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Spring 1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Parvulescu, Anca, "The Professor's Desire: On Roland Barthes's The Neutral" (2007). *Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies Research*. 24. <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wgss/24>

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THE PROFESSOR'S DESIRE

ANCA PARVULESCU

Roland Barthes. THE NEUTRAL. *Trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Trans. of Le Neutre. Paris: Seuil, 2002.*

I add: a reflection on the Neutral, for me: a manner—a free manner—to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time.

—Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*

What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance.

—Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*

Le Neutre reaches us late. Like an echo, it needed time, and it took its time to come. The second of the three courses Roland Barthes gave at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1980, *Le Neutre* was published in 2002 by Éditions du Seuil, following the editorial work of Thomas Clerc, under the direction of Éric Marty.¹ Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier's translation as *The Neutral* brought it to life in English in 2005. After thirty years, *Le Neutre* comes indeed late, but perhaps its lateness, the time of the echo, is part of its very scene.

Barthes did not conceive of *Le Neutre* as a book. It was a course, to happen as a one-time affair and then be put aside: “We’ll have to hold on to the unsustainable for thirteen weeks: after that, it will fade” [13]; “This course is made to die on the spot” [250]. As such, the course is not only an attempt to do justice to a “subject,” to which, Barthes insists, we should not hold on once the course is over, but also to meditate on the very situation of teaching.² The course on the neutral offers the occasion to ask, What is it to teach? And teaching, we soon find out, is a matter of desire: the course should have been called *The Desire for the Neutral*. The teacher follows his desire and, in doing so—Barthes is reminded by a student—inflects and curbs the student’s desire. What is it, then, that one desires when one desires the neutral? The teacher is pressed to offer something by way of definition:

I define the Neutral as that which outplays [déjoue] the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm. For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing: I gather under a name, which here is the Neutral. [6]

The neutral is a “thing” (no qualifying adjective) that outplays, baffles, or dodges the “implacable binarism” of language as seen through Saussurian linguistics: in order to

1. The first course was *Comment vivre ensemble*; the third, interrupted by Barthes’s death in 1980, was *La préparation du roman*.

2. Barthes had offered his vision of teaching at the Collège in his inaugural lecture; see Roland Barthes, “Lecture.”

produce meaning, one is in the same breath choosing A and refusing B. The search here is for a "thing" that might suspend, thwart, or elude the paradigm, what Barthes calls its *arrogance*. Indeed, what would it mean to escape the necessity of choosing, say—this is Barthes's first example—between *je ris* (I laugh) and *je lis* (I read)?

A problem for the teaching theater unfolds: the moment one names the "thing," one brings it into the paradigm, constructing an opposition between the neutral and arrogance. The scene of teaching performs an aporia: "Neutral = impossible; to speak it is to defeat it but not to speak it is to miss its 'setting up' [. . .] to speak this cacophony, I need a course" [29]. There is an obvious tension between teaching, its demands for clear and transparent meaning-making and inherent institutional arrogance, and the neutral. "Arrogance": "the taking of too much upon oneself as one's right; the assertion of unwarrantable claims in respect of one's own importance; undue assumption of dignity, authority, or knowledge" [*OED*]. The teacher is inevitably occupying the place of arrogance. Indeed, foregrounding its righteousness and authority, arrogance is standing, a position Barthes associates with a certain kind of fascism. The neutral teacher struggles to dodge the arrogance inherent to the teaching scene. Sitting, he stammers, cacophonizes. One speaks, but one accompanies speaking with a continuous performance of an apology for speaking.³ The teacher does not offer an anchor in the neutral (neutral is not a new *mana* word); all he does is witness its appearance/disappearance along a grid of readings: "Desire is nothing but a passage. I pass through the neutral" [68]. Ideally, the course will have passed through the neutral and perished, leaving in its wake not the heaviness of a concept but the lightness of a metaphor: "one must say no to the concept, not make use of it. But, then, how to speak, all of us, intellectuals? By metaphors. To substitute metaphor for the concept: to write" [157].

Not a book, Barthes insists, but a *course*, whose words are perishable: "*course* < *cursus*: *what runs, what flows (course of a river)*" [47]. Words, of course, do not simply vanish, *verba volant*; one cannot even take them back without adding to them, without saying more words. The trace they leave, however, acquires an *odor* that insists and persists. It is this odor—bringing forth something *of* the neutral—that we are left with in the wake of the course. As for the book we have in front of us, it follows an altogether other logic. Words on the page are not perishable, they stick, and the odor of their ink is hardly neutral. The risk here is that the book fixes the course, stopping its flow. Barthes's neutral teaching of the neutral risks becoming a *doxa* of the neutral. The book acknowledges this risk but takes it nonetheless. There is no reason to censor the book, Barthes himself agreed: "it's not a 'monument' → the microphones, the notes, even a possible publication are inessential outgrowths, that's to say: there is no reason to censure them, but they are not part of the time of the course" [175]. Attempting to foreground the tension between the time of the course and that of the book, as well as that between teacher and author, the format of the book, following the format of Barthes's own notes, leaves half of each page empty, white, neutral, inviting the student to participate in the writing of something that will have become a course-book. Unlike Saussure's students, who undertook the task of collecting the teacher's and other students' notes, filled gaps and stylistically rounded *The Course in General Linguistics*, Barthes's students insist that the course remain a course and resist its translation into a self-defeating monumental book.

How, then, does one elude arrogance on the teaching scene, especially when one is asked questions? The question terrorizes; it summons an inquisitorial apparatus: "Questioning: perhaps the worst violence" [108]. The question interpellates the teacher as master, as the locus of authority: since you are standing there in front of us, you should answer my question. In order to baffle the arrogance of the teaching situation as the

3. See Barthes's "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers."

situation in which one is asked questions, the teacher claims the right of not knowing how to answer. The teacher will respond, he will say something, words will be coming out of his mouth, but this will not be an “answer”; it will be an echo of sorts. A tactics of answers-gone- astray is developed: beside-the-point answers, silences, forgettings, flights, driftings, time-outs, deafness. Which is not to say that Barthes does not believe in the virtues of dialogue. He encourages his students to write to him and he comes back with his echo (an echo needs time). These become the “Supplements” to the course, themselves exaggerated, threatening to take over the course: “I realize that I drift too complacently, soon there will no longer be a course, nothing but supplements. Supplements to nothing: that’s the ideal Neutral” [69]. Barthes the teacher is a Tristram Shandy, an expert in the art of digression. “Digressions,” we know from *Tristram Shandy*, “incontestably, are the sunshine:—they are the life, the soul of reading:—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them” [Sterne 1: 22.58]. To these digressive supplements, the format of the book invites the reader to add her own Supplements—marginalia to the marginalia of a book that refuses to come.

The biggest prejudice faced when invoking the neutral is that of its being conceived as neither-nor (*ninisme*), which, Barthes insists, is only a farcical copy of the neutral. If, glossing on Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, great things always come back in the form of a farce, the neutral appears under the mask of neither-nor: I am on the side of neither this nor that. This, however, Barthes warns, we must recognize as a distorted thing, “a grimace of the Neutral” [81]. If the neutral is a smile (an image we will come back to), neither-norism is its contortion and distortion. The neutral is not the fashionable, cozy, and profitable *in-between* of neither-norism. One of the most important things about the neutral is that it is not useful, it cannot be recuperated by a utilitarian program, it cannot identify a position, it has no place of its own. This is why the neutral cannot be assimilated to something like Switzerland’s “neutrality” during WWII or the often invoked “neutrality” of scientific discourse. In fact, such “neutrality” is a function of the very arrogance the neutral wants to baffle.

Barthes proceeds by way of listing a series of *figures*—twinklings, glimmerings—in which the neutral bursts or flashes. There will be no narrative that would explain the list besides the above “definition.” The list will stand by itself as a list. It will be an exhibit, a gallery of figures. The teacher explains:

As I did last year: series (sequence) of fragments, each of which is given a title = the figures of the Neutral. Figure: rhetorical allusion (= a circled piece of discourse, identifiable since titleable) + face that has an “air,” an “expression”: fragment not on the Neutral but in which, more vaguely, there is some Neutral, a little like those rebus drawings in which one must look for the silhouette of the hunter, of the rabbit, etc. [10]

An image: Barthes is reading in the library of his vacation home. Space is important here since this library is where thought, losing the heaviness of “rigor,” is not work. In this space, thinking is an erotics of laziness, the pleasure of free reading. Barthes is alone, claiming the “right to social repose (that sociality in me rest a moment)” [18]. He is sitting: “despite its ‘strong’ negativity, the gesture (the posture) shouldn’t be flattened: to be sitting is active = an act” [185]. What Barthes does is leisurely circle out pieces of discourse in which one can discern something *of* the neutral, something with an *air* of the neutral. “Figure,” we must remember, has plastic and architectural overtones; a figure is indeed a vague silhouette or, better, the shadow of a silhouette on a sidewalk (“model,” “copy,” “figment,” “dream image” are all meanings that cling to *figura*; so do “appearance,” “outline,” “statue,” “image,” “portrait,” “*umbra*” [see Auerbach]). The course will

put these silhouettes on display in a gallery and witness the movement of the neutral, its circulation or flux.

What one “gathers under a name” is thus a series of figures. Each figure, a file (*dossier*). No, this is not a bureaucracy of the neutral; the files are never inventoried, just opened (“we don’t do anything more than open files” [198]). Teaching works by way of opening files, which are then offered as *gifts*—to the students flocking to Barthes’s seminar at the Collège in 1978 and, ultimately, to a whole generation of students who opened themselves to the curbing of desire alongside this teacher’s desire. Coming by way of desire, in the students’ hands these gifts become “thesis topics.” In 2007 it might feel like the list (indeed, of many of our PhD topics over the last decades) is coming too late; but perhaps our “subjects” always reach us with a delay. Perhaps their temporality, their *kairos*, is lateness. *Le Neutre* comes “now,” late, too late, some will say, to whisper into our ears the secret of our occupations over the past decades. Now that “theory” is somewhat reenergized by the very debates about its demise, *Le Neutre*, in the perversity of its eventual yet quiet, unfashionable, nonmonumental coming, will have helped us retrospectively “gather under a name.” The neutral is the name of the faceless, appropriately self-effacing center of an epoch we have learned to call “poststructuralist.”

How, then, to order the figures of the neutral without allowing them to gel into a philosophical narrative, a prison-house of the neutral? A problem familiar to Pascal, Nietzsche, or Adorno. Barthes lets chance organize his course. An arbitrary logic borrowed from an arbitrary journal of statistics orders the list of twenty-three figures in which the neutral twinkles:

1. *Benevolence*
2. *Weariness*
3. *Silence*
4. *Tact*
5. *Sleep*
6. *Affirmation*
7. *Color*
8. *The Adjective*
9. *Images of the Neutral*
10. *Anger*
11. *The Active and the Neutral*
12. *Ideospheres*
13. *Consciousness*
14. *Answer*
15. *Rites*
16. *Conflict*
17. *Oscillation*
18. *Retreat*
19. *Arrogance*
20. *Panorama*
21. *Kairos*
22. *Wuo-wei*
23. *The Androgyne* [xxix]

An appendix contains three other figures Barthes did not discuss in the course but which he prepared:

1. *Intensities*
2. *To Give Leave*
3. *Fright* [255]⁴

A list follows a logic of juxtaposition. One puts the neutral in flux in a series of disparate figures and lets it roam. The teacher's task is descriptive: to unthread nuances (*diaphora*) in these figures. Thus Barthes's course is an exercise in nuance: "inventory of micronetworks of words that are very similar but a tiny bit different: → 'discourse on the bit of difference': wouldn't deny difference but would recognize the price of the 'bit'" [130]. The course is a voyage into the microscopic, into the difference of the bit of nuance.

Literature, the home of nuance, enters the stage: "nothing in language but perhaps in the 'discourse,' in the 'text,' in the 'writing,' whose function perhaps is to make up for the injustices, to soften the fatalities of language?" [66]. Literature, the Society of the Friends of the Text will have decreed, especially after a session of reading Blanchot, baffles the arrogance of language from within the neutral heart of language. A matter of compensation when faced with the injustices of language, literature carries the promise of a neutral writing. It is something often overlooked by readers of Barthes's now-monumental essay, "The Death of the Author": "writing is that neuter, that composite, that oblique through which our subject escapes . . ." [49]. Barthes dreamed of writing a novel, the neutral novel. Perhaps appropriately, the project was never completed. A matter of weariness. The time of the neutral novel is that of postponement.

Where does one look for the neutral? We enter a fragile archive, a formless filing cabinet: Blanchot ("except for certain philosophers and for Blanchot . . . the Neutral has had a bad press" [69]); Pyrrho and the Sceptics ("historically, the 'official' space of the neutral is Scepticism" [72]); Eastern philosophies and mysticisms; Baudelaire (of *Artificial Paradise*); Rousseau, Benjamin, Pasolini, Cage. Disciplinarity is out of the question since the neutral crosses language, gesture, affect, action, the body, and thus grammar, philosophy, literature, painting, law. The archive of the neutral is a grid, a network of readings on which the neutral moves—or, as Barthes puts it, alluding to Rousseau, on which one takes the neutral for a walk. The longest walk will be in the company of Blanchot; the course could have been subtitled *How I Learned to Read Blanchot*. This is precisely what Barthes does: read and reread Blanchot in his own style. In the same way his *Pleasure of the Text* is a reading of Bataille and yet Bataille's name appears only sporadically in it, the course on the neutral is an exercise in reading Blanchot, and yet Blanchot drifts in and out of Barthes's course, nonetheless punctuating some of its most intense points. Barthes and Blanchot walk together, alongside each other, sometimes following the same path, at points stepping on each other's toes, at points vagabonding on neighboring terrains.⁵

What, then, is it that Barthes learns from Blanchot? Aside from the figure of weariness, *The Infinite Conversation* offers the occasion to see the neutral twinkle in what we call "free indirect style," "free indirect discourse" or "represented thought." The subject of this narration slides toward the neutral and becomes an "it": "Narration that is governed by the neutral is kept in the custody of the third-person 'he,' a 'he' that is neither a third person nor the simple cloak of impersonality. . . . The narrative 'he' or 'it' unseats every subject just as it disappropriates all transitive action and all objective possibility" [Blanchot 384]. Ann Banfield, reading Blanchot, suggests that the neutral "neutralizes not so much the gender distinctions but the reference to the persons that 'il' otherwise

4. Barthes abandoned a few other figures: "Abandon," "Apnea," "Bisemy," "Center," "Ring," "Prose," "Signature," "Squashed," "Tranquility," "Violence" [255].

5. Following Blanchot and Barthes's convoluted relationship, Christophe Bident speaks of a "discordeme."

has” [172]. The neutral moves the subject toward an “it,” toward the status of “thing” with no qualifying adjective: “Neuter = the nonsubject, the one to which subjectivity is prohibited, which is excluded from it (*mancipium*)” [188]. This is not an impersonal “it,” which is still a subject, but a radical nonsubject, to which language comes closest in what grammar calls the “dummy it.”⁶

The neutral is an occasion to reconsider subjectivity and human action alongside a third possibility, beyond the active/passive dyad and toward the middle voice. Indeed, Émile Benveniste’s name is surprisingly absent in Barthes’s archive, especially since elsewhere Barthes recognizes his affinities with the neutral. When coupled with the neutral, the middle voice gives us a way of thinking about a certain kind of passivity that has troubled readers of Levinas, for example, for a long time. The impetus here, in Barthes as in Levinas, is toward a nonaggressive, nonarrogant form of human action in the middle voice: “The Neutral wallows in (as much as possible) a non-predicable form; in short, the Neutral would be exactly that: the nonpredicable” [53]. “To die,” the verb in the middle voice par excellence, is crucial here, but Barthes is interested in the promise of “to *pathos*: in the neutral: both active and affected: withdrawn from the will-to-act but not from ‘passion’” [73]. Affect, in its archaic form as passion, gives Barthes a model for thinking through the apparent paradox of the neutral as the active-affective. *Le Neutre* offers itself as an opportunity to finesse our work on affect by having us go back to *pathos*. It is an invitation recently taken up by Brian Massumi’s *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Intensity, which Massumi describes in relation to passion, is a figure of the neutral.

Going back to Banfield’s remark, it is the case that the paradigm the neutral baffles, precisely through its “unseating of the subject,” is that of the masculine/feminine. It might be, Barthes also acknowledges, that what we are witnessing along this grid of readings is just a “veiled femininity” [193]. Chance, the aleatory listing of figures, makes Barthes reach the figure of the androgyne—and, with it, the neutral as a question of gender—last, although he agrees that it is here that the course should have in fact begun, that is, if the course on the neutral had a “beginning,” which it does not. Barthes also agrees that this last entry on the list is perhaps “badly explored” [194].

Derrida, of course, has helped us ask the question of the feminine in its relation to the neutral. Juxtaposed to that other missing figure in Barthes’s list, *khōra*, the neutral slowly slides toward the feminine; a feminine not as the opposite of the masculine, but very much the “thing” Barthes is after. Derrida wants to move the discussion “beyond all anthropomorphy,” but in the end sketches an image: *khōra* is the opening of a mouth, in no need of a face or a body [111]. Pushing this image, Kristeva insists one can hear laughter coming out of the *khōral* gaping mouth. “It” laughs—passionately and in nonarrogant bursts. It is perhaps the image of the neutral par excellence. Barthes, however, despite his walks with Bataille, only hears arrogant overtones in laughter and leaves us with the image of the androgyne smiling a Mona Lisa smile. It is an odd place to end the course on the neutral.

Perhaps more appropriately, allowing ourselves the liberty of switching figures around on Barthes’s aleatory list, the course should have ended with the figure of *kairos*. A meditation on time, on nuances of temporality, is an organic part of the course on the neutral. The figure of *kairos*: “to signal the asystematic character of the Neutral: → its relation to occasion, contingency, conjuncture, extemporizing” [169]. *Kairos* is the right, opportune moment but not as understood by Gorgias, as the “instinct” of timely rhetorical intervention, which, in Barthes’s reading, belongs to a “discourse of mastery: the ‘right moment’ = weapon of power: today we would say: political swell” [170]. Barthes’s

6. I develop this point in my current book project, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion*.

kairos resonates with the skeptic notion that works to undo the time of the system, a cut in systematic time in which the neutral flashes. Going back to passion as a model for neutral action, Barthes links it to a “temporal organization: time as the field of the flammable: fire is a particular mode of time: the time of the crisis” [103]. *Kairos* is a creative force: “an energetic element, an energetic time: the moment as such insofar as it produces something, a changeover” [172]. Barthes’s neutral is “an ardent, burning activity” [7] in the middle voice. *Kairos* acquires neutral evental qualities; it is a neutral interruption, an “art of the non-law” [172]. It is the moment of exception, of heterogeneous mutations (“a burst of brilliance of the *kairos*” [173]) we associate with great inventions and events.

Agamben’s challenge: “The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely ‘to change the world,’ but also—and above all—to ‘change time’” [“Time and History” 91]. Agamben himself takes up the figure of *kairos* in order to think the possibility of “changing time.” Having lingered on the margins of Benjamin’s “Theses,” *kairos* has decisively reentered the purview of our attention through Agamben’s *The Time That Remains*. We will have to wait and see how *Le Neutre* will help reshape this conversation. At stake is ultimately a particular form of reading, a reading for nuances of temporality in which the neutral glimmers with the promise of an epochal changeover.

Le Neutre is witness to Barthes’s own “retreat” (a figure of the neutral): “1. Movement of retreating (from the world, from the worldly), but should rather be called: retirement; 2. place to which one retires” [137]. The *kairos* of *Le Neutre*, its opportune moment, is that of a course before retirement and before death. What Barthes reads, he emphasizes, are dead writers; they are his creative objects. To mourn the dead in reading, to be moved by their death, is to be alive, to be joyful to be alive, and yet to know death, to live with death, even in the most intense vitality. The thought of death, of one’s own death (the death of an other is a different story), is not tragic for Barthes, or perhaps it is tragic only in its banality, a neutral banality: “The Neutral would be the very movement, not doctrinal, not made explicit, and above all not theological that veers toward a certain thought of death as banal, because in death, what is exorbitant, is its banal quality” [83]. *Le Neutre* comes to us as a *memento mori*, offering a panorama (a figure of the neutral) of Barthes’s life before death: “Memento mori = I remember → remember to die = remember that you have lived (not: that you have finished living, but: that it is absolutely real that you did live)” [168]. Ultimately, what the course offers us is a style of being in the world, of living and dying, a style of being present to the struggles of one’s time as a teacher, the teacher of the neutral.

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