

The Discourse of Others: Returning to S/Z

Michael Wood

‘Things are just the same as they always were,
only, you’re the same as you were, too, so I guess
things will never be the same again’.

Irene Dunne, in *The Awful Truth*

The theory and practice of deconstruction are generally thought to have their origins in Jacques Derrida’s work of the 1960s, but the quotation above implies a slightly earlier start (1937 – the screenwriter is Viña Delmar). In any event, they were in full swing by 1970, when Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* appeared, even if that book suggests we may want to hang on to the older spelling of difference, and move only a little later to the double sense suggested by *différance*. We could say – we might think Barthes is saying – that *S/Z* is all about difference, and the distinctions that hide where we thought there was pure sameness. This wouldn’t mean we couldn’t talk about deferral too, but it does feel like an inheritance, fully available only when some of the differences of difference have been worked through; when we understand more thoroughly that every text is ‘the return’ of a difference; that there is an ‘infinite paradigm of difference’.¹

For Barbara Johnson, Barthes’ statement that those who do not reread must read the same story everywhere ‘involves a reversal of the usual properties of the words *same* and *different*’, and one of the most interesting forms of difference is internal, the object’s ‘own difference from itself’. She also very shrewdly says that ‘difference as such cannot ever be affirmed as an ultimate value because it is that which subverts the very foundations of any affirmation of value’.² And through that subversion, we might add, a difference once spotted (especially within a zone of supposed sameness) becomes an object of

almost infinite interest. Because it is plural: 'the same and new' (*S/Z*, pp. 23, 16).

Barthes's claim about meeting the same story everywhere appears as a parenthesis in sentence that says: 'Rereading is here suggested at the outset, for it alone saves the text from repetition [...] multiplies it in its variety and its plurality' (*S/Z*, pp. 22-23, 16). This is really dizzying: only a repetition that isn't a repetition can save us from the repetition that is. Barthes already sounds more like Irene Dunne than like Derrida, and without signaling the event, he is in the process of undoing his own key distinction between the writerly and the readerly. As Johnson says, 'Balzac's text [...] reveals a difference not between the readerly and the writerly, but within the very ideals of the readerly',³ and Réda Bensmaïa relates the writerly and the readerly to 'canonical categories' ready for deconstruction.⁴ They are not canonical yet; but as soon as they look as if they might be, they will be obsolete.

Deconstruction doesn't efface difference, of course. *Sarrasine* is not *S/Z*. But categorical differences can become feeble under pressure, or scarcely recognizable. By the time we arrive at Barthes' last word – 'suspension' – we have clearly seen how writerly Balzac's text can be (even if Balzac himself might be thought to abstain from voting on the question) and how readerly Barthes has made what he calls his 'transcription' of an old story.

Claude Bremond and Thomas Pavel tell us that 'Balzac [...] provided the author of *S/Z* with fine arguments against realism, against the rule, and against the Sign'.⁵ These topics are certainly among Barthes' chief concerns but is he really 'against' them? He is interested in their backgrounds, and especially their hidden friends and protectors. He likes to 'cut' words, in Bensmaïa's witty metaphor, the way one cuts a bland wine with something headier.⁶ It's true that such a practice will seem rather threatening if we have invested heavily in the notion of unadulterated meaning.

Many of Barthes' preoccupations continue to be those he pursued in *Mythologies*, but his tone and his hopes are now different. He resorts more frequently to the language of disgust. 'The referential codes of have a kind of emetic virtue, they bring on nausea' (*S/Z*, pp. 145, 139). 'Common opinions' offer a 'nauseating mixture' (*S/Z*, pp. 211, 206). There is a 'vomiting of the stereotype', a 'cultural proverb' is 'sickening' (*S/Z*, pp. 104, 98).⁷ And Barthes has understood that we cannot undo a myth by pointing out how mythological it is. As Claude Lévi-Strauss said some time earlier, the mythical resolution of a genuine contradiction is by definition 'an unrealizable task' –

the myth's job is to know this and keep going.⁸ In this context even the death of the author has not occurred, or has been repealed, and we still need to consider, if with reluctance, the lingering presence of 'that somewhat decrepit deity of the old criticism' (*S/Z*, pp. 217, 211).

This perspective doesn't mean we can't highlight and explore current, powerful myths, only that we shouldn't expect immediate change to result from these revelations. There is much to be said in favour of the May 1968 protests in France but they did tend to replace old stereotypes with new ones, and this effect is undoubtedly part of Barthes' later sense of things, as evoked by Tiphaine Samoyault when she writes of his 'relative indifference to the events'.⁹

One of the essays in *Mythologies* closely anticipates this view of predictable fictions. When Gaston Dominici was tried in 1952 for the murder of some English tourists, the significant aspect of the proceedings for Barthes had to do not with the man's undoubted guilt, but with whether he was likely to understand the psychological novel in which the prosecution and the defence had placed him. 'Literature has just condemned a man to the guillotine', Barthes wrote. We all run the risk 'of being judged by a power which wants to hear only the language it lends us.'¹⁰ This claim is not as extreme (or as literary) as it seems. It is quite customary to seek to understand the difference of others – their difference from us – by devising some sort of novel about them, even if we don't at the time know it is a novel, and the 'truth' of their lives may indeed be unavailable or unintelligible. But then in most cases we could probably invent better, more generous or more open novels than the ones we have settled for.

It is true that the relish with which Barthes unravels the naivete of much belief in realism could suggest that he was 'against' it. But the same relish seems also to indicate a fascination with the sheer ubiquity of our many pretences, our desire to believe complex illusions are just simple facts. Commenting on a reference Balzac has his narrator make to Byron, Barthes writes 'The realistic author spends his time referring back to books: reality is what has been written' (*S/Z*, pp. 46, 39). And later: 'code upon code, realism says' (*S/Z*, pp. 61, 5; translation slightly modified). Realist discourse originates 'only and always' in 'an already written real, a prospective code, along which we discern, as far as the eye can see, only a succession of copies' (*S/Z*, pp. 173, 167).

Barthes suggests repeatedly that Balzac's title character Sarrasine, drawn to an Italian singer he takes to be a woman, is secretly in love with castration, the source of the pitch of the singer's voice. It is also possible that he is in love with the boy he doesn't know the singer is, but this offers a larger gay subtext than Barthes wants to consider. What is really important for him in the figure and behaviour of Sarrasine is his desperate commitment to seeing only what he wants to see, and seeing it only as he sees it. He 'inevitably turns the imposture into proof' (*S/Z*, pp. 147, 141) – a wonderful phrase, which takes us a long way into Barthes' preoccupations.

Every time he finds a false confirmation of what he thinks is Zambinella's gender, Sarrasine is using this tactic, although the imposture itself is a form of current wisdom. Zambinella is dressed as a woman, and since Sarrasine's 'reading of the sexes' depends on clothes, this a prelude to the already identified cause of death: 'if he did not believe clothing, Sarrasine would still be alive' (*S/Z*, pp. 148, 142). Zambinella is afraid of noise, which 'serves to prove her femininity' (*S/Z*, pp. 153, 147).¹¹ Later, a simple adverb ('timidly') and a style of speech ('a soft, silvery voice') will do the same job: 'the sign is stronger than the message, the associated meaning stronger than the literal one' (*S/Z*, pp. 172, 166). Barthes would not ordinarily be so keen on the plain message, but Balzac forces his hand a little here. Zambinella is saying, in this manner and with this voice, 'And if I were not a woman?'

The memorable title of one section of *S/Z* is 'To die of ignorance' (*S/Z*, pp. 190, 184), a brilliant diagnosis of what happens to Sarrasine, but also an elegant compression of a story that has many components. Sarrasine dies of his willed ignorance, as we have seen, not of ignorance *tout court*, and Barthes also provides, in the same section, another cause of death: 'it is from the discourse of others... that he dies' (*S/Z*, pp. 190, 184). His ignorance is double. He doesn't know anything about the role of castrati in the history of opera, and he doesn't know that he doesn't know this. The second feature is a defect in the discourse of others itself, a 'hole in this cultural fabric' (*S/Z*, pp. 190, 185) that pretends to be complete. If the discourse of others were not so pleased with itself, it would not be so dangerous, and we might find a form of freedom from 'that obligative mode by which discourse states a general will, the law of a society, making the proposition concerned ineluctable or indelible' (*S/Z*, pp. 106, 100).

Barthes suggests that gossip is 'aggressive' in this sense, 'and thereby the deadliest language imaginable'. A hyperbolic claim in general, no doubt,

but quite precise in relation to what Barthes calls Sarrasine's 'fate' (*S/Z*, pp. 192, 186).

[T]he snares Sarrasine sets for himself are based on the most social discourse: completely immersed in sociality, the subject takes from it his censures and his alibis, in short his blindness, or even: his own death... Psychology [...] thus appears as a murderous language [...] (*S/Z*, pp. 154, 148).

If gossip is deadly and psychology is murderous, perhaps we need to revise our view that Barthes is not 'against' realism, rule and sign, since they play an important part in any discourse, and especially that of others. In *Le Plaisir du texte* he does say, as Bremond and Pavel remind us, 'Anything, rather than the rule'.¹² But then we are the others, in many respects. And all of these words – gossip, psychology, realism, rule, sign – are the names of codes, and the codes can be, if not arraigned, at least held up to the light. And this is where the pleasure of this text plays a part, both our pleasure in the reading and the writer's own pleasure in what he called the 'composing' of the book, since Barthes is himself writing in a coded way. This code is not that of the sickening, overloaded, complacent doxa that he points to so often, but it does require company, as Samuel Beckett might say. The reader can't believe that he or she is alone in this venture, the only person to be 'getting' what Barthes is saying and not quite saying.

A full unpacking of the code would take a whole (differently coded) book, but we can recall that for Barthes a code is 'a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures' (*S/Z*, pp. 27, 20). We get a good sense of *how* we are reading if we look at another cause of Sarrasine's death: the 'abolition of meaning'.

The topic is the concept of the antithesis, 'the wall without a door' (*S/Z*, pp. 71, 65). It's a strange wall because all though we are not supposed to go through it – that's why there is no door – we regularly do. This is called transgression. If we refuse to respect 'the most inflexible of barriers', namely that of meaning, we are doing something 'rightly scandalous' (*S/Z*, pp. 71, 65). It's interesting to note that Lévi-Strauss, asserting the value of mythology, quotes Durkheim on the 'logical scandal' it represents.¹³ The scandal here, early in the Balzac story, is the apparent melting of an old man and a young woman into a single figure, 'death and life', as the narrator says (*S/Z*, pp. 70,

63). Except that Barthes is also reading another mixture into the scene. Since the old man was once the young castrato, the going through the wall is even more violent. Both partners are '*reversed*'; touched by an extraordinarily powerful chemical agent (for the castrato, the woman; for the woman, castration), the depths are emptied, as in vomiting. This is what happens when the arcana of meaning are subverted' (*S/Z*, pp. 72, 65). If we allow such subversions than everything goes: 'morphology, grammar, discourse, and because of this abolition of meaning, Sarrasine will die' (*S/Z*, pp. 72, 66).

We note that the confusion is only (only!) conceptual. We can, and do, destroy meaning every day. But there are consequences. And we need to remember that in this context a scandal is not what we would in English ordinarily call a scandal but something like a shrieking logical impossibility. This is the moment to return to the idea of difference. All oppositions and categories are based on difference, but not all differences are oppositional. If we take this rendering of the story of Sarrasine – death arising from the abolition of meaning – as a fable adapted from Balzac by Barthes, we do not have to read it as suggesting that we should hang on to our antitheses and unmixed categories, and so avoid further fatal accidents. We may think its implication is rather that we need to know what we are doing when we accept without questioning a societal definition of difference. No one else should have to suffer from our desire for the kind of anarchic personal freedom that is praised so often in our unruly times. But neither should we accept all standing partitions as guarantees of safety, all borders of thought as forms of insurance. Some meanings may die so that others can live, and, as Barthes keeps telling us, many old meanings are dead already.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), pp. 9-10; *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 3. Further references to these works are taken up into the text.

² Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 3, 12.

³ Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p. 12.

⁴ Réda Bensmaïa, *Barthes à l'essai* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1986), p. 12.

⁵ Claude Bremond and Thomas Pavel, *De Barthes à Balzac* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), p. 9.

⁶ Bensmaïa, *Barthes à l'essai*, p. 48.

⁷ The translation is a little politer here, has 'extrusion' for 'vomissement', and 'vexes' for 'écoeure'.

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'La structure des mythes', in *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), p. 254.

⁹ Tiphaine Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), p. 307.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), pp. 48, 50; *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 43, 46.

¹¹ Hard to think of a better translation here, but of course one can be feminine without being female.

¹² Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973), p.67; *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 41. See Bremond and Pavel, *De Barthes à Balzac*, p. 85.

¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), p. 13.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Wood is Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton, and the author, most recently, of *The Habits of Distraction*.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2020 *Barthes Studies* and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).