BOOK REVIEW

The Dictionary as Phalanstery?

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Claude Coste, ed., *Dictionnaire Roland Barthes* (Honoré Champion, 2024).

To begin with the purely quantitative: at 994 pages the *Dictionnaire Roland Barthes* is a significant resource. Its roughly 350 alphabetical entries are the work of seventy-four contributors from twenty different countries. In addition to the entries themselves the work includes an introductory essay by Claude Coste—'Le Dictionnaire selon Barthes'—a Chronology, and a selective bibliography of Barthes' work and of critical work on Barthes. The different types of entries to the dictionary include specific works (books, selected essays, seminars, including unpublished seminars from the considerable archive (for example, the seminar from 1971–72 on the 'Theory of the Text')), significant figures (Artaud, Antonin; Balzac, Honoré de; Barthes, Henriette…), concepts and keywords (Acteur, Adjectif, *Adunata/Impossibilia*, Affiche…), institutions (CECMAS, CNRS, EPHE…). There are several entries on the international reception of Barthes' work, arranged by language and country. Each entry is supplemented by a bibliography (which Coste admits is 'precarious' and subject to the subjectivity of the authors of each entry) and cross-references. Two indexes, of names and of notions, allow for other lines of enquiry and enable further connective work. While the list of contributors includes many established authorities in Barthes criticism (among them Tom Baldwin, Yves Citton, Claude Coste himself, Marie Gil, Anne Herschberg-Pierrot, Diana Knight, Lucy O'Meara, Kris Pint, Tiphaine Samoyault, Anne Simon, Andy Stafford, Yue Zhuo…), Coste makes a point of highlighting the contribution of teams of younger researchers—a group led by Jean-Loup Rivière at the ENS Lyon who co-wrote with him most of the entries on theatre, and groups of Master's

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students at Paris Cergy who were involved in a work of re-reading of a quantity of the entries.

The project of a Roland Barthes dictionary is, of course, hardly a neutral affair. As Coste makes clear in his brief introduction, for Barthes himself the dictionary is a highly ambivalent object: on the one hand it imposes order and code, and is thus on the side of ideology and power; on the other hand, it is an object of multiple pleasures, mobilizing play between signifier, signified and referent, and veering towards the catalogue of fetish-words, word-evaluations or *vocables*. Both stereotype and *objeu*, in the sense proposed by Pierre Fédida in *L'Absence* (Gallimard, 1978), the dictionary is a very Barthesian object. Working from a preface Barthes wrote in 1980 for the Hachette dictionary, Coste also notes the 'hybrid' nature of the 'encyclopaedic dictionary' (p. 13), mediating between definition and description, 'the world of words and the world of things' (*ibid.*), and the pertinence of the Barthesian motifs of the 'lexique' and the 'glossaire'. Ultimately, however, the dictionary is a practical device—the infinite of language is cut, Coste writes, channelling Barthes, by the 'opératoire'—the *operative* would be my provisional translation. Georges Bataille put this slightly differently, as Coste also credits, when he wrote that: 'A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks (*besognes*).' As Barthes himself would note in 'The Outcomes of the Text', his essay on Bataille's 'Big Toe' at the 1972 *Tel Quel* Artaud/Bataille conference, *besogne* is not simply 'task'; it also connotes *jouissance* and the evaluation of a 'creative singularity' (Coste, p. 15).

Given these Barthesian inflexions of the dictionary project the *Dictionnaire Roland Barthes* sets up an impossible demand. Considering also the extent to which Barthes deployed the mechanisms of the dictionary in much of his writing—the indexical entries of *The Pleasure of the Text* and *La Chambre claire*, the 'lexis' of the author in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the 'figures' of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, the different orderings of the Collège de France lectures and seminars—it will be hard not to feel disappointed in advance by a Roland Barthes dictionary which will necessarily be oriented toward information and, as Coste underlines, toward the non-arbitrary, the familiar, the doxa of Barthes: the 'most important and the most expected notions' (p. 17).

However, the aforementioned emphasis on the 'operative' suggests that the *jouissance* of knowledge and language may be found not in judgement but in usage, and so, arbitrarily, I will enter into the *Dictionnaire Roland Barthes* as a user.

I begin, not so arbitrarily and under the constraint of the review form, with *Jeu* (play). The entry, by Marie Sorel (Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle), between *Jakobson* and *Journal*, is a miniature essay which is extremely well-crafted, picking up on the subtleties of Barthes' multifarious engagements with the idea and the practice of play and games, and situating them in relation to other authorities (Caillois, Huizinga, Freud (the *fort-da*), Winnicott…), listed in a helpful bibliography. I am already hooked into the game.

I now follow the cross-reference to 'Drague'. This shorter entry by Hessam Nogherehchi (University of Tehran) appears between Doxa and Drogue. Nogherehchi situates the 'entry' of the term into Barthes' vocabulary at the beginning of the 1960s with *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, signifying a 'permanent change of the object' (p. 232); the term is mobilized further, we learn, in *Le Plaisir du texte* and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. This is interesting and informative, and I am enticed to find out more about the Fourierist sense of the term, but since the entry is somewhat reticent about the more obvious sexual sense of the term, I leave this page for 'Érotisme/Pornographie', sent there by the list of cross-references.

This one, as it turns out, is by Claude Coste himself, who points to the etymological connection of pornography and prostitution. On this point we enter fairly quickly into biographical terrain ('frequentation of gigolos plays an important role in the life and work of Barthes', p. 278). But then again, when he writes on 'overtly pornographic texts' (p. 279) such as Bataille's *Story of the Eye* ('overtly', *really*?) Coste comments on the *distance* Barthes adopts towards the object. Eroticism, of course, is superior to pornography, since it relates to an art of living and of writing (p. 279). This opens a fairly extensive litany of fragments of instances of 'good eroticism' (p. 279*)*.

Seeking something less familiar, I am tempted by the entry under 'Photographs commented by Roland Barthes' but, seeing it is also by Claude Coste, and wanting to vary the pitch somewhat, I look back to the Table of Contents. I am seduced by the look of 'Frappe' and 'Nappé', which instantiate, for this reader, what Barthes might call the *frisson du sens*. Inspired perhaps by the sense of listening to different voices, while I pursue this indulgence, however, another note from Barthes, cited by Coste, insists, overlaps and overtakes, the idea of the dictionary as a 'pratique démocratique de la connaissance' (p. 12, cited from the Hachette preface, *Œuvres complètes* V, p. 925). I now imagine the dictionary as a form of colloquium in the form of a book, a phalanstery perhaps, which

one can enter and leave as one wants, and by any of the multiple enter points available, and I am happy to be able to do so at my leisure.

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