The Robbery of Language? On Roland Barthes and Myth

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Abstract. This article focuses on a text that nearly everyone has read, but has done so a little too quickly – Roland Barthes’s ‘Myth Today’ from his Mythologies. My agenda is to read this text carefully and in the same way that Barthes reads other texts, that is, looking for various hints and suggestions that open up other possibilities. In the first part, I trace Barthes’s argument quite closely, distinguishing between his careful, dispassionate, and technical description of myth in terms of a basic semiological schema and his passionate condemnation of myth. The former attempts to be a universal description of the workings of myth; the latter is a critique of the mythologies of the French bourgeoisie. Barthes also tries to find modes of resistance to such a dominating collection, but his search ends up being forlorn and futile. At this point, I turn and reread Barthes, tracing hints that the myths with which he deals are not so uniform or so suffocatingly dominant. Picking up the passing suggestion that the best option may be to turn myth against itself, I explore what myth conceals (its process of distortion), how it produces resistance and seeks to close it down, how it preserves such resistance by leaving open the possibility that resistance may twist out from under the hand of oppression and gain a voice of its own once again. At this moment, I bring in some of Barthes’s own myths, especially the utopian one of an imaginary Japan in Empire of Signs. Here is an alternative myth of resistance that emerges precisely when it seems as though the semiological foothold for myth has been eliminated.

No denunciation without an appropriate method of detailed analysis, no semiology which cannot, in the last analysis, be acknowledged as semioclasm. (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 9; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 673)

I am interested in a lesser-known path through Roland Barthes’s work, namely his writings on religion. More specifically, his deliberation on myth in the long essay, ‘Myth Today’, is the centre of my analysis.¹ Around this

¹ I am less interested in Barthes’s semiotic interpretations of Genesis 32 and Acts 10–11 (see Barthes 1994 [1985], 217–60; Barthes 2002b [1970]; Barthes 2002 [1972]), which have been mined extensively by some biblical scholars.
theoretical centrepiece cluster a large number of incisive pieces in which contemporary myth is dissected and analysed – from steak and chips to the Tour de France, from margarine to Billy Graham.² Barthes offers a full-blooded theory of myth.

Although my essay is primarily a reading of Barthes on myth, the question of theology and thereby of the ‘hidden God’ presses closely behind.³ My own interest is in the implications for dealing with biblical myth, especially if one takes, as I do, significant portions of the Bible as mythical, such as the master myth of Genesis-Joshua or the mythical underlay of the narratives concerning Jesus (see Boer 2009b; Mack 2008; Thompson 2003). I explore a number of such questions in the conclusion.

In what follows, I engage in a critical and intimate commentary of this crucial essay by Barthes, following the approach I have developed in two recent works (Boer 2007, 2009a). Modelled on the long tradition of biblical commentary, it seeks to be intimate and immanent, attempting to get to know the text as well as I might a lover and developing a reading that emerges from the text’s own concerns and methods. In pursuing such an intimate reading, this essay falls into two parts. The first is an exposition that highlights the crucial moves in Barthes’s text, drawing out the basics of semiology, focusing on a tension in Barthes’s analysis between description and criticism, and tracking his forlorn efforts at resistance to the baleful effects of myth. The second part seeks to apply to Barthes’s argument of his own approach. He has a propensity to focus on the fragmentary hints and suggestions, the moments in a text – an odd feature of a sentence, an image evoked, or a trigger – that make one pause, look up and follow a train of thought. In the same way that theorising those experiences of reading led Barthes to write, so also I use this approach on his own texts.⁴ In this second section, then, I begin to


² The usual and disconcerting story applies here to translations from French: the texts have been pulled apart and reassembled in strange new formations.

³ For more on Barthes’ semiotic and dialectical formalist approaches to myth see MacDonald (2003); Stafford (1998); Stafford (2008); and Roger (1986).

⁴ The usual narrative is that Barthes passed progressively from Marxism and psychoanalysis, through a long structuralist phase to the final emergence of poststructuralism. Yet Barthes offers a different perspective on his work. In the late and very personal Camera Lucida – the last book published in his lifetime – he mentions a methodological discomfort that has continually plagued him: ‘the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical’ (Barthes 1993b [1980]: 9; Barthes 2002 [1980]: 794). He goes on about his attraction to various critical discourses, such as sociology, semiology, and psychoanalysis, which he grew wary of after a while. Whenever they tended to harden and become reductive, he grew unhappy and quietly left them behind. I suspect that the tendency to what he calls reductive systems (organisation in terms of a ‘scientific’ method, full of classification, terminology, and a distinctly pedagogic style) was an effort to rein in his tendency to rely on quick insight – a mistrust of what happens when he is drawn to
follow a series of hints and passing phrases that suggest other possibilities for myth, especially in terms of the dialectic of opposition that emerges from within the myth. So what we discover is that despite Barthes finding the myth baleful, distorting, and best opposed, there is an undercurrent emerging in his analysis that leaves more room for myth – a myth that is cunning, oppositional, and utopian.

**Between description and accusation**

An intimate reading of Barthes shows us a semiological technician at work, an accusation that myth is a thief of language, and an effort to find some purchase to resist all-enveloping myth. I deal with each in turn.

**Basics**

Barthes begins with a careful and dispassionate dismantling of myth. Here we see the semiotic technician, so let us stand beside him and watch him at work. He makes two important distinctions, one between form and content, and the other between primary and secondary sign systems. Myth turns out to belong to form and the secondary sign system.

Invoking the hoary distinction between form and content, Barthes puts the latter aside and opts for the former: myth is *une parole*, a form of speech. Not a bad move, since he can sidelong the conventional points that myth concerns the threefold theogony, cosmogony, and anthropogony – the origins of the gods, universe, and human beings. In other words, myth is not determined by the content of its message, but the way the message is told. The move to form ensures that Barthes is not caught in the traditional concerns about myth as something archaic and primitive, which we as reasonable and enlightened people may now calmly put aside.\(^5\) By taking on form, he can argue that everything can become a myth, that no meaning is safe from myth.

But why say myth is a *parole*? Why not a specific genre, or perhaps a form of thinking, or even a distinct system of thought? Barthes wants to steer the definition of myth close enough to his growing interest in semiology so that the latter can snare myth in its ever-extending reach. Of course, this is tied up closely with what is now known as the linguistic turn in which semiology was a central player. The freshness and crispness of semiology (he was writing magazines, photographs, and fashion. Yet his intuitive insight – the ability to see something from an unexpected and often profound angle – is what remains most alluring in his works. Indeed, we find that the expressive and passing insights characteristic of earlier work like *Mythologies* return with rich vigour in later texts such as *The Pleasure of the Text, A Lover's Discourse*, and *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1975 [1973]; Barthes 1978 [1977]; Barthes 1993b [1980]; Barthes 2002 [1973]; Barthes 2002 [1977]; Barthes 2002 [1980]). They are a stark contrast to the formidable and dry semiological works like *Elements of Semiology* and *The Fashion System* (Barthes 1973 [1965]; Barthes 1983 [1967]; Barthes 2002 [1965]; Barthes 2002 [1967]).

\(^5\) Or at least he does his best to do so. There are moments when he argues, much like Benjamin and Adorno, that the most modern of activities have an archaic and mythical barbarity about them. See Barthes (1993a [1957]) and Barthes (2002 [1957]).
in the late 1950s) shows through his text in the way he needs both to offer an introduction and seek to persuade the reader of its viability. Since semiology’s focus was signs and their interplay, it could leap from the analysis of written texts to all manner of other ‘texts’ – Barthes mentions photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, and publicity – since these too are sign systems.

Already Barthes is careful to make a distinction. All these items are not mythical per se, but they support mythical speech; or even more intriguingly, ‘mythical speech is made up of a material which has already been worked on’ (Barthes 1953a [1957]: 110; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 824). In other words, myth is parasitic, and he tries to show how through a semiological analysis. To be more specific, Barthes designates myth as metalanguage. While the first system is what he calls a ‘language-object’, because it is the language of which myth gets hold in order to build its own system, metalanguage is ‘a second language, in which one speaks about the first’ (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 115; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 829). Myth is, he argues, a secondary semiological chain.

**Baleful deformations of language**

However, this careful and technical effort to dismantle myth is only one dimension of Barthes’s analysis, for he is actually caught between two conflicting directions: one is dispassionate, the other impassioned; one is universal, the other specific. So as we have seen, he sets out carefully and without judgement to pull apart the working pieces of all myth, lay them out and determine the function of each one. For this taking apart he draws upon what was at the time the new method of semiology. But then the target of that analysis is the quite specific mythology of the bourgeoisie. On this matter he is not so sanguine, for what he finds objectionable about bourgeois mythology is that it has a pretence to being ‘natural’. So he sets out to denaturalise that mythology, to reveal its artificiality and strangeness.

Now myth becomes distorting, deforming, and given to duplicity. So despite his best efforts to provide a value-neutral – ‘scientific’ – description of the workings of myth, Barthes always threatens to slip into judgement. The judgements quickly pile up: ‘myth hides nothing: its function is to distort [déformer], not to make disappear’ (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 121; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 834; see also Barthes 1993a [1957]: 122, 123, 131; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 835, 836, 843). The terms Barthes repeatedly uses are quite evocative: empty (une forme vide), parasite (parasite), impoverished (il s’appauvrit), evaporation (l’histoire s’évapore), abnormal regression (régression anormale), penury (pauvreté), putting at a distance (l’élargir), draining out (s’écoule hors), shallow (court), isolated (isolé), robbery (vol), corruption (tout corrompre).

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6 This distinction makes use of a well-known feature of Marxist treatments of ideology. On the one side there is a ‘critical’ approach in which ideology is false consciousness (erroneous beliefs about the world that need to be corrected) and a ‘descriptive’ or functional approach in which ideology is a necessary and inescapable feature of human existence. Among others, see Barrett (1991: 18–34); Larraín (1983b); Larraín (1983a); Dupré (1983: 238–44); and McLellan (1995: 16).
and on and on (see also MacDonald 2003: 61). His favoured image is that of myth as a parasite feeding off the rich and full meaning of the denotational sign; to this I would add the closely related image of a weed that appears in foreign soil and sucks up the nutrients to which it is not entitled. All of these and more make it perfectly clear that Barthes has little sympathy for myth.

At this point, where Barthes launches his comprehensive attack on myth, his analysis becomes very interesting indeed. He lays a number of charges at the feet of myth, charges he feels condemn it beyond doubt. His basic charge against myth is that it scrupes out the full history and meaning of a sign and discards that fullness of meaning so that it may be ready for a new set of associations. Let us see how this works with the saluting young black man (probably a teenager) on the cover of Paris-Match. As the sign of the initial system, the youth is full of biographical history, culture, society, and religion, but all of this must be put aside when this meaning-full sign becomes the formal signifier of myth. What takes its place? It is French imperialism, which evokes French history, colonial ventures, and present difficulties. All of this is drawn from the concept, the second-level signified which now rushes in to fill the void opened up by the signifier-as-form. In short, the myth of French imperialism replaces the concrete sign of the black youth saluting.

So despite Barthes’s effort to provide a dispassionate and universal definition of myth, he actually undertakes a systematic effort to uncover every single reprehensible dimension of French bourgeois myth:

... our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remark about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent on the representation which the bourgeoisie has and makes us have of the relations between man and the world. (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 140; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 851)

Most of his analysis is in fact limited to a particular political and cultural entity as well as a specific class. This is the sustained agenda of the brief forays into everyday French life that constitute the bulk of Mythologies – photographs, exhibitions, films, shows, newspaper articles, and so on. We find, for example, that the ‘natural’ fringes and sweaty faces of Romans in films actually indicate the hybridity and duplicity of bourgeois art (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 28; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 693). Or the assumptions of both psychology and language, which were used in the murder conviction of the illiterate 80-year peasant, Dominici, are distinctly bourgeois ones (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 43–6; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 708–11). Or women writers may be celebrated, but only if the nuclear family stays intact, they recognise the importance of men, and keep producing children (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 50–2; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 713–15). On it goes, with the nationalistic roles of wine and beefsteak (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 58–64; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 727–31), the bourgeois travel guides in which nature becomes picturesque (that is, ‘uneven’) (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 74–7; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 765–7), the representation
of cooking in magazines, which expresses the bourgeois desire for ornamentation (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 78–80; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 770–2), or the assumed political neutrality and the fatuous claim to universal values of culture and style in bourgeois literary criticism (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 81–3; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 7835. See further on gemstones Barthes 2002 [1961]; Barthes 2006: 59–64).

The overwhelming effect is to pick apart the threads of this bourgeois myth as to what society should be like. Barthes is annoyed at the way all these things are taken as so ‘natural’ and wants to show how they are constructed as myth. He unpacks his negative assessment with a well-organised series of observations – myth distorts, deforms, demands, is duplicitous, fleeting and multiple, has unhealthy motivations and numerous alibis, and it freezes and steals language.

As we have seen, for Barthes myth is at heart a deformation. It takes the rich and meaning-full sign of the first signifying system, empties it out, and then refills it with its own pernicious content. Or rather as he later clarifies, it doesn’t discard its former meaning. Instead myth chops that meaning up, throws away some parts, reorganises the others, and then adds its own new content to the mix. It is a fundamentally alienating process that wreaks havoc with the proper historical, social, and cultural meaning of the sign. Or to use another metaphor, myth is a thief, one who steals the meaning of the primary sign, claims it as its own, and twists it to a new usage. Once the meaning has been transformed in some dank hideout, it tries to hock the deformed product in the market of ideas.

Many of Barthes’s other comments on myth fill out this basic observation. So we find that myth is unstable, moving back and forth between the sign on which it feeds and its mythic form, drawing from the former, distorting it, and then moving back to draw yet more meaning from the sign. This means that myth is difficult to pin down, since it functions like an alibi: it is never where you think it is, for it is somewhere else. As MacDonald puts it, ‘myth is not just une parole but une parole qui court’ (MacDonald 2003: 55). Or, to put it in other terms, myth is both fleeting and multiple. As for the latter, Barthes argues that a whole series of items may substitute for one another in the second-level signifier, but they all relate to the one concept. We may replace the saluting black youth with the president stepping off a plane in Algiers, or perhaps a French ship sailing from Tahiti to New Caledonia, or even a map of Francophony (the countries in the world that speak varieties of French from Africa to Canada). All of these fragmentary items evoke the same concept of French imperialism. The new signifier may be qualitatively weak, but it makes up for that puniness by the multiplicity of items on which it can draw. Further, the concept (second-level signified) is itself fleeting, for it constantly shifts, changes shape, and may disintegrate. French imperialism is never stable, passing all too quickly from a glorious reach of French influence to a drain on resources and a source of endless trouble.

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7 See also “Le mythe aujourd’hui” abounds in figures of myth as mobile, where the factor of movement is as obvious as the factor of intentionality (MacDonald 2003: 55).
Now I want to ask why myth is slippery, unstable, and fleeting because it seems to be avoiding something. Let us leave that for a moment and deal with the next observation: myth arrests us and in doing so freezes up. Barthes argues that myth calls out to us and stops us in our tracks. It says: notice this simple fact, this harmless truth to which you cannot but give assent. Of course, everyone supports the local football team, or the beneficent property developer who only wishes to make life better for all, or the peaceful empire that showers so many gifts on its loyal sons and daughters. In arresting me so, the myth makes me complicit, makes me part of it, and thereby locks me in. In this respect, myth congéals and solidifies. Once I am caught, myth freezes up and offers what seems to be a perfectly natural truth. The overwhelming feature of this naturalisation is the way the bourgeois effaces itself as a distinct class and becomes what is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ for the nation as a whole.

At first sight, these two observations seem like a blatant contradiction: how can myth be unstable and frozen, slippery and solid? Barthes does have a knack of touching lightly upon other critics, drawn to an idea or a suggestion in much the same way that his eye and ear are drawn to quirky features of a photograph, a magazine, or a popular saying, or indeed in the same way that he reads, noting a word that fires off its own line of thought. The result can be that he glides over difficulties, not always seeing the tensions between them. In this case, I would suggest that the creaking connection between these two features appears because Barthes tries to connect semiology and ideological analysis. But here we find a twofold solution to the tension. First, myth itself may be fleeting and unstable, but when it is addressed to us it functions like ideology, tying us up in its embrace. This is the moment when myth passes from semiology to ideology, as Barthes puts it, when it corresponds to the assumptions and expectations of a particular society at a specific point in history (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 128; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 841). Second, in this situation myth behaves like a denotative system, assuring us that it states a simple truth that cannot be gainsaid (see Barthes 1993a [1957]: 128; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 840). The French Empire is a fact, it says, and this youth who salutes constitutes the very presence of what he calls ‘imperiality’.

One final point: myth is also motivated. Unlike the pure arbitrariness of signs (there is no obvious reason why the word ‘bicycle’ refers to the two-wheeled vehicle I can see from my window), myth makes an intentional connection. It is no accident that the black salute means the French Empire, for that is motivated. Here Barthes lets himself go, contrasting a healthy arbitrariness with a ‘disturbing’, ‘sickening’, and ‘nauseous’ motivation in myth (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 126, n. 7; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 838–9, n. 1). One comment on motivation before I return to the unstable and arresting nature of myth: what Barthes has done here yet again is slip in a value judgement based on content. He despises the content of the examples he gives, whether a black salute, the assumptions of the judicial system, or the faux-freedom of women writers. Fair enough, but what he means by ‘motivation’ is not merely the fact that there is some deliberate connection between a myth and the particular sign on which it relies; what he opposes is the political motivation behind that connection – a bourgeois one, to be precise. But what if
that political motivation is different? Would Barthes approve? It seems not, for
myth in its very form is baleful.

Desperate resistance

Thus far I have followed Barthes’s argument reasonably closely. To sum up, he
argues that myth is a second-order signifying system that builds upon a prior
one. As such, it is a deformation of language, one that draws upon the primary
sign, steals it, and then offers a very different product – myth. Barthes has
managed to reveal myth’s dirty little secret: that it is a reprehensible feature
of human existence. Yet if that is all, then the implications for theology and
the Bible are not the best. The crucial stories of the Bible or indeed the
central theological doctrines are nothing more than the distortion of language,
and so we should dispense with them as quickly as is seemly possible. Many
would of course concur. But is that all? Does Barthes offer a somewhat
depressing account of the workings of myth and then call it a day? Not
quite, for the second half of his ‘Myth Today’ essay offers a variety of possible
modes of resistance. Let me be perfectly clear: Barthes wishes to find ways to
oppose myth as a whole, but I am more interested in finding ways in which
myth itself offers resistance.

Barthes begins his quest by asking whether some types of language offer
more resistance to myth than others. Fuzzy and unclear language has no
hope, argues Barthes, since it is a sitting duck for the deformations of
myth. But what happens if meaning is completely full and closed off? Myth
simply seizes it wholesale and turns it to its purpose. Barthes offers
the example of mathematics, which we might expect to offer the most reso-
olute resistance. But eventually it too falls and the conquest is as complete
as the original resistance. The last fortress but one to stand up to a marauding
myth, is poetry because its disordering of signs and breakdown of language
offers myth no chink. Yet it falls as well and even more spectacularly than
mathematics – although that fall does not stop Barthes hoping forlornly
that poetry (the search for the inalienable meaning of things) may provide
refuge for the alienated mythologist, which is really Barthes himself
(Barthes 1993a [1957]: 158–9; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 868). Finally, there is the
logical extreme of poetry, the attempt to pursue its pre-semiological tendency
all the way. This is a push to the anti-nature of language, dispensing with all
syntax, punctuation, and meaning. Perhaps Philippe Sollers is the best
embodiment of this approach (Barthes 1987 [1979]; Barthes 2002 [1979]),
but Barthes warns that this task is well-nigh impossible, for there is always
some small outcrop left for myth to gain a foothold.

Even here we find little hope, so Barthes takes another track. In brief, he
argues that since myth is depoliticised speech, and since any myth of the left is
poverty-stricken and halting in its step, the only possibility of opposing myth
is with political speech, since politics and myth grimly stand their ground as
two great opponents.

He begins this argument by pointing out that myth is by definition depo-
liticised. Here Marx makes his most obvious appearance in Barthes’s text. In
particular, Barthes plunders the classic Marxist argument against idealism,
namely that it has the world upside down; any criticism needs to stand the
world on its feet. In the same way that one might deal with religion, or with Hegel's thought, or even with economic theory, so also with myth: it simply has things topsy-turvy. Myth presents its message as perfectly natural, as a given, and in the process it denies history, contradiction, and memory. So the criticism of myth needs to show that all this is subterfuge.

At this point mythological criticism for Barthes is really a version of ideological criticism. In order to oppose myth, political speech is required, and by 'politics' Barthes means 'the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world' (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 143; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 854). Any alternative myth simply won't do, he argues, for the left has a woeful collection of myths. Because it is not the determining feature of our age, and because the bourgeoisie has been able to become 'anonymous' and thereby synonymous with the very identity of nationhood, culture and what is 'normal', the left can offer only a feeble response. Precisely because it is not central to everyday life -- cooking, the home, theatre, law, and so on -- the myths it offers are marginal.5 However, the problem runs deeper than that, for the very process of mythologising weakens the left. As soon as it becomes 'the Left' it has become a mythological entity, trying to become 'natural'; even worse, it may become embodied in a myth like that of Stalin.

So the only answer to myth is a purely denotative speech; only this language can be fully political. It is the speech of the oppressed, the poor, and the colonised, who have little time for the metalanguage of myth. Barthes puts himself in the place of a woodcutter in the very process of production. By saying that he has cut down the tree, the woodcutter speaks directly of what he has done. There is no fuss, for he is involved in production. The immediacy of his involvement leaves language at its denotative level. Only when those who are not woodcutters -- those not involved in the process of production but who live off those who are -- talk about the cut-down tree does the tree become an object of metalanguage, a concept that is open to mythical elaboration. As with the tree, so also with capitalist society: the revolutionary who seeks to cut down that society is the one who speaks in a political manner.

This is a highly problematic argument for reasons that will become clear in the next section. However, even at this point the argument runs into a contradiction with his earlier comments. There we found that all of the other efforts to achieve such a denotative level, even the radical work of writers who seek to remove any signs from language, fall short of their goal. Barthes signals that he is all too conscious of this problem because in the process of writing about the woodcutter, production, and even revolution, he operates at the level of metalanguage. His last refuge is to point out that the critic of mythology is alienated from both myth production and consumption -- that is, the community as a whole -- through his critical act (Barthes

5 Here we can detect a lament of the left's failure in respect to culture, a lament we also find in his comment that pleasure is usually regarded as a myth of the right, while the left is given over to sobriety and commitment. In Pleasure of the Text he suggests it should not be so (Barthes 1975 [1973]: 22–3; Barthes 2002 [1973]: 231–2).
1993a [1957]: 156–7; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 865–7). To my mind this is a tacit recognition that he too cannot escape the process of mythmaking, that there may indeed be a more positive function for myth. And so even with the woodcutter, as soon as you have some sign – the tree or woodcutter – then myth finds fertile ground to take seed. Indeed, the little story of the woodcutter is as mythical as any other – it harks back to simpler time, somewhere in a forest, and the woodcutter is an honest worker who needs to find wood for the fire and food for the table. In short, Barthes engages in his own piece of mythmaking for the left, a moment in which the content he had put aside returns with a vengeance. What of the gods? Will they also return, unexpectedly? Perhaps, but we need to wait and see.

**Dialectics of opposition**

It is a forlorn admission of failure, but only if you hold that myth is inescapably baleful. Barthes is not alone in this respect and stands in a long line of those who are profoundly suspicious of myth. For instance, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that myth is the first moment of social ordering and fixation, when gender, class, and racial roles are fixed, while Walter Benjamin understands myth as a barbaric nightmare, embodied above all in the Nazi myth of blood and soil, from which we desperately need to wake (Benjamin 1982; 1999, vol. 5; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1947]; Horkheimer and Adorno 2003 [1947]). For Barthes it is the preserve of the bourgeois ruling class, whose ideas are after all the ruling ideas of the age.

However, there is another path we may take through Barthes’s texts, a path that produces a different argument. Rather than hold out for as long as possible against the inevitable victory of myth, I suggest that it may well be possible to appropriate myth for more progressive purposes – or rather, that myth itself may embody patterns of opposition and resistance, not so much to myth itself but to reaction and oppression. Barthes – at least the dominant voice in his text – argues that such myths are not possible, or that they are poverty-stricken and clumsy in contrast to the myths of the political right. Yet there are hints in his arguments that suggest far more. In what follows I trace these hints, digging them out and organising them into a coherent whole. I distinguish between two directions: one follows the trail deep into reactionary myths to identify resistance from within; the other tries to outline what such alternative myths might look like.

**Hiding something?**

I begin my search for resistance within with the tip-of that something lies concealed within myth. On this question, Barthes’s comments that myth is duplicitous – always finding alibis, fleeting, multiple, and constantly on the

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9 The passing comments on the petite bourgeoisie also have this self-critical dimension to them, for as an intellectual who had taught in Romania and Egypt and was then ensconced in the CNRS (Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique), he was a classic case of the intellectual as petit-bourgeois.
move – say more than he suspects. When he points out that myth is given to alibis – offering another account and saying, ‘I wasn’t there; I was somewhere else’ – one begins to wonder why such an alibi is needed. Is myth trying to hide something? Further, the dizzying turnstile of meaning – in which the myth switches back and forth between original sign and the new myth – may be seen as an effort by myth to cover its tracks when dealing with the troublesome content of the original sign. Even more, the sheer multiplicity of myth and the constant shifting between items that say the same thing – steak and chips, soap powders, margarine, a new car, a court case all speak of the dominant bourgeois mythology – suggests a nervousness on the part of myth.

So if an accused criminal offers an alibi, slips quickly from one hiding place to another, provides multiple identities, and distorts the truth, then we will want to ask why: Is he or she trying to hide something? Is there a crime that needs concealing? Barthes may well stop me in my tracks at this line of questioning because he is keen to point out that myth hides nothing (le mythe ne cache rien) (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 121; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 834). All it does is distort; other than that, everything is on display. My answer: yes, everything is indeed available for examination, except the process of distortion itself. Barthes himself provides the explanation. When myth does grab me and make me complicit, it stands its ground, locks into place, and ‘makes itself look neutral and innocent’ (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 125; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 838). It behaves like an accused criminal, for once I turn around and look, it stands its ground and appears as innocent as can be. I speak the simple truth, it wants to say, isn’t it obvious? So there is something myth wishes to conceal: its pretense to naturalness and innocence is a cover for having stolen language and having transformed it into something twisted and distorted.10

**Producing and concealing opposition**

The question then becomes what language, indeed what truth, does myth distort? It is none other than the historical, social, cultural, political, and, I would add, the racial and religious truth of the initial sign. What Barthes finds reprehensible is the fact that myth removes these specific and rooted elements of the original sign and replaces them with what is in many respects their opposite. The black salute once again. Although, the young man comes from the French territories in Africa, he has his own long history, from Phoenician and Roman dominance, Arab invasions, and the French colonial expansion. He has his own language and culture with their assumptions concerning everyday life. His religious background too has a long history, which includes conversions to Christianity in the second century and the strength of the early church (the church’s theological hit-man, Augustine, was of Berber origin),

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10 Barthes’s continual Freudian comments are revealing. The threefold pattern of signifier, signified, and sign is like the connection between manifest and latent content in the dream itself; or the latent content of the dream, parapraxis, or neurosis occupies the position of the signified; or the poverty of the mythic signified (the concept) is like the thinness of the Freudian parapraxis, and yet this thinness is out of proportion to its importance.
through Muslim conversion in the seventh to eighth centuries, and the recurring patterns of African practices and beliefs that continue within each new religious conversion. Indeed, religion and the gods are beginning to creep in through the back door. All this has been twisted by myth into something new: the eternal glory of the French Empire.

Taking this a step further, what this myth does through all its swift-footed moves is attempt to deal with the fact that the French Empire has overrun not merely another set of people, but people with a distinct history of their own. In other words, it conceals an unwelcome truth, a trauma even, that it cannot face: the empire is a brutal and alien imposition on a population that can only wish it good riddance. Or it may indeed recognise a snippet of such truth, thereby inoculating itself against the larger truth it cannot admit (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 150–1; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 861). So at this level the myth’s distortions seek to conceal the fact that there is widespread opposition to that empire.

However, this is only the first level, for now a paradox emerges: the empire itself has actually created its own opposition. Had it not invaded in the first place, that opposition would not be a reality. In other words, the empire has created its own problem. That is what the myth seeks to conceal – a basic trauma that it must deny, for if it did, then the empire would lose its reason for existence. The empire has brought about the opposition and therefore must efface it; the only way it can do so is take the very figure of that opposition and turn him into something very different – a thankful son of the empire.

**Preserving rebellion**

But what happens to this opposition? Does myth – or rather, what we should now call reactionary myth – succeed in closing it down? Perhaps not. In order to see why, let me return to the black salute as the distorted vehicle of a unified empire: Barthes observes that the initial meaning-full sign is ‘deprived of memory, not of existence’. Further, it is ‘at once stubborn, silently rooted there [à la fois têtus, silencieusement enracinés], and garrulous, a speech wholly at the service of the concept’ (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 122–3; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 835). The sign speaks with two voices, one in support of the new myth (the glorious French Empire) and another in silent protest (colonised Africa).

Yet myth cannot overcome this resistance embodied in the initial sign. I would suggest that in these comments on the stubborn and silent presence of resistance in such a myth, Barthes has stumbled on a vital feature of myth: it is a means of dealing with problems and contradictions. All too often myth, especially biblical myth, embodies a conflict that must be resolved in one way or another. It may be the primal conflict that is the staple of theogonic and cosmogonic myths, or a myth in which a trickster (Prometheus) hoodwinks the gods and is then punished, or one in which women take

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11 For examples of how army and church inoculate, see Barthes (1993a [1957]: 41–2); Barthes (2002 [1957]: 704–5).
initiative (such as Eve and the fruit) only to be cursed, or periodic rebellion (the murmuring of the Israelites in the wilderness against Moses) that is punished through plague, fire, snake bite, and the earth opening up. Or in our own day it may be the myth of the state in a just and good war against the forces of evil – a ‘free’ and ‘Christian’ West against the evil ‘barbarism’ of Islam.

What we find with such myths is that they explore such protests and rebellions only to close them down in the end. This disruption is not an option, says the myth, and this is why. Yet in doing so, myths time and again preserve the moment of rebellion. It may be condemned as pride, sin against God, and contumacy, but it is there and so may be retrieved. In other words, in the very effort to close down opposition, myth embodies a deep contradiction within. We can go a step further: only through these myths of reaction and oppression does the possibility of subversion arise (See Bloch 1970, 1972, 1985, 1995, and my discussion of Bloch in Boer 2007: 1–56). However much they might dislike each other, two elements are inseparable within myth; like a mutually dependent couple who can only be together by squabbling, the oppressive and subversive elements of myth cannot escape one another. But this means that reactionary myths contain the seeds of rebellion within them, so much so that there is an implicit dynamic within myth that leads to resistance against domination.

**Cunning of myth**

At this point what I would like to call the cunning of myth comes into play, for it seems to me that myth has a knack of twisting out of its oppressive blanket. Barthes hints as much with regard to one of his favourite topics – pleasure – which may well be a revolutionary and asocial breakout from the myths of the right (Barthes 1975 [1973]: 22–3; Barthes 2002 [1973]: 231–2). But a more sustained example appears with our consistent black salute. The African youth cannot be wholly subsumed within the myth of empire, and for that reason myth shuffles about, moving back and forth in order to draw what it can from the man. His salute is indeed a genuine salute, myth urges, and not an ironic one. He does look upward to the flag, to the glorious possibilities of what the empire can achieve for him and everyone, and not to the Senegalese, Moroccan, Algerian, or any other flag of independence from French dominion in Africa, the Pacific, or South-East Asia. Yet the resistance to this act of appropriation is indeed there, for as Barthes points out, the myth of empire is uncertain and fragile, and must therefore be constantly reasserted. Indeed, this myth asserts as strenuously as it can that possibilities – of independence, of other allegiances, and the throwing off of the empire – are overcome by this soldier.

An alternative myth begins to twist out from under its oppressive cover. That myth looks rather different: there is the assertion of a distinct history, of a religious and cultural identity; indeed, it wants to say that this distinct narrative demands its own destiny away from the French Empire. It becomes a myth of anti-colonialism and independence. The opposition that the myth of empire tried to close down and appropriate for itself has twisted out of the empire’s grasp and become a very different, oppositional myth. It cannot be contained forever; the mute protest is always ready to gain its own voice.
Alternative myths

Thus far I have followed a path in which I asked whether myth tries to hide something (distortion), suggesting that it both produces and conceals opposition, thereby preserving rebellion. And I have suggested that there is a cunning of myth in which myths of rebellion twist out from under their dominant control. However, there is another feature of Barthes’s argument that strengthens my search for a dialectic of opposition. In fact, here the content of myth begins to return to Barthes’s analysis, now in the form of a positive myth. And that is the moment when the gods also begin to slip back into the picture.

The initial hint of another path actually appears in Mythologies. Desperate to find a way to resist bourgeois myth, Barthes wonders whether the best option is not to outsmart myth by mythifying myth itself. Or as he puts it, in the same way that myth builds a second layer on top of language, so also should it be possible to construct a third layer that gives myth a dose of its own medicine. It is a case of robbing the robber and turning what is stolen against the original thief.

This passing comment gains a whole new angle in Barthes’s later observations on denotation, the primary system of language upon which myth – at least in Mythologies – builds its own signifying system through distortion and theft. The problem with Barthes’s analysis in Mythologies is that the structural representation of the two overlapping sign systems gives prominence and power to the second – mythological – system at the expense of the first – linguistic – system. Barthes constantly points out that such a representation has its limits, that it can only approximate the relation between the two sign systems, and yet he uses it to argue for the distorting dominance of the mythological system. That system wreaks havoc on the initial denoting system, which can only stand there in mute protest.

By contrast, in his later work Barthes completely undermines this structural dominance of the second system. Denotation, he suggests in S/Z, is by no means the primary site of meaning upon which connotation (and thereby metalanguage) builds its own system. In fact, the two zones play a game with one another, referring back and forth in an illusory fashion (See Barthes 1993a [1957]: 128; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 840). Even more, we may invert the whole relation and see denotation as the last in a series of connotations; one that appears to give the last word of simple and primitive truth, and it does so by appearing to be first. By now Barthes speaks of denotation as operating primarily as an archaic myth of the natural origin of language. Denotation is nothing other than the ‘old deity, watchful, cunning, theatrical, foreordained to represent the collective innocence of language’ (Barthes 1990 [1970]: 9; Barthes 2002 [1970c], 126).

We may read these observations as a retreat from his earlier Marxist assertion of the raw primacy of production and revolution. Nothing is left to resist myth because denotation is if anything even more mythical. But I take these comments in another sense, namely that here we find another angle on the possibility for myths of rebellion. It certainly makes sense in the way his story of the rough and ready woodcutter is already a myth the moment Barthes invokes it. The key here is that the woodcutter – who is involved
directly in production and thereby embodies the only resistance to bourgeois myth – operates at the apparently primary level of denotation. It is nothing less than a denotative myth.

Now two other examples of alternative myths make much more sense. One comes from an extraordinarily sympathetic treatment by Barthes of Charlie Chaplin, especially the film Modern Times. Chaplin’s depiction of a man locked in a cell, happily reading a newspaper with his legs crossed and sitting under a portrait of Lincoln, embodies as nothing else can the alienation of the petite bourgeoisie. Yet Barthes’s other observations draw my attention, for they concern the proletariat. For Barthes, Chaplin provides one of the most powerful contemporary representations of the proletariat, and indeed ‘represents in art perhaps the most efficient form of revolution’ (Barthes 1993a [1957]: 40; Barthes 2002 [1957]: 702; translation modified). The strength of this depiction is that it is not a didactic political endorsement of the proletariat. The man is in many respects at a stage of pre-class consciousness. He is desperately hungry, imagining massive sandwiches, rivers of milk, and pieces of fruit one tosses aside having barely touched them – a land flowing with milk and honey! And yet a strike is a disaster since it only exacerbates his hunger. This moment before the Revolution portrays the humiliated condition of the working class as no other socialist art has done.

This example from Chaplin is hardly a pale and poor myth of the left of which Barthes speaks elsewhere. Instead, we find a vibrant and powerful myth that succeeds through its understatement – a denotative myth par excellence. And it comes not from within the bowels of ‘actually existing socialism’ but from the land of the most overdeveloped capitalism – the United States, where even Marx saw harbingers of the full form of capitalism and the secular nation-state. Here is a dialectic that Barthes has evoked despite himself.

Towards utopia

The second example picks up another comment on denotation, namely that denotation may well be utopian, for it presents the possibility of the world of language that is beyond our own capabilities (Barthes 1983 [1967]: 30; see also 281–6; Barthes 2002 [1967]: 931, see also 1179–84). When I read this comment I immediately thought of the extraordinary Empire of Signs (Barthes 1982 [1970]; Barthes 2002 [1970b]), where Barthes attempts to produce a semi-imaginary ‘Japan’ where there are no signs. In all those domains where bourgeois myth has its stranglehold – language, food, games, cities, street signs, railway stations, faces, writing, the individual subject, theatre, poetry, bodies, and space – Barthes imagines a world where there is no meaning. It is simply not present – no soul, no God, no ego, no metaphysics, and so no myth. Nothing less than a utopian project, the complete absence of signs, should be able to withstand myth, at least according to his argument in Mythologies. Not so, for what happens is that Barthes produces his own myth in what is perhaps his most enticing work. In fact, it goes beyond the myths of denotation, for it even refuses the initial connection between signifier and signified that produces the sign.
What we find in Empire of Signs is a world that will have been – if I may use the future perfect in such a way (See Badiou 1988: 429–75; Badiou 2004: 119–33; Badiou 2006: 391–435). Myth trades on this utopian, even eschatological dimension. Now this is a distinctly formal point, for it makes little difference whether the utopian future is a reactive and oppressive one, or whether it is one of liberation from such oppression. Formally, they operate in a similar fashion.

We can see how this works with the photograph of the black salute (for the last time). The mythical signification of this photograph is that of the French Empire, which effaces the concrete social history of the peoples it overruns and dominates. The image wants to say, argues Barthes, that all France’s sons and (presumably) daughters share the ideals of the empire; we are as one under the flag. Is that a reality or is it an ideal? I would suggest that the function of such a myth is to present a desired position in which the empire might be but is certainly not yet. In other words, there is a distinct eschatological idea to which that myth points, a desired utopian image of a magnanimous empire at peace within itself and proud of its achievements.

Barthes is the last one to feel that this is a desirable ideal. Yet if we focus on form rather than content, then we find a basic feature of myth, one that shows up again and again in Barthes’s own text: the presentation of an ideal – or at least better – future that has not yet been achieved. This point actually applies to any myth, whether of the right or the left, or indeed any other political content they may take. We may find some content more appealing than others, but that does not diminish the formal point. Even the most retrograde myth – of Nazism, say, or slavery or sexual oppression or a theocracy as we find in the biblical text of Chronicles (Boer 2006: 136–68; Schweitzer 2007) – still presents an image of what the desired, ideal, or better society might look like. At a formal level, this utopian dimension of myth applies to any political position of the right or the left, as we see in Empire of Signs or indeed Charlie Chaplin’s film. These myths present the possibility of an imaginary, enticing, and desired world. Yet once we have dealt with form, content begins to return, especially since the opposition is an artificial one that may work for analysis. But it is rarely possible to separate them so easily in the real world.

Concluding theological comments

The main result of my reading has been to uncover a pattern of opposition from within myth. Rather than Barthes’s effort to resist myth (which he finds a malevolent and dismaying distortion) from outside, I have been able to trace another pattern: resistance takes place within myth through dialectics of opposition.

Yet theological matters have often pressed hard upon the back of my discussion of Barthes on myth, occasionally making it stumble forward. I mention one or two here, but there are of course others that may be pursued if one wishes. The first concerns what I have elsewhere called the ‘political master myth’ of Genesis-Joshua (Boer 2009b: 36–115), moving as it does from creation to conquest, creating on route a state-in-waiting, a theocratic tyranny replete with law code, gender hierarchies, family structures, religious apparatus,
and political structure. The question then becomes whether such a myth is a
dreadful distortion of language in the hands of the ruling ideas, which are
(to gloss Marx) nothing less than the ideas of the ruling class. Or may we
find patterns of opposition, resistance, and insurrection embodied within
those myths? I think of the rebellions preserved in the story of the Garden
of Eden, the murmuring in the wilderness, and the occasional coup attempted
by the likes of Korah and company. They may be condemned as ‘sinful’,
earning for their perpetrators less or (usually) more extreme punishments,
yet these moments of resistance are preserved within the stories. And once
there they have a knack of slipping away from those stories to take on a life
of their own.

The second concerns the inescapable mythology of the narratives concern-
ing Jesus in the New Testament. The old arguments of David Strauss do
not want to lie quietly in the grave with him (Strauss 1835, 1840, 1902). As is
well known, Strauss carefully and at great length drew on theories of myth
at the time and then examined, pericope by pericope, the gospel narratives
in order to argue that they are inescapably mythical. Now Strauss took this
argument all the way to argue that myth = fiction, as well as asking what
such myths might mean for Christians today. More recently there has been a
return not so much to Strauss’s arguments as they stood in 1835, but to the
mythical nature of such narratives, either in terms of their ancient Near
Eastern background or in terms of social location, anthropology, and compa-
norative religion (Mack 2008; Thompson 2005). If we grant this position for a
moment, then the question concerns what happens to myth. Does it become
a distortion of language we need to resist? Is it a more sublime way of express-
ing truth? Is it a tribute to the greatness of the human imagination? Possibly,
but I would suggest we might better understand these myths as playing a
double game, operating with a fair degree of cunning and subterfuge.

Let me finish on a related but more personal note. At the cathedral that I
attend from time to time, it is our custom to recite the creed — Nicene or Apostles’
during every service. Initially I decided to opt out of such recital, since
these creeds did not express the way I understood matters. But the more I
began to think about myth and the subversive mythical language used in
such creeds, the more I wanted to assert them. And so now I do, with gusto.

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