BOOK REVIEW

Who Killed Roland Barthes?

Lucy O'Meara

Laurent Binet, *The 7th Function of Language*, trans. by Sam Taylor (London: Harvill Secker, 2017).

Laurent Binet's second novel (originally published in 2015) opens with the death of Roland Barthes. Barthes was knocked down by a van on the Rue des Écoles in Paris, just after having had lunch with the presidential candidate François Mitterrand, on 25 February 1980. He died in hospital a month later. The novel provides these historical facts and then deviates from them: Barthes was murdered. A pair of mismatched investigators – Jacques Bayard, a conservative, cynical policeman, and Simon Herzog, a left-wing postgraduate from the university of Vincennes – must solve the mystery. The novel is a fairly standard whodunnit, replete with the motifs of various crime subgenres (car chase, mysterious Soviet agents, attractive female love interest, setpiece assembling all the suspects...), except, obviously, it's also not a standard whodunnit: it's all about French Theory. It turns out that Barthes was murdered because he was in the process of working out that Roman Jakobson – who produced a typology of the functions of language – had in fact discovered a secret seventh function of language. Whoever holds this secret can persuade anybody to do anything, through sheer rhetorical skill. This is of crucial importance in the run-up to the 1981 presidential election. Bayard is employed by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, desperate to get his hands on it before his opponent does. Lots of other characters want the document too. The action moves from Paris to Venice, Bologna and Cornell University. Along the way we encounter a macabre rhetorical duelling club, Bulgarian spies, beautiful Citroën DS cars, gay saunas, and much besides, accompanied by all the big names of poststructuralist theory – Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze, Althusser and others.

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The protagonist of Binet's first novel, *HHhH*, was also a historical figure – the Nazi security chief Reinhard Heydrich. However, *The 7th Function* plays entirely different games with history. As Binet put it in an interview in May 2017, where *HHhH* was a search for historical truth (a search reflected upon at length within the text), in the new novel he wanted 'to have fun and to twist the rope of truth until it broke'.[1] Some of *The 7th Function*'s events are entirely invented – the death of a leading theorist at the jaws of a pack of wild dogs, for example – and some are a combination of fact and embroidery, as when Binet uses real events such as Barthes's death itself, or the terrorist bombing of Bologna station in 1981, as his points of departure. It is often very unclear what is real and what is imagined – not least because the entire novel is based on considerable research and a deep knowledge of the work of Barthes and other theorists. Binet knows his theory, and his politics too – as part of his research he read Mitterrand's books and Giscard's memoirs, as well as interviewing those present at the Mitterrand lunch on 25 February 1980. There is, then, a kind of documentary verisimilitude which is combined, to very funny effect, with Binet's parodies of theoretical writing – the Deleuzian 'desiring machine' sex-scene is a particular tour de force here. There are any number of in-jokes, some more obvious than others. There are many, many allusions to Barthes's work. Barthes's ideas inform both incidental detail as well the central point of the novel: that semiological inquiry is very similar to detective investigation as it is presented in crime fiction. 'With Barthes', as the novel tells us, 'signs no longer need to be [merely] signals: they have become clues'.

Binet's key preoccupation as a novelist seems to be with the relationship between truth and fiction. By writing about historical – and living – figures within fiction he places himself firmly within a genre that Philippe Vasset has called 'exofiction': fiction which reimagines real lives. Exofiction, as a recent *Le Monde* preview of the 2017 *rentrée littéraire* pointed out, has been endemic in contemporary French literature since 2015. Alexandre Gefen, a specialist in both the work of Barthes and biographical fiction, has suggested that exofiction has the soothing effect of substituting an enjoyable imagined version of history for the real, tragic thing. Crime fiction too, of course, has a cathartic function. In combining exofiction and crime fiction, Binet has produced a novel that will be a supreme irritant to some – notably Philippe Sollers, who is savagely sent up throughout the plot, and meets with an unfortunate fate. Binet has spoken in interviews of his deep enjoyment of 'getting to play God' with his characters; this awareness of the nature of fiction is

woven into the more meta-fictional moments of the text. In Barthesian vein, the semiologist, Herzog, provides analyses not only of the events and characters in the novel, but also of his own situation as a character within a novel: 'How do you know you are not living inside a work of fiction? How do you know that you're real?'

The 7th Function is both a thriller and a novel of ideas, owing perhaps some debt to the novels of one of its characters, Umberto Eco. Its thorough grounding in the period and the ideas on which it draws make it particularly rewarding for those familiar with the theoretical works in question. Its length (almost 400 pages) is unwarranted, but Binet's clear enjoyment in skewering the golden age of French theory is infectious.

Notes

[1] Richard Lea, interview with Laurent Binet, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2017. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/05/laurent-binet-interview-macron-le-pen-7th-function-language-hhhh. Accessed 28 August 2017.

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Lucy O'Meara is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Kent, and the author and/or editor of a number of works on Barthes, including *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool University Press, 2012), and a special issue of *L'Esprit créateur* (Winter 2015) entitled *What's So Great About Roland Barthes*?.

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