

BOOK REVIEW

Very Magic

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John Lurz, *The Barthes Fantastic: Literature, Criticism, and the Practice of Language* (Chicago University Press, 2025).

The material arrangements of John Lurz's remarkable book—its title, its epigraphs, the intriguing collages by the author dispersed through the text—begin very soon to seem less like elements of design than a team of co-authors, begging our intense or distracted attention. In the title 'Barthes' can be an adjective or a noun, as can the central word in the cliché it borrows from: 'trip the light fantastic'. If we were reading another book, we would perhaps not hesitate over the meanings of 'trip'. The epigraphs from Marcel Proust and Stanley Cavell announce a presence and a topic. Returning to Proust at a later moment in the book, Lurz wonders 'if we've ever really left him' (p. 129). And Cavell announces that 'the fact of writing, of the possibility of language as such, is the miracle, the fantastic' (p. vii). The collages, combinations of buildings, landscapes, people and chunks of text, are Lurz's 'practical illustrations of this book's theoretical analysis' (p. xxi). They 'structurally materialize' ideas of 'division or segmentation' (p. 58). The Barthes fantastic is also the fantastic Barthes.

The book takes in the whole range of Barthes' work, early and late, with extended explorations of *Michelet par lui-même*, *Mythologies*, *Système de la mode*, *Sur Racine*, *S/Z*, *Sade*, *Fourier*, *Loyola*, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, *La chambre claire*.

Lurz's 'model' of reading is one 'where it is the linguistic engagement of reading that helps to make sense of and give shape to experience' (p. xvi), not a model he finds 'at first glance' in Barthes. But then he sees that reading itself is an experience for Barthes, 'something that happens to him' (p. xvi), and a quotation from Barthes vividly confirms this perception. He says that what happens when we read is that 'la réalite chevauche tout à coup le

fantastique' [reality suddenly rides on the fantastic].¹ What do we make of this riding? We can picture it, but could we write a book about it? And how often does it happen?

Lurz's answer to the first question is no. He has already said his 'project is an impossible one; the approach to reading and criticism I develop here cannot be said to exist' (pp. xvii–xviii). He has other doubts that he shares with us:

Working through these readings, I have begun to have the uneasy sense that I am basically repeating myself. [...] I am dogged by the possibility that my painstaking articulations are guilelessly reciting ideas overfamiliar to the discipline of literary study, that my interest in the semiological texture of the world [...] is nothing more than a rehashing of tired poststructuralist pieties. (p. 101)

He imagines the 'critiques' of what he is doing: 'how passé, how precious, how pretentious' (p. 128). In the first case he decides to sit on the fence for a while; in the second he suggests his commentators 'would not be totally wrong' (p. 128). The bolder move, though, as Lurz knows, is to keep writing and allow language to play its own games.

An example from another world. In his poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' W. B. Yeats writes 'Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare / Rides upon sleep'. In ordinary usage 'ridden' has no connection to 'riding', but language knows better and so does Yeats' unconscious. It provides the daily dragon with a night mare (or a knight mare) and lets the horse do the riding. It sounds like a bad joke, but it's a perfect picture of a culture that can't even get its distress straight.

Lurz's chapters—on magic, notation, reflexion, and citation in Barthes' work—find and interrogate moves of this kind. Barthes' phrase 'un champ de permanences et de permutations' [a field of permanences and permutations] owes as much to phonetics as to meaning.² When Barthes refers to Virginia Woolf, he is evoking her 'not as the index of a historical person but as the elusive entrée into a dynamic literary field structured by nothing more (and nothing less) than words' (p. 135). The caption for Barthes in *La Chambre claire* 'moves from the imaginary realm of the fantasmatic into the linguistic reality of the fantastic' (p. 135)—a formula for much that is happening in Barthes' writing as Lurz helps us to see it. It is an echo of Lurz's

earlier remark about 'the language of magic' which seems to create 'fantastic experience of the very magic of language' (p. 36).

In relation to *S/Z* Lurz suggests that 'one of the central affordances' of Barthes' interpretative energy is 'that no meaning is ever the final one, no reading ever the last'. I don't think this affordance is true—there are, alas, final meanings all over the place—but the principle is right: any meaning could tip over into another one. This is why Barthes can see fashion as 'a kind of machine for maintaining meaning without ever fixing it' (p. 56).

In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* we learn of a missing grammatical mode:

il manque en français (et peut-être en toute langue) un mode grammatical qui dirait *légèrement* (notre conditionnel est bien trop lourd), non point le doute intellectuel, mais la valeur qui cherche à se convertir en théorie.

we lack in French [and perhaps in every language] a grammatical mode which would express *lightly* [our conditional is much too heavy], not intellectual doubt, but the value which strives to convert itself into theory.³

Lurz doesn't find or create this mode, but he goes a long way towards showing us why we might need it.

Notes

¹ Cited in Lurz, *The Barthes Fantastic*, p. 3. For the original quotation in English, see Roland Barthes, 'On Gide and His Journal', trans. by Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 3–17 (p. 14). Translation modified.

² Cited in Lurz, *The Barthes Fantastic*, p. 140. For the original quotation in English, see Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. by Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1991), pp. 41–62 (p. 58).

³ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Seuil, 1975), p. 59; *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Macmillan, 1977), p. 55. Translation modified.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Wood studied French and German at Cambridge University and was a fellow of St John's College. He taught at Columbia, Exeter, and Princeton, where he is now Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature. He has written books on Stendhal, Nabokov, Yeats, and Hitchcock, and is the author, most recently, of *On Empson* (2017), *The Habits of Distraction* (2018), and *Marcel Proust* (2023). He writes regularly for the *London Review of Books*, and for several other journals.

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