

Working It: On Notation and *The Fashion System*

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‘You better work, cover girl.’ – Rupaul, ‘Supermodel’

I

In September 1979, towards what would be the end of his life and work, Barthes gave an interview to *Le Monde-Dimanche* entitled ‘Dare to Be Lazy’ in which he is ‘tempted to say that I leave no place in my life for idleness, and that that itself is an error’. Continuing a page later, he avows that ‘There are moments when I would really like to rest. But, as Flaubert said, “What do you want me to rest at?” [...] Read? But that’s my work. Write? Again, work.’¹ Amid some wandering comments about the various possibilities and impossibilities of actually being lazy in the modern Western world, Barthes casts himself here as an unwitting and sometimes unwilling workaholic. If reading and writing give more perspicuous and perceptible form to his relentless toil, it is only because they make more concretely material the industrious exertion that all language use entails, the hint of the Flaubertian fantasy book about nothing merging the particularity of writing with the generality of linguistic operation as such. Such a focus on the labor of language is not to announce a resurgently Marxist reading of Barthes’ late-career lyricism but rather to follow his call, made in another interview a few years earlier, that a ‘metaphorical exploration should be made for the word “work” (which is, in fact, much more than *signified*, the true correlate of *signifier*)’. He maintains that ‘[w]e should ward off certain connotations in advance: completely eliminate the idea of work as trouble, punishment, distress, and perhaps give up (at least to begin with, to be thorough) the metonymy that stands proletarian surety for all work, which obviously permits the “work” of the signifier to slip into the socialist camp’.² Nothing against socialism, of course, but in what follows I will be thinking about work as the mode in which we onerously experience the more or less pleasurable play of signification

whose continuous escape from a specific, stable sense would seem to foreclose the phenomenological category of experience altogether. This comes out nowhere more clearly than in *The Fashion System*, Barthes' painstaking analysis of the discourse on women's clothing in the 1958-1959 issues of *Elle* and *Le Jardin des Modes*. An attempt, in the wake of the *Mythologies* collection, 'to give a technical, and not just metaphorical, content to what are too loosely called "languages"', *The Fashion System* offers a methodical illustration of the otherwise invisible or overlooked intellectual work entailed in speaking, even just in recognizing the language of the world.³

The essential form taken by Barthes' unremitting linguistic activity coincides with the fundamental signifying structure of Fashion as a whole, which he describes most succinctly in an article from 1960 that marks his turn from socio-historical discussions of clothing to a more semiological account of its modes of meaning. He writes, 'the signified fashion is supplied using a single signifier, which, both necessary and sufficient, I will call *notable*: any noted feature, any underlined form, in short any vestimentary fragment points, as soon as it is *cited*, to the signified *fashion*'.⁴ The emphasis on a generalized operation of notation asserts its elemental status as the practice by which Fashion establishes itself, while the appeal to a 'vestimentary fragment', along with the sentence's own disjointed syntax, reinforces fragmentation as the bedrock of any kind of meaningful signification. Barthes develops this idea in more explicitly verbal terms in *The Fashion System*'s own argument: writing 'to note that (this year) *skirts are worn short* is to say that *short skirts* signify Fashion this year', he points out how 'the true opposition is less between the *fashionable* and the *unfashionable* than it is between the *marked* (by speech) and the *unmarked* (silence)'.⁵ These lines show Barthes performing his own act of notation, extending his attention beyond the direct attribution of fashion to the operation of speech that underlies it and, more subtly, to what fashion leaves implicit or unspoken. As we explore the sharp distinctions that illustrate how notation works, we will ultimately be plotting the very concrete and, in fact, interminable intellectual industriousness that activates the experience of language animating both the Fashion System and *The Fashion System*.

To make such a claim is to somewhat defy the traditional understanding of this point in Barthes' career in terms of a rigid and routinized structuralism, which his own dismissals of *The Fashion System* as 'in thrall to scientificity' have authorized.⁶ Indeed, the faith he puts into a fashionably

invariable metalanguage at this early moment contrasts with the kind of lively literary sensitivity for which he becomes famous and certainly seems like it ‘exempts its practitioners from writing’, as he puts it in a 1970 interview. Yet, he gestures to the linguistic experience my argument is trying to cultivate when he goes on to assert that ‘the whole delight of it lay in elaborating and developing the system, working on that long and passionately’.⁷ Restating this point two years later, he declares:

I didn’t think of [*The Fashion System*] as a product – but as a production for myself [...] It was a bit different with my other books because there was writing [*il y a de l’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 [*la présentation d’un travail*]. It isn’t a product, it’s work being acted out [*un travail qui est mis en scène*] in front of other people.⁸

The pleasure of this text seems to be less in verbal play than in the intellectual effort necessary to explicitly conceive and approach the world as a materialization of linguistic discourse. At the same time, it is time itself that comes to index this effort, the exertion of ‘work being acted out’ that transforms the static ‘product’ into an energetic ‘production’ repeating the ‘long’ temporal extension required for Barthes to develop the system. And it is ultimately with this sense of temporality that *The Fashion System* functions as something like the prequel to, even the precondition of, the more dynamically textual arguments about the world that he stages through the later, more stylistically and conceptually maverick argumentation like *Empire of Signs*, *S/Z*, or *A Lover’s Discourse*.

The obscured vitality of Barthes’ programmatic structuralism is what his friend and interlocutor Michel Butor draws out in one of the few interpretive readings of this relatively under-analyzed text as he emphasizes the active, procedural valence of the title and almost transforms *The Fashion System* into a kind of manual for working with the text of Fashion that outfits so much of our everyday experience.⁹ He addresses the many ways that, ‘in presenting itself above all as a literary work [*comme oeuvre littéraire*], Barthes’ discussion defies the conventions of the traditional academic thesis for which it was devised. In particular, he highlights ‘the absence of precise references for the immense majority of the citations’, barring later scholars from easily or

effortlessly building on his research. Instead, he insists, 'the work with notecards [*travail de fiche*] must be entirely redone by those who wish to discuss it in detail'.¹⁰ For all its timeless 'scientificity', *The Fashion System* also seems to ask for a kind of readerly re-enactment or reworking that treats it less as a trove of knowledge than as a series of techniques, less as an endpoint of semiological thought than as a starting point for semiological thinking. Furthermore, Butor's phrase '*travail de fiche*' concretely articulates the connection I've drawn between work and notation and suggests the extent to which we are meant to participate in the kind of conscientious notational practice that Barthes systematizes here. In doing so, we will ultimately be working to encounter an animated, almost phenomenological experience of language that, in Barthes' rather triumphant words, Fashion offers us by 'constitut[ing] the garment as a signifier of something which is yet nothing other than this very constitution' (p. 287). My discussion here thus approaches *The Fashion System* as 'a kind of machine for maintaining meaning without ever fixing it' and tracks the ongoing effort of notation by which the textual fabric of the world is articulated (p. 288).

II

Barthes begins his practical exploration of the Fashion System's living language by explaining his decision to limit his attention to what he calls 'written clothing' rather than 'real' garments or their images. 'Only written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function', he writes, 'it is entirely constituted with a view to a signification: if the magazine describes a certain article of clothing verbally, it does so solely to convey a message whose content is: *Fashion* [*la Mode*]' (p. 8; *OC* II, p. 908). Even as Barthes seems to restrict the scope of his analysis, the workings of his scientific language seem to exceed themselves, the opposition between 'practical or aesthetic' and 'signification' obfuscating the practical aspects of signification itself that we've just seen animate the book's exultant conclusion. Indeed, as the 'content' or signified of the magazine's speech, the word '*Fashion*' implies as much the cultural phenomenon of stylishness as it does the act of making or fabrication on which that phenomenon relies. And if this way of thinking is less pronounced in the French '*Mode*' (which nonetheless maintains a sense of 'method' or 'means'),

Barthes elaborates this allusion to linguistic fabrication more forcefully a few pages later in his comparison of the slightly divergent roles that 'description' plays in Fashion and literature. He points out how literary description 'must make the object exist' while the presence of images in fashion magazines takes over this role in a way that 'confirms the fact that specific language-functions exist [*qu'il existe des fonctions spécifiques du langage*] which the image, whatever its development in contemporary society may be, could not possibly assume' (pp. 12-13; *OC II*, p. 913). Even more significant than the introduction of the explicitly practical and productive term 'language-function' is the way the verb 'exist' moves from 'the object' (which is to say, the referent) to the rather fantastic 'existence' of language's own particular effects and operations.

Though he explores three 'specific functions of language', he ultimately positions notation as what links them all together and enacts this linguistic existence most comprehensively. Arguing for instance that the 'explicit *note*' in a fashion magazine emphasizes and focuses our attention on a particular feature of a garment, he expands his claim in a footnote (appropriately enough) that reads 'In fact, all Fashion commentary is an implicit *note*' (p. 15). The clothing descriptions found in magazines thus function as a more detailed performance of the general work of notation, which exhibits the 'emphatic function' of language that 'single[s] out certain elements in order to stress their value' (p. 15). More specifically, linguistic notation 'endows the garment with a system of functional oppositions (for example, fantasy/classic), which the real or photographed garment is not able to manifest in as clear a manner' (p. 14). As the magazine's commentary and captions cut our perception into distinct pieces that play off each other in much the same way that distinct words and sounds do when spoken or written, this direction of the reader's awareness 'rests upon an intrinsic quality of language: its discontinuity' – what he luridly illustrates by stating that 'it is the result of a series of choices, of amputations' (p. 15). The imagery of dismemberment helps to enliven the plodding and exceedingly technical elaboration of what Barthes comes to call the 'vestimentary code' where the almost surgical linguistic operations I'm summarizing are most tangibly materialized. Indeed, the keen clarity that results from linguistic notation has the overall effect of 'reviving the general information conveyed by the photography [in the fashion magazine]', a quickening power he plays up in his claims that 'verbalized notation helps to reinvigorate the [photographs] information' and 'to recharge the message they contain' (p. 15). While his

focus here is on the magazine's photography, this ability of language to impart energy and import to what is or has become flat and vague extends to our experience of the world when he turns to a discussion of real clothing. And it's at this point where we could be said to be, or at least be in touch with, *living* language.

What I mean comes into sharper focus as Barthes digs more deeply into the way material clothing functions according to the intensely oppositional organization of language's signifying system. The most fundamental aspect of this phenomenon is that its signifying unit or, more correctly, the 'signifying matrix', is a compound one that consists of three elements: the garment itself – say, to use Barthes' example, a cardigan sweater; a particular feature of the garment – say, the cardigan's collar; and a variation or alternative to which the particular feature is subject – say, being buttoned or not buttoned (p. 62). Immediately, we can see the 'amputational' operation of linguistic systematics in the particular focus on the collar rather than any of the cardigan's other features as well as in the differential energy of the button, whose potential for alternation introduces what is effectively a hiccup or a kind of prick in the sweater's otherwise stable and continuous material presentation. The point that I'm replicating from Barthes' discussion isn't really that the button makes the collar open or closed but rather the way this very option works as what, in a more deconstructive vocabulary, we would call the cardigan's divergence from itself – the carved-out space where it is able to change its appearance and its significance to become, in the words of the magazine, either '*sporty*' or '*dressy*' (p. 61). But the real upshot of my rather overworked analysis here comes in Barthes' description of the way these elements interact to mobilize that prick and engender a vestimentary signification. He writes, 'signification seems to follow an itinerary of sorts: issuing from an alternative (*open/closed*), it next passes through a partial element (*the collar*) and comes, in the end, to touch and, so to speak, impregnate the garment (*the cardigan*)' (pp. 61-62).¹¹ The self-consciously figurative choice of the word 'impregnate' alludes as much to a saturation of the garment with meaning as it does to a *penetration* of it by meaning, a thrust that the other verbs 'issue' and 'pass through' advance further. Moreover, the obvious implications of gestation, labor, and birth activate all the maternal implications of the term 'signifying matrix' and link the meaningful rupture of this process with the creation of life and liveliness that would affirm or emphasize the garment's existence as such.

This procreative reading finds additional support, or at least some developmental echoes, in Barthes' account of the abstracting effects that go hand-in-hand with the piercing operation of linguistic signification, his claim that 'the second function of speech is a function of knowledge [*connaissance*]'. He continues, 'Language makes it possible to deliver [*livrer*] information which photography delivers poorly or not at all [...] in a general way, what language adds to the image is *knowledge* [*savoir*]' (pp. 13-14; *OC* II, p. 914). His particular point has to do with the authority of the writing in fashion magazines to dictate what is fashionable, but this determination is less important for us than the more general suggestion of the way that such dictation supplements material with conceptual experience. Moreover, as the presence of *naissance* or 'birth' in the *connaissance* of Barthes' original French indicates the creative nativity that conditions such transformation, it begins to extend the productive labor of signification from language itself to those of us working with it. (And though the French *livrer* doesn't have the same connotation as the English 'deliver', Barthes' use of both French words for 'knowledge' throws into relief the pregnant verbal resources that the specificity of *connaissance* makes available.) What is born through this knowledge-creating encounter with language is not so much another existence for the garment but another *aspect* of its existence, a fantastically comprehensible body constituted by the 'system of abstraction' that, through the operations we've been examining, language allows us to bring to the physical world.

Barthes thus describes how language 'helps to grasp [the garment] much more concretely than the photograph...because it permits dealing with discrete concepts (*whiteness, suppleness, velvetiness*), and not with physically complete objects' (p. 12).¹² Significantly, the adverb 'concretely' migrates from what we might think of as its expected reference to the garment's material makeup to qualify the abstract process of mental comprehension instead, a counterintuitive use that points at the way words systematically sculpt the intellectual contours of what they designate. In this case, as intimated in the rhythmic registration of those parenthetical substantives, it's as if the notation of particular aspects discreetly executes the prickly work of amputation and division that we traced in the operation of the cardigan's button. In other words, by affirming one quality rather than another – 'Affirmation is nothing other than a suspended choice', Barthes reminds us, opposed to 'the anonymous reservoir from which [that choice] is drawn' – it introduces an implicitly oppositional structure that directs our attention and

organizes the perceptual space where the garment takes shape (p. 91). Notation thus ‘concretely’ abstracts its object into a materialized structure of knowledge and lets it live an emphatic life that we create by and carry out through language.¹³

Barthes puts this more technically in his account of what he calls ‘the real vestimentary code’ (p. 34). Not fully identical to the ‘written vestimentary code’, which consists of the words used in the magazine’s descriptions, this ‘real code’ refers to the perceptual organization and configuration of garments and sartorial features that result from the processes we’ve just been noting. But, he insists, this coded, structured reality ‘is never reached apart from the words which “translate” it’ (p. 45). As the scare quotes around ‘translate’ suggest, Barthes seems to encounter an intellectual impasse in his attempt to grasp how ‘the (presumed) real itself constitutes a code’ in a way that recalls the alienated position he finds himself in at the end of *Mythologies* (p. 41). Yet, when he admits that ‘dividing [the real code] into segments, necessary as that is, demands a certain amount of “preparation” and, so to speak, “compromise”’, he gestures further at his own practical participation in that work insofar as he quietly, even unknowingly, assumes some of language’s notational agency for himself (p. 43). That is, in those impersonal, anonymous processes of ‘preparation’ and ‘compromise’ on which the divisionary organization executed by the fashion magazine’s speech depends – which, indeed, it ‘demands’ – Barthes stakes out an arena of articulating activity where he might join in the invigorating speech of the world (something, in fact, that *The Preparation of the Novel* could be read as taking up and developing in more literary, writerly terms later in his career).

III

Up to this point, I have been working to synthesize the divisionary labor that animates notation as a living form of linguistic labor, but it is now time that notation becomes its own object of discrete dissection, which will take us more deeply, if somewhat less concretely, into the notational effort with language broached by the work of *The Fashion System*. Because, of course, notation is by no means monolithic but rather ramifies into a number of different orders of meaning that are articulated with – joined to – each other. Our exploration

of the discontinuous link between the 'real vestimentary code' and the 'written vestimentary code' has displayed what Barthes and his predecessors call the system of 'denotation', the privative, negating prefix 'de-' offering an etymological index of the constitutive discontinuities we've been examining. But the system of 'connotation' takes denotation as its support or content, its additive prefix 'con-' indicating the way it introduces additional significations to go along 'with' the original denotation – even as the false etymological echo of deceit and fraud (e.g., 'con artist') suggests the meaningful trickery, if not the outright deception, of signification itself. Part of this deception is, in fact, the very appearance of language's effortlessness, the easy, frictionless use of well-worn significations that comes from taking the discontinuities by which denotation works as already accomplished, an established condition rather than an assertive action. This omission of effort is what grounds popular dismissals of the intellectual industry entailed in speech as such, and Barthes certainly acknowledges the way such misleading secondary meaning 'opens the message to the social, affective, ideological world', which has made connotation central to all manner of important critical demystifications (p. 33).

But in Barthes' discussions of this particular linguistic confidence trick, he places as much focus on the operative 'opening' of the message as on its ideological formation. Doing so, he further excavates the excisions that styled our perceptual experience in the previous section and essentially enlarges our sense of how we actively work with language. Quoting the full comment that I just excerpted frames connotation (what Barthes here calls 'the rhetorical system') as an especially expansive though not necessarily unimpeachable instance of living language:

The communication set in motion by the rhetorical system is in a sense larger, because it opens the message to the social, affective, ideological world: if we define the real by the social, it is the rhetorical system that is more real, while the terminological system [i.e., 'denotation'], since it is more formal, akin to a logic, would be less real. (p. 33)

The contortions that Barthes is obligating the word 'real' to undergo here stretch it to the very limit of its intelligibility as it comes to describe the more or less substantial encounter with linguistic signification itself. The ideological form that this encounter most often takes comes, not coincidentally, from the

domain of work whose outline I have been trying to trace: as he puts it, ‘the notion which best explains the coherence of the Fashion universe, or rather, which does not contradict any of its features, is the notion of work [*la notion de travail*]’ (p. 248; *OC II*, p. 1146). His point is that Fashion often relies on an appeal to activities, occupations, or events that grant an imaginary context or setting in which the meaning of a particular garment or outfit becomes legible (‘*If you want to signify what you are doing here, dress like this*’, he ventriloquizes [p. 249]). He immediately qualifies his focus on work by acknowledging ‘leisure’ as the sphere most frequently associated with Fashion: ‘But’, he specifies, ‘it is precisely a matter of a complementary pair: the world of Fashion is work in reverse [*travail en creux*]’ (p. 248; *OC II*, p. 1146). It seems obvious that this analysis is leaching all force from the suggestion of activity we’ve identified in the English word ‘fashion’, the phrase ‘*travail en creux*’ – literally ‘work hollowed out’ – underscoring the empty, abstract shell that his presentation of work as only a ‘notion’ would also emphasize.

Yet, the ‘complementary pair’ of work and leisure locates the persistence of the oppositional friction by which meaning itself is generated while the image of ‘hollowing out’ echoes the linguistic lacerations that effect such opposition in the first place. What we have here is, in a sense, the denotative aspects of *connotation* – not just the words that define this second order of meaning but also the operations that elicit the incisive effort cutting across and animating both levels. This is what he is referring to in his concluding account of the naturalization of signs, where he emphasizes the purposeful effort entailed in the ‘tireless activity... to constitute strongly and subtly organized semiological systems’ that are accompanied by the ‘equal activity in masking their systematic nature, reconverting the semantic relation into a natural or rational one’ (p. 285). The complex status that ‘activity’ has here finds more nuanced expression in Barthes’ further comments on the modish interpenetration of work and leisure, the fact that ‘in Fashion, all work is empty, all pleasure is dynamic, voluntary, and we could almost say, laborious: by exercising her right to Fashion, even through fantasies of the most improbable luxury, the woman always seems *to be doing something*’ (pp. 253-254). The inescapability of work is striking: exertion transfers from the sphere of professional occupation to the rhetorical speech of Fashion as such, the piling on of adjectives and examples underscoring the explicit reference to the effort of even his own saying in this moment. Furthermore, the insistence on action – especially in the implicit, oblique form that it is taking here –

suggests the extent to which the connotations of Fashion ask us to notice *more*, to *continue* to notice, to *prolong* what and how we notice at all.¹⁴

This is not to deny the ideological presentation of modern careers that Barthes refers to in his claim that “doing” in Fashion (and therein lies its unreality) is ultimately never anything but the decorative attributes of being, since work is never presented apart from a population of psychological essences and human models’ (p. 248). Rather, it is to accentuate that this evacuation of traditional conceptions of employment allows for nothing other than the work of words to emerge – and to emerge, we will continue to see, as an ongoing extension of our attention. Accordingly, when Barthes insists that the ‘human activity’ Fashion tries to signify ‘is tinged with a *certain* unreality [*d’une certaine irréalité*], he speaks as much to a ‘particular’ unreality as to a ‘definite’ one in a way that affirms or paradoxically concretizes the very hollowness, the very emptiness I’ve been engaging the cut of notation to substantiate (p. 248; *OC II*, p. 1146; emphasis added). From this perspective, Barthes’ claim that ‘to dress *in order* to act is, in a certain way, not to act, it is to display the being of doing, without assuming its reality’ reads not just as a condemnation of non-action but also as an *expansion* of action to include the hollow ‘display’ effected by signification itself (p. 249).

Barthes comes to embrace a version of this perspective as he moves to a more performative kind of writing over the course of his career, but here it remains in embryonic form, articulated in stridently negative terms that dismiss or implicitly devalue the opaque working of the signifier. A few pages later he thus writes, ‘the activity assumed by Fashion neither initiates nor exhausts itself; it no doubt constitutes a dreamed pleasure, but this pleasure is “cut short” fantastically, in an absolute instant, divested of all transitivity, since no sooner are they spoken than the weekend and the shopping no longer need “doing”’ (p. 252). His emphasis on the very cut of speech hints, in spite of himself, at the persistent work of vestimentary signification standing in for the undertakings and errands of daily life, the difference that a particular garment makes in our sense of a situation. I am not claiming that the shopping he is referring to is accomplished by simply wearing the right clothes – which is the main fantasy Barthes is critiquing – but I am rather trying to notice the way Fashion intervenes in and constitutes, in all its intransitivity, a *literally significant* part of our practical experience. More specifically, the elision of time here becomes the means for disregarding the work of signification, the imputation of instantaneity extending from the unnoticed (because

‘intransitive’) activity of Fashion’s speech to unperformed activity more broadly. Yet, in asserting that ‘the activity assumed by Fashion neither initiates nor exhausts itself’, Barthes also ambiguously conjoins the sense of Fashion’s timeless simulation with the simultaneous suggestion of a relentless and *temporally extended* undertaking without beginning or end, the continual demand that Fashion makes on us to note the never-not-operational cuts of signification.

This is how we might understand his subsequent claim that ‘thus, we realize the double quality of the Fashion action: it is simultaneously voluptuous and intelligible’, a titillating assertion that describes the condition in which we find signification thickly embodied and sensuously, even sensually, perceptible (p. 252). Rather than taking up the obvious critical resistance he is advancing against Fashion’s presumed immediacy, this point looks ahead to the vivacious, hedonistic arguments Barthes makes in *The Pleasure of the Text* at the same time as it looks back to the invigorating effects of notation as we discussed it in the previous section – the fact that noting the emptiness of Fashion’s significations is paradoxically a way to activate their so-called substance. Accordingly, Barthes’ explicit appeal a few lines earlier to the discontinuous incisions shared between connotation and denotation involves its own lively linguistic implications. He writes, ‘through the connotation of its second system, Fashion divides human activity not into structural units available to a combinatory (such as the analysis of a *series of technical actions* might generate) but rather into gestures which carry their own transcendence within themselves; it can be said that the function of rhetoric here is to transform uses into rituals’ (p. 252, emphasis added). Their censorious tone notwithstanding, these lines paint a picture of ‘human activity’ that is far from the instantaneous availability or unconscious naturalness usually associated with ideology or mythology. Instead, in the conversion of simple ‘use’ to formalized ‘ritual’, they offer a potentially *knowing* sense of performance, in which case the ‘gestures which carry their own transcendence within themselves’ consolidate the signifier-signified relationship to function as a condensed form of acted and active signification. In other words, these gestures become potted dramas of connoted meaning that take place in the temporal world rather than in some abstract, ‘transcendent’ conceptual ambit.

It should of course be obvious that I am reading this argument ‘against the grain’ as we say, the purpose of which is to continue to enrich our sense of the value that comes from working with sign systems. Indeed, the way the

rigorous semiological orientation of Barthes' inquiry in *The Fashion System* treats signification as, precisely, 'a series of technical actions' is what allows me to locate at least the promise of an intentional or deliberate relationship to the operation of denotation and connotation in his otherwise denunciatory assertions (p. 252). To the risk of an overly rosy, idealistic conception of this intentionality, however, we might oppose Barthes' more traditional articulation of the workaday issues at play in this linguistic labor: 'Applied to "doing"', he writes, 'the rhetoric of Fashion appears as a "preparation" (in the chemical sense) destined to rid human activity of its major scoria (alienation, boredom, uncertainty, or more fundamentally: impossibility), while retaining its essential quality of a pleasure and the reassuring clarity of a sign' (p. 252). Even as the word 'preparation' invokes a readymade solution that almost alchemically shunts the effort of articulation into some kind of unspoken pre-accomplishment, this dressing-down of Fashion's ideological representation of the world also provides a more finely formulated inventory of what that effort involves. This is to admit the more negative aspects of the experience of language, the way it also involves the open-ended drudgery of paying attention to well-worn words that are, simultaneously, never really one's own. Workaholism, indeed.

IV

Having sliced and diced the workings of denotation and connotation, we have come to the moment in which we might put some more discriminating analytic pressure on the tentative claims I've been making for the active intentionality or the intentional activity at play in the work of notation. For I do not mean to posit anything like a wholly sovereign or self-sufficient semiological capacity. What I want to clarify in the final section of this essay is how the emphatic agency of this power is predicated on a form of inescapable impotence that makes the most significant part of how notation works a kind of purposeful patience on which all the linguistic effort I have been exploring relies. We get something like a glimpse of this active impotence and the patience with which it is woven when Barthes underscores the indeterminate border between the figurative and the literal on which his research subject situates his discourse – cutting being, of course, an important

part of the expressive work that a clothing designer, a tailor, and even a fashion magazine editor assume in their day-to-day doings. Quickly unraveling any clear distinction between the real and the rhetorical at the end of *The Fashion System's* methodological introduction, he directs us to

Imagine (if possible) a woman dressed in an endless garment, one that is woven of everything the magazine of Fashion says, for this garment without end is proffered through a text which is itself unending. This total garment must be organized, i.e., cut up and divided into significant units, so that they can be compared with one another and in this way reconstitute the general signification of Fashion. (p. 42)

While the connection to the cuts and divisions by which we've looked into denotation and connotation should be clear enough, the imperative 'Imagine' that precedes them asks us to visualize what, in effect, can't actually be seen. And I'm not just talking about the 'endless garment' on which we will comment in a second. Rather, the more extreme visual impossibility here regards that garment's signifying 'organization': we might be able to picture the edges of a garment that have been split from each other, but the split itself, the slice that structures our perception, is precisely what is *not* there. In a sense, however, this visualization of absence follows the sentence's directive to the letter, as 'Imagine' invokes a non-existence or unreality that could be said to have been characterizing language use from the very beginning.

At the same time, these lines also figure the temporal extension of signification that we've been exploring in the 'endlessness' shared between couture and its communication. Imaginatively spatializing the temporality to which Barthes alludes in a footnote to this comment – he specifies that 'We understand *signification*, not in the current sense of signified, but in the active sense of process' – the 'endless garment' returns us to time itself as the thread stitching together the abstract process of meaning's fashioning and our experience of the physical world's concrete materiality. If this sense of extended process and passing time is precisely *not* how Barthes describes Fashion and its 'euphoria', which derives 'from the fact that it produces a rudimentary, formless novel without temporality', it shows us what is at stake in this insistence on the timely work of notation – namely, the rejuvenation of the work of language to attend to the moment-by-moment fabrication of the material world's significance (p. 262). To say this attention is as unending

as the garment itself is not only to maintain its unrelenting extension, the continual reiteration of the cuts that distinguish the patterns of its shape, but it is also to recognize that these cuts don't really end anything but rather paradoxically constitute the continuous persistence if not quite the persistent continuity of its appearance – what we have seen Barthes call the 'real vestimentary code'.

Barthes' more general comments on the very idea of a 'real code' in an earlier chapter (tellingly entitled 'Between Things and Words') develop this sense of temporality in a way that ultimately affirms my opening gesture towards *The Fashion System* as a kind of manual for the work of language with which we are always involved. Using the stop-light as an example, he compares the experience of 'learn[ing] the highway code in an empirical (extra-linguistic) manner' that would entail 'repeatedly associating the green with going and the red with stopping' and 'learn[ing] the meaning of these signals from an instructor [whose] speech relays the real code' (pp. 29-30). One of the main differences in these signifying activities involves the fact that 'the real code presupposes a practical communication based on apprenticeship and thus on a certain duration' while the 'terminological system implies an immediate communication (it does not need time to develop, the word economizes the duration of apprenticeship) but one that is conceptual' (pp. 32-33).¹⁵ The differing emphasis on duration indexes the tendency of speech and language to disconnect us from the practical, time-bound character of our communicative experiences by sheltering us in the 'immediacy' of the 'conceptual'. At the same time, however, the common appeal to an 'apprenticeship' in both these situations echoes the implicit association with the practical, material work of tailoring we just examined in a way that resists the link between words and instantaneous, 'economized' comprehension.

We might even go so far as to say that the analysis in *The Fashion System* as a whole works to weave a sense of time and practical action back into our relationship to speech and language, a project that Barthes' comments in the book's Foreword rather explicitly if also inadvertently support. Addressing the somewhat 'belated' position of his 'venture' – begun in 1957 but not published until 1967 after of a number of 'important works' in semiology had already appeared – Barthes characterizes *The Fashion System* as 'a kind of slightly naïve window through which may be discerned, I hope, not the certainties of a doctrine, nor even the unvarying conclusions of an investigation, but rather the beliefs, the temptations, and the trials of an

apprenticeship: wherein its meaning; hence, perhaps, its use' (pp. ix-x). My initial and admittedly lazy impulse is to leave the clear resonances between his diction and the practical emphasis of my argument to speak for themselves, but the whole point is to underscore the extended linguistic labor that *The Fashion System* both displays and enables, the way that the image of 'apprenticeship' denies any sense of accomplished linguistic or semiological mastery and instead implies an ongoing effort tracked by the punctuated rhythms moving us through 'the beliefs, the temptations, and the trials' of using language. If Barthes' appeal to the book's 'use' is as 'a certain history of semiology', this history is as much the broader intellectual development of the field as it is the temporally extended and never finished employment of words to make the world mean. Barthes gives us one concrete though admittedly 'modest' sartorial example of a Fashion signification that preserves rather than abolishes this sense of time in 'what Fashion calls the *transformation (the summer dustcoat which will become the autumn raincoat)*' (p. 291). Framing this phenomenon as 'a certain solution to the conflict which constantly sets the order of transitive behavior in opposition to that of signs' – which is what my determination in bringing out the *work* of notation and signification has ultimately been aiming at – he describes how 'through transformation, diachrony is introduced into the system' (p. 291). In this case, Fashion no longer ruthlessly denies the temporality of its significations by substituting a new look that completely obliterates that of the previous year. What we get instead is 'a new "doing"' in which 'the language of fashion becomes a true fabricator' according to the sense I have been trying to unearth and effect through my practical readings of Barthes' text (p. 291).

Accordingly, there is perhaps no 'final illustration' of how notation works, which suggests a synthesizing, totalizing accomplishment that would lay all this incisive effort to rest. And I don't think it's by chance that the very next book Barthes publishes after *The Fashion System* is that deliberately cut-up text *S/Z*, which is about barely more than cutting itself. If this initiates (or, given the disintegrated, citational energy of his early *Michelet*, reinitiates) Barthes' increasing use of the fragment as a rhetorical form as opposed to the attempts at discursive unity in his works of the 1960s, it simultaneously extends the rhetorical content of the Fashion discourse that we've been working through here. In the resonant argument that, as one of the key contemporary commentators on Barthes, Claude Coste makes about the place of the word *travail* in the closing lines of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he

not only allows me to splice a distinguished and distinguishing voice at and as the integrating ending of this essay's attempt at critical coherence, but he also projects my points into their own enduring future: 'as long as he works, the writer [*l'écrivain*] coincides with himself, apprehends himself as a happy totality (I am he who writes) and holds off the moment of turning around as long as possible – this moment of bad distance that constitutes the work into an oeuvre and the subject into an author [*qui constitue l'oeuvre en oeuvre et le sujet en auteur*]' (pp. 44-45).¹⁶

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 339, 340.

² Barthes, *Grain*, p. 126.

³ Barthes, *Grain*, p. 43. Pierre Saint-Amand and, more recently, André Benhaïm have addressed work in Barthes, and both approach it in a dialectic with laziness, as a social compulsion Barthes seeks to attenuate and even escape from through writing and literature. Though work's entanglement with leisure explicitly figures in my discussion (echoing Benhaïm's discussion of laziness as itself an action or a form of work), I am more interested here in the more fundamental effort of articulation imposed on us by our status as linguistic beings. See Pierre Saint-Amand, 'Barthes' Laziness', trans. by Jennifer Curtiss Gage, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.2 (Fall 2001): 519-26 and André Benhaïm, 'Barthes on the Beach', *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, 62 (2019): 162-73.

⁴ Roland Barthes, "'Blue is in Fashion This Year": A Note on Research into Signifying Units in Fashion Clothing', in *The Language of Fashion*, ed. by Andy Stafford and Michael Carter, trans. by Andy Stafford (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 49-50.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 268-69. Further references to this work will be given by page number after quotations in text. References to the French original come from *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002) and will be given, when necessary, by volume and page number.

⁶ Roland Barthes, 'Answers', in *Simply a Particular Contemporary: Interviews, 1970-1979*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2015), p. 22.

⁷ Barthes, 'Answers', p. 22.

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'For the Liberation of a Pluralist Thinking', in *Simply a Particular Contemporary: Interviews, 1970-1979*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2015), p. 88; *OC IV*, pp. 471-72.

⁹ One notable exception to this disregard of *The Fashion System* is Michael Sheringham's discussion of it within the context of Barthes' interest in everyday life. He describes how 'the existential or lived ("vécu") dimension of modes of signification' might have 'fully crystallized' in *Empire of Signs* but was anticipated and in a way enabled by *The Fashion System*, which shows how the 'everyday existence of these phenomena [like Fashion] is more closely allied to their semiological – perpetual present – dimension than to their objective historical aspect'. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 177, 183. For discussion of *The Fashion System* within the development of cultural studies more generally, see Patrizia Calefato, 'On Myths

and Fashion', *Sign System Studies*, 36.1 (2008): 71-81, and for a critique of Barthes' framework, see Michael Carter, 'Stuff and Nonsense: The Limits of the Linguistic Model of Clothing', *Fashion Theory*, 16.3 (2012): 343-54. Jonathan Culler also gives an account of some 'serious methodological problems' in Barthes' attempt to adopt the model of linguistics; see *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 39.

¹⁰ Michel Butor, 'La Fascinatrice', in *Répertoire*, 4 vols (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), vol. IV, pp. 385, 386.

¹¹ Translation modified: in the original French, the end of the sentence reads '...et vient enfin toucher et pour ainsi dire imprégner le vêtement (*le cardigan*) (OC II, p. 961).

¹² For example, Barthes refers to a caption such as '*the soft shetland dress with a belt worn high and with a rose stuck in it*' and explains, 'we are told certain parts (the material, the belt, the detail) and spared others (the sleeves, the collar, the shape, the color), as if the woman wearing this garment went about dressed only in a rose and softness' (p. 15).

¹³ To say this is not to imply that this linguistic life is somehow preceded by a raw, meaningless reality into which notation makes its oppositional cuts, as much as it is to make explicit that our very access to reality as such – its very realness – depends on them.

¹⁴ Compare this point with the argument he makes in his 'At the Music Hall' mythological analysis, where he argues that 'the music hall is the aesthetic form of work. Here each number is presented either as the exercise or product of labor [...] [T]he effort is perceived at its apogee, at that almost impossible moment when it is about to be engulfed in the perfection of its achievement'. Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 124. His subsequent claim that 'the music hall requires a profound enchantment whereby it erases all rugosity from labor and leaves only its finished design' (p. 125) depends on the 'immediate time' of the music hall, which 'remove[s] the gesture from its sweetish pulp of duration' (p. 123) – a duration we are working to read back into the very process of signification itself.

¹⁵ Notice the echo between this claim and Barthes' account in 'Myth Today' that myth 'economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply', which emphasizes the elision of language's work, effort, labor, exertion (often at the hands of language itself). Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 153.

¹⁶ Claude Coste, *Bêtise de Barthes* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 2011), pp. 50-51. Coste here recasts the distinction from Barthes's 1960 essay 'Authors and Writers [*Ecrivains et écrivains*]' into the somewhat more legible *auteur/écrivain* opposition. The terminological shifts are a bit dizzying: the English 'author' initially translates

the more writerly ‘*écrivain*’ but, in the wake of Barthes’ later arguments, shifts to name the more stable, authoritarian place of the *auteur*. What I want to underscore here, in this concluding *note*, are the toilsome terms by which Barthes describes the more dispersive, writerly function as ‘the man who *labors*, who works up his utterance [*qui travaille sa parole*] [...] and functionally absorbs himself in this labor, this work [*ce travail*]’. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 144; *OC II*, p. 404.

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