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The Sorceress's Apprentice: Roland Barthes and the Criticism of Magic

John Lurz

All knowledge is linked to a classifying order: to aggrandize or simply to change knowledge is to experiment, by certain audacious operations, upon what subverts the classifications we are accustomed to: this is the noble function of magic.

—Roland Barthes, “Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriqueur”

I

IN A SELDOM-READ 1956 CONTRIBUTION to his “little mythology of the month” series, Roland Barthes addresses the image of the intellectual promulgated by Pierre Poujade’s populist screed *J’ai choisi le combat*. The owner of a book and stationery store who created the right-wing Defense Union of Shopkeepers and Craftsmen in 1953, Poujade penned his book to defend the “common man” against the elites of government, business, and academia, and sparked a short-lived but virulent political movement in France based on antiparlamentarianism, anti-intellectualism, and xenophobia. Barthes’s essay, which wasn’t published in English until 1979, explicates the mythic contours of the Poujadist intellectual based on what Barthes calls “the inevitable basis of all anti-intellectualism: the suspicion of language.”¹ As a sort of culmination of the various condemnations that are routinely pitched at linguistic practitioners (idleness, social detachment, physical weakness, for example), Barthes closes the essay with a striking figure: “in the Poujadist society,” he writes, “the intellectual has the accursed and necessary role of a lapsed witch doctor [*d’un sorcier dégradé*].”² Almost twenty years later, writing in *Le Monde* in 1974, he returns to this image and alludes to the “indictment of magic” that is “periodically lodged against intellectuals,” stating that “the intellectual is treated as a witch doctor [*un sorcier*] might be by a tribe of dealers, businessmen, and jurists.”³ Though not quite bookends of Barthes’s intellectual career, these two far-flung appearances of the sorcerer reveal the persistence

of this distinctive image in Barthes's thinking, the significance of which it is the intention of this essay is to track across its various associations and transformations. Conjuring up a new perspective on one of our greatest and most beloved critical teachers, the deliberately fantastic view of Barthes's career that I develop here magically reanimates the practice of thinking through language itself and spells out the very real trickery by which the words of critical and creative writers alike do their work in the world.

In what follows, Barthes emerges less as a full-blown linguistic sorcerer than, as my title has it, a kind of "apprentice" practicing at the feet of a sorceress, a notably feminine figure whose deeply entrenched exclusion from mainstream society helps him to clarify and cultivate the magical arts that make his status as an intellectual such a socially liminal one. While the most obvious source of this enchanting language might seem to be the roughly contemporaneous discussion of indigenous witch doctors in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*—and this is certainly an implicit reference point for Barthes—Jules Michelet's portrayal of the medieval European witch in his 1862 work *La Sorcière* (translated into English as *Satanism and Witchcraft*) offers Barthes even more fertile resources for conceiving of real-world linguistic effects. Writing almost a hundred years later, in a preface to a 1959 edition of that book, Barthes unpacks his connection with the witch in terms that emphasize her particularly practical relationship to language and its concrete consequences: "in our present society, what best resumes this complementary role of the Micheletist witch is probably the mythic figure of the intellectual, 'the traitor,' sufficiently detached from society to discern its alienation, seeking a correction of reality yet impotent to effect it . . . directed toward *praxis* but participating in it only by the motionless mediation of a language, just as the medieval witch comforted human misery only through a rite and at the price of an illusion."⁴ The focus on complementarity here comes straight from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who describes the position of the sorcerer or shaman as outside of a cultural system into which he nonetheless helps people to integrate themselves and their inexpressible personal feelings.⁵ Accordingly, Barthes locates the witch and the intellectual in a "detached," almost paralyzed position that, as he bemoans at the end of *Mythologies*, is simultaneously inside and outside of the social order. ("The mythologist is excluded from this history in the name of which he professes to act," he writes.)⁶

Yet, as the comments on "correction" and "comfort" imply, Michelet's witch is at least as interested in creating a new reality as she is in reconciling her medieval brethren with the world as it is. The witch's seemingly contradictory combination of practical activity and "impotent" speech

shows Barthes a distinctive mode of being in the world that is comprised of language use itself. That is, instead of assuming a full and immediate real from which her practice of language would divide her, the witch's power—which Barthes ultimately learns from her—is to profess the possibility that language's "motionless mediation" constitutes its own kind of reality. This is as much to evoke the fundamental mediation of the real familiar to us from all manner of ideological and deconstructive analyses as it is to signal *the real of mediation*, which is ultimately what the magical rites and "illusory" comforts of the witch work to index. As magic names this strangely real experience of what has no reality, tracing its occurrences through an oeuvre known equally for its demystifying power and its bewitching style maps an image system that bestows a certain existence, a practical actuality, on intellectual activity itself. Touching in equal measure on the effects of both enchanting dogmatics and illuminating analytics, magic enacts the dynamic, oppositional functioning of language itself while also fleshing out the existential claim Barthes makes at the end of *Mythologies's* original preface to "live to the full the contradiction of my time" (*M* 12).⁷

Françoise Gaillard has recently placed this kind of contradiction at the heart of Barthes's entire intellectual project, describing how, in his work, "to render things all their substantial thickness, to even outstrip the materiality from which their flesh is made, is to multiply in them the layers of meaning."⁸ As Gaillard refuses the divide between thoughts and things, meaning and matter that initially seems to tear Barthes apart, she gestures toward precisely the synthesizing sorcery that we will see the witch's use of language act out. Indeed, when Gaillard continues and suggests that for Barthes "the properly human is the unlimited power to make things signify," she also appeals to a "practice" whose effect is that "the world finds itself re-enchanted."⁹ Though the idiom of enchantment drops out of the rest of her compelling discussion, the more purposeful attention I pay to the verbal traces of Barthes's self-identified witchcraft exemplifies as much as it explicates the epistemological and experiential reserves of language by cutting a magical through line across his deliberately varied intellectual activity. More broadly, my investigation into the way magic inflects Barthes's virtuosic sensitivity to subtle linguistic dynamics is meant to affirm a kind of thinking-through-language that balances the necessary but perhaps overly dominant historicist forces that constitute our current professional formation (and to do so without turning back to an aseptic formalism or an aesthetic ideology, both of which have been alternatively associated with and detached from the close reading methods of the New Critics).¹⁰

Even as I say this, however, the reinvigoration of our relationship to language as quite possibly the most mesmerizing capacity that we

possess also places Barthes's—and by extension our—critical work on language within a larger historical trajectory of modernity's relationship to magical agency. Most notably, Simon During's account of the magical legacy that shaped modern culture as a whole traces the transformations that a premodern sense of magic undergoes in and after the Enlightenment, and details a shift in emphasis from the enigmas of the occult to the dazzle of technique. Whereas During refers to tricks that require manual proficiency and mechanical devices with poorly understood (but perfectly explicable) operational principles, Joshua Landy explicitly discusses literary language as a secular strategy for what he calls a modern re-enchantment of the world, a focus that extends During's exploration of technical craft and intersects with the emphasis on language and signification in Barthes's work.¹¹ Not only do the various kinds of magical thinking that Barthes employs paint a clearer picture of the way the operations of signification offer themselves as part of lived experience and animate our sense of the world; they also allow me to focus my argument on a critic rather than on the more forthrightly “creative” writing of the novelists and poets who help so many of us to engage the magical life of signs. It is not just in the aesthetic register that signification tenders an imaginary reality, even if During, Landy, and a host of others convincingly show how literary discourse remains one of the richest sources for the kind of “self-consciously illusory” magic by which, in the long wake of poststructuralism and critical theory more generally, so many of us more or less explicitly understand our work with language.¹² Rather, what Barthes learns from the sorceress is that the metalanguage of criticism itself partakes in equal measure with the experiential world on which it seems only to comment.

II

Though the sorceress herself doesn't appear in Barthes's thinking until 1959, two years after *Mythologies* was published as a book, Barthes's intertwining of magic, criticism, and world-making begins as early as a 1951 essay on Michelet, which he expanded into a book in 1954. Using evocative terms to explain the import of the great historian's work, Barthes writes, “what matters is that the man of History be presented in an amplified gesture, struck by an enchantment which transmits him through Time, neither living nor dead, in a third state of dreamed existence which enlarges and *imposes* him.”¹³ Singling out amplification as one of the primary powers of Michelet's writing, Barthes asserts a certain “reality effect” for the enchantment that inaugurates this magical line in

his thinking.¹⁴ The “third state of dreamed existence” that figures this effect augments our sense of what we consider reality as the mental world of dreams; imagination receives its own “existential” status. In this, we can see what Patrizia Lombardo means when, in her now classic account of Barthes’s early works, she labels Michelet’s writing as “an alchemy,” “a chemical operation in which elements are mixed together” that offered an alternative to what she characterizes as the chilling severity of the intellectuals who immediately preceded Barthes (e.g., Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Blanchot). Barthes expands on this alchemical mixing of imagination and reality, this fantastic production of thinking’s own actuality, in his account of Michelet’s relationship to historical documents, which he treated “as voices, not as witnesses,” not as impersonal traces of an abstracted moment in the past but as fragments whose survival indicates the “quality of having been an attribute of life.”¹⁵ Here, as the specification of “having been” qualifies any sense of immediacy that the idea of a “voice” or a “life” might insinuate, it also maintains a kind of distance or detachment that characterizes mental or intellectual “existence” more generally. What the historian experiences is the past’s very pastness, its inescapable separation from him, as if what is immediate in intellectual life more generally is mediation itself.

The contradictory coincidence of proximity and distance by which Barthes seems to be characterizing intellectual reality is elaborated in two explicit—and explicitly conflicting—appeals to magic. Referring to the voices that the historian listens to, Barthes describes that he is responsible for “completing by a magical action what in their lives may have been absurd or mutilated.”¹⁶ At first glance, magic seems to name a kind of idealizing reparation or restitution that would redeem the ravages of history. More careful consideration hints, however, at the possibility of preserving or “completing” absurdity and mutilation as such. In other words, magic actualizes what, from an idealizing perspective, would be seen as damaged, lacking, or incomplete; it is not the completion of the incomplete but the realization of incompleteness in itself. Barthes intimates the mode by which this paradox might be accomplished when he uses magic in what we might think of as a more straightforward way to detail how “there was always an obstacle to this magical incorporation Speech.”¹⁷ Here, magic refers to a kind of transcendent immediacy, an absolute comprehension whose impossibility would ally it more closely with deception and delusion. But the “obstacle” of “Speech” forestalls such seamless perfection and thus functions as the very medium that allows the historian to achieve the incompleteness testified to in the earlier quotation. While Barthes’s appeal to speech specifically regards the social gulf between Michelet’s own bourgeois language and that of

“the People” he is trying to resurrect, it also signifies the more general gap by which language relates to reality. More than this, taking the contrasting implications of these two metaphors of magic together offers an instance of the lexical self-contradiction that Barthes will later label an “enantioseme” and articulates nothing other than the divergence that constitutes the reality of linguistic operation itself.¹⁸ The language of magic, it seems, opens up onto an experience of the very magic of language.

These circuitous, argumentative convolutions about the reality of intellectual life find something of a more tangible expression when we turn to the occurrences of magic in Barthes’s famous essay, “The World of Wrestling,” which launched his most influential and concrete foray into cultural critique. Published in a 1952 issue of *Esprit* before his mythology column became an institution in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, this early piece intertwines its specific account of the almost mathematically simplified form of retributive justice embodied by the wrestling match with a more theoretical commentary on the general condition of mystification that anticipates the later programmatic essay “Myth Today.” In this early moment, however, Barthes’s reliance on a rhetoric of magic rather than on a vocabulary of myth to scrutinize the match’s ideological operation echoes and amplifies his commentary on Michelet. To explain the “pure and full signification, rounded like Nature” by which the wrestling match strips the idea of justice of its complexity, Barthes writes, “it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament which finds its natural expression in a gesture” (*M* 25, 18). Magic is used to describe the way the wrestler’s bodily physique “perfectly correspond[s]” to the role he is playing in the contest and also functions as an indicator of the kind of impossible immediacy and total transparency of which Michelet could only dream (*M* 17). Coupling “magical” with “entertainment” adds a valence of distraction and diversion to its use, just as “temperament” suggests a spontaneity and natural authenticity that would relieve the spectators of the need for any deeper deliberation. Magic, however, speaks to more than just the mystification of the wrestling match’s “perfect intelligibility”; as a descriptive term, it also includes in its connotations an alternative—even illusory—perspective that seems to reintroduce some of the nuance and ambiguity whose absence Barthes’s commentary is so committed to displaying (*M* 25). That is, the category of magic implies something other than the normal and mundane, as if this presumed naturalness of expression is consciously restricted to the space “in the ring” (to use the title that accompanies the essay in the latest editions of *Mythologies* [*M* 17]). From this angle,

the wrestling match is an example of the kind of “real illusion” that the intellectual himself magically produces—to say nothing of the kind of acknowledged artificiality that Barthes proposes as the antidote to what he comes to call mythological discourse.

But Barthes is careful to disqualify the possibility of this meaning when he comments on the way the audience “condemns artifice,” the moral rule of wrestling being that “all signs must be excessively clear, but must not let the intention of clarity be seen” (*M* 20). The delicacy of this proviso highlights the ease with which we might otherwise confuse the mystifying performance of the wrestlers in the ring with Barthes’s own demystifying performance on the page, a potential confusion that presages the ideological resurgence Barthes faces when demystification itself becomes critical doxa. This confusion is clearest in the magical imagery Barthes uses to evaluate the dynamic of the wrestling match and that could also be applied to the project of his essay’s commentary. In particular, he makes a comparison between the melodramatic spectacle of the wrestlers’ acting and “the gesture of a conjuror who holds out his cards clearly to the public” (*M* 19). The magic trick being performed here is one in which not only is nothing hidden but what is exposed are explicitly the signs by which the trick is composed; the image is so closely coincident with an analytical method seeking to unveil the semiological structures of what seems unquestionably natural that it can barely be called metaphorical. Speaking to both the artifice of the match and the artfulness of the critique, the magic evoked by the figure of the conjuror bridges the two “intelligible spectacle[s]” and allows the “reality” of the match’s illusion to correspond with the operation of the critic’s language (*M* 20). In doing so, this magic verbalizes a realism of the symbolic that dispels the mystifications of immediacy without also succumbing to them, an effect of magic’s essential ambiguity that Barthes will not be able to recognize until he is reminded of it by the sorceress.

In fact, once he begins to regularly produce his monthly column, the ambiguous language of magic falls almost completely from view in favor of a vocabulary of myth that will drive a wedge between the critic and the world. Overlooking “The World of Wrestling” altogether (which is nonetheless included in the 1957 collection), he instead opens the preface by stating that “the following essays were written one each month for about two years, from 1954 to 1956,” and also goes on to claim that “right from the start, the notion of myth seemed to me to explain these examples of the falsely obvious” (*M* 11). Replacing magic with the more fashionable terminology of myth, Barthes aligns himself with the influential ethnological work done in the 1950s by structurally focused researchers like Georges Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, and Edgar Morin. Martine

Joly investigates the way that this intellectual context approached myth as a “psychological and sociological elaboration of symbols capable of engendering and organizing a mass of signs” that provides a “pragmatic chart of societies.”¹⁹ And this is certainly one way that myth functions for Barthes: as he puts it, “I still used the word ‘myth’ in its traditional sense,” which is to say as a kind of collective imaginary that constructs an implicit or unspoken grid of intelligibility for everyday experience (*M* 11). “But,” he immediately goes on to stipulate, “I was already certain of a fact from which I later tried to draw all the consequences: myth is a language” (*M* 11). Here Barthes attempts to complement the ideological perspective of his contemporaries with a semiological perspective taken from Ferdinand de Saussure that produces “a double theoretical framework” by which he characterizes his analytical strategy in the preface to the collection’s 1970 reissue (*M* 9). In doing so, however, he cedes the self-implicating ambiguity that magic would have offered his methodological framework to what is effectively a preconstituted and stubbornly external conceptual vocabulary.

If I stop short of figuring this move as an instance of mythology’s own mythological condition, it is to avoid the linguistic and intellectual impasse to which Barthes’s adoption of this discourse leads him. For, at the same time as his terse assertion that “myth is a language” attempts to develop the analytical purchase of that term, it also gestures at the paradoxically *asymbolic* place that the word myth ultimately occupies. Despite all the semiotic energy animating his diverse examinations of particular myths—those enchanting analyses of cookery and cars, of children and chips—“myth” itself functions as a strangely monolithic or monologic term in his discussion. As the name of a semiological system, it receives decidedly unsemiological treatment, as is shown by taking a closer look at the infamous discussion in “Myth Today” about the difficult task of combating myth, to which I have already made passing reference. He describes how “the very effort one makes in order to escape [myth’s] stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology” (*M* 135). The persistent repetition of the term here is telling: in the same way that Barthes proposes myth’s inescapability, he seems locked into the single word, the neologistic imperative that he extolled just a few pages earlier reduced to minimal inflections on the same invariable morpheme. It is partly this kind of redundant rhetoric that leads Irene Langlet to judge the “prudently programmatic tone” of the collection’s long final statement as “a far cry from what the

small texts of *Mythologies* had already attained."²⁰ Society might speak in a language of myths, but, as the very principle of social signification, myth itself seems to be the place where semiosis stops—or at least stutters.

To observe this, however, is not to fault one of the great demystifiers for a kind of Homeric nod, but rather to expose the persistent if disavowed presence of the witch's magic that keeps the world-making power of language on the tips of our tongues. What myth's verbal reverberation reveals is the operation of tautology, which Barthes defines in "Myth Today" as "this verbal device which consists in defining like by like" (*M* 152). Though he discusses tautology as one of the privileged rhetorical figures by which the cultural presents itself as natural, the mediated as immediate, in this case it has the opposite effect and underscores myth's own linguistic constitution—to the extent that it brings magic back to his discourse. Admittedly, the recourse to magical language is in an explicitly negative register. He qualifies tautology as a "magical behaviour" in which one "takes refuge . . . when one is at a loss for an explanation: the accidental failure of language is magically identified with what one decides is a natural resistance of the object" (*M* 152). Here, even as magic names a kind of shelter from thinking, a sleight of hand that neutralizes any sense of complexity, it also very much speaks to a laborious practice of brute assertion that stands in for more nuanced forms of signification. This becomes clearer in the explicit emphasis on a linguistic or rhetorical activity that has only itself to say: in unpacking the frustrated parent's retort "*just because, that's all*," Barthes frames tautology as "a magical act ashamed of itself, which verbally makes the gesture of rationality, but immediately abandons the latter, and believes itself to be even with causality because it has uttered the word which introduces it" (*M* 153).²¹ The force in these lines is wholly on the side of the linguistic: they refer to a world whose rational and causal structures are (for better and for worse) only an effect of words. That is, as much as tautology "testifies to a profound distrust of language," it is also, and in the very same measure, a concerted conviction in it (*M* 153). The "bad" magic of tautology turns out to be indistinguishable from the "good" magic of language that so enchanted Barthes in Michelet's work and that brings so many of his particular mythological analyses to life.

At this point, however, any functional work that magic's ambiguity might do is obfuscated by his commitment to the unary framework of myth. As Serge Zenkine puts it in one of the few explicit comments on magic in *Mythologies*, "the term 'magic' usually serves to summarize the structure of myths, but it never designates an activity aimed at producing an effect in the real world, which is the ordinary definition of magic."²² This is part of Zenkine's larger argument that, for the vast majority of

Barthes's analyses, he focuses on "magical objects" rather than active practices (the histrionic conduct of the wrestling match being a notable exception), an observation that throws Barthes's disregard of tautology's performative effects into sharper relief.²³ And not just this, but when Barthes is momentarily able to consider (or, given *Mythologies's* prehistory, reconsider) the analytical room that magical language opens up, he shunts it to the literal margins of his discussion. Thus, in an oft-quoted footnote toward the end of "Myth Today," he writes, "even here, in these mythologies, I have used trickery [*j'ai rusé*]: finding it painful constantly to work on the evaporation of reality, I have started to make it excessively dense, and to discover in it a surprising compactness which I savored with delight, and I have given a few example of 'substantial psycho-analysis' about some mythical objects" (*M* 158).²⁴ As Barthes attempts to address the mythologist's own alienation from the "reality" whose dual ideological and semiological constructedness he repeatedly unveils, his language of "compactness" and "savoring" point to a conception of "reality" as a solid and firmly available presence that engenders much of this pain and anxiety. It is only because he preserves an ideal of a pure and immediate real that he can set up the opposition between its "savoring" and its "evaporation," a dynamic that he repeats in the paragraph to which this footnote is appended when he laments that the mythologist "constantly runs the risk of causing the reality which he purports to protect, to disappear" (*M* 158).²⁵ While we will see how Barthes articulates this situation as a more general split between "language-object and metalanguage," it is precisely to this kind of oppositional thinking that his surreptitious "trickery" speaks—or, better, it is precisely this opposition that "trickery" itself speaks (*M* 145). In other words, his appeal to a Bachelard-inspired approach that draws out the significance of everyday phenomena like steak and wine by lavishing detailed descriptions on their physical composition unexpectedly shows him that the remedy for his intellectual grief is the same as its cause. Almost in spite of himself, Barthes seems to be saying that thinking through language and linguistic structures leads to reality's "evaporation" and its "compactness" alike, a divergent condition that only the tricky "ruse" carried by his phrasing seems able to consolidate. What is most magical about this consolidation is the way it practically resolves the contradictory position in which Barthes finds himself—not by offering him immediate access to a real that is untouched by signification but by helping him rediscover the experiential or "real" effects of signs themselves.

III

If Barthes is not yet fully able to absorb this lesson by the end of *Mythologies*—or if he is only able to admit it in pejorative terms (“ideologism and its opposite are types of behaviour which are still magical,” as he writes in the book’s closing lines)—then it is the figure of the sorceress that he re-encounters two years later when writing the preface of the 1959 reissue of Michelet’s *La Sorcière* who helps him to recuperate magic from the shameful sidelines into which the analytical framework of myth had pushed it (*M* 159). In his summary, for instance, of Michelet’s account of the witch’s gradual formation as a response to the increasing estrangement he finds in pre-renaissance France, Barthes portrays her actions as an emancipatory force in history: “magical rites,” he declares, “being the one way a technique of liberation could be acknowledged by an entire alienated collectivity” (*CE* 105). He is specifically talking about the sorceress’s use of herbs and often poisonous plants as curative treatments for common ailments, but his point speaks more generally to magic’s potential to spark an awareness of alienation and to allow, however meagerly, for its amelioration. The emphasis on rites recalls Zenkine’s point about the absence of mythological analyses of practices rather than objects and designates another affordance of magic that myth does not possess. That is, in addition to—perhaps as a result of—being a word whose meanings cleave along opposing lines, a framework of magic invokes a practical register, a stress on an ongoing process of doing and making that explicitly opposes the timeless, incontrovertible givenness with which myth presents itself.

Barthes makes this more explicit when he observes that “Michelet never distinguishes the witch from her activity: she exists only insofar as she participates in a *praxis*, which is precisely what makes her a progressive figure . . . as opposed to the Church, established in the world as a motionless, eternal essence, she is the world making itself” (*CE* 112). The cultural conditions that bring magic’s practicality to Barthes’s attention are elaborated in Michelet’s account of the way cruelly sclerotic religious dogma and an incontestable feudal system create a state of static inevitability in which, as the latter puts it, “everything is foreseen; no room is left for hope in all the world.”²⁶ Bearing a passing, if exaggerated, resemblance to the sense of immutable “naturalness” by which Barthes characterized 1950s French society, this social stagnancy wraps the medieval world in a “heavy, grey, leaden fog” out of which the sorceress emerges.²⁷ The story Michelet tells of her emergence proceeds in a series of complicated steps, but taking a look at a key moment in her development will drive home both the experiential aspects of language

as we've been examining them, and, all the more importantly given the anxieties with which Barthes concludes *Mythologies*, also the magical contribution that the "metalanguage" of criticism makes in this endeavor.

Accordingly, the incipient witch withdraws to the outskirts of the social order—"leagues away," as Michelet poetically puts it, "far from any thoroughfare, on a desert heath all thistles and brambles"—where she encounters an enlivened environment quite different from the "wretched death in life" in which she had previously found herself.²⁸ Significantly, the agent of this animation is language itself: Michelet narrates how "nature itself seemed changed. The trees had found a language of their own and told her tales of ages long ago. The herbs were simples now. Plants that yesterday she kicked away contemptuously like hay were become beings that spoke to her of healing."²⁹ The sorceress here not only prefigures *Mythologies's* own exploration of the world's linguistic constitution; she also extends the import of semiological analysis itself by unearthing language in the natural and not just the explicitly cultural sphere.³⁰ This is less to suggest an understanding of nature as the product of a cultural framework as it is to advance a kind of linguistic functioning that is not necessarily dependent on (though nonetheless in potential conversation with) the human world. Indeed, Michelet's dramatization of the witch's discovery places the agency of communication squarely with the trees and plants rather than in the witch's interpretive acumen. At the same time as these lines offer another image of what I have called the real of mediation—what is magically transparent here is communication as such—they also accentuate the practical aspect of language, its functional operation that also possesses its own kind of empirical status.

In doing so, these lines intersect with and expand on the one preserve of the nonmythological that Barthes offers in "Myth Today," namely his discussion of "the language of man as producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things" (*M* 146). Barthes uses the example of the woodcutter who "speak[s] the tree" he is cutting down to contrast this "operational" language that is "transitively linked to its object" with the mythologist's "second-order language, a metalanguage in which I shall henceforth not 'act the things' but 'act their names,' and which is to the primary language what the gesture is to the act" (*M* 146). Between these two options, in a convenient coincidence of arboreal imagery, stands Michelet's sorceress listening intently to the tree's own speech, its own magical language. Imparting the tree with a kind of emphatically enunciated existence, a new attribute of intelligibility, this language also offers her a point of contact with it that Barthes's dogged faith in a solid, unmediated real keeps him from fully

imagining. That is, the tree's speech about itself articulates a mediation of its own presence that the witch's speech about it can link up to, a way in which she might "act the thing" *by* acting its name. In this case, the kind of speaking *about* things that Barthes calls metalanguage can work out its own "operational" and "transitive" effects—not on the real thing itself, but rather on its only available aspect: its linguistic mediation. The alternative conception of reality implied here is very much like Gaillard's account of Barthes's work in which the distinction between things and meaning dissolve: "because things are forged of meaning," she writes, "he does not touch things, he touches the signs that serve as their skin."³¹ To say this is to make good on magic's promise to provide a signifying gesture that is itself a productive act, if we insist on framing the magic of this productive signification as anything but a kind of immediate connection or seamless correlation. It is, rather, exactly the opposite: a magical language that works to underscore—to actively speak—the very mediation on which its expressive efficacy depends.

And this is the ultimate understanding of magic that Barthes learns from Michelet's sorceress, an understanding that sutures the exasperating split between language-object and metalanguage by finding it instead in the enchanted heart of language itself. Michelet illustrates this idea early in *La Sorcière* when, employing a lyrical syntax whose performative resonance with his point will have major and lasting ramifications for Barthes's thinking, he characterizes the witch as the embodiment of such elemental divergence. He writes of "*the half-sane [sic], half-insane madness, illuminism, of the seer, which according to its degree is poetry, second sight, preternatural vision, a faculty of speech at once simple and astute, above all else the power of believing in her own falsehoods.*"³² Even as the power of believing in falsehoods prefigures the "artificial myth" by which Barthes tries to undercut the mystifying effects of myth itself, the insistence on duality and contradiction in Michelet's phrasing points to the operation of opposition as the actual power in play. By personifying the split between sane and insane, simplicity and astuteness, faith and falsity, the witch practices what is truly magical about language, namely the differential effect of contrast that creates meaning and significance. This is also what my own attempt to highlight the workings of magic in *Mythologies* has been meant to achieve: not only magic as itself an ambiguous, contradictory term but also as an oppositional complement to myth that opens a different way of understanding language's critical work.

The magic of opposition finds its literary analogue in Michelet's own writing style, whose "special boldness" Barthes avers by noting the way it "deliberately establishes itself in ambiguity" (*CE* 103). The ambiguity to which he refers is the stylistic or generic question of whether *La Sorcière*

is a documentary chronicle of a culture or a fictionalized narrative of an individual, in other words, a work of history or a novel. "But it is just this duplicity which is fruitful," he writes in phrasing that presages the writerly commitments that will increasingly come to characterize his own work (*CE* 103). When he begins to perceive the opposition that the witch herself almost literally embodies, Barthes goes on to proclaim that Michelet "participate[s] magically in the myth [of the witch] without ceasing to describe it: his text is both narration and experience, its function is to compromise the historian, to keep him on the verge of the magical substance, in the state of a spectator who is on the point of falling into a trance" (*CE* 111). While the thrust of these lines seems to suggest that Michelet identifies the witch as a mythological phenomenon, the emphasis on magic, articulated significantly in an action-oriented adverbial form, also opens up a space for analytical commentary without severing the two from each other. Here Michelet's "description" of the myth—what we have seen Barthes call "metalanguage"—is staged as a way for him to engage with it—a collapse of "narration and experience" that posits the language of his analytical commentary as a specific, "magical" mode of connection rather than framing it in terms of an unbridgeable critical detachment meant to evade the opposite condition of an uncritical embrace of mythological immediacy. In fact, Michelet's "magical participation" involves treating language as its own kind of experience, its own reality, with all the revisions of those terms that our discussion of the magical "real of mediation" has brought to light.

Though Michelet evinces this experiential approach to language most clearly in a kind of "novelistic" writing that will become increasingly more important for Barthes as his career progresses, he initially figures the practical effects of signification and encapsulates the broader ambitions of his criticism by explicitly and positively appealing to magic. Thus, discussing gemstones and jewelry two years later, he notes the dearth of "poetic reality" in gold as a physical substance and contrasts it with the literal enchantment it takes on when considered as a signifier.³³ He writes, "But as a sign, what power it has! And it is precisely the sign par excellence, the sign of all the signs; it is absolute value, invested with all the powers including those once held by magic: is it not able to appropriate *everything*, goods and virtues, lives and bodies? Is it not able to convert *everything* into its opposite, to lower and to elevate, to demean and to glorify?"³⁴ While we can read these lines as a further index of his commitment to Saussure, the forthright reference to magic also indicates the added tutorial influence of the sorceress—as if his re-engagement with Michelet's work taught him a kind of trickery he could feel comfortable taking out of the margins and placing front and center. Going

beyond the antinomy of mystification and demystification to which, on the surface, he seemed wedded in *Mythologies*, he turns to a capacity for conversion that, as the flipside of opposition, comes straight from her spellbook. Referring again to the use of poisonous herbs as medicine, he affirms that “witchcraft is a *reversal*” (CE 106).³⁵ As the transfigurative sorcery that the witch practices comes to be brashly embodied in the glitzy power of gold to signify signification itself, it not only offers us a final image of the very real experience of mediation; it also proclaims the way that this magical experience expands the value of the world. This expansion of value is, finally, what enchantment itself means. It’s not just that signification makes the world more valuable in the strictly monetary or economic terms called up by the gold imagery. Rather, as the emphasis on both “lowering” and “elevating,” both “demeaning” and “glorifying” indicates, signification increases the range of the world’s possible values, not just what its value is but the ways it can have value in the first place. In other words, signification frees the world from having just one value or even just one kind of value.

The way language is able to multiply value—or is explicitly disabled from doing so—informs the scattered references to magic that percolate through the last two decades of Barthes’s writing. On the one hand, drawing on the model of Lévi-Strauss, magic functions as a category by which those aspects of a literary work that conflict with a social norm—including “making language itself into a *subject*”—are included as anomalous and thereby recuperated into a social system.³⁶ On the other hand, drawn from Michelet and the witch in whose stead he spoke, magic works to let language speak its own fantastic reality, which augments the established contours of the world. Accordingly, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he figures the oppositional structure by which signification operates as “a magician’s wand” and relates how “the concept, especially if it is coupled, *raises* a possibility of writing: here, he said, lies the power of saying something.”³⁷ Similarly, if more emotionally, *A Lover’s Discourse* details the “magic consultations . . . not absent from the amorous subject’s life” that “question fate,” and declares the necessity of “an object capable of a simple variation (*will fall/won’t fall*) and an external force (divinity, chance, wind) which marks one of the poles of the variation.”³⁸ And lastly, *Camera Lucida* makes the poignant claim that “the realists do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of a *past reality: a magic*, not an art,” a well-nigh alchemical presentation of the past’s actual distance from the here and now.³⁹

Though I leave these peripatetic references almost wholly undeveloped, they nonetheless indicate that Barthes’s call to move in his later work “From Science to Literature,” as the title of a 1967 essay heralds

it, developed in tandem with the transformation we have been tracing of a critical science into a criticism of magic. For all the talk of the unwritten novel that Barthes left at his untimely death, the sorceress still remains the most powerful figure for imagining the lived experience of language, the way language itself acts in the world. This is, in the end, what Barthes seems to be implying when he comments in more general terms toward the close of the preface that Michelet “has participated in the myth of the witch exactly as the witch herself participated, in his own view, in the myth of magical *praxis*” (CE 114). By combining magic and myth in a powerful opposition that has been animating my entire argument, Barthes’s formulation underscores the witch’s existential mode of critical practice that his later, more writerly experiments sought to make as perspicuous as possible. In this, Barthes seems to be following the lesson he contends Michelet himself learned from the sorceress: “what he has undertaken once again, in writing *La Sorcière*, is neither a profession (the historian’s) nor a priesthood (the poet’s), it is, as he has said elsewhere, a *magistracy* [*une magistrature*]” (CE 114). Rather than an object of academic inquiry or mystical worship, the sorceress becomes in these lines a model or even an authority to be followed, one whose verbal alliance with magic offers the critic (left unnamed here) the power to address the captivating affordances of language itself. As we continue our attempts to reimagine how to do things with criticism, let us remember that one potent possibility is to inhabit the magical linguistic work taught to us by the witch and her students.

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NOTES

My thanks for feedback and advice on the preliminary drafts of this essay go to Anne Moore, Josh Landy, and Marshall Brown.

1 Roland Barthes, “Poujade and the Intellectuals,” in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 128. Christy Wampole gives a more extensive account of Pierre Poujade and his politics in “Poujade’s Infowars: On Barthes’s Anti-Anti-Intellectualism,” which is part of the recent collection “Thinking with Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*: Fifty Years after 1968 and Four Hundred Years before” in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 62 (2016), 73–103.

2 Barthes, *Eiffel Tower*, 135; and Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Eric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 1:819. In her 2008 essay reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of *Mythologies*, Martine Joly singles out “Poujade and the Intellectuals” as one of a few texts of Barthes whose content (rather than whose method) “still remain[s] valid for our times.” Joly, “*Du Symbole au Ninisme: Vie ou Mort du Mythe, Aujourd’hui?*” *Nottingham French Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 69. All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

3 Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 343; and Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, 4:571. For an account of a Barthes’s late work as

a phase of “magical criticism” that overlooks the early focus on magic that I am developing, see Claudia Amigo Pino’s “*Genèse d’une critique magique. Les grands projets de Roland Barthes dans les séminaires de l’EHESS*,” in *Roland Barthes: Continuités*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bertrand (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2017), 189–206.

4 Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1972), 113–14 (hereafter cited as *CE*). For a wider-ranging account of Barthes’s (and his colleague’s at *Tel Quel*’s) investment in medieval culture, see Bruce Holsinger’s “The Four Senses of Roland Barthes,” in *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 152–94.

5 See chapters nine and ten of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

6 Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 157 (hereafter cited as *M*).

7 The contradictory spot in which Barthes finds himself in 1957 prefigures some of the contemporary contortions that are today attempting to reimagine the function of criticism at the present time, a movement whose surface-focused, postcritical interventions have become so well known that they hardly need rehearsing here.

8 Françoise Gaillard, “*Roland Barthes: le parti pris du sens*,” *MLN* 132, no. 4 (2017): 845.

9 Gaillard, “*Roland Barthes*,” 847–48.

10 The debates over the “new formalism” constitute another critical morass whose details would threaten to overwhelm this particular argument. Joseph North’s recent *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017) offers a hotly contested historical account of some of this disciplinary background.

11 See the opening chapter of Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); and Joshua Landy, “Modern Magic: Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé,” in *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Landy and Michael Saler (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2009), 102–29. Jane Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001) constructs a resonant argument from a more theoretical perspective.

12 The quoted phrase is During’s, which he uses to describe the persistence of “modern” or “secular” magic in contemporary cultural production, not least those of the aesthetic avant-garde (During, *Modern Enchantments*, 27). For specific discussions of magic and literature, see his chapter, “Magic and Literature, on E. T. A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, and Raymond Roussel”; as well as Landy, “Modern Magic: Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin and Stéphane Mallarmé,” 178–214; and Nicholas Paige, “Permanent Re-Enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics” in *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, 159–80.

13 Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 97. In the initial 1951 article, the sentence omits the last three words; see Barthes, “*Michelet, l’Histoire et la Mort*,” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 1:119.

14 Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, 141–48.

15 Barthes, *Michelet*, 81.

16 Barthes, *Michelet*, 82.

17 Barthes, *Michelet*, 188.

18 See Barthes, *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, trans. Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 45, 62. This duality of magic finds another illustration in *Mythologies*’s ambivalent treatment of Albert Einstein’s brain, which works as a site of both a demystified mechanical labor and a kind of gnostic genius. Peter Fenves offers a thorough discussion of the singularity of this particular mythology in his “‘Einstein’s Brain’ in Three Parts,” in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 62 (2016): 174–88.

- 19 Joly, "Du Symbole au Nénisme," 65.
- 20 Irene Langlet, "Inactualité des Mythologies?" ed. Alexandre Gefen and Marielle Macé, *Barthes, au lieu du roman* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2002), 128.
- 21 For another recent account of magic and rhetoric, see Herbert F. Tucker, "After Magic: Modern Charm in History, Theory, and Practice," *New Literary History* 48, no. 1 (2017): 103–22.
- 22 Serge Zenkine, "Les indices du mythe," *Recherches et Travaux* 77 (2010): 26, <http://recherchestravaux.revues.org/418>.
- 23 Zenkine, "Les indices du mythe." A particularly clear example of this tendency is Barthes's well-known discussion of "The New Citroën," which he categorizes as "a purely magical object" in the first line of that essay (*M* 88).
- 24 Barthes, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:868, 30n.
- 25 Compare this point with Paul Hegarty's acceptance of Barthes's fantasy about reality in "The Time of Myth, Here, Now: Reviewing the Time of *Mythologies*," *Nottingham French Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 52–59.
- 26 Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, trans. A. R. Allinson (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1973), 16. By no means an expert in the Middle Ages, I am not necessarily validating the accuracy of Michelet's account of the period but using it instead to elaborate on the place that the sorceress's magical practice holds in Barthes's intellectual imaginary.
- 27 Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, 16. Barthes's point about the "naturalness" of culture's presentation comes from *Mythologies*, 11.
- 28 Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, 55, 78.
- 29 Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, 58–59.
- 30 Compare this to the claim Barthes makes in footnote 2 of "Myth Today" to find "non-signifying fields" in the natural phenomenon of the sea: "Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology!" (*M* 112).
- 31 Gaillard, "Roland Barthes," 848.
- 32 Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, xv.
- 33 Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, ed. Andy Stafford and Michael Carter, trans. Stafford (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 55.
- 34 Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, 55.
- 35 The operation of abstract value from which this reversal draws is itself a Saussurean discourse whose intricate details are beyond the bounds of this discussion; see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), particularly part two on "Synchronic Linguistics."
- 36 Barthes, "Drama, Poem, Novel," in *Writer Sollers*, trans. Philip Thody (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 66; see also "History or Literature?" in *On Racine*, trans. Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 151–72; and "Style and its Image," in *The Rustle of Language*, 90–99.
- 37 Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 110.
- 38 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 163.
- 39 Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88.