

Barthes as pedagogue: fragments of two seminars

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Summary

Both texts presented here are previously unpublished material from Roland Barthes. By *from* the translator, who functions as a *scriptor*, means that the authenticity of these fragments is relative to what is usually understood by authorship. As *verbatim* excerpts of Barthes' live teaching their ambiguous status would have pleased the author of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*. These texts illustrate the Barthesian pedagogic rhetoric as well as throw a disturbing light on his conception of *écriture* in its rapport with academic writing. To a large extent these fragments offer an insight into what is often denied to university lecturers: the pleasure of playing games with institutional discourse.

Opsomming

Albei hierdie tekste verteenwoordig vroeër ongepubliseerde werk van Roland Barthes. Met van bedoel die vertaler wat as kopieerder optree dat die outentisiteit van hierdie fragmente betrekking het op wat gewoonlik bedoel word met outeurskap. As woordelike uittreksels uit Barthes se lewende onderrig sou hulle dubbelsinnige status die outeur van *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* behaag het. Hierdie tekste illustreer Barthes se pedagogiese retoriek en werp terselfdertyd 'n ongunstige lig op sy opvatting van *écriture* in verhouding tot akademiese skryfwerk. In 'n groot mate bied hierdie fragmente insig in wat dikwels nie toeganklik is vir universiteitslektore nie: die plesier om te speel met institusionele redevoe-ring.

The scriptor's foreword

In November 1974 Roland Barthes resumed his *petit séminaire* at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, as it was still known in spite of its renaming as *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, after the long summer vacation. For the following eight months sixteen students took part in his *séminaire*, every Thursday, from six o' clock in the evening. Barthes had selected them to ensure a variety of academic backgrounds, social origins, nationalities, ages and *moeurs*. Each of them had to deliver an *exposé* in the course of the year. At the same time Barthes was preparing his formal lectures, *le grand séminaire*, that would deal with *le discours amoureux*, during 1975 and 1976. The enrolment of these sixteen students constituted a rare privilege through which they were confronted, week after week from January 9, 1975, when the *grand séminaire* started, with a Janus-like Barthes: the smiling, sharp and incisive teacher who channelled their efforts towards producing either the *mémoire* or the thesis required for graduation – the aloof and intimidating rhetorician of French critique. Two styles cohabited, the aphoristic or categorizing, proceeding point by point, in the *petit séminaire*, and the periodic and nearly *asianist* in the *grand séminaire*. Barthes savoured and provoked the rituals, rites and *étiquette* which gave rhythm to these meetings. They made patent that critical *énonciation* was a question of place whence some spoke and others simply listened before echoing, in the extra-mural circles of Pari-

sian intelligence, what had been said during both *séminaires*. What remains problematic is the place from which Barthes spoke as a pedagogue. Whereas nearly everything has been said on him as a critic, a writer and an intellectual, his pedagogy remains mysterious. This blank in Barthesian studies, reinforced by the *désenchantement* the new French generation exhibits towards what Barthes represents, obfuscates this simple fact: essentially Barthes was a teacher. In my opinion, an understanding of this question lies in the very tone given by Barthes to the *petit séminaire*. Although references were often made by him to the socratic model or to the *phalanstère* model, historians of structuralism and historians of literary theory have neglected them for lack of a material, which was in any case considered less glamorous than his essays. Literary theorists are also imbued with the idea that a theoretician or a critic of Barthes' stature exerted his influence through the written word. In fact a Bourdieusian sociologist of education could easily prove, by comparing *alumni* lists of the EPHE with American, French, Italian and Swiss Faculties of Arts' directories, that during his fifteen-odd years of teaching at the EPHE Barthes disseminated his knowledge, style and vision more efficiently than through his readership. Paradoxically he who was the French *Université's* pariah reproduced, to use Bourdieu's coinage, teachers.

What then is the status of the texts presented here for the first time? They suggest Barthes' audible and largely lost text. In French, *inédit*. They constitute tyronian notes taken by one of his privileged *scriptores*, a term favoured by Barthes, who recorded Barthes' pedagogic voice. His students found themselves projected in the nascent *Fragments d'une discours amoureux*,¹ the key of which is in fact Werther's neurosis of faithfulness, a state of rapture. The *disjecta membra* that follow, recorded on the 21st and the 28th of November 1974, offer a clear insight into Barthes' oral method and his pedagogy, while throwing a disturbingly raw light on two major issues in literary studies: what is it to write a thesis? Why is academic interpretation intimidating? In brief, what is a scholar?

1 Seminar held on 21 November 1974²

The *auctor* speaks:

"Three things about a thesis: a probatory act of initiation; a probatory model, how to choose an object and how to apply a method to it; a repression (*refoulement*) of the probatory object. What can one (*un sujet*) do with a doctoral thesis? Three orders of operation: a rhetoric of the thesis, a poetics of the thesis, a politics of the thesis.

1.1 Rhetoric of the thesis

Rhetoric was born in Syracuse, in the 5th Century BC, when tyrants were overthrown by popular revolt. At trials set up with popular juries to judge the partisans of the tyrants, the issue was to find the best arguments possible: an apprenticeship in techniques. This discursive staging was a question of power. This code was determined by a *teknè*, the psychological code of those men,

the use of a typology of passions. So, a thesis is destined for a receptacle (*réceptacle*), a coded receiver, the institution, and not for a receiver in order to please him.

1.2 Poetics of the thesis

The sum of techniques, their contrivance (*agencement*) with a view to results. Amphibology: the rule is moral and ludic. This is the amphibology between rhetoric and poetics. The repressed (*le refoulé*), the signifier, is the protraction of a rule. In a modern text the subject produces *signifiance*. It belongs to language (*langage*) and thereby it acquires autonomy. But one does not fabricate (*fabrique*) *signifiance*. Therefore a *tekne*. So, a poetics of modern text is impossible. Modern text always is *hors code* firstly because of language (*la langue*), secondly because of the *mise en texte*. Therefore a poetics of the thesis is possible.

1.3 Politics of the thesis

That is to say the work which will ensure the subject of a place in his work. The thesis departs from its traditional model, *i.e.* the thesis as a sum of *énoncés*, by opening up the *énonciation* and introducing "I". The institutional model is ideological. The opening up of the *énonciation* is a fissure in the ideology. It is therefore a political travail linked to a greater social tremor. Intellectuals have no access to politics but by coming to grips with types of ideological discourses (*discursivité*).

What then is this desire for thesis? The exchange act, the material cause, does not exhaust the topicality of the thesis. From the thesis fantasies are projected (*fantasmes décrochés*):

1. An inscription fantasy: "to enrol at the *EPHE*", to trace oneself on a social surface. There is a neurosis in enrolling. To inscribe oneself: to become a trace, a medal, to transform oneself into an aesthetized object. This may be a desire of immortality, the cultural model of which is the inscription in the stone. What happens to academic enrolments? As with fantasies (a fantasy is a scenario in which the subject positions itself in order to achieve pleasure) they collapse . . . like *soufflés*.

2. A thesis fantasy: one builds a scenario of the thesis to be prepared, one gives oneself a rôle in it. It is a matter of two different fantasies. A fantasy of knowledge, in this case invested in method. But, here,³ the real fantasy is the fantasy of the book. One uses the fantasy of the thesis to repress the fantasy of the book. As a fantasy the book is a complete object, a fetish (*fétichisable et fétichisé*), an object held in your hand, a visual signifier. It is the deployment (*l'éploiement*) of desire in writing, a will to be recognized.

Seduction is most important: a thesis is an object that seduces the author, the fetishist stage, and the others, the hysterical stage. In a thesis there is neurosis and hysteria. Neurosis is the refusal to seduce and the thesis as an institution acknowledges this imposition. Hysteria is the will to seduce.

Let us rediscover in this disgraced object a strain of desire.

What is the aim of this analysis? To induce each of you to analyze your thesis work in order to know where the desire of each of you lies. As for me, I would see myself as a writing pervert who loves a partial object in writing. The criterion for the partial plays a great rôle in my pleasure of writing. I have invested in books, I “fetish” to the extreme. I have spent my life fabricating theses and I know that I will never write a single one. Such are my satisfactions . . . satisfactions.”⁴

Gloss

The major interest I see in this presentation of doctoral research lies in the frontal way by which Barthes exposes, at the outset of the *séminaire*, the crucible of each student’s participation: “How am I going to contribute anything to the discussion since I am supposed to produce a thesis for someone whose dislike of academic exercises is well-known?” In a masterly gesture Barthes anticipates the issue and shifts it to the very act of enrolment. In a manner reminiscent of socratic dialectics, implicit in his conception of the *séminaire*, Barthes lays bare the judicial content of any research endeavour (the rhetoric), its amphibological status (the poetics) and its institutional framework (the politics). Yet, behind the playful Aristotelian categorizing (Barthes’ indebtedness to Aristotle remains to be fully investigated), a three-step displacement may be observed: the devaluation of the *Université* to a discursive staging imitating the birth of the First Sophistzy, the pronouncement on the impossibility of a Poetics of *écriture*, the necessity for doctoral students to become intellectuals. At this point Barthes questions the situation of *énonciation* and expatiates on the concept of *fantasme*. By so reserving the *captatio benevolentiae* of his audience to the second half of his introduction, Barthes sifts the heterogeneous elements of the question until the “I” is left. This brings him to reintroduce the problem of pleasure. Seduction, following the etymology “a drive towards oneself”, no longer pertains to satisfying the others through rhetoric but it provides the subject with what a thesis is not, that is, a book. Then, in urging his students to take cognizance of this ambiguous striving, Barthes unveils his own intimate commitment to pleasure: the *lapsus* closes in a remarkably controlled figure of speech (a *reprehensio*), the elegant spiral-like movement of the introduction which, at the level of *énonciation*, is mimetic of a displacement from general repression to personal exposure. Nowhere else has Barthes explained so clearly the predicament of structuralist critics who, astride academe and creation, research and literature, are affronted by the dual task of reproducing academic fodder and vindicating the fact that the validity of any discourse hinges on its *énonciation*.

2 Seminar held on 28 November 1974

The *auctor* speaks:

“Intimidating discourses (*les intimidations de langage*) have been a long-standing interest of mine.

1. State of fear, of this *je ne sais quoi* that fear is. Any research on language

(*le langage*) except in linguistics, implies as a point of departure that the subject is in its most deficient state a subjective indecency. There exist two powers of deficiency/desertion (*défection*): love and fear.

2. Terminology: discourse/text/*écriture*. This terminology is a denoted state, a speech artefact that helps us to think. No morsel of language is ever pure. The only nonconnoted language is the algorism. Question: is there an algoristic connotation?

Discourse. Firstly, a generic meaning, by extension: any delimited nappe of *parole*.⁵ Secondly, a specific meaning, by intension,⁶ when an object of speech (*un objet de parole*) is submitted either to a specific ideological structure – the structure of which is determined by the rapport between language and power(s) – or to a rhetoric and nonlinguistic structure.

Text. Firstly, discourse in its first definition, when negating and overflowing discourse in its second definition. Secondly, by the notion of *signifiante* (Kristeva),⁷ that is the nonarrested signified, a haemorrhage of the signifier: the text is a *katalepsis*. Thirdly, that place where language is denied power.

Écriture. Here, taken in a different meaning from the *Degré zéro*:⁷ an erotic signifying practice. There exists an enjoyment of writing (*une jouissance d'écriture*) the theory of which remains to be written.

3. The anthropological question of the double: the question of discourse (*la discursivité*) is more important than that of language. The question of the birth of division of labor and the question of the birth of language, that is the duality between materiality and ideality, are both historical. One should couple both points: the question of the birth of discourse (*discours*), that *quid* between the first speaking man and the first rhetorical man. When did the antithesis, the duality begin? With Vico rhetoric acquired an anthropological and an historical dimension.

4. Intimidating discourses differ from terrorist discourses. There are *terrorèmes*. For instance, in inverted commas: “What is the birth of language?”. Their aim is to terrorize and not to intimidate. This is the question of terrorizing with words (see the 1869 preface to Michelet’s *Histoire de France*):⁹ the decisive power of reality manipulated by the enemy.

The intimidating discourse belongs to the sticky, the gummy type. The terrorist type of discourse is of the cutting, excluding type; such is the issue when analyzing the militant discourse.

5. Discourse/Power. According to Augustin, there are three *libidines*: the *libido sentiendi*, the *libido sciendi*, the *libido dominandi*. Psycho-analysis has reworked the *libido sentiendi*. Power, in our field, is the great *impensé* of psycho-analysis. Why? Power is the Prince, the Sovereign and so on. Nowadays there is a new fact: numerous pressure groups, the cleavage between Power and non-power is not strict. Pressure groups exist outside Power (the French Communist Party, the intellectuals), potential groups of intimidation. What is happening is a displacement from an ethic of minorities (the gist of democracy) to an ethic of marginalities. *Écriture* is a place devoid of any form of power, an absolute marginality, the only language outside any power.

Yet there always exists a little style, an inevitable cultural trace.

6. I set myself two aims: firstly, an ethology of languages, the classification

and analysis of functioning according to the *moeurs* of the communities who speak these discourses. For us, these discursive communities supersede linguistic communities. Secondly, an ethic of discourses: how to behave oneself amid discourses?

7. Which are the intimidating discourses? A criterion: each of us must think of a possibility of being excluded from a discourse. Is it truly a criterion? . . . In any case, let us distinguish between five liberated forms of intimidating discourse: the medical discourse (from the prescription to the leaflet); the psycho-analytical discourse (which was last year's seminar topic); the socratic discourse that attempts at putting the other one in contradiction with oneself; any discourse of interpretation, especially held by and/or in front of a subject (Zen refuses interpretation); the philosophical discourse, the arrogances of language you find in Nietzsche and Bataille."

Gloss

This presentation prefaced the distribution of seminar topics which were generally related to the students' theses. Although there seems to be no direct link between this introduction and the previous one, Barthes, who is a master of suspense (the actual figure of rhetoric is called *sustentatio*), discloses another crucible of the *séminaire* situation: "How can I speak up without being daunted by the others?" This question of *énonciation*, at the core of any inquiry into discourse, operates as a pattern for an understanding of intimidation. Since all participants are seeking some kind of truth about their own desire and the desirability of their discourse to others, they should investigate the difference between language and discourse, and the latter's relation to love and fear. In such intersubjective hermeneutic echoing, discourses tend in the first place to assume terrorist features: subjects, caught in the dialectical wish to power, set themselves up as minorities. Barthes notes, with socratic irony (as in his rhetorical question: "What is the birth of language?"), that, if the seminar situation permits intimidation, it nevertheless allows each participant to acknowledge the possibility of not understanding and being excluded from someone else's discourse. This appreciation leads Barthes to remind his students that the *séminaire* should eventually emerge as a marginality where *écriture* would be the common attitude to discourse. A direct influence of Fouriérist utopia shines here through Barthes' speech. While the two-fold aim of an ethology and an ethic of discourses constitutes the official hermeneutic project of the seminar and, as such, is one of those theses Barthes never wrote, its marginal and libinal drift lies in Barthes' desire for non-reproduction (to use Bourdieu's terminology). The accuracy with which Barthes defines key words is therefore upset and debased by a triple codicil: the definition of discourse is torn by scholastic logic; the text is a *kataleipsis*; *écriture* adopts a different meaning. The concluding sentence is remarkable insofar as it uncovers one of Barthes' underlying interests: Nietzschean and Bataillan writing exemplify *écriture*, yet how can their arrogance (one of Barthes' striking coinages) not be intimidating? Barthes let his students savour this second *sustentatio* and meditate on written arrogance. As for us protracted

readers, we should appreciate the quiet lesson Barthes is providing on the status of the lecturer, the supervisor and the academic writer. Are we arrogant, marginal or simply terrorist?

Notes

1. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* came out in 1978: rhetorically speaking it was Barthes' final appropriation of a style of writing, reminiscent of the French moralists' "arrogant" *style coupé* as well as Nietzsche's. Barthes devotes several pages to this topic in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). It is topical that his favourite written style coincides with his oral manner and that Barthes acknowledges their rhetorical drift. *A lover's discourse* evinces a similar attention to fragmentation and details; so does notetaking in the seminar's situation.
2. Both transcriptions are from nearly *verbatim* notes. The numbering of sections is Barthes'. The author expresses his gratitude to Miss Patricia Hardy, South African National Gallery, Cape Town, for checking the English.
3. *I.e.* in this seminar.
4. This *lapsus* is given as it happened. Barthes could not repress a smile.
5. I kept the word *nappe* since in English its geological meaning exactly renders what Barthes intended.
6. *Extension* and *intension* as in logic.
7. This is probably a reference to Julia Kristeva's book *Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, published in 1969.
8. *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* was initially published in 1953. It ran through two more editions, in 1965 and 1972.
9. This is a reference to a new preface written in September, 1869 by Jules Michelet for the new edition of his monumental *Histoire de France* (1833-1867, 17 volumes). Barthes devoted his second book to the French historian, *Michelet par lui-même*, 1954.

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