

Roland Barthes and the Impossible Autobiography

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Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes is an autobiographical work by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes, written in the early seventies of the twentieth century. According to the Latin alphabet, the book arranges and combines some passages with different themes, which gives the book the formal characteristics of the dictionary and violates the writing norms of traditional autobiographies. In addition, the book uses the first person, the second person, and the third person interchangeably to carry out a polyphonic narrative, which destroys the integrity and authenticity of the narrative subject, thus completing an avant-garde literary experiment.

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Introduction

“Ecrivains de toujours” is a series of biographies produced by the French publishing house of Seuil in the second half of the 20th century, dedicated to showing the life experiences of French writers from ancient and modern times. Since its publication, Francis Jeanson, Monique Nathan, and Denis Roche have served as editors of this series. From *Victor Hugo* (1951) to *Jean Racine* (1981), 106 single volumes had been published, each 192 pages long. Authors of the series often combine the works of French writers with relevant research materials (such as historical archives, manuscripts, letters, and photographs) to show readers the life course and the world of ideas of the writer. From the 1970s onwards, the series became more diverse, including biographies of historical figures and chronicles of twentieth-century literary genres, such as *Nouveau Roman* (1972) and *Surréalisme* (1973). We noticed that, in the book series, there was an autobiographical narrative work by literary critic Roland Barthes: *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.

Barthes is an old friend of the “Ecrivains de toujours”. In 1954, he completed a biography of the French nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet. In early 1973, Denis Roche, the editor-in-chief of the book series, again asked Barthes to write a work about himself for the “Ecrivains de toujours”, which Barthes gladly accepted. Then, Barthes used his biography as a source to create *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and published his work in early 1975.

From later interviews, we learn that Barthes originally intended to create an allegorical self-portrait. However, when he devoted himself to writing the book, some unexpected problems arose, and the original writing plan had to be shelved (Barthes, 2002, pp. 876-878).

A Book About *Myself*

The “Ecrivains de toujours” has a series of special formal rules, that is, using photographs, texts, a chronology of writings, illustrations and explanatory texts, catalogs and other materials to present the life

experience of the writer and construct a coherent and vivid character. As early as 1954, when *Michelet* was written, Barthes had already demonstrated an intention to go beyond these norms. The book begins: "In this little book, the reader will not see a history of Michelet's ideas, nor his life experience, let alone let them explain each other," but "the system that organizes his most difficult things to let go" (Barthes, 2008, p. 1). Twenty years later, when Barthes re-collaborated with the "Ecrivains de toujours", the theme of his writing changed from others to himself, and his consideration and choice of form and content became even more unique.

Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes uses the Latin alphabet to arrange and combine paragraphs with different themes. In this work, Barthes alternates the first-, second-, and third-person, and repeatedly emphasizes the fictional nature of the narrative content. He seems to set the reader up with a guessing game about the narrator's true identity, and avoids answering "Who is 'I' as the narrator". The work is far from conventional autobiographical narrative works in terms of form. Later critics have often been puzzled by the above technique: is this an autobiography reflecting the author's life course, or is it a novel that parodies real life? The French scholar Philippe Roger even joked that "this is a self-description written by Roland Barthes" (Barthes, 2013, p. 174).

In terms of form, the book adopts a unique "image-text" arrangement strategy, showing the effect of separating the personal past from reality. The book begins with a series of private photographs with descriptive text: from the image of the mother, which foreshadows the beginning of an individual's life, to a portrait of the individual in 1942, these photographs reconstruct the life of the adolescent Barthes in a linear narrative fashion, vividly recreating the various external images of the prehistoric condition of the body interspersed with the family story. We noticed several photographs taken after 1972, taken during the author's adult years, which present the reader with an image of a writer who is passionate about his work. The two photographs form a striking contrast: they show the separation between an adolescent and a mature person. In addition, multiple images, such as sheet music, work cards, watercolor graffiti, and hand-painted postcards, are scattered throughout the text, documenting Barthes's career as a writer. The images contrast sharply with the photographs of the teenage years that appear at the beginning of the work, emphasizing the farewell of the two Barthes.

Barthes objectively describes his childhood experiences, family life, and hobbies in this book. By carefully recording historical facts without making value judgments, he excludes the subjective tendency that often occurs in literary narratives and constructs a character who does not glorify the past and does not regret the passing of youth. Both the photographs of the past and the *biophèmes* in the texts are included in the book, and there is little reference to the current situation of Barthes.

At the end of the book, there is a sentence that says: "It is a recessive book (that goes backward and takes a step back)." We note that the word "retreat" is in italics and seems to be deliberately emphasized. For the writer, taking a distance from the self means to make his past retreat in the face of reality and to make his past retreat in front of the present. Such a way of writing has a peculiarity that is different from the conventional autobiography, and perhaps this is the creative strategy that Barthes has always adopted.

In a fragment entitled "Un livre sur moi", Barthes writes that his ideas are connected with modernity, or with what is called the *avant-garde*, and that he is constantly resisting himself. We believe this passage constitutes the key to understanding Barthes's style: the uniqueness and creativity of a pioneer writer who carried out a literary revolution lies in his constant rejection of the notion of the self and the tradition of autobiographical writing.

From Autobiographical Contracts to Fictional Contracts

According to *The Autobiographical Contract* of Philippe Lejeune, the French literary researcher: “When a person focuses primarily on the history of his personal life, and especially on his personality, we call his retrospective narrative in prose autobiography” (Lejeune, 2001, p. 3). Almost all autobiographical works follow a kind of autobiographical contract that is guided by the autobiographical contract, and the author assures the reader of the authenticity of his work on the title page, inscription, or text. For Barthes, however, literature is a fictitious, unreal art: “Literary language is essentially illusory, and some writers resort to a series of means to make it no longer illusory: to appeal to logic and, if it is not logical, to oaths or contracts” (Barthes, 2011, p. 115). Since the autobiographical contract is detached from the fictional nature of literary language, engaging in autobiographical creation should not be subordinated to the rule of authenticity. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, he tries to make another contract with his readers, the fictional contract: All this should be accepted as coming from the mouth of a fictional protagonist or the mouth of several characters. The book is entirely fictional. We believe that the fictional nature of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* lies in three different aspects.

First of all, the use of personal pronouns. Barthes repeatedly uses the singular third-person pronoun “he” and his initials (R.B.) to refer to himself. In addition, he occasionally uses the first person “me” and “us” as well as the second person “you” to refer to himself. From the perspective of semantic effect, the use of “I” creates a murmuring effect; the use of “he” means introducing the gaze of others and widening the distance between the narrator and the characters; the appearance of the second person “you” implies a dialogue between the narrative subject and oneself, which sometimes evolves into self-questioning or delusional symptoms. We noticed that Barthes also referred to himself as “we”, which showed a pretentious attitude and eloquent tone. The alternating use of these personal pronouns introduces multiple narrative sounds, creating a unique polyphonic effect: the characters are sometimes present and sometimes absent, sometimes fantasized and sometimes sober, and the narrator and characters are sometimes the same and sometimes different. In a paragraph titled “What Kind of Reasoning?”, these pronouns appear simultaneously, presenting the narrator’s logical confusion.

Second, the fragmented text. From the early work about André Gide’s *Journal* to his later work *Sade Fourier Loyola*, Barthes had been adopting a fragmented writing style. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, we notice that the fragmented form of writing is at its peak. The paragraphs with different themes are distributed throughout each chapter of the book, using forms such as newspaper style, maxim style, diary style, test paper style, and note style, each forming independent units of meaning. These irregular phrases are like patterns of different shapes which form a mosaic collage. The narrator’s image is scattered among these passages, with a blurred appearance, leaving only an illusion of a constantly changing character.

Last but not least, the chaotic arrangement of chapters. According to the beginning of the book, Barthes intended to arrange the paragraphs in the order of the Latin alphabet as a whole, occasionally shuffle the order of the alphabet, and adjust the position of the fragments. Replacing the logical sequence and temporal clues of conventional writing with the Latin alphabet order allows the author to avoid developing a writing plan while eliminating the inherent coherence of narrative discourse. In the carefully crafted language maze, the author disrupts their development process and gradually dissolves their complete self-image. In our view, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* is more like an unfinished dictionary, while the sections with titles are like entries in the dictionary, with numerous entries forming an open semantic space that presents the author’s self-awareness.

Reading this book is like flipping through Borges's "Book of Sand". No matter which page or word you start reading, it is hard to have a definitive understanding of the author.

The Promise of Literature

In the paragraph titled "A Book about the Self", Barthes points out that *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* demonstrates the necessity of reshaping various genres: essays almost self-identify as novels, a novel lacking personal pronouns. We believe this passage indicates the anticipation for the birth of a new genre. In the 1970s, he attempted to fictionalize and turn his essays into literary works. *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* is undoubtedly the laboratory of this "novelized" essay literature. By introducing fictional characters and deconstructing the narrator's image, he constructed a unique writing style and created a set of dramatic language about himself.

In 1978, Barthes conceived a new writing plan: to create an autobiographical novel *Vita Nova* based on Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. In 1979, he named the courses given at Collège de France after Proust's famous line "For a long time, I went to bed very early" and told the audience, "I hope to write [...] like Proust, not on par with him, but exactly like him". We believe that the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* signifies Barthes' rebirth: he transformed from a literary critic to a literary creator.

The novel in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* can be seen as a metaphor. Perhaps Barthes did not wish to become a novelist, as this work was merely an imagination of an "impossible literature" (Wood, 2003, p. 11) that transcends the boundaries of truth and fiction. Throughout his life, he never gave up and kept moving towards that impossible goal, until his desperate efforts eventually turned into amazing works.

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