

# For the LIBERATION of a PLURALIST THINKING

An Interview with Roland Barthes

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*Shigehiko Hasumi*

Translated and with an introduction by Chris Turner

## *Translator's Introduction*

November 12, 2015, marks the centenary of the birth—at 107, rue de la Bucaille, in Cherbourg—of Roland Gérard Barthes, one of the major cultural theorists of the twentieth century. The interview we publish below, conducted by the eminent Japanese academic Shigehiko Hasumi, took place in 1972 and first appeared in Japanese in the journal *Umi*, which is a stablemate of *Chuokoron*, one of Tokyo's most distinguished literary magazines. Hasumi, the translator of, among others, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, was instrumental in introducing French poststructuralist theory into Japan.<sup>1</sup> Part of this interview was printed in *Libération* on November 16, 1990, the first full French-language version having appeared earlier that year in the spring issue of the Tokyo-based journal *Représentation*. With the kind permission of Les Éditions du Seuil, the present translation is copublished with Seagull Press of Kolkata.

Barthes's relationship with Japan was an important and complex one. He became deeply fascinated with the country after a first visit in May and June of 1966. Indeed, so unsettled was he by that visit—his recent biographer Tiphaine Samoyault describes the experience as one that “radically displace[d] him”<sup>2</sup>—that he asked Maurice Pinguet, the head of the

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Franco-Japanese Institute in Tokyo, who had been his host in that city, to try to find him a university post there for two or three years (Samoyault 2015: 415–17). Though nothing came of that, he quickly made two further trips to Japan, from March 4 to April 5, 1967, and from December 17, 1967, to January 10, 1968.

Visiting Pinguet in Tokyo, Barthes encountered a culture whose meanings were denied to him by the complete impenetrability of the language and yet, at the same time, gained access, through a seasoned Western observer (Pinguet had lived in Japan since 1958), to expert interpretation of his alien surroundings.<sup>3</sup> For Barthes, the erstwhile champion of Bertolt Brecht, this particular *Verfremdungseffekt* must have had its own special charm. And, as with the *Tel Quel* group's visit to China in the 1970s (in which Barthes participated with no great enthusiasm), the nature of the experience was clearly inflected by preoccupations—particularly around the question of meaning—that lay in his own European past (and present). While much was lost in translation for Barthes in Japan, a great deal more seems to have been found in the almost visceral experience of an abrupt and total loss of access to meaning.

When he transposed this Japanese experience into the theoretical fiction published as *L'Empire des signes* (*Empire of Signs*) in 1970, Barthes seemed to find a kind of liberation in the encounter with a seductive surface of signifiers that appeared to have no transcendental underpinning. As Edmund White put it, Japan, for Barthes, had been “a test, a challenge to think the unthinkable, a place where meaning is finally banished. Paradise, indeed, for the great student of signs.” As the American writer saw it, Barthes's notional (“fictive”) Japan provided a cure

for the author's “repulsion for the ‘overfed’ meanings or the ‘diseased’ signs of our petit-bourgeois culture with its advertising, glossy theatrical spectacles, agony columns and child prodigies” (White 1982).

At the time of the interview with Hasumi, Barthes had already written the enigmatic little book *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973) and was, as he says, hesitating over its publication. *The Pleasure of the Text* is a work that readers themselves have hesitated and puzzled over down the years, not least because it is organized around a central opposition between two categories, the *texte de plaisir* and the *texte de jouissance*, which are not always clearly distinct from each other, nor even very clearly defined. Barthes speaks of the book here as not necessarily possessing a theoretical coherence: there is emphasis on its fragmentary—and even its intertextual—nature, though whether these are necessary consequences of this turn toward the study of “literary erotics” is not addressed.

However, two aspects of Barthes's clearly stated intentions at this point in his intellectual trajectory are perhaps worth drawing attention to. First, he is out to challenge a certain puritanism, which he associates both with the political Left and with the institution of scholarship generally. Second, he is determined to distance himself definitively from simplistic forms of “ideology critique” that depend theoretically on the existence of a kind of Archimedean point of truth located outside ideology.

These are both moves away from the relatively scientific “image” (Barthes's own word here) that had previously surrounded his work and, as such, are key elements in what Philippe Roger refers to as Barthes's *involution créatrice*<sup>4</sup>—his creative involution (1986: 131). It is interesting

to see the latter, in particular, so clearly related in this interview to Barthes's reaction to the proclivities of his own students at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in these post-1968 years.

Barthes describes his newfound concern with textual pleasures as a "dangerous" move. And he speaks elsewhere in the interview of a restlessness that keeps him moving compulsively from one critical language to another, as soon as meanings have solidified and acquired the status of stereotype. We perhaps take the "pluralism" that all this generates within Barthes's work too much for granted, as we look back on an oeuvre cut short at the point where it may even have been about to shift into yet another register—that of the novel. The interview below freezes Barthes's thinking at a point (of some hesitation) where he is about to launch what Jonathan Culler calls "a revival of hedonism" (2002: 84).<sup>5</sup> This is a fascinating moment since, while clearly feeling compelled to mobilize this concern for pleasure and for the erotics of literary production and reception, Barthes must have been aware of the danger of undermining some of the more direct challenges he had mounted earlier against what he saw as a complacent and conservative literary-critical "establishment."

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**Shigehiko Hasumi:** I'd like to begin this interview by asking you a question about the position you occupy in France, which has for several years now been beset by a kind of structuralist fever. The mass media point to you as a representative figure of this new theoretical movement and you're beginning to exert a considerable influence on young scholars. Yet I feel uneasy about this, not because you're a fashionable writer, but because, for those who know

you from your writings in the 1950s, you're someone who rejects the very notion of influence.

**Roland Barthes:** Absolutely. That's true . . . I'm grateful to you for such a clear grasp of a question that is, a little secretly . . . in fact, unconsciously, close to my heart. I reject the notion of influence where I myself am concerned and in the way I experience my own life. It isn't remotely that I feel myself beyond certain influences—I could even say which have operated on me—but I would say that if I cast doubt on the notion of influence, it's on account of a certain theory—or, at any rate, a certain ethics—of language.

In reality, I've always experienced the world of interhuman communication essentially at the level of language. That marks me out. Within myself, I can't genuinely put my finger on particular exchanges of ideas or the influence of certain ideas. I can't say that the ideas of a particular man, a particular writer or contemporary, have really left their stamp on me. What goes on inside me is languages or snippets of language. Nonetheless, I could, if you like, say clearly that there have been two men who have, in a general way, affected my work. On the one hand, there's Jean-Paul Sartre, because I came to writing at the point when Sartre was very widely read. He was really the man of my youth—not my adolescence, but let's say my youth—and, as a result, at that point Sartre left a very big mark on me, even at the level of ideas, of general, ideological, moral, philosophical choices, et cetera. That's certainly the case.

There's another man who had a clear influence on me—indeed I've made no secret of it—and that's [Bertolt] Brecht. That's an influence I can situate and specify, but apart from that, if I can put it this

way, I'm affected by different languages and I think I have to put it like that because, where the whole semiological or structuralist context is concerned, for example—all the people who are ranged alongside me or who I'm grouped with—though I'm not complaining at all and would be quite happy to feel their influence (this isn't in any sense a question of vanity), it can't really be said that I've genuinely been influenced. What there have been are bits of formulations; it's formulations that come through, do you see? The influence stays at the level of formulations. It's clear, for example, that people like [Claude] Lévi-Strauss or [Jacques] Lacan have passed on formulations to me. That's beyond any doubt and I don't deny it.

To sum up, it's not by any means in the name of some proud autonomy of the individual that I reject the question of influence; it's exactly the opposite. It's because I believe in what's now called *intertext* and hence am caught up in a network of language and not, ultimately, in a network of ideas. That's how I'd put things.

**SH:** Sadly in Japan—and no doubt in France, too—you're ranged alongside the Prague theorists or the Russian formalists.

**RB:** But that's not something I ever complain about. If some particular paternity or affinity is ascribed to me, then ultimately I never complain. I've no reason to do so, it would be ridiculous. For example, when I wrote my [Jules] Michelet book, I have to say honestly and for the record that I'd never read a word of [Gaston] Bachelard. And then they said the book was derivative from Bachelard, was influenced by Bachelard, but since Bachelard's someone I admire greatly, and since I very much like what he does, I never complained, you

see. But, in fact, it's not true. Once again, I'm only saying all this because—and you know this as well as I do—it connects with a current theoretical problem, which is the problem of the *intertext*, which is the question of the wider circulation of languages.

**SH:** What's dangerous when you look at things from the standpoint of influences is that you begin to forget to read the texts—your texts, which function like a sort of transformation device, a redistribution mechanism.

**RB:** Yes, you're quite right about that. And it's a question that interests me very much. This summer, I've just written a little text on the pleasure of the text. I don't know yet whether I'm going to publish it. I've just finished it and let's say I'm not very sure. But I noticed this summer that in this text, which is very short—just sixty typed pages—conversations with friends had slipped in. I can't call this other people's ideas. It's the other people themselves that are there, and I might say, "I had such-and-such an idea because I spoke with so-and-so one evening" and sometimes I credit other people with ideas I had in their presence. You can see a psychoanalytic theme emerging here. I believe the presence of another person, even when they don't speak but when they listen to you, more or less creates the ideas you have, if I can put it that way. As a result, influence, as I see it, doesn't at all mean reading authors and then feeling the imprint of their ideas. It's much wider than that, a much larger-scale phenomenon, and in fact it's impossible to pin down.

**SH:** What you call a text is precisely this site where these kinds of influences that can't be pinned down are knotted and unknotted. Yet people prefer to speak of

you by listing those markers that can be pinned down: structuralism, formalism, linguistics, semiology, et cetera. . . .

**RB:** That's natural, yes. First of all, I did have a phase in my life when for ten years I was, in fact, engaged in those things. That's the point when I was beginning to be known a little. It was the point, shall we say, when I did structuralism and semiology in more or less the proper sense of the terms. That was a parascientific phase in my life. But it's clear that I've distanced myself from all that a little since then and that what I do today's a bit different. A life is long and you definitely change over time.

**SH:** I get the impression that you wrote *Elements of Semiology* as a way of refusing to limit your methodological field and working practice. Was it the same with *The Fashion System*?

**RB:** Yes, that's very much the case. What you say is very true and I'd say that one writes books in some small measure so as to kill them—so as not to talk about the subject anymore. It's a little, very didactic text—it came out of a student seminar—and I think it played its part, because no one was talking about semiology in those days. Now semiology very definitely exists. It's struggling to make headway, but it exists. I think this was a useful book at the time, but you don't need me to tell you that it's already very dated so far as content is concerned and seems very basic as they say, very taxonomic. It's a very rudimentary semiology. It's really a bit like a stained-glass window. It's rather primitive stained-glass window art.

As regards *The Fashion System*, that's really a book I didn't write for

publication—I didn't think of it as a product—but as a production for myself. I found enormous pleasure in developing a system without knowing whether I'd publish it or not, do you see? We're talking about the pleasure of the bricoleur who tries to build a system. And even if I hadn't published it, it would have absolutely performed its role for me. I hesitated very seriously about publishing it, because I didn't really need to. It was a bit different with my other books because there was writing [*écriture*] in them, and hence an erotic game with the reader. But with *The Fashion System*, we're really talking about the presentation of a piece of work. It isn't a product, it's work being acted out in front of other people.

**SH:** Here's my first question. It concerns the notion of plurality and I'd like to start from a sentence from Philippe Sollers's recent text on Roland Barthes. . . .

**RB:** (Laughter) Yes, on me. A portrait, so to speak. . . .

**SH:** He says: "R. B., on the other hand, lays himself open: meticulous, understated elegance. He arrives on time, is capable of changing his weight quite quickly, bores easily, never seems to be enjoying himself too much, remembers." And in this sentence, which is both metaphorical and anecdotal. . . .

**RB:** Yes, yes. . . .

**SH:** You're described as a plural being, but this notion of plurality troubles me insofar as it's just a pure metaphor.

**RB:** I've often spoken of the plural myself. In *S/Z*, for example.

**SH:** Precisely. You utter this word *plural*. But to speak about the person who is actually the subject of that utterance, the meaning has to be shifted. The French adjective *nul* would be preferable. "To arrive on time and quickly become bored," you have to stop *nulle part*—nowhere.

**RB:** What you say is very true. And very insightful. Clearly, it's always a little tricky to speak of oneself as though one were oneself, isn't it?—as though one existed as a person, as a self. But let's say that if I were a critic and had to criticize myself as an author, I'd stress exactly what you've just said. In other words, in reality, at the existential or neurotic level—I leave it to you to choose—I have one profound intolerance, which ultimately governs the whole of my life and my work, and that's an intolerance of stereotypes or, in other words, of language that repeats itself and acquires consistency through repetition. I've often spoken about this in asides, though I've never come at the subject head on. In my most recent text I speak about it a bit more. There's the fact that, as soon as language acquires a certain consistency, even if I think it's true . . . the very fact that it's becoming stereotyped triggers an almost physiological language mechanism that I have in me and I react almost with retching and nausea. I can't bear that and so, if I can put it this way, as soon as I feel that a certain kind of language, with all the ideas it conveys, is "setting" somewhere—the way we talk about mayonnaise or cream "setting" and acquiring consistency—then I immediately want to be elsewhere.

Obviously, that gets tricky at times. At any rate, it gives me some formidable problems because our current society is very much one that inevitably solidifies certain ways of speaking and writing very

quickly (this is a feature of its current alienation) and builds up great momentum around the creation of stereotypes—what I call idiolects, very consistent idiolects—and we modern human beings are, as a result, forced all the time in our lives to move through these ready-made, stereotyped languages. So when a language acquires this consistency, I feel stifled and I strive (this is the sense of my work) to try and go elsewhere, even though it's often a language whose freshness and novelty I once experienced and, for that reason, contributed to myself. When it takes on this consistency, I want to move elsewhere—that is to say, I become a bit unfaithful to my own language.

**SH:** But it isn't really unfaithfulness; it's more being faithful to oneself.

**RB:** Yes, of course, it's a dialectic. At any rate, it isn't being unfaithful to what we might call major choices of a philosophical, ideological, or political type. It's being unfaithful to languages when they become too consistent. As a result, I always have difficulties with the major established languages of the current intellectual sphere—with psychoanalytic language, for example, even though I use it. It's a very consistent language and it's in that respect that it offends me. I also have a problem, which I've no reason to hide, with Marxist language, insofar as, when presented as a vulgate, so to speak, it very much veers toward the stereotypical in places.

Ultimately, everything I write year by year revolves around this theme, which is an existential theme because it's a neurotic one. There's also a philosophical resonance to all this, of course: that's where the sort of central sentiment you diagnosed very aptly actually meets up with—and broadens out into—philosophical

perspectives. I'm no philosopher myself, but I've definitely been led to campaign theoretically against what's known as monologism, for example—that is to say, against the rule and domination of a single language, a single interpretation of meaning; against the philosophies based on a single, imposed meaning. I've always argued as strongly as I could for the plurality of interpretations, for the absolute openness of meaning, and, if need be, for exemptions from meaning, suppressions and cancellations of meaning.

There again, we're actually in an age that tends very much toward monologism, because it's a highly conflictual age. If we describe it in Marxist terms, we can see quite clearly where the conflicts are and, for that very reason, it's singular languages, monologistic languages that are doing battle with each other. There's a kind of war of languages and, as a result, in current society a pluralistic attitude is entirely eccentric and heretical. The proof of this is that the Western philosophical tradition is 90 percent monological. Whether in religion, with Jewish, Christian, and even Islamic monotheism, or in secular philosophy, we always find monistic philosophies, and pluralistic philosophies are extremely rare. They're still, let's say, slightly eccentric bodies of thought. So, as I see it, a man like Nietzsche is very important, not as a guide, but as someone who actually formulated and freed up a certain pluralism, a pluralist thinking. This is a bit abstract, but I'm sure you can see what I'm getting at . . .

**SH:** My second question concerns *Empire of Signs*. The Japanese are always very sensitive about what's written on Japan, but that book shouldn't be read as a study of Japanese culture.

**RB:** That's clearly the case. I said so at the beginning. I said it briefly but firmly. There's no claim to . . .

**SH:** Your intention's clear when you write of the dream: "to know a foreign (alien) language and yet not to understand it: to perceive the difference in it without that difference ever being recuperated by the superficial sociality of discourse, communication or vulgarity" (Barthes 1982: 6). I think this text perfectly illustrates the basic desire of Roland Barthes or, rather, the frisson felt by someone who finds themselves on the fringes of this "white" writing, this "no man's land" that you've spoken of so often. For you, Japan was that "writing degree zero."

**RB:** Very right. In actual fact, that's a theme not of the book in general but of the passage you've just quoted on language. Of course, it's a very paradoxical passage. In practice, it's meaningless to say you love a language without understanding it. What can that possibly mean? But it does mean something for me, doesn't it, insofar as I believe in the existence of what we now call the signifier. I believe there's a powerful erotics of the signifier; that that erotics hasn't yet been thoroughly explored at all; and that psychoanalysis gives us certain means to explore it. But it isn't accepted, particularly by most intellectuals who are, shall we say, a breed of a highly monological cast of mind—you see what I mean—highly dogmatic, and one of the focuses of my struggle is always to fight for the signifier, for its erotic sumptuousness, its drive, its liberation. So, at that point, language—that is to say, all languages in their materiality, not in their meaning or even in their structure in the abstract sense, but everything that relates to phonation, to breath, to the presence of

the body in the language—always excites me and more than excites me. In fact, it seduces me, captivates me—in short, it really takes me into the realms of bliss [*jouissance*]. So it's clear that in Japan, I was highly, highly delighted, since it's a language I know absolutely nothing of, and when I say absolutely nothing, I mean I can't even recognize roots. It may be that I don't know Portuguese or even Norwegian, but in the street I'll recognize certain words and so on. In Japan things are totally impenetrable and at the same time (and this is what made me so happy) I was happy to hear the language being spoken, because I could see the bodies in contact with this language that I didn't understand—a whole kind of emotiveness, of rhythms of breathing—and I have to say it gave me daily pleasure, exactly as though I were attending a very fine, very inspiring theatrical performance each day. I have to say it was exactly of that same order.

**SH:** I'm probably wrong about this, but it seems to me that you have two books that express a kind of euphoric state—the Michelet book and *Empire of Signs*.

**RB:** Precisely. You're a very perceptive critic. With the book on Japan, people noticed this, so to speak. People understood that it was a happy book, so it was generally taken that way. But it's rarer to include the Michelet book in this category. I'm going to tell you something that will please you, in view of your insight here. Of all the books I've written, *Michelet* is the one I like best. This is rather ironic, because no one ever really talks about it. It isn't a book of mine that's much discussed—not like *Writing Degree Zero*, for example. For me, the Michelet book is associated with a certain happiness in writing [*bonheur de*

*l'écriture*] and yet, at the same time, there are lots of people who believed I didn't like Michelet. Quite the contrary, it was very much a labor of love. It's a happy book. They didn't see that.

Having said that, it's not easy to repeat . . . you can't be happy every year, you understand. It happens from time to time.

**SH:** Where Japan is concerned, do you have anything you didn't say in *Empire of Signs* that you'd like to add?

**RB:** No, in all honesty, I don't think so.

In fact, this commission from Skira . . .<sup>6</sup> When I went to Japan, I didn't intend to write about Japan at all. I took absolutely no notes or anything. Several years later, when I wrote this little book, I had to reconstruct things in my mind. Fortunately, I had a few appointment books and that was all. I reconstructed everything and so, to answer your question, I drew out of myself absolutely all that I could in terms of recollections and the retrieval of memories. The book isn't a long one, but I really did bring out everything I remembered about Japan. And beyond that, I don't have anything more to say, because to do so would require me to shift to a completely different level and concern myself with the real Japan. I can well imagine that that would be very difficult to do and I'd be incapable of doing it, at least without going back there.

The only thing I could say is that once I'd written this book of sixty pages of text about a country I was actually in love with (there's no other way of putting it), I understood right away that the Japanese wouldn't recognize themselves in it. I mean I was totally clear-sighted about that from the outset. As a result, I can't say I had the slightest sense of sorrow or regret.



But, in spite of everything, I have to say that I'm very conscious it's a book that's not for the Japanese. That's the paradox, do you see? The only thing that can be asked of them is that they understand and accept that I'm clear-sighted about that, and that there shouldn't be any ambiguity whatever about it.

**SH:** My third question relates to [Gustave] Flaubert or rather to his particular place in your writings. You talked about Flaubert in *Writing Degree Zero*. You still speak of him often, but in an indirect way. It's my impression that *S/Z*, your very extensive analysis of a [Honoré de] Balzac short story, revolves around an invisible center that is the Flaubert of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. For the sixtieth birthday of Mr. Martinet . . .

**RB:** Ah, yes, you saw that. That line's also in the pocket edition of *Writing Degree Zero* that came out recently . . .

**SH:** Right. But it might be said that Flaubert makes himself felt in your thinking not as presence but as absence . . .

**RB:** I can tell you one thing. There are, if you like, three writers who definitely count a great deal in my life—I might almost say my daily life—in the sense that they form part of my evening reading—not all the time, but I'm always going back to them to some degree. There's [Marquis de] Sade obviously, there's Flaubert, and there's [Marcel] Proust. So that . . . that kind of selection isn't a selection that's purely theoretical or purely . . . I don't know how to put it. Ultimately, these are authors about whom I can almost certainly say I'll never write a monograph on them. I'll never write a book on Flaubert or a book on Proust. I've written an article on Proust

and an article on Flaubert, but these are rather marginal and nontechnical articles that focus on quite formal aspects, on problems of style . . . Sade I've written about, but he's the least present of the three, in fact, because the presence of Sade is hard to bear in daily life, whereas Flaubert and Proust are present and particularly, as you said, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*.

So, what's Flaubert to me? If I've not written a monograph on Flaubert, that's precisely because, in reality, I don't have any ideas on Flaubert. I'd be incapable of constructing a critical theory about Flaubert, yet I'm steeped in his work and this is true at every moment, because his work is the very work of writing and, as a result, he's precisely a sort of absolutely pluralized being. As I see it, his is a pluralized work and it comes to me unbidden; it's the direct, manifest *intertext*. There's the turn of the sentences, the gaps between the paragraphs and a comedy, too, a certain comedy—well, what he himself called the comedy that doesn't make you laugh. These are entirely avant-garde categories, then, which explain very well why Flaubert, a product, according to the literary histories, of a realist age, always seems in reality like an absolutely avant-garde writer. In other words, in the end, everyone and everything that has to do with literature today has a filiation with Flaubert. I'm deeply convinced of that.

Having said this, I shan't, in fact, ever write a book on Flaubert because I've no systematic ideas on Flaubert, I've no critical ideas on Flaubert. Once again, the secret of that is to be found at the level of language and writing. In my opinion Flaubertian writing (I talk about this in that latest text which isn't published yet; I wrote a short paragraph on Flaubert and I say this there, too) is a writing that is, in reality, entirely readable, since Flaubert is

a wholly classical author and can be read easily. But, underneath, his is a writing that's at the limits of the readable and also on the verge of a certain madness of language [*une certaine folie du langage*]. It's that whole aspect I find exciting in Flaubert. What excites me in Flaubert is precisely that he's a writer who presents himself as extremely readable with such a kind of existential anxiety about language that I'd say he comes close almost to the conceptions of someone like Georges Bataille. There's all of that in Flaubert, isn't there?

I haven't read Sartre's *Flaubert*, the latest one—I know nothing of that—but as I see it, personally, this is what he is: a sort of great experimentalist of writing. And there's nothing at all abstract about this: it relates to absolutely everyday problems of working. I've a deep affection and admiration for Flaubert's relationship with language; it's an extremely subtle, very sly, and not at all spectacular relationship that's very difficult to define.

**SH:** At the Proust evening this January at the École normale supérieure, you applied the word "perpetual" to Proust? . . .

**RB:** Yes, that's right. And that applies to Flaubert, too, absolutely. They belong, in fact, among the unclassifiable authors—that is to say, among those who escape the classifications of the literary histories.

I held a seminar three years ago—two or three sessions—on *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. I didn't say much, but I could see that people were very interested. In the end, I don't have anything particular to argue on that subject.

**SH:** My fourth question relates to the notion of the "theft" of language that you

spoke of in your preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*. You say, "In fact, today, there is no language site outside bourgeois ideology: our language comes from that ideology, returns to it, remains confined within it. The only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction, but only theft: to fragment the old text of culture, science and literature, and disseminate its features using barely detectable procedures, in the same way one camouflages stolen goods" (Barthes 1989: 10, translation modified). It seems to me that this very fine image of theft stands in a certain relation to "white writing" [*l'écriture blanche*].

**RB:** In reality, the idea of the theft of language comes from two key sources: the first of these is an absolutely constant theme since *Writing Degree Zero* and it's in the very title of the book—the "zero degree" of writing. There's a social alienation of languages [*langages*], even within literature, and hence the dream is to have at one's disposal a "white writing" that would, in fact, be a writing that wasn't stolen or appropriated—that wouldn't be anyone's property. At the end of *Writing Degree Zero*, I said (said rather than explained, because it's a very assertive, highly metaphorical book) that this white writing doesn't actually exist; that writing is always diverted or appropriated in some way and, hence, that writers were condemned, in that regard, to a sort of tragic undertaking, so to speak. So this is still that same idea. Mind you, I've changed a little now, because at bottom I conceive writing [*écriture*—though, in this case, in the entirely modernist sense of the word—as a space of activity I term *atopic*, that is to say, a space without location and, to a certain extent, without ownership. But at that stage, this writing that is without ownership or place of origin

isn't actually consumed by the public. It's an ultra-avant-garde writing, which is an unreadable writing and it is, I believe, very important. It's important that it exists, but there's no clientele for it. Five hundred people read it and love it, but that's all. That's the first idea.

The second—more contingent—source comes from the experience I've had since I've been at the *École des hautes études*, experience that means a great deal in my life, and from the contact I have with students. Very often when I write now, though I don't actually say so, I draw on impressions relating to my students and a thing I find striking at the moment—and don't like—is that students (well, this is of course a generalization) are very set on developing an ideological critique; they're mad keen on criticizing ideology, hunting it down wherever it is, detecting it, showing that everything's ideological, waging war on bourgeois ideology. It's a program I've always been committed to myself—for thirty years, if you like—but there is, ultimately, an extremely irritating, depressing side to it, which is that those who do this never ask themselves what ground they themselves are standing on to fight the battle. So, as I see it, my response is what I just expressed here: in other words, there's no language that doesn't ultimately bear the marks of ideology and, as a result, you can't criticize ideology from a pure, neutral ground, a supreme, untainted standpoint, where there's ideological language on the other side, but absolute protection from it on your side.

The critical relation, the challenging relation to the other languages of reified society, can only be a relation, not of aggression or destruction (you can never destroy language or we shouldn't talk anymore), but of filching and theft, in

which you pretend to speak a certain language but undermine it from within. There's a whole technique here that isn't easy to define and there are only qualified successes to be had from it, but I can't see any other solution. In my case, this comes from an ethical stance on culture. I believe that all direct destructions of culture, as postulated in certain forms of avant-garde art or in certain ultra-leftist circles, are complete illusions. You never destroy a culture like that. Culture is something else; it's sticky, it's everywhere, and you can't do much about it. So there's only one way and that's to cheat. You have to cheat. We need a sort of philosophy or morality of cheating. There you are. It's open to debate, but that's what I think deep down.

**SH:** Here, by way of conclusion, is my last question. Can you tell me something about your project on the theory of the bliss of writing [*jouissance de l'écriture*]?

**RB:** Well, it really seems you have some magical intuitions and premonitions, because, as I told you, I've just written a very short text this summer on the pleasure of the text, a text itself made up of fragments and not at all presenting itself as a theoretically coherent piece. I'd go so far as to say that it isn't so easy for me to talk about it because I've just finished it, but for the sake of simplicity let's say that for several years now my—shall we say, critical—attention has been drawn to this problem of the pleasure in and the bliss of texts. Why is this? For a tactical reason: the development of a theory of writing and literature—let's call it a structuralist science of discourse—has entailed, as always happens whenever there's an attempt to build a science, an extremely purificatory, castrating attitude toward the eros or the erotics of reading and writing. The fact is

bracketed out that when we read a text, it undeniably either gives us pleasure or bores us—we relate to it erotically. And no one ever talks about that. Scholarship doesn't concern itself with that, partly because there is, at least in Western culture, a continuous censorship of the idea of pleasure, which is downplayed and undervalued.

For example, we don't, in our part of the world, have any great philosophy of pleasure. Only one man has put pleasure at the heart of his philosophy, a man I have in fact devoted time to myself, and that's Fourier. But he isn't a great philosopher. Everyone regards him as crazy and harebrained. In other words if we want to think about pleasure, about eros, we people of today, we have no philosophy at our disposal. I'd even say that the only current philosophy—philosophy in the very broad sense—that's taken this problem of pleasure head-on is psychoanalysis. You can't criticize psychoanalysis for not dealing with pleasure. But in reality it has only an extremely pessimistic view of pleasure; it always subsumes the idea of pleasure under the idea of desire, which is an infinitely more pessimistic one.

So there was all this—let's call it philosophical—context, the fact that scholarship, particularly with regard to the work of students, stresses in a very superego-ish way—really foregrounding the superego—methodological obligations and attitudes that are often very castrating in relation to texts. There was also the whole business of ideological contestation. I'm thinking, for example, of writings such as those of . . . I don't know . . . the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which always end up totally castrating the erotic relation to the art work, supposedly for reasons of ideological analysis. I wanted to react against all that by concerning myself

with the pleasure of the text, while being aware, nonetheless, that it was dangerous, because, though the pleasure of the text is something that's frowned upon to some extent right across the board, we can say that on the Left, among scholars and protest groups, it definitely meets with censure. Unfortunately, rightists frequently lay claim to it, but they do so for profoundly reactionary reasons. In reality, it's to eliminate politics that people say: "Give us literature that is pleasurable, that's all we ask, etc."

At first I situated pleasure in a pluralist, antimonologistic field and hence one without any ideological superego. I explained that, deep down, one is entitled (I'm simplifying here) to take pleasure in ideologically reactionary texts, and pleasure was no respecter of ideology. Gradually, I was led to apply a distinction that is, in fact, psychoanalytic in origin between pleasure and bliss. From there, it's possible to conceive that there are texts of pleasure and texts of bliss. Texts of pleasure are texts that are, in general, in the domain of culture, texts that accept culture and, in psychoanalytic terms, refer to it and to the imaginary surface of the self and, hence, to very reconciled, highly pacified zones of the subject. Whereas bliss is always based ultimately on perversion or, to put it very roughly, on a sort of loss of consciousness, a kind of fetishization of the object, a sort of major upheaval—in a word, a very fast-acting trauma.

Those texts that are termed *modern* are generally of the bliss type. The text of bliss doesn't necessarily give pleasure: there may be texts of bliss that give an impression of boredom. I played on these two things. I tried to explain that, somewhat unfortunately for me, I was myself an extremely contradictory

man, perhaps because of my past and my generation, because I didn't choose between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss, because I needed both and hence was caught in a kind of historical contradiction which meant that, on the one hand, I often rehabilitated works from the past at the level of pleasure and, on the other, I championed avant-garde works at the level of bliss and that I was, therefore, an anachronistic subject.

I'm doubly perverse because I'm doubly "split" [*clivé*] as the terminology has it. This is perhaps a little abstract. Things very quickly become abstract when you've just been working on them because you want to sum things up very quickly and . . .

**SH:** The trace of this double perversion might be seen in your earliest writings . . .

**RB:** Absolutely, that's rather clear. Certainly, at one stage in my life I went through a phase myself that I've described as a phase of scientific fantasy. Scientificity functioned as a kind of fantasy for me. That was the time of the beginnings of semiology and it was the point where I was beginning to be known a little. I don't deny this at all. I'm very happy to concede it. Only at the moment I'm very much occupied with a theory of the signifier, of literary erotics. There you are, that's all I can say. Well, clearly that's going to change my image a little . . .

### Acknowledgments

This interview is translated from Roland Barthes, "Pour la libération d'une pensée pluraliste," in *Oeuvres complètes* (*Complete Works*), vol. 4, 469–82 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002).

### Notes

1. Hasumi has notably produced studies of the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, John Ford, and Jean Renoir. From 1997 to 2001, he was president of the University of Tokyo.
2. Samoyault suggests that the Japanese experience was as significant as Barthes's meeting with Julia Kristeva in the same year.
3. Pinguet was a devoted student of Japanese civilization. On his return to France, he published an authoritative work on *seppuku* titled *La Mort volontaire au Japon* (1984).
4. Roger is, of course, punning on Henri Bergson's phrase *évolution créatrice*.
5. Culler writes: "Barthes's revival of hedonism may be his most difficult project to assess, for it seems to indulge in some of the mystifications he had effectively exposed, yet it continues to challenge intellectual orthodoxy" (2002: 84).
6. The French original of *Empire of Signs* was commissioned by Éditions d'Art Albert Skira of Geneva and published by them in 1970.
7. Barthes explains the sense of *perpétuel* in his "Supplement" to *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), making clear that he is not speaking in traditional terms of the "eternal" value of great literature: "If the book is not conceived as arguing for an idea or giving an account of a destiny, if it refuses to afford itself depth and anchorage outside the signifier, it can only be perpetual, with no full stop to the text, no last word. . . . The perpetual book seems like a book without a project (without argument, without summary, without will-to-possess)—it isn't going somewhere, it is just going; and it just keeps on going. The perpetual book isn't an eternal book" (163–64).

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