

CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows and staff of the Wilson Center

THE GRAIN OF THE VOICE: Interviews 1962-1980

by Roland Barthes
translated by Linda Coverdale
Hill & Wang, 1985
368 pp. \$24.95

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FORMS:

Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation
by Roland Barthes
translated by Richard Howard
Hill & Wang, 1985
312 pp. \$22.95

The artist composes a work, the critic explains it. Must criticism, then, always play second fiddle to works of art, supporting or setting them straight but never competing? Many recent critics, including Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, have argued otherwise. Their texts are just as creative and just as original, they insist, as the artists'. It is wrong to divide writers into authors and interpreters. There is only the effort to make the world intelligible, an endless project in which all writers participate.

Whatever one thinks of this notion, the texts of Roland Barthes are an excellent point in its favor. During the two decades before his death in 1980, Barthes had come to be regarded by a large public as the most interesting living French writer. Not only did he argue for the equality of the critic with the

"creative writer," he embodied it.

Barthes's writing is not easy to categorize. He dealt with subjects as various as Greta Garbo's face and Einstein's brain, Japan, the language used in fashion magazines ("it's meaning that sells"), the Eiffel Tower, photography, a lover's discourse (the title of his best-seller), or even himself. One of his many books of literary criticism compares the notorious erotic novels of the Marquis de Sade to the utopian socialist writings of Charles Fourier and the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola. Another book is devoted entirely, and exhaustively, to one short story by Honoré de Balzac. Barthes was prolific, protean, and unpredictable. He seldom if ever repeated himself.

But two threads run through almost all his work. The first is a fascination with signs. (At the end of his life, Barthes held an academic chair of literary semiology, or "the science of signs.") The second is a challenge to orthodoxy or conventional ways of seeing. The two threads are closely interwoven. Wherever Barthes looked, he perceived the dominion of signs over nature. We see things not "as they are" (whatever that might be) but in terms of systems of meaning constructed by human beings. Thus he read the world as if it were a cryptogram whose code he had to crack or as a foreign language whose grammar he needed to construe. When he visited Japan, without knowing any Japanese, he was delighted by the frank

artificiality of its customs, and by careful observation he interpreted the whole society as an "Empire of Signs."

Barthes was a master reader. But the object of his reading was not only to understand signs but to demystify them. By exposing the codes and languages that determine meaning, he makes us conscious of the arbitrary schemes and orthodoxies that govern our lives. If we did not choose to wear this year's fashions or think this year's thoughts, Barthes suggests, we might find something better. The proof is Barthes's own writing—sometimes perverse but always brilliant and fresh. Like a new pair of glasses, he makes the world look sharp and strange again.

The two books here are wonderful for browsing. *The Grain* provides a sample of the critic's thought in action: reviewing his career, arguing with the interviewers, trying out ideas, changing his mind. *The Responsibility* collects a variety of late essays, at their best when they catch Barthes's enthusiasm for art that has taught him new ways to respond: Sergey Eisenstein's films, the theater of Berthold Brecht, drawings by Erté or Cy Twombly, the piano music of Robert Schumann. These are not books to read through at a sitting, nor do they present the essential Barthes, if there is such a thing. (The best one-volume introduction remains *A Barthes Reader*, published in 1982, with a good preface by Susan Sontag.) But they crackle with a unique play of mind—that of a critic who really does create his own world.

—Lawrence Lipking '85

**THE HEAVENS AND
THE EARTH:
A Political History of
the Space Age**
by Walter A. McDougall
Basic, 1985
555 pp. \$25.95

Now that the space age is nearly two generations old, scholars are beginning to chronicle its development. In his superbly written history, Walter McDougall, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, considers both the foreign and domestic politics of space exploration and research in the United States and the Soviet Union. In the process, McDougall also delves into the moral dimensions of space technology.

Fundamental to the author's approach is his view of Soviet and American attitudes toward "technocracy"—a social-political order shaped, if not directly governed, by scientists and technicians. In the Soviet Union, state-controlled technological change has been viewed as "a partner of ideology in the building of socialism." Americans, by contrast, long deemed government patronage in science and technology to be incompatible with the nation's ideals. Both judgments require qualification: State-sponsored science existed in Russia long before the revolutionary movement arose. And the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other federal agencies provided important stimuli to American science long before