

PHILIPPE SOLLERS

The  
Friendship  
of  
Roland  
Barthes

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Philippe Sollers

Translated by Andrew Brown

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## *Translator's Note*

Sollers often refers to Barthes's texts without giving publication details or page numbers; I have translated all the quotations from Barthes afresh, with due thanks to the excellent translators who have served Barthes so well.

The pieces gathered in this small volume vary in style. 'Friendship' is a memoir in the form of an improvised monologue; 'R.B.' deploys the language of 1970s French intellectual polemic at its prickliest and most elliptically formulaic; the 'Appendices' look back, at times wryly, on the trip to China that Barthes and Sollers undertook, and also re-state Sollers's claim that Barthes's political analyses have lost none of their trenchancy in an age when a new mutation of Poujadism (paranoid, protectionist and xenophobic) is on the rise – and not just in France. Barthes's letters show a more intimate and unguarded side of him than we usually see: he was clearly an affectionate, loyal and caring friend. I have tried to stick fairly closely to the different tones in these pieces, with their sudden tangential breaks and occasional obscurities. I have kept annotation to a minimum: to explain what Sollers meant, in 1971, by

‘dogmatico-revisionism’, or to detail all the writers, publishers, academics and review editors mentioned by Sollers and Barthes, would involve a mini-history of French intellectual life since the 1960s. It seems less important to dwell on the doctrinal – or purely personal – polemics of forty years ago than to get a sense of why Sollers thinks that now, more than ever, might be a good time for us to be reminded of Barthes’s lifelong and lucid awareness of the ever-present menace of terrorism.



# FRIENDSHIP



The death of Roland Barthes, on 26 March 1980, came as a terrible shock to me, and it's still with me, it just won't go away. A word he loathed, referring to an event that he found heartrending – the death of his mother – was 'mourning'. *Mourning Diary* is a good title, but it's not about mourning. It's about what he called, using a word to which he restored its full force, 'sorrow'. Sorrow is completely different from mourning – which, the psychoanalytical accounts tell us, lasts two years, etc. I still experience this sorrow even today. Just as intensely as then. Sorrow, first of all, that this incident was obscured, in the news I initially received, by a great deal of uncertainty. It was practically as if it *must not* appear to be a fatal accident. I can still see and hear François Wahl saying: 'No, it's just a minor accident, he'll recover, he's absolutely fine.' Was it the lunch with François Mitterrand, who was elected French President the following year, that led to this cover-up? 'It's not serious!' As if Mitterrand had cast the evil eye on Barthes. I was finally informed that he was in a bad state, really bad – dying – and I just had time to go

with Julia Kristeva and hold his hands. He recognized us, he said ‘thank you’. We told him we loved him. But it was the end. I always found this odd because what we lack is a discourse by Barthes on Mitterrand, a ‘mythology’ of that future left-wing president. So presidents of France come and go but we don’t have Barthes’s account of this lunch – *his* account.

And while I’m on the topic of French presidents, I’ll mention, if I may, the fact that when Julia Kristeva was decorated by Nicolas Sarkozy, he told her all of a sudden that she had been friends with Roland *Barthez* (*sic*). There was laughter in the audience, immediately stifled. All the same, this slip of the tongue depicts, in my view, the state of continual degradation in French political life and my feeling that we need to start again from scratch.

So we miss Barthes simply for his way of being, his body. He could play the piano; drawing came to his hands in a completely spontaneous way; his handwriting – it was a pleasure to see his writing in blue ink, his whole way of writing; then there was his voice, the timbre of his voice, his diction. . . Where are we now when it comes to voices? Who still has a voice? There are two, for me, obvious voices: first, Lacan when he started improvising (since he thought aloud, the fact of speaking gave him things to think about), and then Barthes: he starts writing but ultimately he finds things to write about because he’s starting to write. It’s all a matter of voices, in other words something inspired that transpires in a certain breathiness, a certain difficulty, in Barthes’s case, due to the illness he had overcome, after a struggle. What we hear, stemming from all of this, is a very odd detachment.

The first text Barthes wrote on me dates back to 1965, in the review *Critique*, and it was about my book *Drame*. So that was fifty years ago. Has today's literary situation emerged from the desert of that period? Barthes is more contemporary and precise than ever and I am going to deliver a *political* encomium on him, since that's how he always perceived the bedrock of his life, namely the fact that literature grants us a quite particular way of looking at politics. As evidence, we can point to the very fine text he wrote as a young man on Plato's *Crito*, in which he imagines a Socrates who does not commit suicide – after all, things might have turned out differently, no one is obliged to commit suicide, to obey the laws of the city, to sacrifice him- or herself. In 1934, Barthes was nineteen, he was at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and this was when, he says, he started a little literary review – it wasn't a literary review but an 'antifascist republican defence group called DRAF, which we set up to defend ourselves against the arrogance of the "patriotic" youth groups that were in the majority in the final year at school'. What are things like now?

Barthes: political through literature. Literature enables us to say things that are quite accurate and true about politics. Why? Well, this is Barthes's immediate work in a nutshell: how can we avoid the stereotype, the cliché? The world tells lies, commodities are a lie. See Barthes's early work *Mythologies* (which, by the way, ought to be redone, since Barthes's intention is ageless; we ought to write a *Mythologies* for today\*). And so, in 1957, as a

\* There have in fact been several analyses of contemporary culture in the style or spirit of Barthes, both in France and elsewhere, including Peter Conrad's series of 'Twenty-First Century Mythologies' on BBC Radio 4, broadcast in the

barely known writer, Barthes published a droll little book, cold, quirky, insolent, corrosive, *Mythologies*. His aim was to describe, at a distance, the social comedy, so as better to neutralize it. The method isn't all that different from one of Gulliver's travels, except that the Lilliputians, here, are the prisoners of spontaneous beliefs and superstitions that are, perhaps, still ours. You might think that all this is very distant, as we have lived through so many transformations and changes. Far from it. Let's take one concrete example: Poujadism.\* A permanent, specifically French grimace, still at work, now and always. And as far as the rest goes, literary criticism, magazines and weeklies (*Elle*, *Paris Match*, etc.), legends and icons, theatrical spectacles of every kind: it all hangs together, and we're discovering that we live in an order that claims to be natural but is, in every way, intensely deliberate. But there are no big words in Barthes; there's no anathema, no preaching, no denunciation: all the force of the demonstration lies in the apparently neutral description. It's humiliating for a society to be exposed to itself like this, and the greatest insult we can inflict on society is to tell it that we don't believe it. So Barthes has, right from the start, a bad reputation. There's the lie of illusion, there are lies everywhere, and Barthes is the first to sense that the age of the Spectacle is dawning. And we need to become aware of this. These texts are absolutely essential: society is a spectacle and so

autumn of 2014: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/bo4lhs21>. (Translator's note.)

\* Poujadism: a movement founded by Pierre Poujade (1920–2003). Initially aimed at defending small tradespeople against elites, the movement denounced many of the perceived ills of modern times, such as industrialization, and was generally anti-intellectual, anti-Semitic, and suspicious of the parliamentary system of government in France. (Translator's note.)

is politics, where everyone lies more often than not, with endlessly repeated words, i.e. an ideology which imbues everything – and we need to turn this ideology on its back and describe it – and what Barthes calls the ‘sticky’ (what a lovely word!), namely everything that weighs, bogs, slows you down, makes things too noisy. And above all there’s ‘babble’ – a magnificent invention, the Tower of Babel, the Tower of Babble. There’s already the chatter of Barthes’s own time, so what are we to say about nowadays? It’s been multiplied ten thousand fold!

All that sticky, nihilistic stuff is, quite simply, a way of evading reality. It’s a huge drug. I’m very pleased that in one letter he bestows on me the title of ‘great stimulating Drug’.\* It’s true that our lives were completely different. What he spotted in me right from the start was the fact that, from a very early age, I’d begun to lead a very free and restless life, while in his case this was something that caught up with him at the end, in a rather terrible way, it has to be said.

A little politics straight away, since I believe that it’s necessary today: an interview for a magazine. We’re in 1978 and it’s especially interesting as it’s an interview for *Elle*, which had been given a very sarcastic mention in *Mythologies* and, like all magazines in fact, ought to be discussed again, with even darker sarcasm, in a new series of mythologies. While we’re on the subject, before reading the passage relating to the situation in 1978 – as you’ll see, it’s just like today – let’s talk about *Le Monde* which, as you know, waged an absolutely frenzied campaign against Barthes’s *On Racine*, and defended its own

\* Letter of 25 August 1973 (see p. 103 below). (Translator’s note.)

anti-Barthes champion: step forward, Raymond Picard! This was the 'Picard affair', the '*On Racine* affair'. If we re-read what people wrote at the time, it's staggering! It's neither more nor less than demanding someone's death: he should have his head chopped off, quick as you can, and how dare he come along and disturb our little habits . . . ! It's nothing like 1968 when there was turmoil in the university system; it was like a pressure cooker already on the point of exploding, as the Racine affair proved. It was extraordinary in its violence. There followed a lengthy press campaign, and it was amazingly relentless. It was open warfare, right from the start. In any case, literature *is* war. What else could it be? You tell me! Barthes was fully aware of the fact. Literature is war.

In 1978, here's what Roland Barthes says:

The future can never be fully predicted. But any reading of the present does allow us to reckon upon all the fears and threats of the days to come. Latent anti-Semitism, like all forms of racism in every country, every civilization, every mentality, is still thriving in petit-bourgeois ideology. In France, fortunately, it is not supported by any significant political decisions. But the temptation of anti-Semitism and racism is evident in the press and in conversations. The fact that it's a reality on the ideological level means that intellectuals need to be very vigilant. This is where they have a positive role to play. [. . .] I think that, in the face of all these dangers, the right thing – i.e., hope – is always on the side of the marginal.

We may note in passing that hope as a definition of the right thing is surprising and interesting.

But what is emblematic is the idea of a combat on an individual scale. There's no one less gregarious, less communitarian than Barthes. There are his friends, there's a

circle of friends, and sometimes there's a bosom friend who has the right to a personal meeting, while not sharing the same lifestyle or having the same tendencies when it comes to bodily enjoyment. Basically I'm the only heterosexual man to have had the benefit of representing something for Barthes to such a degree. I'm not saying that he didn't have other heterosexual friends, of course, but at this point, where we're in a situation of mass communitarianism, I'd like to underline all the same the beginning of *Sollers Writer* – it's important for today, given the fact that it was written in 1979, on 6 January:

The writer is alone, abandoned by the old classes and the new. His fall is all the more grave in that he now lives in a society where solitude itself is essentially considered to be a failing. We accept (and this is our magisterial ploy) particularisms, but not singularities; types, but not individuals. We create (in a brilliant and cunning manoeuvre) choruses of particulars, all with their protesting, shrill, inoffensive voices. But what about the absolutely isolated person – who is neither Breton, nor Corsican, nor a woman, nor a homosexual, nor mad, nor an Arab, etc? Who does not *even* belong to a minority? Literature is this person's voice [. . .].

Well, that's pretty clear, isn't it? Very well written, to begin with, like everything he wrote. Singularity, that's what he's after.

I can still see us, Julia Kristeva and me, in the courtyard of the hospital of La Pitié-Salpêtrière. We had just bidden him farewell and we were really crushed under our *sorrow*. Roland liked Julia very much, as is shown by a magnificent text that he wrote about her at a time when she was absolutely blacklisted; it's called 'The Foreigner'. And she