

Editorial: Roland Barthes at 100

Neil Badmington

And lead us not into *doxa*... I have an uneasy feeling that Roland Barthes, were he still alive, would have doubts about this venture.¹ An academic journal bearing his name and devoted to his work? In *English*? The noun ‘studies’, with its ring of stillness and seizure? The implicit claim to a field or a fold? Is not the very idea of a publication called *Barthes Studies* at odds with the drift, the unlearning, the reinvention, the non-arrogance, the escape, the *non-vouloir-saisir*, and the ‘desperate resistance to any reductive system’ that so often fire the pages of Roland Barthes?² Might not this journal set or settle at once into *doxa* – that fatal term enlisted repeatedly in Barthes’s work to describe established knowledge, common sense, the obvious, the natural, what-goes-without-saying?³ Have I forgotten that Barthes told the audience at the conference held in his honour at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1977 that he had twice refused the invitation, and that he only accepted on the third occasion because he did not wish to create the image of ‘he-who-refuses-conferences-in-his-name’?⁴

‘The risk is great’, wrote Mathieu Messager in his introduction to the inaugural volume of the Paris-based *Revue Roland Barthes* in 2014. The dangers of ‘coagulation’ and canonisation were, he acknowledged, all too real as the new publication set off on its way. But he added immediately that the *Revue* was determined above all to avoid hagiography, statue-building, and the formation of canons; the focus instead would be upon the multiple ‘becomings’ of Roland Barthes.⁵

In some ways, the *Revue* is the francophone cousin of *Barthes Studies*, and I have been conscious throughout the process of preparation of a similar risk threatening the direction of this journal. How could we avoid what Barthes dismissed as ‘dead repetition’?⁶ The trick, as I see it, is to clear and to preserve an open space for innovative, revealing, challenging, questioning research in English on diverse aspects of Roland Barthes’s work and its implications for cultural analysis. The commitment to openness explains in part the decision to make *Barthes Studies* a fully open-access affair: authors pay nothing to have their peer-reviewed work published here, and every article is free to read online. We welcome future

submissions that have something new to say and that do not merely repeat the known. There will no doubt be temptations to fall into the easy arms of *doxa*, but I hope that there will also be vigilance against what Clarice Lispector called ‘varnished immobility’.⁷ (This does not mean, however, that I have been able to forget the words of the narrator of Thomas Bernhard’s *Correction*: ‘I shall never be a so-called editor, the most detestable type of criminal there is’.⁸)

The essays collected here in the first volume of *Barthes Studies* have their roots in a conference entitled *Roland Barthes at 100* that took place in the School of English, Communication and Philosophy at Cardiff University on Monday 30 and Tuesday 31 March 2015.⁹ While a wild wind raged across the city and made Park Place a test of courage and a graveyard for umbrellas, around eighty scholars from all over the world came together to discuss Barthes’s work, legacies, and futures from a rich, respectful variety of perspectives and positions.

The event, while large when considered in isolation, was merely a small part of a global series of centenary celebrations that has made 2015 a truly remarkable year for readers of Roland Barthes. Some of us had rushed down to Cardiff from Leeds, where the Department of French – thanks to a bit of careful planning by Andy Stafford, Nigel Saint, Richard Hibbitt, and Claire Lozier – had hosted a colloquium entitled ‘Roland Barthes and Poetry’ on 27 and 28 March.¹⁰ Other celebratory events took place in: Paris, Bordeaux, Orthez, London, Providence, Lisbon, Tartu, New York, Leeds, Athens (Georgia), La Paz, Londrina, São Paulo, Bucharest, Lancaster, Boston, Bayonne, Kaslik, Saint Petersburg, Buenos Aires, and Zagreb.¹¹ Michael Sheringham summed things up perfectly when, opening the conference in Leeds, he spoke of the ‘Barthes-athon’ in which we were fortunate to find ourselves. Keeping up with all things Barthes this year has been both impossible and impossibly exciting.

When we gathered in Cardiff at the end of March, the precise anniversary of Roland Barthes’s birth was still some months away. Today, on 12 November 2015, this inaugural volume of *Barthes Studies* is published on what would have been the author’s hundredth birthday. These texts go out into the world to mark a unique and unrepeatable moment, then, but they also, as writings that have no need of their

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creators, move towards moments (2115, 2215, 2315...) at which readers as yet unborn find themselves drawn together irresistibly to celebrate the ongoing centuries of Roland Barthes.

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Notes

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² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 8.

³ For a fine overview of *doxa* in Barthes's work, see Anne Herschberg Pierrot, 'Barthes and Doxa', *Poetics Today*, 23.3 (2002), 427-42.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'Conclusion', in *Prétexte: Roland Barthes: Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. by Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2003), pp. 486-90 (p. 487). My translation. The conference took place between 22 and 29 June 1977.

⁵ Mathieu Messager, 'Si j'étais écrivain, et mort...', *Revue Roland Barthes* 1 (2014), http://www.roland-barthes.org/intro_revue1.html (accessed on 24 October 2015). My translation.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 71.

⁷ Clarice Lispector, *The Apple in the Dark*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (London: Haus, 2009), p. 6. I thank Rodolfo Piskorski for this harvest.

⁸ Thomas Bernhard, *Correction*, trans. by Sophie Wilkins (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 116-17.

⁹ I should like to take this opportunity to salute a number of people without whom I could not have run the conference in Cardiff: Calum Gardner, Helen Clifford, Wendy Lewis, Julie Alford, Dean Burnett, Nathan Heslop, Rajesh Singh, Michael John Goodman, Christine Johns, Caleb Sivyer, Laurel Newnham, Megen de Bruin-Molé, Marija Grech, Wanda O'Connor, Emma Mason, John McKeane, Paula Chamberlain, and Becky Williams. The Institut français Royaume-Uni generously provided funding that made it possible to offer a number of bursaries to students speaking at the conference. Thanks are due to the Institut and Catherine Robert, the French government's Attachée for Higher Education in the UK, for their generosity and support.

¹⁰ Some of the papers from the Leeds conference will be published in 2016 in Volume 2 of *Barthes Studies*, which will be guest-edited by Calum Gardner.

¹¹ I discussed the centenary celebrations in more detail in my 'Fiches and Biographemes', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 June 2015, 17-18.

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