



WILEY-
BLACKWELL



Mythologies by Roland Barthes; Annette Lavers

Review by: Liliane Welch

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer, 1973), pp. 563-564

Published by: [Wiley-Blackwell](http://www.wiley-blackwell.com) on behalf of [The American Society for Aesthetics](http://www.asaesthetics.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/429347>

Accessed: 12/09/2012 22:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley-Blackwell and *The American Society for Aesthetics* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

BARTHES, ROLAND, *Mythologies*. trans. and selected by Annette Lavers. N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1972, pp. 159, \$5.95.

In the world of French literary criticism Roland Barthes is known for having, already in the early fifties, a foreboding of the direction literary activity would be taking in the future. His book *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953) foretold the task of coming critics by its vision of the work of current poets. Whereas the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre had concentrated on literature as a mode of existence and engagement, Barthes saw literature as a fact of language and writing. He analyzed the contemporary transformation within literature as one from an imaginary universe open to the world toward a semantic system closed onto itself. In 1966, when the Sorbonne professor Raymond Picard called Barthes an imposter for publishing a structural analysis of Racine, Barthes answered with a treatise *Critique et Vérité*, one of the most important theoretical works since World War II. This study leads us to the centre of the debates about contemporary man's relationship to art, to reading, and to his own thought.

The book under review is a translation of sketches and an explanatory essay, all written between 1954 and 1956. The sketches analyze the multiple "myths" embodied in "popular" culture and the essay examines the nature of myth as a whole.

For Barthes everything which has meaning and radiates a suggestiveness can become a myth. His short pieces humorously unmask the myths inherent in daily French life. Justifying his endeavor, Barthes writes in a foreword to his book: "The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there."

Take "The Writer on Holiday." The press peddles an image of him which mingles leisure with the prestige of a vocation. While the shopkeepers and factory workers right alongside him lounge on the beaches and stop producing, his "Muse is awake and gives birth non-stop"—writing his next book. The writer thus becomes "a superman which society puts in the window so as to use to the best advantage the artificial

singularity which it has granted him." "Strip-tease," another feature of French life, is given a reassuring petit-bourgeois status, as if "the French public could not conceive eroticism except as a household property, sanctioned by the alibi of weekly sport much more than by that of a magical spectacle: and this is how, in France, striptease is nationalized." Barthes makes his point *ad infinitum*, mixing phenomenological analyses with Voltairian moralisms, as he unmasks the familiar margarine advertisements, the French mystique about wine, the invasion of plastics into toy production, and so on.

Barthes' viewpoint on myth as a whole is similar to that of Marx. Marx had provocatively analyzed the differences between myth and history and ended up by rejecting myth because it inhibited revolutionary impulses. In *Das Kapital* he shows how what man has made historically and socially can be distorted through the mythifications of the ruling classes into something god- and nature-given. Myths then inoculate man against change by transforming man-made patterns into natural laws. Myths veil historical becoming and social creations. Since they prevent change they must be demystified. In the Marxian ideology it becomes the task of the revolutionary to expose the present economic, social, and political conditions as products of modern history and not as eternal natural laws.

Following Marx, Barthes grounds his study in contemporary French life. He sees things robbed of their historicity (the remembrance of their fabrication) as they enter into myths, i.e., as the press, advertising, and the consumer-oriented society make "natural" objects of them. For Barthes the main culprit of this sad state of affairs is the French bourgeoisie. This social class, dominating French life now for over a century, has refashioned culture into something quasi-eternal and seemingly natural. It has created a new myth, a corpus of stereotyped phrases, a doxa which governs France. The great tales of the past, which told myths, have disappeared and the bourgeois mind has replaced them by insidious mythic shells.

Nonetheless, fifteen years after his book first appeared, Barthes found it necessary to move beyond his mythoclasy. In an essay "Changer l'objet lui-même" published in the April 1971 issue of the journal *Esprit*, Barthes writes that the demystification in *Mythologies* has itself become a myth. With every student and intellectual busy denouncing the bourgeois aspects of life, thought, and consumption, Barthes' demythification has itself evolved into a "mytho-

logical doxa." Therefore Barthes' present position is that we must no longer unmask myth. Today we must challenge the symbolic itself, we must call into question the dialectic of the event called "signifying." In his terms, the original mythoclasy will have to be followed up by a semioclasy. Not merely French society is to be challenged, of course, but all of Western civilization. Barthes feels that an endeavor describing and analyzing myths is henceforth obsolete since "sociolects" (established and written meanings within and for particular societies) will become the prime concern: "Mythology (i.e., the study of myth) will be followed by an ideoclectology (i.e., the study of written ideas). The operating concepts of this latter will no longer be the sign, the signifying, the signified and connotation, but rather citation, reference and stereotype." Barthes sees the semiologist (the one who studies the event of signification) no longer reversing the mythic message but engendering a new science.

The French, ever since their German antagonist Nietzsche, have been concerned about one historical cataclysm: "culture" (which includes our presuppositions about the nature of art and education) has come to be understood mainly from the standpoint of the consumer. Instead of understanding "culture" as something we do, as a pattern of creativity, we understand it (and teach it to our children) primarily as something which is already done, as a product of consumption. But taking it as "something done" rather than as "something doing": this is in essence "the death of culture," the "decline of the West." Barthes' efforts must be considered as a response to this cataclysm before it can be adequately evaluated.

LILIANE WELCH

Mount Allison University

Berger completes and fills in the details of the case for Hurd's neoclassical orthodoxy. When he is done we find a more complicated, but not an imaginatively more profound, Hurd than we had before. Hurd's theory of literary kinds is, indeed, the "logical" conclusion of his illogical critical system. Berger catalogues the tensions that characterize his critical method. The roots of his ideas of poetry and poetic imitation are exposed, along with the conservative nature (even by mid-eighteenth century standards) of his theory of literary imagination.

Most interesting is Berger's discussion of the conflicts and contradictions arising from the interplay of argument from literary effect, Hurd's social historical criticism, and justification from the authority of tradition in his theory of literary kinds. Hurd does his best to respect the demands of his own deductive method and rationalistic criteria of literary judgment, but he trips over his own narrow conception of the affects appropriate to each literary type and is often oblivious to the contradictions between his judgments made from different perspectives. Unlike Thomas Warton, Hurd was rarely conscious of the conflict between his taste and system of judgment.

Berger is at his best, and on safest ground, in the description and analysis of Hurd's critical theory. Some of his historical judgments are too sweeping; vast spans of the histories of the ideas of literary imitation and types are bridged in four or five pages. Excessive reliance on secondary sources and standard anthologies of primary sources is most evident in his treatment of the lyric. Generally he has done his work well, but in so doing may have restored his subject to the darkness of history.

LEE ANDREW ELIOSEFF

University of Kentucky

BERGER, DIETER A. *Imitationstheorie und Gattungsdenken in der Literaturkritik Richard Hurds*. Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1972, pp. 183.

Richard Hurd was rescued from the obscurity of the history of literary criticism by those scholars who found in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) evidence of "preromantic" gothicism. Although Hoyt Trowbridge challenged this view in the early 1940's, it survived well into the 1950's. It remained for Stephen J. Curry and, now, Dieter A. Berger to lay to rest the "preromantic" Lord Bishop of Worcester.

BENDER, JOHN B. *Spenser and Literary Pictorialism*. Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. viii + 218, \$8.50.

This book analyses Spenser's imagery in the light of a theory of literary pictorialism derived from Gombrich's studies in the psychology of perception. Dismissing the unprofitable doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* and Lessing's "awkward categorical distinctions," Bender adopts "an affective and psychological approach to the problem of defining literary pictorialism" (p. 23). He conceives of it essentially as "mimesis of the process of visual perception" (p. 65),