

Roland Barthes: His Zero-Degree Achievement

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Roland Barthes affords perhaps the most interesting case of theoretical evasiveness in contemporary criticism. His critical approach provides an eclectic mixture of concepts, but always with the effort to exclude from consideration a small but essential assortment of principles he found unacceptable, including closure, narrative continuity, realism (or mimesis), *engagement* (Sartre's version of political commitment), and, most inclusively, *Doxa* as any orthodox belief system that imposes rigid standards of conformity. Not until two of his final books--*Camera Lucida* and his autobiography, *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes--did Barthes fully confess how and why this elusiveness had dominated his career. In his autobiography he confessed the extent to which his critical stance could be traced to his homosexuality, and in *Camera Lucida* he confessed that both his androgyny and formalist restlessness resulted from his close rapport with his mother--a sense of affinity so intense that once she died he announced he no longer wanted to live. With these two disclosures, Barthes' critical theory suddenly took on a narrative aspect with sufficient linear dynamics to invite reexamination as autobiography no less susceptible to explication than the typical literary text. Ironically, it also disclosed a central unity of action that Barthes had sought to reject in his interpretation of fiction throughout most of his career.

What I am proposing here is a brief and necessarily tentative meta-critical psychohistory explaining Barthes' eclectic formalism as the product of a sense of alienation no less compelling than in Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, or any other author who sought cathartic gratification by way of literary accomplishment. As in the case of Hamlet, Barthes's avoidances manifested a tragic vulnerability that anticipated--indeed, predicted--the circumstances of his accidental death, when, as with Hamlet, his verbal extravagance culminated in silence. According to the conventions of tragedy (one version of *Doxa*), wordlessness finally prevailed through Barthes' collaborative eagerness to die when he walked in front of a moving bread truck.¹ Barthes' incessant rejection of narrative form therefore brought into play its own particular version of narrative continuity that doubled negation by denying the principle of denial imposed by Aristotelian linearity. Indeed, denial became essential once Barthes' mother dependency was brought to an end. But if elusiveness characterized his earlier criticism, his later books confessed with disconcerting honesty personal truths almost too painful to recount, and in his final book, *Camera Lucida*, he repeatedly declared his eagerness to join his deceased mother beyond the grave. This had become his final and most important mission.

Barthes' growth as a critic can accordingly be treated as a magnificent anti-novel characterized in its early stages by formalist evasiveness and in the end by a tragic integrity that obtained his final and irreversible freedom from orthodox values. The difference between his version of literary deception and the paradigm I have described elsewhere--of metaphoric truth denied by narrative closure--results from his holistic vision of closure (what could be more final than his confessed suicidal obsession?) as well as his denial of seemingly limitless meta-critical

evasiveness by the countervailing insistence on autobiographical truth (and what could better exaggerate this mimetic emphasis than his explanation of the snapshot photo?) Barthes' epigraph in his own handwriting at the beginning of his autobiography, "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel," certainly applies to his autobiography, but more, I think, to his entire life--and, indeed, what is "spoken" (Barthes' full output of criticism submitted to language) turns out to be no less profound in its ambiguity than Hamlet's antic disposition four centuries earlier.

1.

Barthes' debut in literary criticism began with his relatively modest effort to deny Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of radical *engagement* subsequent to World War II. Like many of his contemporaries, Barthes recoiled from the propagandistic demands implicit in Sartre's theory of existentialism and tried to find a balanced alternative that conceded these demands subordinate to an unbiased non-political perspective. The issue of Stalinism had isolated Sartre from such disillusioned former resistance fighters as Camus and Merleau-Ponty, and Barthes entered the fray more or less aligned with these figures against Sartre. As a young invalid still under the care of his mother, he did not share their background in the struggle against the Nazi occupation of France. Nevertheless, he sympathized with their concerns and joined in their rejection of Sartre's beliefs. Barthes' unique contribution to the debate was his ingenious substitution of literary form for Marxist *engagement*. With a strategy of rhetorical circumvention he declared his commitment against commitment as a misguided distraction that prevents the achievement of ideal form. *Engagement* (writing as *praxis*) was the primary threat, and Barthes responded by hypostatizing *engagement* as one particular category, of history, whose subordination to a more inclusive category, of form itself, designified *praxis* as a literary imperative. In his later books he extended this strategy to reject any social or political orthodoxy that imposes belief at the expense of experiential freedom.

In his remarkable 1949 manifesto *What is Literature?* Sartre had claimed the modern "engaged" writer is morally obliged to make a radical commitment to history.² According to Sartre, the engaged writer must acknowledge history's unavoidable influence and accept the responsibility of becoming its conscious agent. The objective of the serious writer in Sartre's opinion was to serve as a "mediator" whose *praxis* was the encouragement of social revolution. This role forced him to "tell it like it is" and to suggest possible avenues toward a satisfactory political solution, no matter how remote in the future. The truth, Sartre implied, was the inevitability of a socialist future, so the writer's ethical obligation was to commit himself to this truth. Sartre therefore asked the writer to accept this responsibility without wasting his talent upon aesthetic objectives inconsequential to the political context of the twentieth century. The counterattack against Sartre's theory of *engagement* was spearheaded by disillusioned leftists who could no longer wholeheartedly support the anticolonial movements in Algeria and Indochina, nor, as they had conditionally in the late forties, the Stalinist policies of the Soviet Union. In *The Rebel*, published in 1951, Albert Camus emphasized political commitment as a strictly individual responsibility, and in "On Several Obsolete Notions" and "From Realism to Reality," Alain Robbe-Grillet maintained that commitment is (or was) a fad, and that no further distractions need to be put "above" the work of the artist. He made the posture of silence an aesthetic imperative and pitted himself against militancy by declaring, "We must challenge this terrorist apparatus brandished under our noses as soon as we speak of anything besides the class struggle or the anti-colonialist war."³ Like Camus, he unconditionally refused to compromise his artistic freedom of vision to political goals whose ultimate consequence seemed in fact the destruction of this freedom.

But it was Barthes who offered the most ingenious response to Sartre's theory of *engagement* in his first book, *Le Degre' Zero de l'E'criture*, published in 1953 and translated in 1967 as *Writing Degree Zero*.⁴ Chapters had been published in article form as early as 1947, but the book itself was published after the general reaction against *engagement* had already gained momentum. Also suspicious of Sartre's tendentious demands, Barthes proposed a formal compromise that conceded the importance of *engagement*, then situated it in a more inclusive context whose acceptance almost entirely undermined its importance. His strategy featured extreme rhetorical freedom in his mixture of elliptical pronouncements that ranged from agreeing with Sartre's notion of political commitment at one extreme to maintaining a formal, nonpolitical theory of language and style at the other. From one pole to the other he could move at will, never staying at a position long enough to develop its ramifications with any thoroughness. His political views remained militant enough to provoke attacks by Dieguez and others, but he diluted the category of politics by comparing its impact with those of language and style, two sources of literary form supposedly independent of history. Barthes also tried to establish a dialectic between Sartre's theory of *engagement* and Saussure's theory of language. Unable to find an adequate synthesis between these alternatives, he nervously shifted between them, his indecisiveness prefiguring the ambivalence he later praised in the tragic hero. By means of this vacillation, he progressively stripped the principle of *engagement* of its moral commitment to the truth and instead featured formal lucidity as the primary objective of literary inspiration.

Barthes' use of affirmation to deny was based on a complex strategy of detours, retreats, and new advancements, but with an overall sequence that may be divided into three stages. First he conceded the political relevance of spoken language (*parole*) and thereby suggested his support of Sartre's demands for the author's participation in history. Next he proposed weighing this propagandistic commitment against literary style and the structure of language (*langue*) as two independent but equally basic influences upon the writer. Finally, he suggested that all three of these influences--history, style, and language--are synthesized by literary form, the most important category of all. By combining these categories in a single overarching paradigm, Barthes hypostatized a regressive sequence from history (concessive) to style (tensive) and finally language (formalist), the latter as confirmed by literary form, the organizing principle that brings the three together. Apparently the principal benefit of this paradigm was that it let Barthes designify Sartre's version of *praxis* by subordinating *engagement* to "writing degree zero," the perfect equipoise among these three sources that guaranteed form's precedence over the journalistic excesses typical of *engagement*. Barthes could acknowledge with a generous tautology that historic responsibility is an important feature of prose with social implications, which he called *e'criture*. Loosely translated, *e'criture* meant writing as process--a concept which he traced beyond Sartre to Saussure's definition of *parole* as the spoken word. But then Barthes further eluded Sartre's social imperatives by emphasizing style and language as additional influences upon *e'criture* outside social history, yet loosely connected or "linked" to provide a formal history of literature. Finally, as already indicated, he eliminated partisan commitment from *e'criture* in the sense intended by Sartre by arguing that "writing degree zero" is ultimately the most satisfactory mode of *e'criture* for contemporary literature, the perfect balance between journalism and literary style, each nullified by its compromise with the other.

According to Barthes, these three sources of literary inspiration--language, style, and journalism--provide a basic triad that explains the diachronic history of French literature from classicism to realism, symbolism, and finally existentialism. Barthes explained "zero degree" creativity as a sporadic achievement that now and again occurs as literary history makes its

incessant circuit among these tripartite extremes. The classicism of Racine and his contemporaries, for example, had featured *langue* as syntactic lucidity, but this was followed by realism in the nineteenth century and then by a stylistic density brought to its extreme in symbolist poetry. By the mid-twentieth century Barthes claimed, the trend shifted toward the extreme of journalism advocated by Sartre at the expense of both style and language. For a brief remarkable period, however, he found the pendulum back again at dead center in "writing degree zero," the characterless prose of Camus and Robbe-Grillet whose syntactic lucidity resembled Racine's purity and timelessness. Without exactly denying Sartre's concept of *engagement*, Barthes characterized it as misguided extremism in contrast to the formal, unmediated balance of "zero degree" expressiveness and the Apollonian refuge it offers from social struggle.

Barthes never spelled out his three-stage use of dialectics to deny praxis, but it always seems to have been operative in his use of metaphors, ellipses, and paradoxes. A notable example of this strategy may be found in his first chapter of *Writing Degree Zero*, "What is Writing?" originally published in 1947, in which he almost imperceptibly moved from the first to the second stage within three or four paragraphs, and then brought his argument to rest at the third. He began by militantly declaring *e'criture* to be an "act of historical solidarity," a "function" which links form through "human intention" with "great crises of History" (p. 14). In contrast he found language and style to be "blind forces" and merely "objects" lacking organic validity. At this point he was entirely in accord with Sartre, his theory of *e'criture* consistently extending the principle of *engagement*. But when Barthes transposed his terms to a second level of strategy, defining *e'criture* as "the morality of form, the choice of that social area within which the writer elects to situate the Nature of his language," he diluted political commitment into making a choice about the "nature" of language relative to the discussion of pluralistic social problems (p. 14). He divided Sartre's unified theory of history into separate "areas" within which the writer may choose the most appropriate *e'criture*. A variety of causes took precedence over a single cause rooted in class conflict, and the intrinsic virtue of language took precedence over its use as the vehicle for ideas. Barthes next called *e'criture* an "ambiguous reality" which "refers the writer back, by a sort of tragic transference, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation," presumably language and style" (p. 16). Finally, he claimed in the next paragraph that the freedom of *e'criture* is but a moment in time which must be modified by previous usage, and that *e'criture* is significant "at the level of History" because it provides "a meaningful gesture of the writer." The concept of "gesture" intended by Barthes, necessarily conflicted with Sartre's notion of praxis, since it implied expressiveness rather than taking action. In this fashion, Barthes incrementally shifted his approval from *e'criture* as a prose of political commitment to the formal "instruments of creation," non-political reifications he had earlier described as the "blind forces" of language and style.

Sometimes Barthes categorically denied the truth-claims of *engagement*, for example when he declared, "Any political mode of *e'criture* can only uphold a police world" (p. 28). However, he usually hedged his opposition by questioning *e'criture*'s sacrifice of formal permanence to the alienation he believed was the necessary product of political commitment: "*E'criture*, free in its beginning, is finally the bond which links the writer to a History which is itself in chains: society stamps upon him the unmistakable signs of art so as to draw him along the more inescapably in its own process of alienation" (p. 40). Here it seems clear that Barthes considered history to consist of perpetual repression without the prospect of resolution, and the activist writer to be the victim of his own alienation and justifiably forgotten when the program he advocates is succeeded by others. Also to be noted is Barthes' prelapsarian assumption that artistic freedom was inherited from a Golden Age, a condition "free in its beginning" and mistakenly abandoned over the course of history. This idealization of the past was antithetical with Sartre's conviction that freedom

results from struggle toward a utopian future. Barthes proposed that sporadic periods of history regain *e'criture's* non-historic lucidity, as has most recently occurred, he claimed, in "writing zero degree." History plays its role, Barthes conceded, but writing degree zero plays its role, too, as both the origin and recurring pinnacle of history's evolutionary process. With this caveat Barthes could relegate Sartre's revolutionary optimism to a status inferior to the writer's permanent responsibility to the perfection of literary form. By affirming form, he denied the importance of any vision that emphasized political change.

Language (or *langue*) was depicted by Barthes as the force upon *e'criture* which is the most impervious to the influence of history. Here again he anticipated the structuralist emphasis upon synchrony which derived from the linguistics of Saussure. According to Barthes, *langue's* permanent lexicon of rules and definitions exactly counterbalances both *parole* and *e'criture's* ongoing rush of words and locutions in an utterance. *Langue* asserts itself as a corpus of habits and prescriptions internalized by the individual as "a reflex response involving no choice" (p. 9). Sentences might express the truth, but the word combinations composing sentences are entirely the product of habit. If there is any "truth" to this lexicon of habits, it bears a different origin from the political truths emphasized by Sartre. Obviously borrowed from Saussure, Barthes' concept of *langue* provided fiction with its most basic truth immune to the historic imperative: "This sacral order of written signs establishes literature as an institution and clearly tends to abstract it from history, for no limits can be set without some ideas of permanence" (p. 2). Once again at the second stage of his strategy, Barthes elevated language to serve as a higher authority which necessarily imposes rules and structures upon the experience of literature. However, the linguistic authoritarianism Barthes promoted here was in conflict with his judgment when he deplored, at the first level of his strategy, "the eternal repressive content of the word 'order'" (p. 26). Considered alone, language could be treated as a benevolent deity, an unmoved mover with an inescapable structural ethic, rather than a set of rules affording infinite permutations depending on the choice of the author.

Barthes argued that history is also denied by a second category, clearly psychoanalytic in origin, the mystique of personal style: "It is the authority of style, that is, the entirely free tie between language and its fleshly double, which imposes the writer as a 'freshness' above history" (pp. 12-13). Despite the transcendent implications of "above," this innocent authority apparently comes from below, from the thrust of unconscious forces, indeed from biology itself: "By reason of its biological origin, style resides outside art, that is, outside the pact which binds the writer to society" (p. 12). According to Barthes, the source of style is the deepest region of personality, "where the first coition of words and things takes place," and it expresses drives and feelings that erupt from inside oneself apart from social influence (p. 10). As explained by Barthes, history cannot disclose what is happening inside an author at the moment he is writing, since style is "never anything but metaphor, that is, equivalence of the author's literary intention and carnal structure . . ." (p. 12).⁵ Barthes found in both style and metaphor an inward awareness more basic than conscious perception, social role, and social context. Historic change in values and attitudes was conceded by the definition of *e'criture*, but, like *langue*, the personal matrix of style remained a pure phenomenon independent of social relationships.

But a synthesis was needed, and according to Barthes this could only be attained when literary form succeeds in connecting language and style to history in unmediated equipoise. Through form these three elemental forces, language, style, and history, impinge upon each other to bind the writer to society by shared structural expectations. As the synthesis that combines the three, form necessarily plays a major role in diminishing the relative importance of *engagement* as

a literary obligation: "Every mode of *e'criture* has thus been an exercise in taming or being repelled by that Form-object inevitably met by the writer on his way, and which he must scrutinize, challenge and accept, since he can never destroy it without destroying himself as a writer" (p. 4). Form is more essential to literature than any of its ingredients and in fact "the first and last arbiter of literary responsibility" (p. 83). For this reason Barthes could praise "writing degree zero" for having liberated form from ideology, not because it permits the abandonment of political commitment, but because its perfect equipoise makes this commitment altogether unnecessary.⁶ Without retreating from politics, he was marching in a different direction, toward form's "zero-degree" balance between journalism and the timelessness of style and language.

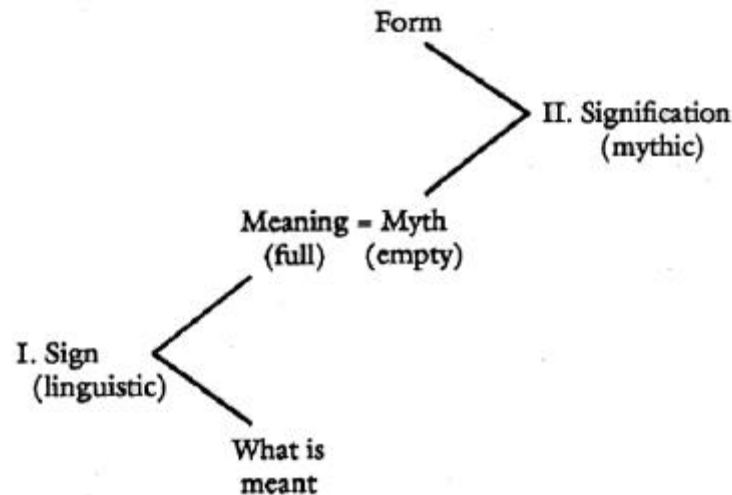
The concept of a "zero degree" was actually suggested earlier by Sartre's expression, "*l'e'criture blanche*," used in his 1947 review of Camus' *L'E'tranger*, but Barthes imposed his own definition of a "colorless language," a "style of absence" which transforms itself into a "neutral term or zero element" (pp. 76-77). Zero degree equipoise becomes exactly the balance between literary style (which Barthes found to be ultimately suicidal in such poets as Mallarme') and the journalistic clarity recommended by Sartre (which Barthes thought reduces ideology to a question of grammar too much in the "imperative mood"). Through zero degree symmetry, Barthes claimed, the excesses of journalism and literary density cancel each other out, leaving us with the "absence of all signs," the "style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style" (p. 77). The "zero-degree" writer might be aware of modern disorder, but anticipates with trepidation the social homogeneity advocated by Sartre (p. 87). The zero-degree writer's disengagement, Barthes claimed, is reflected in an empty style like that of Camus or Robbe-Grillet, which is a "basic speech, equally far from living languages and from literary language proper" (p. 77). The zero-degree writer accepts as an inevitability that the "zero-degree" balance is only temporary, a fleeting opportunity soon to be succeeded by imbalance toward either journalism or literary style, but he also recognizes "that there is no writing which can be lastingly revolutionary, and that any silence of form can escape imposture only by a complete abandonment of communication" (p. 75). Without entirely escaping imposture, he resorts to literary form, "the way a certain silence has of existing," literature's quintessence free from human struggle (p. 78).

2.

In his later books Barthes dealt with many topics besides politics, but almost always with the same strategy of disengaging himself through his affirmative pursuit of alternatives. His logic was essentially dialectic, subordinating both logic and induction to the threefold pattern of withdrawal mentioned above: concessive in granting a role to whatever tendency or disposition he wanted to deny; tensive in establishing a complementary relationship with equally important alternatives; and formalist in establishing a structure (or paradigm) among these alternatives which effectively denies (or designifies) the active ingredient presumably acknowledged at the concessive stage of his strategy. The primary benefit of Barthes' formalist strategy, as compared, for example, to fiction as organized by narrative form, is that its linear sequence did not depend on obvious metonymic advancement toward closure. Barthes ranged as he pleased among his ideas, leaving it to the reader to comprehend his intentions.

Perhaps the most basic use of this strategy in Barthes's criticism may be found in *Mythologies*, published in 1957 and translated in 1972, in which Barthes proposed that myth is a second-order semiological system which doubles signification, thereby diminishing the influence of raw experience as signified by words and word combinations.⁷ He conceded the importance of signification as a representation of whatever is signified, but subordinated its role to a more

inclusive signification based on what he described as a "second-order semiological system," the use of the entire sign--comprising both the signified and its "full" signifier--as an "empty" signifier to convey myth (pp. 114-16). At the "concessive" stage of his argument he granted that full (i.e. ordinary) signification is of course essential to literary expression, but he imposed the caveat, at the "tensive" stage of his argument, that in signification's literary use as a "global sign" it necessarily becomes empty signification in representing myth. By identifying meaning as the final term in ordinary signification and form as the final term in the global signification essential for myth, Barthes brought his argument to its "formalist" culmination by establishing a negative polarity between form and what is meant (the first term in ordinary signification) to explain the distinction between literary and non-literary experience--one necessarily formal and the other necessarily limited to the signification of raw information (pp. 116-18):



If the author's signified meaning is "full" according to Saussure's theory of signification, it becomes the "empty" first term of a mythic system essential to literary experience. A word's signification is necessarily compounded by its second referent based on its mythic implications, and this tandem representation gives literary form its precedence over referential accuracy, including, of course, politicized speech. Here, once again, the complementary interaction among alternatives gives precedence to form as a final term which effectively denies the active ingredient of its opposite. In this instance Barthes' use of form denies raw experience, the first term in ordinary signification, necessarily a more inclusive category of human behavior than the *praxis* implied by *engagement*, whose denial by form was already explained in *Writing Degree Zero*.

To illustrate the tripartite organization of his doubled semiological system, Barthes resorted to the symbolism of the rose:

Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here, then, only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that: to put it accurately, there are here only "passionified" roses. But on the plain of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. (p. 113)

The literary value of Gertrude Stein's *rose*, for example, depends on linking its primitive (or "first order") signification of the flower usually identified as a rose with its literary symbolism (a "second order" signification). The rose as signified at the first level becomes the signification of the mythic rose at the second. As a result, the literary rose becomes both more and less than a real rose. It exceeds the real rose because of its literary status, but it falls short of it because the literary associations linked with this status nullify (or crowd from consideration) most of the direct experience represented by the word *rose*.

What Barthes maintained here was that our plenitude of non-literary experience is actually designified by the literary use of signification. Raw experience becomes accessible to fiction once it can be incorporated into the formalist meaning-form equation at the core of literary experience. But this equation necessarily asserts itself at the expense of the primary relationship between signifier and signified--the full experience of the rose evoked by the simple utterance of the word *rose*. Only in poetry, Barthes claimed, is this process of designification resisted, since poets impose a "regressive" semiological system:

Whereas myth aims at an ultra-signification, at the amplification of a first system, poetry, on the contrary, attempts to regain an infra-signification, a pre-semiological state of language; in short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves. This is why it clouds the language, increases as much as it can the abstractness of the concept and the arbitrariness of the sign and stretches to the limit the link between signifier and signified. (p. 133)

Here Barthes' explanation of the pre-semiological value of poetry apparently converges with my views regarding poetry's metaphoric expressiveness. It would seem an easy step for Barthes to have explored the tension that might have occurred between the ultra- or hypersignification of poetry and metaphor on one hand and, on the other, the null-signification of literary form as the organization of myth. However, he neglected this possibility, in part because he wanted to deemphasize the notion of metonymic linear structure (i.e. plot) in the formal organization of myth, in part, perhaps, because, as Barthes himself argued in *Writing Degree Zero*, the history of French literature, more than that of English literature, has kept form and metaphor in relative isolation from the other. Barthes therefore conceded poetry a density of signification relatively free of formal constraints, while assigning to all other literature worthy of critical examination an empty signification typical of myth: "The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human actions, it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature . . ." (p. 142). Once again, the "full" representation of experience based on the relationship between signified and signifier at the first level of signification is purified through its use as a "global" sign at its second level of signification. A transition has taken place from simple reference to a more inclusive context equating signification with form in the zero-degree equipoise between myth and tangible experience.

3.

Barthes' next major book, *On Racine*, published in 1960 and translated in 1964, was impressive in its range of formalist borrowings.⁸ Here Barthes sought once again to elevate form over history, though he now turned from the general topic of *e'criture* to the more specific investigation of classical French tragedy. He was engaged in the same conflict, but on a different

battlefield and with a slightly different strategy. In *Writing Degree Zero*, he had tangentially suggested the "tragic element" in *e'criture* to be the struggle against "all-powerful signs" imposed by history. Now he expanded this point by removing tragedy from history because its timelessness supposedly excludes the interior features of process and duration. His new task was to eliminate time and process from tragedy so tragedy itself could be removed from history, establishing what might be described as an aesthetics (or "fallacy") of double timelessness. Once again he emphasized the value of literary form, in this instance by treating it as the vehicle of Racinian transparency "eternally open to signification": "Hence it is ultimately his very transparency that makes Racine a veritable commonplace of our literature, the critical object at zero degree, a site empty but eternally open to signification" (pp. viii-ix). Whereas Racine would have been identified in *Writing Degree Zero* as a classical poet who anticipated style's evolution toward the "zero-degree" lucidity of the twentieth century, he now became its most consummate practitioner.

By ignoring the categories of history and style in *On Racine*, Barthes gave the category of language its singular role as the primary source of form in both classicism and modern "zero-degree" *e'criture*. As before, he addressed himself to the question of *engagement*, this time with the somewhat cryptic remark probably influenced by Camus more than anybody else: "To write is to jeopardize the meaning of the world, to put an indirect question that the writer, by an ultimate abstention, refrains from answering" (p. ix). It might seem that Barthes was echoing Sartre in this remark, but careful scrutiny reveals that he wanted not to change the world, but to "jeopardize its meaning," a safer and relatively harmless semiotic preoccupation. It posed no obligation to answer questions about current social problems or even to make such an effort. Barthes wanted to ask "indirect questions" which he himself would not be able to answer--an objective clearly opposite to Sartre's emphasis upon the author's obligation to communicate his own answers, presumably correct ones, to a less enlightened public. Elsewhere in *On Racine*, Barthes claimed that unanswered questions are the most important contribution of the Racinian tragic hero, as if his seventeenth century fictive identity perfectly embodied the "zero-degree" consciousness of today: "Racinian man is caught in his disengagement: he is the man of the *que faire?* not of the *faire*; he appeals to, he invokes an action, he does not perform it . . ." (p. 48). The Racinian hero thereby prefigured modern disengagement, as did Racine himself, but instead of resorting to "zero-degree" form, he expressed his impotent lucidity in the ritual of tragic *de'nouement*. Within the context of tragedy, form manifested itself as his focus of indecision culminating in a silence that afforded "the invasion of the true *praxis*, the collapse of the entire apparatus . . ." (p. 59). Like his twentieth century counterpart in the zero degree author, Racinian man escaped political struggle through his affirmative commitment to the immanent crisis of language.

The eclectic formalism that pervades *On Racine* gives the impression of a brilliantly disarranged catalogue of new dimensions that deny experience by means of form. With a psycho-criticism borrowed from Mauryon, Barthes investigated primordial family jealousies as the matrix for all tragic action. With the structural anthropology of Le'vi-Strauss, he explored unreconciled mythic patterns, for example the antinomy between the powers of the sun and underground which he found to be of central importance in *Phèdra*. And with the critical phenomenology of Bachelard and Poulet he established a spatial dimension for tragedy in its relationship among three sites, the chamber, antechamber, and outside world. Barthes' explanation of the chamber was obviously psychoanalytic, and his explanation of the outside world was just as obviously Marxist, but tragedy, he claimed, is limited to the antechamber, the "site of language," a zero-degree threshold which links these two external realms. The antechamber supposedly reduces tragedy to the empty signification that connects the inner chamber, a psychological "abode of power," with the confused

social realities of exterior space. Occupying this intermediate zone, tragedy provides the "media of transmission" from secrecy to effusion, from immediate fear to fear expressed" (p. 4). Once again Barthes' threefold strategy of disengagement can be detected based on a formalist version of dialectics that recurred throughout his career. Barthes takes the initial step of conceding everything connected to the process of life and politics explained by Saussure to be in the realm of diachrony. Then, however, Barthes draws upon an arena of alternative formalist possibilities derivative of the realm of synchrony also described by Saussure, and from the tension between these two primary sources of human experience proposes his own formalist compromise in zero-degree equipoise, in other words in form as a synthesis of myth and concept, and in tragedy as behavior of the antechamber trapped between inner and outer space:

	<u>Concessive</u>	<u>Tensive</u>	<u>Formalist</u>
<i>Écriture</i> (Writing Degree Zero):	<i>engagement</i>	<u>contra</u> style and language	Zero-degree equipoise
Signification (Mythologies):	concept	<u>contra</u> myth	Form-meaning equation
Tragedy (On Racine):	exterior space	<u>contra</u> inner space	Antechamber as site of language

Once raw experience is offset by its representation, the antithesis between the two provides a zone of interaction that takes precedence over each alone. Inevitably this antithesis is formal, disposing of the material threat posed by one or both of the alternatives. On this basis Barthes could draw upon a large variety of reductive approaches to extract tragedy, indeed all literature, from history through its presumably formal timelessness. The truth value of tragedy was not what it said about real life or what it said about human need, but its success in organizing language (and plot) to keep these antithetical demands suspended and unresolved.

Most remarkably, Barthes tried to reduce to formalist guidelines Lucien Goldmann's Marxist interpretation of Racinian dialectics. He acknowledged the value of Goldmann's Hegelian insight that tragic conflict arises from "pure contraries that are never mediated": "The Racinian world is a world of two terms, its status is paradoxical, not dialectical: the third term is missing" (pp. 41, 49).⁹ But he neglected Goldmann's important qualification that unresolved paradoxes during historic "periods of tragedy" do become resolved by such figures as Plato (for Sophocles), Locke (for Shakespeare) and Marx (for Racine) in later epochs, when the intuitive discoveries of tragedy can be brought into philosophical discourse. This concept of delayed synthesis postpones the mediation advocated by Sartre until destructive contradictions can finally be confronted on an analytic basis, but this, too, Barthes wanted to avoid. He preferred to reject both the direct and "eventual" theories of mediation by instead proposing that human purposefulness is restricted to the vulgar intrusiveness of minor figures such as Oenone, the meddling nurse in *Phèdre* (pp. 53-54). Barthes found the pragmatic futility of these characters to be dwarfed by tragic action which fulfills itself in a perfect zero degree ambivalence of destructive lucidity between "pure contraries that are never mediated" (p. 4). To this intermediate zone of representation, outside history, he restricted his inquiry. In just one sense did he accept the concept of tragic mediation, but his explanation reduced it to futility and absurdity. He claimed tragedy converts praxis first to language, providing the illusion of a dialectic, and then to silence whose dialectic is the "transcendence of failure," the "myth of the failure of myth" (p. 60). On this basis, reminiscent of

Hamlet's fate as discussed in Chapter Six, Barthes was willing to explain tragic reconciliation, but his concession proscribed both signification and human aspirations in favor of silence.

As indicated earlier, Barthes largely concentrated his attack upon process and duration to eliminate from tragedy any reference whatsoever to the processes of human behavior culminating in history or narrative closure. In *Writing Degree Zero*, he had boldly proclaimed, "What must be destroyed is duration, that is, the ineffable binding force running through existence . . .".¹⁰ In *Elements of Semiology*, he had similarly tried to eliminate process and density from connotation in language with an ingenious theory of regressive "planes of expression."¹¹ And now, in *On Racine*, he made tragic action timeless by explaining duration as a tautological cancellation of terms which only accidentally occupy time: "Racinian duration is never maturative, it is circular, it accumulates and harks back but never transforms anything" (p. 49).. He accordingly reduced all tragic process to logical and mathematical formulations outside the dimension of time as a formalist manifestation more synchronic than diachronic. For example, he asserted that "Racinian disorder" is essentially a sign or symbol in a "designed" two-dimensional universe, undoubtedly Euclidian. He likewise claimed tragic conflict is a crisis of space (p. 26), the topographical denial of duration, but also rigidly binary with reversible terms, in this case its algebraic denial (p. 36). He further argued that reversal and discovery are inversions of absolutely no duration (p. 43), that tragic climax does not conclude action, but merely "severs" (p. 50), that soliloquy primarily expresses division (p. 36), and that tragic unity consists of ecstatic moments, or points in time (p. 37). He claimed that dialogue functions on the level of structure, not of character (p. 36), and that "there are no characters . . . only situations" (p. 13). He also said tragic death is "an empty grammatical category" which "never concerns anyone but the other," since "its constitutive movement is to be inflicted" (pp. 30, 32). Finally, he said that words, though they might arouse hope for mediation, function only as an "illusion of dialectic which brings the audience back to silence, the true praxis without duration" (p. 59). He viewed Racinian tragedy as an "autonomous object" that exists beyond history, process, and human frailties in a limbo of aesthetic perfection, its sublimation the final denial of *praxis* and *engagement* (p. 9). In its perfection it offered the model he wanted of literary commitment as a perfect rejection of human experience.

4.

Barthes' formalist emphasis became increasingly personalized over the years, as became obvious, for example, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, published in 1973 and translated in 1975.¹² But not until his autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, published in 1975 and translated in 1977, did Barthes fully draw upon his critical apparatus in explaining the connection between his eclectic formalism and his personal vision of life.¹³ As to be expected, a complex syndrome emerged that gave context to many of his theories that had otherwise seemed random and without any clear unity. Central to Barthes' autobiographical strategy was his acknowledgement of his androgynous preference, substituting his own denial strategies as a homosexual for the homophobic and/or homo-aversive denial strategies supportive of narrative form. With typical elusiveness he finally acknowledged his sexual preference by arguing, for example, that his migraine headaches classified him with the feminine sex (pp. 124-25), that he (like both the *Ancient Mariner* and *Young Goodman Brown*) felt peculiarly excluded by weddings (pp. 85-86), and that the phallus should be done away with instead of being treated as a little god (p. 165). More provocatively, he promoted the "sensuous" as a bisexual objective which isolates literary genius from popular opinion. He argued that writing constantly risks vulgarity (p. 126), that it disperses the energy of seduction (p. 143), and that speech and kissing are interrelated outgrowths of bipedalism which cannot be isolated from each other (pp. 140-41). He also advocated a convergence of love and

language to triumph over the "dreadful reduction" which language alone imposes on our feelings (p. 114), and he claimed that a writer's block results from his inability to capture the "enchantment" of a seduction (p. 86).

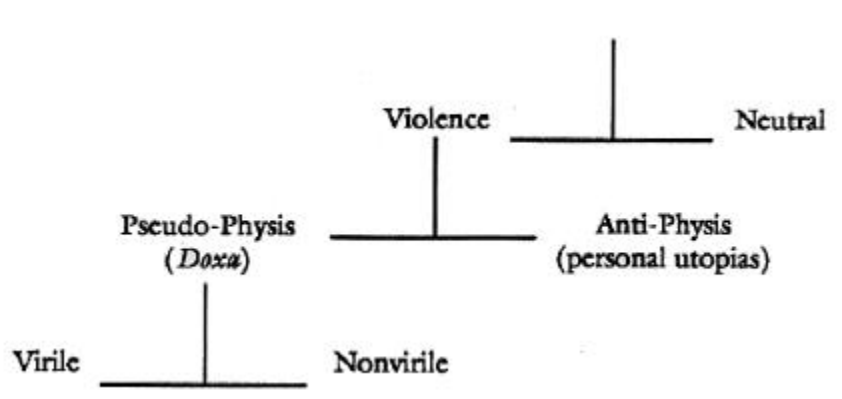
As perhaps to be expected, Barthes maintained that art is never paranoid (emphasizing homophobic denial), but fetishistic (emphasizing self-indulgence), and that even the single word expresses fetish as both mana and appetite (p. 68). Here Barthes' rejection of paranoid experience as a component of literature tied in with his programmatic rejection of plot and the rest of the machinery of narrative form. As earlier indicated, his androgynous bias precluded his acceptance of any synthesis between the "thick" and essentially fetishistic ultra-signification of poetry and its designification by narrative form. Barthes also treated the Oedipus complex as a personal challenge. With obvious relish he quibbled over the relative courage of his earlier remark, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, that fiction should be uninhibited enough to show its "behind" to its Political Father.¹⁴ "Ass" would be inappropriate, he argued, because it was the child's posterior he had in mind, compounding the ambiguity of his obvious disdain for father figures.¹⁵ By spelling out this distinction he claimed to be protesting his innocent intentions, but he also disclosed an infantile defiance reminiscent of both "Young Goodman Brown" and the final image in "Mending Wall."

Barthes identified his primary enemy, the "other" against which he struggled as a critic, to be *Doxa*, or orthodox opinion, thinking's lowest common denominator typical of respectability and patriarchal demands. "The *Doxa*," he argued, "is Public Opinion, the mind of the majority, petit bourgeois Consensus, the Voice of Nature, the Violence of Prejudice" (p. 47). *Doxa* translates from Greek simply as a notion or opinion, but Barthes uses the word to describe any belief system, any righteous cause with popular appeal. In this sense, *Doxa* may be explained as positive belief imposed by the Affirmative Fallacy, while the Affirmative Fallacy may be understood to entail the entire negative displacement that provides the matrix of *Doxa*, guaranteeing its impact among those who believe in it and its offensiveness to others who don't. "I remain behind the door," Barthes claimed, "The *Doxa* speaks, I hear it, but I am not within its space" (p. 123). Obviously, Barthes' aversion to leftist politics in his early criticism had expanded to become an inclusive disdain for all orthodoxy--*Doxa* of the left, of the right, and of non-political issues as well. Barthes' affirmative commitment to aesthetic purity as freedom from leftist rhetoric expanded to become a defense of freedom itself from every instance of orthodoxy and social constraint. His campaign against Sartre's existential-Marxist definition of freedom finally brought his own more inclusive definition of freedom--one that was radically iconoclastic, both anti-Marxist and hostile to traditional bourgeois obligations. *Doxa* was the problem, and the role of the intellectual was to help liberate the public from its ubiquitous repressiveness.

But *Doxa* also bore literary implications for Barthes, since he linked it with narrative form, conventional figures and episodes, and, not least, with the "style of a climax" which gives fiction its closure dynamics. Of course this literary function of *Doxa* offensive to Barthes epitomizes the metonymic function of plot featured by the model of Negative Poetics I am proposing, based on a conflict between local metaphoric confession and the narrative sequence of episodes which ends in closure. Barthes enthusiastically praised literature's resistance against conventional narrative closure: "What carries all before it is the flavor of paradox: to be able to suggest that Narrative is not at all projective, to be able to subvert the narrative *Doxa*" (p. 98). But he could not accept the ultimate success of closure as guaranteed by *Doxa*, the demand for a suitable heterosexual resolution by the overwhelming majority of readers. He accordingly declared narrative form to be oppressively tied to both marriage and the Oedipus complex (p. 121), and he argued that the conflicts these impose exaggerate typologies which are best dissolved through "homosexualities . . .

. whose plural will baffle any constituted, centered discourse . . ." (p. 69). Here again Barthes' explanation of narrative convention falls in line with Negative Poetics, but without conceding the inevitable victory narrative form grants to marriage, the Oedipus complex, and centered discourse at the expense of "homosexualities" and the "plural" as critical objectives. Barthes likewise claimed, predictably, that the dramatic scene, both literary and non-literary, is generated by violence that derives from *Doxa's* heterosexual and patriarchal "insistences" (p. 162). That this narrative "violence" is what makes fiction satisfying to most readers he chose to ignore. He preferred limiting his inquiry to his earlier category of personal style through his pursuit of random *aperçu* and textual curiosities. He accordingly eliminated from consideration the dialectic interaction between narrative *Doxa* and stylistic expressiveness, and reduced literary experience deserving of explication to a melange of androgynous significations that resist integration within narrative form's more inclusive structure. If the heterosexual imagination absorbs and denies metaphor by means of a cumulative linear structure, Barthes inverted his explicative priorities by disregarding these dynamics in favor of local contexts independent of the dynamics of closure. Barthes conceded that any literary text might be shaped and organized by *Doxa*--for example Racine's tragedy (heterosexual) or Balzac's "Sarrasine" (transvestite)--but he found more satisfaction in fracturing *Doxa's* plot-dominated rigidity into myriad fragments, each unique in its escape from "narrative violence."

The escapist strategy of Barthes' anti-homophobic commitment was clarified by his probably unconscious use of the regressive antinomies proposed by Le'vi-Strauss.¹⁶ Whether by accident or design, Barthes stumbled on his own regressive sequence, first by distinguishing *pseudo-Physis (Doxa)* from *anti-Physis* suggestive of his earlier category of style ("all his personal utopias"), then by distinguishing their "violence" from their "neutral" coexistence ambiguously suggestive of both colorlessness and homophilia. Finally, as if by afterthought, Barthes added a final antinomy between virile and non-virile to complete the regressive sequence for rejecting heterosexual *Doxa* by imposing perfect neutrality. The sequence may be diagrammed as follows:



An unpleasant choice (virile vs. non-virile) was revised as an easier choice (physis vs. pseudo-physis), and then a still easier choice (violence vs. "neutral") which featured his earlier formalist commitment to "zero-degree" perfection. But of course the basic distinction for Barthes spanned this entire field of alternations, between "virile" at one extreme, which he despised, and "neutral" at the other, signifying the style of neutrality (ultimately of silence) which he had advocated throughout his career. Barthes accordingly refined his earlier use of the concessive-tensive-formalist interaction by a tandem regression of binarisms expressive of unmitigated aversion. He

no longer proposed neutrality as "zero degree" compromise, but as the single acceptable alternative to three successive enemies, each rendered harmless by its redefinition at a new level of abstraction: virility, *Doxa*, and, the most easily rejected, violence. In effect, Barthes designified all three by organizing them into a hierarchy of binarisms that culminates in neutrality. He expanded equipoise between pure contraries into a regressive advancement among a sequence of equipoises whose metonymic sequence gives narrative effect to its denial of an unacceptable role--in his case one that imposed heterosexual rather than homosexual standards.

Barthes claimed he wanted to differentiate "neutral" from zero-degree vacancy because "neutral" afforded "another link of the infinite chain of language" (pp. 132-33). In his earlier criticism he had emphasized neutrality's universal potential as the primary value of zero-degree purification. Now, however, he finally acknowledged that his defense of neutrality was primarily based on his loathing of heterosexual identity as epitomized by pride in masculine sufficiency, deification of the penis, etc. The masculine role was unacceptable to him, and he was at last able to confess his effort to dispose of it through pun, parody, dislocation, and surreptitious quotation. He stressed duplicity as the fantasy to hear not everything, but something else--the "other" as discerned by the androgynous critic. There is always a struggle against one's own banality, Barthes claimed, and he described his life as a "Book of the Self" which articulated his resistances to his own ideas by falling away from them to gain new perspective. Accuracy was not his purpose, but escape--in his case flight from orthodoxy and the narrative machinery supportive of *Doxa* in the context of fiction. Perversely, because of his escapism, Barthes redefined his criticism as "almost a novel: a novel without proper names" (p. 120). As a novel, his criticism also lacked closure, but, as later to be seen, this, too, would be provided by the end of his career. Barthes' escapism also justified his role-playing as the assumption of an identity not his own: "The origin of the work is not the first influence, it is the first posture: one copies a role, then, by metonymy, an art; I began producing by reproducing the person I want to be" (p. 99). Barthes complained of being out of place. He was left-handed and of Protestant roots in a Catholic nation. Moreover, he was not heterosexual but genderless, not himself but his mother's progeny, not an author but a role player. Was he at least a critic? At last he could confess his reductive eclecticism to have been little more than an "echo chamber" of others' theories, each affording escape from a role he refused to play (p. 70).

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of Barthes' autobiography was his willingness to acknowledge his strategy of evasiveness. Like Hamlet, he admitted dispersing himself to deny his inner vacancy, his heart-of-hearts which might explain his almost infinite elusiveness: "To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?" (p. 92). It turns out that the fragmentation described by Barthes expressed more fundamental difficulties than his androgynous reaction against *Doxa* and its attendant obligations. Implicit throughout his autobiography was his timidity, his reclusiveness and avoidance of others except those who could share his fragile sensuousness. Barthes could boast of at last writing "more openly, more unprotectedly," but he also acknowledged, describing himself in the third person, that he did so "to account for his feeling of insecurity which possesses him today and, still more perhaps, the vague torment of a recession toward a minor thing, the old thing he is when 'left to himself'" (p. 102). As in both Hamlet and "Mending Wall," the word *thing* bore possible phallic connotations, suggesting masturbation and growing loneliness. But more important, Barthes raised the question of whose company he feared losing the most. Who was it, exactly, that shielded Barthes from his "old" and "minor" attractions? He had many friendships, but as Camera Lucida later made plain, it was primarily his mother who nourished and protected him from his infancy until her death two years before his. Her dominance

in his life may be measured by both his reclusiveness and his genderless strategy as critic and iconoclast. Throughout his entire life Barthes' was intensely dedicated to his role as his mother's boy, and his mother-dependency limited his emotional growth to playing out his own version of her role in his militant commitment against heterosexual adjustment, against *Doxa*, against *engagement*, against all suggestions of orthodox social responsibility.

Here, I think, may be found the essential contradiction at the core of Barthes' identity as a critic that led to his rejection of patriarchal demands. Like both Hamlet and Young Goodman Brown, he justified his loathing of father-identification through his vigilant defense of his mother-cultivated innocence, but, unlike Young Goodman Brown, his versatility as a gay iconoclast (he described himself as an intellectual "cruiser") let him abandon gender distinctions relatively confident of his safety from Oedipal demands (p. 72). Opposed to *Doxa* stood childish vulnerability and infantile anxieties, not the least of which was Barthes' apprehension that he might have grown up: "I no longer feel myself to be sympathetic (to others, to myself). It is at this point of contact between the writing and the work that the hard truth appears to me: I am no longer a child" (p. 137). Obviously, however, his childhood continued to haunt him. In perhaps the most memorable episode of his autobiography, Barthes told of his mother saving him from the ruins of a house foundation in which he was trapped, taunted by bullies standing on the walls above him. Likewise, the most memorable photograph included in his autobiography shows him held in her arms, an enormous ten year old child three quarters her size--he on the brink of tears, she standing proud and sufficient in her motherly protectiveness. It almost seems as if she had just pulled him from the foundation and was exposing to the camera his infantile helplessness later to be overcome by identifying with her--her devoted son *qua* homosexual, *qua* critic, *qua* enemy of orthodox opinion.

5.

In *Came'ra Lucida*, published in 1980, the year of Barthes' accidental death, Barthes eulogized his mother by linking her memory to his theory of photography as a medium of truth which absolutely transcends signification.¹⁸ By emphasizing the absolute mimetic truth of the snapshot, Barthes was at last able to cope with mimesis, a principle he had avoided in his earlier criticism. He could finally accept the value of signification in and of itself by featuring the concrete pictorial validity of the ordinary snapshot. Null-signification gave way to ultra-signification based on his new-found fascination with photography's elimination of the formalist equipoise he had emphasized in his earlier criticism. No longer was avoidance his strategy but a frantic effort to recapture photography's signified experience in its fullest detail. Each photograph, Barthes claimed, conveys an indirect but completely accurate transmission of light rays from the subjects photographed to whoever looks at their printed reproduction. The past event recorded by the snapshot is thereby salvaged for the present experience of those who view it. This is true no matter how many photographic surfaces intervene--the lens, film, negative, and print--and no matter how many years have elapsed between the taking and seeing of the picture. Moreover, each photograph conveys certain undeniable truths with obvious existential implications: (1) that the image depicted is from the past, (2) that the subject depicted is already dead or that much closer to death, and (3) that whoever views the photograph is likewise vulnerable to entropy and eventual death. Here at last were signified "truths" that the act of signification could not distill into formalist evasiveness.

A photograph is meaningful, Barthes claimed, if it contains a "*punctum*"--a detail that stands out, giving tension and unforgettability to its frozen image. But there is also a more inclusive *punctum* applicable to all photography, the sense of a lost past and the inevitability of death. For Barthes, images of motherhood seemed especially profound in this respect, and the most remarkable photograph Barthes knew of in this respect was the winter garden image of his mother as a five year old girl accompanied by her older brother. Already evident in her eyes as a child, Barthes insisted, were the kindness and "sovereign innocence" he would later cherish when trying to rekindle his memories of her. There she stood, fixed in time, his mother as a little girl, though she had already in fact lived out her life and died just months before he published his book. The most accurate depiction of her previous existence that remained for him was his small accumulation of snapshots, and their deathly implications provided his best remaining link with his mother.

Barthes could boast of having reversed roles to become his mother's mother in her final years, but this reciprocity culminated in total despair upon her death. Once she died he died as well--there was little to live for except her photographs. The Freudian explanation is plain, if bordering on the simplistic. Much earlier in his life, his love for his mother had been displaced to mother-identification, and now his mother-identification could be taken to its absolute limit by joining her in death. As in the case of Hamlet, self-destruction had become for Barthes both a transcendent gesture of homosexual identification and the ultimate homophobic gesture, a final letting go to regain in death a relationship that had prevented his self-realization in life--except as a literary critic. Throughout his career Barthes had been an enemy of *Doxa*, and now he both escaped and acknowledged its obligation by accepting his death. *Doxa* prevailed because he gave up the struggle, but he won, also, because he gladly preferred death to further enduring *Doxa*'s incessant demands. This was Barthes' time bomb that terminated his career in his final and most inclusive act of denial. By emphasizing snapshot photography's ultra-signification, he eliminated (or designified) the mythic doubling of signification crucial to literary form, as explained in *Mythologies*. As a result he relinquished (or designified) his own role as a critic infinitely resourceful in the study of literary form. No longer was there any meaning in denying orthodox values through an affirmative commitment to the *avant-garde*. Instead he turned to his tiny collection of amateur snapshots as his only means of reclaiming his inspiration in his relationship with his mother. And his snapshots demanded a renewed commitment to silence, neutrality--and ultimately death.

Death, in fact, became Barthes' new affirmative pursuit as captured by photography: "I have become Total-Image--which is to say, Death in Person . . . Ultimately what I am seeking in a photograph taken of me (the "intention" according to which I look at it) is Death! Death is the *eidos* of that photograph" (pp. 14-15). In a later passage he more specifically tied photography to his grief for his mother and his sense of his own impending destruction entwined with hers:

With the Photograph we enter into flat Death. One day, leaving one of my classes, someone said to me with disdain: "You talk about Death very flatly."--As if the horror of Death were not precisely its platitude! The horror is this: Nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph, which I contemplate without ever being able to get to the heart of it, to transform it. The only "thought" I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting; I have no other resource than this irony: to speak of the "nothing to say." (93)

For all practical purposes Barthes' career was finished. Both his literary criticism and mother-dependency ended with his remarkable tribute to his mother based on his theory of photography which explained his total fascination with her memory. She was brought to life, but only by mimetic worship which featured death. Literary signification had imposed silence and neutrality. Hyper-signification demanded death's reward--in effect its transcendence in null signification. Perhaps fittingly, Barthes' theory was best illustrated by the winter garden snapshot of his mother that he excluded from both his autobiography and *Came'ra Lucida*. By her silent but magnanimous smile, his mother, a little girl, perfectly expressed a sense of shared mortality usually reserved to the *moirai* and Cordelias of literary myth. Perhaps relevant here is Freud's theory of ambivalent death symbolism--of silent, smiling maidens on one hand predicting death by their silence, on the other hand symbolizing its denial by their capacity to bear children. Barthes modified this archetype by featuring his mother as a little girl before his own conception was possible. He thereby assigned her all three roles of the legendary *moira*: bearing him, providing him with companionship through life, and finally symbolizing (and neutralizing) his acceptance of death. For King Lear the silent maiden was his daughter Cordelia; for Barthes it was the snapshot of his mother as a child, thus completing the circle that totally eliminated patriarchal authority from his life. Barthes' effort to recapture his mother's generous smile was his terminal affirmation, his final contribution to literary criticism. Other projects persisted, of course, but with his theory of snapshot photography he wrote his epitaph. The rest was silence.

Denied by Barthes throughout his career were masculinity, continuity, closure, belief, righteousness, and political commitment, but most of all, *Doxa*--orthodox belief--the single overriding aversion that summarized the rest. The affirmative values he substituted evolved from early formalist dexterity to an intensely romantic vision of homophile sufficiency--first hinted in *S/Z* and *Pleasures of the Text*, then confessed in his autobiography. When his mother passed away, his emphasis shifted to an obsessive celebration of death which ended in an avoidable accident when he absent-mindedly walked in front of a bread truck. As he had declared much earlier, in *On Racine*, the tragic protagonist merely invokes an action, he does not perform it--so it does not exactly matter whether suicide might have been intended when Barthes was killed. The circumstances of his fatal accident were perhaps absurd, but its literary appropriateness was no less tragic than the stories of Phe`dre, Hamlet, and Oedipus. In a bizarre reversal of narrative form, his effort to retain his mother's memory culminated his abandonment of formalist evasions. The perfectly retrieved image as epitomized by the snapshot (presumably an ultimate act of signification) provided closure to his compulsive rejection of closure over the duration of his career. His earlier formalist strategy based on the sequence among concessive, tensive, and formalist stages, was actually reversed, since he had begun his career as a formalist and now ended it in the concessive mode, his theory of the snapshot conceding life, signification, and indeed his suicidal obligation to both *Doxa* and homophobic closure. As for the intermediate category of tension, this was perhaps best expressed by his many paradigms, all in the tensive mode, whose unavoidable symmetry at least conceded the existence of the energies he wanted to deny--energies to which he would later pay his due. Except for Barthes' inversion of poetry's orthodox sequence--a postponed "open system" honesty that succeeded his "closed system" defensiveness--his entire corpus of prose from *Writing Degree Zero* to *Camera Lucida* may accordingly be judged as a super-novel (not a "sub-novel," as Barthes feared) which established his literary parity with France's major twentieth century novelists.

Barthes was aware of his achievement. As he stated in the epigraph to his autobiography, "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel." He was of course proposing himself as his own protagonist, with the assumption that his hermeneutic restlessness constituted

his story's narrative outline. His insights defied the Aristotelian unities, but once his personal destiny took precedence, these too assumed a linear momentum that necessitated an Aristotelian outcome tantamount to tragedy. Barthes' mother-centered iconoclasm had encouraged his pursuit of criticism, and his final acknowledgment of his indebtedness transfigured his criticism into something akin to fiction. *Doxa* was the enemy, and self-discovery his belated victory as afforded by the regressive mimesis of snapshot photography, actually revising plot as a transition from avoidances to their confrontation--that is to say, from designification to its photographic denial. With this postponed and inverted sense of an ending, his career crystallized into its own version of plot (or *muthos*) unparalleled in the history of literary criticism.

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Footnotes

1. Compare with Barthes' description of the tragic protagonist as one who "appeals to, . . . invokes an action, he does not perform it." On Racine, trans. by Richard Howard (1963; New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 48.
2. Jean Paul Sartre, What Is Literature?, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).
3. Albert Camus, The Rebel, trans. by Anthony Bower (New York: Knopf, Vintage, 1956); Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 38.
4. Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968). In several contexts I have simplified the excellent translation by Lavers and Smith for the purposes of greater accuracy.
5. Barthes' equation between metaphor and the unconscious dynamics of style is more or less in accord with my treatment of metaphor elsewhere, especially in my Frost paper, thus supporting the notion of a dialectic tension between plot and metaphor. This possibility seems especially fruitful if combined with his later treatment of narrative form as the primary source of deception, for example in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 98. Unfortunately, the two concepts--of metaphor and narrative denial--do not cross paths in Barthes' writings, but their connection seems inevitable.
6. Here Barthes' theory of literary experience as an alternative to praxis bears a close resemblance to the model of negative poetics I have proposed in earlier chapters. However, I cannot concur with Barthes' explanation of writing degree zero as a style of perfect lucidity undisturbed by social, psychological, and linguistic impurities.
7. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," Mythologies, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109-159--especially pp. 111-131.
8. Roland Barthes, On Racine, trans. by Richard Howard (1960; New York: Hill & Wang, 1964).
9. Also see Lucien Goldmann, The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine, trans. by Philip Thody (New York: The Humanities Press, 1964), p. 46.
10. Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, pp. 38-39.
11. Barthes, Elements of Semiology, trans. by Anette Lavers and Colin Smith (1964; New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 39.
12. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, trans. by Richard Miller (1973; New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
13. Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. by Richard Howard (1975;

New York: Hill & Wang, 1977). 14. Barthes, Pleasure of the Text, p. 53.

15. Barthes, Roland Barthes, p. 79.

16. The resolution of conflict by regressive schemata is explained by Claude Le'vi-Strauss in both "The Story of Asdiwal," in The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism, ed. by Edmund Leach (London: Tavistock Publ., 1967), and "The Structural Study of Myth," in Structural Anthropology, by Le'vi-Strauss (New York: Basic Books, 1963). The application of his model seems necessarily limited in modern literature, but Barthes' regressive use of binarisms culminating in "neutrality" perfectly illustrates its possibilities, if without Barthes having necessarily recognized his indebtedness to Le'vi-Strauss.

17. Barthes, Roland Barthes, pp. 132-133.

18. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. by Richard Howard (1980; New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).