

Editorial

Auto-prognosis of a Comparative Media Theorist

By Ian Angus

To be asked to speak of oneself is more a burden than opportunity. If thinking is immersed in one's life and situation it can no more be objectified than one's loves or disgusts. The tone is impossible to stipulate. It wavers. It can't help but be retrospective like Minerva's owl. But it may attempt to speak primarily not to what has been done but what remains undone. Its speaking, fessing up, then becomes an aspiration. In this, one may hope not to be alone. Thought in any case belongs to nobody. One seeks only to belong to thought.

Confession

My engagement (Angus 1984) with issues of language was not primordial, so to speak, in that my initial work on technology and reason, stimulated by the crisis and expectation of the 1960's, was grounded in the primacy of experience. The teleology of this work aimed to suggest "a role for reason beyond offering technical fixes in the efforts to solve the world's plethora of environmental crisis" (DeLuca 2001: 325). Already in the 1970's, whenever one said 'experience', both Hegelians and hermeneuticists jumped up and said that 'experience is always mediated by a past; it is never immediate as such' and that 'the embeddedness of thought in language places it in history'. If the immediacy of experience is always mediated, then the starting-place of thought cannot be from the here-and-

now but takes place through an engagement with what is inherited in which the here-and-now is from the start constructed and relativized. It has never seemed to me that this undeniable placing of the thinker, and thus thought, within a historical situation justifies abandoning the unsurpassable first-person character of thinking - which is what 'experience' means, above all, in phenomenology. Such a placing is rather the product of thought. It is no easy matter to say where one's precedents lie, what has made the place where one must inevitably start. It is this that I meant to express in saying much later that "one is forced to risk a decisive act that institutes, brings into being, a philosophy. A tradition is founded on this act, not the reverse, and in this sense philosophy belongs in the wilderness" (Angus 1997: 105).

Post-fession

I would say now that the rejection of immediacy for the primordially of language defines the contemporary philosophic situation. This point is made these days more often with reference to the post-structuralist emphasis on the constitution of the subject by language than the Hegelian-hermeneutic synthesis that predominated in the 1970's. It is not that I reject this point outright but that I see it as more of a situation from which, and about which, problems may be posed than a solution (to other problems which, in any case, are now left behind).

One may well wonder whether there are ever 'solutions' as such in philosophy. The linguistic turn in philosophy and the human sciences is thus not a 'reality' *per se* but a metaphor whereby features of language come to stand for and illuminate human experience *tout court*. Furthermore, the centrality of this metaphor says something about the specificity of our time and its limits indicate the character of a fully contemporary critical theory. Thus, "the disembodiment of signs is characteristic of modernity. It is based upon the standing back from the world and doubling of it in thought that occurs in representation" (Angus 2000a: 256). This situation constructs a barrier due to which the inevitable first-person character of thought is only obliquely recognized these days in such embarrassing locutions as 'strategic essentialism', the 'choice' to deconstruct one object rather than another, or the common co-existence of a liberal political ontology with a theoretical post-structuralism. My work has thus operated at the seam between phenomenology and post-structuralism, or perhaps in the opposition between them, in order to ask questions rooted in the specificity of our time in the first person of my/our own voice.

Profession

Comparative media theory is the name for my approach to communication. I came up with this name on the spot when Shakuntala Rao demanded one to replace 'Innis, McLuhan and all that' in about 1989. I've never been satisfied with it but can't come up with a better one. Philosophically, it is from the tension between the inevitable experiential immediacy to the thinker and the *ex post facto* understanding of the construction of this immediacy by language and history that comparative media theory emerged (Angus 2000b: 35-8). Calling this a 'tension' disallows both the Hegelian-hermeneutic synthesis and the post-structuralist rejection of immediacy that would undermine the first-person character of thought and the risks that this entails and embraces. It marks a space in which the problem of expression comes into view. Thus, when Peter C. van Wyck (2004: 6) observes that "it is really about finding a place for

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Table of Contents

Editorial:	1-4
Auto-Prognosis of a Comparative Media Theorist By Ian Angus	
Evolution Goes Awry By Paul Hegarty	4-7
Untamed By Mike Gane	7-9
Career Man By Scott Pound	9-12

philosophy and finding a philosophy for (our) place” and that “it suffers from waves of its own iterations, each one aimed at a re-diagnosis of the same crisis,” I can only agree. To suffer the iterations of finding where one stands is philosophy itself. This is not a discipline, nor an esotericism, but the struggle to express the meaning of the movements and conflicts of our time. Not necessary to understanding the details, perhaps, nor to plan the reactions of institutions (critics have charged that I cannot account for “large-scale organizational needs” nor for a more formalized, universal conception of identity”, see Morito 1998: 240; others have found the connection of Innis to critical theory useful, see Di Norcia 2001), but to confront them as critical forces that explode our categories and pose a challenge for thought, to express the newness in the new - and also, perhaps, to revere the oldness in the old that is our heritage in allowing us to express the new.

Expression

Comparative media theory begins by taking seriously Harold Innis’s (1973: xvii) question “why do we attend to the things to which we attend?” and interpreting it, not primarily in a psychological sense, but in a perceptual, institutional and intellectual sense (Angus 2005). While communication can refer to representations of prior events in the world - which is its usual meaning in communication studies - it is more importantly directed toward the means whereby we perceive the world to be as it is and therefore to allow certain actions and thoughts and to discourage others. In this sense communication gives an experiential shape to a specific lifeworld. Read in this way, Innis is consistent with phenomenology, even if it be a “faithfully unfaithful reading”(Van Wyck 2004: 4), while his original contribution is the notion that a medium of communication is the key to understanding the lifeworld. The medium of communication such as papyrus, paper, television sets and broadcast apparatus, etc. is only an external vehicle for a content-oriented, representational approach to communication. For Innis, however, the medium of communication both contained a ‘bias’ toward a certain form of expression and also transformed the material basis of society.

Generally, Innis has been understood as referring simply to the ‘dead materiality’ of physical things. It is the major innovation of my interpretation of Innis to connect the medium of communication to the embodied motility of the human body as described in phenomenology. The ‘living body’ is understood in phenomenology to be an orientation in time and space prior to abstract categories and numeration that is the origin of all thinking. The body’s encounters with the world combine an aesthetic synthesis of the perception of

things with a kinaesthetic spontaneity based in the body’s ‘I can’: “Therefore the spatiality of material thinghood and of the thing-world constitutes itself primordially in kinaesthetic self-movement, in the traversing of space in self-nearing and self-distancing” (Landgrebe 1981: 39). This kinaesthetic motility is not opposed to the world in the form of a subject-object relation but incorporates the world, and is incorporated into the world, through the bodily engagement with things. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1967: 143), for example, described how the blind man’s cane is not an external material thing but the very means of his perception of the world and thus an extension of his body: “To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by incorporating fresh instruments.” The human world is thus understood as a living body extended throughout a plurality of media of communication in comparative media theory. As Norman Madarasz (2001: 258) perceptively noted, it “is committed to a conceptualization of culture as a type of discourse aesthetics. It can be said to exceed any indexization of theory to art... . Aesthetics should be taken in the wider Greek sense as a logic of sensibility ...”.

Comparative media theory thus begins from the kinaesthetic motility described in phenomenology (and used to interpret Innis) and Innis’ notion of bias, or inclination, in a medium of communication that gives a certain form, or style, to a specific experiential synthesis in order to give a historical, pre-constituted turn to the kinaesthetic synthesis. It thus attempts to give proper due to both immediacy and mediation but in a form of tension or opposition rather than Hegelian-hermeneutic synthesis (of immediacy and mediation) or post-structuralist rejection (of immediacy). To the extent that such a pre-constituted but *original* subject - whose originality is constituted in the act of reflection - can found a different form of relation to others “such community is not based on a shared essence, but on an asymmetrical encounter *against history*” (Angus 2000a: 208). Kinaesthetic motility within a human world structured by a dominant bias becomes the basic problematic of communication. The question of ‘reality’ thus becomes a question of *translation* between different media of communication not of reference to something extra-communicative. The role of new social movements in these translations concretizes the philosophical concern with ‘the newness of the new’ in political engagements. To this extent, and with another difficult history under its belt, comparative media theory takes up the emancipatory claims of Marxism in a plural, open-ended fashion.

Pressing

Notice two inclinations of a slippery word: press, as in compress, force, crowd; and press, as in press into the navy, urge, or demand (OED). The human world forces and crowds us, pushes us together, moves us in waves, like sticks in the river of time. It demands that we enter, sign up, and urges us to move with the wave. Then, a third meaning: the root of confess, profess, express, which does not negate the first two but turns it toward a voluntary act, if there be a voluntary act, whereby one fesses up to the thought that one harbours against the wave. Again, press, from the old French *prester*, like the current Spanish *prestamo*, loan, advance pay (OED). I lend my thought to the wave, pay out, press upon its direction. Then, press, publication, articulation, a wave within the wave, a greater wave. Not a message, but a bottle. The chosen word, or phrase, is diction, enunciation, dictated, even dictatorial, authoritarian, authoritative, made by an author (OED). A message, not a bottle.

This message-bottle gestalt shift pervades not only communication but also theories of communication. I have argued that orality plays two distinct functions in Innis’s thinking: as a single medium of communication that can be compared (on the same level, as it were) to others and as the basic, foundational human power of communication as such, the meaning-fundament which underlies all media of communication (Angus 2000b: 29-31; 1997: 67-8). My intuition is that this vacillation is ubiquitous in studies of media but I haven’t tried to follow this up. McLuhan is the best known of those for whom the gestalt switch is the model for the study of communication. However, whenever one gets beyond media content, or information, to the notion of ‘medium’ and ‘media’ as such one has to think through this duality in some way. A medium is designed in a prior situation and oriented toward some communicative goal: script, book, radio, television, Internet, etc. However, after some time the new medium is no longer new. It enters into the media environment and is no longer an add-on. Its function is thus in the manner that it horizontally ‘translates’ other media rather than in the goal that defined its design. This temporal sequence is also co-present whenever we investigate any given medium within the media environment. In fixing on a medium we abstract it from the environment. It thus becomes the figure for the translations between all other media. In choosing another medium this one reverts to the environment. Thus, we escape the dead-ends of an epistemological realism in which events are seen as external to a medium, merely represented within it, and an epistemological constructivism, or coherence theory, in which all there is of the event is its internality to the medium. The escape derives from the fact that there is always more than one

medium in a media environment. Thus, the gestalt switch between medium and media environment accounts for the fact that communication is always both representational and constitutive, message and bottle, pressing and diction, the two senses of the word 'institution' (*Urstiftung*) as a beginning instituting and a received institution (Angus 2000b: 4-5 and 189-91; 2000a: 29-31, 99-100, 115-26; 1997: 70-1).

Pressed into Service: Speaking No One's Tongue

Due to the difficulty of finding work in Canada during the 1980's, I found myself teaching in the U.S.A. for seven years. Among other things I found out that the idea that they only teach positivist media studies is a caricature. I discovered their version of rhetoric, which allowed me to re-connect with the debate between rhetoric and philosophy that instituted philosophy. My tongue was split between what and how I could speak with Canada as the ground and the mythical figure of groundless speech of 'international' theory. Thus, I have two books on communication: a Canadian one and an everywhere-nowhere one, though the latter allowed me to come to grips with U.S. studies of the rhetoric of social movements. But it is not the relation between rhetoric and philosophy as such but rather the ground of the distinction between philosophy and rhetoric that is at issue, even though it is investigated in that text almost entirely from the side of an expanded concept of rhetoric. Comparative media theory is understood to be a rhetoric of media forms that institutes kinaesthetically-defined worlds. The last word of the book indicates that philosophy plays a much larger role than this emphasis on rhetoric would suggest. "Such openness, as open-ness, is the limit of communication. We may find it in those components of social life that resist closure and which open humanity to its possibility of reflexive self-constitution, but this possibility itself emerges at the border of human culture, the region where the sacred begins. Since it alone enters this region without belief or armour, philosophy hovers on the skin of mankind" (Angus 2000b: 191). Philosophy is at one with experiences of the sacred in which the totality of human life is shaken but distinct from them insofar as it would not harden such experiences into a religion, which I would understand as any acceptance of a definitive, superhuman origin for the vocabulary of the sacred. Philosophy is constituted by its battle with rhetoric in the domain of human affairs and its battle with religion over the sacred.

Philosophy must therefore think the whole of human life. How should one understand this 'whole', or totality? An empirical aggregate will obviously not do, since any human obviously cannot know all the things or events that are important in human life. Ancient philosophy understood totality as a

cosmos: a structured, value-laden, interdependent whole that defines the role and limits of human life. Modern philosophy, in unleashing human power for self-transformation against any priorly defined state, conceived totality as the 'unconditioned totality of conditions'. In Chapter 3 of *(Dis)figurations*, I suggest that the concept of horizon in phenomenology is a new basis for thinking totality as the style of a form of life. The thinking of the horizon of a world thus encounters the sacred, the beyond-human origin of the human. Philosophy must think the plurality of forms of life, not in their empirical plurality, but each one in its particularity, in order to do battle with rhetoric and guard the sacred origin of ethics within the particularity of the human world in which the philosopher is situated.

The living body is a kinaesthetic self-movement that constitutes the world. My contribution was to show that kinaesthetic syntheses, in both passive and active constitution, are rooted in the media of communication that enable perception of the world, that a specific kinaesthetic synthesis is constituted by a complex of media of communication. Additionally, to show how a kinaesthetic synthesis is 'set into play' by the 'institution', or '*Urstiftung*', of a complex of media. 'Institution' is a species of 'constitution' in which a temporal structure is embedded. Husserl uses the term to describe the 'mathematical substraction of nature' by Galilean science such that one can not 'go back' before it. An institution sets into play a distinction between before and after, and constitutes a new beginning that remains an essential reference and foundation until it comes to exhaust its possibilities in an *Endstiftung*. Thus, a media complex institutes a kinaesthetic synthesis that defines a 'world'. My argument is that consumer society is such a kinaesthetic synthesis and that social movements are, indeed, bodily *self-movements* that augur the *Endstiftung* of consumer society and, thus, open the possibility of a new beginning. Thus, Part 3 of *Primal Scenes of Communication* should have discussed 'new institutions' and not 'new mediations'. This was a slip back into Hegelian language even while it was surpassed. The sense in which this is an 'end' does not imply any sense of moral superiority. Indeed, I would want to say that in some cases much can be learned from supposedly surpassed forms of communication and even that some of them should be revived. The romance of communication studies with technological 'advances' makes this a difficult sell, but I doubt whether such nay-sayers would really want to hold onto the ideal of progress after the disastrous 20th century.

Addiction

If diction is one's saying, the way one is pressed into service, and also the way one presses into, and against, the world,

then because 'ad' is "to express motion or direction towards" and an addict "to devote or apply habitually" (OED), comparative media theory requires an engagement with one's habitat. How does one say one's habitat and one's habituation? I began with Canada, my immigrant's embrace of, and addiction to, Canada, but came to realize through the politics of Québec and the First Nations that my Canada is English Canada, "the only identity of the Canadian nation-state from which I can write as a participant, one whose destiny is also my own" (Angus 2003: 23). Many argue with this denomination, but since I have rejected the transmission model of communication for a model of expression, the dominant public language must be seen as having its effect.

Communication is deeply rooted in the history of Canada as the colony of French, British and American empires. A colony provides raw materials to the centre and receives manufactured goods in return. It is thus stretched between an encounter with the ahistorical, archaic and a historical link to civilization. Geography, the land, versus history. The two poles are held together by communication: transportation of goods and people, information and identity. This imperial communication is repeated within Canada: the interventionist national state, its development of infrastructure, and promotion of national identity. Thus, a divided identity: European and later Canadian, historical and continuous. But also: regional and local, tied to the land, innovative and discontinuous. A hegemonic struggle: a historical continuity which presents itself as an umbrella under which all particular identities can be subsumed, the condition for their very existence, versus particular loyalties whose local relations must be severed by such a subsumption. This division is apparent at all levels: international (Canada versus the U.S.A.), national (Ottawa versus Québec and First Nations; Ottawa versus the regions), sub-national (southern Ontario over the north, metropolitan capital over the regional hinterlands), etc. I defined English Canada as a border in the wilderness, the silent between-point where the babble of unhinged mad discourses passes into the stable sanity of the imperial monologue (Angus 1997: 126-34). This is the origin of philosophy in our own place.

It has often been thought that one must choose between a supposedly old-fashioned nationalism that opposes a uniform Canadian identity to Yankee imperialism and a post-modern plurality of identities within Canada. But why? Such a false choice is the index of a political failure. Instead, the issue is the "recognition of the *multiple forms of dependency* that exist in contemporary society" such that "each [must] be analysed in terms of the *specific linkage* that ties it to the system as a whole" (Angus 1997: 45). There are many

contexts, each containing specific relations of dependency. They translate each other, producing complex and overlapping forms, but this plurality does not evacuate the problem of dependency, nor that of emancipation. It does mean that one must abandon the notion of 'society' as a vague notion of an absolute context that could decide the relations between multiple dependencies for a single 'primary contradiction', and requires that one accept the multiplicity of social movements as an unsurpassable fact.

Prediction/Aspiration/Inspiration

Philosophy cannot predict the future and is, in a certain sense, limited to the domain of the already seen and heard. But, to the extent that it trains itself to apprehend the 'newness in the new', it can become the voice of that which is straining to appear, to achieve solidity. Prediction is thus less like the 'aforesaid' (OED) and more like an aspiration, that to which one aspires, the diction, saying, of that which inspires, which one breathes in and gives life. The multiplicity of dependencies gives voice to the multiplicity of emancipations. Overcoming phallogentrism, Eurocentrism, anglocentrism, etc. implies an aspiration to overcoming 'centrisms' of all kinds, of a thought without centrism, of a living without centrism: "A centrism consists in the subsumption of diverse experiences and contents under an explanatory scheme that is *presupposed as universal although it incorporates elements that arose in a particular history*. A return to concrete and diverse experiences does not negate universality, but opens the possibility that a genuine universality might emerge through the displacement

of centrisms" (Angus 1997: 110). It is the problem of all dependencies to discover how not to be regarded as merely the content of an already given form, but to originate a form of explanation or thought itself. Not to kick the habit, but to form one. Such a universality cannot be found in tradition in Hegelian-hermeneutic fashion (since that relies on a Eurocentric history) nor simply ruled out as impossible (due to the post-structuralist rejection of immediacy for the 'constitutive outside') but must somehow emerge from the return to particularity in a certain mode. Particularity is not particularism or tribalism: "The central proposal of *A Border Within* is that the inhabitation of particularity is the necessary entry point into a non-exclusionary form of universality" one good reader has said (Henderson 2000: 96). How can this happen? Its first condition is that the universality does not subsume each particularity. Thus, that the universality is only available *through* the particularity on which it remains dependent - a universality proposed but in question, a particularity that lends its content to the universality but does not reduce the universality to a particularism, what I have come to call a 'constitutive paradox': "To give a formal definition: lacking hegemonic fixture, an identity oscillates paradoxically between being simply a particular identity and being a candidate for content of the universal hegemonic identity" (Angus 2003: 29). The aspiration of an overcoming of all centrisms would culminate in such an identity.

Spiration

One aspires to a future that inspires one in the present: inspire as to infuse

into the mind, to breath in. (OED) This inspiration is life, the daily continuation of birth. Thus infused, one exhales, breathes out, dictates. If one dictates too much without inspiration, one expires. Death is this expiration. The meditation on death produced philosophy. Movement in and out, body in the world, no subject and object. One still moment between in and out. After inspiration, before dictation. After dictation, before inspiration. What should we call it: the open mouth, the still air, no movement to define an in and out. Not 'in', not 'ex', without a prefix, perhaps just spiration, a silence between death and life. Border. "When spiration splits itself into expiration and inspiration by instituting a border, the two sides of *display* and *abjection* arise. This asymmetry indicates an 'involuntary' moment in one's location" (Angus 2000a: 180). Philosophy must accept its location and, through a decisive act, turns fate (particularity) into a destiny (universality) that can address the human condition. We are all spirants (the Latin present participle of breath), breathers. Philosophy now wants to name the stillness between breaths, that stillness from which we all become present here for a while. In this spiration, philosophy is between natality and death, star-struck at their border.

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Editor's Note. In SRB 14.2 (2004), Peter C. van Wyck reviewed two key books by Ian Angus on comparative media theory. Dr. Angus was invited to respond, not with a letter to the editor, but in the form of a reflection on his contributions to communication theory.

Evolution Goes Awry

Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations of Desire*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.

By Paul Hegarty

In the future, the past: biotechnology not only brings dramatic changes in life and how we view it, it reveals a world where those changes have already been occurring. Nature is revealed as an already biotechnological world, as the posthuman world of cloning, virtual sex and transgenic manipulation draws our attention to processes hitherto ignored or marginalized by mainstream biological thinking, notably in the field of evolution. The future, past: as sex changes, altered by, within and against machine technology and power technologies, it turns out sex has always already been something other. As have machines. Future, as past: things are moving fast, altering everything of our biological being as well as any other being we might have, but futurism dates, and the endless return of biobeginnings is

replayed in Parisi's insistence on the now, to the detriment of futures and pasts already offered, so that exciting new futures and futures past emerge from discourses that have already been surpassed.

Only Forward?

But that would perhaps be to insist on a competitive, linear model of thinking. Parisi offers, in her *Abstract Sex*, a 'turbulent' view, where no phenomenon can be seen to develop in a simple linear, progressive or hierarchical manner. Building chaos into forms we presumed were stable. The world is indeed different in the wake of the now familiar chaos theory, early applications of which looked at animal populations in given environments. I

raise this point now partly because the application of non-linearity is central to Parisi's project of defining complexity as movement of complexity, rather than as product, but also because it highlights the danger of newness and a rhetoric of 'we can no longer...': this new physics (or microphysics? Minor physics?) is not particularly new in itself, but more worryingly, in Parisi, one of its main achievements is to "question Newton's conception of time" (131), when we have had about 100 years of different ways of conceiving time.

Non-linearity comes to us through the prism of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and *Abstract Sex* as a whole can certainly be thought of as an application of their ideas - or maybe part of a rhizomatic spread they feature in. The other key reference point in this

book is the evolutionary theory of Lynn Margulis. It is from Deleuze and Guattari that a new conception of 'abstract' emerges. Parisi refers to their concept of 'abstract matter', which rather than being constituted in fixed entities, is made up of movement, of endless crossing and re-crossing of lines of stratification. 'Abstract sex' itself signals how abstract matter is in motion. Sex occurs in a multitude of ways, few of which involve sexual reproduction, or even sex as humans understand it. The notion of 'abstract sex' is designed to enable us to adopt a much wider perspective on 'sex', so as to better conceptualize life and the interactions that make it up. Sex, then, is the "transversal mixing of information between bodies of all sorts" (17). This is occurring today, at a bacterial level, both inside and outside of already-constituted multicellular organisms, and is the figure of a new permeability of those organisms. As we come to understand that, we have cause, according to Parisi, to rethink evolution and what it has to say in defining living processes and things. Many eons ago, bacteria combined in what sometimes seems an aggressive ("double parasitism", 64), and at other times a benign, co-operation (61-5). This is the process of endosymbiosis proposed by Margulis, as an alternative to the identity-oriented selfish gene theory of Richard Dawkins and neo-Darwinism in general. This process then migrates across the scales, and ultimately occurs at cultural and digital levels. This continual occurrence and re-occurrence of endosymbiosis, it is claimed, overturns the teleological and linear model of evolution.

Matter itself is caught up within cultural assessment and cultural occupation of 'nature'. Parisi moves beyond this perspective (essentially that of Donna Haraway) in order to suggest a malleable, fluid, turbulent reality where culture and nature are never separate but cross each other endlessly, just as bacteria can. There are three phases, so far, of how this occurs, or locations across which it occurs: the biophysical, the biocultural, the biodigital (see *Abstract Sex*, vii, for an ambitious mapping of this, and 21 for further clarification). The first marks the move into life and the move to sex (whilst emphasizing that there is no linear once-and-for-all move from inorganic to organic); the second is the modern period identified by Foucault as the period of biopower and of the proliferation of discourses on sex and sex as discursive event; the third is where we are now - the era where cloning and capacity to intervene 'on' nature illustrates that we are not above nature, in control of it, but endlessly renegotiating our arrangements with it, and continually finding that human inventions are reiterations of other events, occurring across different scales and strata; for example, biotechnology is what is always already occurring when mitochondrial DNA joins cells with

nucleic DNA.

The book is at its strongest when twisting the lines between nature and culture, the latter particularly in its positivistic, scientific mode, and accreting theoretical moments into a multilayered dynamism. Take, for example, the following statement on the process of evolution: "the biophysical order of matter is not dictated by a transcendent force of abolition, but emerges autonomously out of collective assemblages where particle-forces collide at the edge of chaos" (22), or this, on cloning: "mammal cloning involves a highly turbulent process of mitochondrial and cellular symbiosis irreducible to the scissiparity of the Identical" (158). The text, though, has put itself in a difficult place, discursively, with its wish to endlessly return us to earlier phases of life, and then to argue that they are not former, but still there as present (or absent, at some fundamental level) phenomena, and that this is part of a turbulent non-order of things. It is hard to write the turbulence in, in other words, and the second chapter on 'symbiotic sex' is needlessly convoluted, due to its need to cover mindnumbingly dull biochemistry with Deleuze and Guattari. It is also in a difficult place due to its abstraction, in the most literal way possible, that is, in staying at the level of meta-principles with continual gestures toward examples, rather than letting the theory emerge from its own dynamic operations (or evidence, if you favor a more traditional view). There are exceptions to this. The slightly incongruous reading of David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (an interesting reading, but not really in synch with the rest of the book); the straightforwardness of the account of Elaine Morgan's development of the 'Aquatic Ape theory' (more below); but more typical are the concluding claims for "microfeminine warfare" (194-201) which does not go into what this is other than a Deleuze and Guattari inspired 'becoming-woman' of everything; or chapter four's 'biodigital sex' that, ironically, given the theory that drives the book, keeps the metaphysical or abstract speculation apart from the (short) sections on the human genome project, or cloning.

Abstraction itself goes through some mutation in the course of *Abstract Sex*. Firstly, the abstraction of sex from bodies is seen as an outcome of the coalition between virtualization of sex and some sort of inherent masculine drive to abstraction. Descartes is seen as perhaps fathering that sort of abstraction with his mind-body dualism, which I think is slightly misrepresented here since the dualism in Descartes is an inseparable one and the mind is always embodied, subject to a world of thought that informs its mindness. The abstraction of 'abstract sex' itself is a good abstraction, as it claims to not be an essence, or to deal with essences, but to operate as a process. It is abstract sex because sex is something

wider than sex as an act:

sex is an event: the actualization of modes of communication and reproduction of information that unleashes an indeterminate capacity to affect all levels of a body - biological, cultural, economical and technological. Sex is a mode - a modification or intensive extension of matter - that is analogous neither with sexual reproduction nor with sexual organs (11).

But is it even sex any more? Why have sex at all? In maintaining a centrality of sex, however redefined, Parisi's theory runs the risk of falling into the trap identified by Foucault (in his *History of Sexuality*), as sex and sexuality go beyond even their human universalization to somehow map the living universe (and the now non-separate inorganic universe). As even Richard Dawkins (one of the prime targets of this book) admits, "alternatives to sex do exist" (Dawkins 1989: 43), and this even for reproduction. So is abstract sex abstract? It certainly does not seem to be abstract - it seems highly grounded, even if that grounding is a treacherous, precarious one. So abstract sex is neither sex nor abstract. In fact, the standard definition of (animal) sex is itself identified as an abstraction (in contrast to 'abstract sex'), one motivated by gender and other political power relations.

What then is 'abstract sex' doing, what does it allow? Occasionally, a glimpse of purpose can be seen: "these ['co-causal'] relations will enable us to map the mutations of a body-sex through the plasticity of material signs rather than signification, singularity rather than specificity, abstraction rather than generalities" (28). The use of abstract materialism will "produce a map of the non-linear movements of connection between causes and effects unfolding the potential (force) of a body to mutate through an ecosystem of indefinite mixtures" (29), consisting of an "essence [that] is linked to the far-from-equilibrium dynamics of matter" (29). Sometimes, we have a sense of mission, one that arises from a concatenation of 'good things' (symbiosis, abstract, desire, machine) as opposed to something that coheres linearly: "micropolitics requires the *engineering* of abstract sex (symbiotic desire) where bodies of connection are not determined by the identity of sex but by incorporeal mutations of desire or the machinic compositions of essence (difference)" (41).

Bad Science

In this section, I will look at how Parisi categorizes key theories of evolution, and argue that there are some problems here. Nonetheless, we have to also ask the question whether *Abstract Sex* intends to play by the rules of science at all, and therefore 'bad

science' could emerge as a critical approach to scientific discourse.

Darwin, first. Darwin is of course not first in evolutionary theory, and, as I suggested at the beginning, Parisi's rewritings and/or 'swerve' readings of evolution could actually return us to pre-Darwinian thought, purposely or otherwise. Darwin is continually misrepresented in *Abstract Sex*, which asserts the priority of sexual selection for Darwin. This is absolutely not the case, as natural selection is about chance survival, and those who reproduce will be those who have survived to reproduce: "[any] variation [...] if it be in any degree profitable [...] will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring" (Darwin 1985: 115). Sexual selection is, therefore, very much a secondary concern and even occasionally an unreliable source of variation as "sexual selection is, [therefore], less rigorous than natural selection" (1985: 136; see also 193). Darwin is also assumed to be some sort of right-wing economist (admittedly he claims inspiration from Adam Smith, as many neo-liberals have), insistent on competition (22). Parisi (51-3) resuscitates Bergson's sub-mystical view of evolution (via Deleuze) to offer a trenchant criticism of Darwin's 'negativity' - i.e., that selection is only ever negative, working through extinction. Leaving aside Darwin's perfectly valid argument for this - the existence of a species or variation does not prove evolution, only extinction as opposed to perseverance does - it is wrong. Darwin offered many positive reasons for change, most of which are now seen as too corrupted by Lamarckianism. This is not the only occasion where Darwin's theory is offered (by some other source) in opposition to a straw Darwin or Darwinism.

In any case, argues Parisi, evolutionary thought has moved on, taking in non-linear dynamics - but not only does this not challenge evolution in the slightest, it has been incorporated (see Depew and Weber 1997; Gould 2002) as a modification of Darwin's original thought. Darwin, just like Lamarck before him, and most evolutionists today, accept some sort of co-evolution, but unless we adopt the bad bits of Lamarck, environment does not breed changes.

So how is it Parisi gets Darwin so wrong? Evolution, and life in general, is creative, she argues, and has to be seen more positively than the bleak image at the heart of Darwin's thought (this despite the fact that Parisi correctly rejects evolution as favoring the inherently better, even if evidence can be found for and against this in Darwin). Bacteria "invented genetic engineering" (61 and 62) and "bio-technology is not simply natural. It partakes of the hypernatural capacities of a body to become" (196). Darwin, of course, has no sense of agency, and, fundamentally, I would argue, no notion of causal

goodness, or superiority of outcomes. Parisi implicitly opposes a vitalism owing much to Bergson (and Deleuze's take on him) and Teilhard de Chardin to the supposed dualism of Descartes and what is clearly the troubling nihilist universe suggested by Darwin. What is interesting is that this removes the gain made by Darwin (and to some extent Lamarck) in looking at what evidence was there and incorporating that into hypotheses. Instead Parisi offers a metaphysical model of evolution (I doubt that term would be accepted by the author, but I think it would have to apply to a metanarrative about the history of life being about symbiosis, creativity and an intentional universe), and an explicit rejection of the rationalism of scientism. Now, this means that what we have is a critique of scientism, and not just a return to something less than science.

The problem here is that Parisi does take some models that come from science seriously, and presents them as a true picture of what is going on in evolution and technological developments of today, so presumably the 'science bits' aren't just to be taken as working in the realm of metaphor.

Dawkins, now. Dawkins, with his notion of total competition between genes, mirrored in competition between organisms, is identified as being wrong, on the basis that it is a linear, identity-driven, more or less ideological construct, compared to Margulis' conception of endosymbiosis. Neo-Darwinism (with Dawkins as its main representative) does not work due to its insistence on individuation and individual moments (139). In contrast to this is Margulis' notion of endosymbiosis, combined with a "mechanosphere [is] composed of abstract machines - symbiotic compositions of molecular bodies whose differences are ceaselessly engineered" (141). The latter arise from the combination of different bacteria within cells, with mitochondria crucial in the "emergence of such a machine" (66). I am not sure whether Dawkins would go along with the idea of ceaseless transformationism, but he does concur with the rest, and goes beyond it: having argued in favor of the symbiotic origin of the cell, he goes on to add: "I speculate that we shall come to accept the more radical idea that each one of our genes is a symbiotic unit. We are gigantic colonies of symbiotic genes" (Dawkins 1989: 182). He also talks of a 'gene machine' that seems incredibly similar to Parisi's (46-7) view of life in that it favors, or even results from co-ordination. If even Dawkins agrees with this idea, then how much more have other evolutionists, who favor a misleadingly named 'hierarchical' model (see Gould 2002 for his view and that of the field in general) pre-empted what is on offer in *Abstract Sex*?

Time is foreshortened as well as fractalized in Parisi's account of life's development: Darwin's principal criticism of Lamarck was not for the notion of inherited acquired characteristics as

such (he did not dispute it as a factor in evolution at all), but because it misunderstood the speed of evolution, and in so doing attributed a purposiveness to change. Any theory which insists on positive, creative evolution (placed in opposition to a negative force of extinction) will encounter this difficulty - as mentioned above, bacteria are described as inventing or engineering their future. Geological perspective is totally lost, and human(ist) perspective brought to the fore. Parisi has three moments in the history of life, and two of them are centered on humans and the last two centuries. Not only that, but change is speeding up: "from the Internet to virtual reality, from cloning images to cloning humans - [that] are rapidly changing the conception and perception of sex" (25). Within this humanist (and/or anthropocentric) perspective, everything is happening now, through humans, and in a timescale humans can understand. Today, "sex is disentangled from genital sex and sexual reproduction, the symbolic representation of sexual difference. [...] Sex no longer individuates the body but becomes a machinic construction of a multiplicity of modes of information transmission" (39). Here and elsewhere, we encounter the assertion that until yesterday, sex was reproductive, patriarchal and sadistic. Only new biotechnology, Deleuze (whose *Coldness and Cruelty* is cited, but as observing something brand new) and endosymbiotic theory change this.

The net result of this foreshortening of time is that evolutionary perspective is utterly lost, and this is highly comforting, as is the notion of evolution being a positive, creative thing at *precisely the time humans can intervene and be creative*, thus removing humans from evolution, just as 'creationist science' occasionally allows. But none of this is science in the 'traditional' sense - we are not experimenting, and attempting to show objective truths... but are we only swapping metaphors in a world made only of competing discourses, language games? Larger claims are continually made by Parisi, for science that suits, and I feel that Parisi's theory would benefit from taking the theory of 'abstract sex' into explicitly Nietzschean territory, and not claim any truth for any theory, any notion of evolution. Which brings us to the 'aquatic ape'.

Elaine Morgan has theorized that many of the features of humans can only be accounted for if ape ancestors lived essentially in water, for 2-3 million years. Other aspects of the theory point away from Darwin's belief in an essentially passive femininity and toward a view where females changed first, and effectively selected males from a position of evolutionary dominance. As bad science this is good stuff - no evidence, no argument, predetermined outcome. The theory of the aquatic ape has been ignored by a lot of mainstream evolutionary theory, and does seem fundamentally flawed on some really

simple points, such as humans being hairless, or bipedalism being good for swimming. But all science is part of the passive nihilism of truth claims, so there's nothing better or worse about this theory. The theory continues, with a (as cited here in any case) Lamarckian direct influence of environment on genotype: "environmental adaptation involves not a passive but a potential modification of the body's field of action, inventing new internal regions of reception which are resonances of an outside in which they are, as it were, in permanent metastable communication" (178). Whatever terminology you use, this is what Lamarck is accused of (organisms choosing the future of species) but rejected. The theory is also highly teleological, and environmentally

determinist. Everything is utilitarian (whereas Darwin recognized chance and redundancy as significant), and everything in Paris's reading is peculiarly oriented to reproduction - astonishingly so for what claims to be a feminist work (recent work such as Bruce Bagemihl's *Animal Exuberance* points to the vast amount of non-heterosexual sex and behavior throughout nature, and in a less convincing approach, Joan Roughgarden also highlights sexual diversity and transsexualism in *Evolution's Rainbow*).

Abstract Sex raises a large number of issues: how can biotechnology and its natural counterpart be assessed with perspectives outside the main lines of evolutionary questioning?; once that is

done, how can life's development be thought in a non-linear fashion?; how can teleology be avoided?; how can patriarchal presumptions in science be undermined?; how can evolution be thought of as something other than a random destructive force?; how can endosymbiosis be transferred through the strata of contemporary human cultures? In so doing, it provides a way into an interdisciplinary, ideologically aware future where we do not take scientists' word for evolution. However, it also believes its alternative sources too much, and this often entails misrepresentation of evolutionary theory, whether referring to Darwin or contemporary theory (which is, for example, perfectly capable of accepting endosymbiosis as a driver of evolution, and also able to assimilate non-linear dynamics). This has the odd outcome

Untamed

Umberto Eco, *On Literature*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2005.

Cristina Farronato, *Eco's Chaosmos: From the Middle Ages to Postmodernity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

Charlotte Ross and Rochelle Sibley (eds.), *Illuminating Eco: On the Boundaries of Interpretation*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

By Mike Gane

These three volumes make a substantial addition to the Eco literature in each of the relevant domains: Eco's own impressive reflection on reading, an important work devoted to a reading of Eco's oeuvre, and a conference collection indicating the kind of debates which Eco's thought currently engenders. There is certainly not just an amazing range, but there is also a vitality and a quality that is rare in the contemporary intellectual scene, and deserves attention.

Cristina Farronato's book does not aim to be an intellectual biography. It is rather, she says, an investigation into the 'philosophical background' of Eco's writing, particularly his fiction, as it reveals a tension between order and disorder, cosmos and chaos (xiii). She wants to undertake "an analysis of how Eco's background has influenced his studies of semiotics, mass communication, and popular culture". From the acknowledgments we are led to understand that Farronato spent time in the Department of Communication Sciences at the University of Bologna where Eco was her mentor. Clearly this book is intended to be a rebuttal of those critics who see Eco's semiotics as dated and his work as increasingly marginal to cultural studies. Indeed, she claims that "Eco offers precious tools for such study and that disregarding his position handicaps contemporary theory" (7).

Does this book deliver on this objective? It would have to show that there are in Eco's works a set of indispensable critical tools and that he has, or someone has, employed them to telling effect. Her discussions of particular novels are often interesting in their own right, but do not play a crucial

part in her argument. If we jump to the concluding chapter where Farronato sums up and tries to draw conclusions she refers to Baudrillard's work on simulacra, especially a situation of total simulation, to argue that Eco warns "against the danger of such a concept" (194). But Farronato fails to identify what the danger is, and only conjures a dogmatic judgement: "once semiotics has recognised this balance between the multiple manifestations of Being and its resistances, it can proceed to explore the world" (195). Her discussion of Eco's *On Literature* amounts merely to a brief list of its contents (195-7). In considerable awe, she ends by saying that his "theoretical choices were made possible by the vibrant resonating of history in Eco's brain, where it constitutes an empowering model for dealing with postmodern reality" (198). But what is this model, and what are the precious tools that go with it? It appears to be related to a specific notion of reality.

Farronato's effort attempts to locate Eco's solution as lying between a theory of order and of chaos derived from his study of medieval forms. In other words, Eco's intellectual quest has from the start been oriented to a search for a solution to this problem of the tension between closure and infinite openness, what she calls, following Eco's writing on Joyce, chaosmos. Perhaps what Farronato has in mind is that Eco provides a model and tools to solve this problem rather than producing a cultural theory as such. By the end of her account of Eco's travels from the medieval period, she writes "what I am trying to suggest is that medieval and early modern paradigms were important

for Eco's ground-breaking theory ... because they created the necessary tension that would allow him to argue the possibility of a textual interpretation that can be infinite but at the same time limited" (29). For Eco "many modern theories are unable to recognize that symbols are paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but syntagmatically, that is textually, open only to the indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context" (cited 30-1). Farronato comments, inelegantly, and this betrays her understanding of the issues around the concept of the symbol, that Eco can put theories together because they "understand symbols as having any possible meaning owing to the contradictoriness of reality" (30). She rightly emphasises that when writing his classic semiotic studies, he was critical of all attempts to suggest a "universal and ontological importance of these structures" (30).

Her argument (Chapter 3, 32-60) is that semiotic theory provided the essential methodological solution for Eco. In this chapter she gives a very brief account of the key elements of the semiotics (sign, interpretant, unlimited semiosis, encyclopedia, abduction), and then a quick look at his analysis of mass culture and cultural studies, via a discussion of Eco's notion of the open work. Farronato emphasises (52) the way in which Eco always gives an important place to 'external reality', but her citations from Eco are far from conclusive. When she moves (54) from semiotics to a semiology of narrative structure and then to a sociology of literature, the account does not seem to reflect an awareness of these shifts in

relation to Eco's notion of the mechanisms at play or the way in which he thinks effects are produced. Thus, suddenly, the semiotic mechanisms disappear. In their place emerge studies of narration, the significance of different kinds of hero, etc. Against the obvious criticism that his analyses did not apply textual analysis and did not apply his semiotics, Farronato simply says, at least he made a contribution to sociology (56). She moves on to consider his cultural criticism, but again the semiotic model is left behind, for the discussion centres on issues raised by Foucault, and the concept of culture and power. This chapter ends by saying that a consideration of how cultural analysis is done will be considered in Chapter 6.

If we turn to this chapter, called "A Theory of Medieval Laughter: The Comic, Humour, and Wit" (123-139), we find a section which is devoted to a discussion of an example (138) which purports to show a "liaison between texts and situations". The theme here is humour, or more precisely Eco's distinctions between wit, the comic, and humour. Having given Eco's definitions, examples are given from Eco's writings, and Farronato insists (137) that Eco "moves beyond post-structuralist thought, as the language game is not there for its own sake but involves cultural critique". What is this cultural critique? The examples given however reveal no use of semiotic theory, or indeed any cultural critique as such. An example she provides is a brief presentation of Eco's "How to Travel on American Trains". She writes: "Eco refers to Protestant ethics and to political correctness. Taking the train in the U.S.A. is, for Eco, not a choice but a punishment, and the irony is that, unlike the glamorous images of them provided in Hollywood films, American trains are dirty and used only by the poor. White police saunter around and, dangling their baton, in the spirit of political correctness kindly ask vagabonds what they are doing inside the station and seraphically suggest that outside is a beautiful day" (137).

Is this humour? What semiotic technique? How is text in liaison with situation? In what way is this critique beyond post-structuralism? Actually if you read the piece itself (in Eco 1998: 20-23) it is very humorous, but Farronato clearly does not know why and seems unable to employ Eco's concepts, let alone connect the story-line itself with reality. It appears that this might be a story about Eco's observation that poverty exists in the US and that political correctness leads to an uncannily benign police attitude towards 'presumed bums'. But in fact the story hinges also around smoking as Eco finds that to smoke on the train he is forced to join what is, because of political correctness, a marginalized community. But in this community he found he was "the only one wearing a tie... [and] as the smoker was the last car of the train this collection of outcasts had to walk a

hundred yards or so" when the train reached its destination. But in a flourish Eco passes, by contrast, in a last paragraph, to a private, non-smoking faculty dining club where again he wanted to smoke: "A moment of silence and embarrassed smiles followed, then someone closed the doors, a lady extracted a pack of cigarettes from her purse, others looked at my own pack. Furtive glances of complicity, stifled laughter, as in a striptease theater. There followed ten minutes of delightful, thrilling transgression" (22-3). So Eco's critique? Farronato missed it because she only noticed the poverty. And she also missed the chance to discuss in this little gem of a story the acute ambivalences in Eco's social and ethical allegiances (the difference between the smoking car and the faculty dining club), and, reading semiologically, his ironic reference to "the ultimate symbol of marginalization: to smoke," but also, and not least, to his tie.

If we turn to *Illuminating Eco*, edited by Ross and Sibley, we find a very diverse and varied collection of essays. David Robey's introductory essay suggests that at the heart of Eco's novels the crucial issue is uncertainty and truth, where perhaps "laughter and comedy are the sane thinker's way of accepting and affirming the disorder of the universe" (3). The critical level of discussion in this collection is immediately indicated by Robey's acute observations on the differences between interpretative strategies and textual strategies in a discussion of model author and model reader. Robey asks (and Clare Birchall pushes this still further in an excellent discussion, 71-87), does Eco not press his case too far occasionally in holding that interpretative strategies are always "in the text"? (10) And again interestingly but less acutely (because here the question of the symbol not the absolute is raised), Robey asks, is not Eco somewhat nostalgic for a lost world of order in suggesting that in his essay "How I write" the novel *Foucault's Pendulum* came from a combination of two things, the image of the pendulum, and "an overwhelming revelation of the truth, a sense of union with the absolute experienced as he played the trumpet at a partisan funeral" (10 and 176; also, in *On Literature* 310).

There are a number of quality discussions of Eco's novels, particularly *The Name of the Rose* (Key, Sibley), but at the heart of this collection are a variety of challenging essays on problems raised by Eco's semiotics particularly in relation to deconstruction (Birchall, Ross), with a continuing worry about both the nature of the referential interpretative community as anchor, and the basis for Eco's ideas on "the original locus, or place of origin [where] Being, masked, reveals itself in structural events while avoiding all structure" (cited 109). Charlotte Ross examines critically Eco's work on "The Search for a Perfect Language" as a way of teasing out some

of the intractable problems of origin but notes (113ff) that "Eco reasserts the necessity for progress and movement rather than final resolution. Paradoxically while confirming his reliance on an evolutionary teleological model based on ontological truth, he invalidates the very possibility of finding an answer". Examining his ideas on falsity, she again finds Eco's position on truth and knowledge riven with contradictions. And in *Serendipities* she finds that "Eco, like de Maistre, confronts the difficulty of explaining how new input is injected into language, and whilst shying away from the Word as source, finds himself time and again confronted with the Origin he seeks to dislodge" (120). What troubles many contributors to this collection is that Eco seems to require an anchor point in the real, yet his efforts to secure this only lead him into paradox.

On the other hand there is one quite anti-Eco piece in this collection, that by Sangjin Park, which takes the opposed position. Park examines the evolution of Eco's ideas in order to show that they mark a deterioration of his project as soon as he neglects the real. At the beginning, Eco strove to identify relations between text, author and reader "only insofar as they related together" (137). He identifies two periods in Eco's work, the earlier, in which "there was no independent area for the text alone" (136) he calls the "pre-semiotic", and in this period there was no problematic of textual openness. Everything seems to go wrong for Park with Eco's move into semiotics. What follows in Park's paper is a list of grievances against most of Eco's key ideas, either for their "objectivist tendencies" or "lack of empiricity and individuality", or indeed "narcissism" (126). On top of this "Eco's semiotics is hardly a practical tool for cultural and social change" (133). And "if Eco wants semiotic theory to intervene in the historic process, he must use it. He should stop elaborating on a system... [and] concentrate on determining how a text relates to empirical reality" (134-5). It is difficult to understand why Park is interested in Eco, and why this reductive piece is included in this collection, since he seems to have learnt nothing from his encounter with these ideas.

In any case Eco ignores it in response (193-99) to questions arising from the collection. These remarks reveal how on top of all the material from his long career he still is. He notes (194) if "narrative universes are the parameter that enables us to judge our interpretations of the world [t]his does not mean, as some would have it, that the world is a text or a story; it means that we have to interpret it as if it were". To Birchall's query on the nature of the interpretative community, Eco takes up the challenge: there are different and conflicting communities, but one has to choose. Eco prefers to choose rationally that community "which gains the consensus of the learned persons, which controls the content of encyclopaedias... The task of knowledge is to challenge,

everyday, the winning wisdom" (196). Eco replies to Robey that "nostalgia of the absolute accompanies the awareness that this absolute can often be illusory or false" (199).

In *On Literature*, Eco gathers together occasional writings on style, poetics, fiction and truth, form and other topics from the period 1990-2000. Here there are some superb essays on Joyce and Borges. For some however (see John Carey's interesting review, *Sunday Times*, 9th January, 2005), this book reveals in a transparent way the contradiction between Eco the scientist, and Eco the novelist, or as Carey expresses it: reason and superstition. The superstitious elements are those including Eco's own commitment to science itself ("emotional rather than intellectual"), but particularly his concept of the symbol as "instantaneous revelation of the inscrutable" which must remain "inaccessible and inexpressible" (Eco). Carey immediately sees these and similar comments as in conflict with any scientific semiotics. Indeed, says Carey, semioticians would denounce these new ideas as in contradiction to all scientific method and philosophy. In fact Carey picks up other 'superstitious' elements in *On Literature* ignored by the readers covered in this review, especially Eco's argument that deviant children behave as they do "because they are excluded from the universe of literature". Literature also has an improving effect because it teaches the ineluctable force of destiny.

Certainly the first essay of the collection "On Some Functions of Literature" (2000), raises the issue of the power of literature in a way Eco rarely addresses. It seems no accident that it is the introductory essay to this collection. Essentially Eco argues that literature is not fundamentally a vehicle for play;

neither is it for the transmission of ideas or morals, nor the "formation of an aesthetic sense" (13). Eco insists that to read literature means to learn respect, a "profound respect for ... the intention of the text" (5), but it is also to discover that "things happen, and have always happened in a particular way, no matter what the reader wants. The reader must accept this frustration, and through it sense the power of Destiny" (13). Not quite consistently - because he passes over fascist notions of "ineluctable destinies" (perhaps they were not literature?) - he says that no matter what the story, "we need their severe 'repressive' lesson... . Stories that are 'ready made' also teach us how to die" (15). But if this is a surprise, Eco's interest in the symbolic leads to more. Eco notes that metaphors do not belong to the symbolic order, nor do allegories. He reviews various attempts to read the symbolic only in the end to suggest that it is essentially a "textual strategy" (152). Eco works gradually towards the view that "something appears, and we know that it is an apparition, otherwise it would not be so out of place, and yet we do not know what it is revealing to us" (154). In his discussion of Nerval's "Sylvie" there is reference to a clock inserted into the text "that does not have any relevance for the purposes of the plot" (53). But what happens when the existence of this symbolic modality becomes consciously and widely known as a semiotic order? Obsessively almost everywhere today this modality is sensed and we "become sick with language" (157).

Is all this new in Eco? It would seem so, given that these themes are not really dealt with in the commentaries. But Eco explicitly at points refers back to his semiotic writings, particularly and obviously to those on symbols. If we turn back to these writings and particularly

the section on the symbol in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986: 130-163), we find most of the substance of these ideas clearly articulated, especially in a subsection, the "semiotics of the symbolic mode", even down to an analysis of "Sylvie". In fact it is worth reading this analysis before the later one in *On Literature*, for Eco is more explicit. In the story "the narrator fails to understand which [of the three women] he really loves and which one he really loved. At this point the reader catches the possible symbolic meanings of the Renaissance clock. It was a symbol standing for a nebula of alternative and nevertheless complementary contents, namely, the vagueness of remembrance, the incumbence of the past [...] This symbol is open; it is however, overdetermined by the co-text. This is undoubtedly a symbol, since its interpretation is doubtful. The episode is interpreted as a symbol exactly insofar as it cannot be definitely interpreted. The content of the symbol is a nebula of possible interpretations" (161). Significantly for Eco, symbols "are substracted from every 'political' control; they detonate, but they cannot be elaborated from the outside". In contrast to the rational community of critical scientists, here Eco is radical, for this (aesthetic) experience "cannot be interpreted and tamed by an interpretative tradition ... [if] this happens, the aesthetic symbol has provisionally (perhaps definitively) lost its appeal..." (162).

We might say that many of the issues seen as paradoxical and contradictory in Eco's work might be understood more clearly if the relations between the different levels of analysis are clarified. When Farronato comments that Eco can put theories together because they "understand symbols as having any possible meaning owing to the contradictoriness of reality" (30), it is clear that Eco refers in fact to "content nebula". Where Robey indicated problems around Eco's reported

Career Man

Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998 and 2004.

By Scott Pound

The image on the cover of Andy Stafford's intellectual biography of Roland Barthes is one Barthes himself no doubt would have appreciated. Rene Magritte's "La Reproduction Interdite" (1939) depicts, from behind, a figure looking in the mirror; but the figure in the picture, which appears to be a man, sees just what we see, his own back. It's a clever visual trick that doubles as a kind of cosmic aphorism. The typical reversal effect of a mirror, in which the left and right sides get flipped, is transformed into a much more radical reversal, from an anterior perspective to a posterior one, at once captivating and provoking the viewer. In playfully refuting a visual

convention, the image reveals a much darker truth: absolute insight, the kind of specularly we associate with mirrors, is a ruse.

In relation to Barthes's pioneering work as a critic and theorist, the image suggests an epistemological breach between origins and representations whereby individual subjects, supposed beacons of transparency and intelligibility, become opaque (or turn their backs) to themselves. A second look at the painting reveals another twist - both the supposed origin of the image and its reflection in the mirror are in fact representations. That's another piercing statement on subjectivity. Readers of Barthes might therefore see Magritte's painting as

emblematic of the radically attenuated form of subjectivity that we associate with poststructuralism. But that's not all. The conceptual density of Magritte's paintings likens them to visual (as well as cosmic) aphorisms in which the viewer/reader must take an active role. "Whoever is looking at the picture is representing what he sees", Magritte said of the painting in a letter to Paul Colinet in 1957. In this way, the viewer of the painting is interpolated into the activity of representing, and the artist relinquishes his meaning-making role to the spectator. This transfer of agency from the maker to the viewer/reader is what we would think of now as a Barthesian move. It parallels the "radical

reversal” called for in Barthes’s famous essay “The Death of the Author” where the author function is usurped by the reader, such that “every text is eternally written *here and now*” (“Death of the Author” 1468).

Magritte was endlessly fond of lampooning the epistemological fallacies we hold most dear. For that, he is an apt symbol for Barthes’s best qualities: lyrical wit combined with an adventurous, demythologizing intelligence. But while Magritte’s surrealist take on representation serves Barthes well, Stafford’s doggedly earnest book charts a different course. Subtitled “Phenomenon and Myth”, the book sets up a humanist framework for understanding Barthes’s “actual significance” as against “the mythical tendency” that threatens to obscure him (6). It’s a heuristic Barthes himself probably would have abjured. However, the conservative nature of Stafford’s approach might well be the book’s strongest feature. In an avowed attempt to combat the tendency to refract Barthes’s career through the aperture of his late work, Stafford proceeds chronologically (or, if you prefer, diachronically) from the beginning, endeavoring to explain “the ‘late’ by an earlier Barthes” (2). This approach makes sense not just because Stafford is an expert on Barthes’s early journalism, but also because the early Barthes is a revealing and important corpus in itself.

Twenty-five years after his death, the arc of Barthes’s career comes into particular focus thanks to the recent publication of the *Complete Works*, an event Stafford cites as enabling. Others have since followed Stafford’s lead in attempting to re-evaluate Barthes’s career in toto. “The success of the ‘late’ Barthes - perhaps especially in the U.S. - has at times obscured the earlier”, Peter Brooks and Naomi Schor suggest (435). To which Jonathan Culler adds: “It would be a great shame if this [younger] Barthes were forever lost in the image of the ‘*amoureux sans complexe de notre langue et du style*’ promoted by Barthes’s modern admirers, who want to forget the theorist for the writer” (441). While the only choice when evaluating Barthes’s oeuvre is by no means between an early ‘theorist’ and a later ‘writer’, a return to Barthes’s early career is certainly warranted, for several basic reasons. Barthes’s early career was extraordinarily productive; it produced some of his best work; and it catapulted him to fame.

The typical breakdown of Barthes’s career identifies three stages: a beginning, structuralist, stage (*Writing Degree Zero*, *Mythologies*, *Critical Essays*, *Elements of Semiology*, *The Fashion System*, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*) in which Barthes subjected his numerous and diverse enthusiasms to the rigorous logic of the semiotic sign; a middle, poststructuralist stage (*S/Z*, *Empire of Signs*, *Sade*, *Fourier*, *Loyola*, *Pleasure of the Text*) when Barthes, “shifting from an

ethic of commitment to an ethic of the signifier” (*Reader* 417), tracked the more playful quality of *écriture* and outlined the corresponding logic of textuality; and a late, much celebrated ‘autobiographical’ stage (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover’s Discourse*) that also takes in his work on photography, *Camera Lucida*.

Stafford’s breakdown is different. He locates Barthes in relation to his evolving cultural status as journalist, academic, and ‘novelist’, and this is the structure that organizes the book. Configured this way, Barthes’s career is elongated at the beginning to include time he spent during the war languishing in sanatoria being treated for tuberculosis. When Barthes finally returned to Paris in 1947, he was, Stafford tells us, “frankly irrelevant” (14). The first third of the book traces Barthes’s dramatic ascension from “nobody” to author of *Mythologies*, a period during the late 40’s and early to mid 50’s when Barthes managed to leverage his enormous energy and a unique ability to speak across academic and cultural boundaries into a theoretical franchise. *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Michelet* (1954), and *Mythologies* (1957) - Barthes’s first three books - come out of this period. More importantly, they come out of his work as a journalist for a variety of left wing publications, notably *Esprit*, *Combat*, and *Théâtre Populaire*. Stafford’s research into Barthes’s journalistic activities provides us with valuable context for understanding his early work in a new light.

The early journalism was polemical, sometimes stridently so. Of his many influences in this period, Marx and Brecht loom large. “If ... Barthes’s popular theatre activism led to his most political and militant writings, then it is no coincidence that his ‘discovery’ of Brecht in July 1954 heralded his period of intense journalistic activity”, Stafford tells us, creating an explicit link between Barthes’s militancy and his productivity (17). Furthermore, this work, Stafford says, “resulted from both ‘militant’ journalistic *praxis* and financial expediency” (8). In effect, Barthes was able to make a living critiquing the political status quo and, indeed, became famous for it. The irony here was not lost on Barthes’s contemporaries. As Jean Paulhan pointed out as early as 1955, left-wing polemicists always end up being revered by the bourgeois culture they abhor.

Monsieur Barthes is held in high regard by the bourgeois society that never fails to give him financial support. The way things are going, in fifteen years time, he will be Minister for Education; and he won’t make a bad minister (Qtd. in Stafford 1).

As an object lesson in the ability of official cultures to absorb and tame dissent, Barthes is pre-eminent in the French context, but there have been notable others, including Barthes’s fellow laureates at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

Barthes’s early profile as an organic intellectual is an aspect of him we rarely see. Most of us know that the ‘mythologies’ began as a series of regular columns (for *Les Lettres nouvelles*), but few would likely be aware of the fact that “between 1942 and 1960, Barthes published over 200 pieces... in over forty different publications” (13). Like Paul de Man, whose early journalism came to light only as a result of its scandalous nature, Barthes “trained” largely outside the academy as a professional writer and theatre activist. Whether we can really go so far as to say, as Stafford does, that “[Barthes’s] ‘style’ and brilliant ‘essayism’ were indebted (paradoxically perhaps) to his ‘exploitation’ as a journalist in the 1950’s” (14) is another question. The need for caveat and quotation marks would seem to suggest no, but there it is.

Despite the occasional attempt to romanticize Barthes’s time as a journalist, Stafford’s detailed attention to the exigencies of such a livelihood in the 40’s and 50’s foregrounds an important social fact underlying the development of French structuralism and poststructuralism. The high priests of these movements were not well-endowed academics as we might tend to assume by dint of the chic posts many of them later climbed into for six months of the year stateside. In his preface to the English edition of *Homo Academicus*, Pierre Bourdieu (1988: xviii) recounts “the astonishment of a young American visitor, at the beginning of the seventies, to whom I had to explain that all his intellectual heroes, like Althusser, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault, not to mention the other minor prophets of the moment, held marginal positions in the university system which often disqualified them from officially directing research”. In the absence of a strong connection to the academy, the vanguard in French theory nurtured strong affiliations with avant-garde reviews, of which there were a great many in post-war France. Despite their marginal status within the academy, Barthes and his peers still managed to accrue significant cultural capital in the world outside the university (Bourdieu 1988: xix).

Stafford’s detailed and informative research of this period takes us backstage so to speak, giving us insight into the social and discursive network that Barthes relied on to get his work into the public sphere. Stafford points out that “Writing for *Combat* cemented [Barthes’s] relationship with the publisher and literary critic Maurice Nadeau” (18). Likewise:

Having commented on [Jean] Cayrol’s work in *Combat* in 1950, Barthes and Cayrol had become friends. A lengthy study of Cayrol’s novels appearing in *Esprit* in 1952 gave Barthes a regular slot in *Esprit*: an account of a visit to the *Folies Bergère*, and then a

wrestling match, and a sociological study of the human face, all followed in 1953. The depth and breadth of the analyses not only foreshadowed Barthes's later illustrious career, but also convinced Seuil to become his principle publisher for the rest of his life (19).

While it is unlikely that the folks at Seuil decided then and there to be Barthes's publisher till death do them part, we get the point. The social dimension of Barthes's intellectual career stands out in Stafford's presentation, and that will be especially useful for readers of Barthes in the English speaking world (despite the fact that Stafford does not theorize the relation).

And yet, the detail with which Stafford chronicles Barthes's involvement in the left-wing milieu of post-war France can at the same time be defeating, and this may well be a result of Stafford's reluctance to theorize the relations that Barthes was bound up with. Many times the genre of detail chosen is curiously vague and imprecise, as in the following: "In response to Caillois's description of Marxism as 'muscovite dogmatism', Barthes asserted the existence of a 'certain number of men' whose Marxism was impermeable to the Moscow version" (22). Other times, Stafford's telescoping of ideas and positions creates a referential muddle. He writes:

Rejecting the symbolism with which Camus's novel was making Nazi tyranny into a metaphor, and invoking a 'literal art in which plagues are nothing other than plagues' in its place, 'Chronicle of an Epidemic, Or a Novel of Solicitude' clearly prefigured his second article on Robbe-Grillet, which denied metaphor and promoted a 'literal' art. But how did all this fit with historical materialism? (63-64)

At moments like these, the presentation of Barthes's intellectual life becomes tedious, and the reader starts to feel overwhelmed by the sheer one-dimensionality of it all. Perhaps the conservatism of Stafford's approach is not the book's strongest feature after all.

There are, in fact, serious methodological problems with Stafford's book that seem to stem from his reluctance to take a strong theoretical position of his own vis-à-vis Barthes's work and the implications it holds for the task of biography. It's no secret that Barthes's ideas as a theorist hold potentially fatal implications for biography as a genre, but Barthes also embraced the genre himself when, as a so-called 'novelist', he chose to write a biography of himself cum other entitled *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The issue, then, comes down to where Stafford marks his affiliation to Barthes's work. Does he construct Barthes in the

spirit of the theorist who famously proclaimed the death of the author as origin or in the spirit of the writer who found a way to reinscribe the subject as an effect of this schism between agency and expression? It may be unfair to ask. What would a biography in the spirit of Barthes as writer look like? At the same time, is a biography that obeys the spirit of *écriture* at all possible if you are not Roland Barthes? In the face of this decision Stafford seems to have chosen a third option: to construct Barthes as a career man. But is this enough?

Stafford's aim is to put Barthes into dialogue with his age, an approach he characterizes somewhat opportunistically (and again without a theoretical rationale) as both "dialogic" and Bakhtinian (7). He largely succeeds in bringing Barthes into relation with his milieu at the micro level, but there are alarming lapses at the macro level. For instance, how can a book that hopes to put Barthes into dialogue with his age get by with just a handful of references, most of them incidental, to Barthes's most important peers in France? Deleuze is mentioned four times, Derrida four times, Foucault six times, Kristeva five times, and Baudrillard is not mentioned at all. Likewise, Barthes's extensive influence in Anglophone Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines is taken for granted, and we are deprived of another very important form of dialogue: that between Barthes's work and the new discourses that extend from it. Equally disturbing is Stafford's blithe and explicit disregard for several of the most important thinkers in the Barthesian nexus - Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan (11) - and his decision to not relate Barthes's thought to the events of May 1968 (118). Finally, and most baffling of all, is Stafford's haughty dismissal of Cultural Studies as "indiscriminate" (10) and his statement that postmodernism "does not exist" (11). Such lapses, evasions, and biases would do serious damage to Stafford's credibility in many reader's minds, leaving the book's claim to the status of objective intellectual biography in doubt.

Again, these issues lead us further into methodological questions. Is such a thing as an intellectual biography of a poststructuralist thinker really possible? Has Stafford interpreted his task too literally? Or, to paraphrase Jean-François Lyotard, can thinking go on without a body? Recent research on the sub-genre of "the biography of the philosopher" helps us evaluate these questions. Of the seven coordinates identified by Richard Freadman as constitutive of the genre - elucidation, causation, discursive relations, intervention, philosophy's human face, form, and thematics - Stafford focuses primarily on elucidation (creating links between the work and the larger historico-cultural context) and thematics (charting major themes in the oeuvre), with very brief and preliminary emphasis on discursive relations (the extent to

which the subject's thinking impinges upon or influences the procedures and outlook of the biography) and intervention (attempts to revise the subject's existing reputation). The other coordinates of the genre - causation (attempts to account narratively for behaviours, attitudes, personal qualities, and philosophical work), philosophy's human face (attempts to make the work interesting to a non-specialist audience by making the subject interesting), and form (devices of emplotment and characterization) - are absent from Stafford's treatment (Freadman 2002: 313-319).

In his avoidance of modes that involve characterization and speculation, Stafford obeys the logic of textuality, that radical and disjunctive characteristic of the sign that blocks access to self-present subjects. The result is an intensely self-conscious presentation that observes a rigid boundary between Barthes the epistemic individual and Barthes the empirical individual, the latter of which is kept off-limits. For example, Stafford points out, with evident and misplaced contempt for Cultural Studies, "I shall not discuss at which gym Barthes worked out" (10). Stafford's construction of Barthes as an exclusively epistemic individual puts him in direct conflict with the genre of biography that by definition must traffic in forms of questioning that aim to connect epistemic and empirical dimensions. The one-dimensionality of Stafford's presentation, which periodically borders on asceticism, is the result of this conflict and Stafford's withdrawal from the normative tasks of biography.

There are shadowy, but very real, disciplinary and theoretical injunctions at work here. To construct Barthes as an empirical subject with a body that may or may not have regularly visited 'the gym', Stafford runs the serious risk of invoking criticism (perhaps even ridicule) from all the unreconstructed poststructuralists lurking in his audience. Stafford is well-aware of these injunctions. Early on, he dutifully acknowledges the particular perils of biographizing someone like Barthes whose most famous pronouncements target the epistemological viability of life-writing. His rigid adherence to the text and nothing but the text of Barthes's career implies that he sees fit to stick to the paper trail.

A more adventurous biographer would not balk at the challenge of bringing an empirical individual to bear on an epistemic one. After all, Barthes didn't. And neither, according to Freadman's analysis, does Derrida:

It is not clear why the condition of textuality, supposedly so fatal to conventional empirical biographical procedure, does not hold for the Nietzsche letters on which Derrida bases his quite conventional biographical claims about

Nietzsche's writerly intentions - claims that seem predicated on something like a full-blooded, non-attenuated, conception of intentionality - and also his defense of Nietzsche's texts in the face their maniacal appropriation by the Nazis.

Derrida's assault on traditional biography of the philosopher is spectacular, but speculative, and in my view far from conclusive (313).

We should not forget either that, while Derrida and others were locked into a logical critique of linguistic instrumentalism, Barthes's moved quickly on to other things, which influenced him to see language as a repository of tactile, lyrical effects. In his "Inaugural Lecture" to the Collège de France, Barthes writes: "Words are no longer conceived illusively as simple instruments; they are cast as projections, explosions, vibrations, devices, flavours. Writing makes knowledge festive" (*Reader* 464). As early as the *Critical Essays* (1964), Barthes wrote that "To write is a mode of Eros" (xvi). The redeeming element in Barthes's thinking that allows for these risky propositions (which Barthes may well have picked up from McLuhan) and which Stafford ignores to the detriment of his biography, is Barthes's filiation to the voice as a fluid and dynamic medium capable of sustaining an equally fluid and dynamic subject in discourse.

And is this not what it would mean to illuminate a late by an earlier Barthes? Barthes's early interest in popular theatre was fuelled by his intense involvement with Brecht's concepts of the alienation effect and Epic Theatre, and Brecht's influence would persist long after Barthes abruptly lost interest in theatre. "Notions of the theatre inform, directly or indirectly, all his work", Susan Sontag points out (xxix). Among others things, Barthes's involvement in the theatre seems to have saved him from ever wanting to put speech in abeyance. It may very well be considered good form in literary studies to contest the legitimacy of speech, but Barthes never wavered in his fascination with the voice. In all his work, we encounter a rigorous linguistic aesthetic that is at the same time resolutely lyrical. For Barthes, meanings quiver, thrill, vibrate, shudder, quicken, slide, and moan, and this is the source of their endless fascination for him. To construct Barthes's life in a way that is so defiant of this lyricism is misleading.

The strengths of the first third of Stafford's biography are those of the rest of the book, but so too are the weaknesses. Readers will benefit from Stafford's ability to contextualize Barthes's writing career in terms of the discursive regimes that it traverses, and Stafford is especially sensitive to the tensions that animate the middle phase of Barthes's career when he was working principally as a social sciences researcher but wielding great authority

as a literary and aesthetic theorist. At the same time, Stafford's presentation remains periodically cluttered with oblique and far-flung allusions:

Barthes is still an important reference point for the 1960s debates around the politics of the 'new novel'. For example, that which opposed Beauvoir and Sartre to Jean Ricardou in 1965 was summed up by the latter's invocation of Barthes's distinction between 'Authors and Writers'. But the perceived adherence of Barthes to a *nouveau roman* requires a comment similar to Picasso's apocryphal reply to the Nazis as to the creator of *Guernica*: it was not Barthes but the literary institution which had created the myth (86).

References like these seem to function as a kind of narrative shorthand, but are devoid of the kind of detail and context that would make it possible to follow them.

As a prelude to the middle stage of Barthes's career, Stafford usefully points out that the application of the linguistic model to Barthes's methodology coincided with his withdrawal from theatre activism. Arguing that Barthes's enthusiasm for Brecht "had to go somewhere", Stafford finds continuity in the transition: "Combining a sensitivity to dialectical and tactical positions with his belief in the power of the critical subject, the shift from stage to text... had important consequences" (91). These insights pave the way toward two groundbreaking essays that Stafford does not discuss, "The Death of the Author" (1968), and "From Work to Text" (1971). Instead, Stafford works the social sciences / literary field nexus in a discussion of some of the more underappreciated of Barthes's books: *Criticism and Truth* and *The Fashion System*. Combined with the informative section on Barthes's relation with the *Tel Quel* group and, yes, even some words on Barthes's friendship with Phillippe Sollers, the second part of the biography charts a very different course through the oeuvre than one might expect. Much is gained in terms of fresh insight into neglected texts. What falls out of the mix is the radical and influential interdisciplinarity that would characterize Barthes's foray into the zone of *écriture*.

Before Barthes metamorphosed from a theorist into a writer, his considerable adventurousness found an outlet in the two short but very powerful statements just mentioned: "The Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text". Initiating a seismic shift in the disciplinary bedrock of literary studies, "The Death of the Author" promoted a linguistic formalism of the text whereby authorial agency is usurped by language itself. Writing is detached from context at once liberating it from the tyranny of authorship and opening up "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1468). "From Work to Text"

elaborates on the unique qualities of writing by interposing slightly masked Derridean terms like *deferred action* and *playing*, marrying these to a Jakobsonian logic of the metonym, and adding just a *souçon* of Lacan: "The logic regulating the text is not comprehensive ... but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, carryings-over coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy" (1472). The torrent of unhinged signifiers thus set free constitutes a new interdisciplinary object, 'the Text', which replaces the old Newtonian category of 'the work'. What this amounts to is an extreme rationalization of the literary field according to the singular, if unpredictable, logic of *écriture*. In the process, writing and reading are merged into a single signifying practice making the logic of literary production and literary criticism one and the same. Literary critics have yet to stop thanking Barthes for this gift.

Barthes's conviction that "the whole of the enunciation is an empty process" ("The Death of the Author") could not stand for long though. In his haste to create a smooth space for critical acts to occur, Barthes seems to have sent the subject packing only to reintroduce subjectivity in turn as a lyrical function of textuality. Cue the body. Cue biography. In the late autobiographical works, Barthes the rigid formalist turns into an arch sensualist, of language. In these texts, which exhibit an exquisite combination of impressionism and rigour, Barthes establishes his legacy as a writer, "a writer with an almost magical power of analysis and utterance" (Rabaté 2005: 99). The final section of Stafford's book loosens up accordingly and we are told about some of Barthes's more personal issues such as the death of his mother and his analysis.

While the notion of intellectual biography has largely been lost on the poststructuralism crowd, it is not lost on Roland Barthes. In our retrospective gaze upon him now, Barthes is a cultural icon. In a recent testament to his status in France, the Pompidou Centre mounted a comprehensive exhibition of Barthesian ephemera containing video, taped interviews, film clips, photographs, index cards, and work notes. He is likewise still revered in the North American academic community. *Back to Barthes*, a Symposium at the Whitney Humanities Center in December, 2000, convened scholars from all over to discuss Barthes's continued relevance (a selection of the papers from that symposium appeared in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* in 2001). Sky Gilbert's 1994 play, *More Divine: A Performance for Roland Barthes*, imagines a comedic world in which Barthes's rarely disclosed homosexuality might have played itself out. Barthes's legacy in the English-speaking world has certainly not suffered from having had a poet of substantial gifts (Richard Howard) do most of the translating. His

