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**Article:**

Stafford, AJ (2015) *Marking A Writer's Centenary... Backwards. The Case of Roland Barthes, 1915-1980*. *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 51 (4). 480 - 494. ISSN 0015-8518

<https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqv051>

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## Marking a Writer's Centenary ... Backwards? The Case of Roland Barthes, 1915-1980.

### Introduction: Biography's pitfalls

'L'ordre est un meurtre intentionnel.'

Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953)<sup>1</sup>

In an extract from his preface to a new biography of the Lake poets, John Worthen points out that biography is a very inexact science.<sup>2</sup> 'If we miss things out on the grounds that they are unimportant, or because we do not have the space to include them, or because they do not fit the story we are trying to tell,' argues Worthen, 'then all we do is conceal our prejudices'. Worse still, he suggests, is that:

[M]odern scholarly biography and nearly all popular biography [...] remains stubbornly nineteenth-century in its hero- or heroine worshipping concentration on the life of an individual. Lip service only is paid to the fact that the biographical subject was always the member of surrounding and overlapping groups of people, alive and dead. Modern biography at times seems to have learned almost nothing from history, sociology or even psychology [...]. We write biographies of individuals as islands: we live as part of the main.

Interestingly, a number of qualifiers appear in Worthen's critique of biography: 'nearly', 'lip service', 'at times', 'seems', 'almost nothing'. These qualifiers hint that biography is not monolithic (though it is seemingly heavily dominated by an orthodoxy), but also suggest a space, or set of spaces, within which to experiment. Worthen goes on to explain that biography of Coleridge and Wordsworth suffers from the competition between the two men, then, since and

now. Naturally, we do not have that problem with Roland Barthes. But a different issue does emerge: the person who was so acutely aware of the historiographical stakes in looking at the past, especially at individuals or the individual, and/or the masses, cannot, parametrically-speaking at least, be left with a mode of biographical presentation – of which centenary commemoration is a particularly acute and compromising example – which ‘has learned almost nothing from history, sociology or even psychology’.

Barthes pursued endlessly attempts not only to ‘structuralise’ phenomena – to show objects in their irreducible difference to their binary opposite(s) – but also to place them in their material and signifying relation to a social (albeit moving) totality; and this totality, at least in early Barthesian thought of the 1950s, was tightly linked to a complex conception of history and history-writing, via the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet, which considered how the human individual signifies, often in very different ways, across history. But crucially, Barthes wanted an eagle-eyed view of the subject acting in history, which, whilst considering the complex acts of signification that an individual can play across different epochs and places (especially once dead), *also* insisted on a close-up link to that person in their own time of living. The idea of an eagle able to see both the large historical landscape and then a close-up of the actant in their own time is figured in Barthes’s writing by a different metaphor, that of walking ‘with’ a person in history and, at the same time, walking ahead of them by considering the same person from the vantage point of a later historical moment – or what E. P. Thompson called the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’.<sup>3</sup> It would seem then that a standard biographical approach to Barthes’s life might not be appropriate, and this article aims to reconsider one aspect of normal biographical method, that of time being presented by the biographer as running forwards towards death. If we consider death – or the present moment of the person being biographed – as a form of teleology, then a backwards biography, in working against this ‘flow’, is, potentially, anti-teleological.

However, tempted as I have been to narrate backwards the ‘Roland Barthes’ for Reaktion Press’s ‘Critical Lives’ series – in which the life of the writer is traced through their writing –, the editor at Reaktion disagreed.<sup>4</sup> Not only confusing, working backwards through someone’s life would also be unpalatable as a biographical format. Unable to resist my editor’s injunction for the volume (to appear in 2015, for the centenary of Barthes’s birth) to be a ‘standard’

biography, and though convinced that my unorthodox suggestion would probably not have made *commercial* sense, I still consider it important to play out the critique of the (dominant) 'forwards' account used to biography a person's life.<sup>5</sup> To write a person's life 'forwards' risks privileging, teleologically even deterministically, the end of their life and career over all those earlier stages that led (up) to the finality of mortality – to the point that the 'end' comes to explain, colour and over-determine the beginning (and this is, arguably, true of scholarship on Barthes). This strikes me as a particularly Barthesian concern. Hence, any (provisional) de-hierarchisation of the wide range of options open to biography is potentially salutary.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Backwards Barthes?

'L'incohérence me paraît préférable à l'ordre qui déforme.'  
Roland Barthes (1942, OCi 33)

There are a number of good reasons to consider a 'backwards' biography of Barthes. Even in publishing terms there has been a marked backwards feel to Barthesiana; for example, *Les derniers jours de Roland Barthes*, published in 2006 by Hervé Algalarrondo, was followed, more recently, by a *Premiers Jours de Roland Barthes* (by Christian Gury in 2012).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, one major reason for entertaining the idea of 'backwards' biography in relation to Barthes is that there is, in his *oeuvre*, a double looking-back. Since 2002 there has been a raft of posthumous publications of Barthes's lecture and seminar notes and diaries, which have been released (surely for good reason) backwards too.<sup>8</sup> One effect of this 'backwards' policy in the posthumous publication is that the 'late' Barthes (or the second half, roughly 1968 to 1980) has come more into focus, in preference to the early/earlier Barthes; to the point that the privileging of the post-1970 period could be seen as a teleologically-defined reading of Barthes's *oeuvre*, inevitably based on, and read through, the last phase (though, it could be argued, still, in some sense, allowing a reading of the pre-1970 period 'backwards').<sup>9</sup> As well as this 'forwards' intellectual history of Barthes, there is amongst these 'late' (in both senses, late career and posthumously delayed) volumes of teaching materials, an extraordinary set of seminar notes from 1973-

1974, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, in which we see Barthes, the seminar tutor, playing himself out as a writer with the postgraduate students of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris (EPHE), and in which they participate, firstly in relation to 'Roland Barthes', and secondly with a view to their own writing (especially of their Self). In *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, Barthes seems to write, retroactively, backwards, his own past from the beginning but from the vantage point a) of 1973-1974, and b) as established writer and academic. This literarisation of the self raises a key question: can we write our own past, as if it were a journal, but from the distance of much later years?<sup>10</sup> It is a highly Proustian project – and there is no coincidence that the late(r) Barthes turns his attention to the author of the *Recherche du temps perdu* (a backwards-looking novel if ever there was one) – and one which requires extraordinary powers of memory. So the *Lexique de l'auteur* seminar of 1973-1974 is a backwards-looking inscription and contemplation of Self, all in the laboratory of teaching and in the 'play' of writing; and which is then 'essaified', fragmented into Barthes's notorious self-biography in the third person *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* published in 1975.<sup>11</sup> Even Barthes's illness between 1937 and 1946 – his tuberculosis and consequent sensitivity to the body – displays a backwards feel. Re-reading in 1977 Thomas Mann's 1924 novel of life in a sanatorium for tuberculosis, *The Magic Mountain*, Barthes underlined, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977, that his body felt 'historique' (OCv 445-6). The main protagonist in Mann's novel, Hans Castorp, is struck down by tuberculosis in 1907, and so Barthes experienced a bodily analogy with Castorp; and though 'literary' and fictional, in identifying with Castorp's illness, Barthes saw himself as more than twenty years older than he actually was.

The idea of writing Barthes's life in a backwards fashion seems appropriate, because it is (doubly) parametric. Barthes vaunted the notion of 'parametrisation' – adjusting one's critical approach to fit (with) the object of study. Therefore, to respect parametrically a key practitioner of parametrisation *must*, especially in the case of a historico-biographical task, surely entertain a non-teleological, structuralised even unclassifiable approach. Indeed, any 'counter-doxa' to the biography industry and its forward-moving tropes must be recognised as a deeply Barthesian concern. Barthes's chosen and trademark writing form, the fragment, and its concomitant use of what he called the 'discontinu', could be seen as a critique of the teleological nature of all interpretation and writing.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, it is Literature itself, if not the Literary, which seems to justify, if only theoretically, an unorthodox direction to a biography of Barthes. The posthumously-published seminar mentioned above, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, and then the final lectures given by Barthes at the Collège de France before his death, are instructive here; for they show, not so much the semiologist positing 'life as literature' (in the way that Alexander Nehamas has shown for Nietzsche), nor certainly the intellectual living a life *in* literature (the main trope of standard literary biography, one might argue), rather the writer actually living literature *as* life. What would it mean then to (re-)read the rest of Barthes's life *starting* in the (final) 1977-1980 period of his life (when the 'literature-as-life' phase is in full swing), and 'ending' with his orphaned childhood in interwar France? The aim of this article is to show that backwards biography (at least in the case of Barthes) can be fruitful both for Barthesian study – in that it will allow us to show the circular, spiral nature of his concerns, how they return in different places at different stages of his career –, and for a more subjective, communal, even gregarious, relationship with History: a complexity of the past, and of otherness, that never reaches, but could approximate to, a 'totality'; though the binary, oscillating antonym – singularity – is, naturally, ever present in its opposite.

## 2. Psychoanalytical inversions

'Philosopher consiste à invertir la direction habituelle du travail de la pensée.'

Henri Bergson (1934)<sup>13</sup>

""Me prendre est se méprendre", voilà la devise de mon Roland Barthes.'

Jacques-Alain Miller (1977)<sup>14</sup>

There is a wider context to the case for writing Barthes's life 'backwards', that is the temptation of using psychoanalysis. The abrupt inversions operated by post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory, especially in its essayistic rather than clinical form, seem to mirror the inversion of history's forward course that is operated

by a backwards approach to biography. Psychoanalysis, with its irreverence to temporal order, reason and continuity has certainly a role to play in the critique of the standard tropes of teleological biography. In the present day, Pierre Bayard's essayistic work is a good example of this deconstructive approach to life's (seeming) forward movement. *Demain est écrit* (2005), *Le Plagiat par anticipation* (2009), and, most recently, *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* (Minuit 2013) all invert the usual historical processes and vantage points, and it is the first of these essays which looks specifically at biography's premises concerning the direction of history.

Bayard's argument in *Demain est écrit*, with regard to biography, is made succinctly:

[Q]uelle que soit leur construction, toutes les biographies découpent la réalité selon une direction plus ou moins implicite qui va du passé vers le futur et met en scène un jeu de forces orientées toujours dans le même sens, ainsi qu'une logique toujours identique, qui persiste à placer les causes avant les conséquences. (121)

Using Jack London's 'autobiography' *Martin Eden* (1909), having analysed the Wildean inversion of life imitating literature and considered the ironies of life's chronology observed by the reclusive French surrealist poet Joë Bousquet (injured by a bullet in the First World War), Bayard argues that backwards, to some extent, is the correct direction for biography:

Ainsi conviendrait-il [...] d'imaginer des biographies qui s'écriraient, au moins pour une part, dans le bon sens, c'est-à-dire de l'avenir vers le passé. Car pourquoi se contenterait-on [...] de ce qui a précédé des œuvres, sans égard pour ce qui leur succède, alors même que ces événements ont souvent joué un rôle décisif ? (127)

Though it would seem that, here, Bayard misses the crucial point about the artificial nature of standard biography – which is to put forward the illusion that the end is unknown, only for the biographer to write the biography disingenuously using the 'unknown' ending to organise the forward march of life towards it –, his suggestion about the beginning defining the end allows him to

justify any biographer of Jack London writing his biography 'à rebours'; but there remains a challenge:

[L]e centre de nombreuses biographies appartient au passé, d'où il irradie pour organiser à la fois les événements suivants et l'écriture de ces événements. Mais comment s'y prendre quand les événements centraux se situent vers la fin de sa vie et que, pour ainsi dire, le centre est encore à venir ? (127)

This is precisely what Marie Gil's recent biography of Roland Barthes has taken on board.<sup>15</sup>

Gil points out, following Bayard's suggestion, that the 'late event' of the death of Barthes's mother (with whom he lived all his life) is, in many senses, the 'centre à venir' in Barthes's life:

Comment respecter l'ouverture et le mouvement d'une vie, alors que la mise en récit clôt le sens, signifie à partir du point de vue de la mort? [...] [C]ette idée, elle est de Barthes et elle est le point de départ de mon désir d'écrire une biographie dont il serait l'objet. Elle est très simple : elle postule que la vie est un texte. (11-12)

Importantly, Gil's biography of Barthes, dissatisfied with Louis-Jean Calvet's rather 'traditional' effort of 1990, points to the pitfalls of standard biography. Subtling her 'essai biographique' *Au lieu de la vie*, Gil is acutely aware of biography's pitfalls. She sees the biographical essay, of which hers is an example, as distinct from 'le récit de vie anecdotique' which she sees as "lisse" (11). Against the 'smoothness' of standard biography, she proposes the 'parametric' strategy of using one of Barthes's ideas on his own biography. 'La vie comme texte' becomes her strategy for writing Barthes's life. Indeed, Gil's 'fiction' of Roland Barthes's life relies on literary tropes.<sup>16</sup> Such an approach is also an aid to opening up the possibilities of backwards biography.

In his 1973-1974 seminar *Le Lexique de l'auteur*, Barthes had hinted at a better way to write his (or a) biography:

[O]n n'essaie pas de répondre philosophiquement à « Qu'est-ce que l'œuvre de RB ? Qui est RB ? Quel est le sens de cette œuvre ? », mais seulement à « *Comment elle fonctionne ?* » (329).

Gil sees this functional view of life as a move towards 'la vie comme texte', for it inverts biography's *doxa*: 'la vie ne devient pas un texte, la vie se constitue comme texte, est un texte en devenir – elle est *du textuel*' (13, author's emphasis). The implication of Bayard's point – that a life might be ordered by something that happens much later on, towards the end, and that therefore any biography of that life might be skewed by a simple forwards narrative, from cradle to grave as it were – now poses a clear problem. Given her use of a psychoanalytical strategy, Gil is aware that the final years of Barthes's life, after the death of his mother in 1977, play a crucial role in how we look back over Barthes's life. In Gil's analysis, the 'comblement du vide' that has been the driving psychoanalytical force of Barthes's writing throughout his life – a reaction to his semi-orphaned life with his mother, then to her new lover in the late 1920s and consequent half-brother – now finishes with her death in 1977.<sup>17</sup> Barthes's last years are dominated by his sorrow at this loss and by the compensations offered by a fully literary view of life and of his own life.

### **3. Reversibility in memory, literature and writing the Self**

'C'est cela la lecture: réécrire le texte de l'œuvre à même le texte de notre vie.'  
Roland Barthes ('Sur la lecture' [1976], OCiv 927)

Despite the predominance of Barthes's 'Mort de l'auteur' thesis after 1968, a number of critics have tried to find Barthes's interest in biography much earlier.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Barthes's fascination with Jules Michelet, especially in his earlier career, is mirrored by Henri Bergson, whose work, 're-discovered' by Gilles Deleuze in the 1960s, contains a number of backwards motifs and whose 'vitalist' dimensions have a bearing on life-writing.<sup>19</sup> From at least 1970 onwards, though there was, according to Gil, no sign of a desire to go back to the 'full' subject of pre-structuralist, liberal-humanist thought, Barthes's writing

began to consider the, and was generally more, biographical. The 'vie comme texte' that Gil sees developing in Barthes's *œuvre* in the 1970s means that 'l'objet [sa vie] est déjà du texte et la biographie [...] est en réalité une herméneutique, une lecture, une réécriture' (353). Again, Gil is simply applying Barthesian notions to Barthes's own life, and again these are instructive for backwards biography, for the narrative analysis practised by Barthes, especially in his notorious reading of a Balzac story in *S/Z* (1970), has suggested that all narrative (including biography) is a text that is reversible – not to mention easily made into morcels, 'quotes', the 'biographèmes' that Barthes identified in his 1971 book *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*.

Gil's literary and psychoanalytically-inspired approach to Barthes's life then is a deeply parametric one, consistent within the parameters of how Gil reads Barthes's essays across his career. This parametrism is, of course, as much about the biographer as it is about the biographied; but this does not invalidate her project, for her claim is to have written an 'essai biographique'. As opposed to a 'biography' *tout court*, the 'essai biographique' is doubly parametric to Barthes, because not only was Barthes an essayist, but also the 'essai' contains notions of the provisional, of the playful, of the inventive, but also of the 'unfinished'. Barthes's own writing is full of this type of 'renversement', not just historical, but also writerly, and even historico-writerly. Witness this quote from Jules Michelet, cited in Barthes's 1942 piece on the *Journal* of André Gide: "L'Histoire, dans le progrès du temps, fait l'historien bien plus qu'elle n'est faite par lui. Mon livre m'a créé. C'est moi qui fus son œuvre" (OCi 30). This table-turning is a crucial part of backwards self-biographying. 'Self biography' needs to be counterposed to autobiography. Having worked in 1954 on a literary biography of Michelet for the *Seuil* 'par lui-même' series (called that, as each volume contains ample quotes), Barthes famously took the series' name to heart when, in 1975, (as mentioned above) he wrote, for the same series, his *own* 'par lui-même' – but in the third person; and then wrote a review of it in the press (to complete the illusion of self-biography) called 'Barthes puissance trois' (OCiv 775-7)!

Barthesian theory and writing are replete with these deconstructive inversions of linearity and chronology. Even neological and etymological strategy is prone to inversion; as poet Michel Deguy put it, 'Barthes néologise par étymologie', and of which there are numerous examples in his writing (*doxa / endoxa, atopie,*

*acratique / encratique, proairétique, idiorrythmie, Texte, sémioclastie*, and so on).<sup>20</sup> But perhaps the most famous Barthesian inversion (as well as another example of an etymology becoming a neologism) is 'anamnesis'.

Anamnesis, the act of unforgetting (as opposed to remembering), has a highly Proustian charge in its search for a lost moment, but goes beyond Proust's attempts to recover lost time. Barthes first theorises anamnesis in his 1973-1974 seminar, *Le Lexique de l'auteur*.<sup>21</sup> In *La Chambre Claire*, five years later, Barthes famously contemplates a photograph of his mother as a young girl in the Winter Garden, but it represents a moment (unlike Proust's 'madeleine' episode) which Barthes could not possibly have experienced; and yet (backwards, as it were) the photograph, taken before his life, affords him a strong memory of his recently-deceased mother. Gil argues (14-15), quoting the work of Orlando Beer, that the anamnesis is, like the 'biographème', 'exempté de sens', that is, until we read a life (Barthes's life) as a text.<sup>22</sup> The fragments of anamnesis in Barthes's work should be seen as 'signifiants arbitraires ... [qui] mènent à la métaphore de la vie comme texte' (15). Similarly, in *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973), from the same period as the theory of anamnesis, Barthes offered, in a radically off-hand way, a deconstruction – or historical inversion – of the usual 'forwards' chronology of literature and Art: 'Robbe-Grillet est déjà dans Flaubert,', he argued in post-Maoist, terroristic fashion, 'Sollers dans Rabelais, tout Nicolas de Staël dans deux centimètres carrés de Cézanne' (OCiv 230), in what he called the 'désinvolture qui fait venir le texte antérieur du texte ultérieur' (OCiv 240). In a manner which (ironically) anticipates Bayard's 'plagiarism by anticipation', Barthes thus upended, if not temporarily junked, traditional literary history and its facile chronological progression (interestingly, Bayard's *Le Plagiat par anticipation* does not mention *Le Plaisir du texte*).

Thus both anamnesis and reading-literary-history -backwards (or 'plagiarism by anticipation') were first theorised at the same time as Barthes started his *Lexique de l'auteur* seminar. In both of these cases of de-hierarchisation of chronology (the deconstruction of the idea that that which comes first is definitive, or at least influential on what is subsequent), there is an attempt at, or a significant gesture towards, equalising Time's influence on memories, on writing and on life's direction, in such a way that the *impression* on the contemporary subject is the source of literary values. Clearly, and as always in Barthes's work, these acts of de-hierarchisation are as much tactical as

provisional, but they do point to a crucial development in this 1970-1973 period in Barthes's work in which the biographical, what I have called the self-biographical, begins to inflect Barthesian writing.

Barthes's seminar in 1973-1974, 'Le lexique de l'auteur', was an attempt to use the 'laboratory' of the postgraduate seminar to analyse 'the writer', suggesting a social and fascinatingly dispassionate take on the 'self'; and we should be wary of deeming Barthes's 1970s seminar practice and final Collège de France lectures as decadent in their romantic presentation of self. On the contrary, Barthes's continual placing of his self in the seminar, in the lecture theatre and in the texts of the 1970s, must be seen as a 'scientific' activity, but with literary deconstructions of the premise of 'objectivity' in Science.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one of the other crucial aspects of these two operations – anamnesis and plagiarism by anticipation – is their highly subjective nature. In both cases, 'the analysis' starts from the subject, the 'for me' of Nietzschean philosophy (*Le Plaisir du texte*, OCiv 226): we remember, recreate, valorise the past (our past) from the present, with all the layers of memory acting in-between; similarly, goes the essayistic injunction in *Plaisir du texte*, we should insert literature into the literary institution and its concomitant history, *from where we are*.

It is important also that we do not lose sight of the other temporal dimension of a life: the future. In an interview in 1977, 'À quoi sert un intellectuel?', when asked if he was writing for posterity, Barthes's answer is as peremptory as it is portentous: 'Franchement non. Je ne peux pas m'imaginer que mon œuvre ou mes œuvres seront lues après ma mort. À la lettre, je ne l'imagine pas' (OCv 378). Is this further evidence for the justification of backwards biography? Clearly, Barthes is not looking forward, imagining into the future. If we accept this immanent view of his own life and writing, we have two obvious choices: either we go back in time and read Barthes's texts in their own moment, with no condescension of posterity nor teleological approach to its significance (that is, ignoring what has happened since, that is, Barthes's fame *since* his death), which is to take his (very modest) belief quite literally; or we bracket his claim, by having a knowing overview of his life's significance for us today and in which case we cannot then 'go back' to the time of his writings (other than disingenuously). Either way, forwards biography cannot adequately deal with a writer's view of their own posterity, because its constant flitting between immanence (being in the time of the writer) and condescension of posterity

(reading the life from the vantage point of the 'after-life' as it were) tends to privilege the latter: the 'late' Barthes controls retroactively (ironically for 'forwards' biography) the early Barthes, teleologically retro-fitting early Barthesian with what it later becomes. We must be prepared then to plunder the 'early' Barthes to counter the scholarly imbalance that seems to distort, or at least control, our understanding of his work. Indeed, Barthes's first book, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), shows him to be acutely aware of the temporal and 'closed' nature of literary narration, as exemplified by the past historic: because the novel usually uses the preterit, it makes life into destiny and duration into oriented and meaningful time.<sup>24</sup> One criticism of Gil's biography is then that she privileges, in this teleological manner, the later writings in Barthes's *œuvre*.

#### 4. 'La vie comme texte'

'Pour échapper à l'aliénation de la société présente, il n'y a plus que ce moyen : *la fuite en avant*'  
Roland Barthes (1973, OCiv 243)

Gil's definition of a 'text' (466), that it 'retourne sur lui-même pour se clore', as well as her psychoanalytical approach to her essayistic biography of Barthes and its attendant acts of inversion, offer other deconstructive views of Barthes's life, linked to his family. Having set out the 'trou' forged by his father's tragic death in 1916 and its links to Barthes's writing (and especially to that of the fragment), she puts forward a number of family 'fictions', of all which are counter-doxal, because they represent temporal inversions that are impossible in strictly historicist terms. Firstly, Gil underlines how Barthes's mother became, progressively, like a girl to him, even like his own 'daughter', until he declares in his last book, *La Chambre Claire*, the significance of his trawl through photography to re-find his recently-deceased mother:

Les Grecs entraient dans la Mort à reculons: ce qu'ils avaient devant eux, c'était leur passé. Ainsi ai-je remonté une vie, non la mienne, mais celle

de qui j'aimais. Parti de sa dernière image, [...] je suis arrivé, remontant trois quarts de siècle, à l'image d'une enfant. (OCv 847)

So, if the first half of *La Chambre Claire* covers Barthes's own life and career, the second half is a 'walking back up' through his mother's. All that her death does, argues Gil, is to reveal to Barthes the 'vide' or 'manque' across his life which writing (at least up until his mother's death) served to cover over; in other words, 'Mam' – Henriette Barthes – filled that void until 1977, and this, in Gil's 'essai biographique', is *the* organising factor of Barthes's life, the 'problem' then being that this organising principle is not revealed until three years before his own death: 'le texte et la vie sont dans un rapport de symétrie inversée, l'un est le négatif de l'autre'.<sup>25</sup> Hence the photographic 'révélation' for Gil in *La Chambre Claire* is doubly significant. Not only do we see 'Mam's' importance to Barthes; but also, 'par inversion de la chronologie', 'la Mère fait de la vie de Barthes un "cliché", elle est le révélateur, dans un processus d'inversion, de la "photo" qu'est sa vie'; thus, with great historical irony, it would appear that 'Mam', finally, gives posterity to him (Gil 484-5). This 'retournement' of life, a 'disparition du temps chronologique', is central to the final writerly (and life) strategy Barthes devised before his own death in 1980: the 'Vita Nova'. As well as Mam's death in 1977 being the end of the first part of Barthes's life-as-text (Gil 18-19), the 'vita nova' is the moment for Barthes to look back(wards): 'moi qui n'avais pas procréé j'avais, dans sa maladie même, engendré ma mère' (OCv 848). Barthes even sees a projection of her death in 1977, backwards as it were, onto his own (near) death between 1942 and 1946 whilst he was recovering in a sanatorium for tuberculosis. Indeed, in the recently-published *Journal de deuil*, Barthes's deep *chagrin* at her death even upends time in his use of the quote from British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott: 'j'ai peur d'une catastrophe qui a déjà eu lieu'; her demise even inverts identities: 'Désormais et à jamais je suis moi-même ma propre mère'.<sup>26</sup>

The inversion that Gil underlines (53) takes on bigger social and historical issues in Barthes's world. Due to his father's death on active service in the First World War when he was one year old, Barthes's grandparents played a significant role in his younger life – Barthes even attributes his interest in Proust to his own nostalgia for their generation (that is, the end of the nineteenth century). Indeed, argues Gil, his maternal grandfather – Louis Binger, the

explorer and reader of Jules Verne – is a part of the 'figure matricielle'; but crucially, she points out deconstructively, as far as the grandchild is concerned, grandparents *come* from your parents. So backwards biography might even wish to walk back further than Barthes's own life (1980>1915), and up into the nineteenth century, whereby, by osmosis, Barthes had 'lived' the *belle époque* and before (around 1875), through a physical and memorial contiguity with his grandparents. However, Gil decides against a backwards biography, and defends the use of forwards chronology thus:

[U]ne chronologie dans le récit n'empêche pas l'inscription d'une temporalité autre, d'une collusion de temps, de fils souterrains reliant des moments non successifs en surface, des moments épars qui forment un palimpseste ou encore parfois, l'inscription ponctuelle de chronologies inversées – comme Pierre Bayard lorsqu'il trace des biographies inversives, où le fait postérieur, dans la chronologie des années, est la cause d'un fait antérieur. (22)

Gil gives two examples of this 'biographie inversive': firstly, the way in which Barthes inscribes the EPHE and the College de France into his life; secondly, in the figure of Paul Valéry (and 'd'autres éléments encore'). Out of these 'palimpsestes achronologiques', Gil's choice of readings of Barthes might also remove the text in question from their temporal anchorage. On the other hand:

[L]a destruction systématique et non motivée ponctuellement de la chronologie me semble vaine, ou au mieux maladroite dans sa visée générale – qui est d'exprimer que le Temps est autre, qu'il n'est pas chronologique, qu'il est subjectif, etc. C'est le sens du *récit* qui se forme qui doit imposer la représentation du temps qui s'y donne à lire, et non pas un *a priori* sur ce qu'est le temps. [...] La chronologie n'est pas plus fausse que les autres formes d'expressions temporelles, elle est simplement d'une force d'illusion plus vaste parce que davantage partagée. (22, author's emphasis)

In the end, she argues, there is an aesthetic-human question in presenting (a) life chronologically:

Je trouve qu'il est beau que la linéarité temporelle soit ce qui fonde la matière de notre existence, et que malgré l'impossibilité dans laquelle nous sommes de reconnaître une continuité dans notre identité, comme dans cette matière continue qu'on nomme la vie, le récit et la littérature le fassent. (22-23)

Chronology is concerned with tragedy, with time advancing towards a particular goal. It is that which allows Gil to read Barthes's life as a text, and has a practical point: 'Comment aurais-je pu négliger la chronologie, alors que la composition du "texte" se donne à lire dans la mort d'Henriette Barthes en 1977 et dans le "dénouement" qui s'ensuit?'. Not only for her (as for Barthes) is the *afterlife* a 'non-sense', but, importantly for Gil, Mam's death 'condense la première partie de l'existence dans une stase, un non-temps qui en est le reflet et l'inversion' (23-24). For 'her' Roland Barthes, it is the 1977 tragedy above all that structures (retrospectively for us no doubt, but also for Barthes) his biography (as opposed to his life): dualism disappears in favour of the neuter, favouring, in his post-Maman world of 1977-1980, what Gil calls the 'immobilité de l'essence' and hence 'l'usage des majuscules' (25). Here Gil begins to see the biography that the early Barthes had written of Michelet being repeated in the late Barthes's self-biography; and though she does not mention that capital letters already dominate in Barthes's 1950s writing on Michelet, we will see the significance of this type of 'return' in Barthes's work in our conclusion.

Given the predominance of the 'late' over the 'early' in studies of Barthes's work, Gil does not help her argument with the texts she privileges in her 'vie comme texte': *S/Z*, two pieces on Jules Verne, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *Camera Lucida*, *Comment vivre ensemble*, *La Préparation du roman* are all published 1970 onwards, with the exception of one of the Verne texts (from *Mythologies*). In other words, Gil has, albeit by a circuitous route, ended up privileging the 'late' Barthes. The saving grace is her final claim:

Ma méthode abolit [...] l'hétérogénéité entre le texte – le langage de l'écrit – et le factuel, entre le passé et le présent. À rebours de la construction d'un récit, la chronologie est respectée uniquement pour ce qui concerne les faits, mais non les écrits: l'idée est que l'écriture

cryptogrammatique qui donne un récit second, psychique ou structurel, se retrouve dans tous les moments de la vie écrite ou de la vie vécue, et au sein de la première aussi bien dans les paratextes et les avant-textes que dans l'œuvre. (27)

This playing with chronology and text in Barthes's life opens up a compromise for writing a biography of Barthes, which neither falls into the rebarbative nature of backwards biography, nor privileges the 'final' Barthes over the other(s), and which we will now briefly explore in the conclusion.

### **Conclusion: Towards spiral, or 'collision', biography?**

'Human knowledge does not follow a straight line, but endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral.'

V. I. Lenin<sup>27</sup>

Recently published, the 1973-1974 seminar *Le Lexique de l'auteur* is the origins of Barthes's self-biography of 1975, and includes 'fragments inédits du "rb par rb"' (249-346). If the 'anamnèses' point to a backwards direction to writing Barthes's biography, 'la vie comme texte' (324) suggests a de-hierarchisation of time which, though not favouring a backwards trajectory, sets out to equalize succeeding timeframes. In the fragment dated 11 July 1973 (with 'Non' next to it in the margin – that is, not for inclusion in the final published version of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*), Barthes stressed, firstly, that 'la vie comme texte' will be (if not already) 'banal', unless the following is underlined: '[la vie comme texte] est un texte à *produire*, non à *déchiffrer*' (324).<sup>28</sup> Barthes then chooses an example from his own life to illustrate this, now describing himself suddenly in the third person:

Par exemple, cette année (1972-1973), il produit un texte particulier en opérant des sortes de collusions entre des rendez-vous très différents ; il voit coup sur coup des sujets surgis de contextes hétéroclites, incompatibles (aller dans une « boîte » au sortir d'un entretien avec un

militant communiste) ; cela brise la loi monotone du discours de vie, cela produit une sorte de charivari textuel. (*Le Lexique de l'auteur*, 324-5)

Rather than a walking back up through (his) life, the 'charivari textuel' suggests a different figure for understanding Barthes's life: a circular, parametric, spiral biography, what we might call 'collision biography'. This might be a compromise, as it is not backwards as such; but it allows us to approach some earlier texts via late ones. Collision also allows for the posthumous, in a way that standard biography cannot: if you reinsert the raft of posthumous publications into Barthes's life, one must, by definition, lose the 'flow' of his life (and thereby teleologise the posthumous publications at the same time). If anamnesis deconstructs or modifies this spiral, it does not dispense with the need for a supple, subtle approach to writing Barthes's life.

There is a textual counterpart to the historiographical dialectic of walking with/looking back; the recent developments in literary 'critique génétique', concerned with textual genesis, are currently being used to explore Barthes's 'fiches' at the ITEM-CNRS in Paris; but it is, and will be, something that, if used subtly, will avoid the teleology of the published 'final' text. So posthumous texts can also be part of collision biography, including posthumous *avant-textes*, such as the seminar on *Sarrasine* which led to *S/Z* or the *Lexique de l'auteur* seminar which became *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. Both the seminar *avant-textes* and the final published texts could be classed as what Barthes called 'livres-cours', and for which Pierre Bayard's work – on anticipation, on critical intervention, on rewriting endings, even on the detective in literature – has provided a salutary theoretical framework for analysis. So an obvious example of collision, or circularity, in Barthes's *œuvre* is the return, in the 1977-78 lecture course 'Le Neutre' over twenty years later, of the 1947-1953 'Degré zéro' thesis and the theory of a blank language, not to mention of the critique of neither-nor neutrality in petty-bourgeois ideology set out, during the 1950s, in 'La critique Ni-Ni' published in *Mythologies* (OCi 783-5).

If, finally, 'backwards' biography raises two key questions that go beyond the scope of this article (can all of our lives be 'textual'? and: can we compare 'backwards biography' with another recent trend, that of 'what if', or 'virtual', history?), we can begin to conclude this brief critique of forwards biography. The acts of inversion of chronology studied here – whether literary and/or memorial

– suggest that any attempt to biography Barthes must perforce entertain the possibility of a hermeneutic in biography. This is not simply saying that we have the biography of a person *for our age* (which helps explain the extraordinary number of biographies of Winston Churchill, two hundred or so), but also that we valorise different parts of a life and a career, at different times to suit our own interests. It may be that a circular form of biography, what we have (tentatively) called ‘collision’ biography, is the only acceptable compromise (at least in Barthes’s case) between a forwards biography that distorts and a backwards one, albeit parametric to its subject, that nevertheless repels and can exist only in theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, *Œuvres complètes* vol. I, p. 194; references to Barthes’s works are to the five-volume *Œuvres complètes* (new edition, ed. Eric Marty, Paris, Seuil, 2002) and henceforth signalled in the text by ‘OC’ followed by volume and page number.

<sup>2</sup> J. Worthen, Preface to *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (Yale University Press, 2001), in *The Guardian* review, 17 March 2001, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See A. Stafford, ‘Barthes and Michelet: Biography and History’, *Nottingham French Studies* 36:1 (Spring 1997), pp. 14-23.

<sup>4</sup> The only example of ‘backwards’ biography is Alexander Masters’s *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (London, Fourth Estate, 2005), though Martin Amis’ novel *Time’s Arrow*, Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento*, Harold Pinter’s play *Betrayal* and Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Merrily We Roll Along* (based on the play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart) all start from the ‘end’ and work backwards through the narrative of a life. Masters’s ‘backwards’ biography of a homeless drug-addict is inspired by Stuart’s desire that his short and tragic life be biographed as if a ‘murder mystery’ (p. 6): thus we find out only at the ‘end’ about the trauma in early adolescence that will lead, despite a recent, promising rehabilitation, to his suicide.

<sup>5</sup> My aim in the Reaktion book, respecting the comment by Worthen above about ‘living in the main’, is to ‘socialise’ Barthes, to see all his work as part of a social dialogue and social theory of the self and of the literary. An earlier intellectual biography, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998) had tried to see how Barthes was received (‘consumed’, ‘mythified’) in those reviews of his books that he would have read in his lifetime, without ignoring his own agency within and upon literary and intellectual history, that is, Barthes the ‘phenomenon’.

<sup>6</sup> In line with this de-hierarchisation, Steven Ungar argues that we should neither read Barthes ‘via Proust nor Proust [...] within Barthes, but as an ongoing interplay between the two’; ‘Barthes via Proust: Circular Memories’, *L’Esprit créateur* XXII:1 (Spring 1982), pp. 8-19 (pp. 8-9). For a discussion of Barthes’s interventions in literary history, see, in the same number of *L’Esprit créateur* (pp. 35-44), Roland A. Champagne, ‘The Task of Clotho Re-defined: Roland Barthes’ Tapestry of Literary History’, in which Barthes is shown to be ‘inverting’ literary history with respect to Pierre Guyotat, Sade, Genet, Mallarmé and Artaud on the one hand, and La Bruyère and Classical Greek Rhetoricians on the other.

<sup>7</sup> Stock 2006 and Non-lieu 2012, respectively. The former suggests that the last three years of Barthes's life, after his mother's death in 1977, are deeply unhappy ones; the latter that being separated from his Normandy roots in exchange for his Basque/Gascogne upbringing, had particular consequences in Barthes's work.

<sup>8</sup> In chronological order of appearance, with dates of their posthumous publication in brackets followed by the original year of delivery: *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre* (2002, 1976-1977 and 1977-1978 respectively), *La Préparation du roman* (2003, 1979-1980), *Le Discours Amoureux* (2007, 1974-1976), *Carnet du voyage en Chine* and *Journal de deuil* (2009, 1974 and 1977-1978 respectively), *Le Lexique de l'auteur* (2010, 1973-1974), *Sarrasine* (2011, 1968-1969).

<sup>9</sup> See the special number 'Roland Barthes Retroactively', *Paragraph* 31:1 (March 2008).

<sup>10</sup> It is worth underlining that Barthes was wary of the 'diary' format for a writer; indeed, none of his 'journals' – *Incidents*, *Soirées de Paris*, *Carnet du voyage en Chine*, *Journal de deuil* – was published in his lifetime; see also 'Délibération' (OCv 668-81), and Eric Marty, *Roland Barthes, la littérature et le droit à la mort*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Plans and *inédits* of which, thanks to the work of Anne Herschberg Pierrot, can be consulted in the *Lexique* (pp. 249-356) and which begins with a detailed section called 'Biographie' (pp. 249-57).

<sup>12</sup> A non-teleological form of essayism is theorised by Barthes in his 1960 essay 'Écrivains et écrivants' (OCii 403-10).

<sup>13</sup> H. Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant* [1934], Paris, PUF, 1959, p. 1422 (author's original italics).

<sup>14</sup> J.-A. Miller, 'Pseudo-Barthes', in *Prétexte: Roland Barthes. Colloque de Cerisy*, Paris, 10/18, 1977, p. 207.

<sup>15</sup> M. Gil, *Roland Barthes. Au lieu de la vie* (Paris, Flammarion, 2012), references to this henceforth in the text.

<sup>16</sup> Given that her first chapter is called 'les deux côtés', one cannot but think of the two 'côtés' in Proust's *Combray*.

<sup>17</sup> One of Gil's key psychoanalytical suggestions (91-5) is that Barthes's title *S/Z* (1970), for his radical rereading and re-writing of Balzac's gothic short story 'Sarrasine', inscribes the family rivalry, in relation to their mother, between himself and his half-brother Michel Salzedo ('S' of Barthes, versus 'Z' of Salzedo).

<sup>18</sup> See J.-C. Carlier, 'Roland Barthes's Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography', *Cambridge Quartely* 29:4 (2000), pp. 386-93.

<sup>19</sup> In *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907), Bergson argued: '[D]ans l'univers lui-même, il faut distinguer [...] deux mouvements opposés, l'un de « descente », l'autre de « montée ». Le premier ne fait que dérouler un rouleau tout préparé. Il pourrait, en principe, s'accomplir d'une manière presque instantanée, comme il arrive à un ressort qui se détend. Mais le second, qui correspond à un travail intérieur de maturation ou de création, dure essentiellement, et impose son rythme au premier, qui en est inséparable' (*Œuvres*, p. 503).

<sup>20</sup> M. Deguy, 'Le démon de l'analogie', *R / B. Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil / Centre Pompidou, 2002, pp. 86-90 (p. 86); see also C. Hanania, *Roland Barthes et l'étymologie*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009, chapter 8.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Le Lexique de l'auteur* pp. 181ff, and *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (OCiv 685); see also Ginette Michaud, *Lire le fragment. Transfert et théorie de la lecture chez Roland Barthes*, Ville LaSalle, Editions Hurtubise, 1989, pp. 168-86. For a finer differentiation of memory in Proust and Barthes, see Katja Haustein, 'La vie comme œuvre: Barthes with Proust', in Peter Collier et al (eds), *Anamnesia. Private and Public Memory in Modern French Culture*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 175-91.

<sup>22</sup> O. Beer, 'Roland Barthes : la biographie comme un théâtre', in *Écriture* 24 (1985), pp. 141-8.

<sup>23</sup> In *Le Lexique de l'auteur* pp. 92ff, especially pp. 102-5, Barthes is aware of the danger of narcissism and so describes the use of the third person 'Barthes écrit...' as both a 'supreme inflation' and a 'supreme deflation', linked, no doubt, to the decision to divide himself for the seminar into 'RB I' ('celui qui a écrit') and 'RB II' ('celui qui va

écrire'); indeed the 'index' and the alphabetical are other ways of presenting the self 'RB' that undermine narcissism.

<sup>23</sup> Gil's metaphor (25) of (analogue) photograph and its negative coming into view as a positive image allows her to see that the death of Henriette and Barthes's subsequent death are but the beginning of 'la vie du texte - la vie comme texte', and which is redolent of the etymology of 'biographie': 'écriture vivante'.

<sup>24</sup> OCi 189-92. *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* is full of anti-teleological motifs: 'Le Roman est une mort: il fait de la vie un destin, du souvenir un acte utile, et de la durée un temps dirigé et significatif' (OCi 194); this is because the 'mensonge', 'artifice', and 'mythe' of the preterit tense, central to the Novel and to the bourgeoisie's universalist claims, becomes an 'aliénation' in which bourgeois society enshrines the literary, and this ideological distortion is not corrected when the present or 'passé composé' are used instead, because 'la Littérature devient dépositaire de l'épaisseur de l'existence et non de sa signification' (OCi 191).

<sup>25</sup> Gil's metaphor (25) of (analogue) photograph and its negative coming into view as a positive image allows her to see that the death of Henriette and Barthes's subsequent death are but the beginning of 'la vie du texte - la vie comme texte', and which is redolent of the etymology of the word 'biographie': 'écriture vivante'.

<sup>26</sup> R. Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, p. 217 (author's italics), p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Lenin, *Collected Works* (vol 38), New York, Progress, 1981, pp. 357-61.

<sup>28</sup> Barthes underlines how he has said this already in his career, at very different moments (on Gide in 1942, and on Proust in 1966): Gide's *Journal* 'produit' the *Journal d'Édouard* (rather than the other way round, whereby we would, normally, 'read' Gide's *Journal* from the *Journal d'Édouard*), and with regard to Proust: 'l'œuvre de Proust ne reflète pas sa vie; c'est sa vie qui est le texte de l'œuvre' (*Le Lexique de l'auteur*, p. 324); see also 'La vie comme œuvre' in *La Préparation du roman*, pp. 277ff. Could we not rewrite the text of Barthes's life as if it were a pastiche worthy of Jules Lemaitre (where, after all, his writing 'started' in 1933, with his pastiche of Plato 'En marge du Criton' and, in good spiral fashion, was published forty years later in *L'Arc* in 1974)? Jules Lemaitre's 1905 book, read by the pasticheur Proust, *En marge des vieux livres*, involves exercises in pastiche that rewrite the endings of six classic texts. Pastiche seems to provide a 'backwards' view of literature, though not of life; but as a pastiche of Jules Lemaitre's idea of rewriting endings, it is not dissimilar, again, to Pierre Bayard's recent work, this time in *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées* (2000).