

Editorial: The Terrible Power of Language

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There are only a few written remarks in the entire *oeuvre* of Roland Barthes on poetry. The essays in this second volume of *Barthes Studies* map most of them, and draw invisible, sometimes ingenious ley lines that criss-cross the many provinces of what Andrew Brown has called the ‘country of Barthes’. I reserve that task for them, but nevertheless it behoves me to make some attempt to account for this mysterious, tangential connection as the focus of the first special issue of a journal devoted to a single theorist.

However, it is precisely because Barthes’ engagement with poetry is so precarious that it makes such a fascinating object of study. That was what I found at the 2015 ‘Barthes and Poetry’ conference at the University of Leeds in March 2015, organised by Andy Stafford, Nigel Saint, Richard Hibbitt, and Claire Lozier, which became the source for much of this issue. The conference was one of those rare events where devotion to the subject at hand is universal and participation is total; none of the participants were merely waiting to give their own papers or deliver, as the old joke has it, short speeches disguised as questions. Having been invited to give a paper although I was then still a doctoral student, I was posed questions by luminaries like Jean-Michel Rabaté and the late, great Michael Sheringham, from whose books I had learned how to do theory. Likewise, queries from myself and other students were met by these thinkers, as well as by poetry scholars like Fiona Beckett and Adam Piette, and eminent Barthesians like Claude Coste and Andy Stafford (editors of the seminars!) with generosity and excitement at the work we were all doing together. The group, large but coherent, was uncovering the hidden connections through Barthes and what has sometimes seemed in the Anglophone world, at least until the birth of this journal, an unexamined history of Barthes studies. Theories were traded about the origins of ‘The Death of the Author’ (and the irony of that pursuit noted), and the identity of the first English-language book on Barthes debated (all under the eyes of a large framed portrait of one of the candidates, Leeds professor Philip Thody). We shared a vocabulary, a

dense and powerful language of phrases and associations drawn from the corpus of Barthes.

For almost my entire academic career – since I first held *The Pleasure of the Text* in one hand and a poetry anthology in the other as an undergraduate at the University of St Andrews – the focus of my research has been on the relationship between ‘poetry’ and ‘theory’, two unpopular and ‘difficult’ genres. So shines a tough read in a naughty world, however, that theorists have often gravitated to poetry; in the same way, poets do indeed, sometimes partially or perversely but always poetically, read theory. Whereas Barthesians might struggle to piece together the two halves of this issue, poets have a hard time *not* doing so; when I tell them about my research, often the only objection is that *la formule est banale*.

Surprisingly, it is anything but. The connections between poetry and theory are so often assumed rather than examined, which is what makes the essays in this volume so timely and so necessary. As I suggest in my essay, ‘Roland Barthes and the Birth of Language Poetry’, he was the favourite theorist of one of the key tendencies of the North American avant-garde in the 1970s, and he continues to be almost unavoidable for poets. My contribution from English-language literary studies is bolstered by three French experts. Another mutual but seldom discussed mutual fascination is that between Georges Bataille and poetry – Vahni Capildeo’s *Measures of Expatriation*, winner of the 2016 Forward Prize, brought a sequence ‘after Bataille’ to the shelf of every British poetry reader – which is why the essays by Claire Lozier and Jean-Michel Rabaté triangulating Barthes, Bataille, and poetry are such a boon. Lozier explores the nature of the concatenation of the two writers’ wary approaches to poetry and its position at the extremes of language, while Rabaté explores the philosophical origins of Barthes’ commentary on Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* in Nietzsche and surrealism and its later bearing on the ethics and politics of literature and living together. Claude Coste’s essay completes the quartet by suggesting what none of the rest of us, perhaps, dared to: that there is a terror of poetry in Barthes, and in literature in general. What is remarkable here, in what many would have us believe is the doubly abstracted field of poetry/theory, how political these linguistic interventions are; this is because poetry is, to paraphrase Barthes, language working to show itself how powerful it is, and language’s power can be terrible.

I hope that this volume will be only a minor part of a newly flourishing discourse by Barthesians on poetry and poetry scholars on

Barthes. We are living through a time when Barthes has never been more relevant: language as the play of surfaces has gone from being a fun idea to kick around theory seminars (although it was never just that) to a principle essential to understanding the world: it is far easier to convince someone today than it was for Barthes that what is given as a 'fact' is rather a myth. And if the poetry-and-Barthes connection sits at the margin of Barthes studies, well, that is all to the good: it means we are still discovering, into his second century, new reasons why we need Barthes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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