6.

ROLAND BARTHES

["Roland Barthes," Cahiers du Cinéma 311 (1980),]

*

The recent pages about a photograph of his mother, about his "little girl,"[1] perhaps constituted for the first time the words of a man no longer driven by anything except the mystery of profundity and the origin of an enigma, the words of a man no longer made up to please anyone. Is death the beginning of such a secret?

I retain an undespairing affection for this man, no doubt because of that calm voice behind which the very young mastery of a child could be heard, like an object carried in the voice. This man had, and his speech had, a child's knowledge about all knowledge. That's at the origin of his science and it's precisely something that's incapable of manufacturing power (a subjectivity forced into making its origin a possibility through the objects of our human world), and something that kept the slightest vulgarity at bay.

His final writings are, for me, a miracle of the simplest thought and in them there's an art keeping up what must be described as proper appearances. That's to say, the unique content that used to give us forms as lovable objects. This was always just the possibility of discussing the most immediate objects of our culture and what it is about them that opens up (or, strictly speaking, invents) the emotional body.

So I learned something from this man; it's to him that I owe the decision to write (to publish). When I was twenty he showed me that work is a technique, and that in this "philosophical" age we should break it down into the simplest of gestures and objects

since they're what guard, as it were, the mystery of that particular annulment of time during which our whole written language ceases to be obviously destined for anyone (this is the only way I can summarize what wasn't really a teaching: paradoxically, it was by another route that I learnt how to work, choose paper, pens and pencils, and to respect that time which chains itself to objects and around which the essential part of my life began to revolve).

Speaking with this man, I learnt no philosophy or literary history, etc.--as to those, in my way I knew more than he did. But I did learn how all of that could live within me, belong to me, and that somehow a second centre of gravity had already been born, awaiting the body (being able to coincide with the origin of the written word) which would never surround it, reify it, or make it up. Already it was a matter of writing as the condition of living under the the double commandment of a floating truth and a mysterious urgency; a matter of vainly fulfilling the mad programme of such a writing body, like a mass of ideograms that could never be born and whose first point of appearance, floating outside of everything, would only ever be remains.

I learnt that there's no master, that solitude is perhaps the very milieu of work, not its end, nor its destiny, nor its truth.

And that there exists something like a true perspective on everything we do--that perspective is perhaps just the hope of reaching a still unimaginable human being, that is, something that really lives outside us or outside our passions.

I probably don't know the content of my friend's books (books haven't had content for me for a while now), but their particular ideational matter still strikes me. I didn't learn from them any technique, a look, or a manner, but they did send me back to the urgency of writing my own work--that is, back to the real disinheritance of any subjectivity and that can't be delivered up to anyone else by way of the very object which exceeds all of its givens. Even in its very poverty, in its tawdry results, this isn't solitary work: it's situated at the very heart of the species but right where there's no eye

to see either this point where the written is born or whatever still resembles a human being there. And yet it's there in this mysterious shelter, in this interior open to the most violent of winds (open to the tail of the wind blowing from Paradise which causes a tragic storm, according to Benjamin),[2] it's only there in the very matter of language and history that men speak to each other.

It's only there, primally, that we find the drama of our time because even that can disappear.

From talking to this man when I was young I owe the fact that I was able to understand and nurture the anxiety of that historical fragility of our language, of what constitutes our species. And the thing whose sublimity I wanted to reach when I was young was a gesture that is human--that's to say, necessitating more and more the utmost humility. It's true that I didn't know there was something there that would lead me to a certain poverty.

So this friend has died; there's something inadmissible about this fact that I once dreaded for a long time when, no longer a young man, the weight of the friendship disappeared without changing, or when I felt a doubt about the truth of what I'd learned (suspecting, for example, the truth which resided for me in that talent which, certainly, always insisted, but without teaching me anything and without being able to transport the simplest things to where they aren't banal thoughts). I don't know how to admit that his death is a relief in some way. This is certainly tied to a dimension added to an event whose consequence is interior; and yet that body is from then on attached to a sort of interiority of time so that such an event can no longer represent anything for me. Because in the end I can only and unfortunately say this: that presence and that talent had become very heavy...and yet I owe him a lot, having had to understand, for example, that I must, in writing, give my life over to a time that has no measure.

And yet (and this is what's so distressing) death once more adds something to the time that we can only imagine--that's to say, to a sort of impossible virtuality.

Yet the death of this dear friend inexplicably relieves something, like the threat of his death. Just like those unidentifiable people in family photos that fall from the family genealogy, solidifying strongly and measurelessly into an image of time, attaching quite feebly to the external edges of our time, retaining but not engendering the mystery of having been able to live within us. No death can belong to us; what belongs to us is something like one more ghost, a few moments when we're absent from the world because we're thinking about someone who's no longer here and to whom (whether by convention, tact, or fear of death's contagion) we can never again, so long as we have a body, speak in a normal voice--or, I fear, probably even in a whisper. The dead produce a certain harshness in us which is nonetheless the accompaniment to our tenderness or to our melancholy at their departure.

I can't summarize here a teaching that has remained improbable--I don't believe in words spoken from on high. I feel a certain pain when I think of the quiet weakness of this man (of what constituted his culture, his manner of holding himself aloof). And doubtless I can say nothing about his writing--that long ago removed itself from me. I don't like thinking of this man or of his fear of something essential which he never took the time to see. I suffer because of this close friend (like everyone who knew him well and had genuine affection for him) and because he turned away, with all his talent, from what is <u>most mortal</u>. I can't refrain from <u>speaking badly</u> of him, because it's not true to say of this friend that he was all charm and sensitivity. He was unfair, neglectful, frivolous--so he had that calm passion for the living and so probably took the measure of something in all his readers.

It's our duty to be unjust to the dead because they make us demand much more of ourselves, and because with the death of our dearest friends vulgarity ineluctably grows up around us (attaching, to a great extent, to our own desire to remain alive).

We've long focussed on death. My feelings and sentiments don't grow in proportion to the celebrity of this dead friend. But they do cling to the importance of his

unfinished task: it was a work of civilization that Barthes carried out amongst us. In seeing that work I think of the endless distress of humanity. Today, it's simply for the immediate emptiness of our art that I shudder.

Thinking of the increase in anthropological distance which was the most special talent of his work (all objects of knowledge, all practices have changed their distance in relation to our bodies and language because of that work--indeed, the work revealed to us that those distances could be changed), something in the shape of our existence has indeed had its proportions altered.

NOTES

[1] See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (tr. R.Howard). New York: Noonday (1981)

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations (tr. H. Zohn). New York: Schocken (1969), 257-8