

My Life as a Writer on Art

Rosalind E. Krauss

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The gratitude I feel in accepting this honor is for its reinforcement of a trajectory that has been somewhat eccentric, for reasons I will try to evoke.

My ambition as a writer on art coincides with my friendship with Professor Leo Steinberg, which began in 1970. Steinberg's eye was sharp, incisive; when he lighted on a detail in a painting or sculpture, that detail would burgeon into the master explanation for the work as a whole.

For this reason, Leo was often at war with his discipline. This is marked by the outset of his dissertation at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts, where he had chosen to work on Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (1634). His "detail" was the conjuncture of apses at the four ends of the church. He saw these as the inflation and deflation of a breathing body, flexing its lungs from within. Richard Krautheimer, his advisor, rejected his proposal, saying that architecture couldn't be symbolic.

Leo had come to art history from the practice of life drawing at the Slade School in London, which had instructed him in the soundless expression of the human body as it flexes, shifts its weight, makes its slightest gesture. This pressure of the body on canvas or armature informs the work that would secure his fame. *The Philosophical Brothel*, Leo's analysis of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, concentrates on the central standing nude, which he called a «rampant *gisant*», – *rampant* being the word from heraldry for an animal rearing up on its hind legs; *gisant* referring to medieval tomb sculpture with the occupants of the sepulcher depicted as lying down on its lid.

Leo saw this gesture of rearing up/lying down as determinative for the whole of Picasso's painting, causing it to rock back and forth. From the vertical position of the standing nude to its horizontal axis as recumbent, it led him to another formulation – the «flatbed picture plane» – which, in its reliance on the body's slightest gesture, and its

break with modernist orthodoxy was part of his declaration of war on conventional aesthetic discourse.

If Leo's "detail" was the silence of bodily gesture, mine was the formal revelation of Structural Linguistics.

A case in point: the roots of modernism dig deep into the practice of the grid, ballasting early Cubism and moving on to the heart of Mondrian's practice. There is no abstract art without the grid. Some interpretations saw it as imploded onto the very weave of the canvas surface; others saw it ruthlessly expanding into a universal lattice which articulates space at large.

The interpretations of the grid form an opposition, then: the centripetal as opposed to the centrifugal.

Structuralism dispenses with this quandary since every opposition is held to be the very birth of meaning. To pay my debt to structuralism, I am now at work on a book to be called *Roland Barthes: Charms and Demons*. The "charm" for Barthes was any author's idiomatic speech; the "demon" was naturalism which annihilates the charm of form. There is no room to do justice to structuralism in a 20-minute talk. I credit it as formative for my work from the abstraction of the grid all the way to the diagrammatic organization of the chaos of the art of the 1970s (think earthworks; think installation) in my *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*. Those are my "details". I know Leo Steinberg would have been as delighted for me for this honor as I am for myself.

I begin with my work on the grid as an example. In its opposition between naturalism and abstraction it is a Structuralist problem, my solution for which is this.

Claude Lévi-Strauss turns to the Oedipus myth for an example of Structuralism. Mythographers, he says, dismayed at the repetitions and restatements of a single myth, are busy looking for the "Ur-myth" the generative version of the myth at its birth. Lévi-Strauss says the problem is not the onset of the myth but the mystery of its repetition. How, he asks can we recognize this plethora of versions, from Aeschylus to Freud, as belonging to the *same* myth? There must be, he argued, a mythic *structure* which stays constant through all the repetitions.

A good Structuralist, he divided the sections of the unfolding narrative (Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother) into a sequence of "mythemes". Each of these will enact the founding opposition, which, for Oedipus is: born from one? or born from two? We can recognize this in the Oedipus complex as well as we can from *Oedipus Rex*.

To return to the structure of the grid: it arises from color theory: the Impressionists attempted to wrest tonality from natural events: the fog, the cloud, sunlight on water. This would be challenged by the Post-Impressionists, who dismissed tonality for a confrontation of complementary color that would produce, they thought, the very effect of light itself, making its practice *abstract*. I think in *light itself* we find the ultimate opposition between nature and culture: realism and abstraction.

This is an impossibly abbreviated version of the practice I adopted in fashioning art-historical discourse to my own theoretical needs.

To return, briefly, to my current work on Roland Barthes, I am following the clue he gives us when he chooses to speak of Proust, Barthes says:

By setting Proust and myself on one and the same line, I am not in the least comparing myself to this great writer but, quite differently, *identifying myself with him*; an association of practice not of value.

Getting down to the details of this identification, Barthes explains, «Proust's book is, at least for me, the work of reference, the general *mathésis*, the mandala of all literary cosmogony».

The *mandala* telegraphs the themes he finds in the *À la recherche du temps perdu*. He admires their complexities, which he mines for the hidden oppositions they support. The mandala is like Lévi-Strauss's *mytheme*. A binary central to the constant meaning of the myth. The reigning mandala of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Barthes says, is sleep. Sleep is the clue to Barthes's enigmatic grasp on the totality of Proust's work.

Summing this up, he says, "Proust is *another*, almost unknown to himself." For this to be true, the *Recherche* must be told by two voices, which, to hold them constant but distinct, we will call these two voices: the Narrator (the one who says, "I"), and the Author; that is to say: little Marcel and grown-up Proust. As Marcel is lying in his bed in Combray, he recounts the half-dream emerging from the «whirlpool of his awakening», now staring at «the shifting kaleidoscope of the darkness». A second voice abruptly cuts into this half-dream: it is the voice of the author, discoursing on the mandala of sleep.

He writes:

When a man is asleep he has in a circle around him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly bodies. Instinctively he consults them when he awakes, and in an instant reads off his position on the earth's surface, and the time that has elapsed during his slumber; but this ordered procession, is apt to grow confused and to break its ranks. Suppose that towards morning, after a night of insomnia, sleep descends upon him while reading, in a quite different position from that in which he normally goes to sleep, he has only to lift his arm to arrest the sun and turn it back in its course, and at that moment of waking, he will have no idea of the time, but will conclude that he has just gone to bed.

The two voices embody an instinct in Proust more fundamental to Barthes's welcome to a literature, split between the opposition of Novel and Essay, the very opposition which inspires Barthes's greatest books: *S/Z* and *La Chambre Claire*.

In committing myself to a study of the work of Roland Barthes, I celebrate the contribution Structuralism has made to the humanities: reaching across cultures and unearthing the truth of man's earliest literary forms.

Roland Barthes was famous for walking around with notecards in his pockets, anxious to prevent any passing thought from slipping into oblivion. These thought-fragments hit the pages of his books as the little, individually subtitled entries in his autobiographical *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and the numbered journal pages of *Camera Lucida*, just as they perform the interpretative interruptions that nosedive into the unfolding text of *S/Z*.

My reading of Barthes has gone on throughout my adult life, leaving the pages of his books in my library littered with the marginalia of notations.

So it seemed natural to me to address Barthes's work as he had addressed himself: as a fragmented subject. He writes:

...when I write in fragments and when I decide to support a text by means of fragments, I take responsibility for being a fragmentary subject and consequently, it has been said and written, I accept a certain relationship to castration.

The status of the subject – as a *function* of language (rather than of authorship) – empowered the structural linguistic basis of semiology. In Barthes's hands this study elaborates an arc in three parts, themselves congeries of fragments.

The argument of my Barthes's study begins with the enigma of Barthes's idea of the ideogrammatic style of any author as that writer's *biographeme*. What, we may ask, is Barthes's? My "solution" is his ardent identification with Marcel Proust's invention of a third genre, which introduces both a technical and a formal break with semiology. In his autobiography, Barthes treats the structuralist binary in the section titled ~ *Love of an idea*.

Proust betrays that idea with a style that forces Barthes to call its deviance a *third genre*. Indeed, both *Camera Lucida* and *S/Z* adopt just such an anomaly along with its implication of yet another violation of the bi-partite binary, in the defiant addition of a *third* term. That Barthes would accept the third term and act on it in his most powerful and enigmatic books is a symptom of falling out of love. My book, to be titled, *Charms and Demons* is a sort of romance, with Barthes leaving and returning to structuralism as his initiating ~ *Love of an idea*.

The intimacy of Barthes's final book, *Camera Lucida*, is the diaristic form it takes, once more inspired by Proust's third genre. Its intimacy follows another Proustian form that Barthes realizes in the narrator of Proust's *Recherche* whose voice, Barthes marvels, «is *another* Proust almost unknown to himself».¹

Solving this enigmatic allusion is the job of the book.

Another type of fragment that occupies Barthes is the thematic cluster that emerges from the network of a narrative text, studding it with myriad constellations that Barthes welcomes as the creative ensembles that exfoliate within the classical story. He calls the constellations *mandalas*: so many stars strewn across the horizon of the work. Barthes singles out Proust's *madeleine* for the mandala that precipitates thematic concerns from the dome of memory. In the great narratives, these mandalas will necessarily repeat, as they web the work.

I have found myself looking for the *mandalas* that structure Barthes's work. Unsurprisingly, these will often be linguistic. One such is the *shifter*, which loosens the bonds of subjectivity, by tying it exclusively

¹ Barthes, Roland, *Longtemps, je me suis couché à bonne heure...*, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986, p. 282.

to the site of the utterance: this site intermittently *shifting* between two (or more) interlocutors. The referent only exists as either the subject or the object of the statement. The semiotician's *shifter*, which Barthes adopts as his Utopia, underwrites another linguistic marker, called *phatic*. The phatic is a form of pointing – either pointing to oneself or to one's interlocutor. Semiology's example of the *phatic* is the "hello?" on picking up the telephone. It is language's way of locating alternate seats of speech.

The Shifter

The opposing points of view supported by both the shifter and the phatic gave Barthes permission to refer to himself autobiographically in both first and third persons. Musing on the associative structure of his autobiographical account he writes in the section.

~ *The circle of fragments*

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? (RB, 92-93)

Barthes continues.

His first, or nearly first text (1942) consists of fragments; this choice is then justified in the Gidean manner «because incoherence is preferable to a distorting order». (RB, 93)

The converging points of view bring Barthes to the mandala he identifies as *anamorphosis*: the system that splinters the visual cockpit of single-point perspective, splitting the unified gaze by a third.

Anamorphosis

To torpedo the unified gaze was, for Barthes, to dismiss the Natural as the basis of truth. This Naturalism was his *demon* that he summoned either of two strategies to defeat. *Flatness* presses naturalism beyond its volumetric limits; *anamorphosis* deprives the gaze of its support in a unified subject. The result is the oscillation between "I" and "he".

Its Name

Speaking of his will to this defeat, Barthes deflects the Natural by exchanging it for a name. ~ *The ship Argo* provides his great example. A frequent image: that of the ship *Argo* (luminous and white), each piece of which the Argonauts gradually replaced, so that they ended

with an entirely new ship, without ever having to alter either its name or its form. This ship *Argo* is highly useful: it affords the allegory of an eminently structural object, created not by genius ... but by two modest actions ... *substitution* (one part replaces another, as in a paradigm) and *nomination* (the name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts); by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the *origin*: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form. (RB, 46)

Most of Barthes's work concerned the literary text and its analysis; his essay on the pictorial art of Cy Twombly is the exception. Twombly's work offered Barthes the conundrum of the name – the works' names often scrawled onto the opacity of their surfaces. As Barthes exults, «If the canvas is called *The Italians*, do not look for the Italians anywhere except, precisely, in the name».²

The mandalas allow for a great deal of interpretive freedom. They are like cards that can be pulled from a deck in no particular order, and the power they have at any given present is the residue left of their past appearance. We could say that the mandalas are the unconscious of the text.

In this reliance on Structuralism, I am proud to join Jean Starobinsky in the ranks of the Balzan Prize Winners.

² Barthes, Roland, *The Wisdom of Art*, in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 180. The essay was first commissioned for the catalogue *Cy Twombly, Paintings and Drawings, 1954-1977*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979.