

Catherine Belsey (1940-2021)

Neil Badmington

Catherine Belsey finished correcting the proofs of ‘A Battle of Wills’ on 13 October 2020. ‘Don’t change a hair of its head’, she told me. I obeyed my orders – you did that with Kate – and the essay appeared here in volume 6 of *Barthes Studies* on 12 November alongside the other contributions marking the fiftieth anniversary of *S/Z*. The rest of our conversation that October day was typically light-hearted: her two cousins who founded the Independent Labour Party; her recurring dream of losing her handbag; our shared inability to remember the difference between widows and orphans in the realm of typography; the difficulties of folding pamphlets. She concluded by offering to supervise my PhD. Everything seemed fine: Kate, as ever, was Kate. Several days later, she suffered a stroke and was hospitalized in Cambridge. She died on 14 February 2021.

Kate’s parting remark in what I now know to be our final conversation was a joke: she had supervised my PhD around a quarter of a century earlier. I was casually aware of the work of Roland Barthes when I came to Cardiff in 1994 to begin an MA at the age of twenty-three, but it was in seminars there with Kate that I read Barthes properly for the first time. In the magical space of room 2.28, we wrestled with *Mythologies*, ‘The Death of the Author’, and *S/Z*. Those classes dazzled me, challenged me, unmade and made me. *S/Z* was the text that caught my attention more than the others – how could it *do that* with a piece of fiction? – and it was the work by Barthes that Kate and I discussed most over the years. When I interviewed her for the journal *Textual Practice* in 2005, she remembered her own initial encounter with *S/Z* when, in Cambridge in the early 1970s, Rosalind Coward loaned her a copy for twenty-four hours:

I don’t think I understood much of it. (The English version wasn’t yet available, but that wasn’t the main problem.) Even so, I had a feeling that I wanted to make real contact with this creature from another planet: *S/Z* wasn’t like anything I’d ever read before, and it seemed to open up whole new questions about the reading process itself. I stayed up most of the night, and gave it back with great reluctance the following day.

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Kate and I often wondered if it would be possible to write an essay or a book in the style of *S/Z*, and for years we concluded that such a work could only be a fantasy – something that you would have a hard time finding in a bookshop, to recall Barthes’s description of *le texte scriptible*. ‘No pastiche’, as Kate puts it in her contribution to this volume, ‘can hope to capture the *sprezzatura* or, indeed, the effrontery, of the work that suddenly appeared unheralded in 1970.’ But then, over coffee one rainy afternoon in a hotel in Derby in 2019, she made a surprise announcement: ‘I’ve written my *S/Z*.’ She was referring to ‘A Battle of Wills’.

Kate was older than my parents but always seemed so much younger than my contemporaries. Her fearless energy and optimism were there until the end. On our final foreign trip together in 2018, we walked for miles through the streets of Ghent, but I was the one who fell asleep on the Eurostar soon after the train left Brussels. When I awoke, Kate had written a haiku on my boarding pass and was eager to talk about what Barthes called ‘the magic of the signifier’. I only know that phrase – a phrase that has guided my career – because of Kate. She was magical and the world to me.

Catherine Belsey, 13 December 1940 – 14 February 2021

NB, 16 February 2021

Cardiff University’s official obituary for Kate, written by Julia Thomas and me, is available online. Given the formal nature of that notice, I have chosen to make the present text more personal in tone and approach.