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Neil Badmington, Cardiff University
Badmington@Cardiff.ac.uk

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Guided by Barthes: Fragments of a Photo-Journal

Neil Badmington

Dante made Virgil and Beatrice his guides through the realms of the dead. What if Roland Barthes were my guide through life?

The following fragments are taken from an ongoing photo-journal in which I have found myself turning repeatedly to elements of Barthes's work in response to everyday life and its signifying 'incidents', to use a Barthesian term. The journal was never meant for publication — I started keeping it simply to rehearse and wrestle with words — but a conversation with one of the editors of *CounterText* in Malta towards the end of 2018 persuaded me to select a number of passages for airing here.¹ Being invited to participate in a seminar on Stephen Benson and Clare Connors's wonderful *Creative Criticism* anthology at the Msida campus a year earlier, meanwhile, made me reassess the relationship between the critical and the creative in my own writing. 'Guided by Barthes' was guided greatly by Malta, then, which makes its appearance here in *CounterText* feel strangely foretold.

Although all that follows arises from the everyday, I wish to make it clear that I am not presenting some kind of updated version of Barthes's *Mythologies* — that caustic skewering of the quotidian and 'the ideological abuse which [...] is hidden there' (Barthes 2009: xix). Many critics have offered such a thing over the years; particularly successful examples can be found in the form of Rosalind Coward's *Female Desire* (1984), Gilbert Adair's *Myths & Memories* (1986), and, most brilliantly of all, Marjorie Garber's *Symptoms of Culture* (1998). I am, rather, guided in these pages by the column that Barthes wrote for *Le Nouvel Observateur* between December 1978 and March 1979.² The

English title of these gathered texts is 'Day by Day with Roland Barthes', and the focus, as in *Mythologies*, is on everyday phenomena — a conversation in barbershop, a ballet performance, religion, advertising, a Chaplin film. But the similarity ends there: the later chronicles are a world away from the book that made Barthes's name in 1957. They are, for one thing, far shorter than the mythologies: some run to just a few sentences. More significantly, the pieces are incidental, episodic, novelistic, uninterested in unmasking.

In his final entry, Barthes announced that he was pausing the project: 'I must interrupt these chronicles for some time', he began (1985: 116; translation modified). 'Some time' would, in fact, become all time, for Barthes never returned to the column. Before signing off, he considered the status of his 'experiment in writing' (116):

Yet how can such a form be *political*? Someone told me (the voice of rumour): 'I don't read your chronicles; apparently they're just *Mythologies*, only not so good.' No, they are not *Mythologies*, but rather the summary of certain incidents which week by week mark my sensibility as it receives certain stimuli or blows from the world: my personal *scoops* which are not directly those of the present. (116-17; translation modified)

This Barthes, not the semioclastic Barthes of *Mythologies*, has been my guide as the photo-journal has, little by little, incident by incident, developed.

There is a risk, Barthes notes in the last paragraph of his chronicles, that the incidents, as written and published, become 'moralities' sealed triumphantly with 'a final observation' (117). This concerns him: he prefers to think 'of writing as that power of language which pluralizes the meaning of things and, in short, suspends it' (117). I recognize the danger, and I have no desire here to mould 'moralities'. I have sought, therefore, to avoid the awaiting arms of 'a final observation', a message, a lesson about how each incident has marked my sensibility. The entries are titled,

dated, and located, but I have not presented them in chronological order: there seemed little point in flattering the fictions of personal growth, enlightenment, and self-discovery.

On Reflection
30 October 2017, Attard, Malta



On reflection, it's an unsettling case of precisely that. There is a full-length mirror on the outside of the bathroom door in my hotel room. The door opens inwards and comes to face two further mirrors: a large one above the hand basin, and a circular shaving mirror on an adjustable arm. I am staying alone, but every time I enter the bathroom I blossom into triplets. There is no chance of realising the humanist myth of becoming at one with myself by fleeing to another culture: here in Malta I am at three with myself. This is unnerving on three levels, suitably enough. First, one of me is one more than enough; I travelled abroad to flee me, not be me times three. Second, my initial reaction on stepping into the hall of mirrors is always to wonder why my father is with me in the bathroom. This is reminiscent of Freud. In a reflective footnote to his essay on the uncanny, poor Sigmund recalls being alone in his *wagon-lit* compartment

when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-

cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. (Freud 1997: 225)

Freud's trouble seems in part to arise from an encounter with a creature who is older than he imagines himself to be: the realization that he is actually the 'elderly gentleman' is, he writes, a matter of 'dismay'. My father is, by his own admission, now an 'elderly gentleman', but whenever I picture him I see him as he was when I was a child — him at an age close to my own at present. Awaiting me in triplicate among the mirrors in the bathroom is this lost figure from memory. (Rosalind Coward reminds us that Louis Daguerre actually called his early photographic process 'The Mirror with a Memory' [Coward 1984: 49].)

Third, the experience reminds me of a passage in which Barthes writes about seeing himself in photographs:

'But I never looked like that!' — How do you know? What is the 'you' you might or might not look like? Where do you find it? — by which morphological or expressive calibration. Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images. (Barthes 1995: 36)

Condemned. It's a strong word, but it's the right one, I think. What I'm reminded of in the round as I enter the hall of mirrors is the prison of embodiment. I don't mean this merely

in terms of a weary middle-aged aversion to a fallen, fuller form — though Freud's dismayed dislike of the specular intruder's appearance certainly strikes a rubenesque chord. No, more trying still is the fact that I can be nowhere and nothing but this body for the duration of my life; I get no holiday from it, even when I am, as today, hundreds of miles from home in a hotel filled with holidaymakers. At the same time, I can never see myself in full as anything but an image. 'In other words', as Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing which I do not observe: in order to be able to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would be unobservable' (2002: 104). I'm always out of reach because I'm always in reach. I've asked the other two men in my bathroom what they think of these speculative observations. On reflection, they both agree.

À la recherche des dents perdues
11 November 2017, Penarth, UK



The last first. My younger son has been saying all week that he is on the verge of losing his first tooth. There have been crisis meetings in the dead of night, full structural surveys on the way to school, multiple false alarms, an embargo on apples. But this morning there was a frantic hammering on the bathroom door while I was in the shower: the tottering tooth was finally out. It was, as custom dictates, placed beneath the pillow at bedtime; I have just used all of my lamplighter skills to retrieve it under cover of darkness and slide an envelope containing money into its place. Yes, the Tooth Fairy has visited. In the safety of my study, I hold the

tiny tooth in the palm of my hand — *une dent* too small to make a dent in my skin. This is the last first tooth, for there are, and will be, no younger siblings. This will not happen again. I open one of the drawers in my desk and remove the small ceramic container which houses the first fugitive milk tooth of my older son. I drop the new escapee in to join it. They look alike — so much so that I will probably forget in time whose is whose. (Can the authorities identify teeth of uncertain identity from their dental records?) I shake the container gently. The teeth move around freely, chatter. There is space for many more, and the second first tooth would actually have been the third first tooth if the universe had not bared its teeth and decided otherwise some years ago; there will always be a missing tooth, a gap in the smile. And there will be no more first teeth, so it is time to take the bit between my teeth and close the lid on the last of the first. Barthes once reported having a dream ‘whose units are teeth’ (1995: 3). It’s an odd image; it sets my teeth on edge a little. As I seal the container, Barthes’s dream bites at my ankles; I feel overwhelmed, bruised, dented. Outside dreams, in waking life, teeth are mordant markers of time, chapters, milestones — units, precisely, of measurement. Bit by bit, what bit. Here, now, with the lowering of the lid, era and experience bite the dust. The image has legs, has teeth.

Leading Man
16 March 2018, Penarth, UK



(Lead with this sentence.) I am walking the dog. We come to a park where she likes to chase leaves. A notice on the gate barks an order at us: 'DOGS MUST BE LED'. Public signs often behave like this: they issue instructions, establish what is forbidden or what is permitted. To move through the world is to be confronted at every turn by signs that demand attention. As Barthes puts it:

A garment, an automobile, a dish of cooked food, a gesture, a film, a piece of music, an advertising image, a piece of furniture, a newspaper headline — these indeed appear to be heterogeneous objects.

What might they have in common? This at least: all are signs. When I walk through the streets — or through life — and encounter these objects, I apply to all of them, if need be without realizing it, one and the same activity, which is that of a certain *reading*: modern man, urban man, spends his time reading. (Barthes 1994: 157)

This can get a touch tiring: the signs never let up, and there are moments when I long for what Barthes later called ‘an exemption from meaning’.³ Grant me a day’s peace, a day on which no sign sniffs me out and pesters me. ‘I am trapped by language’, Barthes announced gloomily at the Collège de France on 11 March 1978, during his course on the Neutral (2005: 57). Two weeks later, however, his tail was a little less between his legs as he offered a glimpse of hope:

All my life long, I’ve been living this back-and-forth: caught up between the exaltation of language [*jouissance* taken in its drive] [→ whence: my writing, my speaking are glued to my social being, since I publish and I teach] and the desire, the great desire for a respite from language, for a suspension, an exemption. (2005: 93; translation modified)

Exaltation and *jouissance* now glow alongside the weariness; the prison-house of language allows for conjugal visits. And I think I see Barthes’s point, for encountering the words ‘DOGS MUST BE LED’ at the entrance to the park turns out to be a strangely pleasurable experience, in that I manage both to obey its command and resist its restriction. It all comes down to an odd ambivalence in the sign. On the one hand, the verb ‘to be led’ here means that a dog must be kept on a lead. To lead a dog in this sense is simply to attach a lead to its collar: it is led because it is on a lead. So far, so good: I am obeying the sign, staying to heel, for my dog is on a leash. But the more common meaning of ‘to lead’ is ‘to be ahead of something’, with that something necessarily following behind. You are leading, you are in the lead, when you are out

in front. And this is where my resistance to the sign comes scampering into view. While the dog is on her lead, she is out in front of me, leading the way, as she always does. She never lingers behind and lets me choose the direction; I follow her lead. In other words, she is being led and not being led at the same time. I lead her (she is on a leash), but she leads the way and is in the lead. We encounter 'DOGS MUST BE LED', then, and we face a command. In response, we obey ... and disobey. We follow the order but also run free, unleashed. We are led and not led. This is, in short, a matter of what Barthes called 'the magic of the signifier' (1990b: 4) — and the signifier, as ever, is plural, alchemic, capable of making gold out of lead.

True Love Waits
31 March 2018, Los Angeles, California



(Wait while I write this down.) In the United States, Roland Barthes declares in 1970, 'sex is everywhere, except in sexuality' (1983: 29). He doesn't explain the place of love on this occasion, but if we wait patiently until 1974 we find him devoting two years of his seminar at the *École pratique des hautes études* to *le discours amoureux*.⁴ Those swooning, aching discussions in the classroom on rue de Tournon prepared the ground for *A Lover's Discourse* in 1977 — a book that achieved best-seller status by seducing 70,000 people into buying a copy in the first twelve months of its life

(Samoyault 2015: 618). Love sells, then, but love in Barthes's account also involves anxious waiting:

I am waiting for an arrival, a return, a promised sign. This can be futile, or immensely pathetic: in *Erwartung* (*Waiting*), a woman waits for her lover, at night, in the forest; I am waiting for no more than a telephone call, but the anxiety is the same. Everything is solemn: I have no sense of *proportions*. [...]

'Am I in love? — Yes, since I'm waiting.' The other never waits. Sometimes I want to play the part of the one who doesn't wait; I try to busy myself elsewhere, to arrive late; but I always lose at this game: whatever I do, I find myself there, with nothing to do, punctual, even ahead of time. The lover's fatal identity is precisely: *I am the one who waits*. (Barthes 1990a: 37-40)

In Los Angeles, I am waiting. Not for anything as thrilling as a lover, but merely for an Alfred Hitchcock archive across town to open. We arrived from London yesterday evening, so body-clocks are unhinged. The children awoke at 3am and were ready to dive-bomb into the pool by 5.45am. Now, three hours later, they are feuding in the water while I peer over the wall of the sun terrace and down Bunker Hill towards 7th Street, where I will soon wait for a westbound bus. This city is often seen as one of eternal traffic and movement — 'a migratory vastness', to let a phrase of John Cheever's migrate from the East Coast for a moment (Cheever 1993: 185). There is much truth in this, of course, and because I last visited Los Angeles a quarter of a century ago I had forgotten, or repressed, how feral the freeways can be; Reyner Banham's description of the city as a 'uniquely mobile metropolis' still rings true after all these years (Banham 1973: 23). But down at street level I notice two people standing immobile near the kerb, beneath a palm tree. The man takes a photograph of the woman, after which they move nearer to each other. There is an easy intimacy, an attentive closeness. To resurrect an

obsolete phrasing, I am taken under wait when I notice words painted on the tarmac next to them: WAIT HERE. Are these figures lovers? I don't know, but I am charmed to learn that this mobile city is also one whose streets give their blessing to waiting, to *le discours amoureux*.

Bouncing Back

14 October 2017, Cyncoed, Cardiff, UK



I am reading Edmund White in a sports hall while fifteen children bounce on trampolines. This is not quite how, in my distant youth, I imagined that adult life would unfold, but parenting is, I now know, reiterated deployment into unmapped combat zones with no rules of engagement or exit strategies. I watch supportively every week while my own son is heading for the ceiling, naturally, but I always bring a book for when unrelated youngsters are courting paraplegia. The trick is not to get too engrossed in the pages and thereby to miss any springing of the offspring; I have been caught out on several occasions. Having wept in recognition at Noah Baumbach's *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* recently, I suspect that my heedless actions in the sports hall are fuel for future familial grievances, for a funeral speech

which begins, 'My father read gay fiction while I tried to impress him with somersaults'. I sit on the wooden bench by the climbing ropes and try to focus on White's prose, but guilt blanches the bliss. The fear of complete parental failure Barani-flips its way towards me: I am ruining everything by reading fiction instead of simply paying attention to real life.

In an attempt to lift my spirits, I close my book and go in restorative search of signs. I cross to the corner of the sports hall, where there is a large electrical panel that makes me smile as we pass it on leaving at the end of every lesson. I have no idea what the switches operate, but I admire the defiant repetition of signs. I long to meet whoever created these labels. What stubborn care and semiological craft went into ensuring that the spacing of the words was exact, that each white strip was trimmed and fixed with such precision. There is a pure love of signs at work here, for a sign is quite simply, in Roland Barthes's words, 'what repeats itself'. 'Without repetition', he continues, in what reads a little like a repetition of the work of Jacques Derrida, 'there is no sign, for we could not *recognize* it, and recognition establishes the sign' (Barthes 1991: 237).

The word 'trampoline' has its roots in the Italian word for stilts: '*trampoli*'. Facing the parade of 'Open' and 'Close' on the electrical panel, I feel lifted, elated, elevated above the stilted boredom of sport by a string of signs. As if a switch had been flicked and I were at once upon stilts. Hope springs; I am bouncing back.

On Not Giving a Puck

12 February 2018, Ice Arena Wales, Cardiff, UK



Pucking hell — an evening at the ice hockey with the six-year-old and several of his known accomplices. Excitement soon skates off into feral territory, egged on by sugar and food colouring. The young thugs are reprimanded for shouting ‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’ when regular play is underway. One of them punches the team mascot in the face during a photo-opportunity. A group trip to the toilets leads to filibustering at the crowded urinals and shouts of ‘I can see your wink!’ at strangers. My failure in life is complete; all hope is iced. And yet. In the depths of darkest gloom, there is a thawing optimism. One of the regular events at the arena is ‘Chuck a Puck’. This involves the purchase of a soft foam projectile to hurl onto the ice between the second and third periods. The thrower of the puck which lands closest to the centre of the home team’s logo on the rink wins a prize — an Amazon Echo this evening. (‘Alexa: make all of the sport in the world go away. Make my children interested in Proust. Make them like madeleines and *tilleuil* instead of hot dogs with ketchup-

flavoured ketchup.')

A loud announcement tells us that it is time to chuck our pucks. But my son shakes his head. He is not going to throw his, he declares: he wants to keep it instead. 'If I chuck it and don't win, it's all over', he says. His friend yawps in agreement. In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the narrator recalls his participation in childhood games in a Parisian park: 'When I used to play prisoner's base in the Luxembourg, what I liked best was not provoking the other team and boldly exposing myself to their right to take me prisoner; what I liked best was to free the prisoners — the effect of which was to put both teams back into circulation: the game started over again at zero' (Barthes 1995: 50). This is classic Barthes: wanting not to close things down but seeking instead to keep the options open, the pleasure in play. My son has not yet read Barthes but he seems somehow to have internalised the writings: by refusing to chuck his puck, he was refusing to ice the ludic. If the object, like Barthes's prisoners, remains in circulation and off the ice, then the game cannot quite be over, put on ice. Against all odds, I have an heir who has mastered the Barthesian art of not giving a puck.

'MAN-': Of Letters
29 June 2018, Penarth, UK



Man alive! I have made a Manhattan; I have mislaid a Manhattan. I search the house and eventually find it: my Manhattan is on the mantelpiece. This is strange, as I wouldn't normally leave a glass there. As I take a sip I think of Ella Fitzgerald singing 'Manhattan' — one of the most sublime Rodgers and Hart compositions. Not primarily for the music, in my opinion, but more for the lyrics, for the staggering way in which signifiers are spun and split to make rhymes where no rhymes should be. (In a lovely moment, Heather Juergensen and Jennifer Westfeldt's playful script for *Kissing Jessica Stein* finds a way to give Lorenz Hart's words a queer spin by having a stuck needle on a record player leave

Ella singing of how ‘the big city’s a wonderous joy for a girl and ... girl’.)

As I’m crooning quietly to the ice cubes, I realise that my odd choice of resting place for the glass was in fact mandated by language: a MANhattan goes on a MANtelpiece. Man alive — is there no end to the mannered manipulations that I can manage to manoeuvre and manufacture? My life, even my unconscious, is subject to what Roland Barthes called ‘the reign of the signifier’ (1995: 76). I had no sovereign say in where I misplaced my cocktail: an overlap of three letters between one word and another cast its mantle over me. Language manhandles; I am its mannequin. I will, I presume, need from now on to rest each glass of beer upon a bier, a gin on a gin, port in a port, raki on a rack, a Cosmopolitan upon an issue of a popular women’s magazine edited by Michele Promaulayko, a Gimlet next to a small device for drilling holes in wood, and a Pink Lady on — if she’ll oblige — the shoulder of Stockard Channing. (There are worse things I could do.) Life during the reign of the signifier — it’s a heady cocktail, an isle of joy.

Pod Almighty
9 May 2018, Penarth, UK



‘There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean.’ So begins Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* (1990b: 3). Barthes goes on to liken such Buddhists to structuralist critics who foolishly believed that they could see ‘all the world’s stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure’ (3). Looking for a landscape in a bean, he concludes, is a waste of time — ‘a task as exhausting (ninety-nine percent perspiration, as the saying goes) as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference’ (3). I couldn’t agree more, and reading *S/Z* for the first time in an MA seminar with Catherine Belsey in 1994 was life-changing. I left the class full of beans. Golden geese were laying eggs. Magic harps were playing enchanting melodies. Giants would soon tumble.

I have, however, spent my lunch hour savouring how much time I was wasting by looking for a bean in a landscape. In a world which encourages us to optimize input-output

ratios and to be as efficient as possible, I cling defiantly to the time-consuming and inefficient glory of the fresh fava bean. This is a food so stubborn that it has to be teased out of not one but two layers: the outer pod and then the tough inner skin that surrounds the small, soft green delight. The fava is a monument to what Barthes once called ‘wasteful expenditure’ (1975: 23): at the beginning of the preparation process there is a large pile of pods; at the end, there is a tiny haul of beans and a mountain of waste. This is what I mean by looking for a bean in a landscape — a vast verdant landscape of remains that are inedible. According to the principles of modern capitalism, my input-output ratio is dismal, for the aim in all activities, we are told, is to generate profit, to do more with less, to optimize efficiency. ‘The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer’, Jean-François Lyotard observed some decades ago, ‘is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output — in other words, performativity’ (1984: 11). But the fava cares not a bean: it is all about diminishing returns, ‘wasteful expenditure’, and ending up with far less than you had at the beginning.

Lyotard’s words can be found in *The Postmodern Condition* — a prophetic book that was originally a report for the Conseil des Universités of the government of Québec. This is my twentieth year of employment in British higher education and I am, I sincerely hope, closer to the end of my career than the beginning. Over two decades I have watched the principles of performativity, profit, optimization, and bean-counting gradually ruin universities. This is why I look forward so eagerly to the moment every year at which fresh fava pods begin to appear in the shops: it is time again to squander time and plunge into blatant inefficiency. Resistance at the level of the legume — or at least a chance to feel the pulse of another way of life. The fava is a utopian rite for me; I am guilty of fava-rite-ism. But I cannot linger longer with these words, old bean: the favas await and there is (no) time to waste.

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² The English translation states that the column ran from 18 December 1978 until 1 April 1979. I have chosen to use instead the slightly different dates given in Barthes's *Oeuvres complètes*: 18 December 1978 – 26 March 1979.

³ The phrase appears repeatedly in Barthes's later work. For notable occurrences, see 'The Death of the Author', in Barthes 1986: 54; Barthes 1983: 73-76; Barthes 1995: 87.

⁴ The notes from the seminar were published posthumously as Barthes 2007. For the seminar's discussion of waiting, which differs in various ways from that found in *A Lover's Discourse*, see above all 99-101 and 477-82.