizing Barthes as 'influencé par les oeuvres les plus audacieuses du théâtre contemporain et particulièrement par celle de Bertolt Brecht' and as 'le grand maître du culte voué par une chapelle au dramaturge allemand', Jannoud showed his view of the political import of Barthes's 'perspective marxiste': 'Le mythe est un instrument d'aliénation sociale et un moyen de diversion'.<sup>17</sup>

For *Le Monde*, it was Robert Coiplet who provided the first of three reviews of *Mythologies* published by this newspaper in 1957; reading in 'Le pauvre et le prolétaire' Barthes's conclusion that Chaplin's anarchy was the most efficient revolutionary art-form, he began to fear that, politically, Barthes was an anarchist.<sup>18</sup> It seems that Coiplet had misunderstood Barthes's point.<sup>19</sup> Coiplet's review appeared nonetheless charitable, when one considers that he had been the brunt of a number of criticisms in the 'petites mythologies'.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, in 'Critique muette et aveugle' in November 1954, criticising the two kinds of bourgeois critic, Barthes had cited Coiplet as an example of those who quickly deemed a work ineffable and therefore criticism useless. The book version omits the names of the critics in Barthes's sights; in the original he had written: 'c'est ce que fait, par exemple, M. Robert Coiplet dans le *Monde* du 25 septembre à propos de quelques vers mirlitonnesques de M. Emile Henriot, dont, paraît-il, "on ne peut dire en paroles l'émotion qu'on en reçoit"'; and had continued his critique of *Le Monde* critics by writing the following: 'rien de plus à l'aise que M. Kemp [...], rien de plus ironique et plus assuré que Lemarchand [...]; et rien de plus militaire que M. Coiplet [...]'; but he omitted the names from *Mythologies* in 1957.<sup>21</sup> Then, a month later, Barthes had



questioned Coiplet's judicial wisdom. Omitted from the book version of 'Dominici ou la triomphe de la littérature', Barthes's explicit reference to Coiplet had been provocative: the 'satisfecit choquant' provided by *Le Monde* to the 'avocat général' had been written 'dans le style de M. Coiplet'.<sup>22</sup> In his review of *Mythologies*, Coiplet made no reference to these earlier criticisms by Barthes. Ironically, by admitting that he did not feel qualified to discuss Barthes's use of psychoanalysis, Coiplet placed himself neatly into the second kind of bourgeois critic attacked by Barthes in 'Critique muette et aveugle': those critics who did not understand a difficult philosophical question would admit defeat, thereby ignoring and reducing its importance.

The second *Le Monde* review of *Mythologies* in 1957, by Emile Henriot, by contrast, had taken note of Barthes's personalised attacks on *Le Monde* critics.<sup>23</sup> Henriot had noticed how in 'La Littérature selon Minou Drouet' Barthes had considered him a 'défenseur du bon sens', for Henriot's characterization of Drouet as 'un heureux pet jet verbal' whose 'railleries' did not appear to be those of a child. Henriot noted also the manner in which Barthes had ridiculed and challenged his traditional and optimistic conception of childhood, by Barthes's citing the example of the child who murdered. In reply, accusing Barthes of inventing adversaries, Henriot underlined how, in fact, he agreed with Barthes that there existed thoroughly evil children.<sup>24</sup> Despite this retort, Henriot's review was more understanding than Coiplet's; he and Barthes were not so different, only Barthes had misunderstood him. Indeed, his being the 'pauvre et l'imbécile de quelqu'un' could in fact be perfectly 'profitable', provided that this somebody was 'supérieur'; and, in his view, Barthes, this 'chroniqueur excellent et dialecticien parfait', was perhaps superior: ending the review happy with this logic, Henriot wrote: '[i]l y a toujours lieu d'être content de ce qui vous apprend à être modeste'.

It was not only *Le Monde* which showed surprisingly little hostility to Barthes's book; other newspapers which had borne the brunt of the criticisms



in *Mythologies* showed no ill-feeling towards Barthes. The only reference to Barthes's book in *Le Figaro* or *Le Figaro littéraire*, despite its being a common target in *Mythologies*, was a curious and cordial, if not itself mythological, account of the competition between *Mythologies* and Cioran's *La Tentation d'exister* for the Prix Sainte-Beuve.<sup>25</sup> Cioran's book, reported the newspaper, had beaten Barthes's book by nine votes to seven. This announcement in *Le Figaro littéraire* was preceded by André Alter's description of the (literally) bitter battles between the judges who had had to lock themselves away in order to be able to make a decision.<sup>26</sup> Other right-wing journals, such as *La Revue de Paris*, also showed a surprising lack of hostility.<sup>27</sup>

*France Catholique*, however, held firmer convictions as to the worth, or otherwise, of Barthes's study of myth. In a double-page spread called 'Les idoles de notre barbarie', Jean-Pierre Morillon seemed, initially, to be impressed by Barthes's analysis of social alienation in consumer society.<sup>28</sup> However, he felt disturbed, not by Barthes's mythology of the Abbé Pierre, but by the threat to the family which, he thought, the book represented. Extolling the virtues of family life, he noted with outrage that Barthes seemed to be locating the origins of myths not in the 'décadence spirituelle' of contemporary society, but in the ideology of the bourgeoisie; and quoting 'Conjugales', Morillon asked indignantly whether any 'grand mariage' had ever tried to stop a strike or had ever lent support to 'le mal social'; his attitude was that the shop assistant might have a 'coeur tendre' for love and marriage, but she was still in a trade union. Morillon was incredulous that a sophisticated intellectual could hold a facile class explanation of social decay, which ignored the significance of a breakdown of family values - for intellectuals such as Barthes, he said, 'si la Bourgeoisie n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer'.

It was the hardline, right-wing journals which provided the most sustained and vitriolic critiques of Barthes's *Mythologies*. Writing in *Rivarol*,



Pierre-Aimé Cousteau called the book ‘cornichonnerie progressiste’.<sup>29</sup> *Mythologies* was so full of jargon that he felt that he had to translate Barthes’s complicated prose into ‘vulgaire français’; quoting part of the passage describing the Black soldier saluting, and inserting question marks after words which he had not understood (such as ‘impérialité’), Cousteau explained to the readership of *Rivarol* what Barthes was saying.<sup>30</sup> ‘L’Histoire majusculisée’ in Barthes’s writing showed that the author was a Communist: Barthes’s ‘Histoire’ was not ‘la reconnaissance des événements passés’, but, Cousteau suspected, ‘sa négation, à quoi se substitue une sorte de déterminisme immanent et transcendantal qui postule l’inéluctable avènement d’une société marxiste’. He reminded Barthes that the ‘mythe stalinien’ was ‘autrement envahissant que le mythe de l’“impérialité”’, but concluded that it was impossible to change the view of ‘ce Trissotin’; Barthes’s analysis only served to confirm, in his view, the accuracy of the division between Left and Right: ‘La Droite étant l’acceptation du réel (si laid soit-il) et la Gauche le parti pris d’un univers chimérique’.

Less vitriolic, but more contemptuous, Pol Vandromme’s review in *L’Echo du Centre* wondered what the reader had done to have to suffer Barthes’s ‘patois malsonnant’; full of jargon, Barthes’s study had used a ‘dialectique contre l’imagerie populaire’ and had failed to acknowledge that the mythologist had his own mythology.<sup>31</sup> Vandromme’s review was a good example of the *Mythologies*’ analysis of anti-intellectualism: he was surprised that Barthes had not included in his study of myth ‘la nouvelle secte [...] des agrégés de philosophie’ whose ‘ridicule prétentieux’ was evident in all their books; and he ended the review with a humorous parody of intellectual debates: quoting Barthes’s view of the ‘ex-nomination’ operated by myth, Vandromme mused ironically: ‘M. Barthes est digne de participer au prochain débat de *L’Express* avec Mme Audry et M. Morin: L’Histoire tourne-t-elle dans le sens de la machine à laver?’.



If many of these reviews provided a diverse amount of material for Barthesian-style mythological studies, it was clearly the Right-wing which was most convinced of Barthes's left-leaning, if not Marxist, mode of explanation. However, Cousteau's view of the clear division between Left and Right was not easily sustained in reviews in other sections of the press.

### The Centre

Despite apparent divisions between the attitudes of the Left and the Right towards *Mythologies*, there were some surprising reviews from different quarters. There was an irony in the last comment in Vandromme's review on Barthes's suitability to appear in the pages of *L'Express*. Thomas Lenoir's review in *L'Express* was actually very hostile to the book's analysis; he considered that each mythology was an 'éloignement du concret', with a 'pensée [...] même pas abstraite, mais *inopérante*'; citing the example of the 'Guide bleu' mythology, Lenoir refused to accept the relevance of Barthes's class analysis and desire for omniscience in a travel guide.<sup>32</sup> Lenoir's critique made other important points; in attacking certain publications for the promotion of Minou Drouet's poetry, Barthes had forgotten, wrote Lenoir, that it was *Les Lettres nouvelles*, the original publisher of the 'petites mythologies', which had first given space to Drouet's poems (though he mistakenly asserted that Barthes was on the editorial board of Nadeau's journal).<sup>33</sup> The ambiguity of the attitude of *L'Express* to *Mythologies* was underlined by the fact that, as Louis-Jean Calvet has noted, in the summer of 1957 Barthes's book was put on the *L'Express* summer booklist.<sup>34</sup>

If *L'Express* blurred Cousteau's distinction between Left and Right, it was not alone. There was a large difference of opinion in publications linked to religious groupings. Though treating the overall message of the book with a certain sympathy, Gabriel Venaissin, writing in the radical Catholic journal *Témoignage Chrétien*, was sceptical about the accuracy of Barthes's



description - 'Roland Barthes est celui qui ne saurait supporter le désordre du monde [...]: il introduit donc l'ordre dans ce qui n'en a pas' - and was wary of his playful analysis of the Abbé Pierre.<sup>35</sup> This must be compared with the anonymous reviewer in the protestant journal *Christianisme social*, who was unequivocal in his/her support and commended Barthes's 'perspicacité'; as well as the ability of *Mythologies* to forge a clearly Marxian account of the relationship between bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes, the reviewer showed the use of Barthes's 'vaccination' theory by applying it to the French Army's alleged atrocities in the Algerian War and to the media presentation of the allegations.<sup>36</sup>

A common criticism of *Mythologies* which blurred distinctions between Left and Right was that of the book's attitude towards myth. The view of Labour movement activist Georges Lefranc, in the syndicalist *République libre*, was that the masses needed myths and had used them in their political battles: 'il me paraît manquer à M. Barthes d'avoir lu Georges Sorel et d'avoir milité activement dans un mouvement populaire', which, suggested Lefranc, would have shown him that 'le besoin de mythes est essentiel aux masses et qu'elles se hâtent d'en créer lorsqu'on ne leur en fournit pas'.<sup>37</sup> A similar sentiment was repeated in Jean-Baptiste Morvan's review in the right-wing *La Nation Française*; were the myths that Barthes's book attacked not in fact 'un moyen de fixer un peu de couleur et de musique dans la vie personnelle', and of a deeper sacred and spiritual importance?<sup>38</sup> Morvan used this to assert his right-wing republican and anti-marxist standpoint: the idea of clearing away these 'phantasmes' and 'idoles' to open the possibility of 'libération sociale' would, he thought, only lead to 'une monomanie révolutionnaire', and souls would have a 'misère psychologique' in this 'société sans classes'; in short, 'la démystification devient vite totalitaire' and perhaps these myths (though 'ridicules et si futiles') were the 'humbles et précieuses défenses' of the man in the street's 'antiques libertés'.<sup>39</sup>



The political nature of *Mythologies* caused other confusions. The first review in *La Nation Française*, by M. Vivier, describing how Barthes 's'affirme bon marxiste et meilleur élève de Sartre', had underlined the political implications of Barthes's view that the vast majority of myth was on the Right; in attacking the obscurantism of the Church, Barthes had classed 'les démocrates-chrétiens' as right-wing; this was in addition to the readers of *L'Express*, and even certain socialists in the S.F.I.O., who, Vivier pointed out, were also defending the colonial system: where, Vivier wondered, did the Left exist amongst this 'droite pléthorique'? Where was the Left if most of the 'prolétariat' read *France-Soir*, believed in Stalin and Abbé Pierre? In Vivier's view, Barthes's idea of the Left was the restricted number of intellectuals who read '*L'Observateur, Les Temps Modernes et Les Lettres nouvelles*'. Taking the view of Lefranc and Morvan a little further, Vivier thought that the 'culte de Staline' for the one in four voters of the 'parti des 75.000 fusillés' proved that not all myths were 'de droites ni [...] bourgeois', that proletarian ones existed too.<sup>40</sup>

It was not only the question of the political attitude to myth which failed to divide Left from Right; it was also Barthes's theoretical framework. Just as a number of right-wing reviews described Barthes's study as too systematic, so Nadeau's review feared that Barthes would end up with a 'systématisation trop poussée'; and Velan criticised Barthes's use of a 'science formelle' which ended up with a highly functional account of myth.<sup>41</sup>

It was nevertheless clear that the book had engendered a large debate in all sections of the press; even regional and small newspapers and journals took the time to assess *Mythologies*. The book went far wider than Barthes's two previous books, reviews of which had been restricted, largely, to the Centre and Left press. This success, however, had only come about after publication of the book: the 'petites mythologies', when first published in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, had been, with two important exceptions, largely ignored by the



press. However, when seen in the context of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, the original mythological studies had been more political and polemical than the book versions, for they had been an immediate reaction to political and cultural events of the moment. This fact was related, above all, to the nature of the journal in which his 'petites mythologies' had appeared.

## **(ii) The 'petites mythologies' as militant journalism**

Though generally described today as a literary critic, Barthes wrote very few literary reviews for *Les Lettres nouvelles*; indeed, his reviews of cinema, theatre and other events for *Les Lettres nouvelles* outweighed his literary criticism.<sup>42</sup> If Nadeau's journal was predominantly literary, and Barthes wrote regularly for it, what was the nature of his writing, if it was not literary criticism?

From the beginning of the journal in March 1953, Barthes was considered an 'essayiste', rather than a literary critic. Within the first six months of the journal's inception the editorial board, Maurice Saillet and Nadeau decided to publish two lengthy and intellectually impressive articles by Barthes; 'Le monde objet' displayed a complex combination of phenomenological and historical materialist explanations of Classical Dutch art and architecture, 'Féminaire de Michelet' introduced his highly original understanding of Michelet's historiography.<sup>43</sup>

But it was the satire of Barthes's ironic account of bourgeois conceptions of the writer, published in *France-Observateur* in September 1954, which fitted with the quickly changing tone of *Les Lettres nouvelles*. Appearing on the first page of the weekly newspaper's twice-monthly arts supplement, 'L'écrivain en vacances' was a witty satire of the writer, which generated a polemic in the pages of *L'Express*: for the 'tel grand écrivain' in



*Mythologies* wearing ‘des pyjamas bleus’ was named in the original article as François Mauriac.<sup>44</sup> In his weekly column ‘Bloc-notes’, having seen Barthes’s article in *France-Observateur*, Mauriac replied to Barthes, and appeared unusually angry at the mocking of his placing a photo of blue pyjamas at the foot of an earlier ‘Bloc-notes’; Barthes’s article was ‘un méchant papier’, unworthy (‘indigne’) of the author of *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* and the ‘étonnant’ *Michelet*.<sup>45</sup> Though he enjoyed ‘le journalisme de combat’, Mauriac could not understand why Barthes had chosen Gide and himself as ‘adversaires’.<sup>46</sup>

This minor polemic encouraged Nadeau to offer Barthes a regular monthly column: Barthes’s ‘petite mythologie du mois’ began six weeks later, and confirmed his ‘essayiste’ status for *Les Lettres nouvelles*.<sup>47</sup> These monthly ‘essais’ were, furthermore, to become an important element in the political and cultural developments of Nadeau’s journal; written ‘au gré de l’actualité’, they followed the ideological shifts of mass culture and the portrayal of political and social realities, as France returned to a period of political turmoil.

### **Decolonization: ‘le tournant politique’**

After a brief lull of four to five years (after the general strike of 1947-8) the Fourth Republic lurched back into political crisis. The period of Barthes’s intense journalistic activity between 1953 and 1956 was contemporaneous with a very tumultuous moment in French politics, by any standards, as the colonial question spread from South-East Asia to Africa.

Correspondence from Barthes to his friend Philippe Rebeyrol, living in Egypt, underlines his increasing anger and politicisation from 1953 onwards. In a letter dated 10 January 1953, he told Rebeyrol of the ‘lamentable situation politique’ in France where social ‘marasme’ was combined with ‘d’actes fascisants contre la pensée’.<sup>48</sup> The next month, February 1953, he warned his friend that there would be ‘des combats encore à mener’: the ‘Slansky’ and



'Rosenberg' trials were a 'sinistre affaire', rivalled only by the 'abjection de notre parlement et de l'opinion dans l'affaire d'Ouradour'; the 'politique Eisenhower' confirmed his view that 'l'obscurantisme autour de notre génération' was increasing: 'tout cela est de plus en plus oppressant et en profondeur', he concluded.<sup>49</sup>

One might suggest that the sharp coincidence of the destabilisation of France was a factor in Barthes's move in 1953 towards a greater active journalism; this, of course, would be difficult to prove. What can be affirmed, however, is that this politicisation, summed up by the term 'l'obscurantisme', was the germ of his ideological critique which began the following year.

Indeed, as the Indochina war progressed and the civil war began in Morocco and Tunisia in early 1954, Barthes's politicisation grew stronger. His vitriolic attack on bourgeois theatre in the editorial of *Théâtre populaire* 5 (January/February 1954) was matched by his anger at the colonial situation. As France's situation in Indochina deteriorated in Spring 1954, Barthes wrote to Rebeyrol of his despair: 'Tout va bien sauf les dépressions régulièrement amenées par la politique: j'en ai des vertiges, de cette sorte particulièrement poisseuse, produites par l'impuissance devant la bêtise, une bêtise terriblement dangereuse'.

If these comments suggested Barthes's anger and feeling of impotence before the worsening colonial conflict, then the 'petites mythologies' represented an attempt to overcome this impotence, and expose the 'obscurantisme' of which colonial adventures were an important part. The 'petites mythologies' played an important role in focusing *Les Lettres nouvelles*, originally a literary journal, on the political 'marasme' into which decolonization was pushing France.

From the outset *Les Lettres nouvelles* had been mildly political; soon after its inception, there had appeared a long, searching article by Dionys Mascolo on the reasons for his departure from the French Communist Party



and about his future plans as a disillusioned left-wing intellectual.<sup>50</sup> But rather than the debate about the Communist party, it was the colonial question, as we shall see, which began to dominate.

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina had ended the nine-year long colonial war and had badly dented French colonial authority. This defeat had encouraged uprisings in Tunisia and the civil war in Morocco against French rule.<sup>51</sup> The concessions made by Mendès-France to these countries in August 1954 was a spark for the All Saints' Day uprising in the Aurès in Algeria, the beginning of the bloodiest war in French colonial history.

As *Les Lettres nouvelles* followed these events, its political shift was noted by the journal's rivals and opponents; in the January 1955 edition of *La Nouvelle revue française*, Jean Guérin (Jean Paulhan's *nom de plume*) pointed out that, after the departure of Maurice Saillet from the editorial team, Nadeau seemed 'disposé à accentuer le côté politique'.<sup>52</sup>

Barthes's first 'petites mythologies' - containing 'Martiens', 'La croisière du sang bleu', 'Critique muette et aveugle' and 'Saponides et détergents' - had been published in November 1954, the same month as the uprising in the Aurès region of Algeria. It was in the December 'petites mythologies' that he began to attack the ideologies which maintained the colonial status quo. As well as ridiculing media representations of marital values ('Conjugales') and religious and newspaper beliefs in Martians ('Les Martiens et l'église' and 'Les Martiens et la presse') he attacked the Church, the monarchy and, most importantly, the Army.<sup>53</sup> The first paragraph of the first 'mythologie' of December 1954, 'Mythologie perpétuelle' read:

L'Armée, l'Église, la Monarchie, il n'y a encore que cela pour bien distraire les Français [...]. Ouvrez ce mois-ci, comme un autre, la grande presse de distraction: encore des drapeaux (le départ d'Hanoï), des sacres (Mgr Villot, secrétaire de l'Épiscopat) et des rois (le prince Charles, la reine Élisabeth, le prince de Monaco [etc]). (944)



It was the army which the December 1954 'petite mythologie' particularly criticised. Having shown in the three preceding 'mythologies' how 'Ordre' was being maintained by myth, in 'Nouvelles mystifications' Barthes singled out the army for criticism:

Prenez une armée; manifestez sans fard le caporalisme de ses chefs, le caractère borné, injuste de sa discipline, et dans cette tyrannie bête, plongez un être moyen, faillible mais sympathique, archétype du spectateur. Puis au dernier moment, renversez le chapeau magique, et tirez-en l'image d'une armée triomphante, drapeaux au vent, adorable, à laquelle [...] on ne peut être que fidèle, quoique battu. [...] Prenez une autre armée: posez le fanatisme scientifique de ses ingénieurs, leur aveuglement; montrez tout ce qu'une rigueur si inhumaine détruit: des hommes, des couples. Et puis sortez votre drapeau, sauvez l'armée par le progrès, accrochez la grandeur de l'une au triomphe de l'autre. (947)

Guérin's view that Nadeau was increasing the political aspect of *Les Lettres nouvelles* was clearly a reaction to the first two 'petites mythologies du mois', the second in particular.

Continuing the political shift of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, Nadeau published in March 1955 an article by André Calvès which studied and exposed the colonial discourse used by the French government in Indochina; as an ironic 'A to Z' of the vocabulary used during the War in North Vietnam, 'Petit lexique pour servir à l'histoire de la guerre du Nord-Vietnam' underlined the political stance of the journal towards the colonial question. The journal's position was unequivocal when, in April 1955, it published Charles Delasnerie's article 'Pour une politique de décolonisation'.

Calvès's study of colonial discourse in Indochina was a first-hand account of his two-year service as a soldier.<sup>54</sup> The article, a set of notes 'rédigées sur place', bears a strong resemblance to Barthes's 'petite mythologie' analyses of colonial discourse in Morocco, 'Lexique marocain' and 'Grammaire marocaine' which were published six months after Calvès's article, in November 1955.<sup>55</sup> Not only did Barthes use the very same title-word



(‘Lexique’) but also his article exposed the hypocrisy of colonial discourse; just as Calvès’s article had reacted to the French colonial tactics in Vietnam and the language used, so Barthes criticised the double standards of the French government and press in their attitude to the civil war in Morocco.

The publisher of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, René Julliard, was, says Nadeau, despite the threat of censorship and even of legal proceedings by the French State, unconcerned by the journal’s ‘positions morales et politiques’; nor did he try to impede the journal’s ‘prises de position’.<sup>56</sup> Free to carry on the politicization of the journal, Nadeau published in the December 1955 number a manifesto against the Algerian War, ‘Contre la poursuite de la Guerre en Afrique du Nord’, which had been signed by three hundred intellectuals.<sup>57</sup> It was a reaction to the ‘tournant’ of Autumn 1955, when the French government discussed the need for a ‘state of emergency’ in Algeria. Since the signatories were not listed, it is difficult to know whether Barthes had participated.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, his ‘lexique’ of colonial language in Morocco in the previous number of *Les Lettres nouvelles* was an important contribution to the journal’s anti-colonial stance.

This can be seen in the similarity of concerns in Barthes’s and Calvès’s articles. In the July/August 1955 number of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, Calvès began a regular column called ‘le monde ... comme il ne va pas’. This political satire parodied the *NNRF* regular column ‘Le Temps, comme il coule’ and directly preceded Barthes’s ‘petite mythologie’. Many of Calvès’s short pieces were criticisms of French policy in Algeria and Morocco.<sup>59</sup> Barthes matched these with ‘Continent perdu’ and his ‘Lexique marocain’. As in Calvès’s column, Barthes’s main political points were against the Algerian War; both reacted, in their own fashion, to the drafting of ‘rappelés’ in Summer 1955.<sup>60</sup>

But it was not simply the colonial situation which both covered in their own ironic ways. The ‘petites mythologies’ and ‘le monde ... comme il ne va pas’ showed a similarity of themes, outside of colonial conflicts; for example,



Calvès's first column denounced Billy Graham; his 'Sherlock Holmes à Moscou', criticising the *Figaro* visit to Moscow, resembled Barthes's 'Croisière du *Batory*' published the month before; also Calvès had denounced the lynching of Emmet Till, just as Barthes was to in 'La Grande famille des hommes' in March 1956.<sup>61</sup> 'Le Guide bleu' in October 1955 ended by denouncing the guide's bias towards 'franquisme', and the month before, Calvès's 'Les Malencontreux réfugiés' denounced the French government's attitude towards Spaniards who had fled Franco's regime (September 1955); the same month as Barthes's 'L'Usager et la Grève' covered *Figaro* readers' reactions to the transport strike in Paris, Calvès published an article in his monthly column which criticised the CGT for its role in preventing this strike from becoming a general strike.<sup>62</sup>

In the increasing politicisation of *Les Lettres nouvelles* Barthes and Calvès provided each other's regular columns with information to analyse, a kind of duo which continued until the end of the 'petite mythologie' in April 1956, and the creation of 'Faits et commentaires du mois'.<sup>63</sup> Both were important in politicising the journal; yet, in the political battle between the *Les Lettres nouvelles* and the *NNRF*, it was Barthes, not Calvès, who was singled out for criticism.

### **Guérin (Paulhan) and Barthes**

In the May 1955 edition of the *NNRF*, the theatre critic Jacques Lemarchand had denounced *Théâtre populaire*'s obsession with Brechtian theatre as dogmatic; 'L'écolier limousin et le petit organon' had been aimed particularly at Barthes and his 'prise de position' in favour of Epic theatre. Then, in the June 1955 edition of *NNRF*, Guérin too attacked Barthes.<sup>64</sup>

Having followed the 'petite mythologie' through the seven months it had been running, Guérin quoted a number of paragraphs of Barthes's analyses and commented upon them. He quoted the section of 'La croisière du sang



bleu' (November 1954) which likened the royals to a set of pug-dogs in a reserve, as well as the final passage of 'Paris n'a pas été inondé'; then he listed all the other myths that Barthes had exposed (that of the black in 'Bichon chez les nègres', of the avant-garde in 'La vaccine de l'avant-garde', and of the liberal Church in 'Un ouvrier sympathique' and 'L'iconographie de l'Abbé Pierre'). This two-page analysis of the 'petite mythologie' also picked out Barthes's complex study of the myth of Rimbaud in 'Phénomène ou mythe?', which had set out the dilemmas of the left-wing intellectual; Guérin admitted to not understanding at all Barthes's contradictory relationship to myth - what Barthes had called (in distinctly Hegelian terms) 'la dialectique d'amour'; as far as Guérin could understand Barthes's reasoning, it seemed that everything for Barthes was 'mythe'. Completing his dissection of the first seven months of Barthes's monthly column, Guérin quoted the stern final paragraph of 'Critique muette et aveugle', in which Barthes had asserted that, though critics had understood nothing of Henri Lefebvre's play on Kierkegaard and existentialism, Lefebvre the Marxist understood them perfectly; with this in mind, Guérin now accused Barthes himself of being a Marxist and asked why he did not just admit it.

Barthes's reply to Guérin's invitation in the July/August number of *Les Lettres nouvelles* was itself in the form of a 'petite mythologie'. 'Suis-je marxiste?' likened Guérin's question to the recent McCarthyite trials in the United States and accused Guérin of performing a witch hunt.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, he suggested, Guérin did not understand the term 'marxiste'; in order for it to be applied to somebody, opined Barthes, they had to have a theory and a practice; his conclusion was that, since the poser of the question could not understand what being Marxist meant, nor see it other than as a profession of religious faith, Guérin and his journal must be 'parfaitement réactionnaire'; and in a clever twist, he added that, in order to know this, he did not need any further declaration than the question he had been asked: the naivety of Guérin's



question underlined Guérin's reactionary political ideology.

Is there any significance in this caustic exchange? In his biography, Louis-Jean Calvet has suggested that, intimidated by the publication of his letter to Camus in which he had stressed the virtues of historical materialism, Barthes now wanted, in this mythology, to back away from the 'Marxist' label that suddenly seemed to be sticking to him.<sup>66</sup> This explanation of Barthes's reaction is not entirely convincing however, for it does not take into account the fact that, had Barthes wished to shake off the label, he would have ignored Guérin's question, nor that his reply to Guérin was written as a mythology; as a counter-attack, its intellectual and playful nature did nothing to hide the contempt in which he held those liberal intellectuals who tried to maintain that they were neutral, free of ideological constraints ('innocent' in Barthesian terms).<sup>67</sup>

It also showed that Barthes's political viewpoint in the 'petites mythologies' had been singled out above and beyond that of Nadeau and Calvès as the example of the contemporary French Marxist; this was underlined by Guérin's reply to Barthes's 'petite mythologie' 'Suis-je marxiste?' in the October 1955 number of *NNRF*.<sup>68</sup>

In his regular review of recent 'Revue' and 'journaux', Guérin began with a reply to Barthes's mythology. Entitled 'M. Barthes se met en colère', Guérin's 'review' reminded readers how his earlier account of the 'petites mythologies' had been written with 'grande estime'; he had simply asked Barthes to say what was not 'mythique'. Asserting the innocence of his questions he had also asked 'à tout hasard' whether the writer of the 'mythologies' was using 'homme', 'humain' and 'dialectique d'amour' in the Marxist sense: 'C'était là une question innocente', wrote Guérin in an attempt to lighten the tone of the dispute, 'j'aurais pu tout aussi bien lui demander s'il les entendaient au sens nietzschéen ou bergsonien'. In an attempt to bring goodwill to the argument, Guérin suggested that Barthes's question about



Guérin's knowledge of Marxism in 'Suis-je marxiste?' had been 'aimable et flatteuse'; furthermore, why, he asked, could not Barthes have been more 'sensible' to the 'éloge' that his first assessment of the 'petite mythologie' had represented? What was he so scared of, asked Guérin? The Third and Fourth Republics of France had produced no McCarthyists, but plenty of Marxists; Viviani, Briand, Millerand and Laval had been Marxists, as were Blum ('avec certaines réserves') and Thorez.<sup>69</sup> Most Marxists had become ministers, 'Présidents du conseil' even 'Président de la République'; it was, stressed Guérin, the *non*-Marxists (Vallès, Blanqui, Barbès, the Communards, Jean Grave and Fénéon) who had been outlawed and persecuted.<sup>70</sup> Guérin's conclusion, that Barthes was 'bien vu' by 'la société bourgeoise' and received 'sauf erreur, des subventions' was indicative of Paulhan's humour, as well as of the anger that Barthes's views had caused at the *NNRF*:

Il [Barthes] sera dans quinze ans, suivant toute vraisemblance, Ministre de l'Education nationale. Il ne sera pas un mauvais ministre. Mais qu'il ne vienne pas nous la faire à la persécution. Ce serait d'un goût douteux. Qu'il étudie plutôt le mythe MacCarthy [sic]. (803)

Indeed, Barthes's view that the *NNRF* had a 'caractère parfaitement réactionnaire' had surprised and annoyed Guérin. It was 'curieux', replied Guérin, that 'Progressistes en général' considered his journal reactionary, and 'Conservateurs' a 'revue révolutionnaire'. With memories of the collaboration of the *NRF* during the Occupation and of its banned status until 1953, Guérin defended his journal against Barthes's accusations; perhaps, he said, 'M. Barthes' had failed to read, or even misunderstood the journal's 'explications'; to clarify for Barthes, he now quoted (at length) Ramuz' 1931 reply in *Aujourd'hui* to similar accusations: Ramuz' refusal of a doctrine was 'sage', the opposite of Barthes's 'conventions' and 'tricherie'.<sup>71</sup> This was the source of the 'illusion grossière' in which *NNRF* looked 'réactionnaire aux marxistes' and 'marxiste aux réactionnaires'; then again, said Guérin, Barthes was no



‘ennemi d’une certaine grossièreté’.<sup>72</sup>

It is difficult to draw conclusions on Guérin’s view of Barthes in 1955; Guérin’s rather maverick account of Marxists in French history and his prediction of Barthes’s future career were provocative if not playful. Apart from the articles by Guérin and Mauriac, I have found no other references or reactions to Barthes and his mythological standing in this period 1954-1956. However, these two exchanges are interesting in as much as we can see that Barthes was considered, by a minority of critics at least, to be on the offensive before and during the ‘petite mythologie’ period. This was not a mere coincidence, or idiosyncrasy on the part of Guérin; Barthes’s mythological intervention fitted into the politicization of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, and was indicative of the rivalry between Nadeau’s journal and the *NNRF*.

One of Barthes’s early ‘petites mythologies’, ‘Phénomène ou mythe?’ had actually attempted to theorise his and the left-wing intellectual’s political role faced with the ‘obscurantisme’ dominating postwar France. It was no coincidence that this mythology was the concluding section of his most vitriolic and sarcastic mythological study in December 1954.

### **Demystification as a political praxis**

Barthes’s 1953 view that ‘[i]ntroduire l’explication dans le mythe’ was ‘pour l’intellectuel la seule façon efficace de militer’ was to become by the end of 1954 a serious and reasoned political strategy.<sup>73</sup> Eighteen months after writing this he applied it explicitly to his view of the political role of his ‘petites mythologies du mois’. Setting out the necessity of, and contradictions within, an intellectual’s militancy, ‘Phénomène ou mythe?’ treated the dilemma of the left-wing critic, faced with the urgent task of explaining the emerging mass culture and consumer society.<sup>74</sup>

Having just demystified not only Marlon Brando’s betrothal in the ‘petite mythologie’ of the same month (‘Conjugales’), but also the popularity



of War, the Royalty, and Religion, as well as the popular press obsession with Martians, Barthes was keen to stress that it was not only mass culture, but also high culture, which underwent mystification. He proceeded to attack the way in which the literary journal *Les Nouvelles littéraires* had reviewed René Etiemble's recent book on the myth of Rimbaud.<sup>75</sup> Describing Etiemble's book as a 'mystification' because it concentrated on the myth of Rimbaud, the writers for *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, wrote Barthes, would have preferred an account of the poet's 'oeuvre extraordinaire' rather than 'interprétations plus ou moins abusives' (such as Etiemble's), which were 'sans intérêt'. Barthes had nothing but contempt for the reviewer's 'vieux tabou classique de l'inspiration':

Pour *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, le soleil a dû s'arrêter il y a fort longtemps, quand le Poète était un "phénomène" (selon l'expression de Georges Duhamel) sans cause et sans fin, dégagé de toute Histoire précédente ou conséquente, fonctionnant à la façon d'une voix céleste qui viendrait frapper l'oreille tout individuelle d'un lecteur dépourvu lui-même d'histoire et de société. (952)

The classical taboo of inspiration had prevented the reviewer from seeing two sides to Rimbaud, made it impossible 'de poser, d'un côté, la noble Muse de Rimbaud' and 'de l'autre, une collectivité avide, dessinée par son nombre, son anonymat et surtout sa bêtise'. The irony, he suggested, was that denying the myth of Rimbaud was itself part of an enormous 'mythe meurtrier'; to separate 'la Littérature' from its history was to 'exorciser l'intellectuel', to deny him/her a 'pouvoir critique', the intellectual's 'seule générosité'; it was to confine them in this 'monde innocent de l'art inspiré' where they could "'s'émouvoir" sans danger': there was, he concluded, no 'conduite moins "humaniste" que celle qui refuse l'Histoire'.

Barthes then set out the political importance of the myth of inspiration and its propagation: the fact that 'la révolte de Rimbaud' had been converted 'au profit des mythes de l'Ordre' was, in his view, a 'fait de l'histoire humaine'



which was far more important than 'le "phénomène" Rimbaud'. He could see two sides to the question of Rimbaud, his poetry and his mythology; since Duhamel's article for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* denied the importance of the myth of Rimbaud, preferring to concentrate only on his artistic genius, Barthes wanted to redress the imbalance by stressing the way in which Rimbaud (the man and the poet) had been recuperated by the literary institution; and although the myth of Rimbaud was hardly 'plaisant', being full of 'bêtise', 'mauvaise foi' and 'mensonges', he considered it infinitely more 'humain' to study the way in which Rimbaud had been 'mangé' rather than to look for the 'vrai'.

This position as demystifier, Barthes stressed, was not a principle, rather an act which was linked to the historical (or political) moment and circumstances of his (or any demystifier's) intervention: the political problem in reducing 'obscurantisme', he suggested, was not to 'opposer le mythe à sa vérité, comme la maladie à la santé', but to understand its contemporary significance:

Seule compte la réalité générale de l'Histoire dans laquelle le mythe prend place; c'est au nom de cette Histoire que nous devons juger le mythe, et nullement au nom d'une essence de Rimbaud: nous jugeons la nocivité du mythe, non son erreur. (ibid)

This 'mythologie', remarkably candid, and neither ironic nor playful, showed that, in 1954 at least, Barthes firmly believed that he had a political mission in his monthly column: whenever he saw a new myth (he cited the examples of the Martians and of Brando's marriage) he knew that he had to counter these attempts to maintain 'Ordre', by denouncing and explaining them. But here, he conceded, was the dilemma of this political act; this denunciation could only ever be an explanation; and he recognized the inadequacy and limits of such an act: the nature of human alienation was such that he must have a dialectical love/hate relationship with these myths:



Mais dénoncer ne peut être ici qu'expliquer et me voilà plus que jamais lié à mon temps dans une véritable dialectique d'amour. Car dans la mesure où toute mythologie est la surface palpable de l'aliénation humaine, c'est l'homme qui m'est présent dans toute mythologie: je hais cette aliénation, mais je vois bien qu'aujourd'hui, c'est en elle seulement que je puis retrouver les hommes de mon temps. (953)

This was the 'dialectique d'amour' whose significance Guérin had failed to understand. It was a complex compromise which underpinned Barthes's attitude towards myth in all of the 'petites mythologies'; it also explains the apparently contradictory nature of Barthes's attitudes in many of the 'mythologies'.

### **Barthes's dialectical strategy**

Andrew Brown's recent analysis of Barthes's writing has sought to resolve Barthes's contradictory attitude towards the floods of Paris in the mythology 'Paris n'a pas été inondé' by seeing the 'duplicity of response' as typical of Barthes's 'dérive'; this literary 'drift' epitomized Barthes's analysis of myth.<sup>76</sup> Surely, however, the 'dialectique d'amour' is a crucial element in an explanation of Barthes's attitude towards the abundance of myths that the floods generated in the press and media. Brown's point that, depicting the scene of the floods 'with the care of a Dutch landscape-painter', Barthes's mimicry 'enables us to enjoy the floods as an aesthetic object as well as understand them as an example of how myth works', is better explained by the 'dialectique d'amour' than by the notion of 'drift'.

The analysis of Rimbaud in 'Phénomène ou mythe?' not only explained Barthes's contradictory attitude towards a particular myth, but also it pointed to a general strategy in his analysis: the dilemma of whether to consider Rimbaud as a phenomenon or a myth was resolved by looking at the general historical situation in which the demystifier was operating. For example, Barthes's view that Rimbaud's myth should be studied could be seen as



contradictory to his praise of the Rimbaud 'phenomenon' (his poetry), which Barthes used as the corrective to the novels of Jules Verne in '*Nautilus et Bateau ivre*'. Rather than consider the invocation of Rimbaud's poem as typical of Barthes's 'dérive', as Brown does, we can see that Barthes's promotion of Rimbaud's poetry, in direct opposition to his attitude towards Rimbaud in '*Phénomène ou mythe?*', underlines the dialectical nature of his analysis. It was his dialectical understanding of his acts of demystification which informed his use of Rimbaud as phenomenon.

Similarly, Barthes's critique of those who would deny the explanatory role of the critic (in '*Critique muette et aveugle*' and '*Racine est Racine*') stands in direct opposition to his view in '*Adamov et le langage*' that bourgeois critics were explaining too much. Richard Klein's view was that this contradiction was indicative of Barthes's move from thematic to structuralist criticism.<sup>77</sup> It was indicative more, it seems, of Barthes's view of the demystifier's historical relationship to myths: if bourgeois critics were stressing one aspect of a work (the ineffable and inexplicable nature of Racine's theatre), then Barthes's historical understanding of myth pushed him to oppose the 'sécurité admirable du néant' by supplying the historical content effaced by bourgeois ideology.<sup>78</sup> But, if bourgeois ideology was trying to impose meaning and derive security (in the case of Adamov's play *Le Ping-Pong*, by calling up the 'grosse cavalerie du symbole'), Barthes's understanding of the historically-specific nature of demystification, meant that he stressed precisely that which he had criticised in '*Racine est Racine*': the ineffability and inexplicability of a work. The '*Phénomène ou mythe?*' mythology explained not only the contradictions within certain mythologies ('*Paris n'a pas été inondé*'), but also the apparent contradictions *between* mythologies.<sup>79</sup>

Not only did the '*Phénomène ou mythe?*' mythology show Barthes's dialectical attitude towards myth, it underlined also his sensitivity to human alienation: the alienation that myth operated was, perhaps, the central *political*



theme of the original studies in *Les Lettres nouvelles*. Yet, this alienation was not considered the central theme of the book when reviewed in 1957. This is, in a sense, not surprising. Barthes's declaration in 1954 that he hated 'cette aliénation', but that its expression in myth was the only way to 'retrouver les hommes de mon temps', gave his studies a politically clear (if a strategically complex) aspect, which was omitted from the *Mythologies* book. Furthermore, 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' posed an entirely different tactical dilemma: Barthes's view that the mythologist was excluded from both demystifying and appreciating the goodness of wine at the same time was not at all the dilemma he had considered in 'Phénomène ou mythe?'. It was as if Barthes considered, by 1956, that his dialectical strategy could not solve the dilemma; it is here, perhaps that Brown's study of 'drift' could become useful, in that the exclusion of the mythologist suggested an ambivalence in his political orientation and attitude of 1956/7. Barthes's earlier view that demystification should be related to the historical moment became the rather jaundiced view that no total understanding of cultural phenomenon was possible; we will look at the change from a 'dialectique d'amour' strategy to the mythologist's 'aporie' in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' in Chapter 4.

The 'duplicity of response' was, according to Brown, 'fundamental to the success of *Mythologies*', because it 'enables us to participate imaginatively as well as recognize and understand'.<sup>80</sup> It was, Brown suggests, the literariness and ambiguity of the mythological studies which was central to the success of the book.

This appeal was based on a double-edged aspect. On the one hand, his studies could appeal across the political spectrum because they dealt with the manner in which mass and popular culture and myth affected everybody; on the other, his attribution of political and ideological blame onto the bourgeoisie, and the 'petite bourgeoisie', disenchanted large sections of the press.

This relevance of his mythological studies to a wider section of readers



only appeared, however, when they were collected into book form, edited and supplemented with a theoretical essay in late 1956 and early 1957. In contrast to this attempt to widen and lengthen the significance of the studies, was the narrowness of the audience for whom he had originally intended the studies when published in the pages of *Les Lettres nouvelles*.

The success of *Mythologies* came, to some extent, at the expense of the political significance of the act of demystifying which the ‘petites mythologies’ represented in the pages of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, and which ‘Phénomène ou mythe?’ theorised. In his review of *Mythologies*, Bernard Voyenne noticed the difference of tone between the book and the ‘petites mythologies’; his view was that the originals were powerful, but the book version lost this aspect: ‘On était parti sur un coup de trompette; on finit dans un ronron assez morne. Ce qui plaît dans un périodique souffre assez mal l’épreuve du livre’: Barthes’s ‘causticité’ in the original ‘petites mythologies’ had by 1957, said Voyenne, turned ‘en aigreur’. In their original, journalistic context, the mythological studies had engendered a much more acerbic reaction, leading to a greater political significance for Barthes, as well as for *Les Lettres nouvelles*; the reaction might have been more localised (restricted to the pages of the *NNRF* and *L’Express*) in relation to the generalised attention given to *Mythologies* in 1957, but there was clearly a more intense political impact in the ‘petites mythologies’ within *Les Lettres nouvelles*: no review of the book in 1957 inspired the intensity and length of Guérin’s exchange with Barthes in 1955. This was reflected in the differences between the book version and the original series of ‘essais’ in *Les Lettres nouvelles*.



### **(iii) The ‘petites mythologies’ and *Mythologies***

Though many reviews in the right-wing press accused *Mythologies* of using a left-wing jargon, these studies had been significantly toned down from the originals: if the original versions are compared with those in *Mythologies*, it can be seen that Barthes had made complete elisions of sentences, paragraphs and phrases in the editing process. Barthes was acutely aware, it seems, of the marketing imperatives of *Mythologies*; the original studies had been full of Marxian jargon and were written for left-wing intellectuals who would appreciate the dilemmas into which myths put the committed left-wing critic. This editing process was evident also in a number of articles in *Essais critiques*, as well as in the versions of popular theatre articles included in the *Oeuvres complètes* (a point noted by Eric Marty in the ‘Avant-Propos’).<sup>81</sup>

The editing involved in preparing *Mythologies* for publication took two general forms; the first was the elision of certain phrases, names and key words, the second, wholesale exclusion of certain ‘petites mythologies’.

#### **Editing the ‘petites mythologies’**

In ‘La nouvelle Citroën’, Barthes’s editing process omitted from the text of the book an important introductory comment; describing the new ‘DS’ as the equivalent of gothic cathedrals, he had suggested in the original ‘petite mythologie’ its social and political context as the expression of the ‘psychanalyse profonde’ of the people who consumed it, and had related this to the alienation of human experience in distinctly Marxian terms: ‘La mythologie automobile traduit la dialectique même de toute société aliénée: l’appropriation de la magie’.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, in ‘Racine est Racine’, Barthes edited from the original his Hegelian view of the operation of petty-bourgeois ideology; having shown how the tautologists kept Racine and ‘le réel’ on a leash of computable length, he



had asked rhetorically in the original version: ‘Et si Racine se transformait qualitativement?’<sup>83</sup>

The conclusion of ‘Jouets’ had an extra final paragraph, in which Barthes underlined the economic significance of new toys; furthermore, Barthes omitted the three studies of childhood which preceded ‘Jouets’ in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, studies which, via a complex jargon, set out an alternative methodology to that used in bourgeois histories of the Child.<sup>84</sup> The whole question of Barthes’s selection of some ‘petites mythologies’ but not others for inclusion is an important one.

The omission of ‘Suis-je marxiste?’ reduced the polemical nature of *Mythologies*; and, although it encouraged his critique of the myth of impartiality (particularly of intellectuals and critics such as Paulhan), it was not considered appropriate for inclusion in the book. This omission clearly abstracted Barthes’s own political role from the climate of anti-communist hysteria of the mid-1950s; after all, it was only in 1954, one year before his altercation with Guérin, that senator Joseph McCarthy had been censured by the US Senate, and his witch hunt of Communist infiltrators stopped, and not before many left intellectuals and activists in America (including Bertolt Brecht) had been questioned before a court. Though in ‘Billy Graham au Vel d’Hiv’ the evangelist was denounced as McCarthyist in the book, this ‘petite mythologie’, in the same month as ‘Suis-je marxiste?’, had underlined clearly Barthes’s view in 1955 that the same spirit was reaching France.

The objection could be raised that Barthes was restricted by space, that the number of mythological studies had to be kept to a strict page limit. However, it was not simply that Barthes had omitted certain ‘petites mythologies’, but also he had included studies from outside of the original ‘petites mythologies’ column in *Les Lettres nouvelles*; this suggests that the objection that Barthes was lacking space is unfounded. The first four studies in *Mythologies*, ‘Le monde où l’on catche’, ‘L’acteur d’Harcourt’, ‘Les Romains



au cinéma', 'L'écrivain en vacances', as well as 'La Dame aux Camélias' (not, originally, a 'petite mythologie') were considered more appropriate to the book than other, more polemical, or jargon-filled, studies.<sup>85</sup>

When one thinks of the omission of 'Phénomène ou mythe?', with its crucial notion of 'dialectique d'amour', one is inclined to ask why Barthes should have elided his original Marxian terminology and thought. This 'petite mythologie' showed Barthes to be acutely aware of alienation: mythology was nothing but the 'surface palpable' of human alienation; and though he hated this alienation ('je hais cette aliénation'), he understood that it was here alone that he could 'retrouver les hommes de [s]on temps'. This view that myth represented the surface in which one could see the reflection of alienated and otherwise silenced humans was illustrated in his study of human faces, 'Visages et figures', written a year before in *Esprit*. Though Barthes included part of this in the *Mythologies* ('L'acteur d'Harcourt' was taken from the central section of this lengthy article), the crux of the study of human faces was omitted from the book; describing his article as a sociology of faces, Barthes used a mixture of phenomenological and historical materialist categories to underline how 'on a volé à l'homme jusqu'à son propre visage'.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, the book version curtailed a number of significant critiques. A clear example of this toning down is in the 'mythologies' on Martians. In the original versions, Barthes had given examples of the obscurantist use of vaccination in the popular press in the Martians affair. The study of 'Martiens' in *Mythologies* was an amalgamation of three different mythologies - 'Martiens' from November 1955, with 'Les Martiens et la Presse' and 'Les Martiens et L'Église' from the December 1955 number of *Les Lettres nouvelles*; in the last of these, having ironically suggested that the Martians must have a Pope (this is in the reprinted version), he underlined the control the press exerted.<sup>87</sup> He then quoted a Jesuit priest interviewed in *Radar* who used Montaigne to back up his religious beliefs.<sup>88</sup> Barthes's dislike of such



a claim (and use of sceptical humanism) was contained in the final words of the mythology: ‘Forte de quoi, notre grande presse illustrée peut fabuler à loisir sur Lourdes [...] et sur Fatima’. Furthermore, he attacked the myth of enlightenment of other newspapers.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, if ‘La Croisière du sang bleu’, the first ‘petite mythologie’, underlined his opposition to royalty, as a result of the recent coverage given to Elizabeth II’s coronation, ‘Mythologie perpétuelle’, the following month, was directed towards those fellow French who admired the Royals; when he wrote that ‘depuis le Couronnement, les Français languissaient après un renouveau de l’actualité monarchique’, there was no need to qualify this for the readership of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, but it was omitted from *Mythologies*: the French people, ‘friends’ for the British royals, had made the event front-page headlines in France. His contempt for the Royals and the Monarchy in general was best illustrated in ‘Le Group Captain Townsend’, which was also omitted from the book.

His strong views on the Church and the Army were also omitted or toned down. Though Barthes was not writing in such a way as to persuade readers of *Les Lettres nouvelles* of the iniquity of religion and war, rather to underline his ‘étonnement’ at the amount of French interest and to attempt an explanation, his analysis had, as we saw, an important effect on the journal. His jaded analysis attacked the Order and obscurantism of capitalist ideology as it was being used: ‘[d]écidément,’ he wrote after seeing the interest in Church, Army and Royalty, ‘Voltaire, Stendhal, Vallès ou Michelet sont des écrivains d’avenir’.

By his editing process, Barthes was showing that he had recognized that he had written originally for the specialized readership of *Les Lettres nouvelles*. This editing had an effect on the historical relevance of the original mythologies. That they had been written ‘au gré de l’actualité’ was crucial to Barthes’s view of the demystifier’s role and strategy; the original studies had



been written as direct responses to recent events, the context of which were specific: his acts of demystification linked the mythologist 'généreusement' to his historical moment. Indeed, there were numerous examples which linked Barthes not only to debates and events, but also to specific left-wing attitudes.<sup>90</sup> Though many of these are present in the book, they are nevertheless less easy to assign to a particular position by virtue of their abstraction from the historical moment: the original studies were a reaction to important events, which the book, by definition, could not be. This was the crucial connexion between his acts of demystification and the strategy which 'Phénomène ou mythe?' tried to put forward: his acts of demystification were important only in as much as they were reacting to the dominant myths of the moment.<sup>91</sup>

This meant that 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' played an important role in reorienting his mythological studies. In the 'Avant-propos' to *Mythologies*, Barthes stressed that '[é]crits mois après mois', the studies were not particularly organised, did not have a 'développement organique'; they were, after all, part of his own 'actualité'. The organisation that they did have was given to them by the 'façon méthodique' by which he had defined 'le mythe contemporain': the postface 'ne fait que systématiser des matériaux antérieurs'.

This implied that the studies were unchanged, but that they were given an interpretation at the end of the book. Not only did this hide the changes and omissions that Barthes had performed in putting the book together, it implied also that 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', the attempt to found a semiological science for the critique of bourgeois myths and ideology, had not affected or influenced the whole tone of the book; it was as if 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' was a disconnected afterthought. This, as we shall see, was not the case; if the studies had been written 'au gré de l'actualité' between 1954 and 1956, then the specificity of the contexts of the myths was considerably diminished if not removed, by the editing process employed.



### Editing and abstracting from history

If we compare the originals to the edited book versions, Barthes's editing process seems to be significant; three aspects of the editing (sources of his studies, names of figures and changes of emphasis) suggest that a process of abstraction took place.

In the original 'mythologies', Barthes began his 'chronique' by giving accurate references to the material he had used in his studies. These were given in brackets.<sup>92</sup> Sometimes, they were listed in footnotes.<sup>93</sup> If all the dates of magazines and journals were omitted and only two footnotes remained in the book versions, then a similar process took place with the names of writers and critics. We saw how, in 'Critique muette et aveugle', Coiplot's and Henriot's names were edited out, Robert Kemp became 'un tel confessant', and Lemarchand 'un autre avouant tout penaud'. This was the case throughout *Mythologies*; names of media figures were replaced, such as R. P. Avril who, in 'Celle qui voit clair' in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, became 'un Père dominicain' in the book version.<sup>94</sup> In 'La littérature selon Minou Drouet', the 'néophytes vénérables' had originally been listed as 'MM. Kemp, Pasteur Vallery-Radot, Rousseaux, etc.' and the 'classiques attardés' example was Edouard Henriot, all edited from the book version.<sup>95</sup> In the original 'Racine est Racine' mythology, Comédie-Française actress and director Vera Korène, was mentioned eight times, in the book version her name is mentioned only once in brackets (elsewhere, she became simply, 'une artiste'), as the mythology became an impersonal critique of petty-bourgeois art-forms.<sup>96</sup>

As well as omitting and condensing various mythological studies, Barthes changed the names of a number of studies; 'Comment démystifier' became 'Un ouvrier sympathique', 'Nouvelles mystifications' became part of 'Opération Astra'. The most significant changes however, were the changing of 'Grammaire marocaine' and 'Lexique marocain' into 'Grammaire africaine',



which masked the original context (the spiralling conflict in Morocco in Summer 1955), and the slight, but perhaps politically significant, change of title of 'L'usager et la grève' to 'L'usager de la grève'. Above all, the book version removed the 'chronique' aspect which was indicative of the role of the original studies for *Les Lettres nouvelles*.

The internal reference system of the original mythologies was removed. For example, when referring to the Dominici trial in 'La littérature selon Minou Drouet', Barthes cited in a footnote the details of his earlier mythology 'Dominici ou le triomphe de la littérature'.<sup>97</sup> This was evident also in the study of colonial discourse in Morocco. Having described in the previous two mythologies ('La Croisière du *Batory*' the previous month, and 'L'usager et la grève' the same month) the way in which bourgeois ideology tried to portray deserters and strikers as being led by 'meneurs', by external rather than internal influences, 'Lexique marocain' parodied colonial discourse on the 'fanatiques ou manoeuvrés' by suggesting that 'il n'y a en effet aucune raison *interne* à vouloir sortir du statut de colonisés' (my italics); this critique of bourgeois and colonial ideology's attempt to blame revolt on outside influences, which appears as a theme in the two months of the 'petites mythologies' in October and November 1955, is absent in the book version due to the elision of 'interne'.<sup>98</sup>

Adding to the abstraction from history that the editing process engendered, a number of 'petites mythologies' were emptied of their direct contemporary significance. In 'L'usager et la grève', the strike was described as 'la dernière grève des Transports parisiens', and a footnote gave the date of the *Le Figaro* article in which the letters of readers' complaints about the strike had first appeared; the book version, 'L'usager de la grève', mentioned only that the strike had been 'récente', and omitted the footnote reference to the *Le Figaro* edition which had originally provoked Barthes's study.<sup>99</sup> Then in 'La croisière du *Batory*', the historical specificity of the date of refusal of the



‘rappelés’ to board the boat for Algeria in the original (‘l’autre dimanche’) is lost in the ‘un dimanche’ of the edited book version.<sup>100</sup>

Now that the status of *Mythologies* has been fully established, we can move to make a number of general conclusions about its importance for Barthes’s writing and career in the 1950s.

### Conclusion

The editing and subsequent abstraction of the original mythological studies does not mean that *Mythologies* lost its final charge; on the contrary, as the study of contemporary press reviews in this chapter has shown, Barthes’s most famous book (of the 1950s, if not of his whole career), raised a number of polemics. However, all of the reviews of *Mythologies* that I have managed to find show that it was ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’ which raised the most debate in 1957; this meant, automatically, that the critical nature of the original studies was relegated in relation to the final section added afterwards.<sup>101</sup>

This meant that a number of important points about Barthes’s own career have been obscured. Firstly, the original ‘petites mythologies’ were aimed at a specific audience. Not only was this evident in the jargon (for example, the ‘dialectique d’amour’ had meant little to those intellectuals not initiated into Hegelian Marxist theory), it also suggested that Barthes was making specifically political assumptions about his readership: the ‘petites mythologies’, published in the pages of a small circulation left-wing literary journal, needed to take the readership’s left-wing beliefs for granted. Firstly, to understand the analysis of a myth’s operations one had to accept, to some extent that a myth existed and that it was worth demystifying in relation to its ideological role (maintaining the status quo); in this sense, Barthes’s ‘petite mythologie’ was not a mobilising, persuasive discourse, was not trying to



convince in any way. Secondly, Barthes's 'dialectique d'amour', as a recipe for a critical praxis, was necessarily aimed at a like-minded reader of *Les Lettres nouvelles*: in order to understand Barthes's dilemma, the reader had, at least, to agree with the political import of Barthes's critique of myth; if the readership was not preoccupied by the possible damage and ideological control that myths caused, as well as by the difficulty of analysing the ideology of the masses excluded from direct articulation of experience and thought, then a dialectical relationship with those myths was irrelevant.

If, in 1954, his dilemma was resolved, temporarily, in his dialectical attitude towards myth, and this was subsequently ignored in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', a shift of emphasis took place. We will look at this in chapter 4. The main point about the addition of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' for our purposes of understanding *Mythologies*'s success and importance for Barthes was that it attempted to expound (at least the beginnings of) a scientific theory of myth, which, by definition, had to suspend, if not ignore, the dialectical act of demystification which the 'Phénomène ou mythe?' had stressed.

The role of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' was to theorise a sociology of signs, found a new science, which ignored the historical moment of the myth's transmission and consumption; its remit was to point out the double-bind of the demystifier *only within* this science of signs.<sup>102</sup> The aim of the book was not to react to events as they happened, but to use them as examples for setting out a general strategy and theory for demystifying bourgeois myth and ideology; though beginning to be interested in the ideological role and political ethics of a burgeoning mass culture, Barthes had written his study originally not for intellectuals, but for left-wing intellectuals who, reading *Les Lettres nouvelles* in this period of political turmoil, might understand the need for a tactical, or dialectical relationship with capitalist culture. Though not a persuasive, mobilising discourse, more an ironic and detached essayism, the 'petites mythologies' were nonetheless intervening in specific issues; though, later, the



analyses, would lend themselves to theoretical considerations, they were clearly not motivated in the same way as the book by a general theory of semiotic analysis.

If his main aim had been to satirize and expose press distortions, then this had been nevertheless linked to an analysis of the function of cultural phenomena and the ideological role of press coverage. The difference between 1954 and 1957 was that the latter had been promoted over the former by the collection of the mythologies into a book. The whole thrust of the ‘Phénomène ou mythe?’ was the contemporaneous intervention of the mythologist in order to denounce an imposture *at that time*; as Barthes put it in 1954: ‘Seule compte la réalité générale de l’Histoire dans laquelle le mythe prend place; c’est au nom de cette Histoire que nous devons juger le mythe’; and it was this act of ‘condamnation’ which linked us, historically and politically, ‘le plus généreusement à notre société’. In other words, the act of demystification for Barthes was historically-specific; the very attitude the mythologist took defined his/her relationship to the society of that time. If, now, we look at the book *Mythologies*, not only is this historically-specific act of the demystifier not explained, it is also, in practice, denied by the book, and above all by ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’.

The book, catering for a wider range of readership, perhaps including the more academic and enlightened (as well as the left-wing) thinker, needed a more timeless and theoretical, and less politicised, account. This is not to say that *Mythologies* hides Barthes’s left-wing analysis.<sup>103</sup> However, it appears that, paying close attention to Guérin’s criticisms of jargon and lack of clarity in his ‘petites mythologies’, Barthes tried to shift the emphasis of these studies, when collected into book form, in order to give the book version a wider appeal.

The result of this was a political confusion as to the worth of Barthes’s book. Indeed, reviews of Barthes’s book at the time were on occasions difficult



to differentiate politically and implied that *Mythologies* itself had blurred political distinctions; though underlining the political and polemical nature of Barthes's book, many commentators were not in agreement over the political position of the book; their contradictory assessments suggest that the highly political nature of Barthes's studies was clouded by the ambiguity caused by the attempt to marry two different projects.

In 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', his contradictory relationship to myth became a less overtly political stance, instead a more jaundiced, if not pessimistic and negative, view of mass culture; whereas 'Phénomène ou mythe?' advocated the active, politicised demystification of bourgeois culture, 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' was a descriptive, and, at best defensive, prognosis of action before the mystifications of culture; as Yves Velan put it 'Barthes veut donc *faire*, mais sa sympathie se trouve [...] transformée en sarcasme'; in this sense, said Velan, Barthes's book could be no more than a 'poésie engagée'. The book version of the 'petites mythologies', with Barthes's editing, and appendage of a theoretical explanation of myth and the demystifier's relationship to it, had changed a dialectical praxis into a sarcastic negativity, by abstracting the playful critiques of a journalist into a timeless science of myth of a theorist.

This aspect is clear not only from the attempt in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' to provide a 'science formelle' (to use Yves Velan's term) but also in the manner in which the mythological studies were edited, and in some cases, omitted from the book. Also, the collection of the mythological studies into a book altered their original status as journalism; this did not mean that, automatically, they became less radical in their impact. Nor did this mean that they did not anger the right-wing and, in some cases, elicit responses which the book had already analysed. However, the collection into book form, the editing and addition of a final theoretical essay, was indicative of the shift in his perception of his career: it was part of the 'tournant' of his 'itinéraire



personnel', where he ended his role as an intellectuel (a journalist) and become a 'chercheur'.

Before we look at the theoretical shifts which accompanied Barthes's move away from a journalistic intervention, we must look at his experience in the popular theatre movement and suggest its importance within his intellectual and journalistic political praxis. At the same time we will be able to suggest its influence on his attitudes in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in P. Thody, *Roland Barthes*, p.49 and note 24.

<sup>2</sup> 'Bidules et "OMO" sapiens', *Demain*, 21 September 1957, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> 'Mythes, mystère et mystification', *Pensée française*, September 1958, pp.47-48.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, July/August 1957, pp.113-119.

<sup>5</sup> *France-Observateur*, 21 March 1957, p.15.

<sup>6</sup> *Combat*, 25 April 1957, p.7; see also Noël Balliff's 'Démystifier la foule', *Combat*, 19 September 1957, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> *Libération*, 3 April 1957, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> *Le Canard enchaîné*, 13 March 1957, p.2; this study was undertaken by Barthes in the second series of 'mythologies', which began in 1959, and focussed on the verb 'être' in the phrase 'L'Algérie est française', see 'Sur un emploi du verbe "être"', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 7, 15 April 1959, pp.52-53 (OC 811-813).

<sup>9</sup> *La Parisienne*, June 1957, p.782.

<sup>10</sup> *Cinéma 57*, November 1957, pp.123-124

<sup>11</sup> *Europe*, August 1957, p.227.

<sup>12</sup> *Mercure de France*, June 1957, pp.306-309.

<sup>13</sup> *Revue Socialiste*, December 1957, p.558.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, there were no reviews of *Mythologies* in 1957 nor 1958 in *Les Temps Modernes*, *Esprit*, *La Nouvelle critique*, *Les Lettres françaises* nor *Arguments*.

<sup>15</sup> *Pourquoi Pas?*, 20 September 1957, p.20.

<sup>16</sup> *La Croix du Nord*, 23 June 1957, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> *Vigie marocaine*, 'Un voyage au pays de la bêtise et de la mystification', 9 June 1957, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> Coiplet began the review thus: 'Au fond la morale de ce livre c'est l'anarchie. M. Barthes le dit [...] à propos de Charlot [...]. La révolution aboutit à un nouvel Etat politique. Cet Etat, quel qu'il soit, n'acceptera pas qu'un nouvel Charlot destructeur agisse contre lui. Ce serait [...], d'un point de vue politique, la critique que l'on ferait à *Mythologies*'; see *Le Monde*, 9 March 1957, p.14.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes had stressed that the anarchy of Chaplin's film was an aesthetic, which, following Brecht, could perhaps engender an active and critical audience; Coiplet also overlooked Barthes's view that this anarchy was 'discutable politiquement' (*Mythologies*, OC 587).

<sup>20</sup> Barthes had reason to bear a grudge against Coiplet, for the uncharitable review of *Michelet par lui-même*; see 'Michelet extravagant', *Le Monde*, 10 April 1954, p.7. Philip Thody mistakenly listed this review as 10 May 1954, and considered it to be 'anonymous' (p.21, note 13); however, published in April on the same page as Coiplet's 'Courrier littéraire' and beginning with 'Là aussi ...', this review was clearly Coiplet's, since it followed on from his review of Jacques Chardonne's *Oeuvres complètes*.

<sup>21</sup> Compare 'Critique muette et aveugle' in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1954, p.793, with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 583). The review by Coiplet in question - 'Les Jours



raccourcissent (de M. Emile Henriot)', in *Le Monde*, 25 September 1954, p.7 - confirmed Barthes's view with its opening line: 'La critique de la poésie comme celle de la musique est impossible à rendre par les mots [...]' (p.7). The review of the play by 'le marxiste Lefebvre' was written by Kemp and admitted to understanding neither Kierkegaard nor existentialism; see 'Le maître et la servante au théâtre des Mathurins', *Le Monde*, 18 September 1954, p.9.

<sup>22</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1955, p.153, with *Mythologies* (OC 594); the name of the 'avocat général', Rozan, is also omitted from the book version. I have been unable to find in *Le Monde* any reference to the 'satisfecit choquant' which Barthes was criticising.

<sup>23</sup> *Le Monde*, 28 August 1957, p.7. The second review by Jean Lacroix (5 May 1954, p.7) was a purely descriptive account of Barthes's book.

<sup>24</sup> Henriot wrote: 'Mais, bien sûr, il y a des petits monstres et des enfants qui peuvent être aussi méchants que les grandes personnes. De fait, loin d'être le bourgeois chevalier servant de toutes vérités établies, je suis souvent plus triste à leur égard que M. Roland Barthes ne peut supposer, dans son goût de river son clou à l'adversaire imaginé' (p.7).

<sup>25</sup> 'Trois lauréats au Prix Sainte-Beuve', *Le Figaro littéraire*, 6 April 1957, p.3.

<sup>26</sup> This description would have been worthy of a 'mythologie': 'Vers midi et demi, des coups violents furent frappés sous le plancher de la librairie Sainte-Beuve, boulevard Saint-Germain. C'étaient les jurés du prix du même nom qui demandaient à sortir de la cave où on les avait enfermés pour qu'ils puissent mieux délibérer. On ouvrit une trappe et apparut Robert Kanters dont le visage congestionné disait l'âpreté des récents combats. Le vainqueur était, pour les romans [... etc]' (p.3).

<sup>27</sup> Marcel Thiébaud's review credited Barthes with a 'rare ingéniosité'; but he noted how Barthes attacked 'le bourgeois français parce qu'il bougonne contre les grèves', whilst, at the same, defending the Soviet Union 'qui les interdit'; see *La Revue de Paris*, October 1957, p.156.

<sup>28</sup> *France Catholique*, 12 April 1957, pp.4-5.

<sup>29</sup> *Rivarol*, 'Mythomanie', 28 March 1957, p.5. Cousteau wrote that he had never heard of Barthes until he read a favourable review of *Mythologies* in *France-Observateur*; this, one presumes, was Nadeau's article (see above).

<sup>30</sup> 'Traduction en français vulgaire: l'image du bon nègre est un artifice, destiné à masquer la réalité de l'atrocité colonialiste et à nous donner bonne conscience, alors que la seule évocation de la négritude devrait nous faire rougir de honte' (p.5).

<sup>31</sup> *L'Echo du Centre*, 30 March 1957, p.8; Vandromme had obviously not read the 'Avant-Propos' in which Barthes postulated (if not accepted) the existence of a 'mythologie du mythologue' (see *Mythologies*, OC 565).

<sup>32</sup> *L'Express*, 'Le roi est tout nu', 22 March 1957, p.31; 'On ne voit pas pourquoi l'admiration d'un torrent serait bourgeoise et celle d'un plateau prolétarienne [...]. Barthes prend un point de vue absolu, comme un Dieu qui pourrait survoler d'emblée l'ensemble de l'Espagne'.

<sup>33</sup> Though Lenoir overestimated Barthes's role for Nadeau's journal, his main point was irrefutably true; see Drouet's poems in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, September 1955. The right-wing journal *Rivarol* keenly echoed this point a month later; a short article, ironically called 'Le penseur tue-mythes' (by 'le Mauvais Oeil' columnist), repeated the falsehood of Barthes's position on the 'comité de rédaction', as well as the oversight in Barthes's critique of journals participating in the myth of the child poet, and reminded the readership further that it was Julliard, the publisher of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, which had printed Drouet's first collection of poems; see *Rivarol*, 11 April 1957, p.12.

<sup>34</sup> Calvet, p.161.

<sup>35</sup> *Témoignage Chrétien*, 12 April 1957, p.11; this review suggested interesting parallels between 'la technique surréaliste de l'écriture automatique' and Barthes's playful tendency to 'rapprocher des pensées qui ne souffrent pas de l'être, des notions inconciliables, des concepts éloignés et des idées contraires'.

<sup>36</sup> *Christianisme social*, October 1957, pp.817-818; '[L]a bourgeoisie [...] se veut anonyme, afin de se présenter comme modèle éternel. C'est pourquoi elle crée des mythes, qui lui permettent de faire passer ses préjugés et son "ordre" pour des vérités immuables et indiscutables. Le consommateur de ces mythes est surtout le petit bourgeois, fidèle et



inconscient soutien du capitalisme' (p.817); and writing about torture in Algeria: 'Le gouvernement et la presse de droite ont commencé par nier les tortures. Puis quand cela est devenu impossible ils les ont reconnues, voire mêmes proclamées (témoignages des députés Le Pen et Demarquet), mais en ajoutant qu'elles étaient un mal nécessaire, inhérent à ce genre de guerre et d'ailleurs utile. Conclusion: la torture est normale et bonne' (p.818).

<sup>37</sup> *République libre*, 7 February 1958, p.3; Yves Velan's review in *Les Lettres nouvelles* made a similar point: 'la gauche peut-elle se servir du mythe activement [...], peut-on s'en passer pour agir?' (p.118).

<sup>38</sup> *La Nation Française*, 18 September 1957, p.9; Morvan wondered whether the reflections and mirages of these myths 'ne recouvrent pas les trésors profonds d'âmes qui, pour être peu intellectuelles, n'en sont pas moins sacrées'.

<sup>39</sup> Refusing to criticise people's political views, as Republicans might, Morvan considered that this was to offend their 'sentiments'; furthermore, he thought that to consider the "lessivage de cervelles" as the writer's 'tâche primordiale', was, in fact, to impose 'un dressage de chien policier'.

<sup>40</sup> 'Roland Barthes et la chasse aux mythes', *La Nation Française*, 31 July 1957, p.8.

<sup>41</sup> Taking the example of the Sorellian general strike as a 'mythe de gauche', Velan showed, using irony, the political nonsense of Barthes's formalist and functionalist logic: 'Il me semble que tout le matériel est rassemblé: un "méta-langage" emprunté aux traditions ouvrières, un signe de la prise du pouvoir, devenu forme, où se glisse à son tour (amusons-nous un peu) le concept de "galvanicité", et qui devient une signification nouvelle, laquelle a subi à l'usage le même transfert que "quoniam nominor leo": de même que le lion rappelle en fait l'accord de l'attribut, la grève ne sert qu'à maintenir la cohésion des militants' (p.118).

<sup>42</sup> As well as reviews of Vilar's productions of *Le Prince de Hombourg*, *Don Juan* and *Richard II*, and Barrault's *Christophe Colomb*, *Les Lettres nouvelles* asked Barthes to assess contemporary cinema; see 'Jules César au Cinéma', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1954, pp.150-153 (reprinted and edited in *Mythologies* as 'Romains au cinéma', OC 578-580), 'Au cinémascope' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1954, pp.305-306, OC380), and 'Versailles et ses comptes' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, May 1954, pp.784-787, OC 401-403); as well as a hypnotist's show in 'Le Grand Robert' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, October 1954, pp.628-631, OC 435-437) and a computer which could write literature in 'Littérature inhumaine' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1214-1215, OC 239).

<sup>43</sup> 'Le monde objet', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, June 1953, pp.394-405; 'Féminaire de Michelet', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1085-1100; it could be argued that, due to its length and prominent place in the first number of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, his account of Vilar's *Le Prince de Hombourg* was, in fact, an 'essai' rather than a review.

<sup>44</sup> The 'tel jeune romancier' of the *Mythologies* version who had 'du goût pour "les jolies filles, le reblochon et le miel de lavande"' was named in the original article as 'Michel Henry, l'auteur du "Jeune Officier"'; Barthes gave the reference for this as *Arts*, 1 September, and the Mauriac photo in *L'Express* as 'je ne sais plus quel numéro de cet été'; compare *France-Observateur*, 9 September 1954 (p.1) with *Mythologies* (OC 581).

<sup>45</sup> 'Bloc-notes', *L'Express*, 18 September 1954, p.12.

<sup>46</sup> 'A quelles puissances de la politique, de la finance du monde, en a-t-il, ce paladin?', asked Mauriac; and replied ironically: 'Ses confrères en vacances, les écrivains qui ont commis le crime inexpiable de se faire photographier pendant qu'ils pêchaient à la ligne, voilà les misérables qu'il dénonce'; and added that he did not know what 'M. Roland Barthes pense des prisonniers politiques, ni s'il s'intéresse à l'amnistie' (p.12).

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, this article on writers in September 1954 prefigured his first 'petite mythologie' in November 1954, 'La croisière du sang bleu', by relating the writers on holidays to the blue blood cruise; omitted from the book version Barthes ended the original 'L'écrivain en vacances' thus: 'Il y a [...] un fait concomitant d'actualité qui fait bien comprendre comment "l'humanité" de nos écrivains les consacre dans leur délicieuse indifférence, c'est la croisière de l'"Agamemnon": les souverains et les princes d'Europe ont eu eux aussi, pendant ces vacances, leur petite crise de prosaïsme, et colportée avec le même émerveillement: se vêtir d'une chemisette ou d'une robe "imprimée" quand on est roi ou reine, est-ce vraiment possible? Mais oui, ça l'est, du moins quand on y consent, un temps, pour mieux manifester



l'exorbitante contradiction du vêtement et de la "nature". Nos écrivains eux aussi ont été embarqués pour l'amusante croisière d'un nouveau "Sang Bleu" (p.2).

<sup>48</sup> Noting a 'rythme historique' in France which put the petty-bourgeoisie in power 'malheureusement avant qu'elle n'ait pu être absorbée dans les masses plus ouvrières', Barthes concluded: '[O]n a tous les inconvénients d'un gouvernement fort sans en avoir les avantages. Rien que de son point de vue, il est difficile de comprendre la bêtise de notre bourgeoisie qui vole à sa propre perte et toute la France avec, plutôt que de sacrifier quelques petits préjugés ou quelques avantages immédiats. Les origines de ceci sont probablement lointaines et profondes'; 'à la Chambre', he concluded, only 'les communistes et les gaullistes' had a 'certain sens' of the 'échelle historique' of being in power.

<sup>49</sup> All of these events had been closely covered by the newspaper in which Barthes was publishing the results of his literary questionnaire with Nadeau; see *France-Observateur*, any numbers between November 1952 and January 1953.

<sup>50</sup> See 'Sur ma propre bêtise et celle de quelques autres' which, published in *Les Lettres nouvelles* in April 1953, began a debate in the journal on the relationship of the intellectual to Marxism once free of the dogmata of Stalinism; in subsequent numbers Nadeau published a three-part reply to Mascolo called 'Les intellectuels et le communisme'; see *Les Lettres nouvelles*, no.8, pp.1013-24; no.9, pp.1173-84; and no.10, pp.1321-32. Mascolo made a lengthy reply in number 11, with Nadeau adding a short rejoinder; a further article by Nadeau on this issue and a questionnaire aimed at left-wing intellectuals appeared in numbers over the next two or three years, particularly after the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

<sup>51</sup> The collapse of the French fortress coincided with the Geneva convention which ended French control of Indochina.

<sup>52</sup> See *NNRF*, 25, January 1955, p.167.

<sup>53</sup> 'Mythologie perpétuelle', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, pp.944-945; 'Les Martiens et la presse', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, pp.945-946; 'Les Martiens et l'église', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, p.946; 'Nouvelles mystifications', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, pp.946-948; 'L'opération Astra', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, p.948; 'Conjugales', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, pp.948-951; 'Phénomène ou mythe?', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1954, pp.951-953.

<sup>54</sup> See 'Petit Lexique pour servir à l'histoire de la guerre au Nord-Vietnam', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1955, p.394 note. Calvès was another of Nadeau's Trotskyist comrades from before the Occupation.

<sup>55</sup> 'Lexique marocain', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1955, pp.666-670; 'Grammaire marocaine', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1955, pp.670-672.

<sup>56</sup> *Grâces*, p.244.

<sup>57</sup> See *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1955, pp.817-818. This became the subject of a bitter polemic between Nadeau's journal and the *NNRF*. The 'Comité d'Action contre la poursuite de la guerre en Algérie' wrote an open letter to Guérin (published in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1956, pp.151-152) underlining that Guérin's 'note' on the war in the December 1955 edition of *NNRF* (pp.1180-1182) not only showed his 'ignorance totale' but also an attitude which made the 'intellectuel honnête' into 'le meilleur complice du gendarme raciste chargé de maintenir l'ordre colonial'.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-François Sirinelli, in his book on twentieth-century intellectuals, manifestos and petitions, *Intellectuels et passions françaises* (Paris, Fayard, 1990), makes no mention of this particular petition. According to Jean Guérin in the *NNRF*, there were over sixty signatories, demanding 'le retour immédiat du contingent et des rappelés' from North Africa, including Roger Martin du Gard, François Mauriac, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Jean Cassou and Jean-Paul Sartre; see Guérin's critique of the position of Nadeau's journal in *NNRF*, December 1955, p.1181.

<sup>59</sup> Calvès noted, for example, that French repression in North Africa since 1940 had killed more North Africans than the Nazi repression in France had killed French; see 'Quand on eut sur son front fermé le souterrain ...', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, October 1955, pp.498-499.

<sup>60</sup> See 'La Croisière du Batory'; Barthes would have had every reason to protest: in a letter to Rebeyrol, dated 16 November 1955, he wrote that he was 'profondément affecté par les bêtises de la politique française; j'en souffre chaque jour et pas seulement abstraitement puisque j'ai deux amis très proches qui viennent d'être rappelés'; one of these friends was



Bernard Dort.

<sup>61</sup> These articles by Calvès in *Les Lettres nouvelles* are to be found, respectively, in July/August, p.179; November 1955, p.660; October 1955, p.500.

<sup>62</sup> “Ce qu’il y a de bien avec les grèves tournantes c’est que tout le monde s’y met”, *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1955, pp.660-661.

<sup>63</sup> Changing its name to ‘Et pourtant elle tourne ...’ Calvès’s column continued to be published in the ‘Faits et commentaires du mois’ section until 1958.

<sup>64</sup> J. Guérin, ‘Notes’, *La Nouvelle revue française*, June 1955, pp.1118-1119.

<sup>65</sup> ‘M. Jean Guérin me somme de dire si je suis marxiste ou non. Au fond qu’est-ce que ça peut faire à M. Guérin? Ce genre de questions n’intéresse d’ordinaire que des mac-Carthystes’ (p.191, *OC* 499). Barthes’s accusation of McCarthyism might have been inspired by Levi-Strauss’s attack on Roger Caillois, who also wrote for *NNRF*. Caillois had written a critique of Levi-Strauss’s theories, ‘Illusions à rebours’. Writing a reply, which accused Caillois of not being able to imagine another culture (here, China), Levi-Strauss renamed him ‘MacCaillois’; see *NNRF*, May 1955, p.935.

<sup>66</sup> Calvet, pp.151-153.

<sup>67</sup> In this reply to Guérin’s question, he displayed a bitter sarcasm: ‘Oui,’ he replied, ‘ce serait tellement plus rassurant si l’on pouvait distribuer les écrivains selon leur ‘simple’ déclaration de foi, quitte ensuite à revendiquer pour ceux qui n’en ont aucune le prestige de la “liberté”’ (p.191, *OC* 499).

<sup>68</sup> J. Guérin, ‘M. Barthes se met en colère’, *La Nouvelle revue française*, October 1955, pp.802-804.

<sup>69</sup> Guérin noted how Laval had, like Barthes, told one of his ‘adversaires’ to go and read Marx.

<sup>70</sup> To underline his point, Guérin compared the two great socialists of 1911, Guesde and Jaurès; the former, ‘pur marxiste’, had become a ‘Ministre d’État’, the latter, ‘anti-marxiste’, had been assassinated.

<sup>71</sup> pp.804-5. To show that the *NNRF* was not reactionary, Guérin attacked a dogma on the Right; the ‘conseiller ecclésiastique’ for *L’Express*, R.P. Avril, had condemned Catholic refugees from North Vietnam going to the South for using religion for political ends; Guérin attacked Avril’s dogmatic view that God had no ‘résidence locale’, that he was everywhere. If he himself were a Marxist, said Guérin, Marxism would not be a ‘conviction (comme on voit chez M. Barthes)’ but ‘un fait - une somme de faits’; a Marxist, he said, would consider ‘le bergsonisme, le nietzschéisme’ as ‘des opinions (infiniment discutables)’ (p.807); and for the Bergsonian or the Nietzschean, the reverse was, naturally, true; our opinions, concluded Guérin, did not look like opinions to ourselves, but truths; others’ truths looked like opinions, or myths to us. For Barthes, these opinions from Guérin would be a perfect example of the liberal myth of impartiality (‘expression désintéressée’, ‘tout est spontanément pensé’, with an ‘attitude [...] passionnément [...] et respectueusement interrogative’).

<sup>72</sup> Guérin’s playful criticisms of Barthes’s monthly column did not end there. Two months later he wrote in his ‘revue’ column about social theory in the Orient and in France (‘Histoire du sociologue chinois et des Français bavards’, *NNRF*, December 1955, pp.1182-1184); having revealed his surprise that the right-wing *Rivarol* and *La Nation Française* had told the truth about the reasons for the Catholic Vietnamese moving south, he noted how *L’Express* and *Les Lettres nouvelles* had remained silent on the matter; he said that he would carry on reading the right-wing press as much as that of the Left: ‘Nous continuerons à lire l’excellente “Mythologie” de M. Barthes, mais sans cacher qu’il est un certain nombre de mythes dont M. Barthes ne soufflera mot: par exemple le mythe du progrès, le mythe de “la voix du peuple”, le mythe de l’Instruction’; in Guérin’s, view democratic myths were stronger than reactionary myths: the reason was that democracy had won the War against the Nazis; if the Nazis had won they would have been even worse in creating myths (p.1184). This was, perhaps, the source of Barthes’s comment in ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’ which described how he had been asked whether there was myth on the Left; see *Mythologies* (*OC* 710).

<sup>73</sup> ‘Maitres et esclaves’, p.108.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Que ces faits de consommation requièrent aujourd’hui de toute urgence l’attention du



critique, même lorsqu'ils concernent des phénomènes réputés plus nobles qu'une vedette de cinéma, c'est ce que la presse immobile ne peut arriver à comprendre' (p.951).

<sup>75</sup> The *Nouvelles littéraires* edition of 21 October 1954 was a special number on Rimbaud, which included a lengthy article by Académicien Georges Duhamel, called 'Le Phénomène Rimbaud' (p.1); Etiemble's book, *Le Mythe de Rimbaud. t.1 Genèse du mythe 1869-1949* (Paris, Gallimard, 1954) was given a very short review on page 8.

<sup>76</sup> *Roland Barthes: the figures of writing*, pp.26-32.

<sup>77</sup> See 'Images of the self: New York and Paris', *Partisan Review*, No.2, 1973, pp.295-301, in which Klein noted the contradiction between 'Racine est Racine' and the 1963 article for the *Times Literary Supplement* 'Criticism as language' (translated as 'Qu'est-ce que la critique?' in *Essais critiques*). Klein's view was that Barthes's critique of bourgeois formalism in 'Racine est Racine' which exposed bourgeois ideology's abstraction of historical reality in its 'bon sens' refusal of critical/philosophical interpretation, was contradicted by 'Qu'est ce que la critique?' in which 'Barthes adopts the very formula he earlier derogates'; here, writes Klein, Barthes's intention was to defend a mode of structuralist criticism 'whose aim is to liberate literature from the tyranny of meaning to which "bourgeois" culture submits it' (pp.294-295).

<sup>78</sup> Precisely what he did in the footnote to his review of *Le plus heureux des trois (Théâtre populaire)*, 19, July 1956, p.80 note 1, *OC* 552).

<sup>79</sup> This ambiguous, dialectical relationship to myth is implicitly suggested by Rick Rylance's contrast of *Mythologies* with Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*; the 'dialectique d'amour' fits with Rylance's view that, devoid of the 'moral earnestness' of Hoggart's book, *Mythologies* 'finds pleasure as well as cant in the consumer world'; see R. Rylance, *Roland Barthes* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp.62-63.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, p.29.

<sup>81</sup> *OC* 13. Though Marty indicates the articles which Barthes edited, he lists only those which were not republished in book-form in Barthes's life-time (especially the popular theatre material); but he does not indicate the differences between original articles and those which Barthes included in *Mythologies* and *Essais critiques*. For example, the last line of 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne' was edited by Barthes before its inclusion in the 1963 collection *Essais critiques*; the 'plasticité' of Brecht's 'morale', linked to his correct reading of history, and the 'plasticité' of history, were linked by Barthes to a Leninist philosophy: 'c'est en somme' he wrote in 1956, 'une morale de style léniniste' (p.22); the version in *Essais critiques* omits this Leninist dimension to Brechtian dialectics (*OC* 1230). 'Il n'y a pas d'école Robbe-Grillet' was also slightly altered for its inclusion in *Essais critiques*. The original article noted how Robbe-Grillet 's'est un peu prêté' to the 'confusion' around the 'école' of the 'nouveau roman' and, said Barthes, 'a eu tort' to do this. Furthermore, the original cited Robbe-Grillet's 'textes "théoriques"' in *L'Express* and *France-Observateur* which had given examples of other writers who too, according to Robbe-Grillet, had tried to 'rompre avec la tradition stendhalienne ou balzacienne du roman'; these examples, said the original article, 'manquaient de rigueur'. Despite this mild criticism, however, Barthes explained that Robbe-Grillet had an 'excuse'; as a writer 'qui cherche' he was bound to 'se sentir seul', and it was 'normal' that he should join up ('s'adjoigne') with 'quelques compagnons' even if this was 'prématurément'; after all, said Barthes in 1958, 'toute oeuvre est dogmatique, même la plus polie' (p.8); the *Essais critiques* version of the article omits this entire paragraph (see *OC* 1241-1242).

<sup>82</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1955, p.825; in *Mythologies*, the people who consume the car simply 's'approprient en elle un objet parfaitement magique' (*OC* 655).

<sup>83</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, June 1955, p.952; in *Mythologies*, Barthes wrote simply: 'Et si l'on se mettait à penser sur Racine?' (*OC* 621).

<sup>84</sup> See 'Pour une histoire de l'enfance', 'Enfants-vedettes', 'Enfants-copies' and 'Jouets' in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1955, pp.313-320 (*OC* 459-464); using the complex notion of 'embourgeoisement', these mythologies explained the historical conditions and contemporary evolution of capitalist representations of the child. Eric Marty has noted the difference of the final paragraph in the original 'Jouets' and included this in the *Oeuvres complètes*, by publishing this mythology twice (see *OC* 464 and 598).

<sup>85</sup> 'L'écrivain en vacances' was edited to remove the names of Mauriac and Henry; and, as



well as excluding the final passage on the 'croisière du sang bleu', Barthes omitted a paragraph which suggested that the 'stakhanovisme' of the writer who worked fourteen hours a day 'postule les vacances comme le diable postule Dieu', and concluded that not only was this image of the 'artisanat forcené' of literature a 'forme substitutive' of the 'vieux mythe de l'inspiration' but also that the writer was a 'surhomme' which society played with like a 'canari ou [...] un écureuil (l'un chante, l'autre tourne, mais c'est la même chose)' (p.1); clearly, the Soviet phenomenon of 'stakhanovism' was not considered appropriate for the readership of *Mythologies*.

<sup>86</sup> 'Visages et figures', *Esprit*, July 1953, pp.1-11 (OC 224-232). Describing how he had seen an old woman tramp reading voraciously a magazine full of photographs of cinema stars, Barthes's point was that the morphology of human faces were dependent on the dominance of filmstars' faces, an alienation and expropriation summed up in the nuance in the title of the article: the excluded masses had lost the individuality of their 'visages', replaced by impersonal 'figures'.

<sup>87</sup> See *Les Lettres nouvelles*, December 1955, pp.945-948: 'Ainsi le thème du Double en vient à introduire dans la conscience l'idée d'une pluralité. C'est aller trop loin, il est temps de ramener le mythe au service de l'ordre' (p.946).

<sup>88</sup> "L'Église n'a pas d'opinion sur ce qui est hypothétique. L'Église ne bâtit que sur le réel". Compare this last line to Montaigne's 'Je ne bastis que sur de pierres vives'; ironically, Montaigne's quote appeared on the front cover of the first edition of *Mythologies* in Seuil's 'Pierres vives' collection.

<sup>89</sup> 'De même que l'on a vu des mouvements profondément réactionnaires se prévaloir du nom de socialisme ou des journaux notoirement obscurantistes s'intituler *Progrès* ou *Lumière*, de même c'est la raison qui vient ici décorer coquettement le char puissant de la mystification' (pp.946-947).

<sup>90</sup> The Dominici trial, for example, was a 'cause célèbre' on the Left and was covered by Jean Laborde in his critical study *Affaire de Lurs 1952-1956* (Paris, Laffont, 1972).

<sup>91</sup> For example, 'La Grande Famille des Hommes', published in March 1956: writing at the same time as the famous bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, often cited as the beginning of the Black Civil Rights movement - it started on December 5, 1955 and continued for 382 days - Barthes was certainly *au fait*. In the original he had suggested asking, as well as Emmet Till, 'l'étudiante noire d'Alabama' what they both thought of *la grande famille des Hommes*; clearly, Barthes was referring to the fact that no black students were allowed to attend white schools or colleges in Mississippi in the 1950s; the book referred only to Emmet Till, and added, as clarification, that Till had been murdered 'par des Blancs' (*Mythologies*, OC 670).

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, 'Critique muette ou aveugle' (November 1954), in which he gave the date of the *Le Monde* article (p.793); and 'Les Martiens et l'église' (December 1954) where the dates of *Match* and *Point de Vue* were given (p.946).

<sup>93</sup> See 'La littérature selon Minou Drouet' (p.159) the footnote reference to the article by M. Ikor which proclaimed, in *Education nationale* 16 October 1952 noted Barthes fastidiously, that 'notre littérature, elle, pue la fièvre'. Similarly, in 'Astrologie' (February 1956), in a footnote, Barthes alluded to the recent 'enquête remarquable' by Michel Crozier at the CNRS called *Petits fonctionnaires au travail* (p.318); on the same page, he gave a footnote reference to the Gérard Souzay recording of Fauré's songs criticised in 'L'art vocal bourgeois'.

<sup>94</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, October 1955 (p.505) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 639).

<sup>95</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1956 (p.154) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 658).

<sup>96</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, June 1955 (pp.951-952) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 621-622); whereas in the original Barthes had described Korène's desire to apply a "compréhension" poujadiste' to Racine - 'Mme Vera Korène ne veut pas autre chose qu'appliquer...' (p.952) - the book version became an impersonal reference to this literary poujadism - 'il s'agit au fond d'appliquer ...' (OC 621).

<sup>97</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1956, p.154 note 1.

<sup>98</sup> 'Lexique marocain', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1955, p.669. In 'Grammaire



africaine', the phrase became: 'Car seuls, n'est-ce pas ? le fanatisme ou l'inconscience peuvent pousser à vouloir sortir du statut du colonisé' (*Mythologies*, OC 649).

<sup>99</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1955 (p.663) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 645).

<sup>100</sup> Compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, October 1955 (p.512) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 644).

<sup>101</sup> His tailoring of the mythological material to prepare for the conclusions of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' is best illustrated in 'Le Vin et le Lait'. In the *Mythologies* version, a final paragraph was added which showed the link between the phenomenon wine and French capitalism's colonial expropriation of Algerian land, in order for the mythologist's dilemma to be illustrated in the conclusion of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'; compare *Les Lettres nouvelles*, April 1955 (p.638) with the version in *Mythologies* (OC 609). Barthes's view that wine was an example of the contradictory relationship of the 'mythologue' to social phenomena, in that its 'innocent' provision of pleasure, was, at the same time, part of colonialist 'expropriation' and capitalist exploitation, was challenged by Georges Lefranc, for whom the identification of the 'bouilleurs de cru' with a 'privilege capitaliste' showed that Barthes himself was a 'victime' of a myth; see Lefranc's review in *République libre*, p.3.

<sup>102</sup> Bernard Dort, who had helped Barthes with the drafting of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' in Hendaye in Summer 1956, has spoken of Barthes's dilemma of whether to include the 'subjectivité' of the demystifying intellectual in this essay; interview with Bernard Dort, March 1991.

<sup>103</sup> His characterization of the highly reactionary nature of Poujadism as close to fascism is one of the best examples of the political charge of the book: that Poujadist petty-bourgeois ideology was the 'symptôme spécifique des fascismes' underlined how Poujadism went beyond Poujade himself; hatred of intellectualism came from a variety of 'milieux politiques', united in their anti-intellectualist attack on 'toute forme de culture explicative, engagée', and in their desire for a 'culture "innocente"', the naivety of which left the way open for the 'tyran'. Here, quite controversially, Barthes added that a number of writers ('fort connus') had dedicated writings to Poujade (*Mythologies*, OC 680).



## CHAPTER THREE: *THÉÂTRE POPULAIRE* AND A RADICAL POPULAR THEATRE

*Ce qui a fait la beauté d'Athènes, c'est que chez ce peuple actif, énergique, s'il en fut jamais, tout Athénien était prêtre avec les prêtres, acteur avec les acteurs. Le culte et le théâtre n'étaient pas le monopole de quelques-uns mais la fonction de tous.* Jules Michelet

### Introduction

Barthes played an important role in the popular theatre movement of the 1950s, particularly in relation to the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Daniel Mortier's study of the reception of Brecht's theatre in France between 1945 and 1956 has underlined Barthes's importance; David Bradby, meanwhile, has suggested the slow, but eventually enormous, influence that Brecht's epic theatre was to have on French theatre in the two decades after Barthes's efforts to disseminate Brechtian theories.<sup>1</sup> Barthes's interest in and fascination with Brecht, his 'éblouissement' before the Berliner Ensemble performance in Paris in 1954, have become almost mythical in Barthesian studies. Barthes himself helped to encourage this by describing his first encounter with Brecht's theatre as an 'illumination subite', an 'incendie', which, ultimately, caused him to leave the popular theatre, because no theatre could follow Brecht's.<sup>2</sup>

Intentionally or not, Barthes's own retrospective description of his 'éblouissement' has served to belittle, if not to hide, his other experiences in the popular theatre movement. Indeed, with this account a myth has been formed: it seems that the postwar Barthes was destined to become a Brechtian, his 'brechtisme' inevitable. This chapter will aim to challenge this myth by redressing the balance between the mythical 'Brechtian' Barthes and the historical phenomenon of a Barthes actively attempting to instigate and sustain



a radical popular theatre movement in France. In particular, it will look at the conditions in which Barthes welcomed (and could welcome) Brechtian theories, and became a militant advocate of Epic theatre. In order to do this we must place Barthes's 'éblouissement' in the wider context of his role in, and reactions to the vicissitudes of, the popular theatre movement in general and Jean Vilar's TNP in particular.

It was, above all, in *Théâtre populaire* that Barthes's interest in both Brecht's and Vilar's theatres was the most apparent; and it was here that Barthes's fascination for Brecht was intricately related to his gradual disillusionment with Vilar's TNP. *Théâtre populaire* had been set up, according to Bernard Dort, 'dans le sillage du TNP', though maintaining an independence in its views on how to construct a popular theatre; this space allowed the journal to welcome Brechtian theatre, to advocate it in the TNP repertoires and then to criticise Vilar if TNP productions of Brechtian theatre failed to apply Brecht's own directions and stipulations; it was in this context that Barthes was to become France's best-known Brechtian of the 1950s, as well as renowned for his antipathy to Vilar.

Dort has recently set out the three phases of the relations between *Théâtre populaire* and the TNP; between 1953 and 1955, there was a 'soutien inconditionnelle', 1955 to 1960 an 'éloignement' if not a 'rupture', ending in 1960 with a return to a 'dialogue'.<sup>3</sup> The relationship, underlines Dort, was linked above all to the changing fortunes of the popular theatre in and outside of Paris and to the tension between two different interpretations of theatre decentralisation, one part of governmental policy and encouraged by the TNP, the other based on amateur dramatics, and in opposition to Vilar's efforts.<sup>4</sup> Barthes, as we shall see, was a central figure in the journal's shifting attitude to Vilar and to the general perspectives of reaching the popular masses with theatre.

In *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* Barthes had described the exclusion of



the masses that the false universality in the discourse of bourgeois ideology had operated since its gradual accession to power across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This distinctly Marxian view of language, literature and culture in bourgeois society was repeated in March 1953 in his scepticism towards any attempt to end the cultural exclusion of the French masses in class society by bringing them to the theatre.<sup>5</sup> Though enthusiastic about the TNP performance of Kleist's *Le Prince de Hombourg*, Barthes underlined that, because of the 'déchirement persistant' caused by class society, Vilar's theatre, could be 'populaire' only 'idéalement': '[s]ociologiquement', he said, the TNP was only 'une entreprise d'avant-garde', in that it was supported by 'les éléments évolués des classes moyennes' and the poorer elements of the bourgeoisie, rather than the popular masses; following Trotsky's view that all people's culture was impossible in class society, in March 1953 Barthes linked social class to cultural exclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Within three months, however, Barthes was writing for a popular theatre journal, which, in its first editorial, talked of the possibility of constructing a popular theatre, because the 'nivellement des classes' was taking place. Indeed, by the time of his first major article for the journal in July/August 1953, 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique', Barthes's earlier scepticism towards this popular culture was declining; here, he was trying to show how the social aspect of Ancient Greek theatre could be used to help construct a 'théâtre vraiment populaire [...] à la fois Fête et Connaissance, dénouement solennel du temps laborieux et incendie des consciences'.<sup>7</sup> His militancy throughout 1954 and 1955 - in constructing this popular theatre, writing regularly for, and organising, the popular theatre journal and helping the Amis du Théâtre Populaire (ATP) - only implied further that he had overcome his earlier scepticism towards the possibility of a popular theatre in a class society.

This change of heart and of political perspective was only temporary, however. By 1957 his enthusiasm for popular culture could be seen to have



disappeared: by the time he wrote 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', his optimism had clearly been replaced by an even more sceptical view of popular theatre and popular culture in general.<sup>8</sup> To understand the reasons for this change, we must look first at Barthes's role in committing *Théâtre populaire* to a political theatre.

**(i) The politicisation of *Théâtre populaire***

*Le théâtre d'Eschyle ou de Sophocle provoquait son public à une véritable émotion politique.* Roland Barthes

The connections between the labour movement and the ATP were strong; the association's president, Henri Laborde, was also a 'délégué national' to the 'Centres d'Entraînement aux Méthodes d'Education active' (CEMEA), which, according to Emile Copfermann, was federated into the 'Ligue de l'enseignement' with the communist-leaning network of 'comités d'entreprise' called 'Travail et culture'.<sup>9</sup> That the publisher of the TNP's 'collection du répertoire', and the founder of *Théâtre populaire* and the ATP, Robert Voisin, was 'proche du parti communiste', fitted with the Communist party's populist cultural policy. The connections between the TNP and the Communist party were strong enough for the ATP to be formed initially to defend Vilar; a virulent 'campagne de presse' was trying to push Vilar to resign from the TNP for his perceived relationship with the Communist Party and after accusations of mis-management of national funds.<sup>10</sup> The ATP proclaimed its solidarity with the TNP by creating 'un comité technique', presided by Vilar.<sup>11</sup>

Launched at exactly the same time, the ATP was linked firmly to Voisin's *Théâtre populaire*; from the first number until 1956, the journal carried news of the ATP. In the first number Laborde set out the ATP's aims.



Though supporting Vilar's work at the TNP, the ATP was not a 'société d'admirateurs', nor an 'Amitié traditionnelle'; it wanted 'la participation active du public' not a 'public chasseur d'autographes'; it required a 'véritable engagement de responsabilité', with a 'public organisé' aware of the theatre's 'problèmes techniques, politiques et sociaux'; this militant attitude was reflected as the association prepared for TNP performances which, with a 'préparation intensive', would look more like a 'manifestation militante'; already, Laborde wrote, the young activists grouped around the 'coordination' of the ATP had filled Chaillot five times for *Lorenzaccio* and four times for *La Mort de Danton*.<sup>12</sup>

There is little doubt that the ATP was relatively successful in reaching those sections of the population normally unused to visiting the theatre. The association grew rapidly; in June 1953 it had 1,700 'adhérents', by December 1954 10,173; its methods were no different from those of the TNP - conferences, debates, 'lectures publiques' and publications, such as *Théâtre populaire*.<sup>13</sup>

Through its connections with the ATP, *Théâtre populaire* had become involved in the political as well as purely theatrical and aesthetic aspects of popular theatre. Early on, it had begun to include information on the 'grass-roots' of the ATP and popular theatre activities around work-places and factory unions, particularly encouraging these activities in the 'Théâtre et les jours' section at the end of each number. A good example of this was the second number (July/August 1953). A confident editorial proclaimed that the 'ampleur' and success of Summer drama festivals meant that the journal was 'plus que jamais justifiée', that 'il n'y a pas de théâtre sans public'; in the same number the 'Théâtre et nos jours' section carried a lengthy review of a debate organised by the Centre Dramatique de l'Ouest attended by 'militants CFTC' on the question 'Pourquoi la classe ouvrière ou rurale ne fréquente-elle si peu (pour ne pas dire jamais) les spectacles du CDO en particulier, et, d'une façon



générale pour l'ensemble de la France, les représentations dramatiques?'.

Though the ATP declared its independence from the journal, the collaborators of the journal were often the mouthpiece of the association on visits and lecture tours to the ATP associations scattered around France; and despite claims to the contrary the ATP and *Théâtre populaire* were linked firmly in the minds of other popular theatre activists.<sup>14</sup>

If Barthes was radicalised by the popular explosion of interest in the theatre, he was also, in turn, to try to radicalise the masses who came to the theatre.

### **Barthes and a political, popular theatre**

As a 'revue de combat', which wanted to become the *Les Temps modernes* of theatre, *Théâtre populaire* was a highly political journal.<sup>15</sup> Like *Les Lettres nouvelles*, it was to become politicised by the Algerian war. Barthes was an important part of this: in 1958 he criticised Vilar's production of *Ubu* in highly political terms: Vilar had failed to challenge, if not excused, the right-wing and oppressive actions of the government in Algeria and in France.<sup>16</sup>

This political aspect was, in fact, evident soon after the journal's promotion of Brechtian theatre in 1955, which, according to Dort, polarised the theatre movement in France not so much between the 'grand' popular theatre and bourgeois theatre, but between a 'théâtre critique et un théâtre de l'assentiment'; Brechtian theatre was 'critique', whereas most other popular theatre was 'suspect de n'être que "idéologique"'.<sup>17</sup> If Barthes played an important role in this 'combat' in favour of Brechtian theatre after the initial phase of introduction in 1955-1956, he had also been central to inflecting the journal's political stance before the battles over Brecht's epic theatre.

The political orientation was not present from the beginning of *Théâtre populaire*. On the contrary, the editorial of the first number stressed the opposite: setting out the imprecision ('équivoque') with which the term



‘théâtre populaire’ had been used in the past, the first editorial regretted the ‘intrusion de plusieurs éléments étrangers à l’art théâtral, la politique entre autres’ into the popular theatre. This apolitical stance in 1953 quickly disappeared in 1954.

Daniel Mortier notes that during 1954 the journal became more ‘polémique’; a series of articles attacked ‘avec véhémence’ the bourgeois theatre; and by the end of 1954 the journal had acquired, with its critique of the ‘théâtre de l’argent’, a ‘discours marxiste’.<sup>18</sup> There is, however, an important episode missing from his account; Mortier does not mention in his account of the radicalisation of the journal the importance of the editorial in *Théâtre populaire* 5, written by Barthes.

This editorial of January 1954 was deeply political. The journal was ready now to ‘risquer un peu plus son confort moral’. But, noted Barthes displaying his mild scepticism, the popular theatre movement had to be realistic: that French society was ‘déchirée’, ‘soumise dans sa structure économique à la dure sécession des classes sociales’, meant a ‘théâtre collectif’ was impossible under such conditions.<sup>19</sup> The journal could, nevertheless, continued Barthes, play a defined and limited role.

This role, he proposed, involved rejecting the theatre most antipathetic to a reconciliation of society, a theatre which encouraged the ‘déchirement’ and ‘servitudes’ of the economy, the ‘tyrannie’ of myths and ‘notre aliénation présente’. All these ‘malheurs’ could, paradoxically, help the journal to orient and advise in the present situation: ‘nous pouvons définir avec force et constance’ the theatre that the journal did not want, the ‘faux théâtre.’ Barthes’s tone in this editorial was militant even virulent: ‘Or le théâtre que nous vomissons, c’est le théâtre de l’Argent’.<sup>20</sup> This ‘théâtre’ was characterised by expensive tickets, the audience ‘sélectionné’ by ‘sa fortune’; it hid ‘pauvreté (le travail)’ behind a ‘luxé vaniteux’ in the scenery and the costumes; this was given the name of ““bon goût français””, which, with an



‘économie sordide du faux or, du mensonge visuel’ charged for a front-row seat a thousand (old) French francs. The themes in the repertoire of this theatre, only ever showed ‘un homme minuscule’, locked in by his ‘particularisme de fortune’ into a ‘psychologie’: for Barthes, crucially, it ignored the ‘tragique de l’Histoire’.

There was, he said, no need to ‘byzantiser’ on the present state of the French bourgeoisie, to remind everyone that, if economically, it had not changed since the nineteenth century, then, culturally, it was no longer what it had been one hundred years before. French theatre was, with a few exceptions, ‘vieux, particulier, anachronique entièrement coulé dans les formes de l’idéologie bourgeoise traditionnelle’. Its audience, perhaps not defined by its ‘rentes’ but certainly by the ‘assiette de ses revenus’, came only to find a ‘mythologie lénifiante ou émissaire’ which could reassure its fears or ‘sacrifier ses remords’.

This theatre, constituted and maintained in order to ‘donner bonne conscience aux privilégiés’, had the full support of the ‘État bourgeois’; the only theatre which was thrown ‘quelque rognure’ (out of the public purse) was the TNP. Barthes’s conclusion was that ‘notre tâche’ could only be at first ‘destructrice’, and ‘vise gros, ne s’embarrasse pas de nuances’. The definition of the journal’s role had changed significantly from the editorial of number 1 a year before; now the journal needed to mount a concerted attack on bourgeois theatre: ‘Nous ne pouvons prétendre définir le Théâtre Populaire que comme un théâtre purifié des structures bourgeoises, désaliéné de l’argent et de ses masques’.

Though an impressive account of Brechtian theatre’s arrival in France, Mortier’s book overlooks the importance of this editorial; and, though acknowledging the radicalisation of the journal, Mortier underplays the importance of Barthes’s involvement, and the conditions in which he welcomed Brecht’s theatre.<sup>21</sup> Suggesting that Barthes wanted only a ‘théâtre “civique”’,



rather than a theatre 'de combat politique', Mortier has misunderstood Barthes's relationship to the theatre in general.<sup>22</sup>

It is during his account of the journal's and Barthes's 'prise de position' in favour of Brecht in 1955 that Mortier underestimates the political orientation of Barthes's view of theatre. It is clear that, by the time of his 1956 editorial on the avant-garde, Barthes was in favour of a political theatre. This was the result of earlier developments.<sup>23</sup>

Even before the Berliner Ensemble performance in Paris in 1954, Barthes had advocated a political theatre. In his critique of Vilar's choice of *Ruy Blas* for the TNP repertoire, he had considered the commercial failure of the TNP's 1952 production of Pichette's satire of atomic warfare, *Nucléa*, to be 'infiniment plus victorieux' than the success of Hugo's play, even though *Nucléa* had been played only to meagre audiences, been attacked by the critics, and abandoned after only eight performances; in his view, in the theatre there should be a tragedy not a history of love, one which required a participation; hardly a 'histoire', *Ruy Blas* was but 'un cas', was far from the civic theatre in Ancient Greece which involved all the audience, and which Barthes considered important for the contemporary popular theatre.<sup>24</sup>

In the next number of *Théâtre populaire* Barthes's review of Raymond Hermantier's production of Goethe's *Egmont* underlined the political aspect of the performance.<sup>25</sup> Barthes praised Hermantier's audacity in choosing the play, in that it showed that he wanted to 'proclamer sa confiance dans un théâtre de l'idée, qui doit son seul ressort à une morale de l'homme dans la cité': it was a theatre not 'd'alcôve', but 'du civisme'. This civic theatre was precisely political for Barthes: at a moment when 'la scène française semble si craintive devant les grands sujets d'histoire', Hermantier illustrated his belief in a 'théâtre politique'; in showing 'la descente d'Albe' as "'personnelle" comme une arrivée de SS', Hermantier's production had underlined a 'menace "politique"'.



It was above all in his editorials that Barthes was crucial in the politicisation of *Théâtre populaire*. Written (without exception) in the first person plural ('nous'), these put forward the collective and militant point of view of the journal.<sup>26</sup> This collective voice and shift in the journal's orientation was evident in the editorial of number 9, written by Barthes. Based on a reply to a letter accusing *Théâtre populaire* of being 'docte' and 'prétentieux' in its criticisms, Barthes replied on behalf of the team. To the charge of 'pretentious', he admitted that the journal did have pretensions; to the charge of dogmatism he replied that this was simply a reflection of 'notre tâche claire et notre but évident'. If their pretensions were a little excessive, then they had an excuse: their 'insatisfaction profonde' with contemporary French theatre. *Théâtre populaire* felt isolated as the voice of a minority; and since the journal appeared only every two months, it was not surprising that it might be a little 'rude'. Barthes stressed that the journal's writers went to the 'générales' with open minds, with the 'désir profond' to find something to defend or to save in a production, or to give credit to a 'spectacle même maladroit', so long as it was 'pur de tout obscurantisme'. Listing the directors that the journal supported (Vilar, Brecht, Blin, Serreau, Reybaz, Hermantier, Planchon, Monnet), he asserted that these preferences required the journal to take up a firm position, and to make choices and ended with a militant conclusion: there was a 'combat' against bourgeois theatre, which could not be led 'à demi': 'Alors, quelle solution?', he asked: 'Lutter sur tous les fronts' and consider all bourgeois theatre an 'objet d'une interrogation totale'. A tactful, appeasing reply to a disheartened reader, this editorial was also a hardening of his view of the 'gangrène' of bourgeois theatre in general and, in particular, of bourgeois critics.

If *Théâtre populaire* 11 was the 'feu au poudres' in the arguments over the worth of Brecht's epic theatre, then Barthes's editorial was the crucial element.<sup>27</sup> It was a complete reversal of his attitude in the editorial of number



9. Despite having been ‘ébloui’ by the Berliner Ensemble two months earlier, the editorial had not been optimistic, only defensive: ‘Il y a une certaine bassesse du répertoire et une certaine sclérose des techniques qui nous indignent et nous affligent’, he had written. The following lines harked back to this comment in number 9 and they, like all of this editorial for number 11, were in marked contrast:

Notre revue s’est trop de fois indignée devant la médiocrité ou la bassesse du théâtre présent, la rareté de ses révoltes et la sclérose de ses techniques, pour qu’elle puisse tarder plus longtemps à interroger un grand dramaturge de notre temps qui nous propose non seulement une oeuvre, mais aussi un système, fort, cohérent, stable, [...] qui possède au moins une vertu indiscutable et salutaire de “scandale” et d’étonnement. (1-2, *OC* 1203)

Barthes had clearly been inspired between numbers 9 and 11 by a reading of Brecht’s theoretical writings, only translated into French at the beginning of 1955.<sup>28</sup> It was this number which provoked Jacques Lemarchand, drama critic for *Le Figaro littéraire*, to accuse *Théâtre populaire* of having developed a dogmatic defence of epic theatre. The ‘L’écologiste limousin et le petit organon’ was an ironic and generally light-hearted reaction to *Théâtre populaire*’s promotion of Brechtian theatre; according to Dort, the ‘écologiste limousin’ of the title was aimed at him or Barthes.<sup>29</sup>

Lemarchand had been theatre critic for *Combat* up until 1950 and had made a drastic shift of readership by moving to *le Figaro littéraire*. Mortier underlines, nevertheless, his open and avant-gardist tastes; how, after the Liberation, Lemarchand had displayed ‘une sympathie active’ towards the avant-garde in the theatre and could be contrasted with the notoriously traditional ‘chroniqueur’ of *Le Figaro*, Jean-Jacques Gautier.<sup>30</sup>

It was Barthes who, in the following number, took up the gauntlet and defended the journal against Lemarchand’s criticisms. An important editorial, Barthes’s introduction to *Théâtre populaire* number 12, became a defence of



the record of the journal, to counter the accusations that its number 11 smacked of ‘messianisme’, of a “‘brechtisme” totalitaire’, of the journal becoming ‘l’organe du “brechtisme” intégral’.<sup>31</sup> Their crime was to have expressed ‘une sympathie idéologique certaine pour Brecht’, not without having ‘réservé ces objections d’ordre empirique’ which were now becoming ‘un casse-tête’.

It was in the wake of the heated debate over Brechtian theatre that Barthes’s views undoubtedly hardened. In the next number, he defended Sartre’s latest play *Nekrassov*, which had been roundly criticised by every drama critic. The editorial of number 13 is a good example of the inaccuracy of Mortier’s view that Barthes wanted only a ‘civique’ theatre. Here, in 1955, Barthes defended (as a ‘nous’) Sartre’s satirical play. Despite a number of important reservations (‘certaines longueurs, certains excès’ and ‘certains partis-pris comme l’esthétique générale du spectacle, conventionnelle’, as well as ‘le choix de la salle’) Sartre’s play, in Barthes’s view, was ‘hors de doute’ ‘douée d’une force de libération exceptionnelle’; though formally uninspiring, it was an ‘oeuvre forte’, ‘parfaitement *publique*’, and worth defending.<sup>32</sup> Bernard Dort has confirmed that he and Barthes enjoyed the production considering it ‘la naissance d’une comédie satirique dans la lignée de Brecht’.<sup>33</sup>

In the next number of *Théâtre populaire*, ‘*Nekrassov* juge de sa critique’ acted as Barthes’s defence of Sartre’s play, praising the production quite resolutely against the critics. With an appalling critical reception, the production managed only sixty showings. With Dort resigning from *L’Express* over the newspaper’s coverage, Barthes joined the foray: he felt consoled in thinking that *Nekrassov* would ‘libérer chaque soir pendant un temps que je souhaite le plus long possible’ French people ‘comme moi’, ‘étouff[é]’ by ‘le mal bourgeois’: “‘J’ai mal à la France”” he said, quoting Michelet: ‘c’est pour cela que *Nekrassov* m’a fait du bien’.<sup>34</sup>

If there was a certain ‘rapprochement’ with Sartre in this period, it was



clear too that Barthes was prepared to drop his strong 'prise de position' in favour of Brechtian theatre to defend what he himself called 'traditional' theatre. Despite the play's formal deficiencies, it was an attack on the right-wing, a highly political play: '*Nekrassov* est une pièce ouvertement politique'. This defence of Sartre's satirical play was an important development in his attitude towards political theatre and towards the avant-garde theatre. Barthes wanted a theatre which challenged the myths of post-war France in 1956: a political theatre was crucial; this meant that avant-garde theatre was considered by 1956, to be unable to challenge bourgeois theatre and ideology.

Barthes's interest in Brechtian theatre and theories had clearly affected *Théâtre populaire's* orientation. But this was part of a general process, of which defending Brechtian theatre was a central, but not the only, episode. Barthes's general influence on the popular theatre journal was unmistakable.<sup>35</sup> This was also to have an important effect on the popular theatre movement in general; his own views were central to a significant split in the popular theatre movement.

## **(ii) Trials and tribulations of constructing a radical people's theatre**

Soon the ATP association and *Théâtre populaire* were viewed with suspicion by the TNP and the Centres Dramatiques Nationaux (CDN); in particular the militancy of the ATP, its politico-cultural tactics, caused friction with the semi-professional decentralised theatres which helped to support the ATP financially.<sup>36</sup> The antipathy of the TNP towards the journal was related particularly to the manner of decentralisation of French theatre.

Vilar had been appointed by Jeanne Laurent to run the TNP, precisely because of the success of the Festival d'Avignon and of the decentralisation



programme which had begun in 1946.<sup>37</sup> Though decentralisation had led to the rebirth of the TNP, paradoxically perhaps, it was also to generate a rivalry, between the ATP on the one hand, and Vilar's theatre and the CDNs on the other. This friction led to the collapse of the ATP.

The ATP was soon perceived to be in competition with these semi-professional theatres. The rapid expansion of the ATP, politically independent of the decentralised theatres, seemed to threaten the local theatre-goers associations.<sup>38</sup> When the TNP pulled out its support at the 1956 Avignon Festival, the collapse of the ATP (and the Federation) was inevitable. It had been a rival audience association, and had raised criticisms of the TNP repertoire; its ambiguous status - financial dependence, but political independence - had contributed to its downfall; however it appears there were other, more specific, reasons for the rift with the TNP and for the ATP's demise.<sup>39</sup>

The very perspective of the ATP, always diverging, eventually stood in stark contrast to that of the TNP and other state-funded theatres. Its perspective was not simply one of constructing a popular theatre but of changing the whole culturo-educational aspect of theatre, the very manner in which theatre was taught, trained and nurtured. This perspective had been articulated most forcibly in the pages of *Théâtre populaire*.

### **Barthes's 'total' critique**

The 'discours marxiste' of *Théâtre populaire* was reflected increasingly by the journal's general perspective which envisaged the construction of a popular theatre only after a total overhaul of the existing drama institutions and fundamental changes in the economic conditions of theatres; Barthes was the central figure in articulating this perspective.

In a round-table discussion of Guy Dumur's review of Barrault's production of *La Cérisaie*, Barthes underlined forcibly the need for a notion of



totality in the journal's critique of bourgeois theatre:

Bien sûr, les acteurs ne sont qu'à moitié responsables. Les vrais responsables, ce sont les cours dramatiques, la critique, la tradition, le public du Marigny, toutes ces institutions qui réclament du comédien un art du discontinu, posant avec assurance comme un idéal évident dans l'atomisation du rôle au profit d'une perfection aveugle des détails. (88, *OC* 440)<sup>40</sup>

This notion of totality in a critique of French drama was present also in Barthes's reply to a reader's letter the following year; having defended the journal's critique of Barrault, Barthes saw a problem at Barrault's Marigny theatre (namely, that this one-time 'animateur révolutionnaire' had become the 'fournisseur officiel' of drama for 'la bourgeoisie parisienne'); but he had a 'compréhension "objective"' (as opposed to 'cordiale') of the conditions in which Barrault's theatre had to operate: 'nous savons qu'il est prisonnier des données propres à la situation économique du théâtre bourgeois, [...] qu'en un mot il crée sous hypothèque'.<sup>41</sup>

This total critique of the existing drama institutions led by Barthes did not spare the TNP or the other CDNs; as the journal became radicalised by Brechtian aesthetics and dramatic theory, the ATP moved to support amateur theatre with unpaid actors. This was a view of a decentralisation which was not merely geographical, but also attempted to undermine the superiority of the professional troupe and the (perceived) cramping by the State of the theatres it supported. As Dort points out, the journal too understood decentralisation in a different manner from even the provincial popular theatres; for *Théâtre populaire* the popular theatre, in order to succeed, had, clearly, to be supported by amateur (as well as professional) actors and groups; its attention was soon given more to the attempts in the provinces than exclusively to the TNP in Paris.<sup>42</sup> We will see how the journal's strong support for Roger Planchon's amateur 'Théâtre de la Comédie de Lyon', led by Barthes, meant that Vilar and the TNP were not considered the centre of popular theatre in France.<sup>43</sup>



There was another aspect to the differences between the TNP and *Théâtre populaire*; the difficult question of an appropriate repertoire for the popular theatre. As the Algerian War politicised the French Left, so the *Théâtre populaire* team began to advocate a political theatre. The form of this politicised theatre was most clearly articulated in Barthes's articles and editorials for the journal; in his view a production had to encourage the popular audience to act, to see human ills as 'rémediables' by humans themselves.<sup>44</sup> Within this there was, increasingly in Barthes's view, the need for an appropriate repertoire. Though, as we shall see, this was not part of ATP 'policy', Barthes was crucial in articulating its fundamental importance within the ATP and for the success of the popular theatre movement, a shift of perspective which would help to encourage a rift between Vilar and the ATP, if not within the ATP itself.

In his launch of the ATP in the first number of *Théâtre populaire*, the organisation's president, Henri Laborde, had stressed that the popular theatre was concerned above all with the 'relations entre le public et le théâtre'.<sup>45</sup> But Laborde had also stressed that the ATP was not tied to a 'répertoire particulier'; in 1954, Barthes was suggesting a repertoire.

### **A repertoire and production style for a mass theatre audience?**

According to Copfermann, in 1956 the ATP set out the three ingredients necessary for the construction of a popular theatre: 'un public de masse,' a repertoire 'de haute culture' and a 'dramaturgie d'avant-garde', as well as that adopted by Vilar.<sup>46</sup> This, however, was precisely the thrust of two articles written by Barthes in 1954.<sup>47</sup> In this section, we shall look at the manner in which Barthes applied this three-point plan to his proposals and reviews of plays, and, in particular, at the vying for predominance in his thoughts between the three points and how Barthes's conception differed from Vilar's.



Published in *Publi 54*, in July 1954, 'Pour une définition du Théâtre Populaire' was an early articulation of the ATP three-point plan. A definition of popular theatre was an 'entreprise [...] décourageante', but he would nevertheless defy the 'les blasés et les sceptiques', who considered it 'aussi vague que démagogique' and provide a definition which was 'fort concrète'. Thanks to 'tentatives récentes' this definition was now possible, and Barthes put forward a specific perspective of constructing a truly popular theatre:

Je dirai tout de suite et d'un seul mot, que le théâtre populaire est celui qui obéit à trois obligations concurrentes, dont chacune prise à part n'est certes pas nouvelle, mais dont la seule réunion peut être parfaitement révolutionnaire: un public de masse, un répertoire de haute culture, une dramaturgie d'avant-garde. (17, *OC* 430)<sup>48</sup>

Despite his reticence in 1953, where he had considered that the 'déchirement persistant' of society meant Vilar's theatre could be a popular theatre only 'idéalement', Barthes now enthused about the success over the summer of the popular theatre movement across the country. Calling for unity in the popular theatre - 'Ce qu'il faudrait à tout prix, ce n'est pas décourager cet appel, c'est lui donner les aliments qu'il réclame' - he suggested that the TNP was at the centre of all 'réflexions' on the popular theatre: Vilar was a 'très grand acteur', and 'metteur en scène magistral'.<sup>49</sup> But it was above all Vilar's success in winning a popular audience to the theatre which inspired Barthes in 1954.

Whereas in 1953 Barthes had considered the production style of *Le Prince de Hombourg* to be the crucial aspect of Vilar's work, he now began to see Vilar's originality as his 'ampleur sociologique': he had brought about a revolution in the norms of theatre consumption. 'Milieux' (such as 'petits-bourgeois, étudiants ou lycéens pauvres, ouvriers même') which had been 'séculairement éloignés' from drama, now for the first time had access to 'un théâtre de haute qualité'. These social groups had not simply found access to



this theatre but had been “mordu” by the new style and repertoire: ‘c’est un public qui non seulement change, s’élargit, mais aussi s’enracine’; thanks to Vilar, the theatre was becoming ‘un grand loisir populaire’, on a par with the cinema and football. Furthermore, this ‘succès patent’ owed very little to the French state’s pitiful contribution to the TNP (seven times less than that given to the Comédie-Française, and eighteen times less than that given to the ‘théâtres lyriques’). More important than the aesthetics of Vilar’s theatre, cheap seats were the best means of attracting popular audiences, believed Barthes in 1954. Giving the TNP seat prices as an example, he noted that the ‘condition économique’ of theatre was ‘capitale’, affected the ‘morphologie du public’, and made it ‘homogène’: cheap seats removed all financial ‘barrières’.<sup>50</sup> This was the ‘qualité forte’ of Vilar’s popular theatre: the TNP had realised that the only way to ‘emporter l’adhésion du peuple’ was to ‘lui faire confiance’.

This confidence in the audience was important to Barthes’s view of the success of the TNP and for popular theatre in general.<sup>51</sup> The ‘dramaturgie’ of popular theatre had to be open, and based ‘autant que possible’ on a ‘communication matérielle’ between stage and audience. The success of the TNP, with its ‘public élargi’, was due, he said, to Vilar ‘audacieusement’ following Gémier and opening the stage up, removing the curtain, painted scenery, even the ‘toile de fond’: Vilar’s replacement of ‘le mensonge’ in favour of ‘l’illusion’, with its ‘caractère fondamental de l’universalité’, was crucial in attracting and keeping this ‘très grand public’. In noting how Vilar’s production liberated the stage of its ‘valeurs parasites’, Barthes stressed the part of the audience, before his ‘discovery’ of Brecht’s epic theatre which encouraged participation: it was not ‘inflation rhétorique’ to say that the popular theatre gave the spectator the power to ‘faire lui-même le spectacle’; against the views of the ‘blasés’, Vilar’s theatre was ‘adulte’ because it did not consider the spectator to be ‘oisif’, or ‘attardé’. Whereas his review of *Le*



*Prince de Hombourg* had praised Vilar's production style as a purely aesthetic experience, he now considered Vilar's 'dramaturgie' to be only a means to an end, albeit an important one.

The 'dramaturgie' was now subservient to the goal of winning popular audiences, as was the repertoire. Barthes rejected previous attempts to set out an appropriate repertoire for the popular theatre, because they patronised the audience, underestimated its capacity to think.<sup>52</sup> In opposition to the 'théâtre impur' and 'complaisant', given to the 'thèmes dégradants' of money and 'cocuage', he proposed a repertoire which, he considered, was 'pur' and 'fort': the classical theatre of Corneille, Molière, Shakespeare, Kleist and Büchner', where 'en cause' was 'l'homme aux prises avec lui-même'.<sup>53</sup>

This was the basis of his praise of *En attendant Godot* in 1954.<sup>54</sup> Linked in particular to the recent popular success of Roger Blin's production of Beckett's play, Barthes's enthusiasm for the play was based on the reactions and size of the audiences. The fact that the large and distinctly popular audiences had converted Beckett's somewhat obscure, if not intellectual, play into a popular theatre, that nearly one hundred thousand people had seen the play, that the production was being taken up by the cheap seat system 'Timy' and by popular theatre 'associations', meant that, in Barthes's opinion, '[s]ociologiquement *Godot* n'est plus une pièce d'avant-garde'. This June 1954 review was indicative not only of his interest in popular audiences in this period, but also of his belief in their power to dictate and of his faith in their responsible and 'adulte' attitude towards the theatre.

His view in 1954 that the popular audience was the central component of the ATP's three-point plan, that the success of the popular theatre would be based above all on the 'adhésion du peuple' continued the original perspective of the ATP as set out by Laborde in March 1953; in the final paragraph of 'Le théâtre populaire d'aujourd'hui', Barthes declared:



Tout cela constitue une force vive pour l'avenir du théâtre français. Et si les esthétiques et les répertoires semblent aujourd'hui marquer quelque temps d'arrêt après les grands progrès de l'entre-deux-guerres, combien facilement nous en consolerons-nous si le théâtre, après s'être admirablement renouvelé, consent enfin à s'élargir, ce qui est peut-être pour lui la forme la mieux achevée, et, présentement, la plus nécessaire du progrès. (155, *OC* 445)

This predominance of the popular audience in Barthes's view of the ATP three-point plan was, however, to change. As we shall see in his subsequent writings on theatre, the appropriate repertoire and the production style would assume greater prominence; this was a sign not simply of Brecht's influence, but also of his experience in the popular theatre movement. A crucial factor in this was his ambiguous attitude to Vilar's theatre, as well as the alternatives to it he began to suggest.

Despite their enthusiasm for Vilar's TNP in the definition of popular theatre, these articles pointed to other areas of popular theatre activity outside Paris. Barthes was beginning to articulate the importance not only of geographical decentralisation but its popular and amateur aspect.

Bernard Dort has noted that, though the journal was clearly in favour of decentralisation from its inception - he lists the favourable reviews in numbers 1 and 4 of productions in Metz and Toulouse respectively and the editorial of number 2 - this desire for a decentralised theatre 'ne s'exprime guère par la suite'; in Dort's view, a general articulation of a perspective for an amateur decentralisation of popular theatre was not present in the journal until the number 15 in September/October 1955.<sup>55</sup> However, Barthes's attempt to draw attention to the importance of popular theatre outside of Paris had appeared in these articles of Summer 1954; this implies that these two articles had an important effect on *Théâtre populaire's* later support for 'l'autre décentralisation'.

Though 'Le théâtre populaire d'aujourd'hui' saw, ultimately, the French state as the solution for popular theatre, this article nevertheless began to



suggest the importance of theatre beyond the State's control.<sup>56</sup> Barthes cited, as well as Vilar's success at Chaillot and Avignon, that of directors of small Parisian theatre such as Hermantier, Reybaz and Serreau. Furthermore, he asserted, 'où l'espoir devient certitude', was when one recognized the 'véritable appel de la province'. There had been a 'multiplication' of open air festivals, 'suivis par de véritables foules', he enthused; if 'populations laborieuses de banlieue' were coming to the 'spectacles itinérants' of the TNP, this was encouraging demand from 'province'; there was a 'naissance spontanée' in 'plusieurs endroits' of ATP 'associations': 'voilà', declared Barthes triumphantly, 'une force avec laquelle le théâtre français doit heureusement désormais compter'.

He underlined the importance of the decentralisation of French theatre; the 'Centres dramatiques de province' were important in rural and suburban areas; they too were offering a theatre of 'qualité excellente', and always 'honnête'.<sup>57</sup> But underestimated was the effect of the 'festivals de province' in arousing a great interest in the chosen town and its environs. Noting these 'tentatives moins systématiques, moins amples ou moins heureuses, mais toujours authentiques', which were responding to the demand for a popular theatre outside of Paris, Barthes's central point was that the TNP alone could not satisfy the popular swell of desire for a popular theatre. This germ of an interest in decentralised, amateur theatre was to grow as Barthes became disillusioned by Vilar and the TNP.

### **From Vilar to Planchon: 'l'autre décentralisation'**

Between 1953 and 1954 Vilar and his theatre were, for Barthes, considered central to the popular theatre movement; as the 'héritier' of Dullin, Vilar was infinitely more inspiring than another of Dullin's protégés, Jean-Louis Barrault. Barrault's 'total' theatre had been roundly criticised by Barthes at the end of 1953 because of Barrault's choice of Claudel's *Christophe Colomb*.<sup>58</sup>



The 'idée d'impiété' which Barthes considered lacking in the theatre at the end of his brutal critique of Barrault's production was to be provided by Vilar's TNP production of Molière's *Dom Juan*, which he reviewed in January and February 1954.<sup>59</sup> Both reviews praised the atheism of the eponymous hero that Vilar's production and acting had foregrounded, the review in *Théâtre populaire* stressing Vilar's irreverence towards Molière's original text.<sup>60</sup> All one had to do, suggested Barthes, was compare Vilar's 'adulte' production, with that by the Comédie-Française, whose 'bourgeois' and 'manuel scolaire' production had tried to hide ('escamoter') Don Juan's atheism.

Within a month, however, this enthusiasm for Vilar was to be questioned when he reviewed the TNP production of Shakespeare's *Richard II*.<sup>61</sup> Barthes did not take the 'échec' of this production lightly: Vilar's popular theatre was one of the 'vaisseaux célèbres de l'histoire, porteurs fragiles et obstinés de races et de continents futurs', as the 'arche' which held 'en elle seule' the future of popular theatre '(c'est-à-dire, débarrassé de ses structures bourgeoises)'; therefore, he felt 'nullement disposé' to take lightly Gérard Philipe's 'échec' in the role of the eponymous hero.<sup>62</sup>

Though retaining faith in Vilar's acting (Vilar would have been a 'figure exemplaire' in the role of the king), Barthes voiced minor criticism of Vilar; he noted how Vilar's set had succumbed to 'ce nouveau baroque' (in large part, due to Philipe's acting). Similar to his criticism of Barrault's production of *Christophe Colomb*, Barthes considered that there was an 'erreur dans la mesure où il y a complaisance systématique à l'égard d'un public particulier'.<sup>63</sup> Such an attitude could only damage the TNP, give 'une confusion déplorable entre public populaire et public bourgeois'; and, warned Barthes, behind Philipe's 'embourgeoisement', there was 'médiocrité', and 'trompe-l'oeil' encouraging 'forces immenses' to wait for 'la moindre faille' before they could 'introduire leur gangrène'. Though Barthes's criticism was addressed at Philipe rather than Vilar - Philipe's acting was a 'dilapidation' of the TNP and its



excellent troupe of actors which, 'dressé à l'austère et tendre tragédie', was one of popular theatre's 'grands héritages' - this was the beginning of a questioning of the superiority of the TNP in the burgeoning popular theatre movement.

Nevertheless, Barthes had by no means lost faith in Vilar or the TNP at this stage. If we can detect a growing criticism in 1954 and thereafter, we must also compare his attitude towards Vilar's theatre to that towards the Comédie-Française, which he held in great contempt. His view of the TNP in relation to the Comédie-Française is clear in his May 1954 article 'M. Perrichon à Moscou', in which he satirized the Comédie-Française visit to Moscow; compared to this theatrical institution, Vilar's and (even) Barrault's theatre were 'quelques-uns' of France's 'franc-tireurs', 'ses vrais génies'.<sup>64</sup>

Barthes's disillusionment began when Vilar included Hugo's *Ruy Blas* in the TNP repertoire. As with his previous criticism of Philippe's acting, he stressed how this 'acte' was more dangerous precisely because of the esteem in which the public held Vilar.<sup>65</sup> Every 'geste' by Vilar, every 'moment de son effort', he warned, was 'véritablement l'épisode d'un combat', and a reflection of his responsibility; as he had done with Philippe's portrayal of Richard II, he criticised the compromise with certain audiences that Hugo's play, and Vilar's choosing it, seemed to represent.<sup>66</sup> Far from the 'grandeur' and 'Histoire' of Vilar's previous choices, Hugo's romantic play was full of anecdotes, 'du théâtre-rebus' and not 'du théâtre tragique'; Barthes's conclusion was highly critical: 'Donner *Ruy Blas*' was 'un acte inutile'.

As Dort has pointed out, though Barthes praised the skill with which the play was produced, he was introducing the notion, and fundamental importance, of a repertoire.<sup>67</sup> If the ATP had been launched to defend Vilar and to change the relation between the audience and the theatre, by bringing the masses to the theatre, then, by insisting on a specific content to this perceived cultural improvement for the masses, Barthes was beginning to change the



remit of the ATP.

This did not mean that Barthes's attitude to the TNP became centred around questions of repertoire only; the manner of the productions by Vilar's theatre were still of crucial importance; following his criticism of the production style of *Richard II*, Barthes continued a critique of Vilar's production talents. The next number of *Théâtre populaire* contained strong criticism by Barthes of the costumes used in the TNP production of *Cinna*.<sup>68</sup> Though little here suggested that ATP perspectives had been altered, it was clear that both the journal and Barthes were becoming more ambiguous in their view of Vilar. Though, again, he remained impressed by Vilar's acting ('Reste, heureusement, Vilar dans Auguste'), he and the journal were criticizing the production as a whole, particularly the costumes; as Mortier has pointed out, if the journal's confidence in Vilar's acting remained firm, if the 'collaborateurs' continued to admire him, their faith in the TNP was no longer 'totale'.<sup>69</sup>

Barthes's contradictory enthusiasm for the popular theatre was illustrated by his pessimistic attitude. This ambiguous attitude towards Vilar in 1954 encouraged him to look at other popular theatres and other forms of popular theatre; the view of 'récession' in the theatre, coupled with the problems in Vilar's repertoire, encouraged him to see the importance of alliances with the burgeoning avant-garde theatres, producers and plays.<sup>70</sup> This is shown clearly in his favourable review of *En attendant Godot* in June 1954.<sup>71</sup>

This turn towards avant-garde theatre was reflected also in Barthes's praise for Roger Planchon's amateur theatre in Lyon in 'Un bon petit théâtre' in May 1954. Far more 'rigoureux' than Barrault's Petit-Marigny theatre, the Comédie de Lyon was offering every evening, with great popular success, 'un acte' by Adamov (as well as a comedy by Kleist). Even though conditions at Planchon's theatre were no different from Barrault's (both were small and poor), the former's was still very successful. Supported financially very little by the State and the city, Planchon's theatre could continue because of its



audience and local critics, who were not averse, as often was the case with the critics in Paris, to avant-garde plays: 'En bref', Barthes concluded 'ce théâtre marche dans le succès et la pauvreté, ce qui pourrait être une première définition du bon théâtre'.<sup>72</sup> Barthes's interest in the theatre of the Absurd was illustrated by his instruction to wait 'avec confiance' for Mauclair's production of the same Adamov play at the Mardis de l'Oeuvre in Paris.

If this was further criticism of Barrault's theatre, the worth of Vilar's TNP was also being questioned indirectly; in contrast to Barthes's recent criticism of Vilar's choice of *Ruy Blas*, Planchon's repertoire was praised.<sup>73</sup> It reflected Planchon's aim to 'imposer tout ce qu'il aime'; and picking through the programme for the next few months, Barthes was pleased to see not only Kleist's *La Cruche cassée*, and Adamov's *Le Professeur Taranne*, but also that for the 1954 Avignon festival, Planchon was preparing Marlowe's *Edouard II* and Brecht's *La Bonne Ame de Seu Tchou'en*. Mentioning Brecht for the first time in his journalism, Barthes enthused about the enormous diversity of style and period in Planchon's repertoire, noting, nevertheless, that there was one common factor to the plays chosen: each belonged to 'l'éternel théâtre révolutionnaire'. Hoping that Planchon would come to Paris, Barthes wrote he would be completely satisfied with a theatre which played almost exclusively Marlowe, Shakespeare, Calderon and Kleist as old theatre, and Ghelderode, René Char, Adamov and Brecht as regularly as Maison Descaves in Paris played the (highly traditional) theatre of Hériat, Madame Simone or Edmond Rostand. As well as a critique of Barrault's theatre, and a sideways swipe at Vilar's repertoire, it was also a praise of amateur and provincial theatre.<sup>74</sup>

This generated contradictory attitudes in Barthes's analysis. Praising the acting of Maria Casarès in a week later in *France-Observateur*, he appeared inspired by the prospect of Vilar and Casarès playing the lead roles in a production of *Macbeth*.<sup>75</sup> Yet, he was aware also of the limits of such a theatre - the 'état actuel' of French theatre was one of a domination by 'les forces de



récession'. Nevertheless, he looked forward to the conjunction of the best popular theatre in front of popular audiences: 'peut-on espérer meilleure avant-garde que la rencontre d'un art authentique et d'un public nouveau?', was his rhetorical conclusion. Clearly, he was acutely aware of the difficulties for popular theatre, but maintained regardless his high degree of activism for the movement.

His disillusionment with Vilar's theatre was compounded by his disappointment with the TNP production of *Macbeth* in January 1955; far from matching the enthusiasm he had shown when hearing of Casarès' participation, his review regretted the manner of the production.<sup>76</sup> Vilar's acting was impressive, carrying on his 'théâtre de la conscience' that he had begun in his 1954 production of *Don Juan*; but the problem was that, 'du moins à l'échelle du grand public', he was the only actor in France to have this idea; neither the scenery, nor even Casarès, in whom Barthes had had so much confidence six months before, had been able to complement Vilar's acting skills, and he regretted the 'solitude' which characterized Vilar's efforts.

The discovery of Brechtian theatre and production techniques had occurred between his enthusiasm in May 1954 for the *Macbeth* production and the actual production in March 1955, and this review showed how his judgment had been influenced by this discovery.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, such was the influence of Brechtian theatre and the Berliner production, that Barthes was keen to defend epic theatre - as well as *Théâtre populaire*'s promotion of it - that he did not review another TNP production until December 1955.<sup>78</sup> This was a reflection of Barthes's disaffection with Vilar's theatre. 1955 saw the whole of *Théâtre populaire* moving away from the TNP; as Dort has put it, the 'lune de miel' of the journal's 'adhésion (relativement) inconditionnelle' to Vilar's TNP had ended by 1955.<sup>79</sup>

The most important aspect of this growing rift in 1955 was the question of an appropriate repertoire. Reviewing the TNP productions of Hugo's *Marie*



*Tudor* and Claudel's *La Ville* at the 1955 Avignon Summer festival in 1955, Duvignaud criticised Vilar's choice of play.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, in a letter to Voisin in Paris from the Festival d'Avignon, though praising the acting of Casarès and the scenery in Vilar's TNP production of *Marie Tudor*, Barthes too was furious about the choice of play.<sup>81</sup> Dort's review for *France-Observateur* in November 1955 completed the disillusion of the journal's main contributors with Vilar.<sup>82</sup>

The effect was such that the journal began to question the worth of Vilar's whole enterprise at the Palais de Chaillot and at Avignon. Firstly Sartre, interviewed in *Théâtre populaire* 15, denied the specifically 'populaire' aspect of the TNP, and, according to Dort, caused a 'vive polémique' at *Théâtre populaire*: the 'rédaction' did not necessarily share Sartre's view.<sup>83</sup> Then, the editorial of the next number of *Théâtre populaire* (January 1956) talked of the 'pourrissement du théâtre parisien'. Vilar's theatre was included in the criticism; the 'seul successeur de Jouvet et de Dullin' had encouraged the 'pourrissement', because it had joined 'la course' to make money: the TNP had won an audience, but, asked the editorial, 'à quel prix?'; the editorial demanded that the TNP define itself with a repertoire 'aux antipodes à la fois de *Marie Tudor* et de *La Ville*'. With this TNP compromise in mind, *Théâtre populaire*'s task now, continued the editorial of number 16, was to reveal the 'conditions d'exercice' of Parisian theatre; this was the beginning of an understanding of the crucial importance of a decentralised theatre, not only in terms of outside of Paris but also outside of the professional theatre institution.

Though Barthes did not list this editorial as his hand, he was clearly influential in its writing. Having defended Sartre's play in the two previous numbers, Barthes was certainly open to Sartre's point of view; it is possible that Sartre's stark criticism of Vilar's theatre had an important effect on him, for he shifted his own critical focus elsewhere in this period at the end of 1955. In his review of Daniel Sorano's production of Molière's *L'Étourdi* Barthes



criticised the TNP's choice of play; above all, one can detect his enthusiasm for popular theatre changing direction, away from Parisian professional popular theatres, such as the TNP.<sup>84</sup> His drama reviews now praised small, unknown troupes.<sup>85</sup> Above all, it was the amateur production of *Ubu roi* and the amateur drama culture from which it had sprung which inspired him.<sup>86</sup>

The production, wrote Barthes, had been epic, without, he thought, the director Gabriel Monnet's having any knowledge of Brecht.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps for the first time *Ubu* had been 'monté juste'; despite the difficult nature of the play (its 'crudité' and 'anticonformisme'), it had been well received. The production had convinced him of the crucial aspect of the amateur, as opposed to professional, popular theatre:

Il me semble que la leçon de l'*Ubu roi* c'est la nécessité d'ouvrir un front de travail, non plus seulement de spectacle, mais dans des groupes populaires, parmi des amateurs authentiques. L'important, pour sortir le théâtre français de l'impasse bourgeoise, ce n'est pas que quelques-uns de ses professionnels viennent à la politique, c'est que les véritables éléments politiques du pays viennent au théâtre. (109, *OC* 523)

Impressed by the amateur production of *Ubu* at Annecy, Barthes was invited to a drama 'stage' by the company; in January 1956 he published an enthusiastic account of his visit to this 'stage'.<sup>88</sup> The 'stage' set up a way of working 'fort méprisée sur nos théâtres', which consisted of '*penser avant d'accomplir*'. It was the first 'stage' in the history of 'l'éducation populaire' to study the main problems of theatre. In contrast to the professional troupes for their anti-intellectualist suspicion of theorising the art of drama, these 'groupes populaires' and 'amateurs authentiques', he decided, were using a method of work which was already 'un premier acte révolutionnaire'; it took away from the 'propriété exclusive' of the 'techniciens' a 'réflexion franchement intellectuelle' and gave the 'animateurs and instituteurs [...] d'un milieu populaire réel', a chance to discuss such matters. It was up to these amateurs



to demystify the French theatre and to 'prendre conscience' of its 'état catastrophique'; only they had the 'recul' and necessary independence for this; and he praised their '*mission*' to clear the 'spectacle populaire' of the 'réflexes du spectateur bourgeois'.<sup>89</sup> He praised also their 'vaste plan d'action nationale', which he hoped would encourage many to oppose a 'réflexion politique' to the 'résistances probables' of professional theatre.<sup>90</sup> The 'indifférence (intéressée)' of the 'grande presse' could be countered by this 'stage' which represented 'un premier foyer remarquable'.<sup>91</sup>

Barthes's enthusiasm in 1956 for this production of Jarry's play must be contrasted firstly with Vilar's TNP production two years later. Here, in 1958, he began by sarcastically saying that it was a 'très joli spectacle, qui a beaucoup diverti'. Though Vilar had claimed his version would be 'cruelle', judging by his 'spectacle,' Barthes considered that Vilar had a very 'confortable' idea of cruelty. In the midst of the Algerian War, Vilar's production was a 'spectacle éminemment policé' which took the 'plus délicates précautions' not to 'dégonfler nos propres gidouilles'; when, if not now, he asked, would Vilar make the audience 'mal à l'aise'? If *Ubu* was not 'cette subversion générale', 'ce malaise' from which no spectator should be excluded, if it was not a work which, '*mal élevée*', should be a 'crasse' to 'déranger comme une ordure dans un salon', *Ubu* was nothing. He rejected Vilar's comparison of Jarry's play to a Swift-style 'satire de moeurs', as 'inquiétant'; a 'satire des moeurs' was the product of a society 'aux trois quarts réconciliée', which was refining the '*façon* dont les affaires du monde sont conduites', questioning only 'la forme de quelques rapports humains, non l'homme lui-même'. Vilar's *Ubu* was little different: 'une leçon de politesse menée à l'aide de quelques gros mots et de quelques objets disgracieux'.<sup>92</sup> In Barthes's view, Jarry's play should have been a 'nettoyage' threatening everyone in particular the audience, not just a handful of 'privilegiés'; instead, all aspects of the production had become very 'propre' (as if it had been put 'en pension' in a 'collège suisse'): there was now a 'style



Vilar', which, with its aesthetic and ideological norms, stifled the individual actor's 'génie'. Never before had Barthes equated Vilar's theatre with the Comédie-Française:

Comme à la Comédie-Française, où tout comédien venu de l'extérieur est rapidement aplati sous le poids des traditions implicites, le TNP semble avoir éliminé toute tension entre ses acteurs et son metteur en scène, ses spectateurs et son public. (83, *OC* 777)

We must contrast his enthusiasm in 1956 for the amateur troupe also with his review of the TNP's *L'Étourdi*. Not that Sorano had produced Molière's play badly (in fact, it was fully in line with the text); it was the choice of play which inspired 'un certain embarras, une nouvelle déception devant tant de talent édifié sur si peu de chose':

Trop fade pour provoquer un rire profond, trop futile pour atteindre à la comédie véritable, j'ai peur que *l'Étourdi* ne vienne embarrasser d'une nouvelle inutilité un répertoire populaire déjà lourdement grevé cette année par *Marie Tudor* et *la Ville*. (18, *OC* 524)

Although its 'vide' was not as 'répulsif' as 'celui de *Marie Tudor*', it was no less 'inutile'; and mocking the 'bataillon des humanistes' who would ask why he was not satisfied with the humour of the production, Barthes replied in militant fashion, that he wanted 'un peu de ce poids d'Histoire qui rende notre plaisir intelligent et le double silencieusement de la présence et de la critique de "tout ce qui ne va pas dans le monde"'.<sup>93</sup>

Popular theatre was clearly for Barthes more exciting outside of Paris, away from the TNP and professional theatres. But his criticisms of established state theatre seemed to go further than this; in Barthes's view of early 1956 this amateur popular theatre was the only hope for French popular theatre. He concluded in 'Espoirs du théâtre populaire':



Je suis de plus en plus tenté de croire que c'est la seule chance aujourd'hui pour notre pays d'avoir un jour un théâtre qui soit enfin en accord avec son Histoire. (13, *OC* 531)

Part of these 'éléments politiques' was Planchon's amateur theatre in Lyons, the most inspiring theatre for Barthes in 1956. Reviewing Planchon's production of Brecht's *Grand'Peur et Misères du IIIe Reich*, he stressed that the play had never been produced in France.<sup>94</sup> A fundamentally political play, it showed how every human, in his daily and apparently free 'conduites', was actually 'visé par le régime dans lequel il vit'. Planchon 'et ses camarades' had succeeded 'parfaitement' in the synthesis of all the elements; and he praised the progress that they had made since his last review (two years before). His conclusion was once again a jibe at the Parisian scene which would fail to show the play (as well as a regret at the lack of money in Planchon's theatre):

Le paradoxe, on s'en doute c'est que Paris sera privé d'un tel spectacle. L'obstacle? toujours l'argent: on devine que le *Théâtre de la Comédie* n'est pas un théâtre riche et qu'en particulier, *Grand'Peur* n'est pas une pièce à rassembler le public grassement payant. Mais, c'est dommage pour Paris. (17, *OC* 548)

This period saw relatively few articles by Barthes on theatre after this favourable review of Planchon's theatre.<sup>95</sup> His only other enthusiastic theatre review was of the première of Michel Vinaver's *Aujourd'hui ou Les Coréens* also at Planchon's 'Comédie de Lyon'.

If April 1956 saw Barthes make his 'tournant' in his 'petit itinéraire personnel', to become less of an intellectual, and turn towards research, his relative inactivity in the popular theatre movement in 1956 was undoubtedly related also to the collapse of the 'Amis du Théâtre Populaire'. Since its founding in 1953, Barthes, as we have seen, had been actively involved in its attempt to bring serious theatre to the masses. The effective collapse of the ATP had, not surprisingly, an effect on Barthes; in the Summer of 1956, he wrote 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', in which he decided that, since there was



neither a 'culture' nor an 'art prolétarien[s]', all art was forced to '*emprunter*' from bourgeois art and ideology, which could 'sans résistance subsumer le théâtre, l'art, l'homme bourgeois sous leurs analogues éternels'.<sup>96</sup> These conclusions on the insidious and near hegemonic power of bourgeois ideology and art were linked to his experience in the popular theatre movement.

After this, Barthes did not leave the theatre altogether, however. Though he had become a 'chercheur' for the CNRS in mid-1956, he still wrote drama reviews and previews up until 1960; but his writings after 1956 showed little enthusiasm for the TNP or the possibilities of a truly popular theatre, with the exception, in 1958, of Planchon's success in Lyons.<sup>97</sup>

Planchon had succeeded in winning a distinct audience; not only was he still running the (small) Comédie de Lyon, he was also in charge of the (much larger) 'Théâtre de la Cité in Villeurbanne'. At almost exactly the same time as his review of Vilar's production of *Ubu*, he praised Planchon's theatre for its 'trois rigueurs'; without mentioning the ATP three-point plan, Barthes listed repertoire, audience and production style as Planchon's skills; and those faults which Barthes thought Planchon had avoided ('irresponsabilités', 'complaisances', 'tentations et [...] trahisons') were implicitly imputed to Vilar's theatre.

Planchon had displayed great courage since 1953, and, largely unacknowledged, had had to shoulder two 'tares' at once: the instability of Parisian theatre and the modesty of provincial theatre. It was precisely this rigour, after years of 'travail obscur', which now gave Planchon a 'place singulière' in French theatre.<sup>98</sup> Barthes concluded:

Quel homme de théâtre n'a pas fait ce rêve: être à la fois le metteur en scène d'Adamov et celui de Shakespeare, disposer à la fois d'une salle d'avant-garde et d'une salle populaire? (46, *OC* 774)

Was this not the first time since 1954 that Barthes had emitted such an



enthusiasm for a theatre? Four years before it had been for Vilar's theatre, now Planchon had taken over the mantle: indeed, Barthes's praise in 1958 for Planchon's three 'rigueurs' were precisely the three points he had put forward for the ATP in 1954.

The similarity of his praise of Planchon's theatre in 1958 to his enthusiasm for Vilar's in 1954 could not hide, however, an important development in Barthes's understanding of the relative importance of the three components set out by the ATP in 1954 for a successful popular theatre. The combination of a fascination with Brecht and a disillusionment with Vilar meant that Barthes's priorities within his perspective for a popular theatre had changed. The final period of Barthes's involvement in the popular theatre movement, from 1957 to 1960, was to become dominated by his view of the power of the critic; this was evident from the manner in which the 'public de masse' slowly became a secondary consideration.

### **(iii) The final phase: 1956-1960**

Despite the 'pourrissement' of Parisian theatre, Barthes persisted in trying to support Vilar in 1956. Compared to other Parisian theatres and productions, Vilar's theatre was still relatively impressive and drew in large popular audiences; in his review of the TNP's production of Marivaux's *Le Triomphe de l'amour* by Vilar he proclaimed the 'génie de Vilar'.

But Barthes wrote little about the *choice* of play that the TNP had made, only to say that it was far from the traditional Marivaux play: his 'plus vive admiration' for *Le Triomphe de l'amour* was based on the fact that it was 'un Marivaux sans marivaudage'; the significance of the TNP's choice was not in its relation to the popular audience but in its confirmation of literary critic



Albert Thibaudet's view that classical writers always produced 'oeuvres-limites', a one-off work which surprised the readership or audience and went 'contre son public et contre sa légende'. Barthes's interest in Thibaudet's 'oeuvre-limite' reappearing in his view of Balzac's *Le Faiseur* one year later was indicative of a shift in his attitude towards popular audiences.

Rather than repertoire, it was the manner of a production which, increasingly, dictated Barthes's judgments. Vilar had produced a 'Marivaux "matérialiste"', using an admirable realism.<sup>99</sup> Rather than 'ambigu', Vilar had played Marivaux 'à ciel ouvert ... *totalelement*', without 'sucre' or 'soupleurs', nor 'boudoirs' nor 'pleurs rentrés': the production had shown that Marivaux's theatre could be the 'moins vulgaire' of French theatre. The demystifying of Marivaux seemed more important to Barthes than the reactions of the audience and the 'popular' success of the play. This was the beginning of the final phase of Barthes's modification of his original articulation of the ATP three-point perspective: he seemed more interested in the strictly literary, if not aesthetic, aspect of Vilar's production than in the significance of this play in the TNP repertoire; above all, his review was that of a drama critic rather than that of a popular theatre activist; isolated from its critical reception, the aesthetic effect was more important than the popular audience.

### **From a 'public populaire' to the politicisation of criticism**

*[A]u lieu d'adopter le point de vue esthétique, culinaire, la critique doit adopter le point de vue sociologique, scientifique. Elle doit se contenter d'examiner chez les artistes des complexes entiers de représentations en se demandant: à qui cela sert-il? Bertolt Brecht*

In 1961, writing a retrospective account of avant-garde theatre, Barthes set out the importance of criticism for the success of a production: 'Une bonne critique d'un grand journal bourgeois, disait-on il y a quelques années vaut un million de publicité'.<sup>100</sup> His sensitivity to other critics had been intensified by



his experience of promoting Brecht and defending Sartre, but also by the power which the 'bourgeois' drama critics possessed and used.<sup>101</sup> As the popular theatre looked to Barthes to be fighting a losing battle - no thanks, in his view, to the drama establishment - his strategy in the popular theatre shifted, and with it went *Théâtre populaire*.

Émile Copfermann has suggested that, in general, *Théâtre populaire*, tried to 'intervenir davantage au niveau des créateurs, des animateurs, qu'à celui du public'. It aimed, he concluded, 'moins à régler la "consommation", comme les critiques des journaux quotidiens, qu'à l'expliquer'; in continually pointing to the 'absence d'une réflexion critique dans les groupements, associations, syndicats, organisations politiques intéressés' the journal, concluded Copfermann, 'se substituait à eux'.<sup>102</sup>

Looking at Barthes's changing attitude to popular audiences and to the possibility of attracting them to the popular theatre in large numbers, we can see that the journal's 'substitution' was most clear in its obsession with other drama critics, and linked to the defence and promotion of Brechtian theatre.

Barthes's interest in theatre critics had begun in May 1954, with his article 'Monsieur Perrichon à Moscou'; in a bitter article five months later on the *Figaro* theatre critic, Jean-Jacques Gautier, he had shown how popular theatres and audiences could undercut the power of the bourgeois drama critic.<sup>103</sup> If Gautier held the power which could make or break a particular production, then avant-garde directors should simply 'se passer purement et simplement de M. Gautier', and, like Vilar, lower their prices to attract popular audiences: before inviting the 'critique officielle', 'instituez avant-premières populaires' at reduced prices. Barthes's reasoning was that Gautier had dismissed Brechtian theatre as 'un spectacle pour "demeurés"'; directors should quite simply invite these "'demeurés'" to support 'leur pièce'. Though 'pauvres', they would be 'très nombreux'; as well as 'salles pleines' the 'spectacle' would be 'défendu, propagé': the 'public mieux payant' would



follow, said Barthes: ‘n’en doutez pas’. Underlining his 1954 view of the crucial importance of the audience, he asked, ‘[à] quoi bon parler d’une oeuvre si on lui ôte sa destination?’.

The curbing of bourgeois critics’ powers required, in his view, not only a change in direction of the ‘politique des salles’, but also the defiance and exertion of power of the popular audiences. Barthes now repeated his conclusion of his review of *En attendant Godot* four months previously. Blin’s production of Beckett’s play had been a good example; it had taken shape ‘à la mesure du public’ and not ‘de la critique’; in spite of the ‘snobisme’ of a ‘critique hostile’, this (so-called) ‘avant-garde’ play had had ‘plus de quatre cents représentations’; the power of bourgeois critics to make or break a production could be curtailed simply by ignoring them:

[F]aites du spectateur un homme adulte, laissez-le risquer le prix de sa place dans la responsabilité de juger lui-même si le spectacle est bon ou mauvais; appuyez-vous sur lui et débarrassez-le des croquemitaines de la critique; on sera étonné de leur néant. (3, *OC* 434)

Indeed, his belief in 1954 in the power of the popular audience led him to suggest that the popular audience could become an alternative to bourgeois criticism:

[E]n substituant autant que possible les spectateurs eux-mêmes à la critique professionnelle, on peut espérer débarrasser celle-ci de ses tyrans pour lui donner de véritables commentaires. (*ibid*, *OC* 433)

Despite its suggestion of a practical solution to the problem of bourgeois control of drama criticism, this article marked an important point in the development of Barthes’s fascination with critics. This turn to the importance of criticism by the audience was, of course, fully linked to the ideas of Brecht and of a democratic, participatory theatre; but it marked, ironically perhaps, the beginning of his fascination with bourgeois criticism.



The irony in this article was that Barthes himself did not follow his conclusion that the popular theatre movement should ignore ‘croquemitaines’ (such as Gautier) and their ideology. In the next three years, it was they whom Barthes was, largely, to study in his ‘petites mythologies du mois’, which started a month after this article.<sup>104</sup> His growing fascination with other drama critics across the 1954-1956 period was reflected in his constant use of the terms ‘la critique’ and ‘notre grande critique’, for his opponents in the drama critics establishment.<sup>105</sup>

His interest in ‘notre grande critique’ was most clearly a reaction to the luke-warm reception given to Brechtian theatre and dramatic theories. Brecht, he wrote, in September 1954, had been ‘vilipendé ou ignoré par presque toute la grande critique’.<sup>106</sup> In July 1954 he had pointed already to the ‘procédé ordinaire de disqualification’, which operated by considering Brecht’s theatre a ‘produit littéral du réalisme socialiste’; this, said Barthes, was being conducted either out of blindness or ‘défense de classe’.<sup>107</sup> The experience of anti-brechtianism, of seeing Brecht rejected and/or ignored, was to lead him to the conclusion that the act of criticism was crucial to an attempt to redress this imbalance.

In his 1955 reply to the letter which had criticised *Théâtre populaire* for condemning dogmatically and pretentiously certain plays and praising others, Barthes hinted at the journal’s new strategy for the popular theatre; he asked if it was possible to read a ‘critique neutre’. In his view, a purely formal accusation of pretentiousness against the journal was unfounded precisely because there was a content to its ideas, to its pretensions: that was, the desire to denounce and counter ‘l’indulgence ou l’aveuglement d’une grande partie de la critique’.<sup>108</sup> A combination of his fascination with Brecht’s theatre and a disdain for other theatre critics had pushed Barthes, it seems, to overlook, if not relegate, the importance of attracting popular audiences to the theatre.<sup>109</sup> This was most evident in his abandonment of a sociological study of popular



audiences.

His insistence in July 1954 on the ‘ampleur sociologique’ of Vilar’s theatre had been based, in part, on his January 1954 review of the write-up of the conference given by the ‘Centre d’Etudes Philosophiques et Techniques du Théâtre’ on theatre and leisure time in which he had criticised the academic and incomplete nature of the Centre’s analysis.<sup>110</sup> Pointing to the book’s failure to study the social make-up of theatre-goers, he concluded that the popular theatre needed to ‘amener au jour la composition sociale des publics, opposer au public abstrait des esthéticiens et des humanistes, le public concret des historiens et des sociologues’.<sup>111</sup>

By the end of 1956, however, Barthes had shrunk from his earlier enthusiasm for a sociology of theatre audiences. In ‘Les tâches de la critique brechtienne, which noted that ‘en France du moins, Brecht n’est pas encore sorti des théâtres expérimentaux’, he was now pessimistic about a sociology of audiences:

D’une manière générale, nous n’avons pas encore de moyens d’enquête suffisants pour définir les publics de théâtre. [...] On ne pourrait donc étudier pour l’instant que les réactions de presse. (20, *OC* 1227)

This was the conclusion of an important trend in his attitude to popular theatre audiences. In April 1956, he had declared to the ‘enquête’ on theatre audiences in *Arts*, called ‘Un auteur de théâtre peut-il choisir son public?’, that every author looked for an accord with “l’idéologie” d’un public socialement déterminé’.<sup>112</sup> Rather than take this opportunity to suggest that a popular audience should be encouraged, he underlined the inability of playwrights to break out of the ‘compartment’ in which consumption had placed their work. The absence of an optimistic perspective on attracting popular audiences to a range of different plays (evident in his views two years before) confirmed his view of the ‘état catastrophique’ of the French theatre.<sup>113</sup> He replied to the



‘enquête’:

Il n’y a pas d’oeuvre hors du public qui la consomme et tout public est défini [...]. [C]ette diversité n’est qu’un cas particulier du morcellement de la société en classes. Ce ne sont pas des mesures particulières au théâtre qui vont effacer d’un coup de baguette magique le déchirement général de notre société. (3, *OC* 546)

Though Barthes had never claimed that the popular theatre could overcome the cultural divisions caused by class-divided society, and had insisted that a popular theatre under capitalism was popular only ‘idéalement’, he had in 1954, nevertheless, believed it possible to attract popular audiences to a ‘répertoire de haute culture’ with avant-garde ‘mises en scène’. Furthermore, his attitude towards the popular theatre seemed to be that of his 1955 view of the consumption of the novel: the highly compartmentalized and class-based nature of readerships, now, in 1956, defined theatre consumption too. His conclusion to the questionnaire on whether playwrights could chose their audience was to suggest, not that popular theatre audiences were paramount, but that the main task of (popular) theatre was for it to become politicised. His highly favourable review of Planchon’s production of *Grand’Peurs* only underlined this: if popular audiences were dropping then Brecht’s political theatre was the only solution for the theatre. This view of the politicisation of theatre was concomitant with his politicisation of criticism: if ‘le théâtre bourgeois est bien défendu’ and ‘on ne le combat pas à demi’, then the act of criticism was an essential part of this combat.<sup>114</sup>

This was precisely the trajectory that much of his writing on theatre took after July 1954. If the TNP put on a Brecht play, any sociology of its audience would be almost useless, since its ‘mise en scène’ was not up to Berliner Ensemble standards.<sup>115</sup> His references to the audience as crucial to this alternative theatre became less frequent and certainly less optimistic: he began to forget his perspective in attracting a truly popular audience.<sup>116</sup> It was, then,



after the 'éblouissement' that his writings on theatre move, slowly, away from a consideration of (or rather, hope for) a popular theatre; his fascination with Brecht modified his desire for a general theatre 'qui se substitutera au théâtre de l'argent', to one of a narrow politicised militant theatre, which led Lemarchand to accuse *Théâtre populaire*, and Barthes in particular, of 'messianisme' and 'dogmatisme'.

This move towards promoting the act of the critic, as a substitution for the audience, led to a change in his aesthetic views in 1956; the politicised theatre needed to take account of the corrective force of a new, non-stalinist, socialist realism.

### A 'réalisme total'

Calling Planchon's production of Brecht's *Grand'Peurs* a 'théâtre objectif', in that it avoided psychology and placed the characters in their 'rapport profond avec une situation historique concrète', Barthes cited Brecht's theatre as an example of the 'littérature réaliste' which Engels had valued in opposition to the 'littérature de tendance'. This was the basis of Barthes's critique of Stalinist socialist realism in his lecture to a conference on realism at Vézelay in 1956.<sup>117</sup>

Barthes's account of realism agreed with Marx' and Engels' view that Balzac's realism was socialist because it had 'saisi les rapports humains comme des rapports en dernière instance politiques'; in showing 'la structure profonde d'une société', realism was the art of 'significations justes'. However, if this realism could be regulated only by 'l'Histoire, la praxis révolutionnaire', there was a danger that the 'justesse' of this realism would become 'une morale'; in speaking of the 'littérature de tendance', wrote Barthes, Marx and Engels had warned of this danger: alluding to his critique of Stalinist socialist realism in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, he concluded that, since the idea of 'justesse' contained a 'danger de moralité' 'le réalisme socialiste est facilement menacé



de redevenir un art moral, destiner à *rassurer* ses nouveaux lecteurs (comme le faisait l'idéalisme bourgeois)'; and, applying Marx and Engels' warning to France in 1956, he considered, in Barthesian paradoxical fashion, that '[l]e réalisme socialiste s'oppose à la littérature de tendance, même socialiste'. In considering 'la littérature réaliste stalinienne' as both 'progressiste d'intention' and at the same time 'hyper-bourgeoise de forme', Barthes's article aimed to show how Marxian realism had been 'brutalement arrêté' by 'le jdanovisme'.

Though published at the same time as his advocacy of a realism in the theatre, this article was concerned specifically with literature (he cited Aragon, Sartre and Robbe-Grillet), and did not mention the theatre in general nor Brechtian theatre in particular.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, this notion of realism was applied to his view of production techniques. This could be seen in his criticism of a recent production of Labiche's *Le plus heureux des trois*.<sup>119</sup>

Following his critique of the avant-garde theatre for its lack of realism in the previous number of *Théâtre populaire*, he suggested that the Labiche play, 'cautionné par les critiques sous le nom de théâtre de *la bonne humeur*' displayed the 'irréalisme' of a play 'légèrement loufoque' with distinctly political implications: by inoculating the play with a small injection of history, the production could evacuate the 'Histoire réelle', the contents of which Barthes listed in a footnote. Against this 'Labiche irréal', Barthes contrasted the realism of Visconti's production of *La Locandiera* at the IIIe Festival de Paris.<sup>120</sup>

However, despite his earlier criticism of the 'recours annuel' to Labiche's plays, Barthes went on to explain how the production could have been more realist; crucially, it was as if Labiche's play, in Barthes's view, could have been saved if only it had been produced in a better fashion. This was indicative of an important shift of emphasis in his views on the popular theatre and the committed critic.

If Vilar's realism and materialism in the Marivaux production corrected



the Postec production of Labiche, it was because Barthes had dropped any hope of influencing repertoires in Parisian theatre. Martin Sorrell has noted that since the 1960s French theatre has been dominated by directors rather than playwrights.<sup>121</sup> We can see how Barthes, towards the end of his activity in the popular theatre in the second half of the 1950s played a part in encouraging production over text, 'mise en scène' over repertoire in French drama.

Barthes's role in this move of emphasis in the French theatre was connected to his political views and cultural experience in the popular theatre; his seminal review in 1953 of Vilar's *Le Prince de Hombourg* had underlined the singular nature of a production, and its 'plastique' relationship to history.<sup>122</sup> By 1956/7 his experience of drama critics had encouraged him to see the power of the left-wing literary critic: a drama text such as Labiche's play (and one which he would have considered reactionary in 1954) could, in 1956, be 'read' against the grain (in the same way as a novel) by 'producing' the play in a certain manner.

The power of the critic to 'read' (or suggest 'readings' of) a drama text against its original signification or accepted meaning (for example, Balzac's *Le Faiseur* was about the development of Capitalism and its 'mise en scène' should emphasise this oblique reading) did not emerge by accident; it was dependent on Barthes's experience as critic in the popular theatre movement. It marked also the beginning of a development in his work for the popular theatre journal which was a tendency to accommodate, rather than criticise, theatre directors' failure to chose plays which were 'en accord' with France's 'Histoire'. His review of Postec's production of Labiche's *Le plus heureux des trois* was paradoxically both an illustration of his view of the 'pourrissement' of Parisian theatre, but also an illustration of his accommodation with a repertoire.

### **From the critique of repertoire to the critique of production**

His highly favourable preview in 1957 of Balzac's *Le Faiseur*, due to



be produced by the TNP, was a further example of his view of the growth of the role of the critic. Clearly influenced by his reading and articulation of Marx and Engels' favourable view of Balzac's realism, Barthes would not, nevertheless, have considered Balzac's theatre in 1954 as 'grand' in terms of repertoire, nor part of the great tradition of tragic or epic theatre which showed 'l'homme aux prises avec lui-même'. The crucial role of the critic which he had set out in his seminal article 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne' influenced his attitude towards a variety of unlikely plays.<sup>123</sup> The loss of his ATP perspective and especially of a specific repertoire, combined with Barthes's belief in the increasing importance and power of the theatre critic, meant that a Balzac play could be accepted and turned to the left-wing critic's advantage.

This meant that the production would have to reflect the critic's 'reading' of the play, in this case Barthes's materialist analysis. This was the basis of his strong antipathy to Vilar's production; the TNP version did not reflect the materialist aspect that he had underlined in his preview; rather than criticise the choice of a Balzac play, he was disappointed by Vilar's adaptation of it.<sup>124</sup>

This lengthy criticism of Vilar's production was also an important stage in Barthes's disillusionment with the TNP's attempts to bring culture to the masses. Calling the production 'futile', an 'escamotage' of Balzac 'et son temps', Barthes considered that Vilar was moving away from encouraging a responsibility of the spectator; perhaps Barthes's main interest in Vilar in 1954 had been that the latter 'fait confiance' in the audience. Now, warned Barthes however, 'épaissir le rapport du spectacle et du spectateur' at the very moment when 'on irrealise l'oeuvre sous la rhétorique de la futilité' was to 'retirer de la confiance au spectateur', was to 'lui ôter de sa responsabilité'. As Philippe had done in *Richard II*, Vilar was eschewing responsibilities: 'c'est parce qu'il [le public] prend admirablement tout ce que Vilar lui donne, que la responsabilité de Vilar est immense'. The production of this Balzac play was, in his view, as



bad as the inclusion of *Marie Tudor* into the TNP repertoire two years previously:

[S]i Vilar se met à être complaisant, la partie est perdue; ce n'est plus telle ou telle cabale qui le menace, comme aux temps héroïques du TNP, c'est toute une France "irresponsable" qui est prête à lui régler son compte - dans la gloire, bien entendu. (84, *OC* 740)

Barthes's attitude here to the TNP audience was interesting; Vilar's 'complaisance' was a 'voie très dangereuse' because the audience was 'loin d'être assez critique pour redresser lui-même le spectacle'. This attitude towards the audience was an example of Copfermann's view that the increasing prominence of the critic in *Théâtre populaire* led to a 'substitution' of the critic for the critical sensibilities of the audience: the audience could be 'déconditionné' from bourgeois theatre only by relying on the comments of the enlightened critic (here, Barthes's view of *Le Faiseur*'s 'matérialisme'); the role of the director and producer was simply to put into practice the theory of the committed and demystifying drama critic.

The combination of the increased prominence of the critic and his own materialist analysis within this criticism began to dominate his assessments in the popular theatre.<sup>125</sup> This encouraged further accommodation with the plays offered especially by Vilar; this can be seen, most significantly, in his review of the TNP's production of Racine's *Phèdre* in 1958.

This did not mean that his views on an appropriate repertoire disappeared completely. If his final disillusionment with the popular theatre, and the end of his activities in the popular theatre movement were brought about by the arrival of de Gaulle generally and in particular by Malraux's 1959 'réforme des Théâtres nationaux', then it was the repertoire suggested in these 'réformes' which, in large part, disappointed Barthes.<sup>126</sup>

For an activist of the ATP, which had operated largely in opposition to the State's intervention, Malraux's 'réforme' in proposing the setting up of



Maisons de la Culture to promote popular theatre was anathema. Furthermore, the proposals to help the Comédie-Française were not addressing the real crisis of French theatre. This 'réforme', wrote Barthes in a new series of the 'Mythologies' in Nadeau's new, weekly, *Les Lettres nouvelles*, was 'quelque chose d'encore plus bouffon que les autres'.<sup>127</sup> He ironised:

[O]n met en cause non seulement une organisation (les deux salles), mais aussi un régime (la IV République) et une culture (l'occidentale), bref on parle le langage de la révolution totale, tout cela pour faire jouer un peu plus Racine et Claudel, un grand écrivain catholique et notre classique le plus choyé. (51, *OC* 814)

This criticism of Malraux's suggestion of more Racine and Claudel in 1959 made his review of the 1958 TNP production of Racine's *Phèdre* appear all the more curious (as well as his 1959 review of Claudel's *Le Soulier de Satin*). His lengthy review avoided criticism of Vilar's choice of play: it was the appropriateness of the production, the manner in which Vilar had transferred Racine to 1958 France, which dominated Barthes's assessment. Rather than reject Vilar's choice of play from the start, Barthes's article tried to engage and understand the repertorial gamble that Vilar had taken: rather than considering the enterprise an 'acte inutile' as he had done with the TNP production of *Ruy Blas* four years previously, he attempted to understand the significance of Vilar's effort. Though Barthes did criticise the fact that Vilar was putting on Racine, it was Vilar's production and the acting style which the review assessed; his attitude was that if Vilar was insistent on producing a Racine play, then there was a better way of doing this. Unimpressed by the production, he summed up the result: since the production had no negativity, 'la preuve d'une impossibilité' had become a production 'lourde de tous les préjugés passés'; the manner in which Vilar had produced *Phèdre* had avoided 'la responsabilité'; with the correct diction, the play, implied Barthes, could have been better.



Naturally, this contained a criticism of the TNP repertoire.<sup>128</sup> But Barthes's attitude was not that the success of this production was less important than the failure of a better TNP production (as with *Ruy Blas* and *Nucléa*). Despite his view that Racine's theatre was 'trois-quarts mort', was 'loin d'être le sommet rayonnant de l'art', Barthes's accommodation with the choice of production meant that he could engage with Vilar's production and suggest ways of improvement: if Racine was to be played, it had to be done 'sérieusement'; if the myth of Racine was to be destroyed, it should be played properly, in such a way that the spectators treated it like ancient theatre: 'Si nous voulons garder Racine, éloignons-le' was the general advice of Barthes's review.<sup>129</sup>

This article can be seen to be important in number of ways; not only did it represent the final stage in his accommodation to the TNP repertoire, it also marked a turning point in his career as critic: the next two years were taken up, to a large extent, with his detailed studies of Racinian theatre. Within two months of his bitter and ironical criticism of Malraux's suggestion that the French theatre should play more Racine, Barthes had published a very long study (fourteen pages) on Racine's theatre, due to become the preface to a new edition of Racine's *Théâtre*; this was followed quickly by the publication in the November number of *Esprit* of an article which was also part of the 'introduction' to the new edition of Racine's Theatre, and finally by another article on Racine in the 'Débats et combats' section of *Annales*.<sup>130</sup> This spate of writing on Racine's theatre, between 1958 and 1960, was to become the basis of his next book, *Sur Racine* published by Seuil in 1963, and which was to push him into the critical, intellectual and academic limelight when the book was contested by the Sorbonne's Racine expert, Raymond Picard; his original antipathy to Racinian theatre, was, paradoxically perhaps, to become a crucial factor in his notoriety in the halcyon days of French Structuralism.

In terms of the popular theatre, this surprising interest in Racinian



theatre between 1958 and 1960 was but a reflection of his disillusionment with the popular theatre in general and Vilar in particular. This was clear from his interest in the critics and his attitude towards the audience at Chaillot who watched the production of *Phèdre*. Vilar's punishment, wrote Barthes in 1958, was to see the 'passivité' of the audience, which, lamented Barthes, applauded a production 'sans signature'.

This was significant indication of Barthes's view of 'popular' audiences by 1958. The 'public d'aujourd'hui', consumed Racine in a manner which was purely 'anthologique'; this was a 'Racine public' not 'populaire' which, culturally, signified a mixture of 'ennui' and 'fête'. Having softened his criticisms of Vilar's repertoire, Barthes was now losing confidence in Vilar's ability to direct plays in a responsible fashion, and gave little sociological consideration to the popular nature of Vilar's audience.<sup>131</sup> The disillusion with Vilar and the TNP was completed, when, in 1958, 'Situation de Planchon' acted as a point of comparison.

His enthusiasm for both Planchon and Michel Vinaver were to be dashed over a year later, however. Writing his last review of a TNP production, Vinaver's adaptation of Thomas Dekker's *La Fête du Cordonnier*, Barthes strongly criticised the production: 'visuellement le plus fade' ever given by the TNP, with a 'néant' in the 'indigence' of the scenery and the music, and apathy of the actors. Spending two-thirds of a (long) review trying to defend Vinaver against the critics and praising his rewriting of Dekker's play, Barthes showed the extent to which the wider critical response to a production had come to dominate his views on theatre: Vinaver's playing into the establishment critics' hands was the fundamental point of his review.<sup>132</sup>

### **Barthes's departure from the theatre**

Barthes's conclusion to the review was quite dramatic; this production proved 'combien nous sommes allergiques à tout renouvellement', that there



was a 'grande peur d'un théâtre adulte', a 'peur' which reigned 'plus que jamais' over French theatre; and though there were 'une ou deux exceptions près', even these marginalized figures were to succumb.

This final comment was to be true of his view of Planchon. Planchon's production of *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, brought to Paris at the end of 1959 was, despite its success, 'gênant' because of its 'vide'.<sup>133</sup> With its 'futilité' Planchon's production was 'désopilant'; describing the play as 'cette oeuvre fabuleuse et puérile', Barthes considered Planchon to be far from the adult attitude he had praised in his productions a year before. His enthusiasm for Planchon, though not destroyed, was severely questioned; it was 'impensable' that someone such as Planchon should let himself be taken in by 'la fausse alternative de tous les théâtres douteux', that of choosing between 'distraire ou penser: 'les deux ensemble, si possible, mon cher Planchon'. This piece of Brechtian advice was to be Barthes's last comment on Planchon's efforts in the popular theatre.

Neither of these reviews made mention of the relevance or otherwise of the repertoire that these two plays represented; Planchon's choice of play would in particular have been a source of criticism for the Barthes of 1954. His disillusion with the TNP and to a lesser extent with Planchon was not the only factor in his departure, however; his research for the CNRS on fashion, which we will investigate in Chapter 5, was also important.

Barthes did not leave the popular theatre in a definitive fashion.<sup>134</sup> However, his penultimate theatre review showed him to be despondent about the alternatives to the Malraux's suggestion of more Racine and Claudel; in 1960, he criticised heavily Peter Brook's production of Genet's *Le Balcon*.<sup>135</sup> By now, he had clearly given up on the possibility of a truly popular theatre. It was perhaps fitting that Barthes's last ever theatre review should be of a Berliner Ensemble production of Brecht's adaptation of Gorki's *La Mère* at the Théâtre des Nations, the (renamed) festival at which he had seen for the first



time, the Berliner Ensemble six years before.<sup>136</sup>

This account of Barthes's gradual disillusionment with Vilar's theatre and the popular theatre in general suggests concrete reasons for Barthes's departure from the theatre. Jean-Loup Rivière has considered that Barthes's review of Vilar's *Ubu* was an attack on de Gaulle and the 'coup d'état', after which he bowed out of the theatre.<sup>137</sup> Though important, Barthes's disappointment with the arrival of de Gaulle in power did not explain entirely his departure from theatre; it was also the culmination of his experience, the failure of a politicised, decentralised (i.e. amateur and provincial) theatre to emerge.<sup>138</sup>

Clearly, within his disillusionment with the popular theatre and Vilar in particular, Barthes had desired a political theatre, which, with a few exceptions, the popular theatre movement was ignoring. In his 1960 article 'La Réponse de Kafka', he sounded the death knell of a committed literature including that of the popular theatre.<sup>139</sup> He began the article:

Nous sortons d'un moment, celui de la littérature engagée. L'échec du roman sartrien [...], l'indigence imperturbable du roman socialiste, le défaut d'un théâtre politique [...]. (17, *OC* 1270)

Brechtian theatre provided the only alternative to this situation it was not only aesthetically pleasing but also a political theatre for Barthes.<sup>140</sup> Brechtian theory had also influenced him in both his view of the critic and his perspectives for constructing a popular theatre. If, within Barthes's conception of the three-point perspective, the significance of the 'dramaturgie' had triumphed finally over the 'répertoire de haute culture', this could not be separated from the growing prominence of the critic. In terms of repertoire and production style, Barthes had come full circle almost; if his 1953 review of *Le Prince de Hombourg* stressed the production qualities in themselves, rather than their appropriateness to a popular audience, then his ATP three-point



plan's shift in 1954 towards the fundamental significance of the audience had given way to the importance of a play's production.

### Conclusion

The 'prise de position' in favour of Brecht, the subsequent reaction of critics such as Lemarchand's, typified by Barthes's staunch defence of Brechtian, but also Sartrean, theatre, encouraged *Théâtre populaire* to develop an interest in attacking the establishment theatre critics. Clearly, Brechtian theatre had made an enormous impact on Barthes in particular and on *Théâtre populaire* in general. The shift of the journal's perspective by 1955 was illustrated by its understanding of theatrical revolutions; in *Théâtre populaire* 1 Guy Dumur had written an important article called 'La Révolution d'Avignon'; Barthes's editorial in number 11 now talked of 'la Révolution brechtienne'. The journal's view of the connexion between theory and practice (Brecht's theories and their practice in productions by the Berliner Ensemble) was, according to Dort, the basis of the journal's 'brechtisme'; the effect was such that Vilar declared as early as December 1954: '[L]es brechtiens me cassent les burnes. Ces Diafoirus socialisants sont plus léninistes que Lénine'.<sup>141</sup> The journal's aim, according to Dort, was fully Leninist in that it wanted to win recognition of Brechtian theatre and contribute to the application of Brecht's 'système' without forgetting that the two were linked 'voire [...] inséparables'.<sup>142</sup>

This 'système' is evident in Barthes's view of criticism's role and the critic's method; as a totality, a play should be respected in its transfer to stage and criticism of it should reflect this unity. Certain faults in a production meant that the whole production could be undermined. This applied, it seems, as much to productions of Brecht plays as those of any other play. An example of



the latter was the failure of the costumes used in the TNP's *La Cérisaie* and of certain actors; this production was reviewed by Guy Dumur in *Théâtre populaire* 10; in the ensuing discussion, Barthes questioned Dumur's favourable review: 'On a dit: "c'est merveilleusement joué". Oui, ça l'est, mais est-ce "justement" joué?'; he went on to question the costumes, and more particularly the acting style, which, he said, though technically good, was highly inappropriate to Chekov's play.<sup>143</sup> His review of Jean-Marie Serreau's 1955 production of *Homme pour Homme* was an example of the former; though defending the choice of play against other drama critics, Barthes listed 'certaines réserves', insisting that Brecht's theatre worked badly in Serreau's 'climat d'approximation', and required 'un fini particulier'.<sup>144</sup>

Guy Leclerc has suggested, however, that Barthes's harsh criticism of Vilar's *Ubu* was not, in itself, indicative of Barthes's 'brechtien' stance.<sup>145</sup> Indeed, to suggest that Barthes's Brechtian attitude can be related only to aesthetic and dramatic considerations is to misunderstand the conditions which formed Barthes's 'brechtisme'. Brecht's theatre had had a profound effect on Barthes, but this effect was prepared and conditioned by Barthes's experience in the popular theatre.

The relationship between the two was clear from an article published in April 1955; describing the present state of theatre as 'catastrophique', as bourgeois as 'le salon d'un sous-préfet sous Louis-Philippe', Barthes had clearly lost his earlier enthusiasm for the popular theatre.<sup>146</sup> Though his outburst was tempered by recognition of 'quelques tentatives saines, quelques spectacles aigus du TNP, quelques troupes pauvres et pleines de courage', he insisted on the 'gâchis'; this was in contrast to Brecht, this 'génie dramatique', '[c]e nouveau Shakespeare'.

To show the connection between his experience of popular theatre and his interest in Brecht is not to underestimate the effect of the Berliner Ensemble and Brecht's theories on Barthes. Furthermore, Brecht's theorisation of the



theatre had encouraged Barthes to politicise all details of theatre; it encouraged him to defend Sartre and, in a search for a French Brecht, to promote the theatre of Michael Vinaver. He was clearly influenced by Brecht's articles on production; and stressed, against bourgeois theatre, that everything was political in theatre. The notions of totality and 'system' are central themes in Barthes's understanding of theatre.<sup>147</sup>

Nevertheless, even Brecht's 'système' was under pressure from the dictates of the popular theatre economy. If, in 1955, Brecht's 'système' and its application by the Berliner Ensemble became, for Barthes, the guide to a popular theatre which was 'parfaitement révolutionnaire', then, by 1957, he was soon obliged to give ground on this; in 'Brecht "traduit"' he and Dort came to some negative conclusions about the possibility of putting Brechtian theatre on correctly.<sup>148</sup>

Fully aware of the dangers of opening Brecht out to a mass audience, but justifying their own 'confrontation objective' by noting the breadth of Brecht's appeal, Barthes and Dort set themselves up as the guardians of the translation of Brecht's theatre onto the French stage. If Brecht had written his plays 'à partir d'impératifs précis', what, asked Dort and Barthes, would happen to these in the hands of less partisan producers and directors? It was 'stupide' to require an 'orthodoxie servile'; but they insisted that it was 'légitime' for there to be a 'correction', a respect of Brecht's 'fins'. This was their dilemma in 1957, such was the poverty of French popular theatre.

In order to have Brecht's plays seen, they had to accept a 'compromise': Brechtian theatre could not be kept 'en vitrine' in the name of orthodoxy. Since Brecht's theatre was linked 'd'une façon organique' to the 'crise que traverse le théâtre français', the 'implantation' of Brecht could not be achieved 'sans s'attaquer conjointement à la situation générale' of French theatre; he and Dort had little choice but to risk Brecht 'largement' on French stages. Their consolation was that they believed in the audience's desire for a



political theatre; since the first stage of importing Brecht was well under way (the 'public' was now beginning to acquire a knowledge of his theatre), this would influence the manner in which his theatre was produced: the public would dictate, the directors would follow. Though Barthes seemed to be showing confidence in the 'public', it was also an important admission that their views on the inseparability of Brechtian theory and praxis in drama had to be compromised.

It is important therefore to stress that Brecht's theatre was not the sudden 'éblouissement' Barthes has since suggested; whilst acknowledging that Brecht had a profound effect on him, we must keep the scale of this effect in perspective. Though we can suggest a crucial effect of the discovery of Brechtian theatre and its theories on Barthes, the discovery came at a propitious moment: his discovery of Brecht was contemporaneous with his growing disillusionment with the popular theatre in France, and with Vilar in particular.<sup>149</sup> Brecht's theatre became 'substituted' for the popular theatre Barthes had envisaged in 1954; his fascination with Brechtian theatre was dependent, to a large extent, on his experience in the popular theatre movement; his desire for a contemporary and participatory theatre was a preparation for Barthes's 'éblouissement', he was ready for Brechtian theatre: the 'éblouissement' of July 1954 was the culmination of a number of factors in his political and artistic development. His interest in Marxism and the politicisation in France around the Algerian War required a political, anti-bourgeois theatre which Brechtian theatre provided.<sup>150</sup> But this was linked also to the growing realisation of the impossibility of sustaining a decent and truly popular theatre in opposition to bourgeois theatre.

This had implications for the accusations levelled at Barthes and *Théâtre populaire*. The accusation of 'Messianisme' levelled against Barthes is a difficult one to prove, but it would also be difficult to disprove.<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, Barthes's 'dogmatisme' sprung from the opposite desire; the



desire for the masses to have a 'high' ('grand') popular culture. It was within this perspective that he developed his own sociological methodology.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Mortier, *La Réception de Brecht*, and D. Bradby, *Modern French Drama 1940-1980* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp.108-112; Agnes Hübner has also dedicated a book to the study of Brecht's impact on French theatre, see *Brecht in Frankreich 1930-1963* (Stuttgart, J. B. Metzler, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> 'Témoignage sur le théâtre', *Esprit*, May 1965, pp.834-836 (OC 1530-1532); these were Barthes's comments on the popular theatre in 1965 soon after his departure, and contain the first use of the word 'éblouissement' with regard to Brecht's theatre.

<sup>3</sup> Abirached, p.128 and pp.130-131.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.140.

<sup>5</sup> The central thesis in Barthes's history of literary forms was the view that the standardisation of language by the bourgeoisie had begun long before its actual accession to political power in the wake of the Revolution; considering the history of literature as a reflection of a wider, gradual, centralisation of culture which led to the subsequent cultural exclusion of the popular masses, Barthes's analysis was based on a distinctly Trotskyan dialectical explanation of historical, political and cultural change; see L. Trotsky, 'La culture prolétarienne et l'art prolétarien', in *Littérature et Révolution* (Paris, Union générale d'éditions/Julliard, 1964), pp.216-218. His view of literary history stood in marked contrast to the postwar Jacobinism of the Communist Party and to Sartre's account of literary history in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*

<sup>6</sup> 'Le Prince de Hombourg au TNP', p.96.

<sup>7</sup> 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique', p.15.

<sup>8</sup> He concluded that 'en société bourgeoise il n'y a ni culture ni morale prolétarienne, il n'y a pas d'art prolétarien' (*Mythologies*, OC 705).

<sup>9</sup> See E. Copfermann, 'Enjeux politiques et sociaux du théâtre populaire', in Abirached, p.147.

<sup>10</sup> The 1952 production by the TNP of Henri Pichette's satire on atomic war, *Nucléa*, had encouraged accusations of Vilar being a Communist and mismanagement; see Vilar's reply in a 'conférence de presse', 27 April 1953, reprinted in *Jean Vilar par lui-même* (Maison Jean Vilar 1991), pp.131-137.

<sup>11</sup> Despite Vilar's participation, the ATP was politically, but not financially, independent of the TNP; this ambiguity was the cause of the growing rift between the ATP and TNP, which culminated in 1956; see E. Copfermann, *Le Théâtre populaire pourquoi?* (Paris, Librairie Maspéro, 1965), pp.64-72.

<sup>12</sup> *Théâtre populaire*, 1, pp.93-94.

<sup>13</sup> See Copfermann, p.63. The success of the ATP was not reflected in sales of *Théâtre populaire*; the TNP's free newsletter, *Bref*, was sent to over 50,000 people; by contrast, the journal's readership was little more than three thousand per number; interview with Denis Bablet, March 1991.

<sup>14</sup> pp.88-92. In the ATP bulletin of this number, André Despinette, secretary of the ATP, stated the agreement between journal and association: though *Théâtre populaire* offered the ATP 'ses colonnes', the views of the journal were not necessarily those of the 'Association' (p.84).

<sup>15</sup> 'Du combat au constat', interview with Bernard Dort in *Revue des revues*, no.1, March 1986 pp.54-55.

<sup>16</sup> Barthes wrote: 'On dirait que Vilar a retrouvé pour son public ce paradoxe essentiellement français qui fait les lecteurs de *L'Aurore* ricaner aux couplets du Grenier de Montmartre sur nos parlementaires, nos magistrats ou nos ministres, le même jour où ils auront voté pour Laniel, Bidault ou Frédéric Dupont, approuvé gravement les déclarations pompeuses d'un procureur général en faveur de la peine de mort, ou lu sans éclater de rire la dernière mise au point gouvernementale sur la "pacification" en Algérie'; see *Ubu*, p.81 (OC 775).



<sup>17</sup> Dort in Abirached, p.137.

<sup>18</sup> Mortier, p.113 and p.118;

<sup>19</sup> Continuing his 1953 view that a theatre in a class society could be popular only 'idéalement', Barthes wrote: 'Nous ne pouvons aller plus vite que l'Histoire elle-même (nous voudrions, certes, qu'elle allât plus vite), tirer des chèques sur l'avenir, et dire au théâtre d'une société qu'il faudra réconcilier dans son économie bien plus tôt encore que dans sa culture: tu seras ceci, tu useras de tel langage, de tel espace et de telles idées' (p.2, *OC* 381).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.3. This tone confirms Eric Marty's view of the 'violence de l'engagement de Barthes' in the popular theatre; see the interview in *Le Magazine littéraire*, October 1993, p.22.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Dort, too, has a number of reservations about Mortier's study; see Abirached, p.136n.

<sup>22</sup> p.154. In Sartre's view, *Le Procès d'Henri Martin*, the story of a deserter from the Indo-China war, was true political theatre. Furthermore, denying the TNP's status of a truly popular theatre, Sartre was pessimistic about a state-funded popular theatre; see 'Sartre nous parle de théâtre', *Théâtre populaire* 15 and translated in M. Contat and M. Rybalka (eds.), *Sartre on Theater* (London, Quartet, 1976) pp.44-54.

<sup>23</sup> 'A l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?', *Théâtre populaire*, 18, May 1956, pp.1-3 (*OC* 1224-1226); see especially the final page. Indeed, a month before, Barthes had declared to an 'enquête' in *Arts*: 'il n'y a de solution aux problèmes du théâtre que *politique* [...] notre première tâche est de politiser le théâtre'; see 'Le théâtre est toujours engagé', p.3 (*OC* 546).

<sup>24</sup> His repetition of 'Or', combined with his demand ('nous réclamons') for tragedy, made for an angry tone (p.93, *OC* 404).

<sup>25</sup> Though listed in Barthes's and Leguay's bibliography after 'Théâtre capital' (Barthes's first account of his 'discovery' of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, in *France-Observateur*, 8 July 1954, pp.1-2, *OC* 419-421), this review was written and published before (in *Théâtre populaire*, May/June 1954, pp.85-87, *OC* 425-426).

<sup>26</sup> This challenges Philippe Roger's view that a 'rhétorique de manifeste', a collective platform expression of ideas, had been rare in Barthes's writing (see *Roland Barthes, roman*, p.149).

<sup>27</sup> See 'Brecht en France', *Les Temps Modernes*, 171, June 1960, p.1858.

<sup>28</sup> Some of the most important of these writings were included in this special edition of *Théâtre populaire* on Brecht.

<sup>29</sup> Dort, 'Du combat au constat', p.54.

<sup>30</sup> Mortier shows convincingly how Lemarchand appeared as 'crédible' in his mild criticism of *Théâtre populaire*'s 'prise de position' in favour of Epic theatre; Mortier, pp.152-153. Though Lemarchand's article was initially humorous, he appeared more serious at the end. Indeed, this seriousness is confirmed in an interview with Lemarchand in *Bref* a year later (June 1956, p.1): talking about the role of the critic, Lemarchand stated that he had felt seriously concerned by the adverse effect that *Théâtre populaire*'s promotion of Brecht might have on 'les jeunes'.

<sup>31</sup> The charges of 'messianisme' seemed to be levelled against Barthes; in the editorial of number 11, he had noted the dominance of Aristotelian theatre for centuries and had followed this with the words 'Or un homme vient [...] (p.1, *OC* 1203)'. He defended himself by denying that, in underlining Brecht's non-aristotelian theatre, he had wanted to 'opposer radicalement Brecht au théâtre français contemporain': the reference to twenty-four centuries was only a quote from Brecht's own writings.

<sup>32</sup> He justified the aesthetic and institutional exception made of the production (written and played in a 'bourgeois' form, in a 'bourgeois' theatre, by Barthes's standards, though he did not use these terms) by underlining the state of French theatre: '[N]ous n'avons enfin jamais caché ici, qu'il nous paraissait difficile de faire du grand théâtre politique dans les formes compromises de la dramaturgie bourgeoise' (p.1, *OC* 494).

<sup>33</sup> Calvet p.151.

<sup>34</sup> 'Nekrassov juge de sa critique', p.72 (*OC* 506).

<sup>35</sup> Barthes's Marxian critique of bourgeois theatre had, perhaps, an influence on Voisin. Following Barthes's invective in the editorial of number 5, there appeared a rare article by Voisin for the journal, precisely on the subject of money; 'Le théâtre et la cabale' (*Théâtre*



*populaire* 9, September/October 1954, pp.44-56) analysed and denounced bourgeois theatre as the product and image of capitalism, and even capitalized the initial letter in 'Argent', as Barthes had done in the editorial of number 5; and Voisin linked, like Barthes, theatrical form and the theatre economy in his challenge to 'le cabotinage de l'Argent'.

<sup>36</sup> Despite a peak national membership of 25,000, the ATP depended on the support of these theatres. Even with this support, the ATP had continual financial difficulties; see the appeal for donations and the beginning of a campaign of letter-writing to the Ministry of Education in the editorial of the June 1956 edition of *Bref* (p.7). The figure for active members was nearer a fifth of the paper membership, and attempts to win members in large factories, and other manual working-class sectors were, by 1955, meeting with limited success; see Copfermann, pp.66-67.

<sup>37</sup> All involving private, professional troupes, these 'Centres dramatiques' were partly funded by the State in agreement with the local 'municipalité'; Jean-Pierre Rioux has noted that in 1952 these four CDN and the TNP together received barely a third of the money given to the Comédie-Française; Abirached, p.67 note.

<sup>38</sup> The federation of the regional ATPs (FNATP), created at the end of 1955, had transformed the TNP bulletin *Bref* into a monthly newspaper, with editorials each month by the ATP; the addition of Toulouse, Quimper, Poitiers, and Geneva to the federation in 1956 was not necessarily a bonus; it meant that there were misunderstandings with the local Centres Dramatiques which had their own spectator organizations; see Copfermann, p.64.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, pp.67-70.

<sup>40</sup> 'Propos sur *La Cérisaie*', *Théâtre populaire*, 10, November/December 1954, pp.85-92 (OC 440-441). See also the editorial, which, lamenting the demise of Serreau's Théâtre de Babylone, contended that 'le système économique présidant actuellement aux destinées du théâtre le dessert plus qu'il ne l'encourage' (p.1) and suggested following the example of 'l'Allemagne' (sic) for a 'redressement théâtral' (p.2); this editorial was written by Barthes, according to Freedman/Taylor (p.245).

<sup>41</sup> 'Dialogue', *Théâtre populaire*, 12 March/April 1955, pp.107-108 (OC 488).

<sup>42</sup> Abirached, pp.137-139.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*. pp.140-141.

<sup>44</sup> See 'Mutter Courage', *Théâtre populaire*, 8, July/August 1954, p.94 (OC 1200-1201).

<sup>45</sup> In the discussion on RTF with Jean Dasté and Paul-Louis Mignon, Barthes made the important claim that 'un spectacle n'est pas un objet, mais un rapport entre la scène et la salle'; 'Barthes et Dasté à la RTF'.

<sup>46</sup> See Copfermann, p.66. In an interview in 1960 (in *Théâtre populaire* 40) Vilar declared that, having had the experience of the Festival d'Avignon between 1947 and 1951, he had learnt that the future of the popular theatre required 'conjointement' three 'obligations majeures': 'un public de masse, un répertoire de haute culture, une régie qui n'embourgeoise pas, ne falsifie pas les oeuvres' (p.14).

<sup>47</sup> See 'Pour une définition du Théâtre Populaire', p.17 (OC 43-431); and 'Le théâtre populaire d'aujourd'hui' (OC 442-445). Though published in December 1954, the latter was almost certainly written before the Berliner Ensemble visit to Paris in July 1954, since it made no reference at all to Brecht's theatre.

<sup>48</sup> Philippa Wehle has shown how Romain Rolland, inspired by Michelet's view of the popular theatre, had put forward a similar three-point plan at the beginning of the century; see *Model for an open stage: a study of Jean Vilar's theatre for the people* (facsimile, Columbia University, Ann Arbor, 1974), pp.71-75.

<sup>49</sup> Reiterating his reserves as to the feasibility of a truly popular theatre in a class society, Barthes suggested that 'dans la société actuelle', there was 'évidemment' no other means of financing this than via 'les subventions de l'Etat'; but a popular theatre was possible 'aujourd'hui même', he concluded, 'si la nation le veut vraiment' (p.17, OC 430-431).

<sup>50</sup> For Barthes this economic dimension was highly political: 'L'élargissement du public de théâtre ne doit être à aucun moment le fruit d'une charité; il doit être au contraire le signe d'une démocratie sans fraude' (p.154, OC 442-443).

<sup>51</sup> See also 'Avignon, l'hiver', pp.7-8 (OC 393-395).

<sup>52</sup> In particular he criticised Romain Rolland's and other writers' attempts to write plays especially 'pour le peuple': 'un répertoire au rabais, fait de pièces à la psychologie simpliste



et à la mise en scène tapageuse' was a 'préjugé bien dangereux et sottement méfiant' (p.154, OC 443).

<sup>53</sup> This emphasis on historical agency and political dilemma in Barthes's advocating tragedy as the appropriate repertoire for the popular theatre fitted with the three 'mots clefs' of *Théâtre populaire* - 'grandeur', 'Histoire' and 'poésie' - which, notes Dort, were dominant in the journal until the number 11 on Brechtian theatre (Abirached, p.133).

<sup>54</sup> 'Godot adulte', *France-Observateur* 10 June 1954, p.3 (OC 413-415).

<sup>55</sup> Abirached, pp.137-138.

<sup>56</sup> See 'Le théâtre populaire d'aujourd'hui', p.155 (OC 443).

<sup>57</sup> Barthes had visited Jean Dasté's Comédie de Saint-Etienne, for example; see 'Un bon petit théâtre', p.7 (OC 407).

<sup>58</sup> 'L'Arlésienne du catholicisme', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1162-1165 (OC 236-238).

<sup>59</sup> 'Le silence de Don Juan', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1954, pp.264-267 (OC 377-379); 'Don Juan au TNP', *Théâtre populaire*, 5, January/February 1954, pp.90-94 (OC 384-386).

<sup>60</sup> There was a further 'impiété' in the fact that Vilar had given Molière's play a form of atheism which did not exist in the original: 'Cela était-il dans Molière? non, bien sûr', commented Barthes; but, he noted, 'le théâtre n'est pas un musée, et ce n'est pas notre faute si depuis 1665 il y a eu milles formes nouvelles d'athéisme, de Sade à Sartre'. This was part of Vilar's admirable attempt to put back into theatre the 'dimension' of the 'mémoire de son public' (p.94, OC 386).

<sup>61</sup> 'Fin de Richard II', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1954 pp.425-429 (OC 389-392).

<sup>62</sup> Philippe's acting was 'mélodramatique' not 'tragique', 'plus hugolien que shakespearien', and typical of his 'embourgeoisement'.

<sup>63</sup> '[D]onner Claudel au Marigny, c'est à peu près donner *l'Arlésienne* à l'Odéon, c'est se prêter à la pire des collusions, celle d'une idéologie et de ses bénéficiaires'; 'L'Arlésienne du catholicisme', p.1164.

<sup>64</sup> 'Monsieur Perrichon à Moscou'; the original version of this article included brief comments by Barthes on the repertoire offered by the Comédie-Française and a list of the large number of personnel taken over to Moscow, as well as a collection of the reactions of the French critics accompanying the troupe and those of the Soviet press towards the visit; this might be considered Barthes's first attack on French theatre critics, if not a prelude to his 1955 'petite mythologie' on *Le Figaro*'s visit to the Soviet Union in 'La croisière du Batory'.

<sup>65</sup> 'Ruy Blas au TNP'. Barthes's criticism was all the more stark, even irreverent, when one considers that, in the very same number of *Théâtre populaire*, Vilar published the 'Notes pour les comédiens' in his *Ruy Blas*.

<sup>66</sup> Denying that he was showing a 'snobisme' to Hugo's theatre and reminding the readership of 'les hypothèques politiques qui pèsent sur un tel nom', Barthes felt not obliged to ruin his 'admiration singulière' for Hugo the poet by having to like Hugo the dramatist; Hugo's play would encourage, he believed, a confusion of popular and bourgeois theatres in the minds of an inexperienced popular theatre audience (p.405).

<sup>67</sup> As 'théâtre de dérision', *Ruy Blas* could be nothing more than parody, and, he suggested, having more in common with 'la presse du coeur, dans les bandes illustrées de certains quotidiens, dans les courriers sentimentaux', Hugo's play was better being produced 'chez Vitaly' (p.94, OC 386).

<sup>68</sup> 'Propos sur *Cinna*', p.104.

<sup>69</sup> pp.116-117. Mortier has underlined that, just as Vilar was experiencing a challenge to his leadership of the TNP, the editorial of *Théâtre populaire* 7 chose to distance itself from Vilar, asserting that he was neither the 'responsable' nor the 'éminence grise' of the journal; this 'clarification', as we saw in Chapter 1, was instigated by Barthes.

<sup>70</sup> Praising Beckett's, as well as Adamov's and Ionesco's absurd theatre in May 1954 Barthes changed his attitude quite considerably by the time of *Théâtre populaire* 14, in May 1956 (see OC 1224-1226).

<sup>71</sup> Barthes's sudden enthusiasm for avant-garde theatre is evident when we consider his letter to Voisin in Summer 1953, in which he doubted the appropriateness of including Adamov's



play *Professeur Taranne* in *Théâtre populaire* 2.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p.7. Opened 31 December 1952, Planchon's theatre had only eighty seats; Barthes pointed out that there would not even be enough space to fit in 'ces vastes machines financières et mystiques' used in Barrault's *Christophe Colomb*.

<sup>73</sup> Planchon was putting on productions of the very Kleist that Barrault had decided to exchange for a Betti 'plus rentable', jibed Barthes (p.7, *OC* 407). This, he added, was not necessarily without certain concessions; 'la tyrannie du public' meant that Planchon could not be utopian, and was obliged to put on traditional theatre; but at least he produced these plays in an ironic fashion; this was infinitely better, thought Barthes, than the present TNP and Parisian repertoires: '[D]u moins ce théâtre inférieur ne se prend au sérieux [...]. Si l'on pouvait rire à Ugo Betti, à Gabriel Marcel ou à *Ruy Blas* j'y verrais moins d'imposture !' (*ibid.*).

<sup>74</sup> Barthes also gave Planchon the praise he had given Vilar a year before: Planchon's production and directing techniques were likened to those of Dullin (p.8, *OC* 408).

<sup>75</sup> 'Une tragédienne sans public'; Casarès and Vilar were the only two actors able to 'entraîner une participation authentique du spectateur au spectacle'; whereas the audience at her most recent performance had not appreciated her acting style - hence the title of this article - now, wrote Barthes, Casarès was to have the chance to play before a real popular audience (p.7, *OC* 410).

<sup>76</sup> 'Macbeth au TNP', *Théâtre populaire*, 11, January/February 1955, pp.89-90 (*OC* 473-4).

<sup>77</sup> Reviewing this TNP production in *Théâtre populaire* 11, the same number given over in large part to an appreciation of Brechtian theatre, Barthes described the importance of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* in relation to Vilar's acting in the first paragraph; the rest of the review judged Vilar's acting of 'conscience' against Brecht's "distancement"; the former, decided Barthes, though not as 'radicale' as Brecht's (in that it contained no "gestus" social'), did nevertheless achieve an epic aspect in its "gestus" moral, le conflit historique de l'ordre et du désordre' (p.89, *OC* 473-474).

<sup>78</sup> Nor was this a production by Vilar, rather Daniel Sorano's *L'Étourdi*; see '*L'Étourdi, ou le nouveau contretemps*', *France-Observateur*, 2 December 1955, p.18 (*OC* 524-525). Barthes's next review of a Vilar production was not until February 1956 ('Marivaux au TNP', *France-Observateur*, 2 February 1956, p.14, *OC* 532-533).

<sup>79</sup> *Abirached*, p.130.

<sup>80</sup> *Théâtre populaire*, 14, July/August 1955, pp.85-86.

<sup>81</sup> With a 'scène remarquable, Casarès impressionnante', the play was nevertheless 'totalement stupide'; people in Avignon, said Barthes, were wondering in which direction Vilar was moving by putting so much effort into 'tant de connerie'; letter undated.

<sup>82</sup> B. Dort, 'Une reine sans royaume, un théâtre sans objet', *France-Observateur*, 17 November 1955, p.14.

<sup>83</sup> *Abirached*, p.130. Vilar replied to Sartre's view that the TNP was not a truly popular theatre in an interview soon after in *Bref* (15 October 1955, pp.1-2).

<sup>84</sup> Barrault's production of *L'Orestie* was staunchly criticised too; see '*L'Orestie au théâtre Marigny*', *Théâtre populaire*, 15, September/October 1955, pp.87-94 (*OC* 1218-1223).

<sup>85</sup> In the Summer of 1955 he reviewed favourably productions by Hermantier at Nîmes in '*Jules César et Coriolan* (au IIe festival de Nîmes)'; in Paris, he had been impressed by a Dutch production of *Oedipe-Roi* at the 'IIe festival d'art dramatique' in '*Oedipe-Roi* (au théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt)'; see for both reviews *Théâtre populaire*, 14, July/August 1955, pp.89-99 (*OC* 507-509).

<sup>86</sup> '*Ubu Roi*', *Théâtre populaire*, 15, September/October 1955, pp.108-109 (522-523).

<sup>87</sup> The director was an employee of the Ministère de l'éducation, Barthes reminded the readership: 'On le sait peut-être, chaque année, des amateurs de théâtre, venus des milieux populaires, sont sélectionnés par province et rassemblés dans un stage national où, pendant six semaines de travail intense, ils participent, chacun pour sa spécialité [...], à la préparation d'un spectacle: l'un de ces stages est dirigé et présenté par un instituteur, Gabriel Monnet' (p.108, *OC* 522).

<sup>88</sup> 'Espoirs du théâtre populaire', *France-Observateur*, 5 January 1956, p.13 (*OC* 529-531). He was invited by this group to another 'stage d'Education Populaire' in Marly-le-Roy. 'Vivement impressionné' by this production, he had accepted the invitation 'avec joie'.



Though the production was by amateur actors, it had been funded by the state; Barthes reminded the reader in a footnote that there existed in the Direction générale de la jeunesse a 'bureau d'Education populaire' on whom fifteen 'instructeurs nationaux' depended: 'Leur mission à l'échelle nationale' was 'de contrôler, d'animer, d'enseigner, voire de sélectionner les animateurs de groupements culturels populaires (maisons de jeunes, ciné-clubs, troupes de théâtre amateur etc.)' (ibid). This was, of course, all to change under Malraux, with the introduction in 1959 of the Gaullist policy of developing 'Maisons de la Culture'; Monnet was a good example in this policy, for he was co-opted to run La Maison de la Culture in Bourges; see B. Rigby, *Popular culture in modern France: a study of cultural discourse* (London, Routledge, 1991), p.133.

<sup>89</sup> This was exemplified by the 'terme excellent' of one of the 'stagiaires': 'déconditionner'. Barthes had already used this idea in his view of Robbe-Grillet's importance to the novel a few months before; see 'Littérature littéraire', *Critique*, 100-101, September/October 1955, p.826 (OC 1217).

<sup>90</sup> Not, stressed Barthes in 1956, that this should avoid a dialogue with the professional actors. Nevertheless, he drew a conclusion on amateur popular dramatics and professional work; without 'volonté d'offense' towards the latter, he considered that they were 'par condition' ill-prepared to 'dévoiler un oeuvre'; 'parasites par force' of the 'bourgeoisie', despite the 'dure servitude économique' in which they were generally kept, they would not have had the 'maturité civique' to reach the play's 'vérité politique'; only 'ouvriers', 'artisans' and 'instituteurs' had this quality. Contrast this with his defence of the professional in 1958 in 'Le mythe de l'acteur possédé', *Théâtre d'aujourd'hui*, 6, March/April 1958, pp.23-24 (OC 770-772).

<sup>91</sup> Including multiplying and organising the 'liaisons avec le milieu populaire' such as 'associations de spectateurs', unions and 'centres dramatiques'. More remarkable, said Barthes, was their desire for the 'concours' of sociologists, technicians, 'enquêteurs' to provide an 'inventaire permanent' of audiences, either real or potential; his only reservation was whether any professional theatre would be willing to divulge its 'chiffres' and 'recettes'.

<sup>92</sup> Commenting on how he had encouraged ('obscurément') the view that his theatre was the beginnings of a 'critique sociale', Vilar criticised Barthes's 'syllogisme ouvertement terroriste' ('Si l'*Ubu* de Vilar a plu à M. Kemp c'est que l'*Ubu* de Vilar est raté', p.80, OC 775) and wondered for whom *Théâtre populaire* thought it was writing; see *Le théâtre, service public* (Paris, Gallimard, 1975), pp.249-250.

<sup>93</sup> Was this not an echo of André Calvès's satirical column in *Les Lettres nouvelles* ('Le monde ... comme il ne va pas') which had started in November 1955 ?

<sup>94</sup> 'Bertolt Brecht à Lyon', *France-Observateur*, 10 May 1956, p.17 (OC 547-548).

<sup>95</sup> In reviewing a play written by fellow contributor to *Théâtre populaire*, Duvignaud's *Marée basse*, Barthes contrasted Duvignaud's theatre of revolt with Brecht's theatre 'de la révolution' ('Sur *Marée basse*', *Théâtre populaire*, 17, March 1956, pp.88-90, OC 538-539). This seemed to confirm Dort's view that both he and Barthes had been looking, since their defence of Sartre's *Nekrassov*, for a French version of Brecht (interview with Dort). Furthermore, Barthes's April 1956 article on Michel Vinaver's theatre, showing how Vinaver learnt from Brecht, suggested that perhaps Vinaver had superseded Brechtian theatre; see 'Note sur "Aujourd'hui"' (OC 540-542).

<sup>96</sup> See *Mythologies* (OC 705).

<sup>97</sup> See 'Situation de Roger Planchon'. This was complemented by *Théâtre populaire* 28 (January 1958), the main feature of which was André Gisselbrecht's enthusiastic review of Planchon's production of *Henry IV* (pp.1-10) and an interview with Planchon about his new theatre in Villeurbanne (pp.11-22).

<sup>98</sup> Barthes was, in a sense, correct; fourteen years later, in April 1972, the TNP was moved to Villeurbanne and Planchon received his reward.

<sup>99</sup> Barthes noted how it was difficult to use the word realism in a positive fashion: 'Si le mot *réalisme* n'avait été si souvent galvaudé à propos des quartiers de viande d'Antoine, ce serait ici qu'il faudrait l'employer [...]' (p.14, OC 533).

<sup>100</sup> 'Le théâtre français d'avant-garde', *Le Français dans le monde*, 2, June/July 1961, p.12 (OC 916).

<sup>101</sup> Defending the promotion of Brecht in *Théâtre populaire* 11, he wrote in the editorial of



the next number: 'En somme, nous n'avons exercé que notre métier de critique: nous avons fait connaître des idées, affirmé une sympathie, annoncé des objections possibles. Aussi est-il paradoxal que ce soit précisément la Critique qui nous reproche d'avoir fait la critique' (p.2, OC 485). See his editorial for *Théâtre populaire* 13, in which he promised to open a 'dossier' on the manner in which the critics destroyed Sartre's *Nekrassov*.

<sup>102</sup> Copfermann, p.130.

<sup>103</sup> 'Comment s'en passer', *France-Observateur*, 7 October 1954, p.3 (OC 432-434).

<sup>104</sup> See, for example 'Critique muette et aveugle', published in the first 'petite mythologie du mois'; and 'Vaccin de l'avant-garde' (*Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1955, pp.476-478, OC 471-472). See other 'petites mythologies' for their interest in bourgeois critics, such as 'Adamov et le langage', 'Racine est Racine', and 'La critique Ni-Ni'.

<sup>105</sup> There are numerous examples of references in his reviews of productions to the reactions of bourgeois critics: 'Jules César et Coriolan (au IIe festival de Nîmes)', 'Le plus heureux des trois', 'Phèdre', 'Ubu' and 'La Fête du Cordonnier'.

<sup>106</sup> Editorial, *Théâtre populaire*, 9, p.3 (OC 439).

<sup>107</sup> In 'Théâtre capital', Barthes suggested that '[L]a critique bourgeoise, sauf quelques exceptions, s'est empressée d'appliquer [...] ses habitudes d'exorcisme: accusation de démagogie, de succès purement politique ou, ce qui n'est pas mieux, louange superficielle donnée à Brecht comme à un quelconque Anouilh' (p.1, OC 419).

<sup>108</sup> Editorial, *Théâtre populaire*, 9, p.2 (OC 438).

<sup>109</sup> In his review of the performance, having extolled the virtues of Brecht's theatre, Barthes wrote: 'Or cela, c'est la définition même du grand théâtre populaire' (p.96, OC 1201). This seemed to ignore one element (at least) of his three-point plan, the 'public de masse'.

<sup>110</sup> André Villiers (ed), *Théâtre et Collectivité* (Flammarion 1953), included papers by Georges Friedmann, Vilar and Sorbonne professor Henri Gouhier; see Barthes's review in *Théâtre populaire*, January/February 1954, pp.98-100 (OC 387-388).

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, p.99 (OC 388). It was Barthes who had encouraged Dort to develop the journal's sociological understanding of theatre, and who proof-read Dort's two-part sociological study of theatre audiences called 'Pour une Sociologie du théâtre: Un théâtre sans public, des publics sans théâtre' (*Théâtre populaire* 4, pp.12-19 and 5, pp.14-18); interview with Dort.

<sup>112</sup> 'Le théâtre est toujours engagé', *Arts*, 18-24 April 1956, p.3 (OC 545-546).

<sup>113</sup> See his Marxian analysis of readerships in 'Petite sociologie du roman français contemporain', especially pp.198-199 (OC 469).

<sup>114</sup> Editorial, *Théâtre populaire* 9, p.3 (OC 439).

<sup>115</sup> For example, his view of the 'Mère Courage du TNP'; this 'cas' was 'peu instructif en raison du contre-sens de la mise en scène'; 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne', p.20 (OC 1227). Dort notes that the 'reprise' of the TNP production of *Mère Courage* in March 1957, largely unchanged from the TNP's production in 1951, angered himself and others on the editorial board of *Théâtre populaire* and led to a 'rupture de relations' between the TNP and L'Arche; see Abirached, p.136. Since the reprise began in January 1957, it is clear that Barthes was referring to this production, and was one of those who disagreed with Vilar's production style, if not the first to voice his disapproval, since his article on Brecht had been published in January 1957.

<sup>116</sup> Indeed, immediately after Barthes's ecstatic review of the Berliner Ensemble 1954 production in *Théâtre populaire* 8, there was a discussion between Dort, Jean Paris, Duvignaud, Dumur, Clara Malraux and Voisin about the performance (pp.97-103); in a rare comment Voisin noted: 'Tout cela est bel et bon. Malheureusement, les quatre représentations [...] n'ont été suivies que par un nombre restreint de Parisiens [...]' (p.103).

<sup>117</sup> See 'Nouveaux problèmes du réalisme', in Documents, July 1956, pp.737-740 (OC 549-551).

<sup>118</sup> One year later, Marx's view of historical theatre was sharply corrected by Barthes when he compared Brechtian and Marxian dramatic aesthetics; see 'Brecht, Marx et l'histoire', *Cahiers de la Compagnie Renaud-Barrault*, 21, December 1957, pp.21-25 (OC 753-756).

<sup>119</sup> 'Le plus heureux des trois', *Théâtre populaire*, 19, July 1956, pp.80-82 (OC 552-553).

<sup>120</sup> 'La Locandiera', *Théâtre populaire*, 20, September 1956, p. 70-72 (OC 554-555).

<sup>121</sup> 'The dominance of the director', in M. Cook (ed.), *French Culture since 1945* (New York/London, Longman 1993), p.72.



<sup>122</sup> Setting out how 'la plastique d'un spectacle' was more significant than the play itself, Barthes praised the prominence and the historical singularity given by Vilar to 'production', and related this to ancient Greek tragedy '[qui] n'était que mise en scène': '*Le Prince de Hombourg* de Kleist n'est qu'une pièce; *Le Prince de Hombourg* de Vilar est un spectacle, c'est-à-dire nullement le rassemblement d'accidents et d'accessoires autour d'un texte déifié conformément au culte tout bourgeois de la Littérature [...] mais plutôt l'idée sensible d'un certain acte historique qui impose sa plastique à tous les sens du public et la distribue également au texte, à l'espace, à la matière, aux mouvements etc. [...]. [C]e n'est pas *Le Prince de Hombourg* qui est mis en scène, c'est plutôt l'espace rituel du théâtre qui est, pour un soir, peuplé de militaires prusso-brandebourgeois débattant entre deux batailles, une question de règlements' (pp.95-96, OC 207).

<sup>123</sup> See his review of Barrault's 1959 production of Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* (*Théâtre populaire*, 33, 1er trimestre, 1959, pp.121-123, OC 819-820); Claudel's play, though full of 'données mythiques', merited a reading, wrote Barthes; and though based on his despised theme of adultery, the play could perhaps be 'saved' from its 'mauvaise foi' if it were played in a production 'du genre Piscator' (p.123, OC 820). Contrast this review with his bitter invective six years before against Barrault's 1953 production of Claudel's *Christophe Colomb* ('L'Arlésienne du catholicisme').

<sup>124</sup> '*Le Faiseur*', *Théâtre populaire*, 24, May 1957, pp.81-84 (OC 739-740).

<sup>125</sup> This was the case of his review of Vilar's 1957 production of *Le Mariage de Figaro* (*Théâtre populaire*, 23, March 1957, pp.96-97, OC 735-736). This was a review of one page rather than three, and was half-hearted in many ways. Though not a 'spectacle réussi', Barthes defended the production; but his defence was defined by his opposition to the critics' general view that the production was too slow; furthermore, if for Barthes the play itself was a 'subversion sociale' which announced the freedom of lovers in the Revolution, he made no comment on its significance for the contemporary popular theatre, except to underline the play's heralding a 'poison nouveau', the (nineteenth-century) theme of adultery.

<sup>126</sup> As well as the other members of *Théâtre populaire*; see the editorial in number 34 (2e trimestre, 1959 pp.1-4), for a highly critical view of the proposals, which included the comments of those drama critics (such as Lebesque, Lemarchand, Kanters, Kemp) who were strongly in favour of Malraux's 'réforme'.

<sup>127</sup> 'Tragédie et hauteur', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 8, 22 April 1959, pp.51-52 (OC 814-815).

<sup>128</sup> Vilar's attitude was that of 'Ponce-Pilate', his policy 'la politique du pire': Racine was not theatre, ironised Barthes, and Vilar had set out to prove it: 'Ponce-Pilate n'est pas un monsieur qui dit non, c'est un monsieur qui dit oui; en se lavant les mains, Vilar a dit oui à tout le mythe Racine' (p.97, OC 1084).

<sup>129</sup> This desire for a distance between audience and production ('étrangeté', rather than 'familiarité') was the thrust of Barthes's criticism of Barrault's production of *L'Orestie*.

<sup>130</sup> 'La Relation d'autorité chez Racine', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 10 June 1959, pp.3-17 (the piece is introduced by a note which considered the article to be a 'fragment' of his preface); 'L'Éros racinien', *Esprit*, November 1959, pp.471-482). The preface appeared in *Théâtre de Racine*, volumes XI and XII (Club français du Livre 1960); 'Histoire et littérature: à propos de Racine', *Annales*, 3, May/June 1960, pp.524-537 (OC 1087-1103).

<sup>131</sup> In the 1959 round-table discussion on Adamov's *Paolo Paoli*, full of the air of censure, it was now Dort, not Barthes, who offered an alternative to the theatre controlled by the 'pouvoir politique' (see 'Quand les critiques sont dans la pièce', *La Nouvelle Critique*, 94, March 1958, pp.90-105). Whilst Barthes talked about the importance of the critic (the title of the discussion is taken from one of his remarks), Dort insisted that French theatre had to 'susciter, mobiliser, et organiser un public dont la composition sociale soit autre' (p.105).

<sup>132</sup> The critics were 'fermement décidés à voir une pièce irresponsable'; and 'la critique' was 'unaniment résolue à vider l'oeuvre' - only Paul Morelle in *Libération*, said Barthes, had 'soutenu l'oeuvre contre sa mise en scène' (p.103, OC 826 note 1).

<sup>133</sup> '*Les Trois Mousquetaires*', *Théâtre populaire*, 36, 4e trimestre 1959, pp.47-49 (OC 848-849).

<sup>134</sup> Jean Duvignaud, whose name had appeared on the comité de rédaction listing of the inside cover of *Théâtre populaire* since the number 7 (May/June 1954), left the journal suddenly in 1957: in number 25 (July 1957) his name no longer appeared, and thereafter this



one-time illustrious contributor contributed no more articles to the journal.

<sup>135</sup> 'Le Balcon (au Théâtre du Gymnase) *Théâtre populaire*, 38, 2e trimestre 1960, pp.96-98 (OC 814-815). For Barthes, clearly avoiding censorship himself, it was a production which troubled 'aucun ordre', full of 'impostures'. With Marie Bell acting a Gênet play "naturellement", he considered this production a 'sacrilège' (p.98, OC 884).

<sup>136</sup> 'Sur la Mère', *Théâtre populaire*, 39, 3e trimestre 1960, pp.135-137 (OC 1274-1276).

<sup>137</sup> This view is gleaned from Calvet's research, not from Rivière's own writing (see Calvet, p.308); Rivière's own account, 'La déception théâtrale', fails to explain the reasons for Barthes's departure from the theatre; see *Prétexte: Roland Barthes/Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris, Union générale d'Éditions, 1978), pp.110-128.

<sup>138</sup> Barthes's displeasure with Vilar's theatre was summed up by a comment in the letter to Voisin, in which he agreed to review the TNP production of *Ubu Roi*, but complained that it was always he who had to review TNP productions; since, he wrote, he never went to any other theatre than Chaillot, it was not surprising that his reviews were 'défavorables'. Letter sent from 'Hendaye', dated 'Samedi'.

<sup>139</sup> 'La réponse de Kafka', *France-Observateur*, 24 March 1960, p.17 (OC 1270).

<sup>140</sup> Reviewing Planchon's 1956 production of Brecht, he wrote: 'il me paraît difficile de voir *Grand'Peur et Misères du IIIe Reich* sans penser à l'Algérie, à la France de Poujade'; see 'Brecht à Lyon' p.17 (OC 547).

<sup>141</sup> Quoted in Abirached, p.135. Barthes invited the accusation of a Leninist attitude to art by declaring that to separate Brechtian theatre from its 'assises théoriques' would be 'aussi erroné que de vouloir comprendre l'action de Marx sans lire le *Manifeste communiste* ou la politique de Lénine sans lire *L'Etat et la Révolution*' ('Les tâches de la critique brechtienne', p.21, OC 1229).

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> 'Propos sur la *Cérisaie*'; blaming this on the acting institution as a whole, he concluded: 'Tout notre art dramatique repose sur un contre-sens à peu près aussi gros que celui qui ferait jouer Mozart avec le rubato de Chopin' (p.86, OC 440-441).

<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, Barthes had claimed in his review of the *première* of Vinaver's *Coréens* to be 'pas de ceux qui se récrient systématiquement d'admiration devant la *fidélité* d'un metteur en scène au texte qu'il a pris en charge' (p.25, OC 557). 'Homme pour Homme (aux Mardis de l'Oeuvre)', *Théâtre populaire*, 12, March/April 1955, pp.96-98 (OC 486-487). he concluded this review: 'Le problème est donc de savoir si c'est bien aider Brecht en France que de le risquer dans les servitudes du théâtre de l'avant-garde' (p.98, OC 487).

<sup>145</sup> G. Leclerc, *Le TNP de Jean Vilar* (Paris, Bourgois/10/18, 1971), p.228 note 1.

<sup>146</sup> 'Pourquoi Brecht?', *Tribune étudiante*, 6, April 1955, pp.16-17 (OC 481-483). The simple 'geste' of looking in the newspaper could confirm this, he said; theatre repertoires were full of 'impostures idéologiques' (p.16, OC 481).

<sup>147</sup> He had, in fact, already noted the notion of totality before the Berliner Ensemble visit in 1954; he had declared in his 1953 review of Barrault's *Christophe Colomb*: '[P]uisque le théâtre est un acte total mieux vaut avoir le courage et la partialité d'une critique totale'; see 'L'Arlésienne du catholicisme', p.1164 (OC 238).

<sup>148</sup> 'Brecht "traduit"', p.8 (OC 734).

<sup>149</sup> See Mortier, p.125.

<sup>150</sup> In an interview for *Le Monde* in 1971 he underlined the political aspect of Brecht's theatre (11 March 1971, p.14, OC vol. 2 1181-1182): 'Lorsqu'on a souhaité un théâtre politique éclairé par le marxisme et un art qui surveille rigoureusement ses signes, comment n'avoir pas été ébloui par le travail du "Berliner"?' (*ibid.*, OC vol. 2 p.1181).

<sup>151</sup> For evidence perhaps of 'messianisme', see 'Pourquoi Brecht?'.



## CHAPTER FOUR: BARTHES'S SOCIOLOGY: SUBJECTIVITY, LITERATURE AND MASS CULTURE

*Moi, je crois que l'une des raisons de la séduction actuelle que la sociologie peut exercer sur nous c'est que précisément elle se pose franchement, ouvertement, comme une exigence d'explication; et c'est parce qu'elle veut être une explication qu'elle peut prendre place dans un certain courant polémique, dans un certain courant d'engagement [...]. Elle correspond à la situation d'hommes qui veulent expliquer [...] ou démystifier l'ensemble des rapports sociaux dans lesquels ils se trouvent.*

Roland Barthes speaking on 'La crise de la sociologie' to J. Amrouche, 10 May 1956 (broadcast in the series 'Des idées et des hommes', Radiodiffusion française, 19 May 1956), cited on *Des Années frileuses*.

### Introduction

According to the late Julien Greimas, Barthes's early theoretical work was dominated by the search for a human science. Greimas saw two phases in Barthes's thought:

Dans la première, il croyait à la nécessité et possibilité de faire une science de l'homme. De la même manière que les sciences de la nature s'étaient constituées au XIXe siècle, est-ce que le XXe siècle ne serait pas le siècle des sciences de l'homme?<sup>1</sup>

The post-enlightenment scientists of the nineteenth century had discovered the natural sciences; the twentieth century needed, believed Barthes, a scientific understanding of humans and their relationship to this natural world.

Barthes had come to this conclusion partly by a close reading of the writings of the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet. He suggested in 1959 that, despite his faults as a historian, Michelet had 'pressenti la fondation d'une science générale de l'homme', and had been therefore the first modern intellectual.<sup>2</sup> Michelet's innovation had been based on his status as 'un historien discrédité (au sens scientifique du terme)', exterior to the dominant scientific and



academic thought in France of the mid-nineteenth century. As his study of *La Sorcière* had shown, Michelet had broken the divisions between literature and history, had used a poetic, not a scientific, account to explain the social history and significance of witches; in Barthes's view it was precisely the literary nature of Michelet's account which made him the first sociologist.

Before we can establish the significance of Barthes's foregrounding of Michelet's role as sociologist over that of the historian at the end of the 1950s, we must look at Barthes's own early career as a sociologist. As with previous chapters, it is necessary to look at his writings and activities dialectically. As part of disparate groups of left-wing intellectuals, with thinkers such as Jean Duvignaud at *Théâtre populaire*, Maurice Nadeau at *Les Lettres nouvelles* and Edgar Morin at *Arguments*, Barthes played an important role in establishing sociology as a new discipline; thus he can be considered to have played an active role in determining important academic changes in the postwar period which have lasted up to the present day. We can consider him as a phenomenon, acting on the historical situation, not only in political journalism and the popular theatre, but also in wider, intellectual and epistemological matters.

However, within this there exists an important myth: this phase of Barthes's career, typified by his interest in semiology and Structuralism, was presented later by Barthes as a 'petit délire scientifique'. This characterization of his pre-academic sociological thought as scientific, even objective, misses the crucial personal and moral input; in reality, the beginning of Barthes's scientific 'delirium' was, for two reasons, highly subjective. Firstly, though he was searching for a total and scientific understanding of social reality, the content and the method of this 'science' were anything but scientific. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, his growing interest in a science of signs was linked to his own changing political viewpoint in the 1950s; we will look at the politico-theoretical influences in Chapter Five. This chapter will look at the



epistemological origins of Barthes's interest in sociological analysis and methodology.

**(i) A new science of humanity**

After the Second World War there was a veritable 'explosion' of interest in the subject of sociology.<sup>3</sup> In French universities previously, Sociology, as a field of study, had been excluded from French academic tradition; if sociological studies were carried out in France before the Second World War, sociology itself was not considered a separate discipline; even with thinkers such as Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century, considered a pioneer of sociological investigation, and Émile Durkheim at the turn of the century, followed by his nephew Marcel Mauss, French academia failed to recognize the importance of an independent centre for sociological study.<sup>4</sup> It was the United States after the War, having benefited from an influx of academics and intellectuals fleeing Hitler's Europe, which was, by far, the most advanced in sociological inquiry; its Marshall plan is now considered a crucial element in promoting sociology in France.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was an emigré from the Soviet Union and participant in the October Revolution, Georges Gurvitch, who initiated this post-war explosion of sociological inquiry. In 1946, with the help of UNESCO, Gurvitch launched the journal *Cahiers internationaux de la sociologie*, the theoretical journal of the newly-created 'Centre d'études sociologiques', directed by Gurvitch. In 1948 he organised with the help of two members of the editorial board of the history journal *Annales*, Lucien Febvre and Georges Friedmann, the first 'semaine sociologique' conference in Paris.<sup>6</sup>



The collaboration of *Annales* in this enterprise was to be a significant event for French social sciences. Until then, historians had not been considered appropriate researchers in the study of contemporary, social issues and structures; their role had been simply to narrate the past, to construct a history dominated by the elite of society (Royalty, Parliament, military and religious leaders, etc.). Furthermore, this shift of emphasis by Febvre and others was indicative of the changes that the early work of *Annales* had instigated in social theory and research before and during the War; under the influence of Micheletian analysis the *Annales* had begun to stress the importance of the 'masses' in social change and by the 1940s was involving this perspective in developing new ways of explaining historical change and social phenomena of the past.<sup>7</sup>

Executed by the Nazis in 1944, Marc Bloch had founded with Lucien Febvre the historical journal *Annales: économie, société, civilisation* in the late 1920s. Influenced by theorists in different disciplines such as Durkheim, Henri Berr and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, the journal offered an alternative view and explanation of history ('une nouvelle histoire') to the traditional, academic mode of inquiry; launched only months before the Wall Street crash in 1929, the journal fought until the Second World War what Peter Burke has called 'a guerilla action' against traditional historical research.<sup>8</sup> Political and military history, the history of events, was rejected in favour of a study of long-term economic, social and cultural developments. H. Stuart Hughes has noted that in the next decade it would become the single most important forum for the revitalization of historical studies in the Western world; though it was not, according to Burke, until 1945 that a real school emerged which used concepts such as 'structure' and 'conjoncture'.<sup>9</sup>

In rejecting the 'narrative' perspective typical of political history, the *Annales* were carrying on the tradition of history-writing which nineteenth-century thinkers such as Michelet, Marx and Burckhardt had developed in



opposition to the Rankeans.<sup>10</sup> In the view of Bloch and Febvre, the study of history should be problem-oriented: the historian should have no firm answers, be only a self-questioning researcher; as Febvre put it: ‘L’historien n’est pas celui qui sait. Il est celui qui cherche’. Furthermore, historical research should be aimed at all human activities, and work in collaboration with all other disciplines of human science (geography, economics, anthropology, etc.). The shift in the journal’s orientation during the War reflected this attitude.<sup>11</sup>

These changes aimed to renew social and historical inquiry in the postwar period. With the Cold War, the study of history in France was indeed suffering from a lack of a questioning spirit. On the one hand, conservative historians could claim to be ‘neutral’, objective and scientific, and could accuse others, including *Annales*, of being selective or biased.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, historians under Stalinism’s influence could consider *Annales* to be fully revisionist: a tool of ‘Yankee’ imperialism, against the Soviet Union and against the working-class.<sup>13</sup> In its attempt to combat both the obscurantism of Soviet-inspired historical research, and the ‘impartiality’ of Western scholarship, *Annales* counterposed a large vision of history to incorporate both ‘bourgeois’ social sciences and Marxian economics.

As a student of ancient Greek civilization, a popular theatre enthusiast, and an avid reader of Michelet and Jaurès, and newly interested in Marx, Barthes was to become inspired by the *Annales* and its new research methods. On the one hand, its approach stressed the need for a total, synthetic and multi-disciplinary approach within social sciences; on the other, it stressed the mass nature of social reality, and considered, following Michelet, that history was made less by individuals than by the masses.

### **Barthes and postwar ‘sciences humaines’**

There were a number of important intellectual connections between Barthes and the *Annales* journal. Firstly, Barthes’s friend, Philippe Rebeyrol,



had been a student of history at the École Normale Supérieure during the War, when Febvre had lectured there.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, as an avid reader of Michelet, he must have read Febvre's book on the 19th-century historian, published soon after the Liberation.<sup>15</sup> It is furthermore possible to trace a thread back from Febvre to Michelet: Febvre's tutor at the École Normale had been Gabriel Monod, who had been a friend and tutee of Michelet's. We will look at Barthes's fascination with Michelet in the final chapter.

Furthermore, in the late 1940s Barthes had developed a strong relationship with new forms of social theory such as (Sartrean) Existentialism and Marxism; Calvet notes how, at the end of his time in sanatoria, Barthes had been influenced not only by Fournié's Trotskyist version of Marxism, but also by the 'Présentation' in the first number of *Les Temps Modernes* in which Sartre stated his desire for 'une anthropologie synthétique'.<sup>16</sup> In the late forties, this synthetic approach was to be found in France in the work produced by the *Annales* group.

Barthes's writing in the late 1940s seemed to be influenced by this new history; his view in 1947 of the coming to power of the bourgeoisie over a long period of time in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*'s history of literature seemed to draw on the 'long cycle' view of history put forward by the *Annales*.<sup>17</sup> In 1950 he had praised explicitly the 'synthetic' mode of historical representation as practised by 'Pirenne, Marc Bloch ou Lucien Febvre'.<sup>18</sup> It was in 1953 that his interest in the *Annalistes* became most apparent.

Gilberto Freyre's study of Brazilian society, *Maîtres et esclaves*, was, wrote Barthes in his 1953 review in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 'un produit brillant de cette sensibilité à l'Histoire totale, élaborée en France par des historiens comme Bloch, Febvre ou Braudel'.<sup>19</sup> Published by Gallimard in 1952, the French edition contained a preface by Febvre, in which Freyre's analysis was described as '[à] la fois une histoire et une sociologie', and showed an example of 'survol'; both of these ideas would be present in Barthes's own thought and



writing, the latter in his account of Michelet's use of 'tableau' and 'survol', the former in his later claim that Michelet was not only a historian but also a sociologist.<sup>20</sup> As with Febvre, the attempt to 'decompartmentalize' history was crucial to Barthes's understanding of history and sociology; in his review of Freyre's book, it was precisely Freyre's and the *Annalistes*' mixing of social history with anthropology, human geography, dietetics and psychoanalysis which impressed Barthes.<sup>21</sup>

Barthes's appreciation of Freyre's study was part of a wider trend in the development of social sciences in France. Like the *Annales*, he lamented the backwardness of French social history and praised Freyre's methodology; though its racial history was 'toute fraîche', Brazil had not, he said, needed long to develop a study of ethnography, thanks to Freyre. But it was the very methodology involved in the study which impressed Barthes; above all, Freyre's book was 'dynamité de faits concrets', a huge step forward compared to the impressionistic use of 'document écrit' and 'observation touristique' to explain social reality. In Barthes's view, this incorporation of other social sciences had been of great importance in resurrecting Brazil's past, and it had implications for an accurate resurrection of past human realities. That Freyre had managed to 'systématiser' a 'matière historique' which was hardly 'dégagée du corps humain, de la santé, du régime, des phénomènes de mixation sanguine et humorale', meant that he had almost achieved 'la quadrature du cercle des historiens': if the 'point ultime' of historical research for Michelet and Bloch had been to recreate past material and physical realities, wrote Barthes, Freyre's method had come close to achieving this.

Above all, Barthes agreed with the need to break down the barriers which divided history from other disciplines. Many of his cultural analyses incorporated his promotion of an *Annales*-style conception of history.<sup>22</sup> But he also considered that this applied to culture in general; thus he incorporated ethnological theory into his writings on cultural events.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, he used



new social theories, like ethnography and anthropology, in his drama criticism of the mid-1950s.<sup>24</sup> Later his study of Racine, leading to the polemic with Sorbonne professor Raymond Picard, used the anthropology of Darwin and Atkinson.<sup>25</sup> This blurring of disciplines was typified by his incorporation of ethnology in his articles for *Les Lettres nouvelles*; if his 'petite mythologie du mois' was dubbed by him a 'sociologie de la vie quotidienne', it was also an ethnographical study.<sup>26</sup> This desire to write an ethnography had been present as early as 1953.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, in the postwar social science explosion, it was above all sociology which fascinated Barthes. If it was the *Annales* which had inspired this, this school also played a crucial role in Barthes's career. Barthes's second research post at the CNRS, as an 'attaché de recherche' in sociology, was obtained in 1956 thanks to the sociologist Georges Friedmann, a member of the 'comité de rédaction' of the *Annales*.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Barthes's first article for this journal in 1957, signed as a CNRS researcher, referred to works by Friedmann and other *Annalistes*.<sup>29</sup>

Barthes used the new interest in sociology in the 'petites mythologies'; this was exemplified by his citing in 'Astrologie' in 1956 the study of office workers by fellow CNRS researcher Michel Crozier.<sup>30</sup> However, his knowledge of sociology and sociologists was evident before 1956. He had met Edgar Morin in 1952 (whilst working with Nadeau on the questionnaire on left-wing literature) and was acquainted with his writings on the sociology of cinema in 1955, even before they were published.<sup>31</sup> He had first met Friedmann after the *première* of the TNP production of *Cinna* at the beginning of 1954, and seemed to have a good knowledge of Friedmann's work.<sup>32</sup> It is not surprising that when he did finally find full-time employment in 1960, he was to end up working with Friedmann and Morin at the VIth section of the EPHE and on the editorial board of *Communications*. Similarly a colleague on the editorial board at *Théâtre populaire*, Jean Duvignaud, was clearly an important



influence on Barthes. Not only a popular theatre activist, critic and writer of novels and plays, he was also interested in sociology; it was probably he who introduced Barthes to the work of Georges Gurvitch.<sup>33</sup> Citing Gurvitch's seminal 1950 study *La vocation actuelle de la Sociologie*, Barthes asserted, following Sartre's interest in an anthropology which was 'totalitaire', the importance of a 'total' sociology in the study of fashion.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, it was probably Duvignaud who introduced Barthes to the work of German Weberian sociologist Werner Sombart.<sup>35</sup>

The combination of traditional academics' indifference to sociology and the post-war proliferation of left-wing intellectual journals meant that sociology in France was being developed outside of the traditional academic institutions. Indeed, this opposition of non-academic sociology can be seen in Barthes's use of sociology in the popular theatre movement.

Barthes's January 1954 review in *Théâtre populaire* of the book published by the 'Centre d'Études Philosophiques et Techniques du Théâtre' on 'expression collective' in the theatre, and on 'Le théâtre et les Loisirs' lamented the vagueness of the analysis and called for 'une sociologie véritable du théâtre français'; Barthes's view was that, in its 'état embryonnaire', the sociology of theatre needed to follow Vilar's example, which had begun to join the two central aspects of the theatre, 'l'ouverture de la scène et le prix des places':

Qui va au théâtre, en France? Quelles classes, quels groupes, et dans quels théâtres? Voilà ce que je voudrais savoir, et à quoi le livre ne répond nullement. [...] Il nous faut, *d'une part*, poser les problèmes de structure de l'espace scénique, lier telle forme de théâtralité à telle mentalité historique, préciser les rapports d'une esthétique et d'une idéologie, et *d'autre part*, et sans qu'on puisse encore prétendre joindre les deux recherches, provoquer des enquêtes, amener au jour la composition sociale des publics, opposer au public abstrait des esthéticiens et des humanistes, le public concret des historiens et des sociologues. (99, *OC* 387-388)



Aware of the backwardness of French social sciences, and impressed by Vilar's 'ampleur sociologique', Barthes insisted furthermore that class had to be a crucial determinant in any understanding of theatre: 'Jusqu'à nouvel ordre, notre société se compose de classes et ceci devrait avoir quelque place dans un livre sur la collectivité et le théâtre, et même une place antécédente à tous les problèmes de *participation*'. We will come back to the methodological significance of his joining aesthetics with a sociological science of audiences later in the chapter. Not surprisingly, it was Barthes who instigated the important study of theatre audiences executed by Bernard Dort in the same number of *Théâtre populaire*.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, if Barthes's 'sociologie' was being developed outside of the French academic institution, and in relation to the construction of a radical, truly popular, theatre movement, it was free to become part of the politicisation of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, especially against French colonial rule. This freedom allowed Barthes to develop a 'sociologie engagée', to consider the development of sociology to be part of a radical undermining of bourgeois ideology and hegemony, which could go hand-in-hand with the construction of a radical alternative to bourgeois theatre.

Barthes's sociology therefore took on the role of overcoming the social and political exclusion that alienation and bourgeois domination had imposed on the mass of French people; his study of myths, 'la sociologie de la vie quotidienne' was an attempt also to understand, if not give a voice to, the mass of French people silenced by the domination of the false universality of bourgeois language. If his interest in sociology quickly became necessarily a committed and politicised social science of humanity, 'une sociologie engagée', then language was central to this.<sup>37</sup>

Barthes wanted a scientific, objective account and explanation of social reality which understood the totality of human relations (see the quote at the beginning of this chapter); however, such an account only contributed to, and



perpetuated, the exclusion of the masses, since this was a reality which denied the subjective experience of the masses. Before we look at how Barthes tried to solve this dilemma, we must see how it became applied to social sciences, and developed out of his study of 'écriture'.

## **(ii) Literature and social sciences**

*La littérature de gauche en dévoilant du même coup l'homme historique et l'homme éternel participe à une sorte d'élucidation sociologique des divers moments d'une histoire d'ensemble des hommes.*

Roland Barthes and Maurice Nadeau, *L'Observateur*, 15 January 1953, p.18.

Barthes's first articles for *Combat* in 1947 are important for an understanding of his sociological interests, as well as his own political viewpoint. They display his Micheletian and Marxian views of the exclusion of the popular masses, operated by French culture since the Classical age. The first article, 'Le degré zéro de l'écriture', linked literary form to a social and historical blockage: if the 'impasse' of style was the 'impasse de la société même' (and the 'recherche' of a non-style could only be the 'anticipation d'un état absolument homogène de la société'), the majority of contemporary 'écrivains' - meaning, presumably, Camus, Sartre, Prévert and Queneau, whose formal dilemma he had set out earlier in the article - understood that there could not be a 'langage universel en dehors d'une universalité concrète, et non plus mystique ou nominale, du monde civil'. But the materialist and popular culturalist nature of his argument appeared most clearly in the second article, published six weeks later.

'Faut-il tuer la grammaire?' was a reply to critics who had written to the newspaper, in large numbers it seems, to question his opinions in the first article; this second article was not only a reply to the critics, it was a



clarification of the basis of his opinions.<sup>38</sup> Noting how the ‘exploitation’ (‘à peu près fatale’) of literature was indicative of the ‘conditions historiques de la littérature présente’, and that for this reason Sartre’s ‘victoire’ could only be temporary, his conclusion was that all those revolutions announced in literary language were always ‘surfaites’; and the relative level of perfection achieved by classical language should not ‘masquer’ the damage caused by the use of such an exclusive instrument. There was an intimate relationship for Barthes between expression of human totality, literary innovation, and historical language.<sup>39</sup> In the first article this ‘total’ view of literature, language and society meant that literary language was necessarily ‘rassis’ and ‘clos’ because of the ‘immense poussée de tous les hommes qui ne le parlent pas’; now, he underlined this silencing of the masses, since the coming to power of the bourgeoisie:

Tous les commentateurs même modernes de cette période, font grand cas des réformes du XVIIe siècle vers une langue si claire qu’elle puisse être comprise de tout le monde; mais ce tout le monde n’a jamais été qu’une portion infime de la nation; bien plus, c’est au nom d’une exigence d’universalité, que l’on a exclu du langage les mots et la syntaxe intelligibles au peuple, ceux du travail et de l’action. (2, *OC* 79)

Barthes did not deny that there had been a certain ‘universalisation’ of language across Europe; but this, he stressed, was for the ‘élites dispersées en Europe’, living a ‘mode de vie privilégié’:

[C]ette communicabilité tant vantée de la langue française n’a jamais été qu’horizontale; elle n’a jamais été verticale, elle ne s’est jamais profilée dans l’épaisseur du volume social. (ibid)

In his view, the ‘imposture’ of a ‘universal’ language had cost literature dearly. There was a class division in classical French, which, used by ‘un groupe puissant, ou oisif, ou pratiquant un travail spécial’ (in short, a ‘travail directorial’), excluded all action from its language, and had thereby prevented



an effective expression ‘de la totalité humaine’ and impeded the formation of new ideas; in short, the so-called universal language of Classical French was highly exclusive:

De ce langage sont forcément exclues une infinité d’actions, et l’action elle-même, qui n’y subsiste plus que comme mode profond, viscéral, de sentir; d’où, entre autres, la primauté des temps, la disparition des modes, et en général toutes les réformes techniques qui peuvent aider à éliminer du langage des *directeurs* [...], cette subjectivité si spéciale de l’homme populaire, subjectivité qui se détermine toujours à travers une action et non à travers une réflexion. (ibid)

This was to be the basis of his view in ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’ that only the language of production was able to escape myth, contained in his image of the woodcutter and the cherry-tree. Barthes’s point in 1947 was that certain contemporary writers were writing literature in a progressive way which undermined this exclusion of popular subjectivity. These more ‘lucides’ writers, in understanding the exclusion operated by a false ‘universalisation’, were showing that there were ‘autant de grammaires que de groupes sociaux’: to recognize ‘la multiplicité de ces grammaires’ was the ‘seule voie possible de l’objectivité’.

Barthes was linking the writer’s task to a social and sociological task of representing objectively, if possible, the diversity of human experience, in a manner which could overcome the exclusion of the ‘homme populaire’. This was indicative of his sociological interest in literature’s objectivity, in its relevance to the experience(s) of the mass of French people. Three years later, this critique of contemporary language in relation to literature was extended to the recent development in social sciences and would, in the same way, advocate the need for a new language.

The fifth part of the second series of articles to be incorporated into *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* continued the critique of language in modernity.<sup>40</sup> Now, however, it was couched in distinctly socially scientific terms. Indeed, the



search for a literature as sociology was underlined in Nadeau's title for the second series, 'Pour un langage réel'.

The third article in the series, 'Le sentiment tragique de l'écriture', described how the 'impasse' of literature was linked to the fact that the universal language of the bourgeoisie was 'splendide et morte'. Furthermore, not only did French classical language, both bourgeois and socially exclusive, impose literature on the writer as a 'rituel', not as a 'réconciliation', it could not account for modern man's position after the Second World War in particular, and since 1850 in general. Consequently, all modern literature, he said, could have only two objects of study, 'l'homme essentiel' and 'l'homme historique'. Since there was no contradiction between the literary language of classical humanism and the expression of a human essence, no problem existed for the first of these points of study: discredited as it may be ('réfugié dans un alibi de réalité'), the notion of essential man coincided fully with its expression. When trying to represent the 'condition historique de l'homme', however, the modern writer was obliged to use this same outmoded 'ancien langage': by definition, wrote Barthes, a language of essence, of 'spécialistes de l'éternel humain', could only ever be 'approximatif' in any account of historical man. Consequently, any expression of the human condition in literature after the death of classicism, was doomed to lose 'en partie' the very object of its reflexion.

It was not only modern literature which suffered from this inability to represent human reality, he suggested, but also any science of humanity; compartmentalization of disciplines dealing with historical man meant that they were 'liberated' from the responsibility of a general and total explanation:

[L]'homme éternel constituait le monopole des philosophes et des écrivains bourgeois; l'homme historique appartient aussi aux historiens, aux sociologues, aux linguistes, à toute une classe de techniciens, désignés pour des tâches précises, et libérés par là de cette terreur d'une responsabilité vague et



générale, qui tiendrait au langage de la condition intellectuelle, et non à ses entreprises. (7)

Clearly, Barthes was sceptical of the capacity not only of literature but also of science in general to account for human reality. Trained to treat each subject individually, and not in a totality, a whole class of thinkers, researchers and writers were failing to develop a language which could speak for a total human reality. More interested in carrying out studies than questioning the very situation and conditions of their research, these researchers were ignoring 'historical man'.

But he was, it seems, more interested at this stage of his career in the literary ramifications of this division, implying that literature would suffer the most; pitted against the 'fonction scientifique' of language and the newer 'sciences de l'homme', 'l'écriture littéraire' was becoming more and more 'un signe magnifique et désert'. The paradox of the last line underlined the need, in his view, for a cognitive role of literature, but pointed also to the dilemma of the writer:

[C]onfronté de toutes parts avec l'exigence d'une connaissance [...], l'écrivain est séparé des hommes, dont il considère la condition, par toute l'épaisseur d'un mythe mort, qui le tient prisonnier de ses rites. (ibid)

In order to combat this myth of bourgeois language's universality, the writer of 'l'écriture littéraire', had only one solution in 1950:

Or, seul le savoir peut le réconcilier avec n'importe quel moment de l'Histoire qui l'attend, quelle qu'elle soit. Donc, c'est toute la littérature d'expression dégradée par sa forme, qui est justement menacée au profit d'une littérature d'explication ou de combat. (ibid)

Not only had science and technological advancement outstripped humanity's ability to develop a language to express its contemporary condition, rather than its essence, but also this science and advancement was owned and



instigated by the bourgeois class and its ideology; 'Responsabilité de la grammaire' had shown how the bourgeoisie had appropriated the world, colonized it with this false language of universality. This meant science had to be developed in such a way as to combat this class control; literature could help in this by forging a new language, and a new conception of humanity, which could contribute to this new science.

Clearly, Barthes had, by moving into social sciences, begun to mix literary considerations with socio-political and historical ones. The problem was that a new language needed to be developed which could account for humanity's new situation, but the 'classe' of researchers was owned and controlled by the bourgeois class. Barthes's solution to this double bind was a literary one: to help and encourage the development of a sociological aesthetic in the novel which both provided a new language with which to account for the totality of human experience and which challenged bourgeois domination. This was to be the basis of his interest in the 'Nouveau Roman', an interest which developed from these early articles on the nature of bourgeois language and ideology.<sup>41</sup>

### **Literature and humanity's 'nouvelle station'**

It is not possible to understand Barthes's interest in the 'Nouveau Roman' without underlining his desire for a new form of social science. In his first article on Robbe-Grillet's writing in Summer 1954, he praised its awareness of a 'nouvelle structure de la matière et du mouvement', in which the 'fonds analogique' was not 'l'univers newtonien', but 'un complexe mental' which mixed 'sciences et arts contemporains' such as 'la nouvelle physique et le cinéma'.<sup>42</sup> Robbe-Grillet was putting forward a new role for literature which, linked to science, could describe accurately humanity's new situation; for example Barthes considered that the new human experience of the (malfunctioning) neon light at Montparnasse station at the beginning of his first



important article on Robbe-Grillet needed to be accounted for in modern literature and art.

The scientific basis of Barthes's adherence to modernism in literature was stated more clearly a month later in his article 'Pré-romans': there was a crisis of the novel; not on the level of production but on the level of 'structure'; to combat this, 'les états les plus conscients de la création romanesque', Jean Cayrol, Robbe-Grillet, and Duvignaud, used a 'mouvement proustien' in which the writer 'institue son roman devant nous' and then silently 'le renverse' at the moment when, a hundred years before, it would have only just begun to have an effect.<sup>43</sup>

Cayrol's writing demonstrated to Barthes that the novelist's 'fonction' was no longer 'endoscopique', but involved an 'élongement' across a world, which was both 'familier' and 'insolite'. Cayrol's novel *L'Espace d'une nuit* was, for Barthes, one of the 'grandes oeuvres modernes', because the reader and writer, 'la main dans la main', began 'enfin l'apprentissage de "la surface" du domaine humain'; in destroying the representation of Nature as romanticism in favour of its 'épaisseur', Cayrol was showing 'l'état le plus moderne de l'homme'.<sup>44</sup>

If Cayrol's aesthetic undermined the 'subjectivité du créateur', then Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, wrote Barthes, challenged a different 'préjugé du roman classique': 'l'organisation de l'espace littéraire'. Classical notions of time in the novel had already suffered 'les tentatives de destruction ou de remaniement'; classical space, however, remained 'intact'. Consequently, Robbe-Grillet was introducing a new concept of space and time, 'une dimension einsteinienne de l'objet', which broke with the 'vision purement newtonienne' of a Camus- or Breton-style description of a countryside which, said Barthes, was no different from those by Chateaubriand or Lamartine. Painting had long since resolved the problem of 'la figuration simultanée des plans en mouvement', the theatre had achieved this partially (thanks to Ionesco,



said Barthes), but '[l]a littérature, pas encore'. Though modernist, in that it rejected the illusion of objectivity, this new conception of the novelist was not outside of human sciences, stressed Barthes, and was in fact resolutely about human concerns.<sup>45</sup> In making human environment the subject of his writing, Robbe-Grillet's novel was 'terrestre', and allowed us to see the world afresh; Robbe-Grillet was like a modern painter who had abandoned 'la qualification substantielle de l'espace', preferring 'une lecture simultanée des plans figuratifs', and giving back to the object "sa maigreur essentielle".

The other 'tentative d'éclatement du roman' was Duvignaud's *Le Piège*. By becoming theatre, the novel had a 'réversibilité insolite de la fiction sur la réalité', involving an 'accolement ambigu de la vision réelle et de la vision spéculaire'

Barthes's point was that, though all different, these three novelists had the same 'manière d'accommoder le regard': after centuries of 'vision profonde', the novel was now aiming to explore surfaces; this was a direct challenge to traditional realist novelists, to the 'romancier vériste'; descriptions needed to be questioned (naturalism etc.), as did the essential elements of a novelist's 'facture' (including space, objects and the very distance between the novelist and the world and his creation). Thus, all the sciences of 'profondeur' were absent from the novels (psychology, psychoanalysis, and metaphysics). Above all, though looking at the surface of human experience, these novels were not a 'Littérature inhumaine'; on the contrary, in rejecting the 'mensonges séculaires' of the 'profondeur' of nineteenth-century realism, they represented a literature whose object was 'purement terrestre'.

It was above all the socially scientific challenge that these novels posed to nineteenth-century epistemology that interested Barthes. The importance to Barthes of the socially scientific aspect of modern literature had been in evidence in his 1952 view of Cayrol's novels.<sup>46</sup> Calling the main section 'sociologie', Barthes praised the manner in which Cayrol's *Je vivrai l'amour*



*des autres* gradually showed the central character coming to understand the sociological realities of his relationship to the world. Armand's movement from solitude in the first section to 'un milieu [...] plus socialisé' was the starting point of the story, said Barthes, because Armand began to have a contact with humanity.<sup>47</sup> It was the passage of the 'homme cayrolien' from 'un monde pré-adamique' to a socialised 'monde historique' which impressed him; a 'sociabilité' could be seen to develop through Cayrol's long novel, describing a move from an individual through to a social consciousness.

Related to Cayrol's portrayal of objects, Barthes's view in 1952 of the socially scientific significance of literature in Cayrol's prose was the first example of Barthes's 'chosisme'. This 'chosisme' was, he said, Cayrol's 'thème capital'. Paradoxically, this substantive language of objects was, said Barthes, perhaps 'l'état le plus *humain* du langage'. This was indicative of the importance of Cayrol's sociological aesthetic. Cayrol's prose had 'un tragique - en tout cas une pensée profonde', which showed the world full of contiguous objects without an order to symbolize them, leading to a powerful disorienting of humans' perceptions: as soon as one tried to relate to an objet in reading the novel, and allowed 'l'espace de sortir de sa distance idéale', so that 'spatialité' was no longer 'un enchaînement de profondeurs' rather 'une juxtaposition inquiétante de surfaces', there was an important shift:

[T]out l'ordre traditionnel est menacé, il y a crise d'humanisme et c'est l'apprentissage d'une nouvelle station que l'homme doit entreprendre. (492, *OC* 125)

Importantly here, long before his discovery of Brecht and the theatre of the scientific age, there was a human science element to Barthes's conception of modernism. Novels (and all art) needed to keep up with human innovations in the representation and description of the world. Barthes's adherence to the



modernism of the 'Nouveau Roman' was based precisely on finding an art form which understood the 'nouvelle station' of humanity.

Barthes's view of the new stopping-place of humanity was based on two important considerations; the first, the development of mass culture in postwar France, will be discussed later in the chapter; the second came from his own interest in the postwar notions of the absurd. This had come from a profoundly depressing aspect of human history. The 'dégueulasserie du monde', which Barthes described in a letter to Rebeyrol, was part of this new 'station', and literature had to take account of this sociological and historical reality. If Barthes's championing of the 'Nouveau Roman' was based on finding a new language to express this new experience, it was based also on the appalling reality of human experience during the Second World War.

### **The uneven development of science**

Barthes's sociological and mythological studies between 1954 and 1956 displayed his view that science itself was not entirely neutral. Science was, like society, contradictory. This is no clearer than in 'Le procès Dupriez', in which Barthes concluded that 'l'histoire avance inégalement'. The idea of man had changed over the last one hundred and fifty years with the development of 'des sciences nouvelles d'exploration psychologique'. This 'promotion partielle de l'Histoire' had, however, brought 'aucun changement' in the legal system: that justice was an 'émanation directe de l'Etat', and that State had not 'changé de maîtres' since the 'Code pénal', meant that science could be used in a reactionary fashion; this was precisely the thrust of this 'mythologie', which examined the manner in which the court psychiatric expert used 'science' to condemn the accused, and, in Barthes's view, to contribute to a perversion of justice.

This dialectical view of science came from, originally, his proximity to victims of 'Science'. Barthes wanted a new language and literature which kept



up with humanity's new experience, but which had to take into account the abuses of society's technological advancement. This was the technical capacity of the Final Solution. Fournié had borne witness to the horrors of Nazi scientific 'progress'; it was precisely within this context that Barthes had discovered Cayrol's writing. Understanding Barthes's desire for a new language for humanity's 'nouvelle station', depends on looking at the influence of Cayrol's theoretical account of the state of humanity. Cayrol's new 'romanesque' of the late 1940s was explicitly based on his extremely depressing experience of Nazi concentration camps, *Lazare parmi nous*, which Barthes reviewed favourably for *Combat*.<sup>48</sup>

Comprised of two articles, one on 'rêves concentrationnaires', the other on his new 'romanesque [...] lazaréen', Cayrol's book, echoing David Rousset's harrowing account of the camps, had set out the needs of the novel in the light of this human phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> 'Un réalisme concentrationnaire' could create, he suggested, the characters of a new 'Comédie inhumaine' and reject the literature of 'le capitalisme intellectuel ruiné', typified by the 'dogmes stendhaliens ou balzaciens' to which many writers still adhered. It was time to 'témoigner de ces étranges *poussées* du Concentrationnat'; and it was not absurd to envisage an art form 'né directement d'une convulsion humaine'.

As Barthes did in 1954, Cayrol showed how the novel was behind other art forms; this new 'courant concentrationnaire ou lazaréen' was already evident in the work of a number of young painters who showed 'répétition continuelle des mêmes formules, état hypnotique des formes et des volumes, tension de la couleur, monde panique des objets'; Picasso, said Cayrol, was the 'peintre par excellence' who could have put his 'chevalet' on the 'l'Appel-Platz de Matthausen ou de Buchenwald'. In the same way literature, said Cayrol, needed writers who were not afraid to confront death and ugliness, to 'enjamber les cadavres ou la pourriture', writers not afraid to 'salir les doigts'.<sup>50</sup> This 'art mystérieux', could become a unique art, inseparable from



the 'precarious' human condition, but only if it looked closely at the mass graves.<sup>51</sup> This new art, he suggested, had its first 'historien et chercheur', in 'l'inquiet' Albert Camus.

Having been impressed by Camus' first novel, Barthes was to be inspired by Cayrol's new aesthetic.<sup>52</sup> The solidarity and absurdity of 'littérature lazaréenne' gave to both believers and non-believers 'l'innocence, la sagesse, et la solitude du ressuscité'. How did this fit with Barthes's earlier dislike of the 'oeuvre témoin' in his 1944 appreciation of Camus's first novel?<sup>53</sup> Rather than a catholic 'témoignage', Cayrol's new aesthetic was for Barthes an acutely romanticised attempt to show how 'Rêve' had been a way of escaping the 'grande peur' of this 'temps indicible'. It was this interest in 'Rêve' which was to influence his later sociological study of childhood; it was this humanity amidst desperation which was also to inform his later praise of Cayrol.

### **The 'chaleur' of 'chosisme'**

It was in the seminal 1952 account of Cayrol's writing that Barthes first put forward his theory of 'chosisme'; this contained the same kind of compassion as was found in his earlier review of Cayrol's poetry. Though not 'personnalisés', Cayrol's 'objets' had a solidarity and a 'chaleur'. For Barthes, his 'chosisme' was not a paradox; though devoid of human significance, the objects which Cayrol portrayed were nevertheless 'la première et la seule sociologie'; Cayrol's concentration on a description (rather than on an apprehension) of objects showed how 'à travers toutes leurs surfaces réunies se dessinent les linéaments d'une sociologie, un côtoiement, un coude à coude et une complicité humaine'.<sup>54</sup>

This seemed to be a very different emphasis from his later championing of 'chosisme' in relation to Robbe-Grillet in 1954 and 1955. Here, 'chosisme' represented for Barthes a triumph over anthropomorphism, the representation of humanity's control over the world, and a crucial component in bourgeois



hegemony. His fascination with Robbe-Grillet was based precisely on a questioning of bourgeois appropriation of space, articulated by ‘chosisme’: that Robbe-Grillet’s prose gave objects ‘un privilège narratif accordé jusqu’ici aux seuls rapports humains’ meant that humanity’s new station could be accounted for; up until then, literature had presented matter only as the ‘fonction du coeur humain (souvenir, ustensilité)’, never as ‘un espace implacable que l’homme ne peut fréquenter que par la marche’.<sup>55</sup> Robbe-Grillet’s writing had a ‘nature révolutionnaire’, because it rejected the anthropomorphism of metaphor, denied human control over the world.<sup>56</sup>

It would seem that between his 1952 article on Cayrol and his championing of Robbe-Grillet two years later, Barthes had developed his notion of ‘chosisme’ into a harder critique of bourgeois ideology and hegemony; thus, ‘Le monde objet’ and its apparent criticism of bourgeois control of urban geography and town planning, reflected in the triumph of Dutch classical art, might appear to represent an important influence in this shift of ‘chosisme’.<sup>57</sup> However, his sensitivity and antipathy to bourgeois control had been present in the 1952 article on Cayrol.<sup>58</sup>

Barthes had already rejected the classical (that is bourgeois and positivist) ‘appropriation’ of the world in theatre.<sup>59</sup> But it was his assessment of Cayrol’s novels which had first put forward this suspicion of human control; Cayrol’s writing was progressive because it underlined the *inability* of humanity to possess:

La privation du passé est liée à ce qu’on pourrait appeler une impuissance à l’appropriation. L’homme ne pénètre pas plus au coeur des objets, qu’il ne remonte le long de son passé. (487, *OC* 120)

The ‘homme cayrolien’ was therefore in a ‘zone pré-historique, pré-romanesque’: he had a ‘qualité inaliénable de créature’, but, without property nor history, he was ‘enveloppé dans une solitude qui le tient étranger non



seulement à autrui mais aussi aux dimensions constitutives de l'existence, au temps et à la mémoire'. Paradoxically perhaps, though Barthes had underlined the 'chaleur' of Cayrol's aesthetic, the novel was not putting forward a humanist optimism:

L'homme cayrolien [...] n'est pas l'objet d'un humanisme. Le roman [...] le saisit dans un état terrestre bien antérieur à celui où le prend en général la littérature classique; celle-ci s'intéresse à un homme socialisé par son passé et qu'elle regarde fonctionner dans le conflit de ses passions. (ibid)

So the 'chaleur' of Cayrol's 'sociologie' was showing how humans acquired their relationship to the world, without vaunting the control and ownership of that world. This was entirely in keeping with Barthes's (and Robbe-Grillet's) critique of anthropomorphism in 1954 and 1955. Though denying a humanist optimism in relation to the individual, Barthes considered nevertheless that this 'chosisme' had a progressive importance for humanity's relationship to literature and society.

Cayrol's novel was a 'drame de la propriété', which allowed the narrator to 'instituer entre lui et les choses un rapport d'amour et de familiarité', and which treated 'une problématique de l'aliénation'; this was a victory for Barthes, not because it showed humans progressively acquiring a dominant position over nature, but because its 'tendresse humaine' showed literature to be an 'acte de réconciliation'.<sup>60</sup> This was to be precisely the importance of Robbe-Grillet's writing two years later; in setting out the possibilities and limits of the novel in the 'conjonction sociale des temps présents', Robbe-Grillet showed that literature, like 'tout art du dépassement', could be both 'accordée au monde' and 'en avance sur lui'.<sup>61</sup>

This view of the dialectical nature of good art, one which pointed both to contemporary alienation and future potential reconciliation, was to be precisely Barthes's view of a 'sociologie engagée'. If Barthes's original interest in sociological studies had come from highly poetic and literary origins, the



central task for his sociology was to develop a sociological analysis which combined a scientific understanding of the masses with a representation of a human 'chaleur'. In this way the paradox of Cayrol's 'chosisme' portraying a dehumanized world in order to reaffirm the 'chaleur' of the world, became the central, sociological strategy of the 'dialectique d'amour'.

### **(iii) Barthes's sociology: a little scientific delirium?**

That Barthes mixed scientific and artistic criteria and methodology did not mean that some of his social studies were not scientific and objective, that his sociology was pure speculation, flawed empirically. Indeed, on many occasions, he displayed a firm notion of objectivity in his 'sociologie de la vie', combined with a theoretical and academic rigour in his method of analysis. This can be seen above all in his comprehensive use of references to the publications which he was demystifying. The edition of '*Match*' on which 'Bichon chez les nègres' was based, for example, was given full references in a footnote; references to other studies were accurately included (for example, the study by Michel Crozier); also there were a large number of cross-references to his own articles: for example in 'Comment démystifier' (called 'Un ouvrier sympathique' in *Mythologies*), he reminded the reader that he had previously studied the use of 'vaccine' in a different sort of American film and gave a footnote reference to the 'L'opération Astra' mythology published in the December 1954 edition of *Les Lettres nouvelles*.<sup>62</sup> Equally, the content of many of the 'mythologies' involved a demand for scientific explanations. In 'La littérature selon Minou Drouet', for example, he rejected the 'raisonnements [...] tautologiques' which, without 'valeur démonstrative', represented a 'vérité circulaire': 'un nouvel exemple de cette science policière illusoire'; this was



then related to the lack of objectivity in the Dominici trial.<sup>63</sup> In 'Racine est Racine', he chided bourgeois ideology (in the person of Vera Korène) for its lack of science and explanation; the tautology was a way of avoiding the 'risques que toute recherche un peu scientifique de la vérité comporte fatalement'; the opposite of an 'obscurantiste' account, a total explanation of society was the aim of the committed intellectual in Barthes's view.<sup>64</sup>

Steven Giles has underlined the similarities between Barthes's 'semiological dismantling of myth in *Mythologies*' and Brecht's 'defamiliarizing critique of bourgeois ideology's naturalization of history'; if Brecht had inspired his demystification, 'science' was undoubtedly Brechtian in attitude.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Barthes's understanding of the role of art was exactly the same as Brecht's.<sup>66</sup> Barthes's antipathy to 'l'obscurantisme' was dependent not only on Brechtian theory but on the *Annales* too; Febvre, above all, wanted a total, social science, and even suggested that the appropriate methodology did not exclude artistic and aesthetic criteria.<sup>67</sup>

If Brecht's critique was, however, to forge an aesthetic in the theatre, Barthes's was a (modest) attempt to found a critical theoretical praxis in writing and social theory. Adapting Brechtian drama theory to social theory influenced Barthes's sociology, and was the result of his attempt to establish an account of humanity's 'nouvelle station' within a 'sociologie engagée', based upon his own literary interest in sociological study; the 'dialectique d'amour', though using scientific categories, was based upon a Micheletian and novelistic view of popular exclusion.

Crucial in moving his view of the 'tendresse' and chaleur of Cayrol's sociological prose towards the 'dialectique d'amour' was his study of human faces. This study underlined the new 'human station', humanity's new experience, and the arrival of a mass culture helped the sociologist to explain complex issues such as the morphology of human faces; at the same time, his



study underlined how this new experience increased human alienation, robbed people of their individuality.

### **The sociology of mass culture**

Written in 1953, 'Visages et figures' was Barthes's first article to claim a sociological status. It marked the beginning of his fascination with faces, in evidence in later 'mythologies', such as 'Iconographie de l'Abbé Pierre', 'Le visage de Garbo' and 'Photogénie électorale'.<sup>68</sup> It was also an indication of the direct influence of Michelet on his work; according to Calvet, Barthes had been fascinated by the (differing) images of Michelet in paintings and lithographs; and was also aware of Michelet's own fascination with historical faces.<sup>69</sup>

'Visages et figures' began as an attempt to write a sociology of the human face. Why did people's faces look remarkably similar? Commenting on a newspaper report which had suggested that everyone at a 'bal mensuel' looked like the actor Daniel Gélin, Barthes insisted that people resembling film-stars was a daily feature of French street life; this 'contagion', he said, went beyond clothes and hair-styles to include 'la morphologie profonde' of faces, to such an extent that he wondered whether 'il ne serait pas possible de fonder une sociologie du visage humain'. The article thus became a consideration of the methodological possibilities for establishing the reasons and causes of a certain uniformity of human faces in France in 1953.

Barthes regretted, however, the lack of sources for this study.<sup>70</sup> Portraits were of no use, since a portrait's 'intention capitale' was the exact opposite of 'toute sociologie du visage'. In that the 'portrait peint' could cover only two extremes 'l'essence humaine ou l'identité personnelle', the painting of faces went 'toujours vers deux infinis contraires, celui de la personne et celui de l'humanité'; it failed to cover 'la généralité intermédiaire d'un visage collectif', could be neither 'particulier' nor 'universel'.<sup>71</sup>



It was, in his view, the cinema which was the most useful in explaining the ‘morphologie’ of real people’s faces. Based on ‘une sorte de dialectique’ with which ‘l’individu se choisit sa tête’, the choosing of a face’s morphology was based on the cinema as a social phenomenon. Not only did the cinema allow society to choose its faces ‘pesamment, placidement’ as in a well-organised exhibition, but also its ‘visages-archétypes’ were ‘diffusés avec une insistance et une ampleur jusque-là impossibles’; it was now possible to understand why there were so many Gérard Philipe and Daniel Gélin lookalikes in France. The cinema offered excellent faces and dispensed with the need for the individual to decide his or her own, and people accepted this ‘typologie autoritaire’; the mass culture aspect of cinema, its huge consumption (‘ampleur’), had had an important physiognomical influence. Therefore, the ‘nationalisation’ of culture, typified by the post-war cinema, could alone provide the material for a sociology of the face.

The still image could not provide this. Indeed, the cinema’s ‘premier pouvoir’ was the very ‘intermittence’ of its images. A photograph could not provide the same ‘totalité d’un visage-objet’; the photograph was more like the face of somebody we saw regularly and we knew. By definition, he said, this could barely be a source of knowledge precisely because it implied an affective attachment. Our attention was ‘emporté par ce “vent de la mémoire”’; and he contrasted the strength of imprint on the memory of the face of a loved one to that of somebody he saw regularly but did not know, and to that of film-stars. In his view it was, paradoxically, the distant and unknown face which was the easiest to remember.<sup>72</sup>

He now made an important theoretical and methodological division between the ‘préhistoire’ and the ‘histoire’ of this sociology; the physiognomical changes of the masses were now related to a methodological development for sociology:



C'est donc seulement le cinéma qui va constituer l'ère historique d'une sociologie du visage: peinture, photographies même, n'en étaient que la préhistoire. (2, *OC* 225)

This 'préhistoire' was to be the study of the 'acteurs d'Harcourt' (this section of the article is reprinted in *Mythologies*), for it was here that 'les iconographies du théâtre et du cinéma ont divergé'; the history proper of the face could begin only with the development of cinema, anything else was but a pre-history. This division was important for two reasons.

Firstly, the notion of a 'pré-histoire' related to his idea of a 'pré-roman': just as the novel needed to prepare itself for a true novel by having a prefatory cleansing of nineteenth-century (petty-bourgeois and socialist) realism, so a sociology of the form of human faces needed, first, to dispense with archaic attempts to explain the morphology of human faces.

Secondly, this concern with a methodology relied on his own subjective view. For Barthes, it was the framed nature of a face which allowed us to remember it, and therefore to copy it. As long as faces were presented behind the 'guichet d'un spectacle', we remembered them. It was the framed nature of the image, even the commodified aspect ('guichet') of a face which allowed it to dominate the human memory; this framing was crucial to his ability to establish 'une sociologie' of the face: there was, he said 'une sorte de loi' whereby the face existed only 'à distance', only 'comme masque'.

This was the central theme of the whole article: the title played on the difference between 'visage', (warmth, personality, humanity) and 'figure' (outline, anonymity, alienation); Barthes's aim was not to write a sociology of the human face, but to examine the methodology (a 'pré-sociologie') and to show how this methodology had difficulties in coping with social exclusion; this can be seen from the differing descriptions in the article.

He described how the old woman tramp sitting 'dans un train de banlieue', with a 'valise élimée (en carton)' reading a cinema magazine, had



only a 'figure'; she had a 'pauvre visage [...] terrestre' (in comparison to the stars who were 'oisifs' and 'surnourris'). The absurd sight of this destitute, old woman avidly reading a glossy cinema magazine illustrated to Barthes the extent to which alienation operated: 'volé jusqu'à notre visage'. Yet the post-office woman and the café waiter, though unknown to Barthes, had their own 'visage'.

If the *Degré zéro* thesis had shown how, sociologically, the subjectivity of the 'homme populaire' had been excluded from language, and if his own militant activity in the popular theatre was an attempt to overcome the general, cultural exclusion of the masses, then his sociology could try, at least, to show the forms of people's alienation, the manner in which bourgeois society denied people full individual expression and imposed its own culture on the mass of people (here, face morphology).

His view of developing a sociology had to take into account, therefore, a history of mentalities, but the sociology could only begin when there was an understanding of the mentalities of the masses. Now since these masses had no access to speech, how could he perform a sociological study?

Crucially, this was solved precisely by the strategy of 'la dialectique d'amour' that he set out in 'Phénomène ou mythe?'. The committed sociologist needed to look at the forms of bourgeois culture and ideology and the manner in which they distorted, reified and imposed human culture, and to find humans by looking at the alienated culture in which they were reflected. It was precisely what he went on to do in his 'sociologie de la vie quotidienne'.

Furthermore, for the mythologist, there was a warmth in looking at the objects and social phenomena to which the silenced and excluded related; it was not simply that Barthes could perform an act of refinding those 'hommes de son temps', but also that he could find their 'chaleur' as a trace in the social phenomena and objects which mystified and distorted social reality.



This had implications for his methodology. Barthes had accepted that no archive of real human faces existed, that consequently any sociology of faces would have to concentrate on an alienated (that is, commodified) human face. The study of the photos of 'd'Harcourt' actors showed how this inversion of reality and image benefited the petty-bourgeoisie, creating (what we might call, following Walter Benjamin) an 'aura' around theatre actors.<sup>73</sup> It was this which was influencing contemporary face morphology.

This 'aura' set up a paradox: though by definition part of the 'scène', the 'acteur d'Harcourt' was made to look as if he was paradoxically part of the 'ville'. Varda's and Prat's photos of faces were avant-garde precisely because they showed the actor's face to be alienated. This understanding of the inverted nature of the forms of alienation was to influence not only his later sociological studies, but also his theatre criticism.<sup>74</sup>

This was, however, only his pre-history. The real history which allowed a sociology of faces would begin once this point had been made. Barthes analysed the faces of the film stars that the old woman tramp had been poring over as a method of establishing the morphology of faces of the excluded masses (of which the old woman tramp was an extreme example). Unlike the face of the pre-war actor Valentino, Garbo's was part of a shift: as a total mask (as in ancient Greek theatre), rather than as a secret 'demi-masque à l'italienne', her face was, like Gérard Philipe's, 'presque désexué'.<sup>75</sup> Barthes had considered Philipe's face to be typical of this new age of film-star faces. Noting the birth in 1946 of the concept 'J3' (the idea of making youthfulness a 'concept majeur' of film-stars with which the cinema industry 'envahit à la fois la rue, le théâtre, l'écran'), he saw Philipe as part of the tendency to make adolescence 'un âge complet [...] exemplaire'. Without the mystery of a Valentino face nor the 'plastique sacrée des années 25', Philippe's face was typical of the J3, 'lavé du marché noir et de l'oisiveté'. This shift of the actor's face towards a 'condition plus studieuse' was, said Barthes, influenced by the



new social and ideological role of the actor: 'Sans doute, il est impossible que la société se reconnaisse ou s'aime dans un visage vieux'.<sup>76</sup>

There was, it seems, a coincidence in Barthes's thought of myth and sociology, with subjectivity and explanation. His belief that reality was inaccessible meant that he had to look at myth to understand (people's) reality; this illustrated the manner in which his Marxian view of alienation became integrated into his conception of sociology. There was therefore a complex interplay of subjective and objective modes of analysis. Objectively, he underlined the manner in which mass experience of the cinema had affected the masses: a sociology was dependent on the way in which cinema since the Liberation had reached the masses, and was based on the arrival of mass culture.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, this sociology was highly impressionistic: it made no attempt to prove its conclusions with evidence, nor did it escape the use of artistic media to explain social reality.

This slipping between subjective and objective discourses was to influence his later sociological analysis. As well as a history of how writers have perceived childhood rather than a study of childhood itself, his 1955 study in the 'petite mythologie du mois', 'Pour une histoire de l'enfance', assessed the appropriate methodology of social explanation and description. There are a number of specific similarities with the 'Visages et figures' study.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the first of the three mythologies, called 'Pour une histoire de l'enfance', is a good example of an *Annales* style 'marginal history', and of Gilberto Freyre's interest in childhood.<sup>79</sup> Above all, it was another example of Barthes's attempt to 're-find' human phenomena, excluded from social history and literature..

The study was based on a history of representations of the Child, on the forms in which social studies had been realised, and the manner in which a new sociology could be developed (hence the 'pour' of the first section). Not only did it follow on from the epistemological interests of 'Visages et figures', it



continued the ‘dialectique d’amour’ strategy: combining an awareness of the arrival of mass culture with a recognition of its concomitant alienation, the study set out to find a methodology by which the Child could be represented accurately, both historically and sociologically.

As with many of his ‘petites mythologies’, Barthes set out the alienation of class society and the ideology it used to persuade those members of lower classes with upward social aspirations; contemporary images of the child were those of ‘embourgeoisement’ and ‘endimanchement’, a glimpse of a leisurely world offered to a class (the petty-bourgeoisie) which still knew ‘la dure loi du salariat’; images of children playing were constructed in such a manner as to appear within the reach of the alienated masses (precisely in the same way as he described the recipes in ‘Cuisine ornamentale’). In order to understand how this operated and how it could be demystified, Barthes’s account of the myth of the Child was based on an analysis of past representations.

Barthes first set out how the Child had been viewed before the French and Industrial revolutions: here ‘l’enfant ne comptait guère’; childhood was ‘un temps mort’ because ‘ineffable’: ‘point de fous ni d’enfants dans notre littérature classique’. This, he said, had fitted neatly with classical ideology. The ‘philosophie essentialiste’ of the time promoted ‘l’unité de l’essence humaine’. Therefore any challenge to the ‘identité des âges’, which was ‘*autre que l’homme*’, was rejected ‘hors du commentaire’.<sup>80</sup>

Before the resulting divorce between a writer’s ‘condition et sa vocation’ had led to an ‘engagement formel’, it had pushed the writer towards a ‘fuite’ away from a notion of responsibility; the myth of ‘Enfance’ had been precisely one of the forms this ‘alibi’ had taken. The nineteenth century had invented ‘quelques innocences’, which were ‘inconnues autrefois’ because, at that time, ‘l’aveuglement tenait lieu de refuge suffisant’. Amongst these ‘alibis romantiques ou post-romantiques’ figured ‘en bonne place’, those of Childhood, Genius, Madness and the ‘Peuple’.



Now he set out the strategy for ‘refinding’ the child. His critique of these myths led him to look at Michelet’s romantic and poetic representation. The nineteenth-century historian had, in his social and historical representations, continually mixed ‘tous ces refuges pour en faire un paradis d’une seule substance’: the ‘Peuple’ was ‘à la fois enfance, génie et déraison’, acting as ‘un bon sens opposé à la logique cérébrale des adultes’. Whereas classical ideology refused to represent the Child at all, Michelet, irresponsibly in Barthes’s view, had gone to the other extreme and refused to see any continuity between the child and the adult, made the child ‘essentiellement *autre*’.<sup>81</sup>

Barthes seemed to be critical of Michelet’s mystical representation of children. However, in line with his attempt to overcome the alienation of the masses, to provide a demystification which could incorporate a human ‘chaleur’, in short a ‘dialectique d’amour’, Barthes concluded that Micheletian myths could be useful. He wanted to incorporate the poetic nature of Michelet’s account into a new sociology and history of childhood. He underlined the epistemological relationship between (Michelet’s) romanticism and the (modernist) rejection of the manner in which classical ideology had refused a representation of the child: since the (Micheletian) myth represented the world of the child as completely ‘autarcique’ with its own ‘lois mentales’, adults could only look at the child; this ‘regard’, said Barthes, could not but make the child look like a ‘rêveur’; Michelet’s romanticism (‘Rêve’ in Michelet’s terminology) could play a progressive role against bourgeois ideology:

[C]e rêveur, purifié par l’innocence de son rêve, peut avoir la bonne conscience d’échapper aux mystifications bourgeoises; il n’en est pas encore à les dénoncer, mais du moins il les esquive. (314, *OC* 459)



Though they could not denounce bourgeois myths, Michelet's myths could play a progressive role in a development of a new sociology; though his view of childhood was a refuge from reality, Michelet, for Barthes, could still represent an attempt to challenge bourgeois ideology; it was the very 'poésie' of Michelet's descriptions which could be a force in explaining the world.<sup>82</sup> Despite his dislike of romanticism, Barthes believed that Michelet's petty-bourgeois accounts could play a role. This was based not only on Barthes's subjective fascination with Michelet, but also on his objective view of the crucial importance of technological advancement in mass culture.

Compared to the 1950s conception of the Child, Michelet's was progressive; though it had the 'même fonction d'alibi' as 'le traitement actuel du mythe de l'enfance', it was not yet able to be 'vulgarisée': Michelet's myth of Childhood did not have the same 'nocivité' for Barthes since the mass consumer age had not arrived in the 1850s.<sup>83</sup> Having established the history of representations, just as in 'Visages et figures', Barthes believed that a sociology could now be attempted.<sup>84</sup> Crucially, this sociology would be linked to historical change, to the arrival of consumer society; the masses could, objectively, be considered part of a subjective explanation of reality:

[O]n peut vérifier que la technique n'accède à l'Histoire que du jour où elle est prise en charge par le commerce, et en quelque sorte *aliénée* par un usage collectif: mais ce jour-là est un fait nouveau de civilisation qui apparaît. (315, *OC* 460)

Barthes's contemporary understanding of social reality was based firmly on a modernist recognition of a new (postwar) mass culture and society, and of people's experience and perception of it. He used two examples to explain this understanding of the necessary conditions for sociology: the significance of the invention of the light bulb and of the photograph were contrasted with that of the neon light and of the illustrated magazine respectively. Valéry, he said, had considered the most important date of 'la modernité' to be 1799 (the date of



Volta's invention of the 'pile électrique'); this, Barthes suggested, was but an 'étonnement *poétique*'. The invention of neon lights on the other hand was 'un fait autrement historique', in that it modified 'réellement l'habitus urbain des hommes', engaged them 'dans une sensibilité nouvelle à la nuit'.<sup>85</sup> This illustrated Barthes's concerns: an important scientific discovery was irrelevant to the mass of French society. Though inventions had objective historical significance, they were irrelevant for the majority of people until they could modify the subjective experience of mass consumer society. The discovery of electricity was, sociologically, purely 'poetic'; its scientific significance appeared only when it affected people's perception of their world, and suggested a 'nouvelle station' for humanity.

Barthes made the same point concerning photography; Niepce and Daguerre were like saints (part of a 'hagiographie de l'esprit humain'). Their invention was 'une date épique'. In Barthes's view, the 'fait historique correspondant' was 'la naissance du magazine illustré', and its 'diffusion massive', what he called 'la promotion du visuel comme véhicule de mythes'. This was, in his view, infinitely more important sociologically. The invention of the photograph was not so important because 'les masses n'avaient connu pendant des siècles que la forme orale de leurs songes', but now in the 1950s everything was possible; his understanding of the basis of sociology was, as in his view of the cinema, not only that the mass reality had been excluded and alienated (here, that of children) but that this could be corrected by a sociological analysis which was highly subjective: in other words, though the alienated nature of sociological accounts was a result of the development of an alienating culture for the masses, without the mass distribution and consumption of that culture (magazines and neon lights), an alternative committed sociology was impossible. In other words, 'la photographie de masses, en un sens, a créé l'Enfant'.<sup>86</sup>



This had important implications for his 'sociologie engagée': a Micheletian, pre-mass culture would stay with a purely romantic/poetic explanation (a 'refuge'); and the 'transfuges' of reality in this explanation could 'esquiver' only, not 'dénoncer'. The only remedy for a classical and bourgeois conception of the child was a combination of myth (subjectivity) and sociology (an objective account of social relations); Barthes wanted to combine a mythical (Micheletian) perspective to a 'scientific' and historical explanation. This interest in childhood continued after 'Pour une Histoire de l'Enfance', notably in 'La Littérature selon Minou Drouet'.<sup>87</sup> This slippage between objective and subjective analysis, scientific and literary discourses, can be seen in his sociology of the novel published in the same year.

### **Objectivity and form**

Having written the history of literary forms in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Barthes moved inevitably to write a sociology of forms of literature. If *Degré zéro de l'écriture* was somewhat impressionistic in its account of literary history, 'Petite sociologie du roman français contemporain', drawn from a talk given at a conference of French and German writers and thinkers, represents a pioneering attempt to provide a sociology of the contemporary French novel, particularly because of its distinctively 'scientific' approach.

What is striking in this article is the high level of organisation of Barthes's ideas. Interestingly, in his introduction to Barthes's study, René Wintzen had stressed its provisional nature.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Barthes too asserted its unscientific status: 'il va de soi', he said, that it was only 'une hypothèse de travail' and not 'une présentation scientifique de la question'.<sup>89</sup> The article appears however to be carefully researched: it contained a method, a plan, a stated order, divisions into three sections; the discourse was highly academic and rigorous. Barthes was conscious of a theoretical and methodological rigour; his study would be, he said, supplemented by a preliminary account



(also divided into sections) of the various ‘grilles’ which reflected the complexity in the sociology of readership and the ‘compartimentage social’; such a study would have to be complete before ‘une classification positive des publics de romans’ was possible. So, first, he set out the character of these different ‘grilles’: one social (including the divisions of social class, education, place of residence, conditions at work), one anthropological (readership of women or young people), one psycho-social (including political and religious activism, and seasonal differences). Lacking space, he could address only, and in a very ‘grossier’ fashion, the first of these categories, the ‘grille sociale’. Having underlined the necessity of ‘enquêtes soigneuses’ and suggesting that, ‘à ma connaissance’, none of these had been studied in France, he now set out the line that his ‘classification positive’ would follow: he would describe three ‘groupes de publics’ suggesting for each ‘un archétype romanesque’, the ‘ordre de grandeur du tirage’, the ‘complexe distributeur’, social class, ‘les mythes de bas’ and ‘la critique qui prend d’ordinaire en charge la production romanesque du groupe’.<sup>90</sup> This was a comprehensive outline of a study of the question, rather than the study itself; in this sense, we might call it a ‘pré-sociologie’.

Though the study proposed appeared scientific in its method, this did not mean, however, that Barthes’s own opinions were absent from the study. It is after having set out a very impressive field of study that Barthes’s gesture at an objective study of the literary market descended into his own subjective view of literary form.

There was a definite sociological and political problem for the novel; due to the alienated nature of the market, the lack of education, the novel could not cross the ‘différentes couches sociales’:

[L]e roman ne va jamais trouver que *son* public [...]. C’est là un fait grave, dans la mesure où l’on peut concevoir que la fonction de la littérature est précisément de présenter aux hommes l’image *vécue* de l’autrui. (199, OC 469)



The novelist was, with this ‘sociologie terriblement différentielle’, condemned to solitude because of the economic and social nature of the literary market. Here Barthes seemed to come to the same conclusions as Sartre had done a decade before.<sup>91</sup>

The constraints affected the novelist’s way of writing; unable to write ‘pour les *autres*’ the novelist had to pretend that he believed he was writing ‘pour *autrui*’; the ‘aliénation’ of ‘notre société’ was encapsulated ‘tragiquement’ in this ‘ultime contradiction’: just when literature was revealing ‘superbement la réalité de l’Histoire’, the novelist was still obliged to ‘se réfugier’ in an ‘image “essentialiste”’ of the reader.

Though it seemed to reiterate the conclusions of Sartre’s earlier study, coming to radically different formal categories from Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, Barthes’s study was an excellent example of the joining of literary form with a sociology: his conclusion to this ‘sociologie’ of readership attempted to provide a formal solution to the crisis of the novel.

In January 1954 he had not been able to see a synthesis between sociological facts and theatrical form in his assessment of *Théâtre et Collectivité*; he welcomed a sociology of popular theatre audiences at avant-garde and radical theatre productions, but ‘sans qu’on puisse encore prétendre joindre les deux recherches’. Yet, by the time he wrote ‘Pour une définition du théâtre populaire’ in July 1954, his view of the three-point plan suggested that a synthesis of theatre form and a sociology of audiences was possible, if not complete. This synthesis was evident also in his 1955 study of the readerships of the French novel.

Barthes’s attempt in the ‘degré zéro’ thesis to ‘commit’ literary form now took on a more rigorous, scientific and sociological aspect. Whereas sociology had been used in the sense of a literary realism, which accounted for humanity’s new station, now a sociology of consumption could be used to justify further advocating a ‘new novel’. His ‘enquête’ with Nadeau in 1952



had defined left-wing literature as one which questioned the world (including the literary institution): the novel form for Barthes now needed to be ‘*étonnante*’, in order to break the ‘cloisonnement’ of the literary market and institution.<sup>92</sup> In short, Barthes had set out a rigorously objective sociological methodology for the study of readerships, only for this to become a formal analysis of the appropriate course of action to take against the (depressing) results of the sociological analysis that he had begun to undertake.

### Conclusion

It is clear from this chapter how Barthes in 1959 was able to consider Michelet’s writing to be the first sociology precisely because of its ‘poetic’ nature, in opposition to a ‘histoire scientifique’. The literary underpinnings of Barthes’s sociological thought were evident in many of his attempts to explain social reality. This ‘decompartmentalization’ of literary and social science concerns was evident also in his view of history; he wrote (with Nadeau) in early 1953:

On peut même dire que la littérature de gauche affermit et développe en elle tout ce qui n’est pas littérature, qu’elle vise ce degré ultime où la littérature ne serait que la *forme* rituelle de sa propre mise en question et passage direct du domaine de l’expression dans le monde réel de l’histoire. Si ce moment vient jamais, il est possible que la littérature meure. Mais c’est parce qu’elle sera transformée en histoire. (18, *OC* 194)

This was similar to the view at the end of *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* that literature was becoming the ‘Utopie du langage’. However, this chapter has sought not so much to understand Barthes’s literary concerns in the light of his



interest in social theory, but to understand, on the contrary, the impact of literature on his development of a total account of human reality.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the forms of Barthes's praise of Cayrol's 'chosisme' reappeared, though not explicitly as praise, in his description of Michelet's writing of history. For example, Cayrol's literary aesthetic was one of 'élongement' across an object (rather than a 'pénétration'); this was precisely the opposition used in his study of the 'Féminaire de Michelet'.<sup>93</sup>

The connections between sociology and literature went further than mere aesthetic and formal considerations, but also into methodological ones too. The 'pré-sociologie' and 'pré-histoire' of 'Visages et figures' was related to the status of the novels of Cayrol, Robbe-Grillet and Duvignaud as 'pré-romans'; they cleansed the readers' eyes of outmoded nineteenth-century myths of realism, irrelevant to the mass, postwar experience: they hinted at a new way of representing (therefore, of understanding) humanity's new relationship to the world. It was also present in his view that a 'pré-critique' of Michelet's writing of history was needed, before any historical criticism was possible; we will look at this in the final chapter. The important point was that Barthes displayed a 'stages' theory to developing a new sociological (and literary) epistemology and appropriate mode of representation. This 'stages' theory was characterized by ambiguities in relation to nineteenth-century epistemology.

Though professing disdain for the 'profondeur' of nineteenth-century science and literature, Barthes considered, as we saw in his study of the appropriate methodology for a study of childhood, that a dose of romanticism ('Rêve') could be useful for representing the Child; Michelet's myths could be used progressively to prepare the way for a real science of humanity. Here was the strategy of the 'dialectique d'amour', a romanticised, but scientific, explanation of childhood, which understood children's reality by looking at the



manner of their representation, how the child had been 'mangé'; in short, myths were, in some sense, progressive.

Consequently, Barthes's acts of demystification in his 'sociologie engagée' were never neutral, and always political and dialectical.<sup>94</sup> If the tool of demystification involved a counterposition to the obscurantism of myths, it also required, at certain moments, paradoxically, a creation of myths, such as the myths generated in what he called his 'psychanalyse substantielle'. However, in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', he came to the conclusion that this dialectical strategy was only a partial solution, because although it beat myth at its own game, ultimately it contributed to the perpetuation of further myths.

This chapter has looked at Barthes's tendency to mix social science and literature. Not only did he apply sociology to Cayrol's and Robbe-Grillet's novels, he also applied *Annales* social history to criticism of cinema and theatre; and in his review of *Ruy Blas*, for example, he chided Hugo's sociological imprecision.<sup>95</sup> And within aesthetic theory and different media he used theories often without considering the mediatic context; thus, theatre theory was applied to other art forms, such as the cinema (Brechtian theatre theory in his assessments of films starring Chaplin and Brando) and vice versa (see the use of Guitry's film to illustrate his theatrical point about the Folies-Bergère).

This worked both ways however: he also used aesthetic insight in his social theories, in developing a social science. Indeed, the 'mythologies' are full of examples of how Barthes earned social insight from theatrical and artistic categories. For example, in 'L'usager et la grève' his 'sociologie engagée' established the connection between bourgeois theatre's treatment of psychological man and the *Figaro* readers' treatment of social being: both divided the social world into individuals and the individual into essences. Despite his denial of Proust's novels' relevance to a 'sociologie', 'Visages et Figures' was an important article in the break-down of the classical division



between science and poetry; for here he began to consider the cinema, if only as a substitute for any 'archive', an appropriate archive in a study of faces.

Barthes's interest in Michelet is of crucial importance in explaining his shifts in analysis. Writing the preface to Michelet's *La Sorcière* six years after his first attempt at a sociology, Barthes considered that Michelet was the first sociologist because he had rejected the division between literature and history. Yet in 1953, in 'Visages et figures' he had questioned the ability of Proust's novels to offer a sociological stance (though he had agreed only months before with Morin that Proust could be considered 'sociological'.) We will look at Barthes's changing attitude to Michelet in Chapter 5.

The very subject matter of his sociological study of faces led to an impressionistic, if unempirical, account; as a choice of subject for a sociological study, the human face was bound to involve a large amount of (largely unverifiable) opinion. Though written before his discovery of Brechtian theatre and theories, Barthes's analysis used a similar aestheticism. In line with Brechtian aesthetics, many of the 'petites mythologies' and other 'sociologies' involved an important 'subjective' element; 'Photogénie électorale', 'L'homme-jet', 'Strip-tease', for example, based on entirely unverifiable theories, were more opinion than fact.<sup>96</sup>

Barthes's own subjectivity came into his sociology. When he gave Michèle Morgan and Paul Reynaud as examples in 'Visages et figures', he added the 'garçon des Deux-Magots' and the 'demoiselle des postes de mon quartier'. In what sense were these two 'framed', part of an artistic commodity? As a homeless person the old woman tramp was the most alienated; but why did he 'know' her any more than the post-office woman or the waiter? Barthes's main point was that he did not know these faces, for they were not part of his emotional life as such (cinema stars were simply the most extreme form of this). Was the old woman not 'intermittent' like they were? If he did not know her, why differentiate between her and the others? Though



plausible, Barthes's theory of face morphology had very little empirical evidence; nor did his consideration of the methodology appear objective, since it was based on the 'paradox of the observer'.

This did not mean that all of his sociological studies were without validity; only that his writings tended towards a poetic and artistic 'essai', which had more to do with literature than science. His shifting between objective and subjective discourses was based on political intentions; in order to combat the positivistic use of science, Barthes's sociological analysis often involved the use of literary and poetic explanations. There was a real reason for this: writing at a time when adverts were beginning to be mass consumed, adverts were between art and reality by definition.

But more important than this was his view of the exclusion and alienation of the masses. Surely, the old woman episode was indicative of Barthes's inheritance from Michelet: she typified poverty, abused by society; Barthes's description was very romanticised in its attitude: she was a 'figure trop humaine'. Here was a good example of Barthes's 'dialectique d'amour': finding humanity in alienation. This was a 'negative' sociology in which an understanding of real human faces could only be performed by looking at its mirror image, the morphology of real people's faces could only be understood by looking at the reified version (hence the use of 'visages' for actors' faces, and 'figure' for the old woman tramp's face at the end of the article). Sociology for Barthes was concerned more with ideology than an objective reality. Since, sometimes, there were no available resources to achieve a sociology, the reflections of people's realities had to be used.

Paradoxically perhaps, this subjective analysis was to come back as a scientific, general theory of the operation of myth in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'. Removing the names and specific contexts in the reprint was indicative of Barthes's move from the particular to the general, from individual fact to a wider theory; his post-script was a deduction and generalization to form a



theory, therefore an attempt at a science, par excellence. Like Michelet, Barthes's *Mythologies* mixed a subjective, poetic account into an attempt at establishing a scientific theory.

Indeed, there is an important element of subjectivity in the *Mythologies*; Bernard Dort has confirmed that Barthes asked his advice on whether he should include the myth of the mythologist and the dilemmas at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'.<sup>97</sup> However, Barthes's major dilemma - that 'le vin est objectivement bon', but also, at the same time, that the goodness of wine is a myth - developed out of the dialectical praxis he had set out for the committed intellectual. To understand the 'aporie' at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' we must look not only at Barthes's subjective use of 'sociology', but his interest in methodology, representation and Michelet.

This subjectivity in Barthes's analysis did not invalidate his project to re-find humanity; in fact, it highlighted serious epistemological and historiographical problems. His was a methodological search for a new 'sociography'; a committed sociology, needed to question the positivistic claims of 'universality' made by bourgeois ideology, without ending up with a romanticised Micheletian account. But he also wanted a 'realism' in literature which accounted for human experience. This realism had also to explain experience without denying or hiding the alienated nature of the novel, and without employing an aesthetic which justified (passed off as 'natural') the bourgeois conquest of nature and appropriation of the world and the consequent ideological domination. At the same time, however, his view of the theatre was that it should show, ideally, the power of humanity to change the world, or rather, as Brecht's theatre did, encourage the audience to see for itself, dialectically, that human 'malheurs' were 'rémediables' by humans alone. If the notion of 'realism' was contradictory for Barthes in art, this was to resurface in his search for an appropriate methodology; if the limits and sterility of an objective (academic) sociology could be improved by a poetic (and



literary) projection of a world without alienation, how could this be best represented?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Dosse, *Histoire du Structuralisme 1*, p.255.

<sup>2</sup> See Barthes's preface to the 1959 edition of Michelet's *La Sorcière* published by *Le Club français du livre* reprinted in *Essais Critiques* (OC 1250-1259).

<sup>3</sup> See Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, pp.95-105.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, chapter 1, especially pp.13-28.

<sup>5</sup> It was the American Rockefeller foundation, which, in exporting its sociological superiority, saw an interest in financing (and influencing) sociological study in France; see B. Mazon, *Aux origines de l'École des Hautes Études en sciences sociales: le rôle du mécénat américain* (Paris, Cerf, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See G. Gurvitch, *C.N.R.S.: Première Semaine sociologique* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1949), with a preface by Lucien Febvre.

<sup>7</sup> According to François Dosse, this shift was influenced by both Durkheimian sociology as well as Georges Friedmann's use of Marxism in the 1930s, both of which had been markedly absent from French academic concerns; see Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, Part one, especially pp.54-58.

<sup>8</sup> See *The French Historical Revolution: the Annales school 1929-89* (Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/Polity, 1990), p.2.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Obstructed Path: French Social Thought in the years of desperation 1930-1960* (New York, Harper Torch, 1966), p.19; and Burke, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> See Burke, Chapter 1. Appointed to the newly-created chair of 'histoire de la civilisation moderne' at the Collège de France in 1933, Febvre apparently saw it as a restoration of Michelet's old chair at the same college, which had been terminated in 1892; see Hughes, *Obstructed Path*, p.34.

<sup>11</sup> In a lecture to the École Normale Supérieure in 1941, Febvre declared: '[I]l n'y pas d'histoire économique et sociale. Il y a l'histoire tout court, dans son Unité. L'histoire [...] est sociale tout entière, par définition'; see 'Vivre l'Histoire' in L. Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1992), p.20.

<sup>12</sup> Some theorists on the Right considered *Annales* to be 'Marxist'; see Dosse, *L'histoire en miettes*, p.160.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, J. Blot, 'Le révisionnisme en histoire, ou l'école des "Annales"', *La Nouvelle critique*, 30, November 1951, pp.46-60.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Duvignaud has noted that, on return from Rumania, Barthes had helped Febvre to 'classer sa bibliothèque'; see *Le Magazine littéraire*, October 1993, p.63.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Barthes quoted from this book in *Michelet par lui-même* (OC 367). Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter 1, Febvre was to be impressed by Barthes's study of Michelet.

<sup>16</sup> See Calvet, pp.89-90.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Faut-il tuer la grammaire?' (called 'La Responsabilité de la grammaire' in OC, pp.79-81). This 'longue durée' view of the French bourgeoisie's accession to intellectual and economic power (locating its starting point in the seventeenth century, rather than in a brief, revolutionary period at the end of the eighteenth) was not only part of the *Annales* conception of change, but also, as we saw in Chapter 3, a typically Trotskyan account of historical change.

<sup>18</sup> See his review of André Joussain's book *La Loi des Révolutions*, 'Les révolutions suivent-elle des lois?', *Combat*, 20 July 1950, p.4 (OC 86).

<sup>19</sup> 'Maîtres et esclaves', p.107.

<sup>20</sup> G. Freyre, *Maîtres*, p.9 and p.11; Febvre's preface was interesting also for its account of world anti-colonial revolt, at a time when the colonised 'secouent le joug'; and Febvre gave an implicit justification of this revolt; see pp.17-18.

<sup>21</sup> The connections between Freyre, Braudel and Levi-Strauss were more than Barthes's imagination; all three had worked together in Rio de Janeiro in the mid-1930s (see Burke,



*French Historical Revolution*, p.104); and Freyre, a friend of Gurvitch, had been invited by UNESCO to the 'Première semaine sociologique' in Paris in 1948 (see the biographical guide at the beginning of Freyre, *Maitres*).

<sup>22</sup> This 'nouvelle histoire' influenced his critique of bourgeois art forms; see, for example, his disdainful criticism of a Sacha Guitry film in 'Versailles et ses comptes'; prefiguring his critique of Poujade's ideology, Barthes suggested that Guitry had achieved the opposite of Hegel, and converted 'la qualité en quantité'; this was related to Guitry's use of a traditional 'narrative' of French history: 'Remarquez que ce nombre-valeur est chargé de rendre compte [...] de l'Histoire: la France, ce n'est rien d'autre qu'une collection de noms dont la renommée est à peu près de niveau scolaire' (p.785, *OC* 401).

<sup>23</sup> See 'Le Grand Robert' in which he considered the tension generated by waiting for a play as an example of the "anxiétés vagues" of which Mauss had underlined 'le caractère à la fois social et psychologique' (p.628, *OC* 435). Similarly, in 'La vaccine de l'avant-garde' (*OC* 472) he referred to Mauss's view of the 'attente' as a 'richesse ethnologique'. Though Mauss's study *Le Don*, first published in 1923, had been reprinted in 1954, his work, it is important to stress, was not well-known in the 1950s, a fact summed up by Braudel's comment: 'J'ai été un des rares historiens à connaître Mauss' (quoted in Dosse, *L'histoire en miettes*, p.105). See also 'Le mythe de l'acteur possédé', where we see, in 1958, the first appearance in Barthes's writing of Levi-Strauss's 'sorcier' (*OC* 770); a year later he used this as an image of Michelet and intellectuals in general in the preface to *La Sorcière* (*OC* 1258).

<sup>24</sup> For example, in his discussion of Barrault's production of *L'Orestie*, he quoted Engels' *Origine de la Famille, de la Propriété privée et de l'État*, Bachofen's *Le Droit maternel* and George Thomson's *Aeschylus and Athens*; see 'L'Orestie au théâtre Marigny', p.93 n.2 ('Comment représenter l'antique', *OC* 1222 n.1).

<sup>25</sup> See 'L'Éros racinien', p.471n1 (*OC* 994).

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, *Mythologies* was later described as an 'ethnographie de la France' by Barthes, as he explained how his book on Michelet led up to this 'ethnographie'; see *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), p.87.

<sup>27</sup> The opening remarks in his review of Freyre's study of Brazil lamented the backwardness of French social theory and research thus: 'Qu'on imagine que trois siècles seulement après les dernières invasions franques, quelque clerc historien muni par miracle de tous les pouvoirs de la science moderne, ait produit une oeuvre de synthèse sur la formation ethnique du peuple français' (p.107, *OC* 210); and, simultaneously, he prefigured his own analysis in the 'petites mythologies du mois': 'On peut facilement penser de quel intérêt prodigieux serait pour nous autres, Français, une analyse soumise aux méthodes les plus récentes de l'anthropologie, de la diététique ou de la psychanalyse, et appliquée à des faits ethniques vieux seulement de quelques générations' (*ibid*).

<sup>28</sup> Friedmann was, at the time, 'Professeur au Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers'; Febvre became, after the War, an elected member of the committee which ran the EPHE.

<sup>29</sup> See 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement', in which Barthes quoted Friedmann's book *Le Travail en miettes: spécialisation et loisirs* (Paris, Gallimard, 1956) (p.434n, *OC* 745), and works by both Febvre (p.432n, *OC* 743) and his successor, Fernand Braudel (p.433, *OC* 744).

<sup>30</sup> The reference to Crozier's study, omitted from *Mythologies*, is made in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1956, p.18n1 (not included in *OC*); to back up his study of the ideological role of the 'Stars' for women office workers, he cited Crozier's 'remarquable enquête', *Petits fonctionnaires au travail*, published by the CNRS in 1955. See also 'Le choix d'un métier' (*Les Lettres nouvelles* 6, 8 April 1959 pp.52-53, *OC* 808-810), in which, discussing the career advice of Berthe Bernage, the 'conseillère' de *L'Echo de la Mode*, he noted that the magazine had 'quatre millions de lectrices, selon une enquête récente' (p.52, *OC* 808); this objective information was then used at the end of his article to underline the power of ideology: 'Restez où vous êtes, tel est le principe de cette singulière Orientation Professionnelle. On la croirait improbable, insignifiante [...] si l'on ne savait qu'elle s'adresse à quatre millions de Françaises d'aujourd'hui' (p.53, *OC* 810).

<sup>31</sup> See 'Littérature littérale' in which Barthes cited Morin's 'ouvrage inédit sur la Sociologie du Cinéma' as the source of 'cette expérience ethnologique d'Ombredane' where a film was



shown to some black Congolese and then to some Belgian students; the reactions of the latter demonstrated to Barthes the conditioning taking place in the European 'civilisations d'âme' (p.821 note 2).

<sup>32</sup> See Barthes's interview 'Georges Friedmann nous parle de théâtre' in *Théâtre populaire* 22, January 1957, pp.1-4), beginning with the words by Barthes: 'Je me rappelle vous avoir rencontré un soir au T.N.P. après la première de Cinna' (p.1). In the interview, Barthes commented: 'Ceci nous amène à la question des "loisirs actifs", dont vous avez été le premier à souligner l'importance, dans vos ouvrages de sociologie industrielle [...]'; and 'Vous abordez là le problème du théâtre amateur, dont le principe soulève beaucoup de réticences [...] chez les professionnels' (p.3). Did Friedmann's views influence Barthes? Though Barthes had criticised the academic nature of *Théâtre et Collectivité*, in which Friedmann had contributed an article, 'Les Loisirs actifs et le Théâtre' - Barthes's criticism referred to the book's stress on 'psychologie' in Friedmann's article - Friedmann's interest in an 'active', participatory, theatre culture, above all in amateur circumstances, was nonetheless a theme present in Barthes's criteria for a successful popular theatre.

<sup>33</sup> Now a retired Professor of Sociology at the Université de Jussieu (Paris VII), and author of numerous sociological studies (particularly of the 'spectacle'), Duvignaud had reviewed Gurvitch's book on Marx's analysis of social class in 1954.

<sup>34</sup> See 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement' p.433n4 (OC 744): '[D]éfinir un fait social comme le vêtement par la somme d'un certain nombre d'instincts, conçus sur un plan strictement individuel et simplement "multipliés" à l'échelle du groupe: problème que la sociologie veut précisément dépasser' (ibid).

<sup>35</sup> There are three references to the thought of Werner Sombart, in Barthes's writing, each referring to Sombart's idea of the simili; in 'Le comédien sans paradoxe' (*France-Observateur*, 22 July 1954, p.1, OC 427-429), attacking the bourgeois manner in which psychology was put into acting, Barthes suggested that 'Sombart a eu peut-être raison d'établir une relation entre le développement de l'esprit bourgeois et le goût du simili' (p.1, OC 427); in 'Les maladies du costume de théâtre', enumerating the errors of costume design at the Folies-Bergère, the Comédie-Française and the 'Théâtres lyriques', he underlined how 'Sombart a indiqué l'origine bourgeoise du simili' (p.69, OC 1208); then, in 'Wagon-restaurant' (*Les Lettres nouvelles* 3, 18 March 1959, p.51, OC 790) analysing the luxury of the 'Compagnie Cook' dining-car, Barthes saw the use of the simili as typical of an earlier age ('au premier capitalisme' in Sombart's analysis). I have been unable to find a specific reference to the simili in Sombart's work; however, Sombart's most important book, *Le Bourgeois: contribution à l'histoire morale et intellectuelle de l'homme économique moderne* (Paris, Payot, 1926, translation S. Jankélévitch), contains analyses of bourgeois ideology (including, the measurability of success in sport, the sensation of novelty, the sense of power, the value of quantity, the promotion of order), which are similar to Barthes's analyses in the 'petites mythologies'.

<sup>36</sup> Dort's two-part sociological study of theatre audiences, which Barthes proof-read and encouraged Dort to write (published in *Théâtre populaire* no.s 4 and 5, November 1953 and January 1954 respectively), has been republished in one chapter, under the same title, in B. Dort, *Théâtre public* (Paris, Seuil, 1971) pp.315-32.

<sup>37</sup> For example in 'Poujade et les intellectuels' it was precisely this sociology which, in his view, poujadism's anti-intellectualist stance was trying to undermine, and was linked to Poujade's fascism; this attacked 'toute forme de culture explicative, engagée' and reinforced 'la culture "innocente"', the naïveté of which left 'les mains libres au tyran'; *Les Lettres nouvelles*, April 1956, pp.639-640 (*Mythologies*, OC 680).

<sup>38</sup> 'Faut-il tuer la grammaire?'; Nadeau wrote at the top of this article that the previous article had 'valu à son auteur et à la rédaction une abondante correspondance'; 'négligeant ses admirateurs', Barthes was replying, wrote Nadeau, to his 'contradicteurs'.

<sup>39</sup> He linked the clarity and labour of classical French literature to the 'dessein historique' of the bourgeoisie: 'Croire à une grammaire unique, pratiquer une langue française pure, c'était prolonger ce fameux mythe de la clarté française dont le destin est si étroitement lié à l'histoire politique de la France' (p.2, OC 79).



<sup>40</sup> See 'Le sentiment tragique de l'écriture', which was to become, in somewhat altered form, the last chapter, 'L'utopie du langage'. In Thierry Leguay's bibliography in *Communications*, the publication date is mistakenly listed as 16 December 1950.

<sup>41</sup> His comment on the impossibility of representing 'l'homme historique' with bourgeois language in 1950, had changed by 1953; here for Barthes (and Nadeau) left-wing literature's link to sociology had to incorporate both the historical and eternal aspects of man: 'Littérature de combat? Sans aucun doute. Mais d'un combat à la mesure des questions que se posent l'homme historique aussi bien que l'homme éternel'; the left-wing writer wanted not simply a 'changement de ministère', but a 'transformation des conditions, tant extérieures qu'intérieures, qui déterminent l'individu, ses pensées et sa morale'; see 'Oui, il existe bien une littérature de gauche', p.18 (OC 194).

<sup>42</sup> 'Littérature objective', p.590 (OC 1192).

<sup>43</sup> 'Pré-romans', *France-Observateur*, 24 June 1954, p.3 (OC 416).

<sup>44</sup> 'Jean Cayrol: *L'Espace d'une nuit*', *Esprit*, July 1954, pp.150-152 (OC 422-423).

<sup>45</sup> 'Pré-romans', p.3 (OC 417-418).

<sup>46</sup> 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans', *Esprit*, March 1952, pp.482-499 (OC 115-131).

<sup>47</sup> '[I]l observe une gare, un café, une rue, une foire; la ville se déploie, l'histoire commence' (p.483 n1, OC 116n).

<sup>48</sup> Seuil 1950; 'Un prolongement à la littérature de l'absurde', *Combat*, 21 September 1950, p.4.

<sup>49</sup> I have used an abridged version in M. Nadeau (ed.), *Le roman français depuis la guerre* (Paris, Gallimard, 1963), pp.189-92.

<sup>50</sup> With a bizarre use of the phrase of 'salir les doigts' (rather than 'salir les mains') was Cayrol making a subtle challenge to Sartre's recent refusal in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* to 'commit' anything but prose writing? Cayrol's alternative was a Catholicism, which, understanding God's grace, would reveal God's door open, providing a 'salut public'.

<sup>51</sup> pp.190-192. For example, he said, those killed in China's public squares under the 'oeil indifférent' of the cameras; this is presumably a reference to Mao's revolution.

<sup>52</sup> See his early review of *L'Etranger* in 1944; his 1954 review of the same book called its publication a 'fait social', and its success had the same 'consistance sociologique' as the invention of the 'pile électrique' or the 'presse de coeur'; '*L'Etranger*, roman solaire', *Club*, April 1954, pp.6-7 (OC 398).

<sup>53</sup> See Roger p.327.

<sup>54</sup> 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans', pp.488-489 (OC 121-122). This desire for a sociability can be seen in much of Barthes's writing on theatre; in his second review of Vilar's production of *Don Juan*, he saw the production as one which could 'fonder un usage social'; Jean-Pierre Darras' interpretation of the character of Pierrot impressed him, for he had never thought of the role as important; rather than as a purely episodic character, now he saw it as a foil to the eponymous hero; rather than an empty patois, Pierrot spoke a 'langage idéal', was 'toute l'humanité et tout le rêve de Molière'; he was 'la figure de l'idéale sociabilité' (p.92, OC 385, slightly altered).

<sup>55</sup> 'Littérature littérale', p.820 (OC 1212).

<sup>56</sup> 'Littérature objective', p.587 (OC 1188).

<sup>57</sup> It would be possible to consider 'Le monde objet' as a critique of bourgeois town planning, analysing the commodified way in which the archetypal bourgeois city, Amsterdam, was built accurately to facilitate bourgeois mercantile expansion. However, this would be to ignore the positive aspects of bourgeois control that Barthes saw in Dutch classical art. Indeed, writing in 'Printemps 1953' from Holland to Rebeyrol, he wanted to set out a criticism not of painters nor of 'écoles', but of 'sujets' in the mould of the recent book by Malraux; this was, presumably a reference to Malraux's recently published seminal three-part study of art, *Psychologie de l'art* - published by Albert Skira éditeur, this was comprised of: Part I 'Le Musée imaginaire' (1949); Part II 'La Création artistique' (1949), and Part III 'La Monnaie de l'absolu' (1950) - which gave detailed readings of paintings from ancient Greece to the present day; see also note below.

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the editing performed on the *Essais critiques* version of 'Le monde objet' has diminished the positive attitude to the Dutch classical aesthetic; the original article was



headed by a favourite quote of Barthes's from Marx: 'L'histoire ne peut répondre aux vieilles questions qu'en se posant de nouvelles' (p.394) - this was repeated a year later; amongst the views on the conference in the Black Forest from the participants, Barthes's comment was simply a quotation of this sentence from Marx (see *Documents*, February 1955, pp.202-203). The original version of 'Le monde objet' also noted that '[i]l y avait du Maurice Blanchot dans Saenradam' (ibid); when put with the dialectical questioning of the Marx epigraph, this equation of classical painting with Blanchot's aesthetic suggests a far more positive view in 'Le monde objet' of bourgeois aesthetics.

<sup>59</sup> In 'Le Prince de Hombourg au TNP' he had noted how bourgeois theatre involved pure contemplation without participation; and this contemplation encouraged an essentialist view of humans based on positivism: 'La rationalité de cette découverte ne veut s'exercer que dans un espace logique, sans marge, sans ombre et sans arrières, un espace aussi fini et aussi impérieux que le temps lockéen des philosophies positives' (p.91, *OC* 203).

<sup>60</sup> 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans', p.499 (*OC* 131).

<sup>61</sup> 'Littérature littérale', p.826 (*OC* 1217). This was possible only if in an 'état de pré-suicide permanent'; it could exist only 'sous la figure de son propre problème, châtieuse et pourchasseuse d'elle-même' (ibid). *Le Voyeur* was in this 'zone mince', a 'vertige rare' where literature tried, in vain, to destroy itself, thereby destroying the myth of its own institution; it was an 'exercice absolu de négation'. This negative view meant that no matter how generous or exact its content, if it did not question its own existence and role, literature would always succumb 'sous le poids' of a traditional form which compromised it, this form would serve as an alibi to the 'société aliénée qui la produit, la consomme et la justifie'. If his prognosis of the difficulties of committing literature, of developing a literature which could (help to) effect change was the weight of form, his solution was to combat this with form. Robbe-Grillet's 'formalisme radical' was reproached by the Left: but for Barthes this was 'un reproche ambigu' since literature was 'par définition formelle'. But, he insisted, if a writer was to be formalist and responsible, he/she had to go the whole way: Robbe-Grillet's 'formalisation du roman' had a 'valeur' only if it was 'radicale', that is 'si le romancier a le courage de postuler expérimentalement un roman sans contenu, du moins pendant toute la durée où il désire lever à fond des hypothèques du psychologisme bourgeois' (ibid).

<sup>62</sup> See *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1955, p.473 note 1 and p.479 note 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, January 1956, p.153 (*OC* 657).

<sup>64</sup> *Les Lettres nouvelles*, June 1955, p.953 (*OC* 622).

<sup>65</sup> S. Giles, 'Post/Structuralist Brecht? Representation and subjectivity in *Der Dreigroschenprozess*' (*Brecht Year book 17. The Other Brecht 1*, University of Madison Press, Wisconsin, pp.147-164), pp.148-149. In the 'Dialogue' with Bablet, Barthes, quoting Brecht, said that it was time that directors 'eux aussi deviennent des "enfants du siècle scientifique"' (p.107, *OC* 510).

<sup>66</sup> ibid. Giles has shown, furthermore, how the scientific and cognitive status of art in Brecht's conception was diametrically opposed to Althusser's: 'While Brecht argues that authentic art must aspire to the conditions of veracity of the natural and social sciences and emulate their procedures, Althusser feels that art cannot produce scientifically valid knowledge' (p.152).

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Febvre considered that historical and sociological truth was fathomable by using both science and art; he wrote: 'Je me penche sur l'Océan, vous me dites: "Ici trois mille mètres de fond". Trois mille ou trois cents, c'est tout un. Ce qui compte, c'est de savoir jusqu'où la clarté descendra. C'est de faire descendre la lumière plus loin, plus bas, toujours plus bas. De faire reculer l'obscurité. Et donc d'être profond: je veux dire d'éclairer l'obscur. L'art peut illuminer'; see *Combats pour l'Histoire*, p.52.

<sup>68</sup> In 'Le monde objet' he prefigured this study by talking about the need for a sociology of faces (p.401).

<sup>69</sup> Underlining how Michelet's anthropology was one of 'humeurs' not of 'formes', Barthes attributed his judgment of historical figures to a 'morale' of physical appearances: 'Michelet n'écrivait rien sur personne sans consulter autant de portraits et de gravures qu'il pouvait. Il a toute sa vie mené une interrogation systématique des visages passés' (*Michelet par lui-même*, *OC* 294, note 1). Furthermore, Calvet has revealed that Barthes was fascinated by the



portrait of Michelet by Couture above all (front cover of 1988 edition) and how he could not believe how a reproduction of this on a postcard had been 'touched up' to make Michelet look more amicable ('bon' not 'démoniaque') by eliminating his fiery eyes (p.147).

<sup>70</sup> Barthes regretted that an objective sociological study was almost impossible due to a lack of 'moyens': 'Il y faudrait des archives; or, nous n'avons pas, ni d'hier ni d'aujourd'hui' (p.1, *OC* 224). This is not uncommon in his writing. There is another example of this in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', where, regretting his inability to perform 'une étude véritable sur la géographie sociale des mythes', Barthes said it would be 'difficile à établir tant qu'il nous manquera une sociologie analytique de la presse' (*Mythologies*, *OC* 713). In a footnote he suggested that information on readership could aid such a study.

<sup>71</sup> 'Visage et figures', p.1 (*OC* 224). Proust's portrayals, for example, were incapable of providing a clear picture. This was a development in Barthes's views on Proust's literature as sociological source. Comparing Proust's characters with Balzac's in 1950, he had praised the manner in which Proust placed characters in their social reality by their speech; whereas 'les créatures balzaciennes' were like 'relais algébriques' of the 'rapports de force' in society, the 'personnage proustien', with the 'opacité d'un langage particulier', was condensed into his/her profession, class, biology etc: with Proust, literature had begun to 'connaître la société comme une Nature, dont elle pourrait peut-être reproduire les phénomènes'; consequently, Proust was ('peut-être') the first novelist to act as a kind of sociologist; see 'L'écriture et la parole', p.6. See also his view in early 1953 that Proust's writing was 'progressiste' and 'de gauche' because, in trying to portray individuals, 'cet auteur a su démonter, sans aucun recours idéaliste, le comportement de tout un groupe social'; 'Oui, il existe bien une littérature de gauche', p.18 (*OC* 193).

<sup>72</sup> 'Visages et figures', pp.2-3 (*OC* 224). Having rejected painting, he believed also that ethnography was unable to assist; his reason was that the American race, though 'le plus mélangé du monde', had a racial identity which 'saute le plus aux yeux': '[E]n cent ans d'histoire, les Etats-Unis ont produit une race aussi reconnaissable que les peuples les mieux enfermés géographiquement. La morphologie américaine, issue de tant d'hérités différentes, est si pure, qu'elle résiste à tous les travestis [...];' (p.2, *OC* *ibid*).

<sup>73</sup> *ibid* p.5 (*Mythologies* *OC* 226-227).

<sup>74</sup> In praising the acting of Maria Casarès in 'Une tragédienne sans public', Barthes considered it an 'autre grandeur' of this actress that on stage she preferred a 'visage-à-la-scène' to a 'visage-à-la-ville' (p.7, *OC* 411). This was an artistic phenomenon pointing to its own illusion, part of a rejection of naturalism: the idea of 'larvatus prodeo' was here, quite literally, 'pointing to the mask'.

<sup>75</sup> Two years later in 'Le visage de Garbo' he applied this understanding to his study of her face: Garbo had a face which sent the 'foules' into 'le plus grand trouble'; *Les Lettres nouvelles* April 1955, p.632 (*Mythologies*, *OC* 604).

<sup>76</sup> 'Visages et figures', p.9 (*OC* 230).

<sup>77</sup> In this sense, Garbo represented, in his view, the cultural break that he had analysed between (roughly-speaking) pre-and postwar cinema iconography: it represented this 'moment fragile' when cinema would 'extraire une beauté existentielle d'une beauté essentielle'; as a 'moment de transition' Garbo's face 'concilie deux âges iconographiques', assured 'le passage de la terreur au charme' (p.633, *OC* 605). Following his logic, we could say that the 'nationalisation' of the actress' face would be completed by the arrival of Audrey Hepburn. Barthes's sociological analysis seemed to like to see new phenomena as signs of a break with the past. This idea of a break between two eras appeared in 'La nouvelle Citroën' where the 'art humanisé' of the latest Citroën model marked (perhaps) 'un changement dans la mythologie automobile'. Just as Garbo's face was the passage from the hard and frightening to the soft and the youth of Hepburn's, and Valentino's face to Philippe's a shift from the 'magic' to the 'terrestrial', so the 'bestaire de la puissance' of the old Citroën DS had been replaced by comfort: we were passing 'visiblement d'une alchimie de la vitesse à une gourmandise de la conduite' (p.826, *OC* 656).

<sup>78</sup> For example, in 1952 Barthes had considered the desexualised nature of Gérard Philipe, the youthful J3 actor; here, too, in 1955, the child in advertisement photos underwent the same process: 'l'enfant est un objet privilégié pour la photographie d'art, fondée sur une



esthétique d'irréalité et de l'angélisme, et dont la première opération est toujours de désexualiser l'homme en faisant de son visage une pure effluence de spiritualité' (p.317, *OC* 462).

<sup>79</sup> It was the (right-wing) *Annaliste* Philippe Ariès who, in 1960, was to write a history of childhood, *L'Enfance et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*; see Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, pp.67-69.

<sup>80</sup> p.313 (*OC* 459). His view in the *degré zéro* thesis of the effect of the French Revolution (and 'surtout' its consequences) on the writer's relationship to bourgeois 'prétentions universalistes' was part of this explanation; this reinforces my view that Barthes's sociological methodology developed, largely, out of literary considerations.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid* p.314 (*OC* 459).

<sup>82</sup> The bedroom of *Les Enfants terribles*, suggested Barthes, was a good example, for the 'anti-conformisme de la morale et le baroque de la clôture' seemed to make up for the 'la perfection de la fuite': 'Décorée du beau nom de Poésie, l'enfance reçoit les transfuges de la réalité' (*ibid*).

<sup>83</sup> 'Je parle de l'usage que la collectivité fait de l'Enfant dans ses manières d'informer, de représenter, de convaincre, de distraire, dans ses revues illustrées, ses films de publicité ou ses photographies d'art' (p.314, *OC* 460).

<sup>84</sup> This included a notion of 'pre-sociology': 'Je ne sais si l'on a déjà analysé le pouvoir idéologique des représentations standardisées: indépendamment des mythes transportés, il y a de toute évidence une morale de la photographie qui devrait intéresser les sociologues' (p.315, *OC* 460). Here, with typical modesty ('je ne sais') and suggesting the suitability of the subject for someone else, he then proceeded to perform the study himself. Of course, he had already studied one of these myths and, in the next two sections ('Enfants-copies' and 'Jouets'), would carry this study further.

<sup>85</sup> This was the same neon light as the one justifying his praise of Robbe-Grillet; compare 'Littérature objective', p.581 (*OC* 1185) with *ibid*, p.315 (*OC* 460).

<sup>86</sup> *ibid*, p.315 (*OC* 460).

<sup>87</sup> Barthes's 'conclusion' on his history of 'Enfance' came in 'Le mythe aujourd'hui': 'Le mythe de l'Enfance-Poète [...] est un mythe bourgeois *avancé* [...] c'est un mythe encore vert' (*OC* 712). 'Quels que soient les résultats de l'enquête, l'énigme est donc de peu d'intérêt, elle n'éclaire ni sur l'enfance ni sur la poésie' (p.155, *OC* 658). A number of problems emerged with this. In line with his quickly developing interest in the interpretations of 'notre bonne critique', his point of view was based more on the critic's adherence to the myth of 'enfance' (pp.154-5, *OC* *ibid*), rather than an objective and factual account. And, his analysis was to become very unclear. As in 'Pour une histoire de l'enfance', he gave the reader the classical and romantic stages (Pascal's age and the triumph of the bourgeoisie) of this history of perception: and now, unwittingly, he was describing his own view of the need for a mixture of poetry and science to bourgeois ideology in this 'mélange hâtif'; his previous acceptance of Michelet's view of child-as-other now changed: to declare Minou's poetry 'innocente ou adulte' was now to 'la reconnaître fondée sur une altérité'.

<sup>88</sup> In 'Le roman et son public', René Wintzen, the conference organiser, had stressed that what were to follow were less studies than 'notes', 'réflexions', 'un premier jet'; Barthes's article, he stressed in particular, had been 'parlé' and he asked the reader to remember these 'présentatifs' (*Documents*, February 1955, p.176).

<sup>89</sup> p.195 (*OC* 466). This was typical of his modesty, relative to the sociological backwardness of French sociological thought. The 'petite' in the title implies a certain meekness; it is also, of course, present in the title of the monthly column in *Les Lettres nouvelles*.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*, pp.193-195 (*OC* 465-466).

<sup>91</sup> This seemed to endorse Sartre's policy towards a literary readership in *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?*: one had to accept to write for an 'élite', intellectual bourgeoisie.

<sup>92</sup> It was in his sociology of the contemporary French novel that his view of the popular novel appeared. The Communist novel (with the exception of Aragon and Vaillant who had bourgeois readerships and critics) was 'absolument autarcique': works by 'Daix, Courtade, Gamara ou Still [sic]' were produced, written, read, and criticised only by Communists. Though theirs was meant to be the literature of the masses, all Communist writers came from



the bourgeoisie. The subject of the novels was communism, but the art definitely not; the result was that the bourgeoisie could 'les reconnaître' and thus consider them 'rassurants'; and Barthes went further: 'Il n'est d'ailleurs pas interdit de supposer qu'elle les tolère parce qu'elle sait qu'elle peut les compromettre plus facilement' (p.198, *OC* 469).

<sup>93</sup> For Michelet, wrote Barthes, '[l]e mouvement idéal de l'amour n'est pas [...] de pénétration mais d'éloignement' (p.1096, *OC* 329).

<sup>94</sup> He even suggested, in the review of the production of Labiche's *Le plus heureux des trois*, a certain pleasure in demystification: 'démystifier est toujours réjouissant, sauf, bien sûr, pour les profiteurs de la mystification' (p.81, *OC* 553).

<sup>95</sup> 'Ruy Blas au TNP', p.93 (*OC* 404). All of these were written before his discovery of Brecht; this reinforces the view that Brecht only represented a culmination in Barthes's move towards sociology and a scientific theatre.

<sup>96</sup> We could ask why there might be an exception in his rigorously scientific suggestion of a methodology in 'Petite sociologie du roman français'; was Barthes in the middle of his application for a research post in Sociology at the CNRS, and needed to prove his academic capacities in this sphere? It is possible also that the place of publication, unknown as it was to him, inhibited his usually flamboyant mode of approach to 'sociology'. This would seem to vindicate the view I expressed earlier that, when he felt that he knew for whom he was writing, in *Les Lettres nouvelles* in particular, he could afford to be more the 'essayiste', more impressionistic; his 'sociologie' could make basic conceptual, analytical and political assumptions; writing for *Documents*, however, he could not count on such a 'familiarity' with the readership.

<sup>97</sup> See Barthes's comment in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui': 'je suis chez le coiffeur, on me tend un numéro de *Paris-Match*' (*OC*, p.688). Interview with Dort; Dort confirmed that he encouraged Barthes to include the subjective dilemma in the post-face.



## CHAPTER FIVE: BARTHES, MICHELET AND HISTORY

*We know only a single science - the science of history.* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

*Histoire, science de l'Homme; Histoire, l'oeuvre de l'Homme.* Jules Michelet

### Introduction

Barthes's desire to found a 'total' sociological explanation of social phenomena was a constant one. Though his approach and subject matter were often impressionistic and superficial - to understand the subjective and literary underpinning of his sociological analysis, we have looked at the decidedly literary and formal origins of his interest in social sciences - this did not negate the validity of the dilemma that he had underlined.

A 'sociologie engagée', as practised in his demystification exercises, was based on a double bind; on the one hand, in order to represent the social reality of the masses, the mythologist could rely only on the alienated images (or myths) which dominated their lives; at the same time, on the other hand, this 'sociologie engagée' had to expose, uncover and explain the operations by which these myths were consumed, and, to a certain extent, believed, by the consumers and victims of myths. In this sense, Barthes's sociology in the mid-1950s had to try to overcome the difficulty of how, simultaneously, to describe and explain social reality. This, in essence, was his dilemma at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'; any solution to this dilemma, would have to be based on the sociologist's ability to present both a description and an explanation of social reality.<sup>1</sup>

However, alienation and 'la déchirure du monde social' meant that it was impossible, in Barthes's view, to 'dépasser une saisie instable du réel'; consequently, any 'réconciliation du réel et des hommes', any attempt to



describe and explain humanity's relationship to the world would have to be mediated by myths. Barthes stressed that this problem was most acute in relation to the mythologist: social alienation showed that it was impossible to 'rendre' an object's 'totalité'. The mythologist, though demystifying social reality, could not actually act on that reality because, condemned to a 'métalanguage', the act of demystifying myths excluded the demystifier from the mass of people's reality; in other words, and paradoxically, demystification actually excluded him from a direct access to that reality: any critique of the ideological sign led automatically to an incomplete (that is, not total) description of reality.

This pessimistic view at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' was linked to Barthes's own political viewpoint in 1956: unable to see the 'Terre promise', and therefore insisting (*pace* Zhdanov) that a critique of ideology and myth was necessary 'pour le moment', Barthes considered that a 'sociologie engagée' could not rely on a future resolution of 'la déchirure sociale': such was the 'impasse' of history; demystification and ideological critique could resolve 'la contradiction du réel aliéné' only by an 'amputation', and not by a 'synthèse'; a synthesis was not possible because a 'poetic' representation of an object, a description of the inalienable meaning of objects, was in contradiction to this aim to demystify. Barthes's solution was to adopt 'sarcasme' as a strategy for the committed intellectual.

However, in the theatre, Barthes believed in 1956, Brechtian drama seemed to have found an aesthetic which could overcome this dilemma. Barthes had studied the aesthetic techniques of Brecht's theatre, but in 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne' he had insisted also on the sociological importance of its themes:

Le thème idéologique, chez Brecht, pourrait se définir très exactement comme une dynamique d'événements qui entremêlait le constat et l'explication, l'éthique et le politique: conformément à l'enseignement profond du marxisme,



chaque thème est à la fois expression de vouloir-être des hommes et de l'être des choses, il est à la fois protestataire (parce qu'il démasque) et réconciliateur (parce qu'il explique). (21, *OC* 1229).

This double-edged act, protest and explanation, was precisely what Barthes was doing in the 'petite mythologie': his desire to 'dénoncer' contemporary myths was a central feature of the 'dialectique d'amour'. Indeed, the 'mythologies' contained numerous bitter attacks on certain ideologies and injustices. This, as we saw in Chapter Two, was the specifically political aspect of Barthes's analysis. As well as the protestation, there was an attempt at explanation: the 'petites mythologies' tried to theorize, firstly, how injustices occurred, and how these were painted as natural in favour of protecting Order, and, secondly, how particularly the media tried to put across the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology which maintained the status quo; thus, there was a concentration in the 'mythologies' on explaining, as well as criticizing, the origins and operations of the ideology which hid the contingent nature of social injustice.

What Barthes had also learned from Brecht's theatre was that, in order for the exclusion and alienation of the masses to be challenged, the explanation of the alienated nature of social reality had to postulate its transformability; the explanation of people's reality should not be static, but should incorporate the potential for its abolition; in this sense, Brecht's explanation of social ills, in showing that human ills were 'rémediables' by humans themselves, provided a glimpse of this potential for social justice; this was a glimpse, via an objective explanation, of the possibility of a 'réconciliation', in which the subjective elements of history, the excluded masses, acted on the very objective circumstances which alienated them.

This was a critique not simply of bourgeois social science, but also of that developed under the influence of Stalinism. Brecht's 'art révolutionnaire' was a protest against the 'confusion jdanovienne' between 'l'idéologie et la



sémiologie’, a confusion which had led to an ‘impasse esthétique’; Brechtian “formalisme” (Barthes placed this word between apostrophes to underline his displeasure with the word) had, in his opinion, resolved the ideological dilemma of revolutionary art, of how to depict reality and explain it, without failing to postulate its transformability (the ‘vouloir-être des hommes’); but it had solved also the problem of the aesthetic (or formal) manner in which to achieve this, without becoming pure propaganda, of negligible artistic worth. In short, Brecht had redefined the relationship between ideology and semiology. Barthes’s aim, as theorist, sociologist and mythologist was to find a way in which this could be achieved outside of the theatre: how could an objective and ‘total’ description of the real be incorporated with a postulation of the transformability of that reality; in short, how could the social sciences apply Brecht’s aesthetic to their methodology, and combine the subjectivity of a ‘parti pris’ with the objectivity of a science, without becoming a Stalinized propaganda vehicle?

Indeed, writing the postface to *Mythologies* in the same year as his article on Brecht (September 1956), Barthes asserted the importance of this formalism to his study of myth. He insisted that a concentration on the form of a social or historical phenomenon was extremely useful for historical criticism:

Moins terrorisée par le spectre du “formalisme”, la critique historique eût été peut-être moins stérile; elle eût compris que l’étude spécifique des formes ne contredit en rien aux principes nécessaires de la totalité et de l’Histoire. Bien au contraire: plus un système est spécifiquement défini dans ses formes, et plus il est docile à la critique historique. Parodiant un mot connu, je dirai qu’un peu de formalisme éloigne de l’Histoire, mais que beaucoup y ramène. (OC 685)

Barthes put this into practice in his theatre criticisms, in which he redefined the relationship between a formal critique of a production and a historical criticism. There are a number of examples of his historical criticism fulfilling the principle of a ‘pré-critique’ followed by a full-blown historical



critique. The most striking example was his review of Postec's production of Labiche's *Le plus heureux des trois*. Barthes did not, as we might expect, attack this light nineteenth-century comedy itself, rather he criticised the manner in which it was produced, its 'irréalisme':

La caricature esthétique de 1900 [...], c'est un peu ce que toute philosophie de l'Histoire est à l'Histoire: un alibi, une évacuation discrète du réel au profit de ses apparences. En réduisant 1900 à un style [...] en sorte que 1900 n'apparaisse plus que comme une fantaisie légèrement loufoque (1), nos artistes s'entendent pour éluder la réalité même de ce temps. (80-81, *OC* 552).

In line with his view above, he had identified the formal abuse of the production (the lack of 'réalisme' in the production, its 'irréalisme'); and having rendered the 'system' docile, he had been able to perform a historical criticism by 'filling in' this history.<sup>2</sup> He could justify his use of formalism by the need to expose the hypocrisy of the production: Labiche's play had been 'soigneusement dissous' into a 'mythe', an 'alibi d'irresponsabilité': 'à force d'être une époque, 1900 est tout sauf une histoire: sa fonction est de vacciner l'Histoire réelle par une petite inoculation d'époque'. As we shall see in this chapter, concentrating on forms was crucial to Barthes's solution to his dilemma of how simultaneously to explain and describe.

This dilemma, however, had originated not with his view of the theatre but in relation to his fascination with the historian Jules Michelet. During the Occupation, Philippe Rebeyrol, then a student of history at the École Normale Supérieure, had sent his friend, bored by his long stays in various sanatoria, a copy of a Michelet text.<sup>3</sup> Barthes had become fascinated by Michelet's account of history; and, having read his entire *oeuvre*, he had planned to write a thesis on Michelet's political views: a 'critique historique' of his petty-bourgeois populism.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Rebeyrol, in February 1950, however, Barthes set out his major methodological dilemma in his study of the nineteenth-century historian:



[C]'est le rapport même de la méthode historique et de la méthode structurale qui est en cause [...] pour moi il n'est pas question de concevoir la critique structurale [...] comme autre chose qu'une introduction nécessaire mais non suffisante à la critique historique.

The result of his seven year intense study was the publication by les Éditions du Seuil of the only book in the period of his life that I am covering which was not primarily composed of various journalistic essays and reviews: *Michelet par lui-même* was, but for one article appearing in *Esprit* in 1951 and one in *Les Lettres nouvelles* in 1953, original material by Barthes.<sup>5</sup>

It must be noted that, of course, Barthes's interest in Michelet seemed hardly to be in keeping with his other avant-garde and left-wing interests (Cayrol, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Brecht etc.); if anything, Michelet was a stuffy populist, whose style 'shows none of the self-conscious restraint' that Barthes claimed to admire.<sup>6</sup> Was the 'degré zéro' of writing literature his main, or only, concern in the early 1950s? This seems to be Culler's suggestion; there was, however, another more crucial problem which Michelet posed for Barthes.

We saw how Barthes's fundamental interest in literature was how to aid the development of a new human science in such a way as to end the exclusion of the masses; was not his 'sociographical' solution to an explanation of contemporary reality which did not exclude the subjectivity of the 'volume social', his 'sociologie engagée', related to an interest in the corresponding problem for historiography? How had Michelet overcome the exclusion of the millions of historical objects, humans in their masses, in his writing? In other words, if part of Barthes's tactic in his 'sociologie engagée' was to expose the conversion of history into nature, this radical critique of the immobilising nature of capitalist ideology had to fit with his aim to demystify social relations and to establish an accurate account of the structure of society. What was the relation, then, between history and sociology, between change and order,



especially if the committed sociology recognized the alienation of the masses and the need to use myth to refind these people?

### **(i) Barthes and the fundamental importance of history**

It is impossible to overestimate the sheer weight of history in Barthes's thought and writing during this period - of the two hundred or so articles written between 1947 and 1960 a notion of history is present in every single writing.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, history for Barthes had necessarily a connection to other human sciences.<sup>8</sup> Though I have not the space to cover the subtleties of his diacritic use of the capital 'H' in the concept of history (this would need a whole thesis), I want to make a few remarks about its significance in his early writings. This might point to a way of understanding his attachment to the past and his search for an appropriate mode of its representation.

A good example of the difference can be seen in his review of Freyre's *Maitres et esclaves*; Freyre had, wrote Barthes, 'introduit dans l'histoire de l'homme brésilien une sexologie pensée à l'échelle de l'Histoire'.<sup>9</sup> Andrew Brown has noted recently that Barthes's use of capital 'H' not only added emphasis, but also made the word similar to a proper name, and, he pointed out, 'proper names are not concepts'; Barthes would capitalize, rather than hypostatize, the word in order to make it appear on a stage, whereby history became theatricalized.<sup>10</sup> In terms of Barthes's early use of the capital, this seems very plausible, particularly in relation to his desire for history to be present on the stage (hence his enthusiasm for Shakespeare and tragedy, and then Epic theatre): in order not to alienate history from human reality, he wanted to take it out of a purely cerebral and conceptual field, and restore to it the very material and corporeal reality of past human lives, just as on a stage.



This interest in seeing history theatricalized can be seen in Barthes's account of his visit to see the new cinema screen 'Au cinémascope', in which he dreamed of seeing Eisenstein's revolutionary film *Le Cuirassé Potemkine*.<sup>11</sup> Underlining how humanity needed 'une nouvelle dialectique entre les hommes et l'horizon, entre les hommes et les objets', a 'dialectique de la solidarité et non plus du décor', he insisted on 'l'espace de l'Histoire'; with this new understanding, he wrote (before his discovery of Brecht) 'techniquement, la dimension épique est née'. This dialectic, this solidarity with History would be, he imagined, one of humans seeing and participating in a representation of revolutionary history:

Imaginez-vous devant *Le Cuirassé Potemkine*, non plus posté au bout d'une lunette mais appuyé à même l'air, la pierre et la foule: ce *Potemkine* idéal, où vous pourriez enfin tendre la main aux insurgés, participer à la lumière [...] voilà qui est maintenant possible; le balcon de l'Histoire est prêt. (306, *OC* 380)

This view of history would be reflected in Brecht's theatre, which tried to 'surtout refuser à l'homme toute essence, dénier à la nature humaine toute réalité autre qu'historique, croire qu'il n'y a pas un mal éternel, mais seulement des maux rémédiables'; in short, Brecht's theatre wanted to 'remettre le destin de l'homme à l'homme lui-même'.<sup>12</sup>

However, Brown has suggested that Barthes's attachment to this representation of history was paradoxical: for, in wanting to underline a general social significance to 'History', Barthes could use the term at the same time only with a certain detachment (hence the stage); this paradox, says Brown, was typical of Barthes's 'drift'. This is part of Brown's thesis - that Barthes, in his very act of writing, was continually 'losing ground'. In terms of Barthes's later work, it is probably a useful concept. However, does it help to explain his changing understanding of history in the late forties and fifties? Was he simply adrift, or drifting from something?



### Barthes's 'firm' history

If Barthes was strongly influenced by the post-war developments in historiography and new historical research methods, his interest was, nevertheless, not purely intellectual; it fitted in with his political desire of a 'total' explanation of human phenomena, a view of society which was firmly dialectical. We saw how the 'dialectique d'amour' helped to explain Barthes's often (seemingly) contradictory views in the 'petites mythologies'. This dialectical thought was to be found in Brecht's representation of history; the 'plasticité' (a metaphor which conveyed the contradictory notions of firmness and pliability) which Barthes saw in Brecht's representation of history implied that, in the fifties, Barthes held a firmer view of history than the one attributed by Brown to 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Barthes's 'firm' view of history was present not only in terms of representation (in the theatre and the cinema), but also in explanation. In his review of two studies of racism and anti-racism in 1951, 'Humanisme sans paroles', he had insisted strongly on the centrality of history. The first, Michel Leiris's *Race et civilisation*, had demolished the old form of racism: not only could it be proven categorically that racial prejudice was an 'imposture' (since it no longer had the 'garantie de la science'), but Leiris's study had also cleared up the difference between 'faits naturels et faits culturels, entre héritage racial et héritage social'; there were now definite limits to the notion of 'race', restricted to an 'anthropologie physique':

La part de la Nature réduite, celle de la culture apparaît décisive: ce que les racistes attribuent à la race - qualités chez eux, défauts chez autrui - appartient en réalité à la tradition, c'est-à-dire à l'Histoire. (4, *OC* 105)

It was 'Histoire', affirmed Barthes, which had formed 'à peu de chose près tout le conditionnement psychique des hommes', and which had produced 'la pluralité des civilisations'. History had also 'provoqué, pour des raisons



économiques et politiques bien précises’, the growth of racial prejudice, which, far from instinctive, was also ‘culturel’; indeed, very little, in Barthes’s view, escaped the determination of History:

Ainsi rien n’échappe à l’Histoire - ou fort peu de choses, et inconséquentes: la couleur de la peau ou la forme des visages - pas même les aptitudes physiques, dont différents tests ont montré qu’elles étaient le fruit d’un conditionnement, d’une Histoire et non d’une Nature. (ibid)<sup>14</sup>

This was a source of optimism for Barthes. By his very description of the difference between civilisations, their particular faults and qualities, and the ‘fécondité’ of contact between them, Leiris had been able to ‘remettre tout entre les mains des hommes. Barthes’s firm, dialectical view of history led him to believe that Leiris had shown ‘la complexité d’une Histoire qui laisse à l’homme la responsabilité de ses maux, mais aussi par conséquent le pouvoir de leurs remèdes’.

This optimism was evident in the second half of ‘Humanisme sans paroles’, which was given over to praise of an ‘explication triomphante’ of racism in Part Two of Daniel Guérin’s *Où va le peuple américain?*. Guérin’s account of racism’s causes was ‘exclusivement d’ordre social et historique’: ‘le préjugé racial’, reiterated Barthes in a Marxist fashion, had been developed and maintained ‘pour justifier l’exploitation de la main d’oeuvre de couleur’; born at the same time as ‘le capitalisme et le colonialisme modernes’, he went on, racism was a direct product of capitalism reaching its ‘apogée’ in the mid-nineteenth century; noting how in America the peak of slave importation was between 1806 and 1860, when the country had four million slaves and four hundred thousand ‘propriétaires blancs’, he concluded with Guérin that racism had followed ‘très exactement’ the development of American capitalism, rather than the ‘voie démocratique, dont le credo était pourtant promulgué depuis longtemps déjà’; racism, for Barthes in 1951, was intimately linked to slavery and bourgeois democracy’s attempt to hide a contradiction:



Et c'est parce que la condition de l'esclave noir constituait une offense trop flagrante aux termes de ce credo que le nègre fut réellement dépouillé de sa qualité d'homme et assimilé à une marchandise; de cette façon la contradiction disparaissait; tant la bourgeoisie a été apte à accorder toujours, d'une manière ou d'une autre, ses intérêts et sa vertu. (ibid, *OC* 106)

Barthes also praised Guérin's study of the contemporary situation of the 'noir américain' (how the 'efforts de libération', the failures, the 'progrès acquis', 'un affranchissement final' were described 'efficacement' by the book). As with Leiris, Guérin's success, he said, was based, above all, on the book's emphasis on history: the facts had 'quitté l'ordre d'une fausse Nature, pour réintégrer l'ordre vrai de l'Histoire'. Barthes finished the review repeating more firmly his earlier optimism. The very act of explanation postulated the solution to the 'sentiment racial':

[C]omme chez Leiris, l'explication n'est pas seulement la forme nécessaire de la vérité: elle est aussi la figure de l'espérance. C'est parce que rien dans le passé n'existe en dehors de la raison historique, que l'avenir peut devenir la propriété entière des hommes qui le feront. L'explication culturelle des faits prétendus naturels est donc une démarche profondément humaniste. Elle représente même l'humanisme le plus concret, puisque l'espoir n'est pas un postulat messianique, mais une vertu de la vérité. En même temps, cet espoir contient ses propres armes: à l'égard d'un fait de culture comme le sentiment racial, l'explication est un acte authentique de destruction, le premier, sinon le seul. (ibid)

Two important points must be made here. Firstly, Barthes clearly considered that a historical materialist explanation of the origins of racial oppression postulated that oppression's very ending. Secondly, this analysis of history was an acutely 'voluntarist' one: it stressed the decisive action of humans in making history. However, when put together, these two points suggest a rather contradictory view of human agency. Though he denied the 'messianic' nature of his hope, hope nevertheless implied a certain passivity (Barthes would dismiss this, of course, by stressing that his act in ending racism had been that of explaining its origins and causes). We will see in a moment how this



combination of ‘voluntarism’ and passivity was a decidedly (immediate postwar) Trotskyist point of view. To understand, first, how Barthes could combine ‘voluntarism’ with a rather deterministic view of history, we must look at his ‘initiation’ into Marxism.

Barthes’s acute awareness of alienation under capitalism was evident in his letters written to Rebeyrol immediately after the War. Describing in July 1946 his determination to understand Marxism with a (Hobbesian) ‘courage du peureux’, he explained how he held with Marxists ‘l’espoir d’une société, pour ainsi dire, virginale où en quelque sorte tout sera enfin spirituellement possible’. He was convinced in this Liberation period that a true understanding of human reality was impossible under Capitalism: ‘en un sens, je ressens profondément qu’il n’y aura de vraie liberté intérieure que dans une société vraiment socialiste; il me semble que l’homme ne pourra commencer à philosopher qu’à ce moment-là’. Indeed, his claim in 1971 that he had been ‘sartrien et marxiste’ at the Liberation was questionable in relation to his actual view in 1946 of the dependency of existentialism’s validity on a socialist transformation of society: ‘L’existentialisme lui-même, si vrai par moments’, he confessed to Rebeyrol, ‘me paraît inutile jusqu’à ce jour-là’.

Calvet has described how Barthes developed this Marxist perspective during lengthy discussions with Georges Fournié in the sanatorium in Leysin.<sup>15</sup> It was, said Barthes in 1971, the ‘souplesse’ of Fournié’s dialectical, Trotskyist version of Marxism which had impressed him.<sup>16</sup> However, no mention was made by Barthes, nor by Calvet, of the influence of the Marxist philosopher Sidney Hook in his initiation into Marxism; Hook’s version of Marxism will prove to be an important component in an explanation of Barthes’s later theoretical and sociological developments.



### **Voluntarism, determinism and the critique of a philosophy of history.**

In the same letter to Rebeyrol in 1946 Barthes had described, having read Marx's *Sainte Famille*, how he was unimpressed by Marxism; such was the facile nature of materialist analysis that he said he could never 'vaincre' his 'répulsion pour le matérialisme en tant que philosophie': 'cela me paraît d'une confusion, d'une faiblesse et d'une puérité extrêmes. Jamais je ne pourrais croire que le *nec plus ultra* de la psychologie c'est le béhaviourisme', he concluded. 'Et aussi', he added, 'tous ces commentateurs marxistes sont d'une sévérité ridicule'.<sup>17</sup> There was, however, he wrote, one exception to this: he explained how he had found it 'très significatif d'avoir été tant séduit par un simple commentateur de Marx (Sidney Hook) et tant déçu (jusqu'à présent) par Marx lui-même'.<sup>18</sup>

Hook was an American theorist and political activist in the 1930s, whose *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* was to have an important effect on American Marxism.<sup>19</sup> It contained an impressive explanation of Marxist philosophy and political praxis, with important sections on individual agency in history; in his introduction he praised, notably, Karl Korsch for his understanding of praxis and Georg Lukács for his explanation of Marx's dialectics.<sup>20</sup> Insisting in the preface that his Marxism was not 'orthodoxe', Hook had underlined his aim to reinvent Marxism, which, he believed, had suffered a 'castration' at the hands of the Second and Third Internationals, in the exclusion of the idea that Marxism was a 'philosophy of action'. A precursor of 'Western Marxism', Hook attempted to combine in this important study of Marx which had so impressed Barthes, the pragmatic instrumentalism of John Dewey with Marx's historical materialist method.<sup>21</sup> His analysis provided (amongst other things) a detailed and highly sophisticated explanation of the dialectic in theory and in practice.<sup>22</sup>

Hook's 'voluntaristic' approach to Marxist theory and praxis was an important influence on Barthes's view of history and dialectics.<sup>23</sup> Talking about



his initiation into Marxism by his Trotskyist friend in the 'Réponses' interview, Barthes would underline the 'souplesse' of the dialectic which Fournié had imparted to him.<sup>24</sup> However, it seems that it was Hook's version of Marxism which had played the important role in alerting Barthes to the 'suppleness' of the dialectic. Hook's strong reaction to the vulgar materialism of the Second International and to social democratic reformism had insisted on the crucial aspect of pragmatism: a central feature of Marx's thought, according to Hook, was its 'souplesse'.<sup>25</sup>

Barthes seemed to take more than just the 'souplesse' of Hook's Marxism; Hook made an early attempt to suggest the importance of ideology in historical materialist explanations of the human ability to act in history.<sup>26</sup> Within Hook's 'pragmatism' was a denial of 'automatic fatalism' and a questioning of Marxism's 'emphasis on becoming familiar with patterns or laws of class struggle'.<sup>27</sup> This was precisely the thrust of Barthes's review of André Joussain's account of revolutions in 1950.<sup>28</sup>

Rejecting Joussain's 'grande entreprise' of explaining the laws behind social upheavals, Barthes criticised the manner in which Joussain's study ensured that 'l'histoire des hommes' was replaced by 'l'histoire du Destin', a determinism which, inherent in philosophy of history, alienated history from the people who had made it.<sup>29</sup> All this 'entreprise' had to do was offer a scientific understanding of the way change took place, and the very content of history would be evacuated, alienated from humans and made into a destiny: 'il lui suffit de méditer "scientifiquement" sur les "formes" de l'Histoire au détriment de son contenu'. This cunning way of substituting one view of reality for another had been pursued 'diversement' since the moment when historical accuracy began to improve, when 'la science historique elle-même s'étoffe et s'affermir', said Barthes, criticising nineteenth-century historians' use of science and prefiguring his praise of Michelet's use of 'la poésie'. By trying to deduce a law of revolutions from a comparison of ten very different historical



incidents, Jousain was simply doing what historians ‘de Herder à Hegel, de Montesquieu à Michelet’ had done: in establishing what Barthes called pejoratively a philosophy of history, Jousain had failed to understand the nature of revolutions.

‘Mais d’abord’, asked Barthes, ‘qu’est-ce qu’une révolution?’ He certainly did not agree with Jousain’s definition. For Jousain, revolution was a ‘simple changement de régime’, whether or not accompanied by ‘un déplacement de la propriété’; Barthes criticised Jousain for suggesting that ‘[l]a prise de pouvoir par Mussolini ou par Hitler, la révolution nationale [...] de 1940 sont [...] des révolutions à l’égale de la révolution russe’. Jousain’s ‘dégradation des révolutions’ by his erroneous comparisons had been possible only because he had considered ‘ses révolutions du plus haut possible, c’est-à-dire du point de vue le plus formel’.<sup>30</sup> It was Jousain’s use of an exhaustive (Linnaeus-style) catalogue of factors (such as psychological, social, permanent, periodical, intellectual, historical) which were informing his distant and contentless explanations and comparison; and, as with the undermining of Linnaeus’s scholastic attempts to classify all animals by the existence of the unclassifiable, Jousain’s attempt to understand the laws of revolutions was thwarted, said Barthes rather cryptically, by ‘la révolution elle-même [et] son volume spécifique’.

According to Barthes, the explanation of revolutions (indeed, of history) required coverage of a number of concrete dimensions (‘économiques, sociales, intellectuelles etc.’): the problem for historians was, he stressed, no longer that of isolating laws of history, ‘un mécanisme’, ‘un fil’; historians needed to achieve a synthesis which took into account the crucial factors of human society. Citing the work of the *Annalistes* as an example of this synthetic approach, he underlined how it was an awareness of multiple causation which was missing from Jousain’s account; for the latter history was but a ‘somme’ of causes, accidents and individualities, which, when mixed



together, could not account for history's diversity of events. In Barthes's opinion this was a mode of analysis of the causes of revolutions which led Joussain to make erroneous comparisons: the causes of revolutions 'se divisent pour lui en causes psychologiques, sociales, permanentes, périodiques, intellectuelles, historiques etc'.

But Barthes seemed to go further than the *Annales* view of the complex and multiple causation theory. Echoing Hook's emphasis on the voluntarist nature of history, here was the second part of his answer to the question: it was humans who made history. It was under the guise of this philosophy of history (a 'Histoire Comparée' he ironically called it, repeating Joussain's claim) that a 'dégradation' of the revolutionary actions of the masses could take place. Abstracting events from the content not only denied the specificity of those events, it also helped to deny actants in history: historical circumstances and human action were supplanted by 'l'omnipotence d'une Nature-Destin-Providence'. Man's 'instincts' and 'nature' were the 'imposture' which roamed within Joussain's analysis; and Joussain had denied the collective power of the people to make history ('les hommes, eux, en sont absents').<sup>31</sup> In angry terms, Barthes denied anybody the right to dispossess the masses by writing history in this manner:

Or ces hommes, dont la vie quotidienne entièrement attachée à un temps, à un lieu, à une condition de vie, a fait l'Histoire, on n'a pas le droit de les déposséder de cette Histoire. (4, *OC* 86)

Writing against the view that history simply happened, Barthes echoed Hook's insistence on the voluntaristic aspect of history: 'tout fait historique, tout homme historique est inaliénable', and Joussain's 'loi des révolutions' was part of the 'bagages' of a 'mythologie ambiguë qui ne raisonne sur l'Histoire que pour mieux la soustraire aux hommes qui la font'.



Clearly, his anger at Joussain's attempt to dispossess the people and the masses of history prefigured Barthes's 'dialectique d'amour' strategy of 'refinding' the men of his time:

[O]n n'a pas le droit de rapporter les déterminations d'un paysan de Luther à celles d'un avocat de la Constituante ou d'un ouvrier de la Commune; on n'a pas le droit de substituer à ces figures spéciales, un mécanisme général, dont les révolutions tomberaient, plus ou moins mûres, comme les mêmes fruits d'un même arbre. (ibid)

But Barthes's central point seemed to be that the denial of humanity's ability to make history, the alienation of history from the masses, was integral to the formalistic way in which Joussain defined revolutions and equated different historical moments. This critique of historical formalism was to appear again a year later: it was the evacuation of a content of historical and social phenomena which was the object of Barthes's critique of a short sociological study of Marxism by Roger Caillois, the co-founder of the 'Collège de Sociologie'.

### **Roger Caillois's description of Marxism**

Despite the importance of Roger Caillois in founding the 'Collège de Sociologie' before the War, and in articulating the importance of anthropology and theorists from outside of Europe (it was in his 'Croix du Sud' series for Gallimard that the translation of Gilberto Freyre's *Maîtres et esclaves* had been published in 1953), Barthes wrote two acerbic criticisms of Caillois's little-known study of Marxism, *Description du marxisme*.<sup>32</sup> Part of the 'comité de lecture' at Gallimard, Caillois was very probably not predisposed to consider Barthes's manuscript of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, given Barthes's views of his account of Marxism. This episode also began the battle between Barthes and Gallimard which culminated in his altercation with Jean Paulhan, as we saw



in Chapter Two; Barthes's questioning of the impartiality of the liberal intellectual could be seen to have begun with his critique of Caillois in 1951.

*Description du marxisme* was a virulent attack on historical materialism; insisting on the epistemological, rather than political, motive, Caillois identified the support of an 'organisation puissante' (the USSR) as the only reason for the success of historical materialist explanation as a 'science'; and he contrasted this situation with other sciences: 'Derrière Galilée, derrière Newton, il n'y eut jamais rien que la science et la vérité'.<sup>33</sup> His conclusion was that there was a certain 'scandale' in the 'ampleur' of Marxism, when it was clear that its claims to scientific status were masking its 'véritable dogme'. Denouncing Stalin and Zhdanov's attitude to Western Science and dialectical materialism's attempt to explain historical transformation with 'la lutte des classes', Caillois concluded that Marxism's popularity was political rather than scientific:

Ce prestige scandaleux vient tout entier de l'existence des partis communistes et de la Russie soviétique. Pour le dire plus nettement: loin que le marxisme garantisse la force et la raison du parti communiste, c'est partout le parti communiste, avec l'empire qui l'épaule, un cinquième du globe, on le répète assez, qui font, et eux seuls, la force et la raison actuelles de la doctrine marxiste. (28)

Reviewing Caillois's book in both *Combat* and *Esprit*, Barthes repeated his criticism of Joussain's formalism. The first review, "'Scandale" du marxisme?' in *Combat*, finished by putting forward a Trotskyist view of Marxism which challenged Caillois's view that the global success of Moscow-dominated Marxism was a scandal. For 'de nombreux dissidents' (and for Barthes too, it seemed) Stalinism was a tragedy, rather than a scandal:

Le dogmatisme marxiste n'est pas pour eux l'insolent paradoxe d'une malfaçon promue au rang de raison d'État, c'est la tragédie d'une vérité discréditée par les armes sous lesquelles on l'a étouffé. Ici le scandale marxiste n'est plus ce qui



sépare l'erreur du triomphe; il est ce qui sépare la vérité de son échec. (3, *OC* 104)

In the middle of this 'tragédie', the dissidents within Marxism were trying to keep alive 'la conscience du malheur, le goût de l'espoir et la volonté de comprendre' as if they were (Barthes carried on the theatrical image) 'le chœur antique'.

The political significance of Caillois's equation of Marxism with the dogmatic ideology of Moscow would, said Barthes, provide encouragement and reassurance to the enemies of Marxism; though avoiding a personal attack on Caillois, he had, nevertheless, little doubt about the effect on the perceived readership of Caillois's book of the equation of Marxism with religion.<sup>34</sup> But Barthes's main point was that, since Caillois had passed very quickly over the content of Marxism, he had dismissed its explanatory validity. Consequently, at the height of the Cold War, his description would appear to Marxist dissidents like 'l'une des nombreuses tentatives d'engourdissement' used by the right-wing and would deny the 'inquiétude salutaire' which Marxism represented. Rejecting Caillois's view that Marxism was useless to 'le monde moderne', Barthes underlined its capacity to open debate on the 'problèmes profonds de l'Histoire présente'. He concluded by stressing in distinctly materialist terms the historical problem of writing a sociological account of Marxism:

[T]oute sociologie du marxisme est prématurée tant que le "débat" marxiste lui-même n'est pas épuisé par l'Histoire. Or il est loin de l'être. [...] On sait [...] qu'on ne discute pas ici du sexe des anges mais du pain des hommes; et que, par conséquent, il y a une question antécédente à toute "situation" de la doctrine. (ibid)

Philippe Roger has called the first sentence of this an argument 'familier au milieu intellectuel qui va des rescapés du RDR aux survivants du trotskisme'.<sup>35</sup>

What Barthes seemed to be saying was that the flippant manner in which



Caillois had equated Marxism with religious doctrine ignored the crucial nature of the debate about Marxism, which had a bearing on people's lives.

However, this tentative defence of a non-stalinist Marxism, tacitly advocating a Trotskyist version, was only the second half of the review. In the first half, Barthes concentrated on analysing Caillois's mode of description, and on criticising his metaphorical conception of Marxism. Thus, Caillois wanted to analyse, said Barthes, not the ideas of Marxism - though he certainly had disdained 'passablement' the content of Marxism, opined Barthes ironically - but the way it functioned in the modern world. Seeing the 'disproportion surprenante' between the doctrine's 'précarité' and the 'ampleur' of its success, Caillois had deemed the situation 'scandaleux' and suggested that adherence to orthodoxy could consequently be explained only in political terms. In a manner which was to prefigure many of the 'petites mythologies', Barthes now went on to undermine the thought processes which led Caillois to this conclusion. Caillois's description had a 'mouvement double', where form and content, doctrine and orthodoxy, discredited each other mutually:

Fausse en soi, la doctrine voit son errement grossi par l'artifice de son succès; et le succès est lui-même scandaleux parce que ce sont des 'erreurs' qu'il codifie. Aussi importe-t-il moins de juger les deux termes du mouvement que de décrire leur rapport. (ibid, *OC* 103)

Happy to condemn the idea of Marxism 'en passant', Caillois was interested in its 'error' only because, said Barthes, the doctrine of Marxism had been 'exagérément gonflée'. Barthes's ironic conclusion was that 'l'enflure même de la situation marxiste par rapport à la dérision de son objet' was a 'paradoxe inadmissible pour la raison', and that, typical of 'reason', 'le scandale marxiste est d'ordre purement quantitatif'. This was an ironic comment which could easily have appeared in one of the 'mythologies'.

His second review of Caillois's book, 'A propos d'une métaphore', published in *Esprit* four months later, carried on the critique of metaphor. Here,



he attacked the analogical manner in which Caillois had equated Marxism with the Church:

Cette méthode consiste à dégager de deux faits historiques différents, des caractères semblables et généraux, d'amorcer une sorte de constante de l'Histoire, de ramener marxisme et chrétienté dans les limites d'une Histoire purement institutionnelle, objet d'une sociologie des Formes. (677, *OC* 111)

Caillois was using, he said, a nineteenth-century technique of explanation: the analogy. His critique of Joussain had shown how content had been evacuated; now Caillois's 'histoire analogique' was offering in the same way a shallow view of history, in the form of a philosophy of history:

[L]'analogie était la méthode scientifique par excellence, parce qu'au XIXe siècle, la Science [...] ne pouvait se contenter d'une pure description des phénomènes historiques; il lui fallait à tout prix en trouver l'ordre secret et moteur, la raison, la loi, l'esprit, l'*organisation*, mot qui commence alors sa fortune. (ibid)

It was, wrote Barthes, Michelet in particular who had been guilty of this formal, analogical account of history, which, like Caillois's equation of Marxism with a religion, had acted as a way of writing of history which generated security (we will look at this in relation to Michelet later in the chapter):

Michelet a [...] constitué les origines de Rome, par une série d'analogies, induisant l'inconnu du connu. L'Histoire s'est alors trouvée pénétrée d'une multitude de thèmes, qui joignaient des points éloignés du Temps et introduisaient dans la masse du passé une familiarité apaisante. Cette sécurité était aux yeux des historiens d'alors celle même de la science [...]. (ibid)

The problem with the analogy, typified by Michelet's writing of history, was that it could not account for the singularity of specific historical phenomena, could not explain all of an event's contents:



La méthode historique s'est trouvée soumise à une nouvelle exigence, le jour où l'on a compris que les caractères d'un fait n'absorbent pas tout son contenu, que celui-ci était incessible, alors que ceux-là pouvaient se reproduire d'un fait à l'autre. On s'aperçut que l'Histoire contenait une postulation contradictoire, car il y a en elle un mouvement irréversible et une stabilité des lignes, une disparité absolue de fond et une communauté de formes. (ibid, OC 112)

Barthes's point was not that analogy was an incorrect method of writing history, but that an analogical writing of history could not, alone, represent historical reality in its totality: if moments in history were fundamentally different by virtue of their content, they might also resemble each other formally. This contradiction had important ramifications for historiography:

Le problème de l'historiographie moderne est de rendre compte à la fois de la structure et de l'écoulement du Temps, d'organiser le passé, c'est-à-dire d'établir un rapport entre les faits qui n'ont eu lieu qu'une fois. Or toute Histoire scientifique n'explique rien, toute Histoire analogique sacrifie le contenu du fait: l'Histoire est inaliénable et pourtant explicable; tel est le dilemme. (677-678, OC 112)

Traditional narratives (a 'Histoire scientifique' such as Joussain's) were incapable of *explaining* historical phenomena; and any account which considered distinct historical events as formally similar ('Histoire analogique') evacuated the specific content of these events. In other words, the singularity of a historical phenomenon could not be taken out of a human context (it was 'incessible' - non-transferable, or 'inaliénable'); yet, Barthes was insisting, the similarity of disparate historical phenomena implied a possibility of a general explanation of causes. It was Marx who seemed to Barthes to have found the solution to this:

Marx semble l'avoir bien vu: la lutte des classes, par exemple, n'est pas une analogie, mais un principe organisateur, qui n'attende en rien au contenu incessible de chacun des épisodes; elle est une constante coextensive à la singularité des faits historiques; mais au lieu d'être un lien de surface, l'analogie est placée à la racine des faits; il s'agit d'un hypophénomène, si l'on veut, et de cette façon l'ordre et le mouvement de l'Histoire sont conciliés. (678, OC 112)



Barthes was resolving the contradiction in 1951 in a dialectical fashion: the notion of class struggle could explain change since, though it was a 'constante', it did not ignore the particular form any one event or phenomenon might take. At the same time he was displaying once again a 'voluntaristic' view of history: history was 'inaliénable' because it was made by human actants.

Two things were clear in Barthes's view of history in 1951; firstly, that history was inalienable, and secondly, that analogy was, formally, an incorrect way to represent history. For Barthes these two contexts were intimately linked: a historiography needed to be developed which did not deny that humans had and could make history, but which did not at the same time use this idea to explain all of history's contents. In other words, Barthes believed that the general view that humans made history was correct, but that without a formal solution to a representation of this in its historical complexity and variability, Joussain and Caillois could continue to alienate history from the masses.

However, emphasis on a content-based analysis and on the voluntarist, inalienable nature of history seemed to disappear across the 1950s. In his study of fashion, 'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement', published in *Annales* in 1957, it was no longer historical materialism but a study of forms which could resolve the historiographical contradiction of how to represent simultaneously change and structure; faced with the same dilemma, as we shall see, Barthes would consider that it was semiology, not Marx's 'lutte des classes', which could solve this epistemological problem.<sup>36</sup>

## **(ii) Form and structure, not history and its contents**

'Histoire et sociologie du vêtement' was an impressive study of the methods used so far to understand the history of fashion. Subtitled 'Quelques



observations méthodologiques', this long article displayed not only Barthes's impressive academic knowledge of the history of the study of fashion but also his sensitivity to the problem of simultaneously explaining and describing both changes in fashion and their relation to the norm. If, six years earlier, he had analysed the same dilemma in relation to Caillois and Michelet, by 1957 it was not simply 'historiographie moderne' which was implicated, but the very direction of a cultural understanding.

If the science of fashion history was founded in the nineteenth-century at the same time as the birth of all other 'sciences humaines', then, suggested Barthes, it was faced with exactly the same epistemological problem as all social sciences; the analysis of fashion forms in history had ramifications for the 'chercheur' which went far wider than the study of clothes:

[L]'histoire du costume a une valeur épistémologique générale: elle propose en effet au chercheur les problèmes essentiels de toute analyse culturelle, la culture étant à la fois système et procès, institution et acte individuel, réserve expressive et ordre signifiant. (441, *OC* 752)<sup>37</sup>

We will look at how Barthes's proposed mode of analysis failed to cover the 'acte individuel' in a moment. Nevertheless, Barthes's point was an important one.

The problem of how to establish a total knowledge and understanding of social phenomena was typified by the contradictory relationship of fashion to historical change and structural norms:

L'histoire du costume témoigne à sa façon de la contradiction de toute science de la culture: tout fait culturel est à la fois produit de l'histoire et résistance à l'histoire. (ibid)

If this contradiction underlined for Barthes the question of the direction not only of studies of fashion but that of social sciences in general, it went to the heart of his interest in history. As a study of the institutionalisation of clothing



forms, this was not so far from the study of the relationship between literary signs and the literary institution in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*:

En fait, ce qui doit intéresser le chercheur, historien ou sociologue ce n'est pas le passage de la protection à la parure (passage illusoire), mais la tendance de toute couverture corporelle à s'insérer dans un système formel organisé, normatif, consacré par la société. (433-434, *OC* 744)

It was the structural (institutional) explanation (the 'inside' of clothes), which explained the particular forms that clothes took; social changes (history) were external, they determined changes in fashion, but not the specific forms taken:

Le vêtement [...] est à chaque moment un équilibre processif, à la fois produit et défait par des déterminismes de nature, de fonction et d'amplitude variées, les uns internes, les autres externes au système lui-même. (440-441, *OC* 752)<sup>38</sup>

We will see how this study not only was different from his study of literary forms in the 'degré zéro' thesis, but more importantly, how Barthes's solution to this epistemological dilemma was indicative of his move away from his earlier insistence on a voluntarist Marxian conception of history.

### **Fashion and form**

The study underlined Barthes's interest in the *Annales* and its new mode of inquiry; recent innovations in 'études historiques' ('[s]urvenu en France depuis une trentaine d'années') had, he said, not yet brought changes in the analysis of fashion:

[L]a dimension économique et sociale de l'Histoire, les rapports du vêtement et des faits de sensibilité tels que Lucien Febvre les a définis, l'exigence d'une saisie idéologique du passé comme peuvent postuler les historiens marxistes, c'est en fait toute la perspective institutionnelle du costume qui fait encore défaut; lacune d'autant plus paradoxale que le vêtement est objet à la fois historique et sociologique, s'il en fût. (431, *OC* 741)



Up until 1957 a history of clothes had been ‘un fait essentiellement romantique’. Before the nineteenth century there had never been a real history, only ‘des études d’archéologie antique ou des recensions d’habits par qualité’; in line with the study of history in general, ‘des travaux proprement scientifiques’ did not begin until 1860. Earlier romantic studies in the nineteenth century had tended either to be used by artists to recreate “‘couleur locale’” or to evoke an ‘équivalence’ between styles of clothes and “‘l’esprit général’” of the particular period. But even the more scientific aspect of nineteenth-century studies of clothes had been no better; furthermore these were, he said, still used in 1956. Treating fashion as an ‘événement’, these accounts understood fashion simply as an ‘addition de pièces’, to find above all the ‘origine circonstancielle’.<sup>39</sup> So, not only was fashion linked to commerce, but so was the discourse on it; Barthes’s aim was to find an analysis which could provide an alternative to the ‘insuffisances’ of what he called this ‘histoire historisante’; his idea was to bring in a notion of structure.

This posed, however, the epistemological problem, which we saw above: any attempt to introduce a notion of structure into a historical study, had to accept that each historical moment was an ‘équilibre de formes normatives’, and, at the same time, an ‘ensemble’ nevertheless ‘sans cesse en devenir’. All historical analyses of clothes had, up until then, managed to resolve this contradiction only ‘dans la confusion’; either they had understood the differences internally, or by looking at the external historical events: ‘[l]’insuffisance des réponses’ was ‘au niveau à la fois de l’analyse et de la synthèse’.<sup>40</sup> On the level of ‘différenciation interne’ no study had defined what a clothes system might be, what Barthes called ‘l’ensemble axiologique’ - the ‘contraintes, interdictions, tolérances, aberrations, fantaisies, congruences et exclusions’ which any historical period might witness. In this sense they had missed the *social* importance of clothes: the ‘archétypes’ were ‘purement graphiques’, part of an ‘ordre esthétique (et non sociologique)’. Thus our



knowledge of fashion had no precision in the date at which a form or a function of an article of clothing changed (its ‘seuil qualitatif’) nor any consideration of the legal definitions of what constituted under- and over-garments.

In line with his view of the exclusion of the ‘subjectivité de l’homme populaire’, Barthes underlined the exclusion of mass social reality that traditional history-writing of fashion had operated by concentrating only on the aristocratic aspect: ‘[s]ocialement [...] les histoires du costume ne s’occupent à peu près que du costume royale ou aristocratique’. In the *Critique* article on fashion in 1959, he underlined the ‘état anthologique’ of these studies which operated ‘comme si le peuple n’avait jamais été habillé’.<sup>41</sup> If the ‘inside’ of clothes had been ignored, then, the same was true of external differentiation; though the researcher might recognize, suggested Barthes, a general history in which, traditionally, fashions changed with political regimes, this history had never been presented as anything but national and aristocratic, and was always exclusive of a popular vestimental reality. This aristocratic history failed to understand why certain clothes were worn outside of the ruling élite. Hinting at his desire to end the exclusion of the masses from the historiography of fashion forms, Barthes noted not only that the masses had been written out, but also that, if they were included, it was in an abstract fashion only:

[H]ors des classes oisives, [le costume] n’est jamais mis en rapport avec le travail vécu du porteur; c’est tout le problème de la fonctionnalisation du vêtement qui est passé sous silence. [...] Le Roi reste ici magiquement affecté d’une fonction charismatique: on le considère par essence comme le Porteur du Vêtement. (431, *OC* 743)

What was the connection for Barthes between historians of fashion writing the masses out of history and sociologists’ not understanding the institutionalization of fashion forms? A functional explanation had been ignored entirely in relation to the clothes of the masses; in short, a functional explanation was a necessary component in any attempt to explain social history



and sociological reality of the masses in its totality. This was Barthes's central theoretical innovation in this article. The traditional, narrative history was, he said, only part of a more general mistake in an 'external' study of clothes, which was to ignore clothes as function; crucially he was posing the tension between history and structure: it was the epistemological problem of how to represent this past reality. An analysis was required which, whilst avoiding a concentration on aristocratic history and a mythical view of ordinary people's fashion tastes, could still account for formal changes. Following Greimas's 1950 study of fashion in 1830, Barthes underlined that it was semiology which could overcome this methodological and historical problem and this semiological method had to be a distinctly functionalist one. There were two crucial points in this; firstly Barthes was offering a semiological, historiographical solution to what was clearly a concrete, social problem; secondly, this semiology was suggested at the expense of a Marxian historiography put forward in 1951.

We might suggest that this was based on the fact that Barthes's object of study had changed here from history *tout court* to the history and sociology of fashion, and that this required a different methodology. However, the formalistic analysis clearly required by his study of fashion was also different from his analysis of forms in the 'degré zéro' thesis of the late forties and early fifties.

Though a functional explanation was clearly present in the 'Degré zéro' thesis, it had clearly been related to popular culture only in as much as the masses were excluded from literature; the 'Degré zéro' thesis treated the realities of literary form only for an élite set of writers, at a time (1947-1953) when literature was evidently of little importance to a large section of the population, who were either functionally illiterate or alienated enough by work and conditions not to find literature of interest or worth (here, clearly, the cinema and the theatre especially were considered by Barthes as the most apt



forms of 'popular culture'). In this sense, we suggest that in this 1957 article Barthes was bound to be more aware of a mass cultural expression than he appeared in the 'Degré zéro' thesis because of the sheer nature of the object of study. Fashion was a social phenomenon which, by definition, required an act of creativity by those masses excluded from traditional historical and sociological discourses: to wear a certain type of clothes was to act against (as well as within) social norms, and represented an inalienable form of making 'history'.

However, the irony was that, as Barthes appeared to be becoming more interested in representing in totality the reality of the masses in contemporary as well as historical times, his mode of analysis seemed to move away from the inalienability of human acts. The 1957 study of fashion seemed to stress the structural and institutional aspect of fashion: in trying to find a suitable account of fashion as a totality, he seemed to be denying the importance of history and human agency. He wrote:

Des faits historiques violents peuvent troubler les rythmes de mode, amener de nouveaux systèmes; ils modifient le régime de participation, mais n'expliquent nullement les formes nouvelles. (442, *OC* 751)

This, in itself, was not indicative of Barthes's abandonment of voluntarism. But, when placed next to his attitude towards the sheer weight of history in determining forms of literature, it pointed to a significant decrease in the importance of history in his analysis for two reasons.

Firstly, the 'Degré zéro' theory of form had insisted on the centrality of historical events in the 1848-1851 period, both political (subjective - the ruin of bourgeois liberalism) and objective (the first economic crisis caused by capitalism) in determining 'écriture'. This rather mechanical and overly determinist view of history's effect on form had, by 1957, been replaced. By using Saussure's diachrony and synchrony distinction, Barthes was suggesting



that humanity's progress, its struggle with nature, was now of little importance and he seemed to question the material basis of human development in the history of clothes:

L'étude du costume doit réserver sans cesse la pluralité de ces déterminations. La précaution méthodologique principale est ici encore de ne jamais postuler hâtivement une équivalence directe entre la super-structure (le vêtement) et l'infra-structure (l'histoire). (441, *OC* 752)

Barthes had conceded that 'une saisie idéologique du passé' by 'les historiens marxistes', could be of use, but that a total explanation by Marxism alone could not achieve this.

Secondly, not only did this semiological method contradict his assertion of the crucial importance of history in the forms of literature, it seemed to deny the active participation of the masses in shaping forms. Even *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, itself rather determinist and pessimistic in its view of the possibility of liberating language and literature, had managed to show that there was a 'voluntarist' aspect to history. This was contained in the first paragraph of the book (absent from the various articles on the 'degré zéro' published in *Combat*). Hébert's use of 'grossièretés' had heralded, wrote Barthes, a new, tumultuous situation in French history ('Toute une situation révolutionnaire'); his editorials in *Le Père Duchêne* were, by their very use of foul language (such as 'bougre' and 'foutre'), indicative of the enormous changes taking place in France.

However, was there not a contradiction here in Barthes's analysis? Why begin a book which set out to deny the fundamental importance of the 1789-1794 Revolution upon literary form with an example which underlined the revolutionary nature of certain journals? Surely, the answer lies in the voluntaristic aspect that Barthes wished to stress in 1953: Hébert's swear words might not signify (they only 'signalaiert'); but Barthes's reason for putting this in the first paragraph, unless a glaring contradiction, was to insist



upon the voluntaristic aspect of language, which, like the power of the masses ('la lutte des classes' in his terminology of 1951), allowed humans, to some extent, to act upon the institution of language (here the taboos of swear words before the final overthrow of Absolutism).

Though Barthes's central aim in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* was not to insist upon the capacity of humans to transform language (rather, his point was the opposite: language is a ritual like literature, which is incorporated, even recuperated, by the institution of language and literature, to the extent that history is abstracted), it was used to show how a language event, such as swearing, looked before its abstraction. Indeed, this relationship of Hébert's revolutionary audacity to Barthes's voluntarist view of history informed the dilemma of the 'degré zéro' thesis: though the history of literature since 1850 had been one in which 'Histoire' (the 'déchirement social') had constricted writing, Hébert had shown that language could be changed; this was a tension which culminated in Barthes's dialectical and eschatological question, 'Est-il possible de libérer la parole avant l'Histoire?'. Even this ambiguous (though still voluntaristic - 'libérer' implies an act) aspect was absent from his proposed methodology for studying fashion.

But it was above all the absence of a consideration of the historical significance of (any) 'acte individuel' which underlined Barthes's move away from voluntarism; this was compounded by his critique of a prototype of Anglo-American methodological individualism, which he considered to be a purely mythical explanation unable to enlighten the 'chercheur'.

This mythical view was contained in the manner in which a psychological explanation of clothes was used to explain forms; in Barthes's view, it left 'entière la difficulté méthodologique majeure, qui est d'unir à chaque instant une histoire et une sociologie du costume'. In his view, a study of the 'mobile de parure' was based on an 'illusion "psychologique"', which was unable to explain societal phenomena in their totality, a method which



sociology needed to leave behind; Barthes claimed that he wanted a materialist account of form which understood the individual and the particular in relation to the whole and the general, to the social.<sup>42</sup>

In so doing, however, had not Barthes denied the individual nature of clothes as expression? His desire for totality in explanation was central to this epistemological shift, formed in opposition to the individual, mythical epistemology. In his desire to insist on the social and material, as well as the formal conditions of vestimentary phenomena, had he not abstracted the role of the masses, sometimes necessarily individualised, in creating fashion forms?

In advocating semiology as the solution to the contradiction of history and structure, he was essentially underlining the linguistic, hence literary, dimension of the history of clothes: the fashion institution (the dominant ideology, in a sense) had been posited as the determining factor of form, not historical development and social events; where did this leave the creative (that is, resistance) aspect of popular revolt in his account? In his view it was 'Histoire' and 'culture', not people, which acted as resistance to the dominant ideology and social norms: if 'tout fait culturel' was 'à la fois produit de l'histoire et résistance à l'histoire', then individuals, as a collective group, did not seem to affect this.

Barthes's major concern was that 'épistémologie actuelle' needed to study the 'totalité historico-sociale' as 'un ensemble de relais et de fonctions'; the fact that '[l]e costume est essentiellement un fait d'ordre axiologique' meant that 'ce sont des *valeurs*, qui témoignent du pouvoir créateur de la société sur elle-même'.<sup>43</sup> Not only did this axiological methodology evacuate agency (considering clothes and language, and all other social phenomena as 'relais' and 'fonctions'), it also suggested a methodology for a historiography, in essence, no different from Caillois's and Joussain's.

We will remember that Barthes had exposed in 1950 and 1951 precisely the 'fonctions' of Caillois's argument and his 'sociologie des formes',



and Joussain's formalistic evacuation of historical agency, both of which he had considered indicative of their attempt to abstract and alienate history from the masses who, in Barthes's view, had made (and would go on to make) history. Though a functionalist analysis of forms had been clearly present in his accounts of literary form between 1947 and 1953, the 'degré zéro' thesis was based on the constricted, but nevertheless possible ways of liberating writing and language; the history of fashion, by contrast, insisted only on the methodological contradiction of a scientific and total account of social forms, without any notion of an eschatological liberation.

Therefore, in order to establish how Barthes's interest in 1957 in a formalist social and historical science developed between 1951 and 1957, we must look at his attitude towards history in relation to his favourite historian Jules Michelet. The root of Barthes's displeasure with formalism was given in 'A propos d'une métaphore', we will remember, where he traced the analogical abuses of the masses (by Joussain) and of contemporary Marxism (by Caillois) back to the nineteenth-century romantic epistemology, in particular to the writing of history by Michelet.

In this final section we must try to establish the extent of Michelet's influence on Barthes in the light of his move from content to form, from history to structure. Despite his brusque characterization of Michelet's populism as 'petit-bourgeois', and the political similarity of this populism to Poujadist ideology, Barthes's attitude towards Michelet was one which developed across the fifties: though Barthes criticised aspects of Michelet's politics and historiography, he was nevertheless influenced by Michelet's writing.



### (iii) Michelet and historiographical critique.

Like his 'sociologie engagée', Barthes's interest in history was constrained by a double bind: he wanted a scientific and objective analysis, which, as his interest in the *Annales* showed, used the latest progress of the social sciences to forge a 'total' social history; but this history should not exclude a description and an expression of the 'subjectivité de l'homme populaire'.

A good example of Barthes's interest in popular history was his highly favourable review of Claude Roy's poetry anthology *Trésor de la Poésie Populaire*, in which he opposed the 'poésie de classe', based on the muse, to a 'poésie populaire', defined by 'consommation'; inspired by the *Annales*, Barthes criticised 'l'histoire littéraire courante' and suggested that an 'autre histoire' was needed, which would look for facts 'non dans la singularité de la littérature, mais dans sa *sociabilité*'.<sup>44</sup>

This desire for a historiographical 'sociabilité' was reflected most clearly by his active involvement in the French popular theatre movement of the 1950s; the social nature of art was a common theme in his analysis of popular theatre, linked to the civic theatre of Ancient Greece. If the popular masses were excluded from going to the theatre by the predominance of bourgeois culture (with its high prices etc.), then, in Barthes's view, this was only part of a wider exclusion, in which the very writing of history had, up until now, been implicated.

This did not mean that the *Annales*, though pioneering in applying scientific methods to historical research, had solved the problem; Barthes wanted a new historiography to reflect also the important element of popular subjectivity, that of the popular classes actually making history. This desire of Barthes's for a 'voluntarist' account of popular history was to be satisfied, to a large extent, by the theatre.



The fact that popular culture had been, in his view, marginalized, if not silenced, since the seventeenth century, was part of (if not determined by) the way in which history had been written; if the theatre can be considered as an art-form which tries to recreate, quite literally, the physical reality of the past and of the present, then it also poses human history as a theatricality, sees humans making history as part of a stage-scene. Tragedy, and then Epic theatre, were forms which encouraged the voluntarist view of history. Indeed, Barthes made the connection explicit between popular theatre and writing history in 1954. In his review of *Ruy Blas* at the TNP, he applauded Michelet's portrayal of History, comparing him to Shakespeare:

[N]ulle part, *Ruy Blas* ne présente cette transmutation épique qui change l'événement en Histoire et les hommes en destin, comme on le voit chez Michelet ou Shakespeare. (94, *OC* 405)<sup>45</sup>

There was a connection between writing history and popular theatre. There can be little doubt that Michelet's writings had helped to influence Barthes's popular theatre activism. Barthes's promotion of tragedy, and then of epic theatre, was based on the education of the popular masses, who (in the first half of the 1950s at least) seemed keen to learn: not only was the popular theatre for Barthes a challenge to the philistinism of the bourgeoisie, it was also (as typified by Vilar's productions of Shakespeare, Molière and Kleist, and Planchon's efforts in Lyons) bringing education to the masses, recreating the civic theatre of ancient Greece.<sup>46</sup> Barthes admired Michelet's writing because, in his view, it understood the fundamental contradiction of writing history: how to be a part of the struggle for change, by describing episodes partially, and simultaneously to stand back and give history a meaning. Furthermore, Barthes was to stress in 1974 that Michelet's attraction for him had been the 'parti pris' that was invested in his account of history.<sup>47</sup> Michelet's relation to and very writing of history reflected his love of 'le peuple'.<sup>48</sup> It was in these two points



that Barthes's writings in the 1950s began, usually tacitly, to display the influence of Michelet, until in 1959 his open praise and heralding of Michelet as the first sociologist. Thus, though Barthes seemed critical of many of Michelet's theories and beliefs, he was to become influenced by his knowledge of Michelet's writings.

### **The two-term dialectic and the motor of history**

In the same year as the publication of *Michelet par lui-même* Barthes seemed to reject Michelet's ideology and writing of history. For example, in his 'militant' editorial for *Théâtre populaire* 5 in January/February 1954, Barthes advocated an account of 'le peuple' which understood the dialectical nature of history and which rejected an essentialist, nineteenth-century, tacitly Micheletian, notion of 'le peuple':

Nous ne concevons pas ici le peuple à la manière du XIXe siècle comme une catégorie éternelle, d'essence inaltérable en dépit des options de l'Histoire. (1-2, *OC* 381)

In his view, a more dialectical conception was required; he went on:

Le peuple est toujours dans l'Histoire, et c'est toujours l'Histoire qui fait le peuple, emplit ce mot de contenus différents selon les époques, faisant ici un peuple-cité, là un peuple bourgeois, là encore un peuple prolétaire. (2, *OC* 381)<sup>49</sup>

The same year, his critique of Michelet was explicit; during his vitriolic attack on Sacha Guitry's latest film, *Si Versailles m'était conté*, he rejected Michelet's understanding of history.<sup>50</sup> Having observed how Guitry's film had brought 'l'Histoire dans une prostitution générale', he compared this to Michelet's misinterpretation of history: '[d]es esprits sérieux', he complained, had underlined the errors in Guitry's film; but, in his view, it was 'vraiment comique' to address 'le même reproche à Guitry qu'à Michelet': 'L'erreur



historique', asserted Barthes in relation to Michelet, 'est un phénomène adulte, mais quel sens peut-elle avoir dans cette préhistoire de l'imbécillité?'

Michelet's 'erreur', for Barthes, was to have maintained a romantic notion of the motor of history.<sup>51</sup> Tracing Caillois's metaphorical equation of Marxism with the Church back to Michelet's nineteenth-century philosophy of history, Barthes had rejected in 1951 the idea that history moved in a linear, even manner, growing like a plant, as a historicist myth typical of an analogical, Romantic mode of analysis; and he had named Michelet as this analogical thinker.<sup>52</sup> 'Formellement', stated Barthes, romantic thought, from 1750 to 1850, had been based on the metaphor of the 'série équationnelle de la "chaîne"', an image which, in covering both 'l'identité et la variation des types', postulated 'un continu et un devenir de la Nature'. Jousain's philosophy of history had been an example of this; it alienated history 'au profit de quelque surnature'. It was precisely between his articles on Jousain in 1950 and Caillois in 1951 that he had analysed analogy in Michelet's discourse on history; and this analysis had influenced his critique of formalism.

Albert Béguin has noted that there is a fundamental difference between Barthes's view of Michelet in the 1951 article, 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort' and the final book version. In the former, Barthes displayed, he said, an 'eschatologie marxiste' by looking at Michelet's 'conception d'ensemble'; in the latter, however, Barthes appeared, affirmed Béguin, more interested in Michelet's 'fonction imaginante'.<sup>53</sup> If we look at Barthes's article, is Béguin's view borne out?

This first publication of his views on Michelet was a study of the historian's conception and account of history. Barthes's aim was to describe how Michelet's political and romantic attachment to the people translated into his writing of history. Firstly, he offered an explanation of Michelet's conception of change: whereas Vico had seen change in terms of 'grands pans immobiles', history ordered 'comme un monde stellaire', Michelet had seen



change in purely naturalistic terms. Characterizing it as a 'Histoire-Végétation', he analysed Michelet's account of humans, ideas, systems, religions and countries and its portrayal of their capacity to grow, triumph and die, just as a plant would. Furthermore, he gave a historical explanation for Michelet's conception of History which was worthy of the *degré zéro* thesis; Barthes was showing how Michelet's writing pointed to and reflected (inadvertently) the historical moment in which he was writing (the end of the Enlightenment period): Michelet had been marked and heavily influenced by developments in natural science (Lamarck's zoology, Lavoisier's chemistry and de Beaumont's geology); thus, in the same way that Vico and Newton had relied on the image of matter, so Michelet had used the two movements of the plant in his rhetorical account of history. But secondly, and more importantly, Barthes was seemingly critical of the manner in which change in history was represented by Michelet.

Like his criticism of Caillois in the first review of *Description du marxisme* which criticised Caillois's mathematical view of Marxism (and prefiguring his critique of Poujadist ideology in the two well-known 'petites mythologies' of 1955 and 1956), Barthes's study noted how Michelet's historiography used a form of balancing which denied a (dialectical) resolution; this was based on what he called Michelet's two-term dialectic:

L'altérité des objets historiques n'est jamais totale, l'Histoire est toujours familière, car le Temps n'est là que pour soutenir une identité; son mouvement est équationnel, sa dialectique à deux termes. (500, *OC* 93)

He gave two examples of this. The first was the way in which Michelet's account of history had put Jeanne d'Arc immediately after peasant Jacques; the second was Michelet's portrayal of Louis XI. In the first, Barthes pointed out that, though historically they were unrelated, Michelet had put them together because they held similar values - of 'le Peuple', anti-feudal and anti-English



(which were also Michelet's values, Barthes pointed out). Jeanne d'Arc and Jacques in Michelet's writing of history were, suggested Barthes, like 'deux termes d'une identité mathématique'. This was precisely the basis of his critique of Joussain's and Caillois's historical formalism.

This critique continued in Barthes's 1953 article 'Féminaire de Michelet'.<sup>54</sup> If, for Michelet, the Woman was that area of Nature which was beyond History, then this was, said Barthes, indicative of his conception of change; Michelet's 'Histoire' knew only 'une dialectique linéaire, à deux temps'.<sup>55</sup> This idea of a two-term dialectic was to become, in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', part of Barthes's quandary, which considered that the 'amputation' of the dialectic was necessary, if only temporary, for the mythologist to perform both the semiological dismantling and the ideological critique of myth.<sup>56</sup>

In 1951, however, it was indicative for Barthes of how Michelet saw change occurring and part of his criticism of Michelet's writing of history: the two-term dialectic illustrated the organic and romantic aspect of Michelet's historiography. Noting that Michelet considered history to be driven by "le chemin de fer historique", Barthes concluded that there was only one moment in Michelet's account of history when the constant oscillation of the two-stage dialectic had been resolved in a 'contrepoint historique': the French Revolution; history, in Michelet's writing, was moving inexorably towards the French Revolution. The Revolution had been for Michelet the motor of all history preceding it, it was the 'ordonnatrice du temps'.<sup>57</sup> Here, perhaps, was the basis of Béguin's view of an 'eschatologie marxiste' in Barthes's analysis:

Il a compris que la Révolution était une totalité qui nourrissait chaque instant de l'Histoire, et qu'on pouvait à tout moment la disjoindre du cursus historique, la poser tout entière comme une essence au milieu du Temps, sans troubler pour cela l'ordre profond des événements. (501, *OC* 94)



Barthes's criticism of Michelet was such that he was aware of the ridiculousness of his historiography. Michelet's insistence on the importance of the Revolution had left the historian with a problem. Prefiguring his criticism in 'Humanisme sans paroles' of hope as an 'espoir messianique', he related Michelet's conception of history to a religious problem; the anti-clerical Michelet had in fact a 'véritable théophanie'. Just as the Messiah's arrival had been announced centuries before, so in Michelet's history-writing, '[l]'Histoire entière jusqu'en 1789, et depuis l'Inde antique, n'a été qu'un temps préparatoire'. The Revolution was for Michelet the 'achèvement' of History, in the same way that, after the arrival of Christ, Christians were waiting for the Apocalypse. But the similarity of Michelet's difficulty to that of Christians ended there. What, asked Barthes, did Michelet do with the History which followed the Revolution? The Christians could explain their waiting by referring to the patience of God; but Michelet, 'profondément gêné' by nineteenth-century historical reality, had to account for this phenomenon in a non-theological manner: so, said Barthes, he used Cournot's word 'post-histoire' to describe his own century.<sup>58</sup> In this way, Barthes linked Michelet's romanticism to a teleological and (seemingly) obscurantist view of history: 'Or toute Histoire pourvue d'un terme est un mythe', he concluded.<sup>59</sup>

However, this eschatological critique was ambiguous in Barthes's writing. Though he had clearly criticised Michelet's conception of history, the criticism was tamed by certain factors. If Michelet had a teleological view of history with this dialectic of two terms only, which saw History as running like a train towards its destination (the French Revolution), then surely Barthes was considering a resolution to a dialectical analysis to be linked to a teleological view of history. Indeed, Barthes seemed to welcome the way in which the Revolution's 'signification profonde' in history had allowed the historian to give meaning and a physical reality 'à n'importe quel moment du passé'.



Furthermore, Barthes's 'Il a compris' seemed to point to his later praise of Brecht's historiographical aesthetics.

We will remember that part of Barthes's praise of Brecht's theatre was based on Epic theatre's ability to show both the 'vouloir-être des hommes' (as a social 'réconciliation') and the reality of contemporary alienation; in short, Brechtian theatre's explanation of reality both described reality and postulated its transformation (precisely the point Barthes had made also in 'Humanisme sans paroles' in relation to racism); thus Barthes's own writing seemed to display a teleological aspect.

This teleological aspect was evident in a lecture Barthes gave in 1949 as director of the library belonging to the 'Ministère des affaires culturelles' in Bucharest.<sup>60</sup> Given to the French Institute in Bucharest on 22 September 1949, this lecture was transcribed by Barthes and sent to Philippe Rebeyrol. Calvet has described the talk as a strange mixture of French cultural nationalism and historical materialism.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, this lecture displayed an important aspect to Barthes's understanding of and relation to 'History' (as well as his most consistent use of 'Histoire' with a capital 'H').

Talking to the 'fidèles' of the French Institute (mainly French-speaking Rumanians) Barthes regretted the circumstances which were forcing the closure of the establishment. Whilst reaffirming his adherence to a Marxian critique of society, he tried to explain the apparent contradiction of Rumania's situation (it was, rather confusingly for Barthes, the 'Marxist' popular government which was ejecting the French imperialist aggressors). There was in his 'personne' ('vous le savez mieux que quiconque') an 'esprit fermement - et plus que jamais - attaché aux méthodes critiques du matérialisme dialectique', as well as 'une conscience particulièrement attentive à l'histoire présente de la Roumanie'. In totalitarian Rumania, this attachment was, he said, a 'paradoxe apparent seulement aux yeux de ceux qui ne sentent pas l'ambiguïté de l'Histoire': the closing of the institute could not be explained



unless it was understood in relation to ‘History’. Finishing his talk by playing a recording of Glück’s *Orphée*, and setting out his reasons for this choice, Barthes displayed his rather teleological view of history. This piece of music had been written, he said, in a period of ‘History’ when the intellectual was not ‘déchiré’ between ‘la justice et la force’; all the ‘bêtise’ was on the side of the government and the ‘Law’, and ‘tout l’avenir’ was on the side of the ‘malheureux’: it was an ‘époque de lutte heureuse’, at a time when ‘l’Histoire n’était pas ambiguë’.<sup>62</sup> Trying to understand the paradox of a ‘Marxist’ government closing a library and still maintaining his attachment to historical materialism, Barthes concluded that closing a library was an irrelevance (‘historiquement dérisoire’) when put in its context, because, said Barthes in mystical, if not teleological terms, ‘l’Histoire ne pourra jamais marcher contre l’Histoire’. This did not prove conclusively the teleological nature of Barthes’s view of history, but pointed to the ambiguity in his view of the motor of historical change.

If there was an element of teleology in Barthes’s view of history, this did not prevent him pointing out the irony in Michelet’s treatment of post-Revolution history. Indeed, for Barthes, it was this paradox - that Michelet had lived and written only during this ‘post-histoire’- which was at the heart of Michelet’s mythical and romantic notion of history:

Tout au long de sa vie, commencée à la mort même de la Révolution, Michelet voit naître et croître une ambiguïté: l’Histoire se révèle peu à peu inaccomplie; elle survit à la Révolution et reproduit les caractères même de la pré-Révolution. (502, *OC* 94)

Yet, Barthes considered this to be, in one sense, a positive aspect to Michelet’s writing. It was this ‘ambiguïté’, he wrote, which had made Michelet’s ‘surdité [...] à son temps’ into something ‘très spéciale’; living at ‘l’aube du mythe révolutionnaire’, though only able to be ‘vigilant dans le passé’, Michelet had lived ‘à travers lui’.<sup>63</sup>



This inconsistency in Barthes's critique of Michelet's historical 'steam train', his teleological attitude towards the French Revolution, and consequent inability to write post-revolutionary history, was reflected further in his second example of Michelet's analogical method. In trying to portray Louis XI, Michelet had been 'aliéné' by that which escaped from the 'récit', because, Barthes asserted, the totality of this king's life had been described only by a historian in the flow of History, by using no 'recul', only 'Passion'. Here, said Barthes, Michelet had encountered a problem: on the one hand, he had wanted to live (physically and emotionally) the flow of historical events, but on the other hand and at the same time to be able to stand back from them, theorize the motors and structures which produced them in their particular order and mode of occurrence. This was remarkably similar to Barthes's own 'aporie' at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'; namely, that of the left-wing intellectual choosing between revealing the goodness of wine and demystifying its myth of 'bonté'. We will return to this in a moment.

In Barthes's view, Michelet seemed to have resolved this historiographical contradiction for the historian by using the 'aporie du Récit' and a 'euphorie du Tableau'; Michelet's writing of History was located 'entre la remontée et la station'. This had made Michelet's 'survol' of fifteenth-century Flanders, and its resulting tableau, a painting of history 'd'en haut'. Thereby he had been able to reveal the 'ubiquité profonde des causes et des effets, des corps, des idées et des actes'. The resulting tension now explained how and why Michelet's history went 'par ondes' (the 'récit' would be drawn towards an 'étalement', the tableau to an 'ouverture', and on to the successive event). Consequently, Barthes seemed to be saying that it was to the credit of Michelet's historiography that it was not a logical sequence of events, nor an 'ordre d'explications', but a 'série d'équations', in which '[l]e discours est un vaste système de transformations, destiné à poser l'Histoire comme un continu végétal non comme une extension dialectique' and in which '[l]a causalité



disparaît au profit de l'identité'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, though Michelet's history was 'linéaire', it was nevertheless 'profonde'; and it had introduced into history-writing an 'ordre vertical', a 'polyphonie'. These were all elements of the 'subjectivité de l'homme populaire' that Barthes had considered in the 'degré zéro' thesis to have been smothered and stifled by the bourgeois centralization and standardization of language. This, however, was only part of a more general appreciation of Michelet's historiography, evident in Barthes's writing in the early 1950s.

### **Portraying a 'total' historical figure**

In 1951, Barthes seemed to consider the writing of both Balzac and Michelet to be reactionary: both writers used the past historic as a way of affirming order and security.<sup>65</sup> The 'fonction' of the 'passé simple' was to unite as quickly as possible 'une cause et une fin', thereby establishing and maintaining order; and Barthes gave an example from their writing (in Michelet, the 'duc de Guise mourut', in Balzac 'la Marquise sortit à cinq heures'). Both had used the past historic to deny the 'tremblement de l'existence': the political role of the 'pierre angle' of the 'récit', the preterite, was to give a closed, defined and familiar world ('la construction d'un monde autarcique'), rather than the image of a contingent world ('jeté, étalé, offert, sans limite'). The 'sphéricité' of their long 'récitatifs', asserted Barthes, were 'projections planes d'un monde courbe et lisse' (the 'roman-feuilleton' being a degraded version of this) which, via the preterite, gave rise to the 'expression d'un ordre' and a 'euphorie', by showing a world which was no longer 'absurde', where reality was not 'abandonnée' but 'claire' and 'familiale' and in the creator's hand. Full of 'rapports cohérents', the world painted by Michelet and Balzac had no 'tragique', thanks to the 'sécurité' provided by 'Belles lettres'.



However, though Barthes had put the portrayals of both Michelet and Balzac together as part of a literature which generated security, in the same year his study of Michelet's writing considered not only that the historian's portrayals were superior to Balzac's but that they helped to solve an important historiographical and literary problem.

In 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', Michelet's portrayals were contrasted with, and praised over, Balzac's. Michelet's painting of a figure 'avec toute sa chair' was contrasted with a 'roman balzacien'. In Balzac's writing, description aimed to represent human interaction without suggesting corporeal reality, and, for Barthes, Balzac's descriptions failed to have the bodily, indeed material, strengths of Michelet's portrayals: Balzac's functioned only so as to be interpreted, and simply to become part of a character or the intrigue.<sup>66</sup>

By contrast, since the body for Michelet was an essence, 'une densité irréductible', Balzac's lengthy descriptions would have been superfluous in Michelet's portrayal:

Peindre longuement un front, des lèvres, n'a guère de sens, car chaque détail du corps n'existe que par sa participation à une complexion totale, c'est elle qu'il s'agit de donner. (504, *OC* 96)

Barthes seemed to endorse Michelet's painting of historical figures, which involved giving them a nick-name, a condition which '*en général*' determined their place in, and attitude towards, particular events (Marat as a 'crapaud' was a 'portion de matière' not a 'portion d'espace', for example). For Barthes, Michelet was the 'Historien charnel' who could provide in his historical account sociological information: '[l]a condition physique fonctionne exactement comme une condition sociale'. This was the basis of his view in the review of Freyre's study of Brazil that a historian's dream was the 'quadrature du cercle', in which a past existence could be recreated in its totality.



This fascination with Michelet's corporeal account of history was to have an effect not only on Barthes's sociology but also on his literary aesthetics; it was to be precisely the sociological concern for representing the past masses which informed, in part, his praise of Cayrol's new 'romanesque' six months after the article on Michelet, in 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans'.

Reversing his earlier view in 1951 that there was no solution to the third person's generation of security, except to use the 'je' (hence his praise of Camus's *L'Étranger*), Barthes suggested that Cayrol had solved this problem; his 'il' in *Je vivrai l'amour des autres* had a 'durée du roman' which was simply that of the 'Narrateur'. Though the novel was narrated using the third person, Cayrol's third person was a 'transformation formelle' of the 'je'; it was as if the 'il' acted as a 'je', was a 'récit à partir d'un seul corps humain'. Unlike Balzac's 'il' which was determined by a history, the character as third person in Cayrol was the 'matériau', not the 'fruit', of a creation, and was more relevant to the human 'station' because it put forward an existential reality; whereas Balzac hid existence, Cayrol's style of portrayal (and perhaps also Flaubert's, suggested Barthes, prefiguring his view in the 'degré zéro' thesis of 'tout un monde' between Flaubert and Balzac) was existential in that 'l'histoire de l'homme se confond avec le trajet de la conjugaison'. The 'il' of an account of Caesar, where the 'il' excluded all notion of existence, was but an 'état algébrique de l'action' showing characters as simply determined by 'une liaison', a 'clarté' or a 'tragique des rapports humains'; by contrast, Cayrol's novel was 'le terme d'une gestation partie d'un "je" transformé et généralisé'. In other words, following his study of Michelet, Barthes had concluded that a correct portrayal of humanity (a sociology) had to include a corporeal reality in its account of humanity's relationship to the world.<sup>67</sup>

Barthes considered also that Cayrol's existential 'il' had solved another related problem. Noting how the 'homme cayrolien' was both central and



'extérieur' to the novel, he concluded that Cayrol's third person had solved a major problem:

Le *il* historique ne couvre ni personnalité ni généralité, il n'est qu'une algèbre de l'Histoire. Le *il* cayrolien, bien qu'entièrement fondu dans la durée romanesque, tient hors du roman une part de lui-même, qui est celle de son passé inconnu et de son avenir mystérieux. (485, *OC* 118)

It was precisely this contradiction of how to paint both an individual in particular and in general that Barthes would consider in his 1959 preface to *La Sorcière* to have been solved by Michelet's 'poésie'; by presenting both a particular and a general witch and establishing a 'généralité intermédiaire', Michelet had become in Barthes's opinion the first sociologist: Michelet's *Witch*, wrote Barthes, 'réunit en elle le général et le particulier, le modèle et la créature: elle est à la fois *une* sorcière et *la* Sorcière'.<sup>68</sup>

Not only were sociology and history related in Barthes's thought (and his sociological sensibility began with literary considerations), but also it was Michelet who helped Barthes identify the problems of sociological analysis. However, it was not simply the manner in which Michelet represented and recreated the existence of the individual which interested and influenced Barthes. The worth of Michelet's very historiographical project had been, for Barthes, that to give voice to those excluded from traditional history.

#### **Michelet's resurrection of the masses: 'Ce livre est moi-même'.**

*Après l'horrible et ténébreuse affaire du 24 juin 1848, courbé, accablé de douleurs, je dis à Béranger, "Oh, qui saura parler au Peuple? ... Sans cela nous mourrons". Cet esprit ferme et froid répondit: "Patience! Ce sont eux qui feront leurs livres". Dix-huit ans sont passés. Et ces livres où sont-ils?* Jules Michelet, cited by Barthes in 'Aujourd'hui Michelet' (*OC* vol 2, p.1583).

The most crucial aspect of Barthes's 1951 analysis of Michelet's historiography was the manner in which Michelet had made his writing of



history into a resurrection of that mass of historical objects silenced by exclusion. It was this which underscored Barthes's whole article and explained the title; by trying to resurrect the silenced masses, Michelet had lived out that history, and simultaneously, if not paradoxically, had prefigured his own death. The 'fondement de l'Histoire' for Michelet was 'en dernière instance', said Barthes (obliquely alluding to Engels' famous defence of historical materialism), 'la mort charnelle de millions d'hommes'; and Michelet, the 'Historien charnel', had found a way to '[r]efaire la vie des morts'.<sup>69</sup>

The overcoming of the division between living through history as a means of representing historical actants and seeing history as a prefiguring of one's death was central to Barthes's view of the manner in which Michelet had written history. If Michelet's account of history had shown a historical phenomenon to be involved in the growth-triumph-death sequence, like that of a plant, then the third term, 'la terminaison' or death, was a historical moment, suggested Barthes, which was 'privilégié'; and what had characterized certain events as historical for Michelet (the collapse of the Roman Empire, the death of Christianity, the decline of the Middle Ages etc.) was, in Barthes's opinion, their pivotal, that is ambiguous, relationship to history: as if it were part of Nature, the death of a historical phenomenon led to a new birth. Therefore Michelet's relationship to History, indeed the latter's very conception of the historian's role, had been to prefigure his own death; for, if Michelet's leitmotiv had been to '[r]efaire la vie des morts' then, this had been a way for the historian in reality to 's'approcher de leur mort': for Michelet, the problem was not how to 'changer la mort en vie', wrote Barthes, but to collapse the division between them; in this sense, history for Michelet had been the 'propre mimodrame de sa Mort'.<sup>70</sup>

This made Michelet into what Edmund Wilson has called the 'historian from below' *par excellence*.<sup>71</sup> Michelet's historiographical solution to the exclusion of the masses had been to use what Barthes called 'Magistrature': he



would give to people, as in a judgment, a role in history. For Barthes, not only did this apparently resolve in practice the dilemma of the people's historian, it seemed also to allow the masses a role in history: Michelet 'resurrected' the millions of silenced individuals in the past, and could, in Barthes's view, explain their desire and capacity to act (as well as the actions themselves) by giving them a significance in the course of historical events.

Michelet's solution to the problem of people lost in history, said Barthes, had come from his 'supervisibilité'; Michelet had been able to run alongside ('côtoie') what Barthes called the 'masse totale' of History (a term similar to his 'volume social', the mass of people whose social experience bourgeois language had excluded). Michelet had enjoyed this 'position de supervisibilité', because it had allowed him to 'ordonner l'Histoire comme un spectacle'. This 'overview' had allowed Michelet to pass from a historian of 'Passion' to one of 'Creation'; like a god, he had been able now to give history a significance, an order and a certain reversibility ('une cosmogonie'); and in as much as the flow of history was temporarily halted, the historian could see 'dans le Temps des résistances, des noeuds' and 'dans l'Histoire un dévoilement, des structures'.<sup>72</sup>

Michelet's theomorphic position in relation to history up until the French Revolution stood, however, in contrast to his view that his own century was a 'non-histoire', a sad world, emptied of men and 'peuplé seulement de casernes et d'usines'. In as much as Revolution for Michelet was both an end and a 'principe', it was a 'terme-valeur' which transformed history into Myth and provided Micheletian history with a 'moralité': the 'innéité du Juste dans le Peuple'. Here was Michelet's partisan account of history; it had 'à la fois raison et passion', typical of 'tout récit mythologique'; and, consequently, it had functions which were both 'pathétiques et explicatives'.



## Conclusion

Barthes had criticised formalism in the social sciences in the early 1950s. Michelet's use of analogy had led to the historiographical abuses of the masses perpetrated, for example, by Jousain's content-less philosophy of history and the use of mathematics by Caillois in his description of Marxism - a two-term dialectic meant abstracting a historical phenomenon from its specific temporal position, and removing its content.

Yet Barthes conceded in his later writing that there were real reasons for Michelet's formalism and analogical method. Michelet's 'supervisibilité' had the merit of giving voice to those excluded by traditional historiographical and 'sociographical' discourses, and allowed them to be seen as actants, without his avoiding the historicist realities and contradictions of writing history.

This had implications for Barthes's understanding and use of history. He very rarely wrote the French word for history without a capital letter; therefore, there is, Andrew Brown has suggested, an irony that Barthes should claim that he was using a capital only to distinguish history from story, whilst writing about the very writer who had influenced him to divinize and theatricalize the concept 'history'.<sup>73</sup> The irony becomes much greater when we consider how Barthes, across the 1950s, began to conflate (that is, collapse the distinction between) 'History' and its narration. We have seen in Chapter Four how he used cultural categories to explain social realities; in his conception of history this tendency is repeated: 'History' became synonymous with its mode of representation.

It is important to mark the difference between history and historiography. It is, of course, artificial to separate the two, for there is an integral relationship between one's view of history and the appropriate mode of its representation. However, in separating the two for the moment, we can see



more clearly how they are related in a moment. If we look, for example, at Barthes's account of Brecht's representation of history we will see a confusion, I think, in his view of the differences between Brechtian and Marxian realism. In 'Brecht, Marx et L'Histoire' he stated that Brecht was a Marxist, but asked whether the German playwright held the same view of History as Marx; then he went on to compare Marx's advocating an historical theatre with Brecht's Epic theatre: surely it was the representation of history not its real existence which Barthes was analysing?<sup>74</sup>

This 'slippage' began, not with Brecht, but with Michelet. Was Michelet's 'supervisibilité' any different from Barthes's view in 'Au cinémascope' which had suggested that the spectator had been made into a god and encouraged an active participation in events? Barthes's view of voluntarism (particularly in the popular theatre, but also in 'representation' in general) reflected his analysis of the 'spectateur-dieu' in Michelet's writing of history.

This had an effect on Barthes's view of Michelet. In concentrating on the manner in which Michelet had overcome the distance (both historical and social) between himself and the masses, Barthes had committed the problem of historiography to the need to resurrect, re-find and, ultimately, give voice to those excluded from traditional narrative history. In doing so, had he not tamed his criticism of Michelet? Michelet had encountered the dilemma of how to end the exclusion of the masses, thought Barthes, and had found his own solution to this. Thus Barthes began to treat the form of a writer's account of history as indicative of, if not more important than, its content and ideology.

In this sense, Barthes's fascination with Michelet was fundamentally historiographical.<sup>75</sup> Barthes would, however, perhaps have questioned this term; he would have said that, rather than study Michelet's writings, he was more interested in the manner in which Michelet invested himself in these writings; his 1951 study of Michelet might be termed 'structural', in that he



looked at Michelet's ideology and morality as revealed in his writing of and attitude to history, without looking at the specific historical, and therefore political, ramifications of Michelet's circumstances. So, if he did not accept Michelet's view of change, he did seem to admire Michelet's *representation* of History. Is there a contradiction in this, or is it simply resolved by opposing content and form: Michelet misunderstood the determining factors in change, but painted humanity's role in determining history correctly?

There is a problem in such a division, for surely explanation and description are firmly connected: history and historiography are in some way inseparable: if Michelet was a petty-bourgeois historian whose ideas on history (nationalism, the unity between classes, romanticism etc.) were incorrect in Barthes's view, then surely his representation of history was automatically flawed?

If Barthes wanted to save something from Michelet's representation of history, the only way was to overcome the division between form and content, or rather to collapse the distinction and establish a different division: a structural versus an historical criticism. Structural critique meant understanding a writer's relationship with his/her object of study; in the case of Michelet, this was a good place to start, since he had an intimate relationship to his object of study. In fact, it was precisely Michelet and hitherto studies of Michelet which encouraged Barthes to develop this type of criticism. Therefore Barthes's very object of study in his book on Michelet (i.e. Michelet the historian) influenced his own critical practice. The important point here is that, at all stages in Barthes's analysis of 'l'Histoire de Michelet', there was no distinction between History and its mode of representation. Indeed, Barthes's interest in Michelet's mode of account led him to study not only the form, but also its content as a form.

Though Barthes's move across the 1950s from a critique of ahistorical formalism to a promotion of formalism was not immediately connected to his



dilemma of structural versus historical critique, it was his study of Michelet which shifted his perspective towards form. As an attempt to refind the very historian who himself had tried to write the people into history, Barthes's desire to 'retrouver les hommes de son temps' began with trying to find Michelet's reality.<sup>76</sup> Barthes's earlier search for a realism which recreated the past sociologically, totally, by representing the relation of the individual to the social and historical and without denying the structural and longer historical dimension had pushed him towards a historiographical solution. In this sense, Michelet's double re-creation of the past - material (carnal) reality was combined with an object's historical significance - superseded Barthes's earlier view of the appropriateness of placing Marx's 'lutte des classes' at the root of analogy in any attempt to solve the dilemma of how to represent the individual, the particular (whether object or human) and, at the same time, to cover the general 'communauté des formes'.

This can be seen in the manner in which historical critique of Michelet diminished in Barthes's thought. Although, in the preface to *Michelet par lui-même*, Michelet was considered a petty-bourgeois historian (whose ideas, he stressed in 1956, looked like those of the right-wing demagogue Pierre Poujade) Barthes insisted that there was an 'ordre des tâches'. This meant that before a 'critique historique' could be performed effectively on Michelet, his structural relationship to history (his 'thematic coherence') had to be analysed; thus, Barthes summed up Michelet's petty bourgeois ideology in a single page, using a quote from Marx.<sup>77</sup> Though he stressed that his concentration on Michelet's act of writing and representation of history was only a 'pré-critique', a prelude to a fully-blown political and historical critique, Barthes avoided a clear analysis of Michelet's political ideology. If in 1950 the historical critique appeared more important, *Michelet par lui-même* reversed this dilemma: it was the historical critique which was treated in two pages, and the structural critique which was the bulk of the book. Of course, this 'critique



structurelle' too was presented in a modest fashion (in that it was but a 'pré-critique', which reiterated the contradiction he had come up against in 1950). Nevertheless, the historical critique was to be conspicuously absent from the book. It may not, in fact, be unfair to say that the rest of Barthes's writing on Michelet for the rest of the fifties only served to diminish the historical critique which he had been keen to write; never was the 'critique historique' of Michelet of which he had spoken in 1950 to appear in Barthes's writing.

The effect of Michelet's historiography on Barthes's theoretical developments was important. Barthes's view that Michelet was able both to empathise with humans in history and to explain their significance prefigured precisely the dilemma at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', in which Barthes showed the difficulty for the mythologist of how to relate to contemporary (as opposed to specifically historical) phenomena. However, the problem of wine's complicity in forming a myth represented a development from his earlier historiographical problem.

Barthes had wanted in 1954 to find a way of being able both to describe and explain reality, at the same time as countering myths and attempting to account for the subjective experience of the mass of people. He had wanted to use myth to establish a scientific and total understanding of alienation which allowed the theorist to refind those who had been excluded and alienated. It was precisely his fascination with Michelet's acts of 'résurrection' which was to inform Barthes's sociological dilemma of 1954: how did the writer (in Barthes's case, the sociologist who was 'engagé') refind the lost masses? Barthes's solution, the strategy of a 'dialectique d'amour', was a transposition of Michelet's perceived historiographical solution to a sociological (rather than historical) context: in the same way that Michelet had tried to find the 'lost' masses of history, Barthes's 'sociologie engagée' aimed to 'retrouver' those lost in contemporary society. However, by the time of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' in 1956, his 'sociographical' dilemma of how to find the masses had been



supplanted by his consideration of the exclusion of the very person involved in using the 'dialectique d'amour', the mythologist himself.

The problem was that Barthes had transposed Michelet's historiographical solution to a contemporary sociological situation. In short, Barthes's 'aporie' at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' showed that he had realised (tacitly) that Michelet could live out the reality of the excluded masses and act as their mouthpiece precisely because they were part of a past history. Barthes's problem was that the excluded masses whom he was trying to re-find and represent were, though alienated and excluded, still in existence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See 'Nécessités et limites de la mythologie', the last section of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' (OC 717-719).

<sup>2</sup> In a footnote, he 'filled in' the historical reality of the year 1900, which Postec's production had evacuated: 'Je rappelle que 1900 est aussi l'époque des massacres des grévistes par la troupe (Fourmies, Martinique, Chalons-sur-Marne, Raon-l'Étape, Draveil-Vigneux, Villeneuve-Saint-Georges), de la colonisation de Madagascar, des famines de l'Inde, de l'Affaire Dreyfus, des pogroms de Russie méridionale, etc.; bref, on le voit, des bagatelles, qui donnent la mesure d'une époque parfaitement "irréelle" !' (p.81 n.1, OC 552 n.1)

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Philippe Rebeyrol, 14 October 1992.

<sup>4</sup> See Roger, p.74 note 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, *Mythologies* and *Essais Critiques* are all, in the main, collections of republished essays.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Culler, *Roland Barthes*, p.42. Indeed, Thérèse Moreau has recently tried to establish a connection between Michelet's portrayal of 'la Femme' and fascism; see *Le Sang de l'histoire: Michelet, l'histoire et l'idée de la femme au XIXe siècle* (Paris, Flammarion, 1982), pp.14-15.

<sup>7</sup> His distinctly Hegelian sensitivity to history was evident in his letter to Rebeyrol (31 May 1947). Thanks to 'mon information marxiste', Barthes told his friend that he now had 'une vue authentiquement "désurnaturalisée" de toute la Nature': 'je vois de plus en plus "l'aventure du monde", [...] l'infinité des ses possibilités [...]. C'est à partir du jour où l'on comprend que tout est historique, qu'il n'y a rien en dehors de l'Histoire, pas même l'Histoire ni la Nature' [...]. Therefore, concluded Barthes, 'la liberté (même à l'intérieur de soi)', was, following Hegel, 'la reconnaissance de la nécessité'.

<sup>8</sup> In 'Continent perdu' for example, he wrote ironically: '[C]es bons ethnologues ne s'embarrassent guère de problèmes historiques ou sociologiques[...]; les rites, les faits de culture ne sont jamais mis en rapport avec un ordre historique particulier, avec un statut économique ou social explicite' (pp.313-314, OC 663-664).

<sup>9</sup> 'Maîtres et esclaves', p.108 (OC 210). Later, in Micheletian fashion, Barthes likened his use of *Histoire* (with a capital letter) to his use of capitals in *Déterminisme* or *Nature* which, with their intellectual vagueness, acquired, he said, an existential precision: *l'Histoire* was 'une idée morale [qui] permet de relativiser le naturel et de croire à un sens du temps'; see *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, p.129.

<sup>10</sup> See A. Brown, *Roland Barthes*, p.77.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Au cinémascope'; Eisenstein's film had been banned in the West since its completion and was not allowed to be shown in France until 1954.



<sup>12</sup> 'Brecht, Marx et l'Histoire', p.25 (OC 755).

<sup>13</sup> 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne', p.22 (OC 1230).

<sup>14</sup> Barthes went on, of course, to try to disprove even his view that forms of faces were 'natural', with his attempt in 1953 at a sociology of the morphology of human faces; this is indicative of his increasing desire for a total, historical explanation of all human phenomena.

<sup>15</sup> Calvet pp.87-90.

<sup>16</sup> 'Réponses', p.92.

<sup>17</sup> Yet, he stressed to his friend, 'politiquement', he could 'guère penser que marxistement'; the 'description du monde' given by Marxists 'seul' was 'juste'. He considered that there was a 'souplesse' and 'intelligence' in Marxist theory, which was lacking in contemporary Marxist praxis. This led to two reservations about committing himself to a political praxis: two points were 'obscurs' and left him 'réticent pour le moment': 'la liaison entre une philosophie matérialiste, notoirement insuffisante, et la révolution marxiste, qui me semble vraie - la place, la nature de l'intellectuel dans cette révolution'. How could a Left-wing intellectual agree with the Marxian explanation of the world and accept the philosophical inadequacies of (Marxian) materialism? This would become a suspicion of the ultimately determining nature of the material 'base', a questioning of Marx's model would appear explicitly, as we shall see, as early as 1957 in Barthes's thought. His scepticism towards materialism would reappear in 'Triomphe et rupture de la bourgeoisie' in a bracketed paragraph not included in the book version; talking about the 'rapport profond' between 'Forme' and 'Histoire', he added in parenthesis: '(Il se pourrait, par exemple, que le problème du déterminisme des superstructures soit résolu un jour en direction d'un examen des formes et des structures et non de l'histoire traditionnelle des idées, où les relais sont plus nombreux et plus complexes)' (p.4).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Barthes's ambiguous relationship to Marxism was evident in a number of ways. In a letter to Rebeyrol a month later (August 1946) he described how much he had enjoyed reading Marx's ironic account of the 1851 *coup* in France: 'Je prends bien de la hauteur à l'égard du marxisme; je crois que je l'ai exorcisé; je viens de lire avec une complaisance complète Le dix-huitième Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte, oeuvre très belle, puissante par sa cohésion, son air de vérité'. Nevertheless, his fascination with literature turned him away from the militant use of Marxian analysis: 'Mais comme nos marxistes actuels, si prétentieux, si fiers de leur philosophie matérialiste, sont loins de l'intelligence active de ce livre, de la souplesse même. En fait quelqu'un qui croit de près ou de loin à la littérature ne peut pas être absolument marxiste. Il faut en prendre profondément parti'. He had expressed a similar aversion to militancy within literature in a review in *Existences* in 1943 of a special number of *Confluences*, in criticising the militant manner in which the 57 writers had dissected literature. Such a theorisation would, however, be central to Barthes's later writings on the 'Nouveau Roman', and pointed to a contradiction, if not a development, in his interest in literary theory (see 'A propos d'un numéro spécial de "Confluences" sur les problèmes du roman', OC pp.40-41). Indeed, though in August 1946 he had considered that materialism and literature were incompatible, he informed Rebeyrol six months later (16 May 1947) of his use of materialism: 'j'ai écrit [...] un texte sur la critique littéraire, sur des postulats matérialistes'; this was, presumably, 'Le Degré zéro de l'écriture', published in August 1947.

<sup>19</sup> Translated from the German in 1936, this was the only book by Hook translated into French by 1946; see *Pour Comprendre Marx* (Paris, Gallimard, 1936). See A. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The rise and decline of the anti-stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp.3-16.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Hook had declared in *Pour Comprendre Marx*, in Lukácsian fashion, that '[l]a philosophie de Marx est une synthèse dialectique de ces moments objectifs et subjectifs' (p.14). Hook's Lukácsian analysis helps to explain, perhaps, despite Barthes's denial of a knowledge of Lukács ('Réponses', p.93), a distinctly Lukácsian appearance to *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*.

<sup>21</sup> See Wald, pp.118-127.

<sup>22</sup> See Hook, *Pour Comprendre*, pp.14-34 and p.59ff. See also Hook's study of praxis in history, *The hero in history* (Secker & Warburg, 1945).

<sup>23</sup> Wald describes Hook's voluntarism as 'activist and pragmatic' (p.126).



<sup>24</sup> It was the 'intelligence, la souplesse, la force des ses analyses politiques, son ironie et sa sagesse, une sorte de liberté morale, bref la réussite totale de ce caractère qui semblait débarrassé de toute *excitation* politique'; it had given him 'une très haute idée de la dialectique marxiste (ou plutôt, ce que j'ai perçu, grâce à Fournié, dans le marxisme, c'est la dialectique)'; he described this experience in a way which was reminiscent of his 'éblouissement' before the Berliner Ensemble in 1954; indeed, he added that such a 'séduction' he did not find again until 'la lecture de Brecht' (p.92).

<sup>25</sup> Hook, p.17; Wald, p.127.

<sup>26</sup> He criticized Engels' tendency of turning Marx's method into a hypothetical-deductive science, thus avoiding the question of 'commodity fetishism': 'Toute l'économie bourgeoise' declared Hook, 'consiste en un processus dans lequel les choses agissent [...] derrière le dos de l'homme', engendering 'de l'obscurantisme religieux' (p.156); furthermore, for Hook, 'un mythe n'est qu'un élément d'un système idéologique général': in that myth reflected 'dans une forme altérée son milieu social', no important myth 'qui tient sous son emprise des millions d'hommes ne peut être une création arbitraire' (p.182). apart from Lukács and the Frankfurt school very few commentators of Marx and theorists of Marxism by the mid-forties had underlined the importance of ideology in historical materialism; Hook's attempt clearly influenced Barthes's interest in ideology and commodity fetishism in his later study of myth.

<sup>27</sup> Wald, p.127.

<sup>28</sup> 'Les révolutions suivent-elles des lois?'

<sup>29</sup> Prefiguring his 'voluntaristic' account of explaining racism, Barthes noted that Jousain's view of history did not need to 'avouer tel ressort métaphysique ou raciste' in order to alienate history.

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, if we look at Jousain's book, we can see Barthes's point; changes in power such as England in 1688, Italy in 1921 and Germany in 1933 were considered by Jousain as revolutions in the same way as Russia in 1917, France in 1789 and Spain in 1936 (see Jousain, *La Loi des révolutions*, in particular pp.15, 28, 38, 103-104). The second half of the book attempted to explain three particular events as 'révolutions sociales': 1789, 1917 and 1933; and it attempted to draw conclusions of the causes and effects of 'revolution' from a comparison of these historical events.

<sup>31</sup> The opening words of Jousain's introduction underlined his attempt to deny a voluntaristic aspect to human action in history: 'Les hommes ne sont que trop portés à exagérer le pouvoir qu'ils ont sur eux-mêmes: le sentiment qu'ils ont d'agir librement et d'exécuter ce qu'ils ont résolu leur fait oublier aisément qu'ils sont mus par les désirs et par les passions dont ils sont esclaves' (*La Loi des révolutions*, p.9).

<sup>32</sup> Paris, Gallimard, 1950; in her recent biography of Caillois, Odile Felgine considers that this short study 'le place définitivement parmi les adversaires' of Marxism and marked the end of his interest in the 1930s in left-wing radicalism; see O. Felgine, *Roger Caillois* (Paris, Stock, 1994), p.304.

<sup>33</sup> Caillois, *Description*, p.33.

<sup>34</sup> It was not surprising that the very ideas of Marxism had been treated by Caillois 'd'une main à la fois ferme et expéditive', said Barthes, for otherwise a debate might have developed, which, said Barthes ironically, might have undermined the reader's sense of security derived from this 'évidence mathématique' (ibid).

<sup>35</sup> Roger, p.314; Roger backs up my point about voluntarism and determinism by calling this attitude a 'hybride de hégélianisme vague et de volontarisme implicite', and an analysis which 'n'engage pas son auteur à grand-chose' (ibid).

<sup>36</sup> A similar article was written by Barthes on this subject in 1959; see 'Langage et vêtement', *Critique*, no.142, March 1959, pp.242-252 (OC 793-801).

<sup>37</sup> Barthes added: '[E]lle est évidemment tributaire non seulement des autres sciences de l'homme qui l'entourent, mais aussi du stade épistémologique de la science sociale dans son ensemble; née avec la science historique, elle en a suivi de loin le développement et elle se trouve en même temps qu'elle devant les mêmes difficultés [...]' (ibid).

<sup>38</sup> There was also within the structure, within the form, 'une histoire interne du système': fashion forms could follow history 'dans un contrepoint libre': certain forms could be only 'des "produits", les termes d'une évolution intrinsèque', and not at all 'des "signes"'. There could be 'un arbitraire historique' in which was formed the 'insignifiance du vêtement', a



“degré zéro” of ‘signes vestimentaires’; and Barthes added: ‘comme disent les structuralistes’, as if he did not consider himself one of them (p.441, *OC* 752).

<sup>39</sup> p.430 (*OC* 741).

<sup>40</sup> p.431 (*OC* 742).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Langage et vêtement’, p.244 (*OC* 794).

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, he did not consider Flügel’s use of psychoanalysis to be part of the ‘psychological’ studies that he was rejecting; see p.439 (*OC* 750), including footnotes 2 and 3; see also ‘Langage et vêtement’, where he set out the two ‘hypothèses importantes’ of Flügel’s psychoanalysis; these underlined the importance of fear and desire of nudity in human choice of clothes, and postulated clothes as a form of ‘communication’ (p.248, *OC* 797). The confusion in Barthes’s analysis was evident in his attitude towards another historian of fashion. He praised a rare example of a study which, using a materialist analysis, had managed to account for the appearance of ‘une supercherie vestimentaire’ as ‘une transformation idéologique de la fonction de “paraître” social’ by linking this to the rise of capitalism: Quicherat’s *Histoire du Costume en France* (p.433n1, *OC* 743n1). However, in the *Critique* article, he cited this work as an example of the ‘recherches archéologiques’ which, regrettably in his opinion, portrayed history, very traditionally, as a series of ‘règnes’ (p.245n, *OC* 795n1).

<sup>43</sup> p.441 (*OC* 752).

<sup>44</sup> See ‘Trésor ouvert, trésor retrouvé’, *Bulletin de la Guilde du Livre*, 2, February 1955, pp.60-61.

<sup>45</sup> The influence of Jean Duvignaud might be cited here. See his comparison of Michelet and Shakespeare (‘La tragédie en liberté’, *Théâtre populaire*, 1, May/June 1953, p.15). This is actually included by Barthes in the ‘Ce qu’en disent aujourd’hui’ section of *Michelet par lui-même*, pp.168-9.

<sup>46</sup> Each performance of a particular production took on a singular historical significance, represented ‘une suite d’actes humains d’abord purement contingents’; see ‘Le Prince de Hombourg’, p.94 (*OC* 205).

<sup>47</sup> See ‘Modernité de Michelet’, *Revue de l’histoire littéraire de la France*, September/October 1974, pp.804-805.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes seemed to consider that Michelet was ‘de gauche’; see his 1952 comment on Michelet’s role in the 1851 elections and on his treatment by Napoleon III in ‘Ecrivains de gauche ou littérature de gauche?’, p.18 (*OC* 133).

<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the fact that ‘people’ were attending popular theatre was not going to be the final goal of a militant popular theatre movement: ‘[N]ous nous refusons à accrédi-ter davantage le mythe d’un peuple-panacée, d’un peuple-tabou, propre à guérir par la seule imposition de son nom toutes les impuissances esthétiques’.

<sup>50</sup> See ‘Versailles et ses comptes’, p.785 (*OC* 402).

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, he believed that Michelet’s *Histoire* was, since it had a beginning, an end and a direction, ‘proprement philosophie de l’histoire’ (*Michelet*, *OC* 258).

<sup>52</sup> See ‘A propos d’une métaphore’, p.677 (*OC* 111). Hayden White’s *Metahistory* has also considered Michelet as an important analogical thinker. But, though characterizing Michelet’s writing of history as Romantic in its ‘substitution of emplotment for argument as an explanatory strategy’ (p.143), White recognized that Michelet’s application of Vico’s ‘New Science’ to historical study represented a sharp move away from the ‘Ironic’ and romantic historians, typified by Carlyle; Michelet’s ‘new’ method, involving ‘concentration et reverberation’, was, White affirms, ‘a flame sufficiently intense to melt down all the apparent diversities, to restore to them in history the unity they had in life’; this required a use of metaphor, which (White seemed to agree with Barthes) was a way of identifying with, resurrecting and reliving the past ‘in its totality’.

<sup>53</sup> See ‘Précritique’, in *Création et Destinée*, p.245.

<sup>54</sup> This article is omitted from the *Oeuvres complètes*.

<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the resultant ‘temps historique, droit comme un fil’, as a ‘fuyant irremplaçable’ was no different from the ‘fil’ he had criticised in Jousain’s account of revolution; *ibid*, pp.1092-1093.

<sup>56</sup> See the last paragraph but two of ‘Le Mythe, aujourd’hui’ (*OC* 718).

<sup>57</sup> ‘Michelet, l’Histoire et la Mort’, p.502 (*OC* 94).



<sup>58</sup> Prefiguring postmodernist thought on the end of History, Barthes noted how Michelet, having completed his history of the French Revolution, could, despite writing three more books before his death, only protest that 'l'histoire était finie' (*Michelet, OC* 255). See, for example, the 'end of history' thesis of Francis Fukuyama, discussed by A. Callinicos in *Theories and Narratives. Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/Polity, 1995), p.4, pp.15-22.

<sup>59</sup> 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', p.503 (*OC* 95). Two years later Barthes regretted that, though influenced by Vico, Michelet had not displayed a Vicoesque schema of history, which, progressing in a spiral ('par tours et retours') would have countered the teleological nature of his historiography; see 'Féminaire de Michelet', pp.1092-1093 (and note 1).

<sup>60</sup> Worsening Franco-Rumanian relations had been brought to a head by the Moscow-backed coup of 1947; this had prompted Barthes to write to Rebeyrol in Paris to discuss the problems of Barthes's job, which had been to complete the closure of the French Institute in Bucharest.

<sup>61</sup> pp.116-117.

<sup>62</sup> This idea that the intellectual's political role was unambiguous and clear before the nineteenth century was a theme which would resurface in Barthes's 1958 preface 'Voltaire, dernier des écrivains heureux?', republished in *Actualité littéraire*, March 1958, pp.13-15 (*OC* 1235-1240, a slightly edited version).

<sup>63</sup> 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', p.502 (*OC* 94).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*, p.500 (*OC* 93).

<sup>65</sup> See 'Le temps du récit', in which he wrote: 'Image d'un ordre [le préterite] constitue l'un de ces nombreux pactes formels établis entre l'écrivain et la société pour la justification de l'un et la sérénité de l'autre' (p.4).

<sup>66</sup> A 'portrait de Balzac' was 'jamais une substance' only an 'addition de lieux signifiants' (p.504, *OC* 96).

<sup>67</sup> 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans', p.492 (*OC* 117-118).

<sup>68</sup> *Essais critiques, OC* p.1253.

<sup>69</sup> p.510 (*OC* 101).

<sup>70</sup> See 'Michelet, l'Histoire et la Mort', pp.509-510 (*OC* 102).

<sup>71</sup> See E. Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (London, Collins/Fontana, 1974), Part 1, Chapters 1-4, pp.9-32. Subtitled 'A Study in the writing and acting of history', Wilson's study, published in 1941, predated Barthes's first article on Michelet by a decade. A colleague and comrade of Sidney Hook, Wilson had echoed Hook's voluntaristic account of history in this study of Marxist historiography; the similarities with Barthes's 1951 analysis of Michelet are striking; I have found, however, no evidence to suggest that Barthes had knowledge of this book. Wilson's account located Michelet as the first revolutionary writer (he noted that Michelet was the first to write a history of the French Revolution based on archives from the time). He also noted that Michelet had written the first 'Republican history' of 1789; all that had gone before was either 'monarchic' or 'military'. Not only did Wilson's account insist on the importance of revolution in Michelet's thought, it also isolated similar themes to those in Barthes's study. Locating Michelet's influence in Vico, Bacon and Grotius, Wilson underlined the 'organic' nature of human progress in Michelet's writing; Vico's *Scienza Nuova* was an early form of sociology and humanist anthropology which, as Barthes suggested in 1951, had a profound effect on Michelet. Wilson also highlighted the contradictory objectives of Michelet's writing of history. Firstly, he said, Michelet had looked for a fusion of disparate materials, finding interrelations between diverse forms of human activity (the notions of 'structure' or 'tableau' in Barthes's terms); secondly, he had wanted to recapture the colour and flavour of a period, that is return to the past and pretend not to know the outcome (change or 'récit' for Barthes); Wilson stressed, more so than Barthes, the way in which Michelet managed, unlike other historians, to give the reader the impression that they did not know what the outcome of a particular event would be - the 'illusion of no hindsight'. In terms which prefigured Barthes's analysis, Wilson underlined the skill with which Michelet could both give a general picture and focus on one particular historical object; Michelet's technique, said Wilson, was to narrate, then, occasionally, to stop and give a general historical picture. Wilson also pointed out how Michelet had tried to live his history and referred to Proust's parody of Michelet (cited by Barthes in *Michelet par lui-même, OC* 360-361). Wilson's central point was that there was an enormous contradiction at



the heart of Michelet's life and of his writing of history : Michelet loved the people, said that it was they who made history, yet, noted Wilson, it was he who had done all the speaking, all the acting, all the resurrecting.

<sup>72</sup> In 'La cathédrale des romans' (*Bulletin de la Guilde du livre*, March 1957, pp.105-107, OC 725-727), a review of a new edition of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Barthes likened Michelet's technique of making the reader into a 'véritable dieu' to Hugo's 'tableau de Paris vu à vol d'oiseau': 'Un autre grand romantique, Michelet, avait lui aussi tiré des effets tout modernes de ces vues cavalières, qui font du lecteur un véritable dieu, comprenant l'espace historique et terrestre (mais tout espace n'est-il pas historique?), à proportion même qu'il le fait des yeux' (p.106, OC 726)

<sup>73</sup> See Brown, p.77; and 'Aujourd'hui Michelet', *l'Arc*, 52, 1er trimestre, 1973, p.25 note 2 (OC vol 2, 1581 n.1): 'Si je mets [...] une majuscule à l'Histoire, ce n'est pas pour la diviniser: c'est pour distinguer l'Histoire, science et matière de cette science, de l'histoire, anecdote'.

<sup>74</sup> See 'Brecht, Marx et l'Histoire', p.22 (OC 753).

<sup>75</sup> In a review of a book on Bakunin by B. Hepner ('Bakounine et le panslavisme révolutionnaire', *Combat*, August 10 1950, p.4, OC p.87), Barthes had begun to display an interest in the representation of history, before his 1951 study of Michelet's historiography. Assessing Hepner's book, he had applauded its non-biographical nature and for being a 'livre d'histoire authentique'; commending its linear quality, Barthes considered that the book narrated the history effectively by not isolating themes but putting forward a 'véritable front fonctionnel d'idées'; this 'éclatement incessant de l'Histoire' made the book sound like an intelligent conversation. Avoiding the political significance of Bakunin's ideas, Barthes's interest here was clearly in the historiography used by Hepner, in the form of the telling of history. However, being 'linéaire' only, the book was criticised by Barthes for not covering 'les profondeurs des structures historiques'; here Barthes prefigured his view of the contradiction of historiography: how to account for, and describe simultaneously, change and structure.

<sup>76</sup> See Bernard Dort's review of *Michelet par lui-même*, 'Vers une critique totalitaire' in *Critique*, 88, September 1954, pp.725-732.

<sup>77</sup> See *Michelet par lui-même*, OC 247-248; Barthes made the connection in 'Poujade et les intellectuels', where he suggested that Poujade could have written 'certaines pages' of Michelet's *Le Peuple*; see *Mythologies*, OC 679-680.



## CONCLUSION

*Aussi notre interprétation de l'histoire sera-t-elle à la fois matérialiste avec Marx et mystique avec Michelet. Jean Jaurès*

Journalism was the central feature of Barthes's activities during the 1950s. His research for the first post at the CNRS remained incomplete due to his preference for an active journalism. This activity was concentrated in two areas. In the popular theatre movement, he promoted popular (and later, amateur) dramatics as cultural expression. In demystifying French culture and ideology, above all for *Les Lettres nouvelles*, his 'sociologie de la vie quotidienne' was, though often complex and jargon-filled, clearly aimed at a left-wing intellectual community. Both activities, highly political, involved Barthes taking up positions: against the Algerian War and other colonial wars, and in favour of Brechtian theatre. These were, of course, intimately connected; a political and radical theatre could show the masses now attending the theatre that the resolution of humanity's ills was in their hands.

This has two significances for Barthesian studies. Firstly, his interest in political theatre undermined Edgar Morin's view that Barthes was interested more in Brecht's aesthetic than in the political aspect of his theatre, when in fact they were indistinguishable.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, Barthes was first and foremost a left-wing intellectual, who believed that his political praxis was most effectively carried out by writing against bourgeois ideology and society, and whose effect helped to radicalise others.

However, this did not mean that Barthes's journalism had equal weight in the various publications. Above all, his role for Nadeau's journal was significantly different from his input into Voisin's popular theatre journal. Though a regular



contributor to *Les Lettres nouvelles*, during the same period as his involvement in *Théâtre populaire* (1953 to 1956), and with a similar intensity between 1954 and the beginning of 1956, Barthes was not writing editorials as a member of the 'comité de rédaction' for Nadeau's journal. The 'petite mythologie du mois' was a separate section of *Les Lettres nouvelles* which was not integral to any 'line' or editorial stance.<sup>2</sup>

Here was an important difference between Barthes's role for *Théâtre populaire* and *Les Lettres nouvelles*. Not only was he integral to the running and preparation of *Théâtre populaire* he was also directing its editorial line; here he was crucial in advocating an aesthetic and artistic form (tragedy and then Brechtian epic theatre), as well as in articulating the general aim of attracting popular audiences with innovative productions.<sup>3</sup>

For *Les Lettres nouvelles*, by contrast, he was simply a contributor, not involved in making decisions for the journal's contents and direction. This can be seen by the surprising absence of comment from Barthes on the 'Nouveau Roman'. If Barthes in the 1950s was well-known for his fascination with Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, his desire to change and revolutionise the novel as well as the theatrical form was also important.<sup>4</sup> Though not as intense as his 'brechtisme', his enthusiasm for the 'Nouveau Roman', as exemplified by the novels of Robbe-Grillet, began at almost exactly the same time as his 'incendie' before Brecht's Berliner Ensemble in mid-1954.<sup>5</sup> However, if Robbe-Grillet was championed by Barthes (in the same way as Brecht's theatre) as an appropriate novel form, this did not take place in the pages of *Les Lettres nouvelles*; Barthes wrote almost nothing on this new author for Nadeau's journal (except briefly in the December 1955 'petite mythologie', 'La Critique Ni-Ni').<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his only strictly literary review in Nadeau's journal was a short but favourable assessment of a new collection of Jean Cayrol's poetry; and if Cayrol could be considered a proto-



'Nouveau Romancier' then Barthes's favourable views on Cayrol's prose were also markedly absent from *Les Lettres nouvelles*.<sup>7</sup> Barthes urged Nadeau, successfully, to publish Robbe-Grillet in *Les Lettres nouvelles* and to read Butor's *l'Emploi du Temps* in manuscript.<sup>8</sup> So, if this was the case, why did Barthes not review Robbe-Grillet's works for Nadeau's journal? The reason lies with Nadeau. As he had set out in the 'Présentation', Nadeau wanted *Les Lettres nouvelles* to avoid a dogmatic view of literature; a literary journal should not be a mouthpiece for one particular kind of contemporary literature, in the manner of the Hussards or the Sartrians. Dort's view that *Théâtre populaire* was aiming to be the *Temps Modernes* of theatre was clearly noticed by Nadeau. Nadeau has described how *Les Lettres nouvelles* could easily have become the 'organe théorique' of the 'Nouveau Roman', but he prevented this.<sup>9</sup>

This reflected not only Barthes's lack of influence on *Les Lettres nouvelles*, but also two entirely different understandings of the role of a left-wing literary journal. Whereas Voisin was actively involved in the translation and publication of Brecht's theatre and theoretical writings, Nadeau's journal avoided promoting a particular aesthetic or literary theory. That Nadeau did not ask Barthes to write on Robbe-Grillet suggested that this was one way for *Les Lettres nouvelles* to remain an open journal, not tied to a particular 'line' (except that of promoting a literature 'en marche'). Nadeau's journal had resisted the temptation of advocating a 'littérature engagée', and it did not articulate the perspectives nor entertain the desire of creating a popular novel and overthrowing the 'bourgeois novel', in the manner that *Théâtre populaire*, under Barthes's pen, was promoting a popular theatre and advocating the demolition of 'bourgeois theatre'.

However, even if Barthes did not influence the artistic and literary stance and content of *Les Lettres nouvelles*, his regular contribution to the journal helped encourage its political inflection; despite his unintegrated status, he was



nevertheless crucial in the politicisation of Nadeau's journal. This marginal role on *Les Lettres nouvelles* meant that Barthes was free to write in a highly subjective and flamboyant manner: his writing was not, as such, trying to achieve anything (in the way that the theatre journal was).

This conception of the writer had implications for his view of a sociological science. 'L'écrivain en vacances' had illustrated his interest in sociology in relation to the idea of the 'prolétarianisation' of the writer, which Barthes considered to be the crucial idea in the *Figaro* account of Gide's travels along the Congo: 'Voilà donc un bon reportage, bien efficace sociologiquement, et qui nous renseigne sans tricher sur l'idée que notre bourgeoisie se fait de ses écrivains.'

There are a number of problems with Barthes's analysis. Firstly, it would be somewhat fanciful to consider this to be the intention of the *Figaro* writer and photographer. Barthes would reply that the mythical treatment of the proletarianization of the writer was, rather than an intention, only the net result of the operation of bourgeois ideology, a function of the photo story. Secondly, this view is, of course highly subjective (though I do not necessarily disagree with it). This can be seen in the way in which the article contains a number of important slippages. Barthes tried to give the impression of being the average reader - '[i]l peut me paraître même flatteur, à moi simple lecteur'. Barthes considered himself, as we have seen, to be suffering from the exploitation of the writer; for him to consider himself but a simple reader was to ignore his contradictory role as journalist, exploited and proletarianized, but also as popular theatre activist and theorist. This was, as well as a playful view of the writer, a highly subjective (that is, personal) analysis.<sup>10</sup> Though it is difficult not to agree with Barthes's conclusions, it would be equally difficult to find the hard evidence used in this study. This is not to say that he avoided social and historical fact. On the contrary; every phenomenon was given a context in his demystification of the bourgeois



press and ideology. This did not however stop his conclusions, though amusing and plausible, being scientifically questionable. If this mythology of the writer on holiday involved Barthes himself (in that, in the 1950s at least, Barthes wrote in order to live) the analysis was based on his own experience.<sup>11</sup>

This leads us to suggest that there is a certain irony behind the importance of *Mythologies* for its author. Though Barthes was clearly an 'intellectuel' in publishing the book, it could be considered the end of his journalistic political praxis; not only did the success of the book mean that his financial worries were receding, it coincided also with both his new-found interest in an academic career and the end of his enthusiasm and activism in the popular theatre. The book *Mythologies* which, in part, questioned the bourgeois representation of the writer, was to become an affirmation of his own ability to escape this status as journalist.

As well as seeing a significant decrease in his writings and activities within the popular theatre movement, 1956 was the moment at which his regular column, the 'petite mythologie du mois', ended. This happened at a time when his second research post at the CNRS began, a post which was to prove to be far more significant than his first CNRS research which had begun in 1952 and ended inconsequentially in 1954. This second research post in sociology influenced his appointment in 1960. Barthes had made a move from journalism towards an academic position which was based upon his interest in the social sciences as they developed rapidly during the Fourth Republic.

This thesis has shown that Barthes's theoretical developments were dialectical in two ways. Firstly, subjectively, they shifted in opposition to bourgeois theory and ideology; secondly, and objectively, they were intimately related to the historical conditions in which Barthes was constrained to operate. If he was scathing of academic and literary institutions, he was, paradoxically perhaps, profoundly influenced by and instrumental in the development of sociological



analysis. Barthes was therefore a historical actant in innovating structuralism, but this was itself conditional upon historical factors (backwardness of sociology, his position outside of the academy, the inordinately high profile of intellectuals in the 1950s, expansion of left-wing journals, the explosion of popular and mass culture etc.).

This raises the difficult question of what was the most important determinant in Barthes's move from journalist to academic. This is a typical problem of biography, and one which Barthes himself encountered in relation to Michelet: can we write the history of an individual's life and be able to give an accurate account of the multiplicity of dilemmas facing that individual? Biography cannot tell us precisely the weights of the multifarious influences upon these developments: a scientific answer to these is impossible. Yet we can make hypotheses. That Barthes's interest in semiology and structuralism accompanied him towards his first full-time post in 1960 was not mere coincidence; it reflected his own personal career move away from journalism (from an 'intellectuel de gauche' towards a researcher), but also completed a change of political viewpoint. In this sense, 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' represents not only the beginning of Barthes's structuralist phase, but also the beginning of the end of his insistence on the masses making history: ultimately, a move away from the historicism of Marxism.

However, to account for Barthes's move from an active, militant journalism to an institutional praxis by an account of theory and sociology alone misunderstands the intensely political nature of the Barthes of the 1950s. The intensity of his anger in letters to Rebeyrol throughout this period points to other more specifically political concerns; he wanted, after all, to be linked 'généreusement' to his specific historical moment. Therefore, an oblique reading of history could be performed by looking at the specifics of Barthes's own political



assumptions and beliefs. For example, an examination of his views on the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, in short his stance on the Cold War could be made; similarly, we could establish his own specific political beliefs in relation to French politics of the 1950s.<sup>12</sup>

A good example of how political realities affected both Barthes's theoretical and career perspectives was his involvement in the popular theatre. If his interest in sociology was partly developed in relation to popular culture, his gradual disillusion with the popular theatre was bound to affect this sociology. His departure from the theatre had a profound effect on both his career and his theoretical development. The connection between Barthes's departure from the popular theatre movement and his interest in fashion forms was far from coincidental. He had written a lecture for the ATP and a lengthy article for *Théâtre populaire* on costumes and their significance within a production. Furthermore, Louis-Jean Calvet cites the example of the invitation by Olivier Burgelin to speak at the Maison des Lettres on theatre, which, to the surprise of Burgelin, became a lecture on fashion.<sup>13</sup>

This substitution of fashion for a popular theatre interest was illustrated most clearly in Barthes's letter written to Robert Voisin in 1961. Barthes's distance from the popular theatre journal and theatre movement from 1957 to 1961 was dependent on his devotion of time and energy to the research into fashion. The epistemological shift was reflected in his letter to Voisin which, as we saw in Chapter 2, set out Barthes's reasons for the growing distance between himself and *Théâtre populaire* after 1956, as well as his suggestions for the conditions of his future involvement.<sup>14</sup> This letter underlined not only the shift in Barthes's sociological epistemology but also changes in his political views. It was not simply the considerable difference between the enthusiastic ATP organiser of 1954 and the rather detached academic of 1961. Barthes's comments were



political in relation to the failure (in his eyes) of the popular theatre movement, and in relation to a general epistemological shift. He told Voisin that he had the ‘sentiment que d’anciens schémas explicatifs ne collent plus d’une façon satisfaisante à la situation du monde et qu’il faudrait comprendre de nouveau ce monde’. What else was this other than a questioning of the historical materialism of *Théâtre populaire*? Barthes tried to reduce the importance of this questioning by saying that his view could be a ‘sentiment faux, trop vite acquis, paresseux etc’ (and, he wrote, even if this feeling was ‘fondé’, it did not follow that ‘il faille abandonner cet instrument de réflexion et de combat qu’est une revue comme la nôtre’). However, it was clear that his study of fashion had been part of his questioning of Marxism.<sup>15</sup> This abandonment of a rigid schema was present throughout the letter; his second suggestion, that of creating a popular culture journal, would have to be a ‘reconnaissance du monde tel quel’, which, as an ‘élargissement’ of the journal, would require ‘une suspension de jugement’.

It was precisely this attitude Barthes had taken towards Michel Vinaver’s play *Coréens* in 1956.<sup>16</sup> Whereas he had admired Brecht’s theatre precisely for its voluntaristic and eschatological aspect, and for the manner in which it invited and, in some cases, forced the audience to judge the action on stage, in April 1956 he praised Vinaver’s play precisely for the absence of judgment of the characters. Indeed he recommended the play’s *non*-eschatological perspective as the prime element in considering Vinaver’s theatre as a potential successor to Brecht’s.<sup>17</sup>

This, in turn, was related to political questions. Vinaver’s innovative theatre was linked explicitly and intimately to the changes that, Barthes thought, were taking place in the Soviet Union after Khrushchev’s famous 1956 speech. In the light of the supposed ‘dégel’ in the Soviet Union, Barthes considered that Vinaver’s play was posing ‘un problème idéologique nouveau’: there could be perhaps, outside of ‘des alibis et des mystifications humanistes’, a new



‘assentiment au monde’. The ‘affrontement manichéen du Mal capitaliste et du Bien révolutionnaire’ underlined the need for a new ‘dialectique’, in which the Cold War division of politics was not so much ‘nié’ as ‘éloigné’. Without this becoming an ‘irresponsabilité’, Barthes believed that Vinaver’s theatre depoliticised theatre in a progressive manner.

This was an important political shift for Barthes. Up until 1956, he said, ‘dépolitiser le réel était toujours une façon de le politiser au profit de l’oppression’. Now, he said, Vinaver’s ‘nouveau type d’accommodement’ could make a new image of the real in which ‘la politique serait en quelque sorte la ligne supérieure et diacritique’.

This was interesting for three reasons. Firstly, it advocated a depoliticisation of the real (something which *Mythologies* seemed to reject). Secondly, it was indicative of a shift in Barthes’s attitude to Brechtian political and revolutionary theatre. Finally, its close connection to the perceived ‘dégel’ implied particular political views within the Cold War.

The ‘correction’ operated by Khrushchev was, like Vinaver’s play, a ‘reconnaissance du caractère *immédiat* du réel’; thus the title of Vinaver’s play, *Aujourd’hui*, was in tune with this because it showed the present as a ‘matière *immédiatement* structurable’; above all, Barthes’s rejection of an audience’s need to judge, moved away from the Brechtian model of theatre. Indeed, Vinaver’s play contradicted ‘le dogme traditionnel de la Révolution comme durée essentiellement eschatologique’.

This questioning of an eschatological perspective was an important element in Barthes’s theoretical development. During the late Forties, he had kept an ambiguous, but nevertheless eschatological, attitude towards liberation of the self and language. We saw in 1947 how he had considered all philosophy impossible until a truly socialist society was established. This eschatological perspective had



been replicated in his dilemma at the end of 'Le Degré zéro de l'écriture' in 1947: 'Est-il possible de libérer la parole avant l'Histoire?'

Philippe Roger has considered this question to be indicative of the fundamentally *non-marxist* aspect of Barthes's *degré zéro* thesis, suggesting that a true Marxist would not even pose such a question.<sup>18</sup> Without entering into the semantic and political complications around the meaning of 'Marxist', we can question Roger's judgment. The eschatological framework within which Barthes posed the question was in fact profoundly Marxian: could literature break free of the economic and social determinants of capitalism, and generate a language to overcome social exclusion, to represent (as he put it in 'Faut-il tuer la grammaire?') the 'subjectivité' of the 'homme populaire', and 'se profil[er] dans l'épaisseur du volume social'?

The problem that Barthes had in deciding whether literature could be liberated before 'History' explains his contradictory views on literature and form. The 'degré zéro' series seemed to be a constant oscillation between negative and affirmative answers to that question. This uncertain perspective in this literary-political dilemma influenced his aesthetic judgments, for example in his highly ambiguous view of the avant-garde in the theatre.<sup>19</sup>

Ambiguity was evident not simply towards the avant-garde in the theatre. Barthes displayed differing perspectives of the theatre and the written word in general. His attitude to the avant-garde seemed to be the same for the popular theatre as for the novel (the absurdism of the 'Nouveau roman' was like Absurdist theatre - neither could be 'total', but both could 'cleanse' literature and theatre for the receiver).<sup>20</sup> How did Brecht's theatre, however, fit into this? Was the aesthetico-political motivation behind his determined defence of Brecht the same as that behind his praise of Robbe-Grillet? Barthes's reasons for praise of the two writers were diametrically opposed. Surely, to advocate a radical theatre for the



masses at the same time as an introspective, complex and (potentially) élitist novel form was contradictory? Furthermore, the questioning of human power over the world in the 'Nouveau Roman' was promoted at exactly the same time as Brechtian dramatisations were praised precisely for encouraging the view that human destiny was 'entre les mains des hommes'. On the one hand, Barthes wanted to expose and criticise bourgeois colonization of the world (anthropomorphism); on the other, he wanted to stress a quasi-divine human control over the world (a 'supervisibilité' which was 'théomorphique').<sup>21</sup> While Brecht's theatre gave its audience the possibility of a demiurgic capacity to judge and act accordingly, Robbe-Grillet's first novel taught us how to look at the world no longer 'avec les yeux du confesseur, du médecin ou de Dieu', but with those of a man walking through town 'sans d'autre horizon que le spectacle, sans d'autre pouvoir que celui-là même des yeux'.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps Barthes's reasoning was that the new novel could not reconcile the description of humanity's new station with an explanation of this condition. If the apotheosis of theatre was Brechtian drama's ability to explain the causes (and therefore the remedies) of human ills, to be able to go beyond a purely cognitive, human science, then the popular theatre displayed a fundamental difference from the novel. Literature could be scientific and human, locating humanity's station without alienating humans, but could do so in a passive fashion. If the theatre, for Barthes, held potentially the ability to represent humanity's capacity to make history, and could encourage a civic and political view amongst the popular audience, it was because it could describe human reality and, at the same time, promote its transformation. In other words, epic theatre was inherently 'popular', because, in the people's interest, it encouraged and postulated the transformation of the world. In this sense, Brecht's theatre was and could not be alienated, precisely because it was based on the inalienability of the people making history.<sup>23</sup>



The notion of 'écriture' was better suited to literature than to theatre, in that literature did not have the collective and social power of theatre, and was by definition an individual act. Here was the basis of Barthes's 'stagist' theory of liberating 'la parole': the new novel was a step towards unalienated literature, a 'pré-roman'; it was a theory which recognized the alienated nature of the literary market and the reading act. Brecht's theatre, on the other hand, incorporated within it the aesthetic which could encourage a socialist transformation, precisely because it was consumed by the masses. Not only did this generic difference have bearings on Barthes's aesthetic views, it suggested also the extent to which, politically and socially, he believed it possible to develop this radical popular theatre; was it possible to 'libérer le théâtre' (to parody Barthes's eschatological question) 'avant l'Histoire'?<sup>24</sup>

There were two important exceptions to this generic difference. The first appeared in the infamous quarrel with Camus in 1955 after Barthes's review of *La Peste*.<sup>25</sup> Rather than treat Camus's allegory of the Resistance and the Occupation as a novel, Barthes applied Brechtian theatre categories to his criticism of this novel. *La Peste*, said Barthes echoing the voluntarist aesthetic he had seen in Brechtian theatre, failed to show a solidarity underlining and encouraging humanity's ability to act: by not showing humans in the act of finding this solidarity. Consequently, Camus's novel had taken on a moral (if not quasi-religious) dimension where humans were naturally good.

This application of theatre categories to the novel was not inconsistent in itself, but appears more so when one considers Barthes's reviews of 'traditional' novels at the same time. His praise of Zola's *Nana* the same year was the second example of his conflating dramatic and literary categories in his criticism.<sup>26</sup> Considering the anti-naturalism of his promotion of the 'Nouveau Roman', his favourable review of Zola's novel was highly contradictory. Surprisingly, Barthes's



assessment stressed the epic (Brechtian and theatrical) aspect to Zola's portrayal of nineteenth-century reality, which allowed him to stress the progressive nature of Zola's scientific picture. This could be put down to Barthes's fascination with the classical novel.<sup>27</sup> But it could also be explained by his financial needs: though he had told Rebeyrol how he was tired of writing reviews, he had stressed also that the money was quickly earned. Therefore his unfavourable review of *La Peste* - journalistically very dangerous (if you are asked and paid to review a new edition for a book club, it is ill-advised to review the book unfavourably) - and the resulting polemic, pushed Barthes, ever the dialectician and pragmatist, to find a positive element to Zola's novel.

This explanation might back up Andrew Brown's view that Barthes drifted between positions. However, these two episodes in Barthes's literary criticism of the 1950s are, in my opinion, exceptions to a rather strict dialectical rule; the 'dialectique d'amour' strategy suggests a more reasoned strategy on Barthes's behalf, involving a certain rigidity (within flexibility): his firm belief was that it was necessary to oppose bourgeois ideology. Furthermore, Barthes had a specific aesthetic aim: to reveal the dialectical relationship between Literature and society; that is, form (and content, to an extent) could be intimately linked to (and determined by) 'History'. Yet he believed that the writer could act upon the world of literature. In other words, new forms of literature could be easily recuperated by bourgeois ideology, yet they could demystify both the literary institution and the very ideology which justified its existence. Such an avant-gardist and dialectical view of literature stood in marked contrast to the literary strictures of the Communist Party and (to a certain extent) to the one-sided Sartrean view of literary creation.

However, this dialectical analysis made for a contradictory social theory. His interest in social sciences influenced his criticism, but also vice versa; that is to



say, his literary values informed his sociological analysis and explanation. In 'Pour une définition du Théâtre Populaire', Barthes's interest in a sociology of theatre became integral to his view of the popular theatre. Of the three 'obligations concurrentes' required for a revolutionary popular theatre, the most important was the 'public de masse'. His subsequent desire for an objective and total, that is fully scientific, understanding of theatre stood in marked contrast to the subjectivity (the 'vécu') of his sociological analysis in 'Visages et figures': sociologically, the theatre was a very different object of study for Barthes.

The failure of a true people's theatre to emerge led to the undermining of his attempt to combine the objective sociological analysis of the theatre and its audiences with a non-bourgeois drama form. If the three crucial elements for a popular theatre, led by the idea of a mass popular audience, were to disappear slowly, to be replaced by the defence of Brechtianism, and by a predominance of form, this did not represent simply a triumph of a 'répertoire de haute culture' and of a 'dramaturgie avant-garde'. In Barthes's criteria for a popular theatre, it meant also an abandonment of a sociology of popular theatre audiences. His view by 1956 in 'Les tâches de la critique brechtienne' was that it was impossible to establish the sociological make-up of theatre audiences. As far as the popular theatre was concerned, an objective sociology, that is a concern for a 'public de masse' had been, by 1956, severely undermined.

Though not the only pressure acting on Barthes's career and his sociological methodology (his own personal need for a stable job must be recognized), this adverse experience was important because it laid the basis for his mode of sociological inquiry, one which he himself called an interest in 'formes'. Whereas the three-point plan of 1954 had been content-based (a specific repertoire and an avant-garde production technique, as well as the attracting of popular audiences), Barthes's enthusiasm for Brechtian theatre became after 1956 more



formalist and devoid of specific aims within the political perspective of the popular theatre. With the gradual abandonment of a science of audiences, the last bastion of his objective sociology, he could begin to reinterpret and redirect his 'petite mythologie du mois', into a theory of ideology, which stressed that commodity fetishism was the dominant feature of ideology in 1950s France. The 'decompartmentalization' of art and sociological reality meant that formalism could be gradually applied to social sciences, and also that Barthes's own subjectivity could be incorporated into his development of a methodology.

The combination of the 'vécu' and subjectivity of his analysis with an abandonment of voluntarism suggested that Barthes was continuing the work of the 'Collège de Sociologie'. If one of the Collège's central features was an understanding of the sacred, the manner in which people understood their world (myth and festival had been common themes in the Collège's studies), Barthes's analysis of ideology via myth added to this.<sup>28</sup> It was precisely the 'vécu' of daily life, which, with a literary notion of daily experience, combined with his interest in *Annales*, underpinned Barthes's attempts at developing a sociological analysis.<sup>29</sup> The difference was, however, that in developing a 'sociologie engagée' outside of the academy, Barthes added a popular and mass dimension to the subjective method of the Collège's version of sociology.

Indeed, subjectivity was substituted for objectivity in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui'. His earlier desire to give a voice to those excluded gave way to emphasis on himself acting as this voice, a strategy which, inevitably, ended up with his exclusion from the very people in whose interest demystification needed to be practised. The 'aporie' at the end of 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui' was informed by his interest in Michelet. The question of whether the historian should criticise the ideology of Pascal's *Pensées*, rather than perform a poetic appreciation of the



*Pensées* themselves, had been resolved by Barthes in practice by his failure to perform a critique of Michelet's ideology.

The strategy behind this was based on Michelet's own historical 'reformism', which required the voice of the silent historical masses to pass through the historian. Though Barthes shared the despair of Michelet at the exclusion of the masses that the growth of capitalism had operated, in writing a study of Michelet for the *par lui-même* series he had created an irony. He wanted to refind the individual reality of a writer who had spent decades refinding the reality of millions: Barthes's interest in Michelet was related to the popular masses, but stressed, paradoxically, the individual. In likening Michelet's Witch to the contemporary intellectual, Barthes was asserting the crucial importance of Michelet as a modern intellectual.

In Barthes's view, the contradictions of writing, of history and of taking up political positions had been first experienced by Michelet. Barthes's interest was not so much to expose the relationship of form to 'History', but to understand Michelet's political and personal relationship to his object of study (the people in history): Michelet represented a search for an understanding not only of modernity but also of the intellectual's relationship to the alienated masses. If, as his talk in Rumania suggested, the 1848 period was the beginning of this modern period, then the ambiguity of 'History' was related to the advent of historical materialism: since this period the intellectual had been subjectively impotent and yet History, objective progress, could not be stopped. Did not Michelet represent for Barthes therefore a near-perfect example of the central thesis of the 'degré zéro' analysis; namely, that it was around 1850, the time of Michelet's most intense intellectual and writing activity, that modernism can be seen to appear in his writing?<sup>30</sup>

This gives a clue to the connection between the tensions between history and structure and content and form. This connection is 'écriture': Michelet



displayed his politics and his 'style' in his very act of writing, in his very act of describing history.<sup>31</sup> It is in this sense that we must understand the changes in Barthes's attitude to the opposition of a structural critique to an historical critique. It was the power of 'magistrature', the desire to recreate the past, combined with his partiality to a cause, which made Michelet part of modernity. Writing the preface to Michelet's *La Sorcière*, Barthes showed how Michelet had become the first intellectual, not only because he was the founder of a truly human science, but also because of his 'parti pris': Michelet represented the first intellectual, half a century before the word appeared during the Dreyfus affair.

Therefore, if Barthes's view of history was linked to the possibilities and limits of the intellectual and the writer in this fragmented modernity, then this subjective view was balanced by an acutely objective view of History. The abandonment of an eschatological perspective was reflected, by the summer of 1956, in Barthes's comment in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', that the mythologist could not see the 'Terre promise'. Though his question as to whether literature could be liberated before history did not affirm a Marxist eschatological perspective, it had nevertheless placed the question within a dialectical and materialist perspective of the possibility of a socialist transformation. His ironic comment on not being able to even imagine the possibility of such a transformation was indicative of his shift of perspective.

Indeed, by 1957 this pessimistic outlook, combined with his desire for a 'total' explanation, had led him to question the ability of an orthodox historical materialist method to provide an explanation of certain human phenomena: the development of fashion forms across history was dependent on structural and institutional factors for which the 'principe organisateur' of class struggle could not account.



Barthes's view that each time a writer wrote, it was the very existence of literature which was 'mise en question' was related to his view of history: 'ce que la modernité donne à lire dans la pluralité de ses écritures c'est l'impasse de l'Histoire'. The idea of an inexorable march of history was evident in the 1961 letter to Voisin. Barthes related the 'impasse' of the popular theatre movement to the 'impasse' of society. Though he qualified this last remark by suggesting it was more a question of the 'impuissance' of 'notre pensée', rather than the blockage in social conditions, his teleological view of history was nevertheless evident: 'en Histoire', he concluded, 'il n'y a pas d'impasse'.

Barthes had seemingly criticised Michelet's 'steam train' view of history, but had ended up replicating its obverse side. Crucially, his historical determinism of the inevitability of justice in history (with its temporary 'impasses') became a historical determinism of the impossibility of justice in history. Though direct opposites politically, these two perspectives are two sides of the same coin. They point to an ambiguous but resolutely determinist view of change which had been in evidence in his 1949 lecture in Rumania.

This was connected to the politico-epistemological importance of Michelet's history for Barthes's historical perspective. What Barthes did was to criticise Michelet's 'steam train', believing that this was the result of his philosophy of history. However, surely the problem was not so much Michelet's holding a philosophy of history but which philosophy of history: Barthes had shirked the crucial question which he had found fascinating in Michelet's historical prose, namely the nature of the driving force of history.

This was, partly, as a result of Georges Gurvitch's conception of the limited role of sociology. Although Barthes's study of the meaning and function of form was encouraged by semiology (and to a certain extent by the 'degré zéro' thesis - though this had the firmness of history behind it) this formalism was



facilitated by the influence of a Gurvitchian view of sociology. The questioning of an 'équivalence directe' between the 'base' and the 'superstructure' was typical of Gurvitch's Weberian sociology - the sixth of Gurvitch's criticisms of nineteenth-century social theory had been aimed precisely at the assertion, particularly in Marx's thought, of the primacy of economic determination in the development of human society. Against this Gurvitch had insisted on the 'variabilité' of causes; and, without denying the importance of material and economic factors, he had, as Barthes pointed out, set out the need in sociology to take account of the 'pluralité des déterminismes'. Gurvitch's (and Barthes's) conclusion was that, in order for sociology to achieve a synthesis between empirical description and explanation, the sociologist had to refuse all desires to resolve, amongst other things, the question of predominant factors.<sup>32</sup>

Combined with an abandonment of voluntarism, this denial of an 'algebra' of history meant that Barthes could embrace structuralism. Furthermore, though disavowed in 1950, a 'sociologie des formes' was to become his central theoretical concern in *Mythologies*. Latent in this was his conflation of fact and representation in the writing of history, an analysis which was to underpin his seminal 1967 article 'Le Discours de l'histoire', perhaps the classic *post*-structuralist critique of history and important influence on contemporary post-modernist views of history.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, Barthes can be considered a precursor of post-structuralism in his insistence in critical analysis on the importance of ideology and poetics for representation. His interest in the formal appearance of history writing, the search for a form of writing which could overcome the contradictions of explanation and description, led to the post-structuralist conflation of fact and representation of history, what Bryan Palmer has called the 'descent into discourse'.<sup>34</sup> Though he underlined the central importance of history in 'Le Mythe, aujourd'hui', Barthes's conception of history seemed to have changed in some way. Or more precisely, the



counterposition to his view of history shifted to the representation of history, which seemed to consider the historical and structural method to be compatible, or, at least, that a structural analysis was by no means a negation of history.

André Burguière has argued, more recently, a similar point. Writing in *Annales* in 1971 an introduction to a special edition on history and structure in the human sciences, he declared that ‘la guerre entre l’Histoire et le structuralisme n’aura pas eu lieu’. An opposition between synchronic and diachronic modes of explanation within structuralism was an illusion.<sup>35</sup> This strategy has been typical of strands of post-structuralist critiques of historicism: by denying the opposition of history to structure within structuralism and insisting on the historicist basis of structuralism, post-structuralism can present itself as a radical break from both Marxist and structuralist discourses: only post-structuralism, the argument goes, has questioned the importance of history by reducing it to the level of discourse.<sup>36</sup>

Alex Callinicos has shown that the central feature of post-structuralist social theory is its challenge to the voluntarist aspect of human experience.<sup>37</sup> Therefore the development of post-structuralism (in Barthes’s version at least) was based, in part, on a rejection of his earlier belief in a voluntaristic theory of the human subject. The centrality of the economy, the determined nature of history, and his belief in the power of people to make history (represented by his activism in the popular theatre, above all) slowly disappeared to leave a purely superstructural view of historical change: things changed and the history of the material world had very little weight in this. In a sense this was the utopian analysis of the ‘degré zéro’ thesis without the weight of history as ultimate determinant.

Thus, the roots of post-structuralism are reflected in the distinctly modernist dilemmas of Barthes’s interest in Michelet. His contradictory, rather than dialectical understanding of history informed his two-term dialectic, which, in turn, encouraged him to oppose semiological to ideological analysis without



postulating the third revolutionary term typical of a dialectical analysis. If this was indicative of his indebtedness to Michelet's two-term dialectic, as well as his own utopianism, it was indicative also of a political conception of the possibilities of change at the time of publication of *Mythologies*. The book covered the objective facts, the subjective reaction, and the subsequent alienation of the victims of myth; however, the analysis, in concentrating on the perception and representation of a complex 'dialectique', implied a passivity on behalf of those masses. It stressed the effect of technological innovation, mass culture, and modernity on the masses, underlining the subjective effect. But it ignored the creativity of the subjective. In this sense, it was not the dialectical account of the relation between ideology and active praxis which Barthes had looked for in the early 1950s.

The ultimate irony of Barthes's political strategy of combatting bourgeois myth and ideology was the publication of a book which, denying the eternal nature of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois culture, sought to justify the sarcastic nature of the writer's role. In trying to show how semiology could undermine the essentialism of bourgeois ideology, Barthes's analysis could only pessimistically underline precisely how much he believed that people had swallowed these myths.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 1982 Morin wrote: 'Dans le fond, Barthes croyait à la vérité du théâtre de Brecht, plus parce que celui-ci avait prôné et établi la distanciation de l'acteur face à son rôle que par adhésion au spectacle politique'; see *Communications* 36, 1982, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Nadeau has confirmed that Barthes needed often to be reminded of the dates of 'bouclage' of the next number for his monthly articles; this is indicative of his peripheral role for Nadeau's journal. Interview with Nadeau, 17 March 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes was considered, it seems, an expert on Vilar's acting too: the back cover of *Théâtre populaire* between numbers 3-5 announced a forthcoming article by Barthes called 'Jean Vilar, l'acteur'; this article has never been published. Similarly, his 'Petit lexique du spectacle', advertised on the back cover of *Théâtre populaire* for over two years (nos 13-32, except 27), was never published.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes's importance in the early evolution of the 'Nouveau Roman' has been noted by a number of critics; in Nadeau's view, Barthes was so impressed by Robbe-Grillet's prose that it was he, not Robbe-Grillet, who began the mutations of the novel known as the 'Nouveau Roman'; see *Grâce* pp.380-1. See also the prominent position given to Barthes in Nadeau's account of Robbe-Grillet's early success, in *Le Roman*, pp.163-164. The importance of Barthes's



'objective' theorisation of Cayrol's novels in 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans' has also been noted; see C. Ostier, *Jean Cayrol* (Paris, Seghers, 1973), pp.52-55.

<sup>5</sup> According to Calvet, it was Bernard Dort who had urged Barthes to read *Les Gommages* (p.143). Both Dort and Barthes had attended the Franco-German literary conference in January 1955 on 'Le roman et son public' in the Black Forest with Robbe-Grillet, Cayrol and prominent German writers; see 'Rencontre en Forêt noire'.

<sup>6</sup> His promotion of Robbe-Grillet was published in the pages of *France-Observateur*, *Critique*, and *Arguments*; see 'Pré-romans', 'Littérature objective', 'Littérature littérale' and 'Il n'y a pas d'école Robbe-Grillet'. Even the 'mythologie' 'Tables rondes', published in the second series of *Les Lettres nouvelles* which began in 1959 (4, 25 March 1959, pp.51-52, OC 802-804), was more a critique of 'round-tables' rather than a defence of the 'Nouveau Roman'.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes's seminal article 'Jean Cayrol et ses romans' did not encourage Nadeau to ask him to review Cayrol's prose for *Les Lettres nouvelles*; the review of Cayrol's *Les mots sont aussi des demeures* in 1953 underlined Barthes's interest in the role of 'objets' in literature, an enthusiasm not shared by Nadeau.

<sup>8</sup> See *Grâce*, p.378. Robbe-Grillet's short story 'Traduction' was published in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 29, July/August 1955 a year after Barthes's first article on Robbe-Grillet.

<sup>9</sup> Nadeau held important differences with Barthes over the 'Nouveau Roman'. Nadeau's view had been that the writing of 'Nouveau Romanciers' such as Robbe-Grillet and Butor merely copied the works of Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, and Kafka which had already contested the novel. Though Barthes denied that there was any 'école' of the 'Nouveau Roman', it was undeniable that the Éditions de Minuit had done much to promote many new novels, since many of the novelists came from the 'écurie de Lindon'; see *Grâce*, p.384.

<sup>10</sup> p.1 (OC 580-581).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this subjectivity is repeated on a number of occasions; the original used terms such as 'je sentirais' and 'je sais' (p.2, omitted in OC).

<sup>12</sup> Writing to Rebeyrol 10 January 1953 we saw how Barthes believed that the political 'marasme' in France could be solved only by 'les communistes et les gaullistes'. Writing to Rebeyrol in Egypt in December 1956, Barthes expressed his fear for his friend in the 'situation bouffonnière [...] lamentable' (a reference to the Suez crisis); however, the Soviet invasion of Hungary was more important to Barthes in France: 'Ici, évidemment, surtout dans les milieux de gauche où je suis, c'est la Hongrie qui a été le grand événement. Cela a étroitement secoué et cela n'est pas fini. Que d'amis déchirés et désorientés!'. For Barthes, however, the events in Hungary seemed to be but a confirmation of the character and the persistence of this character in the Soviet regime; he wrote: 'Pour moi qui ai toujours pensé que le Stalinisme était une déviation sinistre du socialisme, avec lequel le socialisme même ne devait composer que sous les conditions très précises, cela n'a pu que me confirmer dans mon pessimisme; je crois que le socialisme est très malade et je ne vois pas comment il pourra subsister entre ces deux capitalismes massifs, l'un l'Etat, l'autre occidental-américain, qui l'entourent. Il y a maintenant des guerres de colonies partout. Ce qui se passe en Pologne est seul à donner l'image d'une dernière correction révolutionnaire. J'ai mal travaillé avec tout cela. Je m'y remets maintenant'; letter dated 9 December 1956.

<sup>13</sup> See Calvet, p.167.

<sup>14</sup> Dated 3 September 1961, Barthes's letter to Voisin explaining his lack of involvement in the popular theatre, concluded that 'l'impasse de notre théâtre [...] serait aussi l'impasse de notre société'.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes had already come into political conflict with Voisin over his view in his last article for *Théâtre populaire* that the subject of *La Mère* was not Marxism but 'maternité'. A letter to Voisin (9 August 1960) explained his fear of having the 'aile gauche' of *Théâtre populaire* 'à mes trousses' for this comment; clearly, Barthes avoided this confrontation by commenting that, though not the central subject of the play, Marxism was indeed the object.

<sup>16</sup> 'Note sur "Aujourd'hui"', pp.58-60 (OC 540-542).



<sup>17</sup> Barthes's enthusiastic review of Planchon's production of Vinaver's play six months later underlines this break: 'Aujourd'hui [...] semble rompre avec les prémisses les plus valables de l'art révolutionnaire (celui de Brecht par exemple), qui sont toujours d'ordre polémique, démystificateur' (p.25, OC 557).

<sup>18</sup> Despite Roger's view that the book version 'n'engage nullement la forme'; Roger, p.308.

<sup>19</sup> See 'Le théâtre français d'avant-garde', which showed that his general attitude to the avant-garde theatre did not change between his editorial in *Théâtre populaire* in 1956 ('A l'avant-garde de quel théâtre') and 1961: avant-garde theatre was 'essentiellement relative, ambiguë'. However, a shift between 1954 and 1956 had taken place; in 1954, Barthes had considered Beckett's *Godot* and Adamov's *Taranne* to be crucial components in the construction of a radical popular theatre.

<sup>20</sup> Written at almost exactly the same time as his enthusiasm for *Godot*, 'Littérature objective' assessed Robbe-Grillet's contribution thus: 'Sa tentative vaut en importance celle du surréalisme devant la rationalité, ou du théâtre d'avant-garde (Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov) devant le mouvement scénique bourgeois' (p.590, OC 1192).

<sup>21</sup> There was, however, one aspect which united the two artistic media: bourgeois psychology. In both the theatre and the novel, psychological portrayals of characters disallowed, highly undemocratically in Barthes's opinion, the spectators and readers the conditions in which to ask themselves the important questions of their relationship to the world and whether and how they would act within it.

<sup>22</sup> 'Littérature objective', p.591 (OC 1193).

<sup>23</sup> Barthes made this point in his first review of Brechtian theatre for *Théâtre populaire* in July 1954 ('*Mutter Courage*'), reprinted under the title 'Mère Courage aveugle' in *Essais Critiques* calling Brecht's theatre 'ce théâtre désaliéné' which the journal had been waiting for (p.97, OC 1202).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Moriarty has noted that if *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* showed Barthes's pessimism about literature escaping bourgeois recuperation then only the theatre 'offered a hope of escaping from the impasse of literature' (Moriarty, p.45); it would, therefore, be of interest to establish Barthes's view of the political efficacy of the theatre in comparison with 'la littérature' (the novel and poetry). This would involve a study of Barthes's contradictory requirements for both media; with its 'material' (i.e. bodily) immediacy and its collective consumption, the theatre inspired for Barthes a Marxian and existentialist voluntarism; and, in showing humanity's ills as 'remédiables' by humans, his preferred theatre underlined human, historical agency and control over the world; by contrast, the novel, requiring a highly individualised consumption, and mediated by written language, was 'constitutivement réactionnaire', in that it showed bourgeois appropriation and control of the world (see in particular the 'petite mythologie' 'Nautilus ou le bateau ivre'), and consequently a novel should seek specifically to deny humanity's control over the world (as, he suggested, Cayrol's and Robbe-Grillet's writing aimed to do).

<sup>25</sup> 'La Peste: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?', *Club*, February 1955, pp.4-8; see also 'Réponse de Roland Barthes à Albert Camus', *Club*, April 1955, p.29 (OC 452-458, and 479).

<sup>26</sup> 'La mangeuse d'hommes', *Bulletin de la Guilde du Livre*, June 1955, pp.226-228 (OC 491-493).

<sup>27</sup> In an early article ('Plaisir aux classiques', OC 45-53) he had emphasised the pleasure gained from reading seventeenth-century classical literature 'against the grain'.

<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to establish whether, or to what extent, Barthes knew of this 'Collège'; but clearly, some of his ideas, particularly on theatre as festival, were indebted to Caillois's theory of the 'Festival'; see D. Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie 1937-1939* (Paris, Gallimard, 1979). Hollier noted in the foreword to the English edition (translation by B. Wing, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1988) how Caillois's theory of the sacred regretted the manner in which paid holidays atomized modern society (pp.xxvi-xxvii); in the same manner, Barthes in 1953 insisted on the need for a society in which 'la Fête' typical of Ancient Greece



became a central feature of contemporary daily life; see 'Pouvoirs de la tragédie antique', pp.13-15 (*OC* 218-219).

<sup>29</sup> Barthes followed precisely the trajectory of *Annales* across the 1950s. After Braudel took over the running of the *Annales*, though he claimed fidelity to Bloch and Febvre's method, he radically changed the *Annales*. A desire for a total science was mixed with a more fertile poetics, as H. Stuart Hughes has noted, and Braudel's work became a 'hotch-potch of statistics and poetics'; this view is echoed by Dosse, who notes the obsessive manner in which Braudel tended to give an inventory and classification to everything; see Hughes, p.59 and Dosse, *L'Histoire en miettes*, p.105.

<sup>30</sup> A close study of the dates and importance of passages by Michelet included by Barthes in *Michelet par lui-même* would suggest a strong bias in favour of texts written by Michelet after 1848.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes made this point in 'La modernité de Michelet', p.805.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes's questioning of historical materialism had been evident in the contradiction in his view of existentialism. Even though he had considered existentialist philosophy useful only after a revolution (not before the arrival of a 'société vraiment socialiste'), he had dismissed the philosophy of materialism as behaviourist, and had stressed by contrast the *non*-determination of character (freedom to act or voluntarism) typical of existentialism; this contradiction was (partially) resolved in the attempt to marry Marxism with existentialism.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Joyce has described this view of history thus: 'The major advance of "post-modernism" needs to be registered by historians: namely that the events, structures and processes of the past are indistinguishable from the forms of documentary representation, the conceptual and political appropriations and the historical discourses which construct them', quoted in A. Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives*, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> See *Descent into Discourse: the Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> 'Présentation', *Annales*, numéro spécial 'Histoire et structure', May-August 1971, pp.1-7.

<sup>36</sup> A good example of this is the introduction by R. Young and G. Bennington to *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), edited by D. Attridge, G. Bennington and R. Young.

<sup>37</sup> See *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* (Oxford/Cambridge, Blackwell/ Polity, 1989).



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### 1. BOOKS/ARTICLES BY BARTHES

#### a. Books

The following is a list of the books published by Barthes in the period covered by this thesis (1947-1960), all of which appeared originally in journals between 1947 and 1960 (if only in part in the case of the book on Michelet and the *Essais critiques*):

*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, Seuil, collection 'Pierres vives', 1953.

*Michelet par lui-même*, Paris, Seuil, collection 'Ecrivains de toujours', 1954.

*Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, collection 'Pierres vives', 1957.

*Essais critiques*, Paris, Seuil, collection 'Tel Quel', 1964.

References to these books are given, however, to the first volume of Barthes's Complete Works:

*Oeuvres complètes, tome 1: 1942-1965*, Paris, Seuil, 1993, edited by E. Marty.

I have also consulted the second volume of the Complete Works:

*Oeuvres complètes, tome 2: 1966-1973*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, edited by E. Marty.

Pending the publication of the third and final volume of the Complete Works, I have also consulted the following:

*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

#### b. Articles

The following is a list of all of Barthes's writings and interventions between 1947 and his appointment to a full-time post in 1960. Where possible, I have tried to suggest an order which respects the dates of publication, rather than Barthes's own order reconstituted by Thierry Leguay in *Communications* (4th term, 1982, pp.135-173), to which I am nevertheless very indebted. I have included also a small number of journalistic interventions during this period not listed by Leguay, as well as page numbers, and a small number of important corrections.

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'Le Degré zéro de l'écriture', *Combat*, 1 August 1947, p.2.

'Faut-il tuer la grammaire?', *Combat*, 26 September 1947, p.2.

#### 1950

'Les révolutions suivent-elles des lois?', *Combat*, 20 July 1950, p.4.

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- 'L'écriture et la parole', *Combat*, 7 December 1950, p.6.
- 'Le sentiment tragique de la littérature', *Combat*, 14 December 1950, p.7.

### 1951

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- 'Le temps du récit', *Combat*, 16 August 1951, p.4.
- 'Humanisme sans paroles', *Combat*, 30 August 1951, p.4.
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- 'La querelle des égyptologues', *Combat*, 25 October 1951, pp.4-5.
- 'A propos d'une métaphore', *Esprit*, November 1951, pp.677-678.

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- 'Écrivains de gauche ou littérature de gauche?', *L'Observateur*, 27 November 1952, pp.17-18.

### 1953

- 'Oui, il existe bien une littérature de gauche', *L'Observateur*, 15 January 1953, pp.17-18.
- 'Folies-Bergère', *Esprit*, February 1953, pp.272-280.
- '*Le Prince de Hombourg* au T.N.P.', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1953, pp.90-97.
- '*Maîtres et esclaves*', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, March 1953, pp.107-108.
- '*Les mots sont aussi des demeures*', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, May 1953, pp.359-361.
- 'Le monde objet', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, June 1953, pp.394-405.
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- 'Féminaire de Michelet', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1085-1100.
- 'L'Arlésienne du catholicisme', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1162-1165.
- 'Littérature inhumaine', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, November 1953, pp.1214-1215.

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- 'Le silence de Don Juan', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1954, pp.264-267.
- 'Au cinémascope', *Les Lettres nouvelles*, February 1954, pp.305-306.
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