‘As if spoken by a character in a novel’: The Tragic Knowledge of Barthes’ Performative Writing

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A Writer who Speaks: Staging ‘Extreme Subjectivity’

At the end of his first lecture course on *How to Live Together* (*Comment Vivre Ensemble*, 1977, first published in 2002), Barthes acknowledged his dissatisfaction with his lecturing at the Collège de France, as he felt unable to nuance how he presented himself to his audience:

> Only writing is capable of picking out extreme subjectivity because only in writing is there a concord between the indirectness of the expression and the truth of the subject – concord that’s impossible on the level of speech (and so impossible to achieve in a lecture course) because, whatever our intentions, speech is always both direct and theatrical.[1]

This remark reiterates an opposition between writing and speech, frequent in Barthes’ thinking, in which the latter term is negatively connotated. While writing, the receiver of the text is absent from the room, and thus deferred, imagined. In contrast, speaking in public means the audience’s presence (and expectations) has to be acknowledged and addressed directly. So, even if the topic at hand is as personal as Barthes’, in a lecture hall, like an actor on a stage, one is inevitably cast into a role and turned into an image. For Barthes, even when trying to be sincere, directness inevitably becomes a pose, shaped by a constant self-reflection about the other’s evaluation of one’s performance.

So, for Barthes, speech creates a theatrical setting: a body talking before a silent audience, exposed to their gaze, directly caught in the moment of utterance. In ‘Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers’ (‘Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs’, 1971) he already states: ‘As soon as you have finished speaking, the vertigo of the image begins: you exalt or regret what

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you have said, the way you have said it, you *imagine yourself* (you consider yourself as an image); speech is subject to remanence, it *smells*.'[2] Writing offers the chance to escape this '*staging* imposed by the use of speech', because it 'has no *smell*: produced (having accomplished its process of production), it *falls*, not like a collapsing soufflé but like a meteorite disappearing ; it will *travel* far from my body'.[3]

But just as is the case with other oppositions in Barthes' work implying a value judgment – e.g., readerly vs. writerly, pleasure vs. bliss – the opposition between speech and writing is not as straightforward as it seems. When in his lecture notes of *How to Live Together* Barthes continues his remarks on the difference between writing and speech, he gives the example of his seminar on the lover's discourse, and the consequent, hugely successful *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 1977). He deems the book less rich but 'more true',[4] implying that the written text was a better expression of his 'extreme subjectivity' because it was cleansed from the theatricality of direct speech in the seminar itself. But already in the introduction to *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes muddies the waters when he deliberately stages the lover as a speaking subject: 'So it is a lover who speaks and who says'.[5] While the 'live' body of the writer is absent in the act of reading a text, the 'voice' of the writer does not take a disembodied standpoint outside the textual universe: it belongs to a specific body made present in language. It is precisely this presence of a subjectivity that 'performs' (*in*) the text that cuts across the neat opposition between writing and speech. We can even argue that the 'truth of the subject' Barthes was looking for in writing actually required such a staged performance of subjectivity. In his lecture notes of the seminar on the lover's discourse, Barthes emphasized the fundamental, and inevitable, theatrical nature of subjectivity itself: 'subjectivity is *theatrical*, an infinite theatre of signs at the end of which there is nothing'.[6] Here, Barthes seems to overlap with what theatre and performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan argues in *The Ends of Performance* (1998): that performance, understood as 'twice behaved behaviour',[7] eventually simply becomes '"behaviour" because it is performed much more than twice'.[8] Which is to say that it is only through theatrical, *performative* situations that the subject is shaped and revealed – for there is no essential subjective 'truth' hidden behind the 'theatre of signs'.

Especially since *The Pleasure of the Text* (*Le Plaisir du texte*, 1973), subjectivity – and its relationship to performativity – had gradually

become more important in Barthes' writing. As the author states at the beginning of *A Lover's Discourse*:

> Whence the choice of a 'dramatic' method which renounces examples and rests on the single action of a primary language (no metalanguage). The description of the lover's discourse has been replaced by its simulation, and to that discourse has been restored its fundamental person, the *I*, in order to stage an utterance, not an analysis.[9]

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes is very well aware of the staging of this 'I' who speaks. That is why he calls the different headings introducing each fragment an 'instrument of distancing, signboard à la Brecht'.[10] For just like Brecht, Barthes wanted to expose the theatrical lure and break the spell of a too direct, uncritical identification with what happens on stage: the audience should always know that it is just a simulation, a staging of subjectivity. In 'The Death of the Author' (1967) he had already famously remarked on the fallacy of seeking any personhood in a text, pointing at writing as a 'destruction of every voice',[11] a space where 'the very identity of the body writing' is obliterated.[12] It is, he writes, language that '"performs", and not "me"'.[13]

But when Barthes presents the image of the mourner in the second part of *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre claire*, 1980), published three years after *A Lover's Discourse*, the Brechtian signboards are gone. The opening of the second part suggests that this 'fundamental person, the *I*' now coincides with Barthes himself: 'Now, one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs.'[14] This more straightforward way of presenting himself is in line with the 'new Aesthetic' Barthes proposed in one of the final lectures of *The Preparation of the Novel* (*La Préparation du roman*, 1978-80, first published in 2003). There, he adamantly defended the notion of *simplicitas*: the desire to write texts that are readable, non-ironical, and without the kind of sophisticated intertextuality that 'will prove to the reader judge that we've not been taken in by ourselves, by what we've written, by literature, etc.'.[15] It is precisely this kind of rhetorical safeguard that Barthes now wants to expel from his writing: 'what simplicity wants, will want, then, is for us to write, as much as possible, *at face value*'.[16]

This shift for Barthes is not only aesthetical, but also ethical. It is a crucial element of the project of the *Vita Nova* that Barthes explored in his final years: 'for someone who has *experienced the jouissance, the joy of writing* […], there can be no other *Vita Nova* (or so it seems to me) than

the discovery of a new writing practice'.[17] This ethical project implied a return of the subject, without the need to immediately denounce it as a lure. In fact, the lure itself has now become an active, transformative force: 'Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity. Better the Imaginary of the Subject than its censorship.'[18] So, while it appears that the 'truth' of subjectivity can only be *written*, as Barthes stated at the end of his very first lecture course, this writing has to be a 'new practice' – *performative*, a writing that does not pursue 'meaning' as much as become 'meaningful in the material, dis/continuous act of writing', as communications and performance scholar Della Pollock would put it in her ground-breaking 1998 essay 'Performing Writing'.[19] The writer (and the reader) thus learns what the lover in *A Lover's Discourse* already knew: 'it is not the truth which is true, but the relation to the lure which becomes true'[20]– the *way* it happens, a 'twice behaved behaviour'.

What we would like to propose in this essay is indeed to adhere to this 'truth of the lure' created by Barthes' textual expression of his 'extreme subjectivity'. We want to argue that he does this by developing a specific form of performative writing that allows him to stage a speaking subject in the text, while at the same time escaping the directness of speech, the exposure of a body in front of an audience. We want to argue that Barthes does this by turning himself into a character. This process is made explicit in the opening statement of Barthes' extraordinary autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, 1975); a statement that – similar to the staging of the lover's discourse as a speech act – frames *all* of the book as a performance: '*It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.*'[21] What if we were to follow Barthes' later appeal to *simplicitas*, take the lure of this 'as if' 'at face value' indeed, and treat Barthes as a character '[p]racticing language. Performing writing. Writing performatively'?[22] A character forged through 'a fundamentally material practice' that 'make[s] writing speak as writing'?[23] This would allow us to assemble a citational, dramatic Barthes-character that performs *in* the text, *as* text, *from* text. And this character does not have to be limited to the staged subjectivity we encounter in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida*. We can expand it to all of Barthes' writing of that period, including the posthumously published works, such as *Incidents (Incidents*, 1987) and *Mourning Diary* (*Journal de deuil*, 2009), the seminar and lecture notes, as well as the personal archive which his biographer, Tiphaine Samoyault, had access to. By considering all these different texts 'as if spoken by a character in a novel', we propose

a speculative framing of Roland Barthes as a character generated in and by the act of writing itself.

As we will argue in what follows, by constructing Barthes as a textual character that emerges from all these different texts, we turn ourselves into performative readers, or even co-performers: we no longer approach him and his writing with a detached scholarly outlook, but intertwined, moved, transformed by what is evoked in the writing.[24]

Performative Writing and Citational Being

In 'Performing Writing', Della Pollock argues for a writing that 'refuses an equally easy and equally false distinction between performance and text, performance and performativity/textuality, or, for that matter, performativity and print-textuality'.[25] As she stresses, this refusal is not 'to wring the life out of performance' or 'to remarginalize it within cultures of scholarship', but rather to see how performative writing allows to counter 'the absence/death of performance in processes of knowledge formation'.[26] By considering writing as a potential form of performance, she sees a chance to 'write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social mortalities, to make writing/textuality speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain'.[27] A proposal so Barthesian that it is no surprise to see Barthes' name pop up in the paper several times.[28] For, despite Pollock not developing further the relation between Barthes and performative writing herself, these remarks are indeed a good description of what Barthes was exploring in his last years.

Pollock goes on to unfold performative writing into 'six excursions' that seek to present the characteristics of performative writing as 'a technique, even a technology'.[29] These reveal further aspects of how language is enacted in writing. The first excursion is the ability to be 'evocative', by which Pollock means writing that make that which is absent or intangible ('words of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight') present by bringing the reader (or audience) into the world created by language (provoking the encounter of 'the writer and the world's bodies').[30] This evocation allows for creative and critical modes to intrude on each other, very much thanks to the *incorporation* of the writer's experience. Performative writing, here

> moves *with*, operates alongside, sometimes through, rather than above or beyond, the fluid, contingent, unpredictable, discontinuous rush of (performed) experience – and *against* the assumption that (scholarly) writing must or should do otherwise.[31]

These processes of transference and incorporation are, of course, essential to our argument, and are intimately related to the second excursion, by which performative writing is metonymic: it can never be 'whole' for it is forever substituting language for the world, to the point where it can unwrite itself.[32] Consequently, it finds itself sufficiently 'filled with longing',[33] that the writing can become 'an *enactment* of loss'.[34] Barthes the character, performatively un/made in the process of writing, is a metonymy for the real author, and, in turn, re/made in the readers' minds.[35]

Pollock then reaches the 'subjective' possibilities of performative writing.[36] These are not straightforward autobiographical, individualist aspirations. On the contrary, and again, crucially, she refers to the 'critical "intimacy"' spurred by the embodiment of

> the performative self or subjectivity as the performed relation between or among subjects, the dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous (rather than continuous) relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and/or reader(s).[37]

Barthes the subject is, again, one such cluster of performed relations with whom both the author and his readers have this critical intimacy. Pollock doubles down in refusing this subjective notion to be a mere projection of the self, but 'a relation of being and knowing' capable of articulating, shifting from one's experience to another, making these anew in the process.[38] This lack of stability, this constant, restless movement, resonates in the next excursion, nervousness, according to which performative writing 'anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice'.[39] The term 'nervous' refers not so much to a fidgeting-like movement, as to a bodily transmission similar to that of the nervous system, generating meaning in the relay. This sense of crossing delivers into what is possibly the most significant excursion for us in our argument: citationality.

Having suggested that 1) Barthes' writerly performance successfully *evokes* a persona that then exists in the text and in the readers'

minds; that 2) this character is *metonymic* for the actual Barthes-the-person, and therefore self-aware of the implicit loss; that 3) despite this irresoluble absence, the writing fires off a network of relations between *subjectivities*; and it does so in a way that 4) simulates the electricity in the body's *nervous* system, sparking off different bodies of knowledge – we proceed to establishes how Barthes' writerly performativity is *citational.*

The definition of performance as a 'twice behaved behaviour' evidences just how close citationality and performativity are. Pollock posits that performative writing 'quotes a world that is already performative – that is composed in and as repetition and reiteration'.[40] This ability to re-present already existing material has, in Pollock's discourse, two consequences: the 'expos[ure of] the fragility of identity, history, and culture', and, in turn, the possibility of using this repetition's self-knowledge in order to play with the inevitable differences that incur in its multiplication.[41] In an example that is relevant to our proposal, Pollock cites Umberto Eco's idea that it is no longer possible to say 'I love you' and not sound like the sentence is a direct quote from a cheap romance novel. She writes, 'In citational performativities, love comes home to language, and language to desire, each renewing itself in the other-texts and other-bodies without which it is nothing.'[42]

The implications, here, are significant. If we consider Barthes as a character, it is obviously a character that is aware of its citational condition. In his seminar notes on the lover's discourse, we can read that 'Phrase = (virtual) "quotation". The quotation is what is *immediately* invested by my existential situation.'[43] And he does it again in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: 'in order to speak one must seek support from other texts'.[44] What strikes us here is how seamlessly citations help bridge not only (hyper)textual realities, but *existential* ones. The subject performs language, but this language is not theirs. Nonetheless, this does not stop these borrowed phrases from being 'true' to personal, embodied experiences: these phrases, as we were saying, travel not only from text to text, but also from text to life. Existence itself becomes a performance of previous scripts, an embodied 'quotation' of a 'Phrase' capable of creating those nervous and subjective associations. Which means the affective iteration of these quotes does not stop with the performative written subject; it also travels to the reader. Which is why Pollock finally calls performative writing *consequential.*[45] As she considers the power of speech to alter reality, performative writing becomes a 'mobilizing *praxis*' and 'an operational means of action and effects'.[46] The citational performance continues, transferred to the reader who becomes a cowriter in the process.

The textual iteration of the writer's subjectivity thus engages the reader's, and forces their involvement in the process.

Almost a decade after 'Performing Writing', Pollock revisited some of the ideas in that essay in 'The Performative "I"' (2007). Here, Pollock is specifically invested in untangling the issues of this (shared) subjectivity-forming iteration, what she calls 'the passionate, excessive, errant, collective and often exuberantly irregular "I"',[47] a 'becoming-"I"' (on the verge of [a] becoming "we")'.[48] And this is precisely the point we are trying to make: that Barthes performed a passionate 'becoming-I', which 'emerges as a writing self, not a writer or author per se but a figure of semiosis-in-process'.[49] Borrowing from Austin and Derrida, she asserts that identity is citational in itself, 'the material effect of embodied repetitions', and as a result, selfhood is an illusion.[50] This extends to 'linguistic figures like *I, me, you, him*' since these, too, 'are materially embedded in language systems that [...] are as much given to lies as they are to truth, or are essentially fictive'.[51] The resulting "I" is deemed 'always a creative self-fashioning', a citational, linguistic, performative assemblage 'that the desirous reader [...] hungry for truths [...] willingly ignores' and accepts.[52]

Barthes as a Tragic Character

And so it is that, returning to Barthes, the engaging quality of wandering quotes, this 'Phrase' that becomes 'invested' by an 'existential situation' is made clear. In an auditorium at the Collège de France, on 18 February 1978, Barthes offers the introductory lecture of his lecture course on *The Neutral* (*Le Neutre* 1977-8, first published in 2002). He says to his audience: 'I want to live according to nuance. Now, there is a teacher of nuance, literature; try to live according to the nuances that literature teaches me.'[53] This is a crucial quote: it both summarizes what is at stake for Barthes in his lectures, and describes the ethical project that underlies his teaching as professor of literary semiology at the Collège de France. Barthes goes on to illustrate the importance of nuance by highlighting the difference between saying 'my lips on his hand' versus 'my tongue on his skin'.[54] The same gesture, kissing a hand, could be interpreted as either a sign of lechery or sentimentality, depending on the choice of words. What might have seemed a fictional, or gratuitous example is actually a citation – from both life and writing. 'Fragments pour H.' is a personal letter written in 1977 and only published posthumously in 1986 by its intended

receiver, 'H.' (writer and photographer Hervé Guibert). A private text, it describes a personal, domestic setting – a great contrast to the auditorium where Barthes would eventually repeat it. In it, Barthes and Guibert quarrel: 'The meaning of the scene is as follows: by distancing spectacularly his body from mine, retreating to the back of the room, leaving it in a haste, he made me into a leaper: I would have leaped on him, and, in advance, he got out of the way.'[55] Guibert had reproached Barthes for having put his tongue on his skin. 'I did not want "my tongue on his skin" at all, but only, or otherwise, "my lips on his hand".'[56] In her biography, Samoyault alleges that Barthes may have, in *citational* jest, proposed sex to Guibert in exchange for an introduction to one of the latter's texts, *quoting* a similar proposal from the epilogue of Balzac's *Sarrasine*.[57] This would then be a somewhat eccentric, intellectual variant of Eco's remark that one is no longer capable of saying 'I love you' without being self-consciously citational. But Barthes may have been citing not so much Balzac, but Racine. More specifically, he may have been reiterating a formula of Eros that Barthes himself had already identified as recurrent in the playwright's work: 'A has complete power over B. A loves B, who does not love A.'[58] Since he had already noted in his book on Racine that the passionate, frustrating 'Amour-Passion' in some of Racine's protagonists resonated with his own love life, the intimate scene above may have been the unconscious performance of a fantasy, a doomed scenario the subject re-enacts unconsciously making the self an unwilling performer in a libidinal script.[59] The double 'use' of the quote allows it to travel back and forth from the private to the public. The same, in fact, as happened with the 'figures' Barthes discussed in the *A Lover's Discourse*. As Samoyault's archive work makes clear, the figures travelled from a personal 'cahier-journal' to the seminar and then, finally, to the book. In his seminar on the lover's discourse, Barthes found himself talking about love while the object of his (unrequited) desire, a young psychiatry student, was present in the room, making the seminar 'a troubled space, closely mixing pedagogical relation, literary experiment and amorous life, an autofictional space'.[60]

Using Samoyault's biography here is not an attempt to get to the autobiographical truth about Barthes by exposing a personal issue that gave shape to his thinking. It is precisely this opposition between the hidden truth and textual appearance that Barthes tried to deconstruct. As we already quoted, for Barthes, there is nothing behind the 'theatre of signs'. Just like the scenes in a classic novel all belong to the same diegetic universe, the 'private' and 'public' Barthes as they both emerge from his

texts 'perform' at the same level here, without hierarchy. Together, these different existential situations help us to understand the character better, allow us to grasp why Barthes actually disliked his own live performance. Whether a melancholic 'lover' in the scene of the seminar, a 'leaper' in the domestic scene with Guibert, or a 'professor' in the scene of the Collège de France, Barthes felt that his affectivity was painfully misunderstood by the other – both in his theory and in his personal life. Hence his wish to hide the obscene presence of his affected body, and create a delayed, more controlled, distant context (that of the auditorium), behaving the behaviour twice, and doubling down in the gap of difference generated. But the citational performativity at play reaches beyond the texts in which it appears and *affects* us, too – *consequentially*. If we understand Barthes as a subject in process of becoming generated in the writing itself, we can swerve away from autobiographical judgement, and into an opportunity for empathy and learning: we find ourselves dealing with a performative-'I' that reiterates previous texts – not only by literally citing a text (the 'Phrase'), but also by performing previous scripts. In this case, we want to argue, the character Barthes invites us to interpret him within the context of a very specific narrative form of western culture: the script of tragedy. Not only in his private love life Barthes-the-character reiterated the tragic protagonist (in this case, Racine's), but also in other domains his character can be viewed in the tragic mode.

When we consider Barthes to be a tragic character, we follow the definition of tragic thinking that professor of Theatre Studies Hans-Thies Lehmann gives in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016):

> a primeval or essential bent toward destruction, an enduring fall, a mode of experience that rouses to pessimism and denial of the world. It is elicited by a violation of due measure, an overstepping that lies within Being itself, an a priori 'too much' that marks existence and life.[61]

In our epistemological separation of theory and literature we tend to forget that, through the ages, tragedy has also been a mode of *knowledge*, one that also combines the reflective with the affective. As drama scholar Peter Arnott argued in 'Greek Drama as Education' (1970), ancient Greek tragedy had an important didactical function:

> In the fifth century at least, the drama, like all poetry, was considered primarily as a teaching medium. The poet was the *didaskalos*, teacher, not merely in the sense that he taught his

> actors and choruses, but also with the implication that he instructed his public, through a medium that offered the widest possibilities for the dissemination of ideas and information, and which could also, in a single hearing, reach the greater part of the body politic.[62]

In this light, we can argue that Barthes' performative writing is an unexpected heir to this dramatic genre that combined the reflective with the affective, the intellectual with the emotional, and also art with ethics. In other words, we can learn not only from Barthes the scholar (the one who writes), but also from Barthes the character (the one that emerges in the writing), because the latter has an emotional impact on his readers. As Lehmann points out, this affective knowledge production of tragic performance got eclipsed in the reception of tragedy:

> The formula *pathei mathos*, learning through suffering, held not just for the hero but also for the spectator. *Anagnorisis* meant experiencing a massive blow to the mythologically arranged world, and it entailed uncertainty about the soundness of the juridical, mental and religious foundations of the *polis*.[63]

As a character, Barthes appears as a tragic hero who learns through suffering, and passes this learning on to his readers, or rather, his co-writers. Once we accept the possibility of Barthes-the-character, we can then compare him to other dramatic, fictional characters, and not only to other thinkers, as would be more common; and also, at the same time, increase the citational potential of his 'existential situation'. To be sure, this is not a belated postmodern anachronistic and ontological game with textual subjectivities. We want to demonstrate that the possibility of a performative, becoming-Barthes creates a site where he can reiterate, transformatively 'quote' fictional characters from different historical periods; which then actually reveals aspects of Barthes' project that we would not encounter were we to stick to the actual context of his own contemporary French intellectual culture.

The Flaw of Acedia

In his *Poetics* (ca. 335 BCE), Aristotle names *hamartia*, the fatal flaw that leads to the hero's downfall, as one of the essential elements in a tragic plot.[64] Obviously, Barthes' transgressive return to the intimacy of the individual subject is far less extreme than the overconfidence that makes Oedipus commit patricide and incest, or Antigone's rigid refusal to obey her uncle's order not to bury her brothers. But we want to argue that it can nonetheless be read as a kind of transgression, an 'overstepping' that – however subtle – radically challenged the intellectual norms of its days. As one of the fashionable godfathers of French theory and artistic avant-garde, the protagonist transgressed the laws of his intellectual polis. He wanted to reclaim some classical humanistic values, and affirm those elements (the intimate, the imaginary, the genre of the novel…) that he had questioned earlier himself, be it from a structuralist, Marxist, or psychoanalytical perspective. This intellectual *hamartia* is closely linked to another, affective one: the violent way his mother's sickness and subsequential death affected him. This was a mourning that, as Barthes himself stated in *The Neutral*, went against the social code:

> society codifies mourning in order to assimilate it: after a few weeks, society will reclaim its rights, will no longer accept mourning as a state of exception: requests will begin again as if it were incomprehensible that one could refuse them: too bad if mourning disorganizes you longer than stated by the code.[65]

In *The Preparation of the Novel*, too, Barthes continued to claim this weary 'state of exception', this '*same, uninterrupted* sadness, a kind of listlessness that (since a recent bereavement) bears upon everything I do, everything I think (lack of investment)'.[66] It was an obstinate refusal to deny his own weariness and mourning that Barthes both beautifully and painfully expressed in his *Mourning Diary*.

Long before the 'affective turn' in the Humanities made it acceptable for scholars to openly talk about personal loss, pain, suffering, Barthes claimed the right to an expression of mourning that was neither productive nor creative; a mourning that blocked, inhibited, and ultimately thwarted Barthes' desire to write a novel as a way to give form to this grief. In these texts appears what Pollock earlier called 'the passionate, excessive, errant, collective and often exuberantly irregular "I"',

but moreover, an excessive I, that like the protagonist in a tragedy, is doomed to fail: at the end of his very last lecture at the Collège he had to admit that he had been unable to write a novel.[67] When we read the lecture courses, we might be tempted to interpret this failure, too, as a deliberate performance, assuming Barthes to be someone merely pretending that he intends to produce a work. In fact, he seems to suggest so himself: 'I am playing a role, I'm exercising and revealing an imaginary [...] I'm not going to produce a work – other than the Course itself'.[68] This has also been the conclusion of some of Barthes' critics, like Diana Knight and Thomas Clerc, who considered this 'Novel' merely a conceptual figure, never really intended to be real.[69] And yet, as the notes found in Barthes' personal archive make clear, he was in fact working on it, and had already assembled plenty of material, which reveals that he was much more seriously involved in writing a novel than he wanted his audience to believe.[70] In a way, Barthes is only pretending that he is pretending: under the guise of a simulation, he was actually exploring this 'new practice of writing'. The reason why he could not write a novel was thus not merely theoretical, but also, and most importantly, affective. A personal note from July 1979 makes it clear: 'in the end, I am separated from it – by grief, sorrow, depression – acedia'.[71] And of course, there was also the fatal van accident on his way to the Collège, only two days after giving his last lecture of *The Preparation of the Novel*. This tragic element of course influences our reading of Barthes: more than the 'original' audience of his books and lectures, we are aware of both Barthes' genuine ambition to write a novel, and the fact that his time was running out, and Barthes would not get the chance to overcome his weariness.

Obviously, this 'flaw' of weariness separates Barthes from the heroes of classic Greek tragedy, who played a much more active role in their own downfall. However, his passivity reiterates another important tradition within the tragic genre. Barthes' explicit melancholy makes him an heir of the tragic protagonists of baroque theatre, as discussed by Walter Benjamin.[72] There, the hero comes too late to the stage, and can only reflect on a world in decline, warily, unable to change the tide. This sentiment of decline is particularly clear in *The Preparation of the Novel*: the golden era of the great novelists, Tolstoi, Proust, Gide, is over. Literature is no longer sacred, young writers are no longer fully invested in their writings, and books are objects about as solemn as frozen pizzas. When Barthes wants to return to the earlier tradition, he discovers that it has lost its aura. He laments the loss, implicitly compares himself to an aristocrat without money. And here again we see how different existential

situations get intangibly mixed in his phrasing, and his very intimate experiences of mourning as a son seem to influence his cultural analysis as a professor: 'I can sense that literature is on the decline, in the process of dying out: it's then that I love it with a penetrating, even an overwhelming love, in the way one loves and embraces something that's going to die.'[73] In a nervous, performative jump, he is talking about literature like he is talking about his mother.

Beyond Plot

Barthes' inability to act, to get the *Vita Nova* going, and to write the Novel, also makes his lecture courses sympathetic to the symbolist theatre of Maurice Maeterlinck. Just like Maeterlinck, Barthes disliked any notion of plot. Intimate contemplations, what happens inside characters, are much more relevant than outer acts. One way in which Maeterlinck avoided action was to simply start after the tragedy: in his piece *The Blind* (*Les Aveugles*, 1890), for instance, a group of blind, anonymous people await the return of their priest, unaware that he is already sitting between them, dead. Lehmann uses Adorno's remark about Beckett's theatre – 'the catastrophe has already occurred' – to describe the dramatic situation of *The Blind*.[74] Barthes famously used a similar quote in *Camera Lucida* (this time not by Adorno, but by Winnicott), in order to describe his reaction to finding a photograph of his mother as a child: 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.'[75] Winnicott's (or Adorno's) quote can in fact be used to describe the atmosphere of the whole of Barthes' later work: the catastrophe, the death of his mother, seems to have already occurred and makes every action futile and doomed in advance. Barthes desperately searches for a new mode of existence, of writing, that could guide him – but just like the priest, the Novel appears to be already dead on stage; like Godot, the much anticipated, salvatory *Vita Nova* does not manifest itself.

What lies beyond the symbolic theatre of Maeterlinck, and its fascination with the ineffable, is the transgression of bodily affects, explored in the so-called post-dramatic theatre. For mourning may leave one speechless, but it can never leave one disembodied. It is precisely the bodily presence on stage that is explored in post-dramatic plays. Lehmann argues that contemporary life's increased gamification and virtualisation has led to theatrical performances becoming extremely and provocatively

real: 'the dimension of "game" (*Spiel*) intrudes into real life (*das ernste Leben*); in turn, art responds by incorporating more and more "seriousness" (praxis, *realia*) into aesthetic play'.[76] The confrontation with the real, 'the merciless exposition of the human body', making 'the hero appear in all his vulnerability' became the goal of these performances.[77] It is a reaction against a culture that 'continually forgets – and wants to forget – the catastrophe objectively befalling almost all the bodies in this world'.[78] And by staging these transgressive, affective moments, without the mediation of a fictional plot, the audience is confronted with this excessive side of human existence: 'theatre becomes the space for shared and reflected affectivity'.[79]

What Lehmann notes in the work of Romeo Castellucci seems to apply to the later work of Roland Barthes as well: 'Spectatorship is meant, over and above a merely emotional-identificatory experience, to involve confrontation with what cultural norms deny and abandon in shame, disgust and aversion – even though it stands at their very core.'[80] Obviously, the lectures at the Collège de France, or a subdued book such as *Camera Lucida*, seem a far cry from the provocative scenography of Castellucci and others. Yet precisely because it lacks the specific frame of a theatre, which is after all, a staging of the real, the transgression becomes more palpable when performed in scholarly texts or in lectures at one of France's most prestigious academic institutions. Barthes' bodily presence, and his own struggling with it, indeed confronts us with a painful, affective reality that is often repressed in academia, as if professors, or their audiences, did not have sentient, and suffering, bodies. That is why it would be a mistake to not take into account the slight sense of aversion, shame and perhaps even repulsion evoked by Barthes' public and private performative subjectivity. The overwhelming grief in *Mourning Diary*, or the saddening sexuality of an old bachelor in *Incidents*: by 'performing' these slightly obscene 'existential situations', and the uneasiness with which we meet them, Barthes confronts us with the inherently tragic nature of human experience.

And just like in the classic Aristotelian tragedy, this arouses in us feelings of 'pity and fear'. In her 'Aristotle's "Poetics" and the Subject of Tragic Drama: An Anthropological Approach' (1988) Synnøve des Bouvrie is quickly to point out that we should not understand pity in a Christian sense here: for the Greeks, it was a matter of identification, as the spectators were afraid that what happened to the protagonist could be their fate as well.[81] As Katja Haustein writes in '"J'ai mal à l'autre": Barthes on Pity' (2015): 'We identify with the fate of the other. We see in his or

her fate the fate of all living beings, including our own.'[82] A 'dramatic' reading of Barthes as a character invites us to such an identification, similar to the way Barthes relates to Proust in 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…' (1978): 'I am not in the least comparing myself to this great writer but, quite differently, *identifying myself with him*: an association of practice, not of value.'[83]

A Moment of Truth

Barthes' performative writing is indeed *evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, consequential.* Through it, we become affected ourselves, identify with the emotions Barthes deals with: love, mourning. As Pollock wrote about the performative-'I', 'it moves beyond the atomization, alienation, and reproduction of the authorial self toward new points of identification and alliance'.[84] Even, more specifically, the weariness inherent in academic existence:

> And then a time also comes (the same time) when what you have done, worked, written, appears doomed to repetition: What! Until my death, to be writing articles, giving courses, lectures, on 'subjects' which alone will vary, and so little! (It's that 'on' which bothers me.)[85]

In the later work of Barthes, the usual critical distance between a scholar and the sources and references he discusses collapses, and this movement has an effect on his readers as well. They are invited to do the same, and to participate in this reiterative performance of quotes, phrases, characters, this citationality from one text to another, but also from text to life, and vice versa. Just like Barthes took a phrase from a personal, domestic context (the letter concerning the incident with Guibert) to a more public one, we can do the reverse as well and repeat a quote of Barthes into our own personal context, especially when we are, just like Barthes, scholars: e.g., writing an academic text, and then, suddenly, this 'Phrase' that imposes itself on us: 'What! Until my death, to be writing articles…' It is the same kind of identification that occurs when, in *The Neutral*, Barthes reiterates a quote by Gide, who described himself as 'a tire that flattens': in quoting him, *performing* him as a character, just like we can perform Barthes, keeping the citational fabric that makes up performative writing and

performative subjectivities, echoing in each one's own specific existential situations.[86]

At this point, we experience what Barthes called in *The Preparation of the Novel* a 'moment of Truth', the moment in the reading of a novel which he defines as

> a description, of an enunciation, a sudden knot in the path of reading that assumes an exceptional character: conjunction of an overwhelming emotion (to the point of tears, to the point of distress) and a self-evident truth giving rise, within us, to the certainty that what we're reading is the truth (has been the truth).[87]

This is similar to what Barthes a couple of years earlier called the 'quotation': 'Moment of Truth: that which, in my reading, happens *to me*, a subject in the literal sense: which means I can only make sense of it by referring to my own experience'.[88] And while in the context of *A Lover's Discourse*, the link was the lover's passion, here the link is mourning, the love for someone irretrievably lost. In some classic novels Barthes found examples of such 'moments', like in Proust's description of his grandmother, which Barthes linked to his own mourning experience. The moment of truth generates a feeling of pity, and as such, for Barthes, it had a cathartic quality: '*pity* is an old word: it's *written affect* in that it justifies *catharsis*, that is to say: *Tragedy*'.[89]

It is fascinating – and also, ironically, tragic – that Barthes himself was unable to experience this sense of *catharsis* in his own writing on mourning in *Camera Lucida:*

> Here again is the Winter Garden Photograph. I am alone with it, in front of it. The circle is closed, there is no escape. I suffer, motionless. Cruel, sterile deficiency: I cannot *transform* my grief, I cannot let my gaze drift; no culture will help me utter this. […] [T]he photograph is undialectical: it is a denatured theater where death cannot 'be contemplated', reflected and interiorized; or again: the dead theater of Death, the foreclosure of the Tragic, excludes all purification, all *catharsis*.[90]

It was precisely this inability to transform his grief while writing *Camera Lucida* that Barthes was trying to overcome in his final lectures on *The Preparation of the Novel*. And here we see that his remarks on tragedy in

Camera Lucida become again one of those travelling quotes that get performed by Barthes in different contexts. In his very final lecture course, the remark is reiterated, and slightly altered, as if what remained impossible in his writing of *Camera Lucida* had become now possible when uttered as a professor:

> the Writer draws his strength from the tragic status of literature today; for Tragic = active Force -> What is the Tragic? = to come to terms with your Fate, in such a radical way that it gives rise to a freedom; for *to come to terms with is to transform* […] Separation shall be transformed into the very material of the Work, into the concrete labor of the Work.[91]

This quote can be found in the notes for the session of 23 February 1980, only two days before the accident that would lead to his death. At the same time, it is also an important reminder that Barthes' performing 'character' is always a textual construction. For it is only the character Barthes that gave this part of the lecture. In reality, these passages were actually never spoken that day, 'probably because he was running out of time'.[92] So, the people who attended his concluding lecture naturally did not know that this was what Barthes had planned to say, just like they did not know that this was actually Barthes' last appearance before an audience. Only in 2003, after the publication of the notes of his lecture courses, did the transformed 'quotation' from *Camera Lucida* become part of Barthes' publicly accessible oeuvre. When we read the transcript of the notes, the character of Barthes is evoked, and it speaks to us, now more than forty years after his death: in the imaginary scene we project while reading, he is immediately *there*, and his invitation to transform, to change the way we write, still stands, as a consequence of his work. We know that the subjectivity that is evoked by his different texts is inevitably textual, and effect of Barthes' performative writing. But at the same time, this imagined subjectivity as it appears on the textual stage counters the apparent deadlock of Barthes' final phase, when he seemed unable to reconcile humanism with poststructuralism, or the novelistic with the theoretical. Because this is only the case from a purely theoretical point of view. From a performative stance, be it the domesticity in *Incidents*, his *Mourning Diary*, and in autobiographical snippets like his letter to Guibert, to his public lectures at the Collège de France, the mute, massive affectivity of grief and depression achieves a dramatic, convincing active force of its own. And this performative force, we should not forget, can

also be a creative, consequential force. The example of Barthes as a character might be as generative as his writings. For while, on a personal level, Barthes was unable to transform his grief, felt stuck, and failed to write a novel and to fully establish the *Vita Nova* he was looking for, he did manage to inspire a new writing practice. The actual Novel may never have materialized, but the *The Preparation of the Novel* itself, just like the other works written in the last years of his life, are anything but a dead-end. It is precisely these texts, permeated by this strong affectivity and extreme subjectivity, that still influence many contemporary scholars and writers in exploring their own performative forms of writing.

Subjectivities, a Conclusion

Barthes' return to the 'illusions of subjectivity' was a shift that baffled and irritated some of his critics, who found it hard to align this last phase in Barthes' work with his previous critical positions, most notably of course his notion of the 'death of the author'. Was this 'simple' presence of the author, the authenticity implied in this exposure not precisely a 'myth', the naturalization of a discursive, ideological construction?[93] Yet, at the same time, books like *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida* have greatly influenced and inspired subsequent literary and artistic currents. We are thinking of works that would now be labelled as autotheoretical (or, alternatively, critical memoir, creative criticism, life-thinking).[94] In autotheory, an autobiographical voice 'inscribes a performative mode of citation alongside a postmemoir', as writer, artist, and curator Lauren Fournier describes.[95] A lot of what is at stake in these performative autotheoretical texts is, as we have indicated, already present in Barthes' later work. Not only did Barthes experiment consistently with theorising himself as a subject, he also used literature, philosophy, and art to structure (or, going back to the idea of performativity, to stage) his thoughts and affects. He made clear that to leave one's own embodied subjectivity out of the equation would border on intellectual dishonesty at worst, a lack, at best. In this light, autotheory and other recent forms of performative writing seem to closely continue Barthes' exploration of the interaction between the intimate lived experiences and theoretical reflection. It is this interaction which turns the research, and the reporting of that research, into a performative form of writing. A form that includes personal loss, pain, suffering – themes that have been particularly important in

autotheory – and becomes a contemporary reiteration of the tragic knowledge of Greek tragedy.

What Barthes felt unable to achieve at the end of his first lecture course on *How to Live Together* became perhaps only possible through a performative writing in which the indirectness of writing allowed him to stage 'an extreme subjectivity', as Pollock calls it, that created a critical intimacy with his posthumous readership. At this point, it becomes impossible to determine where Barthes' performative writing stops and that of his readers begin. To use Barthes' own terminology: the written character though which he expressed his subjectivity is not readerly, but writerly. Retroactively constructed from different texts, it allows the readers in their turn to 'perform' Barthes, creating in their reiteration that which Barthes desired his writing to be: the possibility to '*travel* far from my body *in his final place*'.

Notes

[1] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces: Lecture Course at the Collège de France*, ed. by Claude Coste, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 113.
[2] Roland Barthes, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 309–331 (p. 321; italics in original).
[3] Barthes, 'Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers', pp. 310, 321. Italics in original.
[4] Barthes, *How to Live Together*, p. 131.
[5] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2018), p. 9.
[6] Roland Barthes, *Le discours amoureux: séminaire à l'école pratique des hautes études, 1974–1976 ; suivi de Fragments d'un discours amoureux, pages inédites*, ed. by Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 307. Our translation; italics in original.
[7] Richard Schechner, quoted in Peggy Phelan, 'Introduction: The ends of Performance', in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 6.
[8] Phelan, 'Introduction', p. 10.
[9] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 3.
[10] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 5.
[11] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142–148 (p. 142).
[12] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 142.
[13] Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 143.
[14] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 63.
[15] Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel. Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 301.
[16] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 301. Italics in original.
[17] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 5. Italics in original.
[18] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 3.
[19] Della Pollock, 'Performing Writing', in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. by Phelan and Lane, pp. 73–103 (p. 75).
[20] Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 230.
[21] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2020), p. 3. Italics in original.
[22] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 75.
[23] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 75, 76.
[24] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 81, 80–82.
[25] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 74.
[26] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 79.
[27] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 79.

[28] See Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 83, 94.
[29] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 80, 79.
[30] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 80, 81.
[31] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 81. Italics in original.
[32] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 82, 83.
[33] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 84.
[34] Jane Blocker, quoted in Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 84. Italics in original.
[35] See Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 83.
[36] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 86.
[37] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 86.
[38] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 86, 87.
[39] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 90.
[40] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 92.
[41] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 92.
[42] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 94.
[43] Barthes, *Le discours amoureux: séminaire*, p. 292. Our translation; italics in original.
[44] Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 107.
[45] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', p. 94.
[46] Pollock, 'Performing Writing', pp. 96, 95.
[47] Della Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', *Cultural Studies <–> Critical Methodologies*, 7.3 (2007), 239–255 (p. 240).
[48] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 246.
[49] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 247.
[50] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 242.
[51] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 241.
[52] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 241.
[53] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral. Lecture Course at the College de France (1977–1978)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 11.
[54] Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 11.
[55] Roland Barthes, 'Fragments pour H.', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, pp. 1005–06 (pp. 1005–06). Our translation; italics in original.
[56] Barthes, 'Fragments pour H.', p. 1006. Our translation.
[57] Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 606.
[58] Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), p. 24.
[59] Barthes, quoted in Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 407.
[60] Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, pp. 618–19.
[61] Hans–Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. by Erik Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 80.
[62] Peter Arnott, 'Greek Drama as Education', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 22.1 (1970), 35–42 (p. 35).

[63] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 362.
[64] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453a, trans. by W. H. Fyfe, in *Perseus Digital Library*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0056> [accessed 20 April 2023].
[65] Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 17.
[66] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 7. Italics in original.
[67] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 240.
[68] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 171.
[69] See Kate Briggs in Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. xxvi.
[70] Samoyault, Roland Barthes, p. 660.
[71] Barthes, quoted in Samoyault, *Roland Barthes*, p. 656. Our translation.
[72] See Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, pp. 287ff.
[73] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 277.
[74] Beckett, quoted in Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 369.
[75] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 96.
[76] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 440.
[77] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 430.
[78] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 429.
[79] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 430.
[80] Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, p. 431.
[81] Synnøve des Bouvrie, 'Aristotle's "Poetics" and the Subject of Tragic Drama: An Anthropological Approach', *Arethusa*, 21.1 (1988), 47–73 (p. 53).
[82] Katja Haustein '"J'ai mal à l'autre": Barthes on Pity', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 55.4 (2015), 131–147 (p. 142).
[83] Roland Barthes, 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 277–90 (p. 277; italics in original).
[84] Pollock, 'The Performative "I"', p. 252.
[85] Barthes, 'Longtemps', p. 285.
[86] Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 16.
[87] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 104.
[88] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 104. Italics in original.
[89] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 107. Italics in original.
[90] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 90. Italics in original. We are grateful to Harry Wilson for pointing out this reference in his comments on a previous iteration of this line of thought.
[91] Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 298. Italics in original.
[92] Léger, quoted in Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 450.
[93] See, e.g., Jonathan Culler, 'Preparing the Novel: Spiralling Back', *Paragraph*, 31.1 (2008), 109–120.
[94] Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2021), p. 7.
[95] Fournier, *Autotheory*, p. 7.

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