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ROLAND BARTHES



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Roland Barthes

TRANSLATED BY
Richard Miller

PREFACE BY
Richard Howard

 **Blackwell**

Translation © 1974 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.
Originally published in French as *S/Z*
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108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
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Published by arrangement with
Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.
19 Union Square West
New York, NY 10003, USA

First published in the United Kingdom 1990 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd
Reprinted 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002

ISBN 0-631-17607-1 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by Athenæum Press Ltd, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

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**This book is the trace of work done during a two-year seminar
(1968–1969) at the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes.**

**I hope that the students, auditors, and friends who took part
in this seminar will accept this dedication of a text
which was written according to their attention to it.**

A Note on S/Z

"It will afford profit and pleasure to that numerous class of persons who have no instinctive enjoyment of literature," writes a British reviewer of the French text of *S/Z*. *Instinctive enjoyment of literature!* Surely all of Roland Barthes's ten books exist to unmask such an expression, to expose such a myth. It is precisely our "instinctive enjoyment" which is acculturated, determined, in bondage. Only when we know—and it is a knowledge gained by taking pains, by renouncing what Freud calls instinctual gratification—what we are doing when we read, are we free to enjoy what we read. As long as our enjoyment is—or is said to be—instinctive it is not enjoyment, it is terrorism. For literature is like love in La Rochefoucauld: no one would ever have experienced it if he had not first read about it in books. We require an education in literature as in the sentiments in order to discover that what we assumed—with the complicity of our teachers—was nature is in fact culture, that what was given is no more than a way of taking. And we must learn, when we take, the cost of our participation, or else we shall pay much more. We shall pay our capacity to read at all.

Barthes calls his study an essay, and in it a consideration of more than just the tale by Balzac is desirable if we hope to discern what it is that is being *tried* here. For the work on the text by Balzac, the dissection—into 561 numbered fragments, or *lexias*, varying in length from one word to several lines—of *Sarrasine*, is not performed for the sake of identifying the five notorious codes (her-

meneutic, semantic, proairetic, cultural, and symbolic), or even for the sake of discriminating the classical text (with its *parsimonious* plurality of interpretation and its closure of significance) from the modern text which has no such restrictions, no such closure (for the final closure of the modern text is *suspension*). Rather, the work so joyously performed here is undertaken for the sake of the 93 divagations (I use Mallarmé's term advisedly, for it is with Mallarmé, Barthes has said, that our "modernity" begins) identified by Roman numerals and printed in large type, amounting in each case to a page or two. These divagations, taken together, as they interrupt and are generated by the lexias of the analyzed text, constitute the most sustained yet pulverized meditation on *reading* I know in all of Western critical literature. They afford—though Barthes can afford *them* only because of the scrupulous density of his attention, his presence of mind where one is used to little more than pasturage—a convinced, euphoric, even a militant critique of what it is we do when we read. For reading is still the principal thing we do by ourselves in culture, and it has too long been granted—as when Valéry Larbaud calls it the one unpunished vice—the amnesty of our society. We have "forgiven" masturbation in our erotic jurisdiction, but have we even learned to "indict" reading?

"What do you read now?" the hungry interviewer asked the famous writer, a woman of commercial success in the theater whose autobiography has defined a character of considerable literary sophistication. And the famous writer answered:

I don't read novels any more, I'm sorry to say. A writer should read novels. When I do, I go back to the ones I've read before. Dickens. Balzac I find now when I go to get a book off the shelf, I pick something I've read before, as if I didn't dare try anything new.

Aside from the underlining fact that it is a writer speaking, this is a familiar experience, this preference for what Barthes calls the *readerly* over what he calls the *writerly* (I believe Richard Miller has been both plausible and adroit in his translation of *lisible* and

scriptible; the dilemma is characteristic of the problem any translator of Barthes confronts, and the solution is characteristic of Mr. Miller, properly concerned with his reader's comprehension, not his comfort). It is a familiar experience because only what is authentically writerly can *become* readerly. If we were to set out to write a readerly text, we should be no more than hacks in bad faith; yet, as readers, how hard it is to face the open text, the plurality of signification, the suspension of meaning. It explains that hesitation at the bookshelf, the hand falling on the Balzac story, the known quantity. Known How often we need to be assured of what we know in the old ways of knowing—how seldom we can afford to venture beyond the pale into that chromatic fantasy where, as Rilke said (in 1908!), "begins the revision of categories, where something past comes again, as though out of the future; something formerly accomplished as something to be completed." (A perfect description, by the way, of the book in hand.) Why we read in this repressed and repressive way; what it is, in the very nature of reading, which fences us in, which closes us off, it is Barthes's genius to explore, not merely to deplore. His researches into the structure of narrative have granted him a conviction (or a reprieve), a conviction that all telling modifies what is being told, so that what the linguists call the message is a parameter of its performance. Indeed, his conviction of reading is that what is told is always the telling. And this he does not arraign, he celebrates.

So exact are Barthes's divagations, so exacting are their discoveries about the nature of reading, that we may now and again be dismayed—if we are in the main readers of the *readerly*—by the terms he has come to (he usually assumes Greek has a word for it) in which they must be rendered. For Barthes's text is *writerly*—at least his divagations are. This criticism is literature. It makes upon us strenuous demands, exactions. And because of them, precisely, we too are released, reprieved; we are free to read both the readerly (and can we ever again read Balzac in *all innocence*? can we ever want to?) and the writerly, *en connaissance de cause*, knowing the reason why. Essentially an erotic meditation, then, because it concerns what is inexpressible (which is the essence of eros), Barthes's

essay is the most useful, the most intimate, and the most suggestive book I have ever read about why I have ever read a book. It is, by the way, useful, intimate, and suggestive about Balzac's tale *Sarrasine*, which the reader of the readerly will find reassembled at the end of this writerly book, *en appendice*, as the French say.

RICHARD HOWARD

S/Z

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure: we shall, they thought, extract from each tale its model, then out of these models we shall make a great narrative structure, which we shall reapply (for verification) to any one narrative: a task as exhausting (ninety-nine percent perspiration, as the saying goes) as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference. This difference is not, obviously, some complete, irreducible quality (according to a mythic view of literary creation), it is not what designates the individuality of each text, what names, signs, finishes off each work with a flourish; on the contrary, it is a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which each text is the return. A choice must then be made: either to place all texts in a demonstrative oscillation, equalizing them under the scrutiny of an in-different science, forcing them to rejoin, inductively, the Copy from which we will then make them derive; or else to restore each text, not to its individuality, but to its function, making it cohere, even before we talk about it, by the infinite paradigm of difference, subjecting it from the outset to a basic typology, to an evaluation. How then posit the value of a text? How establish a basic typology of texts? The primary evaluation of all texts can come neither from science,

for science does not evaluate, nor from ideology, for the ideological value of a text (moral, aesthetic, political, alethiological) is a value of representation, not of production (ideology “reflects,” it does not do work). Our evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write: what is within the practice of the writer and what has left it: which texts would I consent to write (to re-write), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine? What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the *writerly*. Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text.

II. INTERPRETATION

There may be nothing to say about writerly texts. First of all, where can we find them? Certainly not in reading (or at least very rarely: by accident, fleetingly, obliquely in certain limit-

works): the writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore. Further, its model being a productive (and no longer a representative) one, it demolishes any criticism which, once produced, would mix with it: to rewrite the writerly text would consist only in disseminating it, in dispersing it within the field of infinite difference. The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure. But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions), they make up the enormous mass of our literature. How differentiate this mass once again? Here, we require a second operation, consequent upon the evaluation which has separated the texts, more delicate than that evaluation, based upon the appreciation of a certain quantity—of the *more or less* each text can mobilize. This new operation is *interpretation* (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it. Let us first posit the image of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation). In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as*

far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. The interpretation demanded by a specific text, in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible. This necessary assertion is difficult, however, for as nothing exists outside the text, there is never a *whole* of the text (which would by reversion form an internal order, a reconciliation of complementary parts, under the paternal eye of the representative Model): the text must simultaneously be distinguished from its exterior and from its totality. All of which comes down to saying that for the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic; thus, if one or another of these are sometimes permitted to come forward, it is *in proportion* (giving this expression its full quantitative value) as we are dealing with incompletely plural texts, texts whose plural is more or less parsimonious.

III. CONNOTATION: AGAINST

For these moderately plural (i.e., merely polysemous) texts, there exists an average appreciator which can grasp only a certain median portion of the plural, an instrument at once too delicate and too vague to be applied to univocal texts, and too poor to be applied to multivalent texts, which are reversible and frankly indeterminable (integrally plural texts). This *modest* instrument is connotation. For Hjelmslev, who has

defined it, connotation is a secondary meaning, whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation: if E is the expression, C the content, and R the relation of the two which establishes the sign, the formula for the connotation is: (ERC) R C. Doubtless because it has not been limited, subjected to a typology of texts, connotation has not had a good press. Some (the philologists, let us say), declaring every text to be univocal, possessing a true, canonical meaning, banish the simultaneous, secondary meanings to the void of critical lucubrations. On the other hand, others (the semiologists, let us say) contest the hierarchy of denoted and connotated; language, they say, the raw material of denotation, with its dictionary and its syntax, is a system like any other; there is no reason to make this system the privileged one, to make it the locus and the norm of a primary, original meaning, the scale for all associated meanings; if we base denotation on truth, on objectivity, on law, it is because we are still in awe of the prestige of linguistics, which, until today, has been reducing language to the sentence and its lexical and syntactical components; now the endeavor of this hierarchy is a serious one: it is to return to the closure of Western discourse (scientific, critical, or philosophical), to its centralized organization, to arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth).

IV. CONNOTATION: FOR, EVEN SO

This criticism of connotation is only half fair; it does not take into account the typology of the texts (this typology is basic: no text exists without being classified according to its value); for if there are readerly texts, committed to the closure system

of the West, produced according to the goals of this system, devoted to the law of the Signified, they must have a particular system of meaning, and this meaning is based on connotation. Hence, to deny connotation altogether is to abolish the differential *value* of the texts, to refuse to define the specific apparatus (both poetic and critical) for the readerly texts—it is to make the limited text equal to the limit-text, to deprive oneself of a typological instrument. Connotation is the way into the polysemy of the classic text, to that limited plural on which the classic text is based (it is not certain that there are connotations in the modern text). Connotation must therefore be rescued from its double contestation and kept as the namable, computable trace of a *certain* plural of the text (that limited plural of the classic text). Then, what is a connotation? Definitionally, it is a determination, a relation, an anaphora, a feature which has the power to relate itself to anterior, ulterior, or exterior mentions, to other sites of the text (or of another text): we must in no way restrain this relating, which can be given various names (*function* or *index*, for example), except that we must not confuse connotation with association of ideas: the latter refers to the system of a subject; connotation is a correlation immanent in the text, in the texts; or again, one may say that it is an association made by the text-as-subject within its own system. Topically, connotations are meanings which are neither in the dictionary nor in the grammar of the language in which a text is written (this is, of course, a shaky definition: the dictionary can be expanded, the grammar can be modified). Analytically, connotation is determined by two spaces: a sequential space, a series of orders, a space subject to the successivity of sentences, in which meaning proliferates by layering; and an agglomerative space, certain areas of the text correlating other meanings outside the material text and, with them, forming “nebulae” of signifieds. Topologically, connotation makes possible a (limited) dis-

semination of meanings, spread like gold dust on the apparent surface of the text (meaning is golden). Semiologically, each connotation is the starting point of a code (which will never be reconstituted), the articulation of a voice which is woven into the text. Dynamically, it is a subjugation which the text must undergo, it is the possibility of this subjugation (meaning is a force). Historically, by inducing meanings that are apparently recoverable (even if they are not lexical), connotation establishes a (dated) Literature of the Signified. Functionally, connotation, releasing the double meaning on principle, corrupts the purity of communication: it is a deliberate "static," painstakingly elaborated, introduced into the fictive dialogue between author and reader, in short, a countercommunication (Literature is an intentional cacography). Structurally, the existence of two supposedly different systems—denotation and connotation—enables the text to operate like a game, each system referring to the other according to the requirements of a certain *illusion*. Ideologically, finally, this game has the advantage of affording the classic text a certain *innocence*: of the two systems, denotative and connotative, one turns back on itself and indicates its own existence: the system of denotation; denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the *last* of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature: doesn't a sentence, whatever meaning it releases, subsequent to its utterance, it would seem, appear to be telling us something simple, literal, primitive: something *true*, in relation to which all the rest (which comes *afterwards*, *on top*) is literature? This is why, if we want to go along with the classic text, we must keep denotation, the old deity, watchful, cunning, theatrical, foreordained to *represent* the collective innocence of language.

I read the text. This statement, consonant with the “genius” of the language (subject, verb, complement), is not always true. The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it; I do not make it undergo a predicative operation, consequent upon its being, an operation known as *reading*, and I is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to occupy. This “I” which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost). *Objectivity* and *subjectivity* are of course forces which can take over the text, but they are forces which have no affinity with it. Subjectivity is a plenary image, with which I may be thought to encumber the text, but whose deceptive plenitude is merely the wake of all the codes which constitute me, so that my subjectivity has ultimately the generality of stereotypes. Objectivity is the same type of replenishment: it is an imaginary system like the rest (except that here the castrating gesture is more fiercely characterized), an image which serves to name me advantageously, to make myself known, “misknown,” even to myself. Reading involves risks of objectivity or subjectivity (both are imaginary) only insofar as we define the text as an expressive object (presented for our own expression), sublimated under a morality of truth, in one instance laxist; in the other, ascetic. Yet reading is not a parasitical act, the reactive complement of a writing which we endow with all the glamour of creation and anteriority. It is a form of work (which is why it would be better to speak of a lexeological act—even a lexeographical act, since I write my reading), and the method of this work is topological: I am not hidden within the text, I am simply irrecoverable from it: my task is to move, to shift systems whose perspective ends neither at the text nor at the “I”:

in operational terms, the meanings I find are established not by “me” or by others, but by their *systematic* mark: there is no other *proof* of a reading than the quality and endurance of its systematics; in other words: than its functioning. To read, in fact, is a labor of language. To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. —With regard to the plural text, forgetting a meaning cannot therefore be seen as a fault. Forgetting in relation to what? What is the *sum* of the text? Meanings can indeed be forgotten, but only if we have chosen to bring to bear upon the text a singular scrutiny. Yet reading does not consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, a legality of the text, and consequently in leading its reader into “errors”; it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their finite quantity, but according to their plurality (which is a being, not a discounting): I pass, I intersect, I articulate, I release, I do not count. Forgetting meanings is not a matter for excuses, an unfortunate defect in performance; it is an affirmative value, a way of asserting the irresponsibility of the text, the pluralism of systems (if I closed their list, I would inevitably reconstitute a singular, theological meaning): it is precisely because I forget that I read.

VI. STEP BY STEP

If we want to remain attentive to the plural of a text (however limited it may be), we must renounce structuring this text in large masses, as was done by classical rhetoric and by

secondary-school explication: no *construction* of the text: everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure. Whence the idea, and so to speak the necessity, of a gradual analysis of a single text. Whence, it would seem, several implications and several advantages. The commentary on a single text is not a contingent activity, assigned the reassuring alibi of the "concrete": the single text is valid for all the texts of literature, not in that it represents them (abstracts and equalizes them), but in that literature itself is never anything but a single text: the one text is not an (inductive) access to a Model, but entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately, not at a legal structure of norms and departures, a narrative or poetic Law, but at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened: each (single) text is the very theory (and not the mere example) of this vanishing, of this difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissive. Further, to study this text down to the last detail is to take up the structural analysis of narrative where it has been left till now: at the major structures; it is to assume the power (the time, the elbow room) of working back along the threads of meanings, of abandoning no site of the signifier without endeavoring to ascertain the code or codes of which this site is perhaps the starting point (or the goal); it is (at least we may hope as much, and work to this end) to substitute for the simple representative model another model, whose very gradualness would guarantee what may be productive in the classic text; for the *step-by-step* method, through its very slowness and dispersion, avoids penetrating, reversing the tutor text, giving an internal image of it: it is never anything but the *decomposition* (in the cinematographic sense) of the work of reading: a *slow motion*, so to speak, neither wholly image nor

wholly analysis; it is, finally, in the very writing of the commentary, a systematic use of digression (a form ill-accommodated by the discourse of knowledge) and thereby a way of observing the reversibility of the structures from which the text is woven; of course, the classic text is incompletely reversible (it is modestly plural): the reading of this text occurs within a necessary order, which the gradual analysis will make precisely its order of writing; but the step-by-step commentary is of necessity a renewal of the entrances to the text, it avoids structuring the text *excessively*, avoids giving it that additional structure which would come from a dissertation and would close it: it stars the text, instead of assembling it.

VII. THE STARRED TEXT

We shall therefore star the text, separating, in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface, imperceptibly soldered by the movement of sentences, the flowing discourse of narration, the "naturalness" of ordinary language. The tutor signifier will be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call *lexias*, since they are units of reading. This cutting up, admittedly, will be arbitrary in the extreme; it will imply no methodological responsibility, since it will bear on the signifier, whereas the proposed analysis bears solely on the signified. The *lexia* will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience: it will suffice that the *lexia* be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings; its dimension, empirically determined, estimated, will depend on the density of connotations, variable according to the moments of the text: all we require is that each *lexia* should have at most three or four meanings to be

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