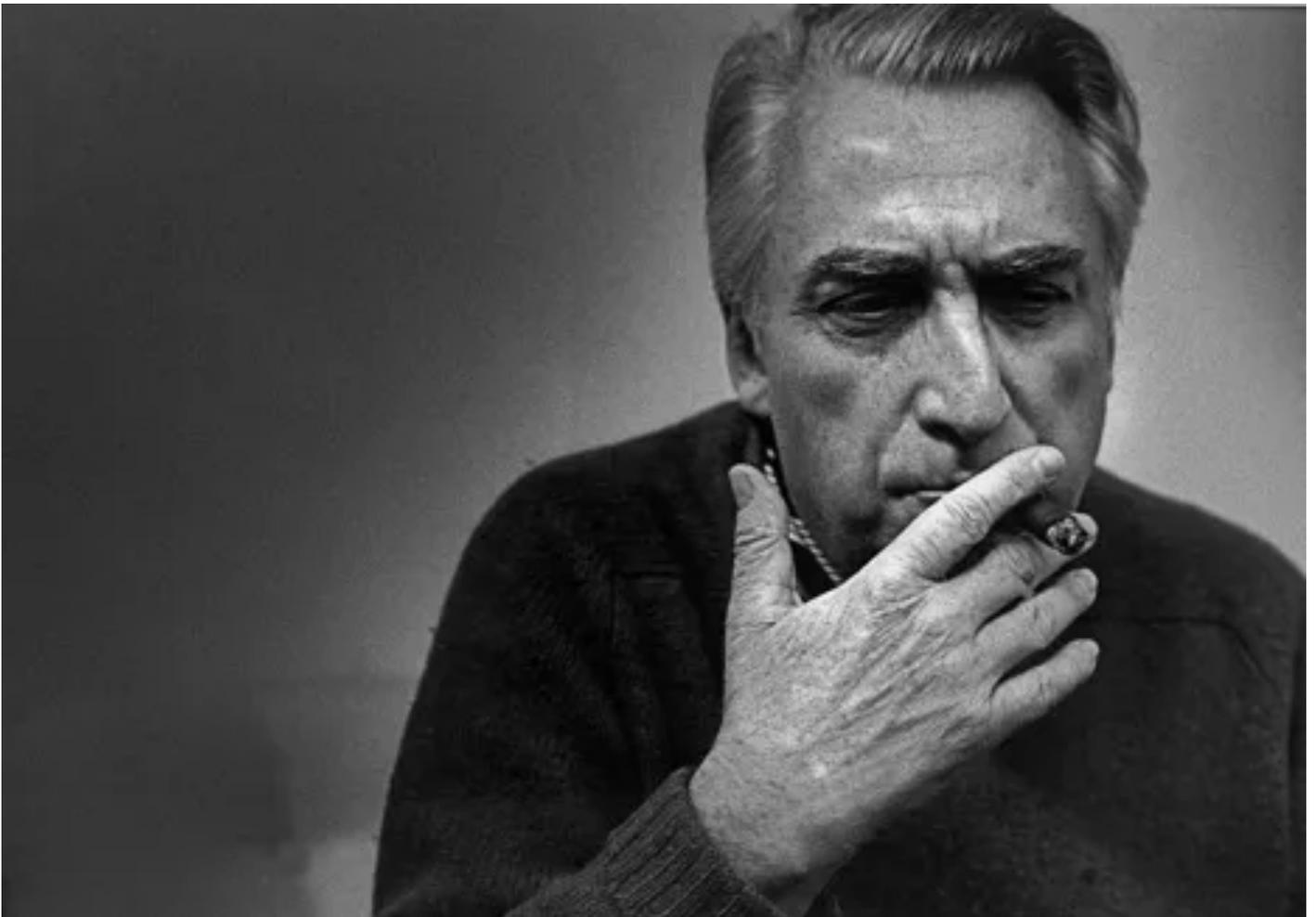


ROLAND BARTHES: MYTHS WE DON'T OUTGROW

By Marco Roth

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Perhaps the best way to understand what drove Roland Barthes, then a thirty-nine-year-old professor of literature, to begin writing the series of short essays later published as “Mythologies” is to take a brief glance at the myth of the supposedly decadent influence of French theory on American

intellectual life. “He’d met Roland Barthes, at a dinner party, and been converted, over cassoulet, to the new faith,” goes a line about a Brown semiotics professor in Jeffrey Eugenides’s recent novel, “The Marriage Plot.” It’s a sentence that both describes and reenacts the mysterious process by which an essayist and literary critic who would have “interrogated” that dish of duck fat, beans, and sausage, demanding to know what it thought it was doing at his dinner party, somehow came to be seen as just another aspect of the stereotypical Frenchness he’d set out to unmask as a repressive fraud.

Anyone who reads Barthes on the myth of steak frites, or the recipes in nineteen-fifties *Elle* magazines—“A peasant dish is admitted only on occasion as the rustic whim of blasé city folk”—will immediately understand that the American professor is one more dupe of a consumer mentality that leads us to haplessly confuse our gastronomic, religious, and intellectual experiences of other cultures. An interest in the writing of a gay professor of rhetoric, born to a protestant family on France’s Atlantic seaboard, ought not to be conflated with a taste for Provençal cooking; neither should the lure of French theory be assimilated to the grand tourist’s reverence for the mysteries of Notre Dame or Chartres. That is to say, it’s a good thing we still have Barthes to help us understand what’s always at risk of happening to writers like Barthes.

A new, unabridged edition of “Mythologies,” translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers, provides additional antidotes to another stereotype about so-called French theorists. Annette Lavers’s 1970 translation included only twenty-eight of Barthes’s original fifty-three short essays, most no longer than two pages, but the entirety of his afterword, “Myth Today.” (In the longer essay, he explains how the coverage of royal weddings, sensational crimes, jet pilots, and famous writers photographed “on vacation,” set alongside advertisements for cleaning products and food, constituted a language with rules as codified as those of the classical French theatre he’d studied.) The ratio of theory to practice in the original edition could give the impression that Barthes was trying to erect a rigorous social science of semiological analysis on the rather gauzy foundation of a few photographs, articles, and advertisements that he’d arbitrarily selected from *Paris Match* and *L’Express*.

In fact, “Mythologies” began as a species of cultural journalism, of which certain blogs (Paul Krugman’s, for example) might be the closest contemporary analogue. Beginning in 1954, Barthes had been asked to write a monthly or bimonthly column for the Paris literary magazine *Lettres Nouvelles*, which he did, dutifully, for two years. His attempt to synthesize

these pieces into a larger statement of methodology came later, as Barthes reread his own closely observed and documented associations. The myth—current since Edmund Burke denounced the Declaration of the Rights of Man—of French intellectuals blinded by their own theories, implicitly contrasted with the more empirical and process-driven Anglo-American mind, thus bites the dust, as Barthes himself hoped it would.

“Mythologies,” like Krugman’s blog, also can be read as a kind of chronicle. Barthes used his platform at the magazine, in part, as a way of tracking his frustrations with social and political landscape of France from 1954 to 1956: a time of increasing middle-class prosperity, coinciding with France’s struggle to hold onto its colonies in North Africa and Southeast Asia, and DeGaulle’s attempts to restore some kind of national pride in the aftermath of the Second World War. Most worryingly for Barthes, these were years that also saw the rise of an explicitly anti-intellectual, racist, and populist political party—the forerunner of today’s Front National—headed by a former French Air Force pilot, rugby player, and gym teacher, Pierre Poujade.

Barthes detects elements of *Poujadisme* in the press’s fondness for tautologies (“business is business,” “Racine is Racine”); the cult of jet pilots (“the jet man is defined less by his courage than by his weight, his diet, and his habits (temperance, frugality, continence)”); and a brief vogue for the hypnotic spectacle of mass American evangelical “crusades” (“If God is really speaking through Dr. Graham’s mouth, it must be acknowledged that God is quite stupid,” he writes of Billy Graham’s appearance at the Vélodrome D’Hiver, where, thirteen years earlier, thousands of Paris’s Jews had been herded prior to their deportation to Auschwitz). Barthes could be scathing, or sometimes just catty—and much of the pleasure of reading “Mythologies” comes from its archly composed anger—but his intention often seems less to deplore than to understand the habits of mind that led his countrypeople to rise, open-mouthed, to such bait.

The urge to succumb to the mythic appeal of modern products, including politicians and celebrities, as well as to the stories we come to associate with them, affected Barthes. It takes a certain unabashed enthusiasm to begin an essay on car design “I believe the automobile is, today, the almost exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals,” even as he concludes pessimistically that the auto industry has fallen prey to “petit bourgeois annexation.” His piece on “professional” wrestling—“it is no more ignoble to watch a wrestled performance of Suffering than the sorrows of Arnulphe or Andromaque”—was a direct influence on Sontag’s “Notes on Camp,” and pretty much every subsequent, serious exaltation of low or popular arts and culture. When Barthes writes of the “impassive anonymous” hero or bastard of the ring, leaving with a gym bag and his wife on his arm, like a priest packing up after Mass, he establishes a particular tone of genuine fascination that makes us see the spectacle and its actors in a new way—through style—and also reminds us that the word “theory” really just means a way of seeing things.

Contemporary readers will also detect a hint—in essays like those on Citroens and the marketing of margarine through an early version of the “I can’t believe it’s not butter” campaign—of the current practice of “semiotic brand analysis,” when companies hire intelligent people, usually with an undergraduate background in the classes Eugenides makes fun of, to explain to them how to increase the appeal of their own brands. Barthes may not have looked favorably on what he called “the domestication” of the automobile, but when he notes how “the dashboard looks more like the worktable of a modern kitchen than a factory control room,” he was articulating a change that made cars more acceptable to women and families, of which the Citroen designers themselves may have been only dimly aware.

The legacy of “Mythologies” falls short of the complete smashing of signs, the “semioclastm” Barthes wished for in his 1970 preface—neither he nor anyone else has solved the problem of why certain basic human longings for freedom, or heroes, or cleanliness attach themselves so easily to travel guides,

bicycle races, plastics, and laundry detergent. And he probably could not have anticipated how completely the very instruments of his analysis could then be adapted to sell even more of those things, especially in Europe's former colonial domains. Yet the essays retain a force of example that harden them against being read, with fond nostalgia, as mere articles of an outmoded age of cultural criticism. The very ease with which, as a party game, you can substitute "The Tea Party" for "*Poujadisme*" in certain sentences without changing the meaning very much should be proof that there are certain myths we don't outgrow, even if the signifiers change. For another generation caught in the idiocies and contradictions of its moment, these essays reveal how an acutely intelligent and sensitive mind can write its way through and set its own poise against them.

Photograph by Ferdinando Scianna/Magnum.

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