

La Nausée Through Barthes: A Retrospective Reading

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In a 1980 interview, recorded ten days before his death, Roland Barthes said about Jean-Paul Sartre: “à peine Sartre propose-t-il une idée, que cette idée séduit, en tous les cas me séduit” (Barthes, “A Propos” 52). Although belonging to the same generation, and although both contributed extensively to the intellectual currents of the time, these two writers often took very different approaches, and they weren’t always in agreement. However, there was obviously a certain respect that existed between the two, and here we see evidence of an appreciation for the often-radical ideas that Sartre produced. Elsewhere in the interview, Barthes recognizes Sartre’s role in allowing philosophy to find a place outside of strictly academic settings: and we certainly see evidence of that in Sartre’s 1938 philosophical novel *La Nausée*. Although Barthes’ “Myth Today,” the second component of his two-part 1957 collection of essays *Mythologies*, does not cross over into the bounds of fictional writing, I believe that many interesting parallels can be drawn between the two works. Through a study of Barthes’ “Myth Today” and Sartre’s *La Nausée*, I will examine the ways in which the two authors approach the idea of a bourgeois construction of society and the role that language plays in this construction, with the added interest of highlighting the ways in which Sartre illustrates a stripping-away of social myth in his novel *La Nausée*, and what this absence of myth reveals about man’s reliance on language to understand and cope with the world.

For Barthes, the importance of language in shaping bourgeois society lies in its being the basis of what he calls myth. This concept of myth is constructed using a Saussurian notion of signifier, signified, and sign. Barthes, however, expands this triangular construction to produce a second level of signifier, signified and sign: in this case, the signifier is the same sign from the first equation, and the sign in this second equation is the myth. One possible rendering of myth is as an image, word, or text, then combined with a certain notion, to present a meaning. But it is not, as Barthes insists, “an object, a concept or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes 109). This signification is the myth. Perhaps the strongest example of myth that Barthes gives us is of the young black soldier saluting on the cover of *Paris Match*. The image, that of a young black soldier saluting, is the signifier in this

case. The concept signified, is that of a “purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness.” The meaning, signification, or myth that comes out of this image is the following: “France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by Negro soldier in serving his so-called oppressors” (Barthes 116). This myth, although taking place at the level of meta-language, as Barthes calls it, is nevertheless solidly grounded in the particularities of language.

Barthes in fact begins his essay “Myth Today” with the statement: “myth is a type of speech” (Barthes 109). And while not all language constitutes myth, myth cannot exist without language, as language is the basis of all communication and myth is, ultimately, a type of communication. Without delving too deeply into the intricacies of Barthes’ exploration of myth, there are perhaps a few elements to highlight when speaking about the importance of language in myth: myth is made possible by the very flexibility of language, which lends itself to being borrowed and distorted to serve new meanings; Barthes’ depiction of myth takes on the shape of a sort of pyramid, the base of which is formed by a signifier and signified, which then become incorporated into what Barthes calls a second-order semiological system, or a “metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first” (Barthes 115). The signifier of myth, what Barthes calls both meaning and form, already carries with it an intrinsic value, a history, stemming from the linguistic component of myth: it is “already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions” (Barthes 117). However, once myth takes hold of this form, it empties it of meaning, and “its newly acquired penury calls for a signification to fill it” (Barthes 118). For example: the image of a young black soldier giving the French salute has a meaning on a linguistic level. However, when combined with a nationalistic concept, it leaves behind its simple young-black-soldier-giving-the-French-salute-ness, in order to allow the communication of the myth of the greatness of the French Empire. This relates back to the idea of myth being an interaction between history and nature, which will be discussed further on.

It is clear, regardless of whether or not we get into the minutiae of Barthes’ linguistic explanation of myth, that language is an essential element to myth. And in turn, myth is

essential to society; or more specifically, to bourgeois society. Myth serves to communicate bourgeois ideologies, without seeming to do so. Barthes writes that “the essential function of myth” is “the naturalization of the concept” (Barthes 131). In the case of our example, it is the naturalization of a “purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness,” through the image of a black soldier giving a French salute, and the myth of the superiority of the French Empire is imposed on the recipient not as an ideology, but as a truth: “the myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system” (Barthes 131).

Could myth then be read as a type of propaganda, in that it unwittingly takes hold of its victim and insinuates nationalistic ideas in his head? Perhaps, and perhaps Barthes has just found a new, more technical name for propaganda. But it would also seem that Barthes’ myth goes far beyond propaganda in creating the world that we know and experience daily. It is not always the fierce, banner-waving vehicle for a dominant ideology that we might expect. In many ways, myth allows us to understand and cope with reality. We will return to this idea, but for now let us focus on the role of myth in bourgeois society. In many ways, it is the tool that this society uses in order to perpetuate itself:

. . . 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. These ‘normalized’ forms attract little attention, by the very fact of their extension, in which their origin is easily lost . . . Yet it is through its ethic that the bourgeoisie pervades France: practised on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order—the further the bourgeois class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become. (Barthes 140)

Myth is the means by which the bourgeoisie naturalizes these representations, makes them appear natural and essential, and therefore accepted and propagated without question.

Now, if we turn to Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1938 novel *La Nausée*, we see another case for the importance of language as the most essential building block for a bourgeois understanding of the world. To briefly summarize the intrigue of this philosophical novel, we have a protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, a historian and perpetual loner who one day receives a feeling of nausea, or discomfort (*gêne* in French), from a pebble that he picks up on the beach. This feeling of nausea continues to dog him throughout the novel, and shakes his

perception of the world, upsetting everything he thought he knew about what it means to exist. One of the manifestations of this nausea, or perhaps one of the causes of it, is his realization that he has been living based on the presumptions of bourgeois society: namely, that power comes through possession, and we therefore define ourselves as human beings by what we are able to possess. Success in a bourgeois society is often defined by increased capacity to possess, and therefore increased power. But what Roquentin also comes to understand, is that at the most basic level of possession, we find language. More specifically, the capacity to name things.

If we take a random object, for example a pen, the capacity to name it as a pen allows us to internalize some aspect of that pen, even if it was just an arbitrary name for that object. Naming the object is, in its own way, a sort of taking possession of that object; regardless of whether or not one actually possesses it, a process of identification, categorization, rationalization and, in turn, internalization of that object has taken place. My capacity to name the pen gives me the impression that I understand what a pen is, that I understand its place in the world, and that it is some ways under my control; I am comforted.

This instance of naming a pen is a microcosmic example of the ways in which the capacity to possess, a virtue as defined by bourgeois society, largely dictates our place in the world and our understanding of ourselves, and the way in which language is so important in contributing to this notion of possession. Roquentin also discovers how important language is in keeping the scary notion of contingency at bay; this too will be examined later.

There is, however, one very specific episode in that communicates extremely well Barthes' notion of myth. When Roquentin visits the local museum of Bouville, he visits the painting of one Olivier Blévigne, an "important" man in the history of the city, one of the elite. He is presented in a rather grand portrait, depicted in a way that befits his status. He communicates feelings of grandeur and righteousness that are combined with notions of being an upstanding citizen, and his portrait displayed in a hall with other men such as Pacôme, who is described as follows:

He had always done his duty, all his duty, his duty as son, husband, father, leader. He had never weakened in his demands for his due: as a child, the right to be well brought up, in a united family, the right to inherit a spotless name, a prosperous business; as a

husband, the right to be cared for, surrounded with tender affection; as a father, the right to be venerated; as a leader, the right to be obeyed without a murmur. For a right is nothing more than the other aspect of duty. His extraordinary success (today the Pacômes are the richest family in Bouville) could never have surprised him. (Sartre 147-148)

This concept of the important men of Bouville finding their place in that hall because they had the right to be there, because they had always fulfilled their duty to society, would be communicated through the myth of that painting. But every time Roquentin visited the painting of Olivier Blévine, there was always something that bothered Roquentin: he later comes to realize that the man in the painting measured 1.53 meters tall, or about five feet. The painter had strategically painted him to seem larger, but in comparison with other paintings, the distorted size of the furniture reveals the truth. From that point on, Roquentin begins to realize that the “truths” which society presents as eternal are more often than not empty façades, and that society is the result, not of some epic fulfillment of what is meant to be, but simply the random result of decades of society creating systems and constructs solely for the purpose of perpetuating itself, and that existence is, ultimately, completely absurd.

We therefore find that Barthes and Sartre both have a bone to pick with bourgeois society. Both works demonstrate an effort to reveal the structures it puts in place in order to perpetuate the dominance of its own ideologies. They both also seem to highlight an unconscious acceptance of these structures, or at least of the information conveyed by them as truths. We can see that, essentially, for both authors, language is the basic vehicle for the communication of these ideologies, or of myth. However, what Barthes shows on a somewhat theoretical level, or at least an analytical one, Sartre presents to us in a very personal way. Where Barthes is speaking about myth, Roquentin is actively interacting with it. The former perhaps introduces us to the notion of myth, and how it acts to shape society, but he does not explore the consequences of a world devoid of myth. Sartre takes this extra step, showing us what a world would look like if it were no longer dictated by bourgeois ideology. Or at least he tries to; it's fairly impossible to use language to describe a world in which language is arbitrary.

What Roquentin experiences, when he can no longer utilize language to describe the world around him, when objects are reduced to mere signifiers without signified or sign, is the truly contingent nature of existence. That is, the absolute random chance of everything. What

he experiences is that everything is random, and arbitrary. There is no real reason that a pen should be called a pen or that possessing copious amounts of pens should be equated with success. But society tells us that pens are pens, and that owning things is good and that the French Empire is superior and has a benevolent relationship with its colonies. It does not matter if this is true, it only matters how powerful the vehicle is that conveys these ideas to us. Hence, the importance of myth. But when Roquentin sees the world stripped of myth, or of bourgeois ideology, he comes face to face with the truly contingent nature of existence, which then loses all meaning for him. He must then find a way to justify his own existence in a world that, essentially, has no meaning.

Here we see the importance of myth and social ideologies and constructions as a means of understanding the world and coping with existence. When Roquentin first views the painting in the museum, he receives the myth of this man's greatness as a truth. He feels that there is something odd about the painting, but it is not until he later learns the truth that he sees the lie. He is accepting the myth, and in doing so he is buying into the truths presented to him by bourgeois society, and thus perpetuating its dominating ideologies. Yet what Roquentin will also discover in this novel, is that as much as this society relies on us for its continuation, we rely on it, perhaps even more, to make sense of the world. We need society to dictate our lives, give us purpose and direction, tell us what is wrong and right and good and bad. Essentially, societal structures are what allow us to cope with the contingent nature of existence. And the values of this society are communicated to us, in large part, through myths, and at the most basic level, through language. Roquentin discovers, in a very personal way, what it means to experience the world unaffected by social constructs such as myth. He faces an extremely bleak reality that would cause most to lose hope for the future or even will to continue. He must decide how to exist without rules, guidance, goals or purpose.

In the case of Barthes, we also see how myth, as a social construct, helps us to rationalize human existence, through a process which Barthes calls making "contingency appear eternal" (Barthes 142). For Barthes, the mythification process happens at the crossroads between history and nature. Myth "transforms history into nature," taking something evident and rooted in history and rendering it instantaneous, and natural. Myth "is not read as a motive, but as a reason...for the myth-reader... everything happens as if the

picture naturally conjured up the concept” (Barthes 129-130). There is an almost passive reception of the myth, since the readers of the myth are most likely unaware that they have received this myth or that there is even a myth to receive in the first place. And this is the very power of the myth, that it is able to communicate ideologies so fluidly without implicating the receptor of the myth. There is no conscious buying-into of the notion of French imperialism, yet the acceptance of the “truth” is almost inevitable. This discrete imposition of meaning removes any question of responsibility on the part of the consumer of myth, and therefore allows him or her to buy into certain bourgeois ideologies innocently, without reflection or guilt.

We will now return to this concept of “making contingency appear eternal.” Barthes writes that “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification...” (Barthes 142). In other words, myth takes reality, a product of social constructs, and removes the intentionality behind it, rendering it seemingly natural. For example, going back to Roquentin’s visit to the local museum, in his initial contemplation of the painting he is not seeing the image of a man whose dominant figure and sense of importance and power overtly embody and perpetuate the values of bourgeois society. Myth momentarily brushes aside the imposing nature of bourgeois ideology being communicated through this painting, in order subtly to communicate the same values of this society in a way that seems natural. The painting has not ceased to represent these values, but it no longer states them; it implies them. The contingent nature of the world, or in this case the happenstance of a short, fat man in an ornate painting somehow representing bourgeois values, is made to seem eternal, as though a short, fat man in an ornate painting had always and will always represent bourgeois values, because these values are essential, indisputable elements of life that have always existed and will always exist. And this eternal aspect of society allows us to accept it without question and innocently play our role in it. Myth rationalizes our existence, and allows us to believe that things happen the way they do because there is no other possible way they could happen: myth “abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences...it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (Barthes 143). A pen is called a pen, because there’s no other

possible name for it. And if that is true, then there is no fathomable reason to think it should be called anything other than a pen.

In the case of these two works, “Myth Today” and *La Nausée*, we have evidence of the epic role that myth plays in modern society. We, as human beings, could not exist without society, and society cannot convince us of its importance without myth. Myth also reveals to us what an important role language plays in shaping society, and in helping us to understand the world and cope with existence. My hope is that through this paper I have been able to show some sort of progression of language through the two texts, from a linguistic and semiotic study in Barthes and the power of naming in Sartre, to the role of language in shaping bourgeois society in the two works, and finally to the importance of society, or myth in society, in rationalizing existence and allowing us to understand our place in the world. Because unfortunately, as much as we would like to, we can’t all forego our reliance on society, catch a train to Paris, and devote the rest of our life to writing a novel about a man on a beach who picks up a pebble and sees the world in a different way.

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