Roland Barthes lets his surroundings play with his senses. In the city he listens to the churning of filing jigs, smells the muggy air of the underground; on the village roads of Bayonne he kneels to touch the flattened petal of a common daisy. A keen observer and an even more avid journalist, Barthes finds time and again that he is left with irony on his lips, a pungent taste born of the incongruities of the world around him. He observes an increasingly advanced society but a progressively regressive community, a “bourgeoisie” that is more involved in using than creating.

In “The Light of the Sud-Ouest,” Barthes tells of returning to his hometown, tracing old towpaths that follow the right bank of the Adour, lingering in “a stubborn feeling of solidarity” (4). Gripped by nostalgia, he remembers the “inimitable fragrance” of that old neighborhood, an odor constituted by “all the objects of petty commerce . . . the string for making sandals . . . braided by old Basque men, hot chocolate, Spanish olive oil” (8). Yet Barthes takes care to distinguish his youth in the Bayonnais hinterland from the “provincial, meridional, [and] bourgeois youth” of his Parisian childhood (7). His Sud-Ouest, Barthes writes, was one of sensations, “realities” that left their mark in “odors, exhaustions, sounds of voices, errands, changing light, everything that, with regard to reality, is somehow irresponsible and having no meaning except to form, later on, the memory of lost time”—a period so different from his time in Paris, during which Barthes had virtually no “impressions” (7). But returning to Bayonne in his autumn years, Barthes notices, much to his regret, a shift in the village’s authenticity. No longer are sandals handmade; gone are the days when chocolate and olive oil were sold in intimate shops, claiming their space rather than struggling for spots on the cold metal of a supermarket shelf. This overflow of urban personality onto the innocence of his hometown frightens Barthes. To him, the world around the village is now founded on “bourgeois norms,” cultural values grounded in materialism, and he is afraid that these norms have penetrated the seemingly impermeable sphere of the charmed village.
This fear develops into biting satire. Barthes's writing style changes enormously from the imagistic pondering in “The Light of the Sud-Ouest” to the terse assertions characteristic of his essays in Mythologies. He exposes the double nature of common cultural beliefs, brutally dissecting them until they appear to us nothing more than conventional myths. These myths are responsible not only for masking an object’s authenticity, he argues, but also for stifling our ability to create. Yet he enters his arguments brashly, bombarding us with a deluge of unorthodox claims and ardent observations because he needs us to understand his exasperation: beneath his assertiveness is a mounting anxiety. What he sees in the world around him is a static society, one in which the community is taking, absorbing meaning rather than producing meaning of its own.

He begins making this distinction between using and creating as early as childhood, “at the age when memory is formed” (“Sud-Ouest” 7). Sitting on a park bench in Bayonne, Barthes leans forward and squints “so as to obliterate all perspective, the way children do,” to see across to the flowerbed on the other side of the road (3). Here emerges Barthes's belief that children are more apt than adults to be producers. Perhaps it is because childhood is the period when the mind is still original, copper not yet discolored by the oily palms of contemporary culture. Or so it was once. In “Toys,” Barthes criticizes the way these values ostensibly rob a child of the potential to act as a producer. He laments the material aspect of contemporary French playthings and complains that they always mean something, always “prefigure the world of adult functions,” so much so that they “cannot but prepare the child to accept them all” (53). French toys are so implicated in meaning that they do not allow the child to act as a demiurge and produce significance of his or her own. Plastic dolls, for instance—ones that have an esophagus and can “wet their nappies”—leave nothing to the child's imagination. Playing with them renders the child a user, while simultaneously conditioning the child for the “mainsprings of adult causality” (54). Barthes recognizes the tragedy of our modern day: technological advancements have resulted in a “bourgeois,” superficial society. He sees people changing, acting more and more as consumers, in the literal sense of the word, so he stops, for an essay, to show us the value of producing.

A producer himself, Barthes attributes the writer's acts of production to an almost divine compulsion in “The Writer on Holiday.” To him, the function of “the man of letters” is as incomparable to human labor as “ambrosia is to bread” (28). The idea of a writer on holiday, he maintains, is a delusion of society akin to the stereotype of acclaimed writers wearing blue pyjamas.
Rather, the writer is “the prey of an inner god who speaks at all times, with
the holidays of his medium” (28). Barthes flatters the writer with divine praise, claiming that the writer is “endowed with a human existence . . . but unlike the other workers, who change their essence . . . , the writer keeps his writer’s nature everywhere” (28). By revealing this difference between the writer’s work and other producers’ work, Barthes separates the writer from social figures and the proletariat: the writer is more than just producer.

As Barthes celebrates the writer, he simultaneously commends himself as reader and viewer. He produces constantly—and also involves himself in a lifelong search for individualistic meaning in art. In “At Le Palace Tonight . . . ,” he recounts his love for a rescued theater. Its stages fringed with “great swathes of red velvet,” Le Palace is modern, yet maintains the “old power of authentic architecture” (43). But most important is the nature of light in the theater. Barthes personifies light, endowing it with a “complicated and refined mind” as well as mobility: “Here light occupies a deep space, within which it comes alive and performs like an actor” (40). Light is a “public art, in that it is achieved among the public, as well as a total art, where scintillation, music, and desire unite” (47). Here, we see the complexity of his thoughts on art. A linguistic artist, Barthes does not believe art to be confined to one interpretation. Just as light is a “total art” encompassing myriad different forms and expressions, art does not restrict meaning.

Barthes’s distinction between producer and consumer becomes more complicated in S/Z, where he analyzes his own medium, language. He first separates the user from the producer, writing that “the goal of literary work (of literature as a work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). Yet Barthes finds that the modern reader has become idle: “He is intransitive . . . instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of the writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (4). He calls this non-action the readerly text, in which the reader passively locates a “ready-made” meaning. Instead, Barthes suggests we involve ourselves more with the writerly text because it commands the reader to interact actively with the work. This type of text, he contends, is preferable to the readerly because “the writerly text is ourselves writing” (5).

Underlying Barthes’s “writerly text” is what author John Berger calls participation between art and its audience—and this participation, to Berger, is not limited to the written text. In “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible,” Berger examines the effects of our progressive society, telling us that “technological innovation has made it easy to separate the apparent from the
existent" (106). But the existent, he writes, is quickly disappearing, leaving us in “profound isolation” (107). As the body disappears, it takes with it meaning that is concrete, leaving us grappling with the apparent. The absence of the concrete makes our attempts at understanding inherently more difficult, because, unlike what is real, the apparent is not limited to any discrete number of meanings, but can take on any interpretation we decide to give it. But Barthes finds that our effort to make the apparent apprehensible is valuable because it allows us to act as producers as well as consumers.

True understanding will evade us unless we open ourselves to collaboration, whether we are the artist or the viewer. Berger suggests that the artist does not merely copy what he sees, but engages in a constant and faithful interaction between himself and the model. He writes: “The modern illusion concerning painting is that the artist is a creator. Rather, he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received” (109). The artist finds inspiration in the model, yet what he paints or draws will never be exact because the “likeness” of the model will be modified in the artist’s mind. Those who observe the artist’s work will also find it mildly distorted by their own perception. The product, the piece, is finally the result of the seeing—not just what is seen.

The necessity of such collaboration destabilizes, for Barthes, the notion of a text having a single “producer.” In “The Death of the Author,” he belabor analyses that rely on aspects of the author’s identity to draw meaning from the work and dismantles the notion of a “knowable” text, shrugging it off as a delusion of our Western culture. “To give a text an Author,” he says, “is to impose a limit on that text” (142). According to Barthes, we should approach a text with the understanding that writing is “the destruction of every voice,” that the origin of meaning lies solely in language itself. The reading of a text, he suggests, should prompt a rewriting in our minds, one that is unique to us, because the mind of the writer is a mystery to the reader. That is, the text should reveal the writer’s concept, but it is ultimately up to the reader to make this concept into something significant. Much like Berger, Barthes holds adamantly to the notion that an active reader will find pleasure in pursuing the implications of the text because, for this kind of reader, the act of reading is interactive, an adventure rather than a labor. Our desire to understand the world around us is, ironically, driven by the frustration that we simply do not, cannot, fully understand it. Still, our infinite struggle to comprehend is what makes our moments of discovery so blissful.

Barthes often calls us to confront the “unknowable” (by which he alone seems to not be intimidated), and he has a control and understanding of art
that most of us lack. His essays explore the discrepancy between what *is* and what we *perceive*; and his examination of what he calls “bourgeois norms” exposes a judgment on how we make use of the world. Do we take the world simply as it presents itself to us? Or do we take the world instead as a template upon which we can construct our own ideas and meanings? Barthes recommends the latter. But despite his firm grasp on the nature of creativity, he does not think himself singularly above the common man. Barthes instills in us the notion that we, too, can achieve the transcendence of producers if we try returning to that royal road of childhood and free our mind from the pressing influences of social conventions. Only then can we begin to rebuild the community of producers that he is so afraid of losing.

**Works Cited**

