

Roland Barthes: Writer, Intellectual, and also Professor

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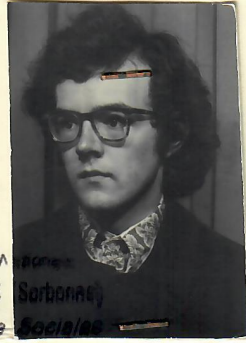
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CARTE D'ÉLÈVE STAGIAIRE
Année scolaire 1971-1972

M. onsieur PATEMAN Trévor
Né 19-7-47, le 19-7-47
Nationalité Anglaise
Directeur d'études : M. onsieur BARTHES
Carte délivrée le 29 septembre 1971

POUR LE PRÉSIDENT :
ET PAR DÉLÉGATION
L. VELAY
DIRECTEUR D'ÉTUDES

LE PORTEUR :
Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale
ÉCOLE des HAUTES ÉTUDES
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1.

Neil Badmington invited me to contribute to this issue of *Barthes Studies* after reading my letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1 August 2025:

Public lecturing to large audiences has long been an important aspect of Parisian intellectual life. In 1971 Roland Barthes, by then installed in an academic post, signed up to offer a course of lectures on the history of semiology. The École Pratique des Hautes Études, reckoning he would pull the crowds, rented a public theatre. There was an evening production running and the props left in place

included a sign with the words 'Le Petit Cirque' [The Little Circus]. Clearly rather uncomfortable, Barthes installed himself stage far left sitting behind a plain desk on a hard chair. During the second or third lecture someone in the packed gallery got up and denounced him for still thinking in binary terms when the world had moved on to ternary, etc etc. Barthes never returned to the theatre. He moved to an ordinary seminar room, day and time communicated only to his students, and got the audience size down from a few hundred to twenty or thirty. This allowed him both to present, rather modestly, material written on index cards and also to digress, which opened a space for students to respond. I was one of them and found this relaxed style agreeable; it is consistent with Neil Badmington's characterisation of Barthes' way of thinking and his commitments (TLS 25 July). He wanted to breathe freely.

2.

Tel Quel published a very substantial piece by Barthes in its issue for Autumn 1971 (number 47) titled 'Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs' [Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers]. Recently arrived in Paris, I bought a copy and have now re-read the essay, probably for the third or fourth time. In the opening sentence Barthes advances the idea that there is a fundamental connection between teaching and speaking (*la parole*). This connection places the teacher, the prof., in the same position as the patient on the psychoanalytic couch speaking to a more or less silent analyst and thus liable to transference identifications and more general anxiety. Barthes lists, randomly, eight things which the (vulnerable) teacher expects of the student, of which recognising the prof as occupying some definite 'rôle' (in quotation marks) comes first; he adds in brackets 'tout visiteur dont on ne veut pas de quelle *image* il vous sollicite devient inquiétant' [any newcomer who cannot be placed as to the *image* he asks of you is immediately disturbing].¹

On the first occasion when I visited him in his office, he asked me—rather anxiously, I thought—what I wanted. I forget the exact words. He then asked if I knew his other English student Stephen Heath (I didn't) as if that might allay his disquiet.

But Barthes had already discharged the final expectation numbered 8 in his list as *bailleur de service* [someone who provides a service]. I had written to him in May 1971 asking if I could join his 1971–72 seminars

as an *auditeur libre*, a visitor rather than an enrolled student, offering the recent award of a Leverhulme European Studentship by way of credential. His hand-written reply on the notepaper of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE, now the EHESS) begins 'Je vous accueillerai bien volontiers' [I will be pleased to welcome you] and ends with his home address and telephone number at the rue Servandoni. I had to write again in August when Leverhulme small print advised me that I must formally enrol for a recognised course and as a result Barthes wrote back to accept me as a *stagiaire*—a first-year student on the two-year Diplôme course of the EPHE, again giving me his number and asking that 'vous aurez la gentillesse de me téléphoner (un matin: 326 95 85) pour que nous prenons rendez-vous' [Be so good as to telephone me (mornings; 326 95 85) so that we can arrange to meet].

3.

In the middle of the essay, discussing the role of the intellectual, Barthes has a short section titled 'Les Questions' which begins 'Questionner, c'est désirer savoir une chose. Cependant, dans beaucoup de débats intellectuels, les questions qui suivent l'exposé du conférencier ne sont nullement l'expression d'un manque, mais l'assertion d'une plénitude. Sous couvert de questionner, je monte une agression contre l'orateur' [To question is to want to know something. Yet in many intellectual debates the questions that follow the lecturer's talk are in no way the expression of a lack but the assertion of a plenitude. Under the cover of asking questions, I attack the speaker].² The interruption which I described in my TLS letter did not even hide the aggression and was an instance of a more widespread post-1968 anger.

Barthes wanted to find a way of teaching which would reduce the opportunity and likelihood of aggression or more general grandstanding. He closes the essay by giving an account of his method in a section headed 'La parole paisible' [Peaceable Speech] which opens 'L'une de choses que l'on peut attendre d'une réunion régulière d'interlocuteurs est simplement celle-ci: *la bienveillance*: que cette réunion figure un espace de parole dénué d'agressivité' [One of the things that can be expected from a regular meeting together of speakers is quite simply *goodwill*, that the meeting figure a space of discourse divested of all sense of aggressiveness].³

Goodwill is a literal translation of *bienveillance* which itself derives from a Latin *benevolentia*. But in French and English it is a partial synonym for gentillesse and kindness. It is also strongly connected to the peaceableness which appears in the title to the section. In an earlier section, headed 'Notre place' [Our Place], he has rejected 'l'espace magistral d'autrefois, qui était en somme un espace religieux (la parole dans la chaire, en haut, les auditeurs en bas' [the magisterial space of the past—which was fundamentally a religious space (the work delivered by the master from the pulpit above with the audience below] and asserts the value of instability in the teaching situation, or as one might say, 'le tournis des lieux de parole' [the giddy whirl of the positions of speech].⁴ But in grounding this rejection he has also called up some very well-known religious language which (most often) gives us in English 'Peace on Earth and Goodwill unto all men' and in French 'paix sur terre, bienveillance pour les hommes'.

I had encountered other attempts to disrupt the magistral. In the 1960s, A. J. Ayer conducted a professorial philosophy class in Oxford, primarily aimed at graduate students, which he called 'Informal Instruction'. He spoke rapidly, standing up, moving around the room, seeking for someone who would interrupt or ask a question. He would then move towards them, then turn away looking for someone else to join in. There was a strong element of showing off ('I can take on all comers') but it did produce an energetic atmosphere; all of us ended up trying to think on our feet.

In London, when the anarchist philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend came to lecture in 1969 it was no accident that Imre Lakatos, Karl Popper's successor at the London School of Economics, was in the back row of the stepped lecture theatre. He was soon on his feet protesting, and not much later down at the front, taking the chalk from Feyerabend and scribbling amendments to Feyerabend's diagrams. The audience was thus cast as excited spectators at a boxing match, wondering whether they would actually come to blows. It was, of course, meant to be memorable and was.

Barthes' idea of 'la parole paisible' [peaceable speech] could be regarded either as an attempt to create a (binary) polar opposite to the magistral or as a move to insert a new form into the complex and multiple field of teaching methods, of which those of Ayer and Feyerabend might be regarded as (eccentric) outliers, suitable for mention in a digression.

4.

In May 1972, Barthes agreed that I could progress to the second year of the course, to complete which I would then need to submit a thesis which would have been a study of *En Attendant Godot*: 'D'accord, vous serez titularisé cette année ... mais j'espère vous voir mieux un jour prochain. A bientôt R B' [OK, you will be enrolled this year ... but I hope to see more of you one day soon].

I did not have funds to remain for a second year and didn't submit a thesis. Barthes lists as the seventh function of the prof 'pour ceux qui ont le fantasme de la thèse (pratique timide d'écriture, à la fois défigurée et protégée par la finalité institutionnelle) de garantir la réalité de ce fantasme' [for those possessed by the fantasy of the thesis (a timid practice of writing at once disfigured by and shielded by its institutional finality) to guarantee the reality of this fantasy]. Not much encouragement there. But Barthes had his own phantasms, including the urge to systematise which appears in such works as *Eléments de Sémiologie* (1964), the would-be doctoral *Système de la Mode* (1967) and *L'Ancienne Rhétorique* (1970). The seminars which I attended on Ten Years of Semiology were expository, the material read from index cards. But the unhurried presentation was interrupted by Barthes' own digressions, sometimes humorous. It was the digressions, opening the way to student questions, which gave life to the seminars and made them engaging and relaxed.

I think they were quite long; nothing like Derrida's Fidel-Castro-length lectures but perhaps two hours rather than ninety minutes. Nothing like Lacan's packed theatrical performances either and which I attended wearing a buttonhole orchid. (He wrote telling me to arrive early 'vu l'affluence' [given the crowds].) But Barthes' preferences were very similar to Foucault's who succeeded in conducting seminars despite his Collège de France obligation to lecture publicly to anyone who chose to attend. He simply grilled everyone who packed into a large room for the first session, asking why they were there and whether they were willing to engage with a collaborative project, studying the parricide Pierre Rivière's memoir. The grilling got rid of the unserious or, at least, the timid.

Both Barthes and Foucault may have been responding to the events of May 1968 in which challenges to pedagogic authority had been prominent, just as they had been at the London School of Economics in 1967 ('Beware the Pedagogic Gerontocracy' on a large banner). The spirit

of 1968 lived on out at Vincennes, its campus corridors covered in graffiti, and where Lyotard taught. If I wanted to introduce myself I could find him 'à la permanence de Philo pour le Comité de grève (en bas du bât. D) vendredi prochain' [roughly, as the on-duty philosopher in the office of the Strike Committee (downstairs in Building D) next Friday].⁵

Lévi-Strauss did fulfil his Collège de France obligations and lectured in regular professorial style to large audiences; all the material duly appeared in book form as *La Voie des Masques* (1975). It's an important book because in it Lévi-Strauss seeks to resolve the Structure versus History debate which raged around his work. I still think his outline solution is successful and creates the basis of a viable account of the dynamics of cultural change. I wrote a short piece about this and if the numbers at academia.edu are an index it is my most successful piece of writing in what is now an excessively long publishing career.

During the year I was also able to listen to Derrida at the École Normale (but I gave up—it was boring), Todorov also at the École Normale, and Roman Jakobson giving a one-off lecture at the Collège de France. On that occasion, Lacan occupied a seat near the front of the auditorium or, rather, stood up in his place while we waited for Jakobson so that we would all see that Lacan was present.

Anthony Wilden was visiting from the USA. He had already published his Lacan translation *The Language of the Self* and now brought to Paris the text of a book on Lacan which he had written. In a small group conversation, he said he had gone to see Lacan who had the typescript on his desk with underlinings. Lacan declined to endorse the work. He had underlined all the occurrences of his own name and complained that it did not appear often enough. (I am relying on my memory.)⁶

5.

Back in England, I wrote a long review-cum-essay about *Mythologies* for a journal called *The Human Context* and in 1973 sent Barthes a copy. His reply can be read below. And when I self-published my first book *Language, Truth and Politics* in 1975 he acknowledged the copy he had received with a picture postcard from Biarritz. As I re-read these two notes a life-time later they strike me as perfect cases of *bienveillance* towards a student who didn't quite know what he wanted.

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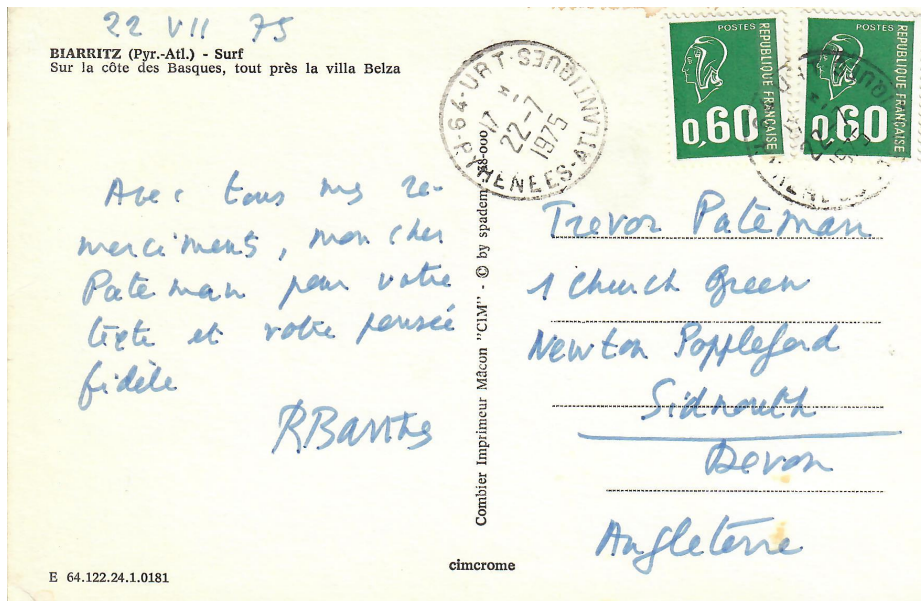
22 Mai

Merci, très vivement, pour
l'article et la lettre. Je
regrette votre départ, j'au-
rais bien voulu vous voir là.
Et donc, je vous reverrai
avec plaisir, quand
vous reviendrez. Disons
que je vous attends.

Votre

RPantag

Trevor Pateman



Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Seuil, 2002), vol. 3, pp. 887–907 (p. 892).

² Barthes, 'Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs', p. 896.

³ Barthes, 'Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs', p. 905.

⁴ Barthes, 'Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs' p. 899.

⁵ Letter of 26 October 1971.

⁶ My English summary of Elisabeth Geblesco's alarming account of Lacan's clinical practice in her *Un Amour de Transfert* (EPEL, 2008) is at https://www.academia.edu/43059186/Jacques_Lacan_in_the_text_of_Elisabeth_Geblesco [accessed 7 October 2025].

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trevor Pateman is the author most recently of *Culture as Anarchy* (2023). A significant part of his life-time work is currently archived at academia.edu from which it will disappear in due course when the subscription is not renewed.

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