Tutoy-ing: Roland Barthes et Moi

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It was perhaps fitting that my first encounter with Roland Barthes should have taken place on the level of the signifier. (I am not being anecdotal—let us simply consider this beginning one in a series of *fiches* or note cards.)

The fall of 1972, the beginning of the semester; my mother had just died, as I sat down at the seminar table of the École Pratique des Hautes Études. This was the much written about *petit séminaire* which Barthes had adopted to make it more intimate, and perhaps more like the American model. As he described it: 'Our gathering is small, to safeguard not its intimacy but its complexity'.[1] There were perhaps ten or fifteen students, miniscule compared with the mega-lectures I attended that year with Michel Foucault at the Collège de France (a gigantic hall and a spill-over room with a television image of the lecture), Jacques Lacan (an open-to-the-public auditorium at the Law School packed with glitterati and unhoused people) and Gerard Genette's sardine-packed seminar room with the occasional added presence of Tzvetan Todorov as a regular visitor.

I should add that it was an act of combined desperation and chutzpah that led me from Tremont Avenue in the Bronx to rue de Tournon in Paris where the École Pratique des Hautes Études, 6th section, stood with its non-descript façade and cloistered courtyard.

Act of Desperation

I had been at Columbia University as an undergraduate with all the *Sturm und Drang* of the student revolution of 1968. When I then became a graduate student in the same institution and same department, I was seeking ways to escape the campus while still having the luxury of retaining my student perks. For two years I moved to a hippie commune in upstate New York and

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commuted to my classes. For the third year I came up with what I thought was an ingenious plan. I wanted to keep my fellowship while not being at the university—and I discovered that I could take a course called 'Study in the French University System' through the French department. Even though I was not a student in that department, I asked permission. The French Department told me to ask the English Department which asked me to ask the French Department. Taking advantage of the confusion, I simply signed up for the course. In a few months I was living in a *chambre de bonne* in Montparnasse and walking to Roland Barthes' office to ask if I could take his seminar.

There was, as I recall, a perpetual gloom in the rooms of that building on rue de Tournon, as if whatever light there was would have to come from within. I was the only American in the *petit séminaire*. With the arrogance of the graduate student, I had come to see this baggy monster of structuralism in person; to slay it or be slain. Barthes in contrast to my oedipal vision of him was soothing and inspiring like the cigars he continuously smoked, whose haze hung heavy in the room as an indictment against the haziness of my own brain attempting to turn French into something I could understand.

Chutzpah

My French was barely adequate. I had gotten the lowest grades of my undergraduate career in French class because, although I had a good accent, my grammar was ungrammatical to say the least. I probably had the linguistic capacity of a not-very-talented five-year-old.

I was in terror that October day of having to speak. But the novelty of the twenty-three-year-old American student was too great for Barthes to resist, and he said to me immediately: '*Monsieur Davis, vous êtes de boeuf à l'or?*' His slow, so French, cadences bringing to me the absolutely impenetrable message: 'You are of the golden cow?' Jet lag was still lying hard on my brain. So, this was structuralism, I thought. What is the signified? Is that how he thought of America or was there a hypersignified level of meaning? The American student as a worshipper of some hidden god concealed in the golden calf? In desperation and fear of silence I played the only card between myself and humiliation—I said, '*Comment*?' Barthes repeated himself with depressing accuracy. '*Monsieur Davis, vous êtes de boeuf à l'or*?' There was a blank moment

as I prayed for inspiration the way I used to pray to God when I was a child in synagogue to help me find the correct place in the Hebrew prayerbook when everyone was chanting in unison, and I was lost. Then the moment of *éclaircissement* came to me: He was asking me if I had been a graduate student at Buffalo! His accent concealed the meaning. I quickly responded: 'Non! De Columbia!' Temporary salvation.

The Body

One had the impression of slowness, deliberateness, almost sluggishness. Particularly one associated this with the mouth. One of those mouths that seemed perennially wet and always nursing—on the cigars, on the words. I choose the word 'nursing' deliberately because the mother is never absent with Barthes (when the mother died, so did the son). Barthes said that the professor in the *séminaire* created a maternal space since mothering was accomplished without words and without deliberate demonstration—without waiting for the death of the other—the teacher. The arms and fingers remarkably small and pudgy, inelegant—a physical counterpoint to the words—an irony of the body. His suits always English, not French—an example of otherness. But the cigarette dangling from the lip integrated him deeply into French culture. One recalls the squint as the smoke burned his eyes, but the demand for perpetual signifying alliance to the Parisian intellectual prevented him from ever removing the cigarette and sparing the eye. Hence suffering at the demands of doxa.

He began the first class, concordantly, with an analysis of the space of the classroom noting that the professor took the role of mother. The term '*maternage*' or '*apprentissage*' is used in place of '*l'enseignement*'. This was the Barthes who saw the class as a phalanstery.[2] Interestingly, the word *séminaire* in French could be either an academic class or a theological seminary. Barthes saw it as both—a place of brotherly love that was also a location where he took on the role of intellectual eminence if not God. As a place of mothering, the class reproduces Barthes' own homelife. [3] 'I was attached solely to my mother and hers was my only household'.[4] If home was mother, then class was home, and Barthes was mother. And for him in the broadest sense it was an 'amorous' place.[5]

His voice was mesmerizing. Many have called it 'beautiful'. He spoke slowly, fortunately for me, and one could feel his thoughts forming through his words. Like my mentor and dissertation advisor Edward Said, there was no gap between his thoughts and his words, both evolved and then were embodied in the voice as if you were watching a cinema of thoughts becoming spoken language. You could almost see the editing process, the point of view, the master shot, and the focus into a specific point.

I had never witnessed any teacher of mine do such a focused and entertaining analysis. Barthes, as we know, had a talent for analyzing the ordinary. And so, the classroom provided him with a degree zero location for detailed observation. I recall in that class he also wrote on the blackboard '*Bonjour lunettes; au revoir fillettes*.' And then analyzed that phrase for the rest of the class. To me this was astounding. And I remained astounded for the entire year. My notes say, 'this man will analyze anything'. For him everything signifies. Is this an obsession?

A typical class would begin with his quietly entering the room. Lighting up a cigarette. Removing from his leather briefcase a stack of *fiches* and then arranging them on the seminar table (he sat in the middle of the table, not at the head) as if he were playing solitaire. These cards or slips of paper were of course the famous building blocks of his next book. They had no particular arrangement, so in setting them up and rearranging them, one could see him speculating on their order as numbered paragraphs in a future volume. There was then an aleatory, although focused, shape to his class.

The Subject of the *Séminaire*

It was the doctoral thesis. That was all. As far as I recall there were no texts in the class. We arrived each week without having to read anything. This was so different from my classes at Columbia as a literature major. Novels and poems were the subject unless the class was on criticism, in which case theoretical works were the subject. With Edward Said I had read much of French criticism, but also the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—all of which were tinged with Said's readings. On the other hand, Barthes' seminar was textless, and therefore all text. And of course, the subject of the course was actually

Barthes himself. It was a series of classes each week that was like the television series *Seinfeld* except instead of being about nothing it was being about being about—and perhaps one could add another iteration—being about being about Barthes. One watched Barthes think and speak. This is what Barthes' teaching and writing encompassed. As Andy Stafford notes: 'Barthes was always speaking through "himself": all of the self-delusions (and "happy" myths) […] apply first and foremost […] to Barthes the mythologist himself'.[6] Later in life, he made this subject position clearer—that he was speaking not as a general reader who might use the locution 'one', but as one speaking/writing from the central citadel of his personal self: 'I shall be speaking of "myself". "Myself" is to be understood here in the full sense: not the asepticized substitute of a general reader […] It is the *intimate* which seeks utterance in me, seeks to make its cry heard'.[7]

The Last Day of Class

Barthes in his office which I remember for the only time as streaming in sunlight. Barthes puts his arm around my shoulder and says deliberately '*Vous pouvez me traiter comme un ami*.' I puzzle many times over the significance, the code. Has he said this many times to the young men and boys he has engaged with? The significance of the word '*ami*' together with '*vous*'. Barthes wrote 'Friends. I always like to be alone with a friend, because the relation between several others runs the danger of hurting me more than the relation between one other and myself.'[8] He added, with his arm around me, that I can use '*tu*' with him. I did not know this, at the time, but this was a special gift he gave selected students, since he preferred the use of '*vous*'.[9] He was managing a transition with me from student to … disciple? Lover? Friend? In my class was another student Jean-Louis Bouttes who was a predecessor friend. Barthes never indicated in class any particular closeness with him, although others have documented their intimacy.[10] He clearly was offering me a friendship apart, as he preferred. Had I been a different type of person, I would have recognized the offer as something weightier than I did that afternoon. I might have pursued Barthes, become an intimate, and a friend. Someone more ardent or calculating might have done so. But I did not. Was I oblivious?

Distracted? Put off? Hard to say, but I packed my bags and headed back to the United States.

Barthes apparently preferred socializing with students to being with colleagues.[11] He hung out with Bouttes and his roommate smoking marijuana and enjoying a kind of student bohemian life. This Barthes was unknown to me. It needs to be said (does it?) that his desire for me to be an '*ami*' would now not cut a very attractive ethical stance now. I was twenty-three and he was fifty-seven. He was my professor, but that was then, it was France, and awarenesses moved in different directions in those days.

In 1980 I do not treat Barthes as a friend. In a review I wrote of A *Lover's Discourse*, which I pan in the *New York Arts Journal* despite appreciative qualifications saying, 'the voice of the authoritative literary theoretician seems

to have given way to the combined anxiety-filled discourses of Proust and Woody Allen […] hysterical and banal'. I was in mourning for the passing of the professor—refusing the friendship and possible love of the confessor. I would add that my year in Paris included my first sexual encounter with a man, actually a couple. This was my version of Bertolucci's (at that point unmade) film *The Dreamers.* It was the era of summers of love and sexual experimentation, so perhaps on some unconscious level I had both refused and admitted Barthes into my own lover's discourse.

Undecided Professions

The history of the word 'professor' as it is given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reflects the undecided quality of the word. The original use was 'one who made a profession […] one who makes an open declaration of his sentiments or beliefs, or of his allegiance to some principle'. In other words, someone who professed or confessed something about their sentiments or beliefs. The word was later applied to 'a public teacher of the highest rank [in the] university […] one who makes a profession of any art or science; a professional man [sic]'. We have moved historically from an individual space of public confession to a guardedly private institutional space where the private is subsumed under the public affiliation. As a student, my professor was Barthes (although he actually did not have the highest degree in academia), the seminar a semi-public space for those who were admitted, the contract an institutional and legal one. But as reader and 'friend' Barthes had become professor in the original sense of one who confesses. And in his own life and career Barthes moved from professor of system to confessor of desire.

The Problem of Barthes as a Literary Institution

When Barthes' *Essais Critiques* was published along with *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology,* fueled by the more popular *Mythologies* and the resurrected master's thesis *Système de la mode,* one had the strong sense, at that

time and from the perspective of an American student, despite the insurrectionary feeling one had about semiology, that Barthes was an authority. That kind of professor had a system, a body of knowledge linked to power, and disciples as well as an intellectual cohort. The disciples (we disciples?) were there growing in the garden. Kristeva, Genette, Metz, Todorov were the cohort institutionalizing sub-specialties and creating, in turn, disciples. At the time, I was attending Barthes' class as well as that of Genette's in which Todorov would attend to argue and elaborate. *S/Z* gave the promise that despite the attacks on semiology for being trivial or reductive, one could use the method on serious literature and expand it exponentially rather than reduce it to Propp's seven narrative plots or some one-for-one template of interpretation. Yet *S/Z* contained the seeds of its own destruction in the arbitrariness of the lexia, the eccentricity of the reading, and the impossibility of falsifiability. But the Professor of Desire who would then write *The Pleasure of the Text, A Lover's Discourse, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, and *Camera Lucida* is not a professor in the accepted sense (except as a confessor) but is instead an amateur (one is naturally compelled to add the word 'rank' to indicate our disgust and awareness of the lack of rank, inferiority). Barthes uses the word 'amateur' as one who renews his pleasure (*amator*) and says it is the amateur who 'will be perhaps—the counter-bourgeois artist'.[12] As Barthes wrote, he is caught between doxa and paradox in his work. *Mythologies* attempted to demystify. The demystification became 'immobilized in repetition' and had to be replaced by 'semiological *science*' only then to become encumbered by 'the (often very grim) science of the semiologists'.[13] Then the introduction of text, desire, the 'claims of the body', which then 'tends to degenerate into prattle'.[14] Barthes moves from science to desire. One notes his fear or concern about repetition, which will become more profound as he makes the later decision to prepare for the novel. One wonders about the fear of repetition, as he articulates 'No, Sisyphus is not happy: he is alienated not by the futility of his work, but by its *repetition*.'[15] Repetition, inherent in structure, later haunts Barthes who seeks to escape the constraints of structure, of paradigms, but fears he, like Sisyphus, is caught in what cannot be escaped by either cleverness or even time.

Barthes as Teacher

For me, as his student, Barthes had perhaps been two people—the teacher (the professor) and the critic. In that division (Barthes would say dispersion), is to be found the truth of Barthes since as teacher he saw a road out of the obsession, could we say repetitiveness, of writing—although ultimately it was a road not taken. For Barthes there was a 'basic link' between teaching and speech as opposed to writing.[16] 'Between the language of the teacher and that of the intellectual there is hardly any incompatibility […] but the writer stands apart, separate'.[17]

Two things Barthes does not like about teaching. First, speech is authority, and it is impossible to contravene that authority since to speak badly, to hesitate, to waver does not 'render less disagreeable the role that makes every speaker a kind of policeman'.[18] To refuse that authority is to be a 'liberal' in the sense that one apologizes for that authority but does not relinquish it.[19] The second thing Barthes does not like about teaching is that it is a discourse that can be summarized. Like a Jivaro shrunken head—the form is separable from the content: 'what is lost is the supplement, the point of the advance of the state of language'.[20] Writing, on the other hand, is characterized by the impossibility of speech, the impossibility of summary. Writing is polysemous as opposed to speech which, by virtue of summarizing, singularly 'clear'.[21]

Barthes writes a good deal about teaching. In this sense, he is unlike almost all the critics and theorists of his time who pay virtually no attention to the classroom. As part of his theory of education, Barthes notes that the speaking subject, the teacher, is grounded by context—the room, the words, the body, the moment—and grounded in place. Writing, on the other hand, is utopian (literally without place). The teacher speaks and the students listen: therefore, the teacher is the analysand rather than the analyst, speech being the location of the unconscious since it cannot be called back, altered, or disguised.[22] The speaker/teacher is always in a position of possible humiliation and display. Listen to Barthes' description:

> Scarcely have I made this audience smile with some 'witty' remark, scarcely have I reassured it with some progressive stereotype, then I experience all the complacency of such provocations; I regret the

> hysterical drive, would like to retract it, preferring too late an austere to a 'clever' discourse. […] Should some smile answer my remark or some gesture of assent my stereotype of intimidation, I immediately persuade myself that these manifestations of complicity come from imbeciles or flatterers.[23]

Barthes' solution to the problem of the classroom, to his role as teacher, is to 'work patiently tracing out a pure form, that of a *floating* (the very form of the signifier); a floating which would not destroy anything but would be content simply to disorientate the Law'.[24] Teaching would be a kind of Zen practice, as my notes to his class indicate, the closest that a teacher can come to mothering, that is to say education without demonstration. Barthes links this floating to the feeling one has smoking marijuana as opposed to drinking alcohol. Although he admits (or prevaricates) that because of his 'bronchial inability' he has only witnessed this 'good will', 'relaxation', being 'disarmed' by observation, we do recall he is probably referring to his experiences with his students and cruising, as it were, the hippie aesthetic for propaedeutic purposes. But it is important to see that this drugged floating is only one of several attempts Barthes will make throughout his career of finding a non-punitive, non-authoritative, non-prescriptive positionality from which he can, paradoxically, prescribe and derive authority.

Why does Barthes seem to reject the very structure of traditional pedagogy, the classroom that he describes as the locus of desire and demand, an erotic space, a place of the body in discourse (certainly more present than in the text where he had worked so hard to include the body), and a psychoanalytic space? This apparent refusal becomes a species of paradox. Barthes as teacher can be seen as a practice that blurs the focus on the life of Barthes and the problematic of Barthes—because he must be a problem to all his readers as he is to himself. This is so because Barthes is not an institution in the way that someone like Foucault was. We cannot 'follow' Barthes because he has deracinated himself, become protean, rejecting each of his previous doxa. We can only trace him. Counterintuitively, he is without followers or disciples because he refuses to teach in the traditional sense. How can you be the disciple of shape shifter? You can only imitate the style which while stylish cannot be the content.

Barthes and Brecht

Barthes' difficulty with the classroom, of the voice, the context, of speech and his assertion of the centrality of writing points to a release from the social or conventionally political. This release is all the more ironic considering his attachment to one theorist in particular—Bertold Brecht. One of the puzzles of Barthes' writing is its constant reference to Brecht but the absence of any real, extended book-length consideration of Brecht. In 1954 Barthes wrote a short review of *Mother Courage* and a year later wrote a very brief editorial for an issue of *Théâtre Populaire* devoted to the Brechtian revolution. Brecht appears here and there throughout Barthes' work as a touchstone along with Freud and Marx. Whenever Barthes mentions Brecht, it is always with the reverence one has for an authority or even an introjected ego-ideal. It is Barthes' point in his review of 1954 that *Mother Courage* challenges French theater because it is a 'totally popular' production in which 'the complex design can be understood only by the people'.[25] This Lukácsian popularism is accomplished by the continual maintenance of a distance. The spectator may identify with Mother Courage but must not have her viewpoint: 'because we *see* Mother Courage blind, we *see* that which she doesn't see'.[26] Therefore, the audience sees with a 'double vision' not only the 'social evil but its remedies'.[27] Brecht's accomplishment for Barthes in 1954 was that a play's object was not 'some sort of dramatic style' but 'the conscience of the spectator, and by consequence his power to make history'.[28] Or, as Barthes says in his editorial, he chooses Brecht because of his belief that 'art can and must intervene in history […] that the theater must resolutely aid history in unraveling the process'.[29]

In reading these two pieces written when Barthes was thirty-eight and was an officer of instruction researching lexicology at the National Center for Scientific Research, one feels a graduate student Marxist enthusiasm (verging on cliché) rebounding from what must have been a narrow connection with lexicology. Youthful enthusiasms often wane, but one notices that Barthes never abandoned this view of Brecht even as he eventually abandoned demystification, structuralism, semiology, and several other *isms*. His view of Marxism had evolved so much so that he could refer to it in my class, according to my notes, as a 'fiction in the sense that it is a discourse on a praxis'. In 1973, Barthes could still write that Brecht's vision was 'the clearest

and most intelligent that dramatic theory has ever produced!'[30] His focus here is the 'social gest'. That is, 'a gesture or set of gestures (but never a gesticulation) in which a whole social situation can be read'. This gesture can be called a 'pregnant moment […] to whose rhythm History becomes intelligible and desirable'.[31]

What most appeals to Barthes about Brecht is this social engagement as it appears in form. But what is strange is Barthes' reluctance to engage with the social, the contextual. Barthes transmogrifies Brecht (in an action that must seem as truly alien to Brech's view of the world) when he says that 'rhetorical forms may be gestural'.[32] Such a transformation allows Barthes to claim that all writing is gestural and therefore social. But, if we place Barthes' idea of 'floating' (or later another version as the 'neutral') next to Brecht's engagement, then I believe we can understand Barthes' sense of his own subversiveness. Floating, Barthes' solution to the problem of how to be a teacher without being an authority, required to 'not destroy anything but would be content to disorientate the Law'—a sort of quiescent guerilla tactic, passive resistance.[33]

How Does Barthes Float?

Floating is first and foremost a rejection of system. One notes that Barthes' work (after *Elements of Semiology*) rarely contains any footnotes. In this sense, his work floats free from the anchorage (literally) of any authority on the page. Then there is the *fiche*. This is the material form of the fragment, those small slips of paper he cut up from the larger graph-marked sheets of composition paper so typical of the French institution of education. This cutting turns the larger sheet of institutional paper into subversive collages that bob on the surface of a deeper unconscious. Writing a book, or teaching a class, was simply assembling these fragments, after *S/Z,* in alphabetical order or using some other form of random arrangement. I recall vividly Barthes coming into the classroom and laying out the *fiches* in some imaginary order and then shifting them around as he sat waiting for the class to begin or moving them again during the class as if compelled by a mysterious Ouija board token. The order was therefore improvisatory, aleatory, and rhizomatic rather than systematic and arboreal. Then the alphabetical order, used to create his books,

freed Barthes from any system of constraint. This is reminiscent of another Barth—John Barth, the novelist, who in his work *The End of the Road* has his character make all decisions based on the laws of sinistrality, alphabetical and numerical priority. Barthes asks 'if you put the fragments one after the next, is no organization possible?'[34] His answer takes a musical form: as with a song cycle 'each piece is self-sufficient, and yet it is never anything but the interstices of its neighbors'; Barthes is saying that meaning will inhere out of randomness, out of floating.[35] I would call this process 'fiching'. Barthes has gone 'fiching' or if you like 'angling'. He is presenting angles without encompassing the whole figure, and yet the angles will imply a connected into a *trompe l'oeil* whole.

The Secret Hidden in the Pensive Text

Barthes, in flight from the systematic, creates a kind of system (since even alphabetical priority cannot eliminate a kind of floating order of the fiches, of brain-teasing versions of optical illusions). It is also clear that Barthes uses his anti-system in strangely religious, obsessive, and eccentric ways. I recall, and my class notes confirm, an extraordinarily strange moment in the seminar when Barthes revealed a fact that has—to my knowledge—never been exposed elsewhere in the Barthian canon. That day Barthes confided in us, members of his phalanstery, that he had deliberately (not randomly) arranged in *S/Z* his explanatory paragraphs which are interspersed through the lexia and given roman numerals so that the very last one would be number 93 which, he told us, was the year of his mother's birth. That paragraph is called 'the pensive text' and begins:

> Like the Marquise, the classic text is pensive: replete with meaning (as we have seen), it still seems to be keeping in reserve some ultimate meaning, one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying…[36]

In this instance, the ultimate meaning is the place of the mother—the female protagonist—behind the text, hidden from those outside the phalanstery, perhaps behind all texts for Barthes. No one can know this meaning. It is

recondite and perhaps the notion is that it should always remain hidden, except as a slip of the tongue in the mouth of the analysand as he talks in class (recalling that for Barthes the problem of teaching is that the word, once spoken, cannot be recalled or revised). But by reserving this locus of meaning to himself (and the analyst *cum* student) Barthes' systematic reveals itself as individually psychoanalytic in the peculiar sense of being centered on the un/conscious organization of the mind rather than the organization of society. My notes from class say, 'He included the object in the text—between the paragraphs—because he wanted the object to be there—against Todorov.' I am not sure what the opposition to Todorov might have been, but I suspect that Barthes had a strong sense that putting this loaded but hidden signifier of the mother in his work would somehow put his actual mother in the text, not some hypersignifying, semiological algorithm of lexical meanings. In other words, again, the personal over the social.

In that same paragraph, Barthes continues:

> … this zero degree of meaning […] this supplementary, unexpected meaning which is the theatrical sign of the implicit, is pensiveness: the pensive […] is the signifier of the inexpressible, not of the unexpressed.[37]

What is remarkable here is the word 'theatrical'. The zero-degree of meaning of the hidden 'mother' object is the theatrical sign of the inexpressible. But Barthes use of the theater would be unrecognizable to Brecht. Rather than creating a social gesture here, Barthes has made a hermetic and totally self-referential meaning. How can this be theatrical in any Brechtian sense except in the oedipal theater of Barthes inner sensorium? His use of the idea of pensiveness seems part of his constant search for a term that would both make and unmake his authorial/authoritative subject position. Think of degree zero, floating, neutral, pensive as ways of being without being, of doing without doing, and most often about being about being about.

I would like to add a quirkier interpretation of this section on pensiveness. I am not going to claim that it is the only possible, or even a possible, explanation. But it occurred to me in this essay (keeping in mind the original Montaignian meaning of 'essay'—to try, to attempt) that the word 'pensive' kept flashing on my anagrammatic mind as something else. I realized that in both French and English there is an anagram of 'penis' plus 'ev' or 've'.

If the former, 'ev' is used in French as an abbreviation for 'en ville', which means either 'in town' or 'downtown'. ('VE' is a lesser possibility since in English it is used for 'VE Day' which commemorates the victory in Europe, although one could posit a venereal connection.). If we went with the notion of 'en ville', it would signify a ligature between the penis and being downtown or in the center of the city. Given that Barthes deliberately hid his mother in this paragraph, why would he not also allude to his homosexuality, which often involved cruising the central city in search of young men for sex.[38] We can also note Barthes' penchant for hiding or concealing meaning in this work noted by Julia Kristeva in her novel *The Samurai* in which an anagrammatical play engaged with Balzac's name suggested the title *S/Z*.[39] 'Sarrasine' is a story that essentially plays *fort/da* with the penis, having us wonder if the opera singer is male or female. And the painting by Girodet that Balzac uses in the short story as an example of how La Zambinella actually looked also has as its *punctum* a strong shadow falling on the genitals of Adonis creating ambiguity as to whether there is a penis or not. Barthes may have felt that hidden questions of gender and sexuality could also be hidden in this paragraph. Less hidden is a general discussion of the phallus in paragraph XVII, where Barthes uses Lacanian language to discuss who has or does not have the phallus:

> This structure might be defined in phallic terms: (1) to be the phallus (the men: the narrator, M. de Lanty, Sarrasine, Bouchardon); (2) to have it (the women: Marianina, Mme de Lanty, the girl the narrator is in love with, Clotilde); (3) to have it and not to be it (the androgynous: Filippo, Sappho); and not to have it or to be it (the castrato).[40]

It would be facile to say that Barthes has hidden his homosexuality in the paragraph. More likely, if concealment is the case, Barthes is illustrating the drama of a castrato who both reveals and conceals his gendered/ungendered state as a kind of inexpressible plenitude, a 'supplementary, unexpected meaning' which 'having filled the text […] supplement[ed] it with an *et cetera* of plenitudes'.[41] The Marquise, at the end of the tale, 'remained pensive'. For Barthes, this is the classic text saying to the reader that it itself is in a state of 'suspension'. Here, Barthes is inserting meaning, but at the same time denying that the meaning is there—both the mother and the penis—are in a state of suspension—neither signifying nor not signifying.

Barthes Between Foucault

Barthes' in-betweenness—neither teacher nor writer/both teacher and writer, neither activist not critic/both activist and critic, concealer and confessor—stands in contrast not only to Brecht but to one of his most famous contemporaries—Michel Foucault. Although contemporaries, colleagues, and gay men, Barthes seems rarely to mention Foucault in his writings nor interviews and vice versa (although it was Foucault who, it has been said, finally enabled Barthes to give his lectures at the College de France and who provided a moving eulogy for him after his death).[42] Certainly in class, Lacan and Derrida were mentioned but never Foucault. Although both Barthes and Foucault wrote about the death of the author and the author function, only other academics have created a colloquy concerning these two essays. Neither of the protagonists had seriously engaged with the other's ideas, and Foucault does not rely on Brecht at all. Could this be a sign, at least on Barthes' side, that the very politically active and 'out' Foucault was kryptonite to Barthes' more repressed and inwardly turning self even if Foucault might not have seen things that way? In any case, Foucault was reported by Phillipe Sollers to have said when Sollers was defending Barthes, 'One can't be friends with both of us.'[43]

In my first week in Paris, I was charged by Edward Said to deliver a manuscript to Foucault. I was quite terrified to have to call up the intimidating looking academic with the shaved head and the stern expression, figure out how to use the public phone in the café that required a *jeton*, make repeated calls (no answering machines in those days), and then tell Foucault in my faltering French what I was sent to do. When I went to his apartment, he opened the door and apologized saying, 'I am sorry that I haven't been available. I am in the archive all the time.' He was presenting himself as the hermetic scholar rather than the activist intellectual. He was in fact was both although not so seamlessly integrated—as the split between his writings and his interviews indicates.

The Third Meaning

Rather than Brecht's social gest or Foucault's activism, Barthes is drawn toward the personal gesticulation. As Barthes says, '[n]ot every gest is social: there is nothing social in the movements a man makes in order to brush off a fly'.[44] His systematics never move to ascertain what is political, what is factual, what is actionable in history. His work never takes him to the archives to find out the historical context. He is a reader, or a re-reader of underlined literature, not a researcher drawn to the dusty shelves with undiscovered texts. Rather, he is drawn to brushing off the fly. In that sense, meaning isn't social or constructed (except in a semiological sense) but more dependent on the interaction of his personal insight with the social object. And this is linked to the *punctum,* that unaccountable, almost whimsical, moment of visual epiphany. Most clearly, this personalization is located in what Barthes calls the 'obtuse' or third meaning in a film. In looking at Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, Barthes realizes that a woman in mourning is significant to him because her costume is so artificial. 'All these traits (the funny headdress, the old woman, the squinting eyelids, the fish) have as their vague reference a somewhat low language, the language of a rather pitiful disguise.'[45] This third meaning of disguise in film was a 'dramatic dialectic that Brecht would have liked' because it is at once the emotion and the distancing from the emotion as well.[46] This is 'the *expression* of grief', not the grief itself.[47] In this sense, Barthes returns to his 1954 essay on *Mother Courage* in which the fact that we see her blindness sets up a dialectical relation between ourselves and Mother Courage's grief. Yet instead of the political context of 1954, Barthes' noting of the obtuse meaning leads us to the conclusion that this meaning is special because it cannot be described—certainly not critically. 'The obtuse meaning is a signifier without a signified, hence the difficulty in naming it.'[48] Its main function is to 'distur[b], steriliz[e]' criticism and metalanguage.[49] 'The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end', in the realm where articulate language is not more than an approximation.[50]

This *punctum* that produces the 'obtuse' meaning is related to another moment in the class in which Barthes discussed the tick. He was fascinated by the fact this insect's entire life was devoted to waiting patiently, silently, zen-like on a stalk of grass for the moment when the animal or human passes by. Only then arrives the singular moment when the tick jumps from the stalk

and attaches to the body. Why was Barthes so obsessed by the tick? (I recall his sharp, quick pronunciation of the word *tique* because it took me a few minutes to understand that he was referring to the bug.) It could have been that this was the insect version of the *punctum*, the momentary attachment for which one waits a lifetime—whether in photography or desire.

Barthes obsessively moves toward this third meaning in his latter works as a kind of suicidal project in which, like Joseph Conrad, he tries to write about that which is inherently inexpressible. *Camera Lucida* is a 'mad'[51] (to use his word) attempt to say that since photographs are always about what is (was) pure contingency, they are 'outside of meaning' and 'cannot signify […] except by assuming a mask'.[52] Barthes' study of Bunraku, the Japanese shadow-puppet theater, points to the illusory quality of western theater since the visible operators of the puppets are dressed in black and busying themselves around the doll without any 'promotional demagogy.[53] It 'changes the driving link between character and actor'.[54] In this context Barthes praises Brecht as 'the first to understand and state the critical importance of oriental theater' which separates the actor and the character.[55]

Like Eisenstein's use of disguise, Bunraku makes a statement about theater, but that statement is not at the level of the signified. This is similar to Barthes' view of music. What fascinates him is not the *pheno-song*, that is 'everything in the performance which is in the service of communication, representation, expression, everything which it is customary to talk about'.[56] But the *geno-song* is 'the signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings) […] [It is] the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers'.[57] Likewise in his discussion much later of Proust, he sees that author's choice of form as '*a third form*'—'novel? essay? Neither one, or both at once'.[58]

In photography, film, Bunraku, the novel, and music, Barthes finds the essential essence in the third meaning—that meaning which is Brechtian in the sense of calling into doubt the unmediated view of art. But unlike Brecht, that meaning does not involve a call to action. Barthes is even interested in the third meaning in his own works: 'what he says about the large objects of knowledge (cinema, language, society) is never memorable. […] Whatever pertinence there happens to be comes only in the margins, the interpolations, the parentheses, *aslant* [*en écharpe*]: it is the subject's voice *off*, as we say, off-camera, off-microphone, offstage'.[59] The third meaning is then

in a profound way a discourse of marginality, a commitment to the aside, the throw-away line, the style.

In talking about Barthes' ambivalent positionality as professor/confessor, one has to address his lifelong attempt to find a way to talk about this almost ineffable stance about a kind of universal solvent that would undo binaries, decompose and discomfort structure (and politics), while at the same time being personal and quiescent. Barthes' later idea of the 'Neutral' is yet another of these attempts. As he writes in his notes for the College de France lectures, 'I define the Neutral as that which outplays [*déjoue*] the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm.'[60] But he has been baffling the paradigm for years. Now toward the end of his career and life, he fears that he has nothing new to say, while having to present lectures at the Collège de France. Is he, as he notes, 'Condemned to repetition? To seeing the future, until death, as *humdrum*? […] When this text, this lecture course is over, there'll be nothing else for it but to start over again, to begin another one?'[61] We would like to say that Barthes was constantly refining, redefining, examining, reinscribing his insights into new and potentially more explanatory forms. But to his own 'gloomy' insight his work looks like a mechanical reproduction of his artful foundational insight. I do recall that in his later New York University lecture, he dwelt on the fear that we have only one insight in our lives, perhaps two if we are lucky.

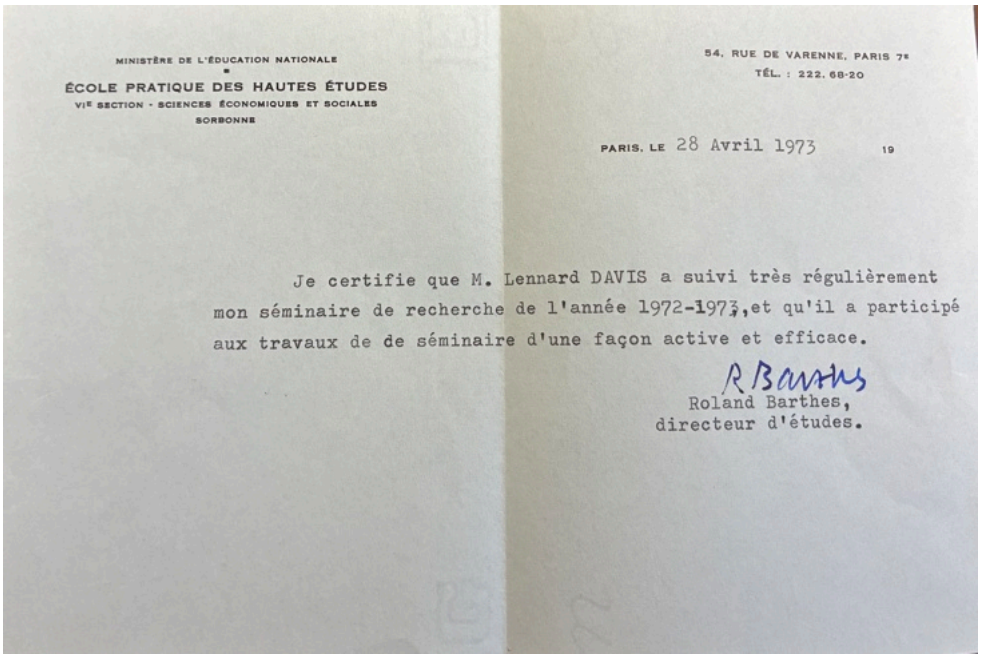
But there is a comfort, if I can say that, of being a consistent being in a world of change and flux. Academia and the intellectual world amount to a discipline, and that discipline acts in the way Foucault foretold—both as form of proliferation and as a molding form of restraint and control. To be Barthes was to both be in that world and subject to that restraint and constraint, and yet to have forged an identity which allowed him to avoid being a specialist. Each new book would be at once a new book and an old one because the centrifugal force holding it together was the living, pulsing, obsessing being Roland Barthes himself by himself. Hence the problem for us is like the problem of the cloud chamber in physics. In the cloud chamber one can see the trail of atomic and subatomic particles. But one can never point to those objects because all that remains is the trace. Thus, with Barthes, we can say he taught, he wrote, he lectured; we can account for the trail, but to make the coherent account we have to provide the supplement, the narrative thread, the chemical structure to which Barthes is always providing the universal solvent that dissolves any such attempt. However, Barthes paradoxically remains

claiming, modestly but powerfully, the third meaning, the obscure meaning, which he has hidden and to which only he has the key. And given the locked nature of the unconscious, we have to wonder if indeed there is any key at all.

Postscripts

I get a letter of recommendation from Barthes. It was sent to my Paris address, the envelope handwritten by him. Typewritten on the École Pratique des Hautes Études letterhead but on a fiche-length paper is '*Je certifie que M. Lennard DAVIS a suivi très régulièrement mon séminaire de recherche de l'année 1972-1973, et qu'il a participé aux travaux de de* [sic] *séminaire d'une façon active et efficace.*' It is signed R Barthes and '*directeur d'études*' is typed beneath the signature. Is this a recommendation aslant? It feels a bit of a throwaway. But the *punctum* is '*active and efficace*'. What does that mean? In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* he observes that he writes in two modes: the active and the reactive. The reactive is moved by indignation, but the active is 'moved by pleasure'.[62] I was hardly effective in class, and I'm not sure how active I was. If I were active, it surely would have been with a very low efficacy in French.

Part of me wonders if this was a projection on his part imagining a more intimate relationship, one 'moved by pleasure' in which I would be both active and effective. Or was myself as part of the 'the student audience', a screen for his projection of activity and efficacy since 'the student audience is still the exemplary Other because it *seems* not to be speaking—so that then, from deep in its apparent silence, it speaks all the louder *in you*: its implicit speech, which is your own, touches you all the more immediately'.[63]



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SORBONNE

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TÉL. : 222. 68-20

PARIS, LE 28 Avril 1973 19

Je certifie que M. Lennard DAVIS a suivi très régulièrement mon séminaire de recherche de l'année 1972-1973, et qu'il a participé aux travaux de de séminaire d'une façon active et efficace.

R Barthes
Roland Barthes,
directeur d'études.

R Barthes

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Or was I as part of the 'the student audience', a screen for his projection of activity and efficacy since 'the student audience is still the exemplary Other because it *seems* not to be speaking—so that then, from deep in its apparent silence, it speaks all the louder *in* you: its implicit speech, which is your own, touches you all the more immediately'.[64]

Barthes and I corresponded a bit after I returned to the US. I don't have those letters, alas, but he did tell me he was coming to New York University to give the now famous lecture '*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure: Proust et moi*' in which he revealed his desire to write a novel and his ambivalence about doing so. I attended the lecture and met with him afterwards. I recall standing on the street near Washington Square Park and talking with him. As many have noted, he was sad during the period after his mother's death. In that talk, which was the opening of his College de France lectures, he said 'I have to get out of this gloomy state of mind that the wearing effects of repetitive work and mourning have disposed me to'.[65] Shortly he too would be dead. Later, I gave a talk about Barthes at a conference hosted by Michel Beaujour at NYU on the subject of Roland Barthes. I believe this essay in its original and unfinished form was what I presented.

Lennard Davis

His Signature

When regarded directly it seems to lack the 'e' between the 'h' and the 's'. Each other letter is clearly written. If there is an 'e' it is hidden in the curve of the 's'. We could ask why someone who spoke so deliberately and slowly, whose writing is so clear and lucid, would elide or swallow the 'e'. If we think of S/Z, orthography and the subtle difference between phonemes were important to Barthes. If his signature had a hidden 'e' could that signify? Is the hidden 'e' a word beginning with that letter—eros? Ego? Essai? Could it be his hidden homosexuality, or perhaps it is something like an obscure object? Could it be the erection that was concealed, shrunken into the 's'? The fact that we are playing this guessing game, searching for the hidden clue, seems vastly appropriate to the professor/confessor who hides his mother's year of birth in a book that no one will even know or find.

Circularity

Shortly after I met Barthes in New York, he crossed the street in Paris and was hit by a laundry van, as we know. He died as a result of the injury. My mother was crossing the street in New York City the year I was a student; she was hit by a van and died of her injuries. This is pure coincidence, but, in my mind, there is a connection. She was sixty-three and he was sixty-four at their deaths. Barthes was so concerned about my story when I explained why I had begun the séminaire late. The mother, the death, the violence, the randomness. And then the same thing happened to him. There is nothing much to say about the alignment, except that it feels like a coda to my classroom experience. It is the *punctum* to this story of the teacher and the student. It provides something solid, but completely aleatory, to hold onto. At least it is for me.

Friend

And now, at seventy-six years old, I am senior to Barthes and no longer the acolyte to the master. Yet, I am still studying with him as I read his postmortem writings and publications. I see an entire life in a way he could not have. If not an Olympian view, I have the benefit of hindsight whereas he had only foresight.

In a Barthian moment, I wonder why I have written this essay. I resurrected it from the past, from my younger self. Did I do it as a nostalgia for my youth, for the beginning of the journey now that I have retired from teaching this past January? Did I do it to rekindle the possibility of knowing the protean Barthes? I certainly wanted to reread some of his important works and to read those works that I had not read, those published after his death. Perhaps I wanted to rekindle something I missed with Barthes? To resurrect the dead Barthes who seemed like a distant land I had once visited.

Rereading his work, I have seen possibilities open up to me in my own writing. Roads not taken. A vista that stretches from rue de Tournon to my farmhouse in upstate New York on a rainy August day. I think of Edward Said's last works on late style; Barthes' *Mourning Diary*. What is the fitting work for the last part of an academic life? My own opus includes much personal reflection including two memoirs and a fair amount of self-scrutiny in regard to disability and poverty—a legacy from Barthes to me, perhaps.

I feel closer to him having delved into his work again, the way one reexperiences a food one has not eaten since childhood. (OK, Proust, yes; Barthes, surely.) This time, as I, the elder, approach Roland some twenty years my junior now, I can put my arm around him and say '*Maintenant, tu peux me traiter comme un ami*' .

I use '*tu*'.

Notes

[1] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1986), p. 332.
[2] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 333.
[3] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 337.
[4] Roland Barthes quoted in Tiphaine Samoyault, *Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Polity Press, 2017), p. 32.
[5] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 332.
[6] Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes* (Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 67.
[7] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p.284.
[8] Quoted in Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 392.
[9] Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 404.
[10] Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 392.
[11] Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 391.
[12] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 52.
[13] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 71.
[14] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 71.
[15] Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, trans. by Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 4.
[16] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language,* p. 309.
[17] Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 190.
[18] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 192.
[19] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 192.
[20] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 193.
[21] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 310.
[22] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language,* p. 312.
[23] Barthes, *Image Music Text* pp. 194–95.
[24] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 215.
[25] Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Éditions du Seuil, 964), p. 48. Translation mine.
[26] Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 48. Translation mine.
[27] Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 48. Translation mine.
[28] Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 49. Translation mine.
[29] Barthes, *Essais critiques*, p. 52. Translation mine.
[30] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 73.
[31] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 73.

[32]Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 74.
[33] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 215.
[34] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 94.
[35] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 94.
[36] Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. by Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 216.
[37] Barthes, *S/Z,* p. 216.
[38] Louis-Jean Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, trans. by Sarah Wykes (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 178.
[39] Calvet, *Roland Barthes*, pp. 169, 204.
[40] Barthes, *S/Z,* p. 35.
[41] Barthes, *S/Z,* pp. 216–17.
[42] Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 409.
[43] Calvet, *Roland Barthes*, p. 137.
[44] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 74.
[45] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 57.
[46] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 58.
[47] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 58.
[48] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 61.
[49] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 61.
[50] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 64.
[51] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 119.
[52] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 34.
[53] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 173.
[54] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 173.
[55] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 177.
[56] Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 182.
[57] Barthes, *Image Music Text,* p. 182.
[58] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 280.
[59] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 73.
[60] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 6.
[61] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 4.
[62] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* p. 43.
[63] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 314
[64] Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 314.
[65] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 5.

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