A black and white portrait of Roland Barthes, looking thoughtfully at the camera with his hand near his chin. The background is dark and out of focus.

ROLAND  
BARTHES  
BY ROLAND  
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*by*

ROLAND BARTHES

*Translated by Richard Howard*

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English translation © Richard Howard 1977  
Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1977 978-0-333-22665-0

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First published 1975 by Éditions du Seuil  
This translation first published in the U.S.A. 1977  
First published in the United Kingdom 1977

Published by  
**THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD**  
*London and Basingstoke*

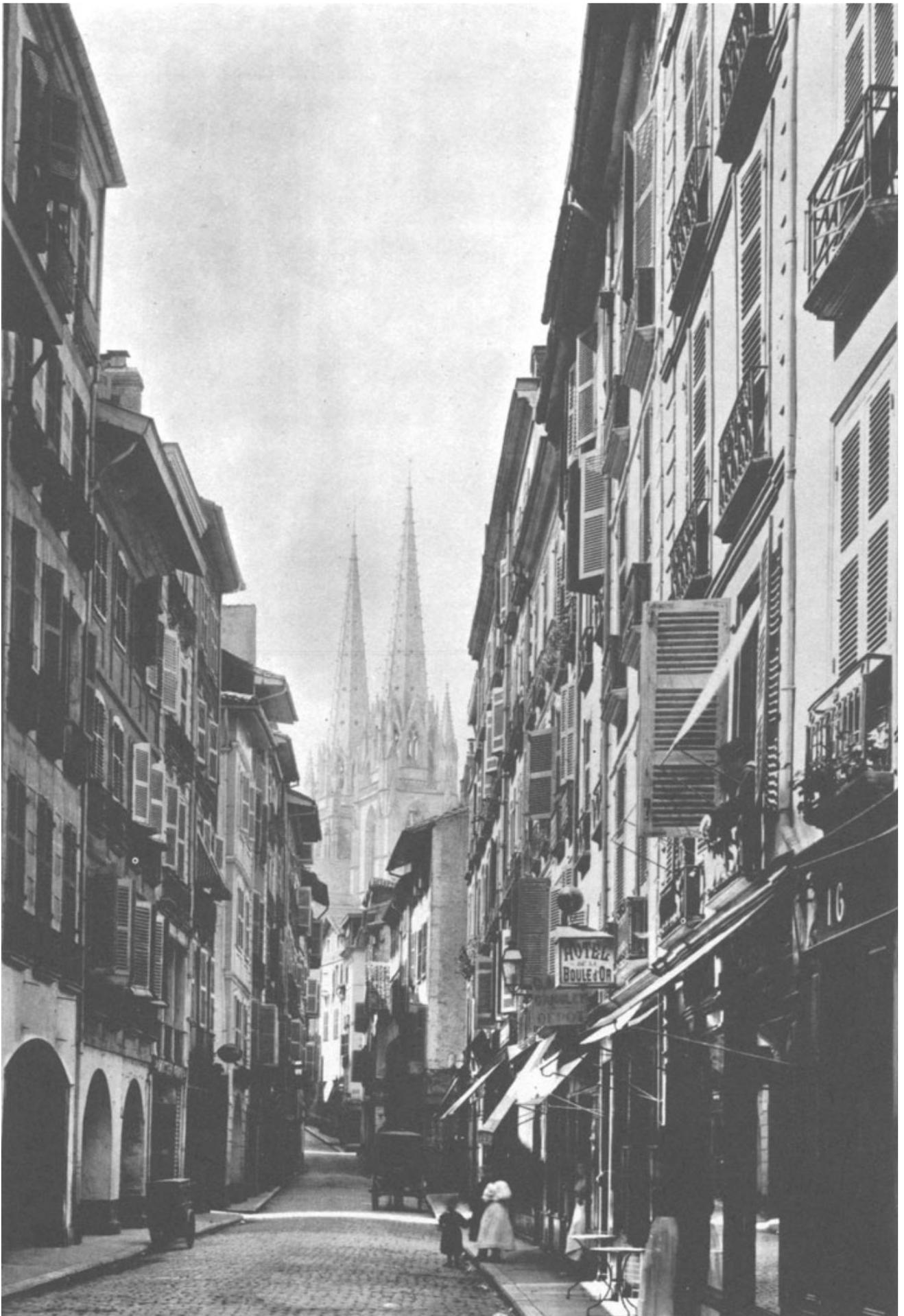
*Associated companies in Delhi, Dublin, Hong Kong,  
Johannesburg, Lagos, Melbourne, New York,  
Singapore and Tokyo*

ISBN 978-1-349-03520-5    ISBN 978-1-349-03518-2 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-03518-2

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Tout ceci doit être considéré  
comme dit par un personnage  
de roman.

*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*



*To begin with, some images: they are the author's treat to himself, for finishing his book. His pleasure is a matter of fascination (and thereby quite selfish). I have kept only the images which enthrall me, without my knowing why (such ignorance is the very nature of fascination, and what I shall say about each image will never be anything but . . . imaginary).*

*And, as it happens, only the images of my youth fascinate me. Not an unhappy youth, thanks to the affection which surrounded me, but an awkward one, because of its solitude and material constraint. So it is not a nostalgia for happy times which rivets me to these photographs but something more complicated.*

*When consideration (with the etymological sense of seeing the stars together as significant constellation) treats the image as a detached being, makes it the object of an immediate pleasure, it no longer has anything to do with the reflection, however oneiric, of an identity; it torments and enthralls itself with a vision which is not morphological (I never look like myself) but organic. Embracing the entire parental field, such imagery acts as a medium and puts me in a relation with my body's id; it provokes in me a kind of obtuse dream, whose units are teeth, hair, a nose, skinniness, long legs in knee-length socks which don't belong to me, though to no one else: here I am henceforth in a state of disturbing familiarity: I see the fissure in the subject (the very thing about which he can say nothing). It follows that the childhood photograph is both highly indiscreet (it is my body from underneath which is presented) and quite discreet (the photograph is not of "me").*

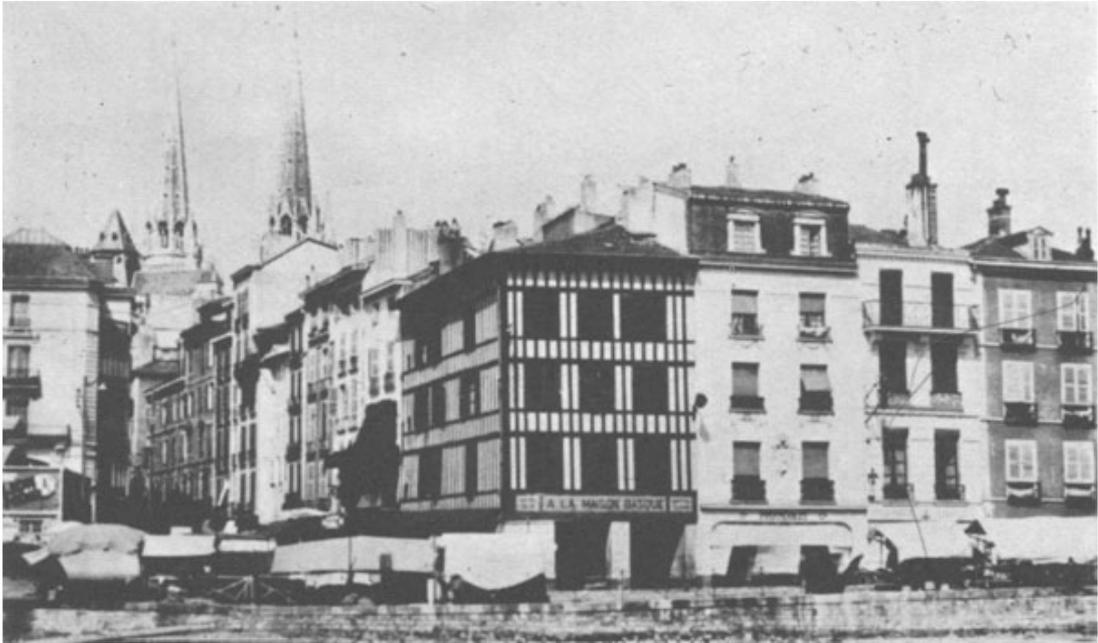
*So you will find here, mingled with the "family romance," only the figurations of the body's prehistory—of that body making its way toward the labor and the pleasure of writing. For such is the theoretical meaning of this limitation: to show that the time of the narrative (of the imagery) ends with the subject's youth: the only biography is of an unproductive life.*

*Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing; it takes my body elsewhere, far from my imaginary person, toward a kind of memoryless speech which is already the speech of the People, of the non-subjective mass (or of the generalized subject), even if I am still separated from it by my way of writing.*

*The image-repertoire will therefore be closed at the onset of productive life (which for me was my departure from the sanatorium). Another repertoire will then be constituted: that of writing. And for that repertoire to be displayed (as is the intention of this book) without ever being hampered, validated, justified by the representation of an individual with a private life and a civil status, for that repertoire to be free of its own, never figurative signs, the text will follow without images, except for those of the hand that writes.*

*The demand for love*





*Bayonne, Bayonne, the perfect city: riverain, aerated with sonorous suburbs (Mouserolles, Marrac, Lachepaillet, Beyris), yet immured, fictive: Proust, Balzac, Plassans. Primordial image-hoard of childhood: the province-as-spectacle, History-as-odor, the bourgeoisie-as-discourse*



*On such a path, a gradual descent toward the Poterne (odors) and the center of town. Here one encountered some lady of the Bayonnaise bourgeoisie walking back up to her Villa des Arènes, a little package of Bon Goût in her hand*

### *The three gardens*

*“That house was something of an ecological wonder: anything but large, set on one side of a considerable garden, it looked like a toy model (the faded gray of its shutters merely reinforced this impression). With the modesty of a chalet, yet there was one door after another, and French windows, and outside staircases, like a castle in a story. The garden, though continuous, was arranged in three symbolically different spaces (and to cross the boundary of each space was a significant action). You crossed the first garden to reach the house; this was the “worldly” garden, down which, taking tiny steps, pausing often, you accompanied the ladies of Bayonne to the gate. The second garden, in front of the house itself, consisted of narrow paths curving around twin lawns; in it grew roses, hydrangeas (that awkward flower of the southwest of France), carpet grass, rhubarb, kitchen herbs in old crates, a big magnolia whose white flowers bloomed on a level with the upstairs bedrooms; here in this garden, undaunted under their mosquito netting, the B. ladies, each summer, settled into canvas chairs with their elaborate knitting. At the far end, the third garden, except for a tiny orchard of peach trees and raspberry bushes, was undefined, sometimes fallow, sometimes planted with vegetables that needed no tending; you didn’t go there much, and only down the center path.”*

*The worldly, the domestic, the wild: is this not the very tripartition of social desire? It is anything but surprising that I turn from this Bayonnaise garden to the fictive, utopian spaces of Jules Verne and Fourier.*

*(The house is gone now, swept away by the housing projects of Bayonne.)*





*The big garden formed a kind of alien territory—  
you might say that its chief function was to serve as the  
burial ground for the extra litters of kittens. At the end,  
a darker path and two hollow balls of boxwood: several  
episodes of prepubescent sexuality occurred here*

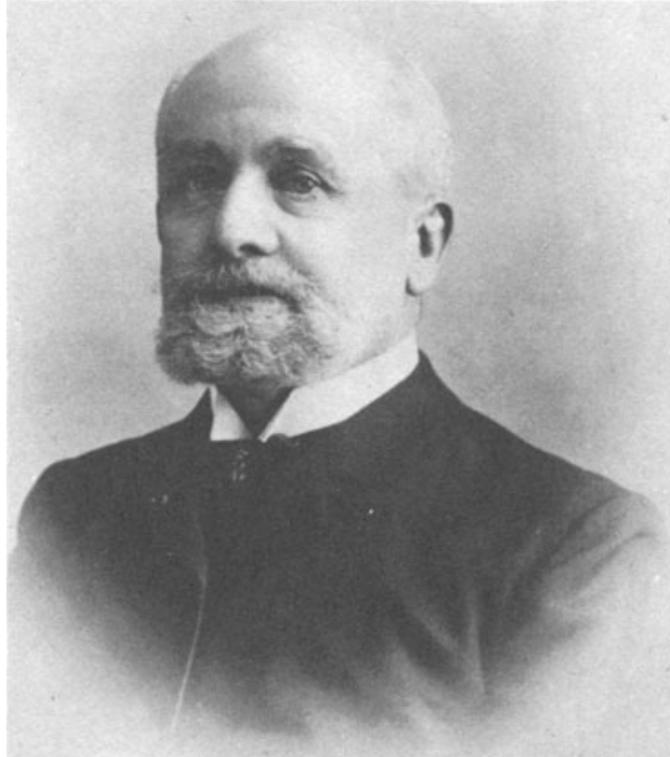
*What fascinates me here: the housemaid*



*The two grandfathers*



*In old age, he grew bored.  
Always coming early to table  
(though the dinner hour was  
constantly moved up), he lived  
further and further ahead of  
time, more and more bored. He  
had no part in language*



*He liked writing out the programs for musicales,  
or mending the choir music stands, boxes, anything  
made of wood. He, too, had no part in language*

*The two grandmothers*



*One was good-looking, a Parisienne. The other was good, a provincial: steeped in bourgeoisie—not in nobility, from which she was nevertheless descended—she had a lively sense of social narrative, which she served up in a fastidious convent French, safeguarding each imperfect subjunctive; gossip inflamed her with a passion—an amorous passion whose principal object was a certain Mme Leboeuf, the widow of a pharmacist who had made a fortune in coal tar; this woman was a kind of black flower bed, mustached and beringed, who had to be lured to the monthly tea party (the rest in Proust). In both sets of grandparents, language belonged to the women. Matriarchy? In China, long ago, the entire community was buried around the grandmother.*



*The father's sister: she was alone all her life*

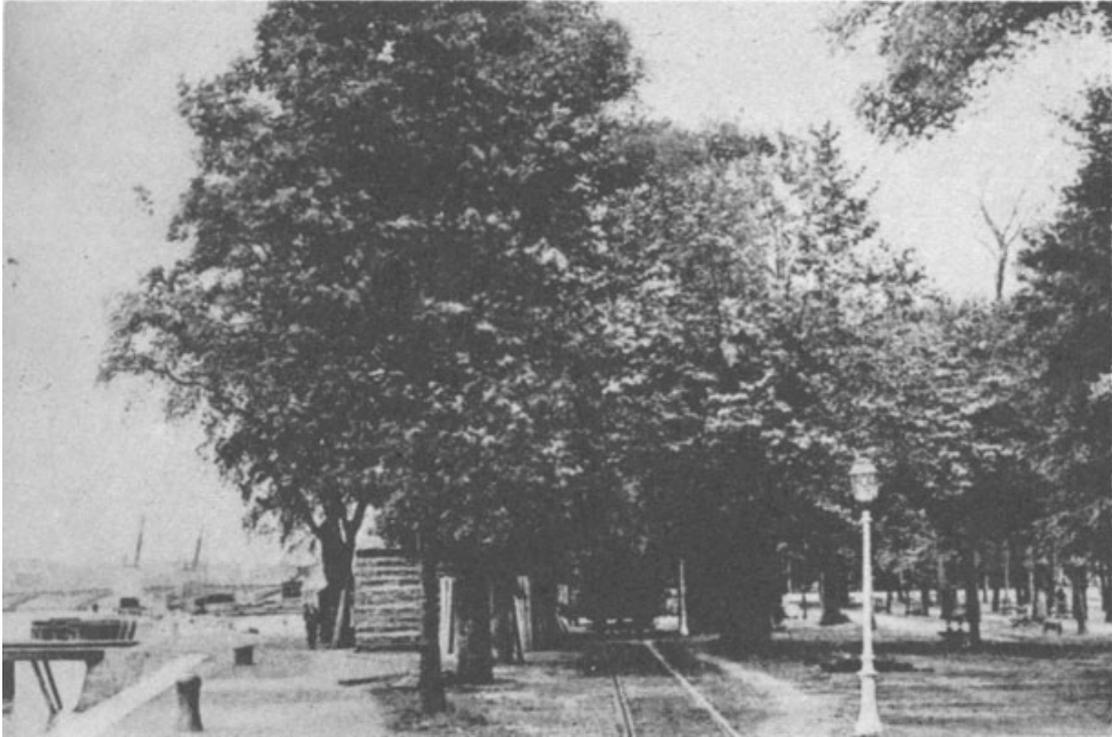


*The father, dead very early (in the war), was lodged in no memorial or sacrificial discourse. By maternal intermediary his memory—never an oppressive one—merely touched the surface of childhood with an almost silent bounty*





*The white snout of the streetcar of my childhood*



*Coming home in the evening, a frequent detour along the Adour, the Allées marines: tall trees, abandoned boats, unspecified strollers, boredom's drift: here floated the sexuality of public gardens, of parks*



J. Soufflet. M. Barthes, Inspecteur aux chemins  
de fer de l'Etat, en résidence à Marmande (Lot-et-Garonne) reconnaît  
avoir à mon oncle, M. Paul Raymond, Chef de bureau à la  
Préfecture de Seine-et-Oise, en résidence à Fresville, la somme  
de Cinq cent francs, que je m'oblige à lui rembourser en totalité,  
à la date du premier Décembre mil huit cent quatre-vingt quatre, et  
dont je m'engage à lui payer les intérêts, à raison de 5 % l'an, le  
1<sup>er</sup> Juin 1884 et le 4<sup>er</sup> Décembre de la même année.

A Marmande, le 1<sup>er</sup> Décembre 1883

Approuvé l'écriture ci-dessus.  
Barthe Barthes  
not. de Lapalme.



*Has not writing been for centuries the acknowledgment of a debt, the guarantee of an exchange, the sign of a representation? But today writing gradually drifts toward the cession of bourgeois debts, toward perversion, the extremity of meaning, the text . . .*

*The family novel*

*Where do they come from? From a family of notaries in the Haute-Garonne. Thereby endowing me with a race, a class. As the (official) photograph proves. That young man with blue eyes and a pensive elbow will be my father's father. Final stasis of this lineage: my body. The line ends in a being pour rien.*





*From generation to generation, tea: bourgeois sign and specific charm*





*The mirror stage:  
"That's you"*



*From the past, it is my childhood which fascinates me most; these images alone, upon inspection, fail to make me regret the time which has vanished. For it is not the irreversible I discover in my childhood, it is the irreducible: everything which is still in me, by fits and starts; in the child, I read quite openly the dark underside of myself—boredom, vulnerability, disposition to despairs (in the plural, fortunately), inward excitement, cut off (unfortunately) from all expression.*

*Contemporaries?*

*I was beginning to walk, Proust was still alive, and finishing À la Recherche du Temps perdu.*





*As a child, I was often and intensely bored. This evidently began very early, it has continued my whole life, in gusts (increasingly rare, it is true, thanks to work and to friends), and it has always been noticeable to others. A panic boredom, to the point of distress: like the kind I feel in panel discussions, lectures, parties among strangers, group amusements: wherever boredom can be seen. Might boredom be my form of hysteria?*

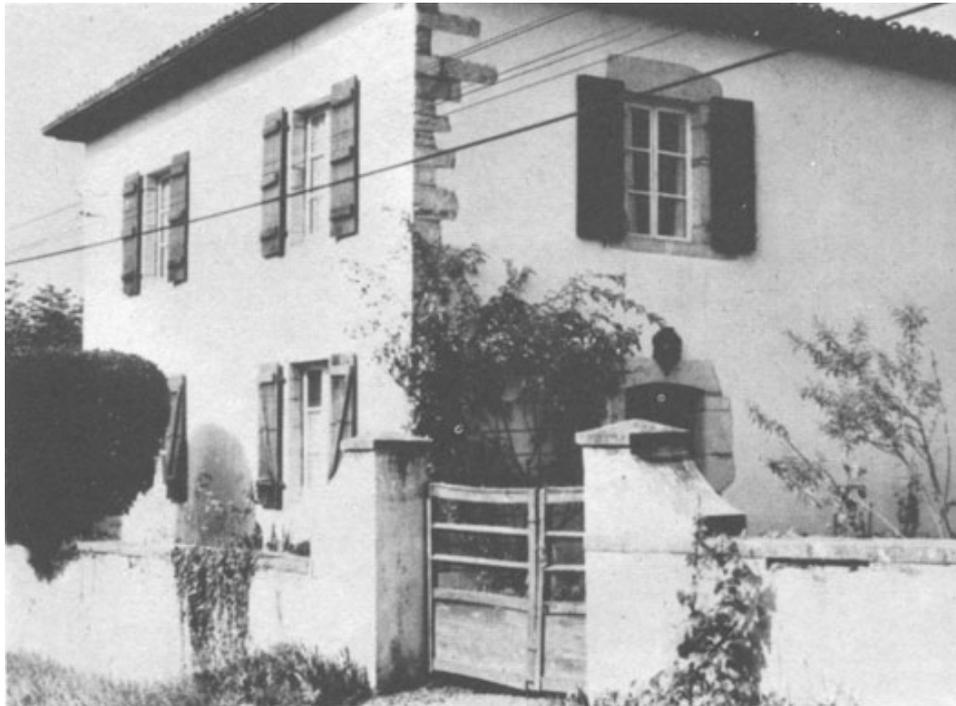
*Distress: lecturing*



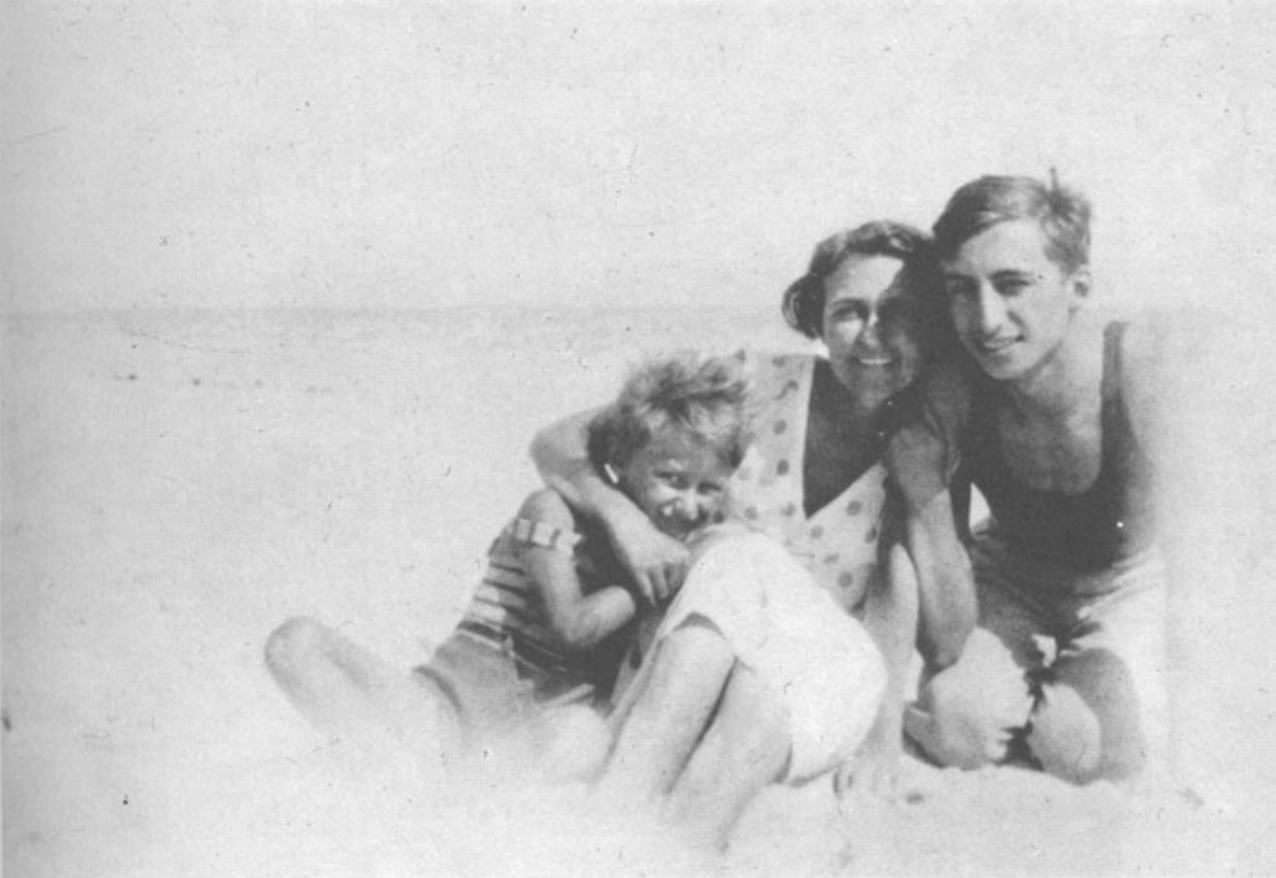
*Boredom: a panel discussion*



*“The pleasure of those mornings in U.: the sun, the house, roses, silence, music, coffee, work, sexual quiescence, holiday from aggressions . . .”*



*Family without familialism*





*“Ourselves, always ourselves . . .”*



. . . *among friends*

*Sudden mutation of the body (after leaving the sanatorium): changing (or appearing to change) from slender to plump. Ever since, perpetual struggle with this body to return it to its essential slenderness (part of the intellectual's mythology: to become thin is the naïve act of the will-to-intelligence)*





*In those days, lycée students were little gentlemen*

Any law which oppresses a discourse is inadequately warranted

9 Sujet fort bien compris, traité avec goût, personnalité, et de  
façon très intéressante, - Sans un style un peu gauche par endroits, mais  
Barthes toujours sûr. - La "difficulté" samedi 13 Mai 1933.  
191 imaginée par vous est très curieuse; mais pas très probable. Essayez.  
Vous s'en devez attendre une révolution sociale pour que la société  
à la tête bien faite que la tête bien pleine oppresse ?  
Person de français.

" J'ai lu dans un li-  
vrel est cet on mystérieux? re qu'on nous apprend à vivre  
- Votre premier plan est bien d'être quand la vie est passée. La leçon  
d'être.

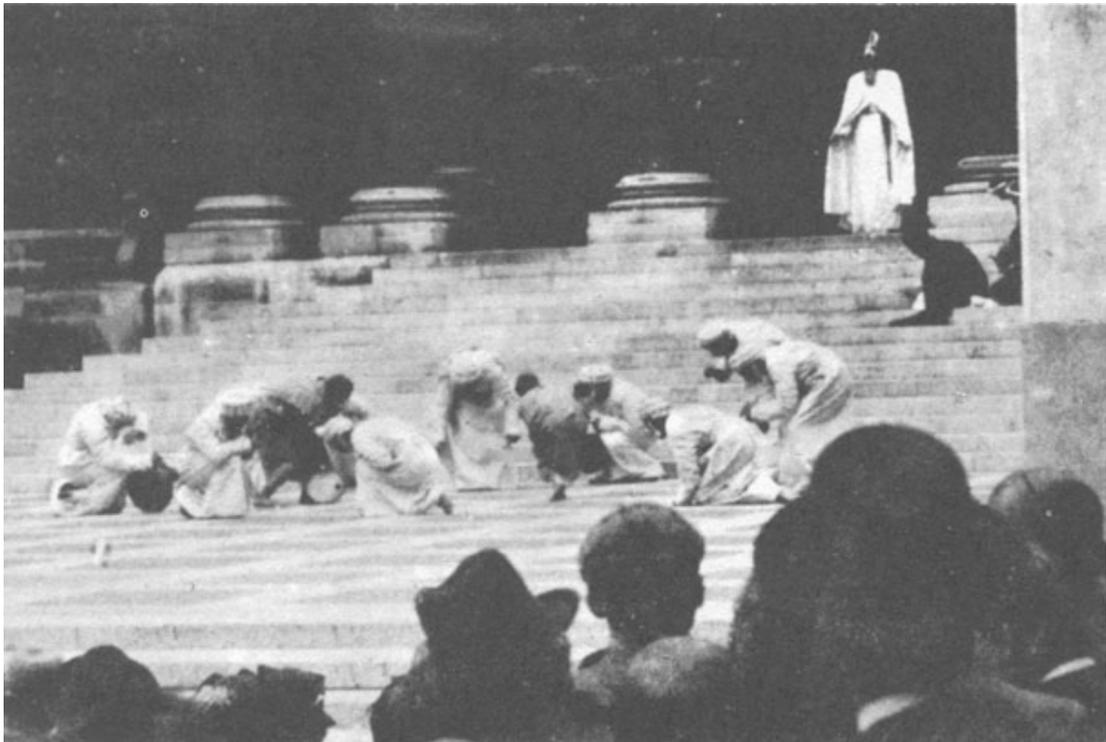
fut cruelle pour moi, qui, après avoir  
passé la première partie de ma jeu-  
nesse dans l'illusion trompeuse  
d'être un homme invincible parce  
qu'instruit, me vois aujourd'hui,  
grâce aux hasards des mouvements  
politiques <sup>se dit</sup> à un rôle secondaire  
et fort décevant.

Issu de l'aristocratie bou-  
geoisie d'autrefois, qui ne prévoyait  
cette fin qu'elle touchait à sa fin  
je fus élevé par un professeur à  
l'ancienne mode, qui m'enseigna  
beaucoup de choses; il croyait qu'il

Imp. <sup>Carrière</sup> le <sup>bon</sup> rôle joué qui  
est de voir; il est l'opéra de <sup>deux</sup> <sup>deux</sup> <sup>deux</sup>  
plus brillant.

Illy.

*Darius, a part that always gave me terrible stage fright, had two long declamations in which I was likely to forget my lines: I was fascinated by the temptation of thinking about something else. Through the tiny holes in the mask, I could see only very high up, and very far away; while I delivered the dead king's prophecies, my eyes came to rest on inert—free—objects and books, a window, a cornice, a piece of the sky: they, at least, weren't afraid. I excoriated myself for getting caught in this uncomfortable trap—while my voice continued its smooth delivery, resisting the expressions I should have given it.*



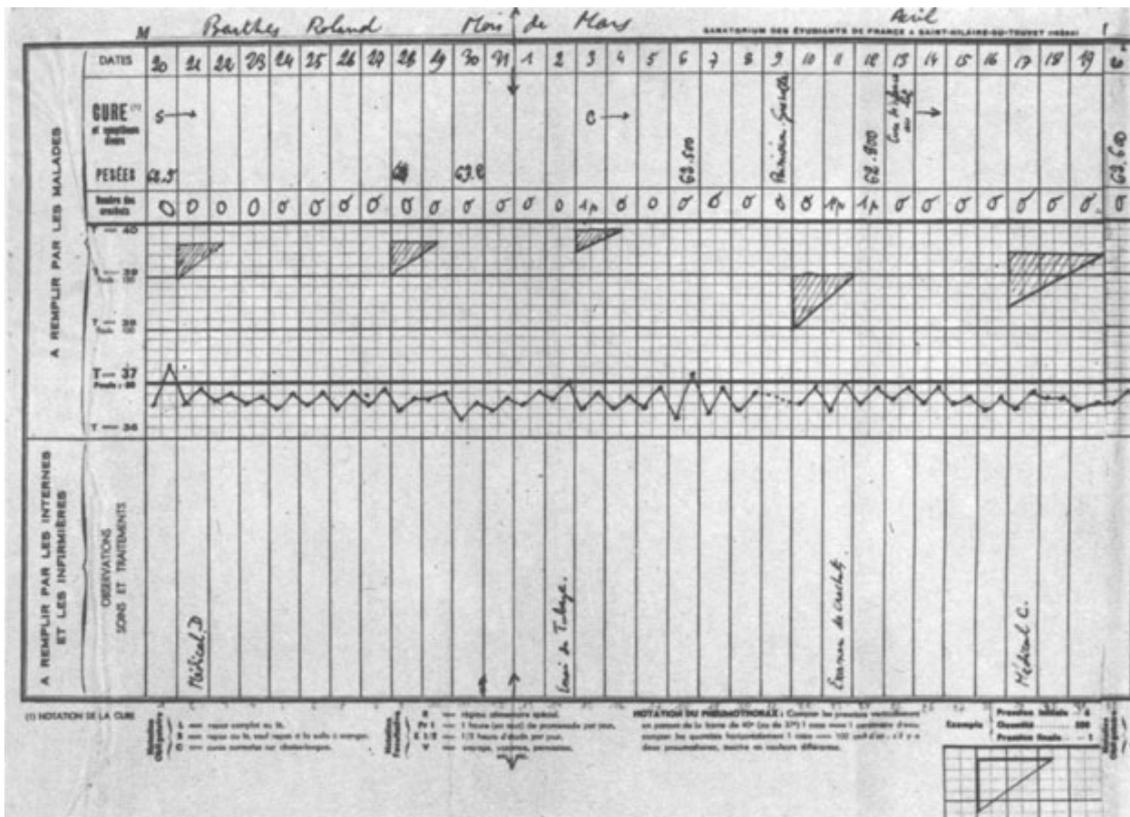
*Where does this expression come from? Nature? Code?*



*Recurrent tuberculosis*

(Every month, a new sheet was pasted on the bottom of the old one; at the end, there were yards of them: a farcical way of writing one's body within time.)

Painless, inconsistent disease, clean, odorless, id-  
less; it had no other signs than its own interminable  
time and the social taboo of contagion; for the rest, one  
was sick or cured, abstractly, purely by the doctor's  
decree; and while other diseases desocialize, tubercu-  
losis projected you into a minor ethnographic society,  
part tribe, part monastery, part phalanstery: rites, con-  
straints, protections.

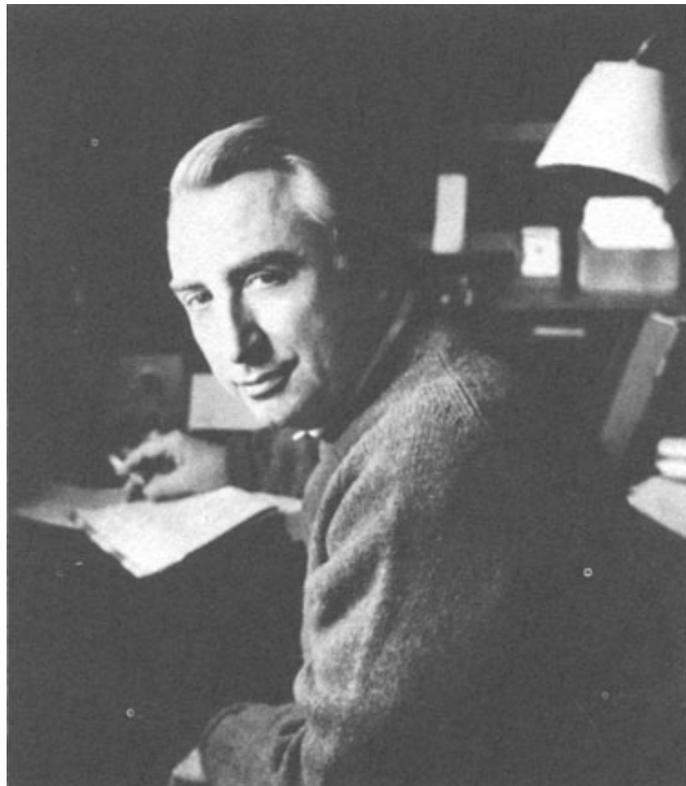


*“But I never looked like that!” —How do you know?  
What is the “you” you might or might not look like?  
Where do you find it—by which morphological or ex-  
pressive calibration? Where is your authentic body?  
You are the only one who can never see yourself except  
as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are  
dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens  
(I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look  
at you): even and especially for your own body, you are  
condemned to the repertoire of its images.*

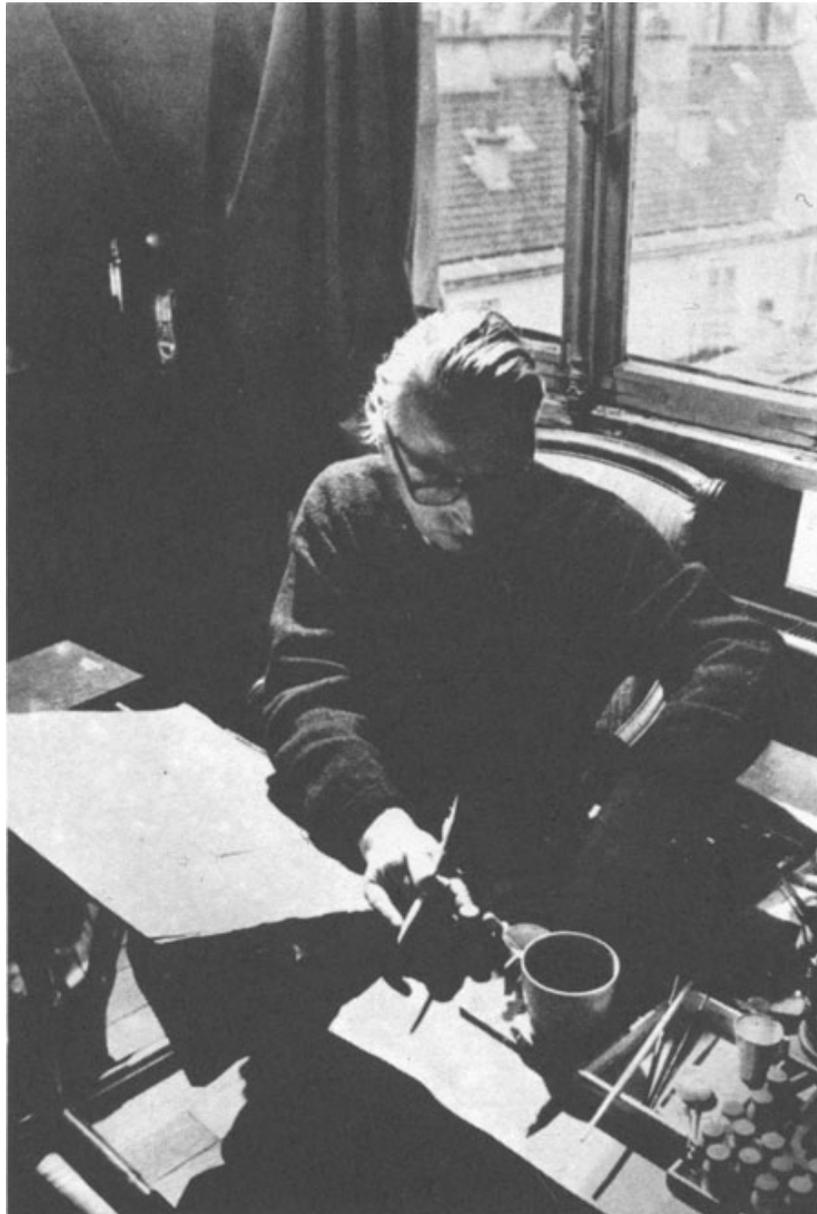


*1942*

*1970*



*My body is free of its image-repertoire only when it establishes its work space. This space is the same everywhere, patiently adapted to the pleasure of painting, writing, sorting*







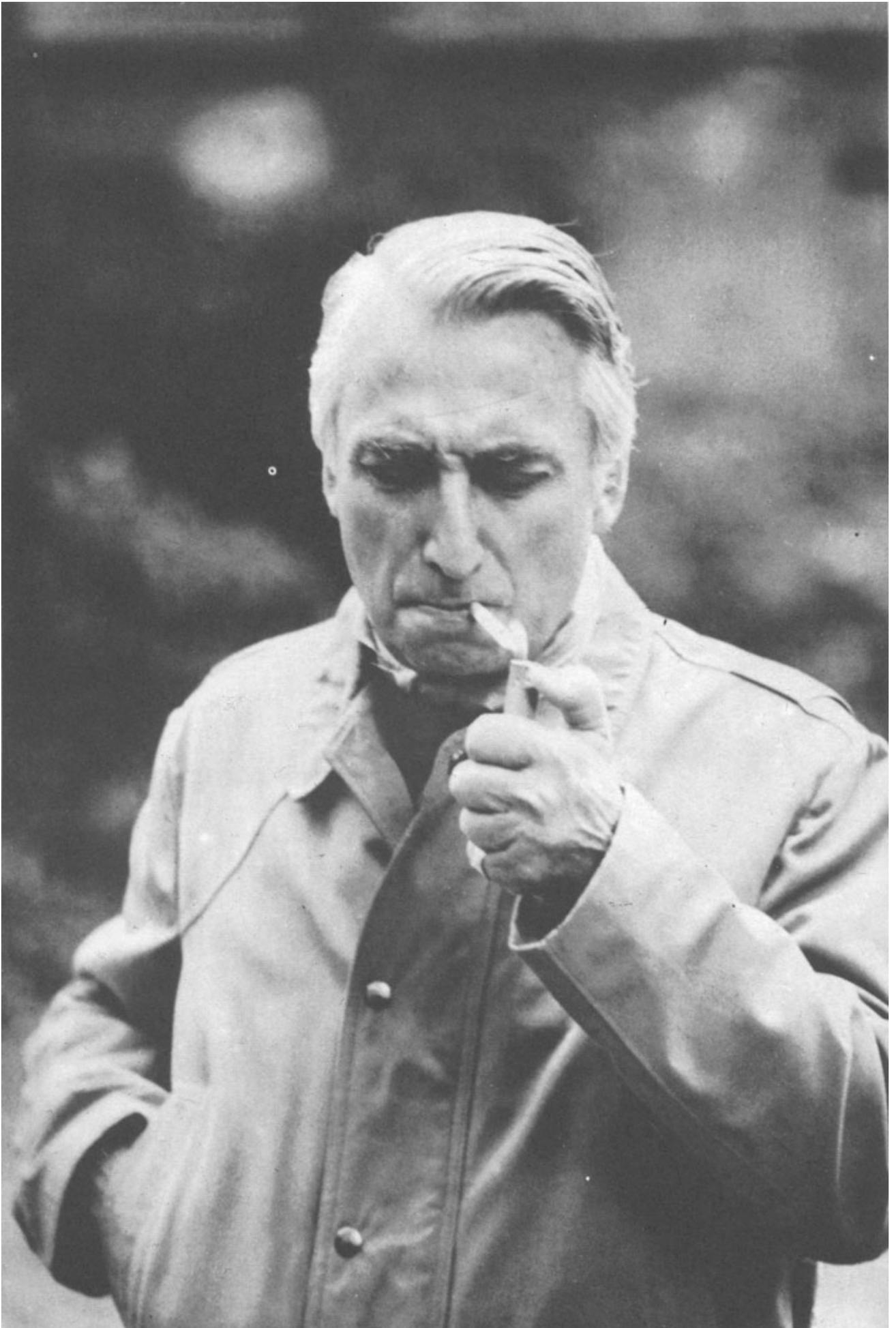
*Toward writing*

*According to the Greeks, trees are alphabets. Of all the tree letters, the palm is loveliest. And of writing, profuse and distinct as the burst of its fronds, it possesses the major effect: falling back.*

*A hemlock tree stands lonely  
Far north on a barren height.  
He drowns; ice and snowflakes  
Wrap him in sheets of white.*

*He dreams about a palm tree  
That far in an eastern land  
Languishes lonely and silent  
Upon the parching sand.*

*Heine*



*Left-handed*

*Actif / réactif* ~ Active / reactive

In what he writes, there are two texts. Text I is reactive, moved by indignations, fears, unspoken rejoinders, minor paranoias, defenses, scenes. Text II is active, moved by pleasure. But as it is written, corrected, accommodated to the fiction of Style, Text I becomes active too, whereupon it loses its reactive skin, which subsists only in patches (mere parentheses).

*L'adjectif* ~ The adjective

He is troubled by any *image* of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—*adjectives*; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death.

(In Morocco, they evidently had no image of me; my efforts, as a good European, to be *this* or *that* received no reply: neither *this* nor *that* was returned in the form of a fine adjective; it never occurred to them to *gloss* me, they unwittingly refused to feed and flatter my image-repertoire. Initially, this matte quality of human relationships had something exhausting about it, but gradually it came to seem a triumph of civilization or the truly dialectical form of erotic discourse.)

*L'aise* ~ Ease

Being a hedonist (since he regards himself as one), he seeks a state which is, really, comfort; but this comfort is more complicated than the household kind whose elements are determined by our society: it is a comfort he arranges for himself (the way my grandfather B., at the end of his life, had arranged a little platform inside his window, so as to obtain a better view of the garden while he was working). This personal comfort might be called: *ease*. Ease can be given a theoretical dignity (“We need not keep our distance

with regard to formalism, merely our ease’), and also an ethical force: it is the deliberate loss of all heroism, *even in pleasure*.

*Le démon de l’analogie* ~ The demon of analogy

Saussure’s *bête noire* was the *arbitrary* (nature of the sign). His is *analogy*. The “analogical” arts (cinema, photography), the “analogical” methods (academic criticism) are discredited. Why? Because analogy implies an effect of Nature: it constitutes the “natural” as a source of truth; and what adds to the curse of analogy is the fact that it is irrepressible: no sooner is a form seen than it *must* resemble something: humanity seems doomed to Analogy, i.e., in the long run, to Nature. Whence the effort of painters, of writers, to escape it. How? By two contrary excesses, or call them two *ironies* which flout Analogy, either by feigning a spectacularly *flat* respect (this is the Copy, which is rescued), or by *regularly*—according to the regulations—distorting the imitated object (this is Anamorphosis).

Aside from these transgressions, what stands in beneficent opposition to perfidious Analogy is simple structural correspondence: *Homology*, which reduces the recall of the first object to a proportional allusion (etymologically, i.e., in the Edenic state of language, *analogy* used to mean *proportion*).

(The bull sees red when his lure falls under his nose; the two reds coincide, that of rage and that of the cape: the bull is caught in analogy, i.e., in the imaginary. When I resist analogy, it is actually the imaginary I am resisting: which is to say: the coalescence of the sign, the similitude of signifier and signified, the homeomorphism of images, the Mirror, the captivating bait. All scientific explanations which resort to analogy—and they are legion—participate in the lure, they form the image-repertory of Science.)

*Au tableau noir* ~ On the blackboard

Monsieur B., teacher of the third form at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, was a little old man, a socialist, a nationalist. At the beginning of the year, he solemnly listed on the blackboard the

students' relatives who had "fallen on the field of honor"; uncles abounded, and cousins, but I was the only one who could claim a father; I was embarrassed by this—excessive—differentiation. Yet once the blackboard was erased, nothing was left of this proclaimed mourning—except, in real life, which proclaims nothing, which is always silent, the figure of a home socially adrift: no father to kill, no family to hate, no milieu to reject: great Oedipal frustration!

(This same Monsieur B., on Saturday afternoons, by way of amusement, would ask a student to suggest a subject for reflection, anything at all, and no matter how preposterous, he would always manage to turn it into a little dictation exercise, which he improvised as he strolled around the classroom, thereby testifying to his mastery of ethics and his ease in composition.)

*Parodic affinity of the fragment and the dictation exercise: the latter will sometimes recur here, as an obligatory figure of social writing, a vestige of school composition.*

### *L'argent* ~ Money

Poverty made him a *desocialized* child, but not *déclassé*: he belonged to no milieu (he went to B., a bourgeois site, only for vacations: *on visits*, and as though to a performance); he took no part in the values of the bourgeoisie, which could not outrage him, since he saw them only as scenes of language, something novelistic; what he took part in was the bourgeois *art de vivre*. This art subsisted, incorruptible, amid every financial crisis; not misery, as a family experience, but embarrassment; i.e., a terror of certain terms, the problems of vacations, of shoes, schoolbooks, and even food. This *endurable* privation (as embarrassment always is) may account for a little philosophy of free compensation, of the over-determination of pleasures, of *ease* (which is the exact antonym of embarrassment). His formative problem was doubtless money, not sex.

On the level of values, money has two contrary meanings (it is an enantioseme): it is very harshly condemned, especially in the theater (many attacks on the *théâtre d'argent*, around 1954), then

rehabilitated, following Fourier, in reaction to the three moralisms which are set in opposition to it: Marxist, Christian, and Freudian. However, of course, what is defended is not money saved, hoarded, blocked; it is money spent, wasted, swept away by the very movement of loss, made brilliant by the luxury of a production; thus money metaphorically becomes gold: the Gold of the Signifier.

*Le vaisseau Argo* ~ The ship *Argo*

A frequent image: that of the ship *Argo* (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended with an entirely new ship, without having to alter either its name or its form. This ship *Argo* is highly useful: it affords the allegory of an eminently structural object, created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution, but by two modest actions (which cannot be caught up in any mystique of creation): *substitution* (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and *nomination* (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts): by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the *origin*: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form.

Another *Argo*: I have two work spaces, one in Paris, the other in the country. Between them there is no common object, for nothing is ever carried back and forth. Yet these sites are identical. Why? Because the arrangement of tools (paper, pens, desks, clocks, calendars) is the same: it is the structure of the space which constitutes its identity. This private phenomenon would suffice to shed some light on structuralism: the system prevails over the very being of objects.

*L'arrogance* ~ Arrogance

He has no affection for proclamations of victory. Troubled by the humiliations of others, whenever a victory appears somewhere, he wants to go somewhere *else* (if he were God, he would keep

reversing the victories—which, moreover, is what God does!). Transposed to the level of discourse, even a just victory becomes a bad value of language, an *arrogance*: the word, encountered in Bataille, who somewhere mentions the arrogance of science, has been extended to all triumphant discourse. Hence I suffer three arrogances: that of Science, that of the *Doxa*, that of the Militant.

The *Doxa* (a word which will often recur) is Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice. We can call (using Leibnitz's word) a *doxology* any way of speaking adapted to appearance, to opinion, or to practice.

He sometimes used to regret having let himself be intimidated by languages. Then someone said to him: But without them, you wouldn't have been able to write! Arrogance circulates, like a strong wine among the guests of the text. The intertext does not comprehend only certain delicately chosen, secretly loved texts, texts that are free, discreet, generous, but also common, triumphant texts. You yourself can be the arrogant text of another text.

It is not very useful to say “dominant ideology,” for the expression is a pleonasm: ideology is nothing but an idea insofar as that idea dominates. But I can go further subjectively and say: *arrogant ideology*.

#### *Le geste de l'aruspice* ~ The soothsayer's gesture

In *S/Z*, the *lexia* (the fragment of the text being read) is compared to that piece of sky cut out by the soothsayer's staff. This gesture appeals to him: it must have been a fine thing to see, in those days: that staff marking out the sky, the one thing that cannot be marked; then, too, any such gesture is mad: solemnly to trace a limit of which immediately *nothing* is left, except for the intellectual remanence of a cutting out, to devote oneself to the totally ritual and totally arbitrary preparation of a meaning.

*L'assentiment, non le choix* ~ Assent, not choice

“What is it about? The Korean war. A small group of French forces is on some sort of patrol in the North Korean highlands. One of them is wounded and found by a Korean girl, who leads him to her village, where the peasants take him in: the soldier chooses to remain among them, with them. *Chooses* is our language, at any rate. Not quite Vinaver’s: as a matter of fact, we are in the presence of neither a choice nor a conversion nor a desertion, but rather of a gradual *assent*: the soldier acquiesces to the Korean world he discovers . . .” (Apropos of Michel Vinaver’s *Aujourd’hui ou les Coréens*, 1956.)

Much later (1974), on the occasion of a trip to China, he tried to use this word *assent* again, to explain to the readers of *Le Monde*—in other words, of *his* world—that he was not “choosing” China (too much was missing for him to shed light on such a choice) but *acquiescing* in silence (which he called “insipidity”), like Vinaver’s soldier, to what was under way in that country. This was not understood at all: what the intellectual public wants is a *choice*: one was to come out of China like a bull crashing out of the *toril* in the crowded arena: furious or triumphant.

*Vérité et assertion* ~ Truth and assertion

His (sometimes acute) discomfort—mounting some evenings, after writing the whole day, to a kind of fear—was generated by his sense of producing a double discourse, whose mode overreached its aim, somehow: for the aim of his discourse is not truth, and yet this discourse is assertive.

(This kind of embarrassment started, for him, very early; he strives to master it—for otherwise he would have to stop writing—by reminding himself that it is language which is assertive, not he. An absurd remedy, everyone would surely agree, to add to each sentence some little phrase of uncertainty, as if anything that came out of language could make language tremble.)

(By much the same sense, he imagines, each time he writes

something, that he will hurt one of his friends—never the same one: it changes.)

*L'atopie* ~ Atopia

*Pigeonholed*: I am pigeonholed, assigned to an (intellectual) site, to residence in a caste (if not in a class). Against which there is only one internal doctrine: that of *atopia* (of a drifting habitation). Atopia is superior to utopia (utopia is reactive, tactical, literary, it proceeds from meaning and governs it).

*L'autonymie* ~ Autonymy

The enigmatic copy, the interesting one, is the dislocated copy: at the same time it reproduces and reverses: it can reproduce only by reversing, it disturbs the infinite sequence of replicas. Tonight, the two waiters from the Café de Flore go to the Café Bonaparte for their apéritif; one has his “lady” with him, the other has forgotten to take his flu pills; they are served (Pernod and Cinzano) by the young waiter of the Café Bonaparte, who unlike them is on duty (“Sorry, I didn’t know this was your lady”): everything circulates in familiarity and reflexivity, yet the roles remain inevitably separated. A thousand examples of this *reverberation*, which is always fascinating: barber getting a haircut, shoeshine boy (in Morocco) having his shoes shined, a cook making herself dinner, an actor going to the theater on the night his own play is off, a screen writer who sees films, a writer who read books; Mlle M., an elderly secretary, cannot write the word “erasure” without having to erase; M., a pimp, finds no one to procure (for his personal use) the subjects he furnishes his clients, etc. All of which is *autonymy*: that disturbing (comical and banal) strabismus of an operation that comes full circle: something like an anagram, an inverted overprinting, a breakdown of levels.

*La baladeuse* ~ The caboose

There used to be a white streetcar that ran between Bayonne

and Biarritz; in the summer, an open car was attached to it: the caboose. Everyone wanted to ride in that car: through a rather empty countryside, one enjoyed the view, the movement, the fresh air, all at the same time. Today neither the streetcar nor the caboose exists, and the trip from Biarritz is anything but a pleasure. This is not to apply a mythic embellishment to the past, or to express regrets for a lost youth by pretending to regret a streetcar. This is to say that the art of living has no history: it does not evolve: the pleasure which vanishes vanishes for good, there is no substitute for it. Other pleasures come, which replace nothing. *No progress in pleasures*, nothing but mutations.

*Quand je jouais aux barres . . .*

~ When I used to play prisoner's base . . .

When I used to play prisoner's base in the Luxembourg, what I liked best was not provoking the other team and boldly exposing myself to their right to take me prisoner; what I liked best was to free the prisoners—the effect of which was to put both teams back into circulation: the game started over again at zero.

In the great game of the powers of speech, we also play prisoner's base: one language has only temporary rights over another; all it takes is for a third language to appear from the ranks for the assailant to be forced to retreat: in the conflict of rhetorics, the victory never goes to any but the *third language*. The task of this language is to release the prisoners: to scatter the signifieds, the catechisms. As in prisoner's base, *language upon language*, to infinity, such is the law which governs the logosphere. Whence other images: that of choosing up hand over hand (the third hand returns, it is no longer the first one), that of scissors, paper, stone, that of the onion in its layers of skin without a core. That difference should not be paid for by any subjection: no last word.

*Noms propres* ~ Proper names

Part of his childhood was spent in a particular kind of listening: listening to the proper names of the old bourgeoisie of Bayonne,

which he heard repeated all day long by his grandmother, infatuated by provincial worldliness. These names were very French, and in this very code nonetheless often original; they formed a garland of strange signifiers to my ears (the proof: I remember them very well: why?): Mmes Leboeuf, Barbet-Massin, Delay, Voulgres, Poques, Léon, Froisse, de Saint-Pastou, Pichoneau, Poy-miro, Novion, Puchulu, Chantal, Lacape, Henriquet, Labrouche, de Lasbordes, Didon, de Lignerolles, Garance. How can one have an erotic relationship with proper names? No suspicion of metonymy: these ladies were not desirable, or even appealing. And yet, impossible to read a novel, or memoirs, without that special greediness (reading Mme de Genlis, I note with interest the names of the old nobility). It is not merely a linguistics of proper names which is needed but an erotics as well: names, like voices, like odors, would be the terms of a languor: desire and death: “the last sigh which remains of things,” says an author of the last century.

*De la bêtise . . . ~ About stupidity . . .*

From a musical game heard each week on FM and which seems “stupid” to him, he realizes this: stupidity is a hard and indivisible kernel, a *primitive*: no way of decomposing it *scientifically* (if a scientific analysis of stupidity were possible, TV would entirely collapse). What is it? A spectacle, an aesthetic fiction, perhaps a hallucination? Perhaps we want to put ourselves into the picture? It’s lovely, it takes your breath away, it’s strange; and about stupidity, I am entitled to say no more than this: *that it fascinates me*. Fascination is the *correct* feeling stupidity must inspire me with (if we reach the point of speaking the name): it grips me (it is intractable, nothing prevails over it, it takes you in an endless hand-over-hand race).

*L’amour d’une idée ~ Love of an idea*

For a certain time, he went into raptures over binarism; binarism became for him a kind of erotic object. This idea seemed to him inexhaustible, he could never exploit it enough. That one

might say everything *with only one difference* produced a kind of joy in him, a continuous astonishment.

Since intellectual things resemble erotic ones, in binarism what delighted him was a figure. Later on he would find this (identical) figure again, in the opposition of values. What (in him) would deflect semiology was from the first the pleasure principle: a semiology which has renounced binarism no longer concerns him at all.

*Le jeune fille bourgeoise* ~ The middle-class maiden

Surrounded by political upheaval, he plays the piano, paints watercolors: all the false occupations of a middle-class maiden in the nineteenth century. —I invert the problem: what is it which, in the practices of the middle-class maiden of those days, transcended her femininity and her class? What was the utopia of such activities? The middle-class maiden produced uselessly, stupidly, for herself, but *she produced*: it was her own form of expenditure.

*L'amateur* ~ The amateur

The Amateur (someone who engages in painting, music, sport, science, without the spirit of mastery or competition), the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier: in the immediately definitive substance of music, of painting; his praxis, usually, involves no *rubato* (that theft of the object for the sake of the attribute); he is—he will be perhaps—the counter-bourgeois artist.

*Reproche de Brecht à R.B.* ~ Brecht's criticism of R.B.

R.B., it seems, always wants to *limit* politics. Doesn't he know what Brecht seems to have written especially for him?

“For instance I want to live with little politics. Which means that I do not want to be a political subject. But not that I want to be the object of a great deal of politics. Now one must be either the object or the subject of politics; there is no other choice; there is no

question of being either both together or neither one; hence it seems indispensable that I should engage in politics and it is not even up to me to determine how much I should do so. This being so, it is quite possible that my whole life must be dedicated to politics, even be sacrificed to politics.’’

His place (his *milieu*) is language: that is where he accepts or rejects, that is where his body *can* or *cannot*. To sacrifice his life-as-language to political discourse? He is quite willing to be a political *subject* but not a political *speaker* (the *speaker*: someone who delivers his discourse, recounts it, and at the same time notifies it, signs it). And it is because he fails to separate political reality from its general, *repeated* discourse that politics is barred to him. Yet out of this preclusion he can at least make the *political* meaning of what he writes: it is as if he were the historical witness of a contradiction: that of a *sensitive, avid, and silent* political subject (these adjectives must not be separated).

Political discourse is not the only kind to repeat itself, generalize itself, exhaust itself: as soon as there is a mutation of discourse somewhere, there follows a vulgate and its exhausting cortège of motionless phrases. If this common phenomenon seems to him particularly intolerable in the case of political discourse, it is because here repetition takes on the style of a *climax*: politics qualifying itself as the fundamental science of the real, we endow it, hallucinatorily, with a final power: that of checkmating language, reducing any utterance to its residue of reality. Then how tolerate with sanguinity the fact that politics too belongs to the category of languages, and turns to Prattle?

(For political discourse not to be caught up in repetition demands unusual conditions: either such discourse itself establishes a new mode of discursiveness: as is the case for Marx; or else, more modestly, by a simple *intelligence* of language—by the knowledge of its own effects—an author produces a political text at once strict and free, which assumes the mark of its aesthetic singularity, as if it were inventing and varying what has been said: this is what Brecht does in his writings on politics and society; or else, finally,

that politics, at an obscure and even improbable depth, arms and transforms the very substance of language: this is the Text, that of Philippe Sollers's *Lois*, for example.)

*Le chantage à la théorie* ~ Theory blackmailed

Many (still unpublished) avant-garde texts are *uncertain*: how to judge, to classify them, how to predict their immediate or eventual future? Do they please? Do they bore? Their obvious quality is of an intentional order: they are concerned to serve theory. Yet this quality is a blackmail *as well* (theory blackmailed): love me, keep me, defend me, since I conform to the theory you call for; do I not do what Artaud, Cage, etc., have done? —But Artaud is not just “avant-garde”; he is a kind of writing *as well*; Cage has a certain charm *as well* . . . —But those are *precisely* the attributes which are not recognized by theory, which are sometimes even execrated by theory. At least make your taste and your ideas match, etc. (*The scene continues, endlessly.*)

*Charlot* ~ Chaplin

As a child, he was not so fond of Chaplin's films; it was later that, without losing sight of the muddled and solacing ideology of the character, he found a kind of delight in this art at once so popular (in both senses) and so intricate; it was a *composite* art, looping together several tastes, several languages. Such artists provoke a complete kind of joy, for they afford the image of a culture that is at once differential and collective: plural. This image then functions as the third term, the subversive term of the opposition in which we are imprisoned: mass culture *or* high culture.

*Le plein du cinéma* ~ Saturation of the cinema

Resistance to the cinema: the signifier itself is always, by nature, continuous here, whatever the rhetoric of frames and shots; without remission, a continuum of images; the film (our French word for it, *pellicule*, is highly appropriate: a skin without puncture

or perforation) *follows*, like a garrulous ribbon: statutory impossibility of the fragment, of the haiku. Constraints of representation (analogous to the obligatory rubrics of language) make it necessary to receive everything: of a man walking in the snow, even before he signifies, everything is given to me; in writing, on the contrary, I am not obliged to see how the hero wears his nails—but if it wants to, the Text describes, and with what force, Hölderlin's filthy talons.

(No sooner have I written this than it strikes me as an avowal of the imaginary; I should have uttered it as a dreamy speech which seeks to know why I resist or I desire; unfortunately I am condemned to assertion: we lack in French [and perhaps in every language] a grammatical mode which would speak *lightly* [our conditional is much too heavy], not intellectual doubt, but the value which strives to convert itself into theory.)

### *Clausules* ~ Clausules

Often, in *Mythologies*, the politics is in the last word (for instance: “So we see that the ‘lovely images’ of *Lost Continent* cannot be innocent: it cannot be innocent to *lose* the continent which has been rediscovered at Bandoeng”). A clausule like this must have a triple function: rhetorical (the scene ends decoratively), signalitic (thematic analyses are recuperated, *in extremis*, by a project of commitment), and economic (the effort is to replace political dissertation by a lighter ellipsis; unless this ellipsis is merely the casual method by which we leave off a demonstration *which is self-evident*).

In the *Michelet*, this author's ideology is dispatched in one (initial) page. R.B. keeps and evacuates political sociology: he keeps it as signature, he evacuates it as boredom.

### *La coïncidence* ~ Coincidence

I record myself playing the piano; initially, out of curiosity to *hear myself*; but very soon I no longer hear myself; what I hear is,

however pretentious it may seem to say so, the *Dasein* of Bach and of Schumann, the pure materiality of their music; because it is my utterance, the predicate loses all pertinence; on the other hand, paradoxically, if I listen to Horowitz or Richter, a thousand adjectives come to mind: I hear *them* and not Bach or Schumann. —What is it that happens? When I listen to myself *having played*—after an initial moment of lucidity in which I perceive one by one the mistakes I have made—there occurs a kind of rare coincidence: the past of my playing coincides with the present of my listening, and in this coincidence, commentary is abolished: there remains nothing but the music (of course what remains is not at all the “truth” of the text, as if I had rediscovered the “true” Schumann or the “true” Bach).

When I pretend to write on what I have written in the past, there occurs in the same way a movement of abolition, not of truth. I do not strive to put my present expression in the service of my previous truth (in the classical system, such an effort would have been sanctified under the name of *authenticity*), I abandon the exhausting pursuit of an old piece of myself, I do not try to *restore* myself (as we say of a monument). I do not say: “I am going to describe myself” but: “I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.” I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination. Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?* The fact (whether biographical or textual) is abolished in the signifier, because it immediately *coincides* with it: *writing myself*, I merely repeat the extreme operation by which Balzac, in *Sarrasine*, has made castration and castrature “coincide”: I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to; and in this movement, the pronoun of the imaginary, “I,” is *im-pertinent*; the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*: essential danger for the life of the subject: to write on oneself may seem a pretentious idea; but it is also a simple idea: simple as the idea of suicide.

One day, having nothing better to do, I consulted the *I Ching* about my undertaking. I drew the hexagram 29: K’an, The Perilous Chasm! (work at the mercy of magic: *of danger*).

Ben d'artant

Et fan-de de plai-sant con. lavo tant em-

Cresc. molto

ban-nés sont de o- deurs qu'il hât cœur qui-

Rall. Tempo.

ne-ra- joi ni-e En re-gar-dant ces tel-les

Rall. Tempo.

Trio retenu et bis Lento

heurs Que le temps heu-beau d'A-mour fin e

1939. Roland Barthes.

Graphic bliss: before painting, music

*Comparaison est raison* ~ Comparison is motive

He makes an application that is at once strict and metaphoric, literal and vague, of linguistics to some remote object: Sadean erotics, for instance—which authorizes him to speak of a *Sadean grammar*. Similarly, he applies the linguistic system (*paradigm/syntagm*) to the stylistic system, and classifies the author's corrections according to the two axes of the paper; similarly again, he enjoys proposing a correspondence between Fourierist notions and medieval genres. He is not inventing, not even combining, he translates: for him, comparison is motive: he enjoys *deporting* the object, by a kind of imagination which is more homologous than metaphoric (we compare systems, not images); for instance, if he speaks of Michelet, he does with Michelet what he claims Michelet has done with historical substance: he functions by sliding over the entire surface, he caresses.

Sometimes he translates himself, doubles one phrase by another (for instance: *But what if I liked the demand? What if I had a certain maternal appetite?*) It is as if, striving to epitomize himself, he could not get it over with, heaped summary on top of summary, unable to decide which is the best.

*Vérité et consistance* ~ Truth and consistency

“The truth is in the consistency,” Poe says in “Eureka.” Hence if we find consistency insupportable we cut ourselves off from an ethics of truth; we abandon the word, the proposition, the idea, once they *set* and assume the solid state, *stereotyped* (in Greek, *stereos* means *solid*).

*Contemporain de quoi?* ~ Contemporary of what?

Marx: “Just as the ancient peoples experienced their prehistory in imagination, in *mythology*, we Germans have lived our post-history in thought, in *philosophy*. We are *philosophical* contempo-

raries of the present, without being its *historical* contemporaries.” In the same way, I am only the imaginary contemporary of my own present: contemporary of its languages, its utopias, its systems (i.e., of its fictions), in short, of its mythology or of its philosophy but not of its history, of which I inhabit only the shimmering reflection: the *phantasmagoria*.

*Éloge ambigu du contrat* ~ Ambiguous praise of the contract

His first image of the *contract* (the pact) is more or less objective: sign, language, narrative, society function by contract, but since this contract is generally masked, the critical operation consists in deciphering the confusion of reasons, alibis, appearances, in short, the whole of the social *natural*, in order to make manifest the controlled exchange on which the semantic process and collective life are based. Yet, at another level, the contract is a bad object: a bourgeois value which merely legalizes a kind of economic talion: *nothing for nothing*, says the bourgeois contract: under the praise of bookkeeping, of profit-making, we must therefore read the Base, the Paltry. At the same time, and at yet another level, the contract is ceaselessly desired, as the justice of a world finally “regular”: the preference for the contract in human relations, the security once a contract can be interposed between them, the reluctance to receive without giving, etc. At this point—since the body intervenes directly here, the model of the good contract is the contract of Prostitution. For this contract, declared immoral by all societies and by all systems (except the most archaic), liberates in fact from what might be called the *imaginary embarrassments* of the exchange: what am I to count on in the other’s desire, in *what I am for him?* The contract eliminates this confusion: it is in fact the only position which the subject can assume without falling into two inverse but equally abhorred images: that of the “egoist” (who demands without caring that he has nothing to give) and that of the “saint” (who gives but forbids himself ever to demand): thus the discourse of the contract eludes two plenitudes; it permits observing the golden rule of any *habitation*, discerned in the Shikidai passageway: *no will-to-seize and yet no oblation*.

*Le contretemps* ~ The *contretemps*

His (admissible?) dream would be to transport into a socialist society certain *charms* (not *values*) of the bourgeois art of living (such a thing exists, indeed there once existed several): this is what he calls the *contretemps*. What rises up against this dream is the specter of Totality, which demands that the bourgeois phenomenon be condemned *entire*, and that any leak of the Signifier be punished.

(Might it not be possible to take one's pleasure in bourgeois [deformed] culture *as a kind of exoticism?*)

*Mon corps n'existe . . .* ~ My body exists . . .

My body exists for myself only in two general forms: migraine and sensuality. These states are not unheard of, but on the contrary quite temperate, accessible, or remediable, as if in either one it had been decided to reduce the glorious or accursed images of the body. Migraine is merely the very first degree of physical pain, and sensuality is for the most part considered only as a kind of reject-version of active pleasure.

In other words, my body is not a hero. The light, diffused character of pain or of pleasure (migraine too *caresses* some of my days) keeps the body from constituting itself as an alien, hallucinated site, seat of intense transgressions; migraine (as I am rather carelessly calling a simple headache) and sensual pleasure are merely coenesthesias, whose function is to individuate my own body, without its being able to glorify itself with any danger: my body is theatrical to itself only to a mild degree.

*Le corps pluriel* ~ The plural body

“Which body? We have several.” I have a digestive body, I have a nauseated body, a third body which is migrainous, and so on: sensual, muscular (writer's cramp), humoral, and especially: *emotive*: which is moved, stirred, depressed, or exalted or intimi-

dated, without anything of the sort being apparent. Further, I am captivated to the point of fascination by the socialized body, the mythological body, the artificial body (the body of Japanese costumes), and the prostituted body (of the actor). And beyond these public (literary, written) bodies, I have, I may say, two local bodies: a Parisian body (alert, tired) and a country body (rested, heavy).

*La côtelette* ~ The rib chop

Here is what I did with my body one day:

At Leysin, in 1945, in order to perform an extrapleural pneumothorax operation, a piece of one of my ribs was removed, and subsequently given back to me, quite formally, wrapped up in a piece of medical gauze (the physicians, who were Swiss, as it happened, thereby professed that *my body belongs to me*, in whatever dismembered state they restored it to me: I am the owner of my bones, in life as in death). For a long time I kept this fragment of myself in a drawer, a kind of body penis analogous to the end of a rib chop, not knowing quite what to do with it, not daring to get rid of it lest I do some harm to my person, though it was utterly useless to me shut up in a desk among such “precious” objects as old keys, a schoolboy report card, my grandmother B.’s mother-of-pearl dance program and pink taffeta card case. And then, one day, realizing that the function of any drawer is to ease, to acclimate the death of objects by causing them to pass through a sort of pious site, a dusty chapel where, in the guise of keeping them alive, we allow them a decent interval of dim agony, but not going so far as to dare cast this bit of myself into the common refuse bin of my building, I flung the rib chop and its gauze from my balcony, as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes, into the rue Servandoni, where some dog would come and sniff them out.

*La courbe folle de l’imago* ~ The imago’s impossible graph

R.P., a Sorbonne professor, regarded me in his day as an impostor. T.D., today, regards me as a Sorbonne professor.

(It is not the diversity of opinions which amazes and excites; it is their exact contrariety; enough to make you exclaim, in the presence of such a reversal, *That does it!* and the pleasure such an experience affords is strictly *structural*—or tragic.)

*Couples de mots-valeurs* ~ Pairs of value-words

Certain languages, it seems, possess enantiosemes, words which have the same form and contrary meanings. In the same way, for him, a word can be good or bad, without warning: the “bourgeoisie” is good when it is considered in its historical, ascensional, progressive role; it is bad when in power. Sometimes it happens that language itself provides the bifurcation of a double word: “structure,” a positive value initially, has come to be discredited when it was apparent that too many people conceived it as a motionless form (a “blueprint,” a “schema,” a “model”); luckily “structuration” was there to take up the slack, implying the positive value par excellence: the *praxis*, the perverse expenditure (“for nothing”).

Similarly, and more particularly, it is not the *erotic*, but *erotization* which is a positive value. Erotization is a production of the erotic: light, diffuse, mercurial; which circulates without coagulating; a multiple and mobile flirtation links the subject to what passes, pretends to cling, then lets go for something else (and then, sometimes, this variable landscape is severed, sliced through by a sudden immobility: love).

*La double crudité* ~ Raw twice over

*Crudity*, in French, refers to language and to food; in reference to food it means *raw*. From this (“precious”) amphibology he finds the means to hark back to his old problem: the problem of the *natural*.

In the field of language, denotation is really affected only by Sade’s sexual language; elsewhere, it is merely a linguistic artifact; it then serves to render hallucinatory the pure, ideal, credible *natu-*