The objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline.

Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’, 1958

Mieux valent les leurre du la subjectivité que les impostures de l’objectivité.

Barthes, La Préparation du roman, 2 December 1978

Early in La Chambre claire, Barthes explains that in his writing he has always hovered between two sorts of discourse; he feels the ‘inconfort’ of a subject ‘ballotté entre deux langages, l’un expressif, l’autre critique’. His only sense of certainty, within the network of discourses in which he finds himself, is that he feels an ineradicable ‘résistance […] à tout système réducteur’ (CC, 794). His own subjectivity, “l’antique souveraineté du moi” (Nietzsche), must be used as a methodological starting-point. Selecting the photographs he would use for the book, Barthes had the ‘bizarre’ thought that perhaps, after all, it is by examining contingent individuality that a general validity can be reached – a ‘mathesis’ or knowledge which would respect particularity, and yet ultimately lead to the attainment of general truths:

Pourquoi n’y aurait-il pas, en quelque sorte, une science nouvelle par objet? Une Mathesis singularis (et non plus universalis)? J’acceptai donc de me prendre pour médiateur de toute la Photographie: je tenterais de formuler, à partir de quelques mouvements personnels, le trait fondamental, l’universel sans lequel il n’y aurait pas de Photographie. (CC, 795)

Here we see the culmination of a method which Barthes had been setting out with increasing confidence over the course of the Collège de France teaching: the ‘idée bizarre’ of a mathesis singularis was in gestation during this time.

This chapter will trace the paradoxical combination of the personal and the general – or ‘scientifique’, connoting both science and knowledge – in Barthes’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, and the lecture given in Paris and New York the following year, ‘Longtemps, je
me suis couché de bonne heure…’ These are the only two texts from Barthes’s Collège de France teaching which were published before 2002, and in them we discover not only the manifestos for the form and preoccupations of Barthes’s lecture courses, but also an important articulation of the contradictions inherent in the status and mindset of this ‘consecrated heretic’. These texts articulate the profound tensions of Barthes’s time at the Collège de France: tensions between the literary and the scientific (or semiological); the teacher and the writer; the critic and the artist. These texts set up a lecturing style which seeks ultimately to outline what in *La Chambre claire* is called ‘la science impossible de l’être unique’ (847) or ‘une science du sujet, dont peu m’importe le nom, pourvu qu’elle parvienne (ce qui n’est pas encore joué) à une généralité qui ne me réduise ni ne m’écrase’ (801). This search for a realm of knowledge and of love that is immune to any ‘système réducteur’ is, of course, problematic for many critics of Barthes. The ‘impossible science’ proposes that through an examination of the self’s most profound emotional responses we discover an ‘intraitable réalité’ (CC, 885) that refuses further analysis. This, says Jonathan Culler, is ‘Nature slip[ping] back into [Barthes’s] writing’. However, as Culler also implies, this new endeavour is also linked to the ‘systematic endeavours he [has] renonce[d]’.3 Though apparently a radical departure, Barthes’s new science is connected to his previous writing, and though the presence of a ‘Nature’ unmediated by culture is at the heart of *La Chambre claire*, I contend that this endeavour is an extension of his career-long uncovering of what lies beneath codes. The difference is the change of interest regarding what lies beneath: no longer concerned with political uses of the sign, Barthes now wishes to demonstrate the individual impulses that underlie any attempt at objectivity, thus inaugurating a new – though apparently regressive – demystification.

This individual science or knowledge is, of course, much more difficult to discuss and to classify than, for example, the ‘science canonique des signes’ that Barthes rejects in ‘Travaux et projets’. This is the point. The fact that the ‘sémiologie’ Barthes is interested in has a ‘statut difficile’ allows Barthes great freedom of play, and the rejection of disciplinary ‘purity’ as an ideal makes way for the inclusion of the heterogeneity of objects, and the dilettantism of method, that Barthes personally favours and which he will deploy in his first lecture course under the rubric of ‘paideia’. Julia Kristeva describes, in 1971, this taste of Barthes’s for heteronomy and subjectivity in critical discourse. She could almost be writing about *Leçon* itself: “Le critique”, lui, se charge d’indiquer l’hétéronomie [...] par l’introduction de l’instance du sujet, en assumant...
une parole représentative, localisée, contingente, déterminée par son “Je” et donc par celui de son destinataire’.4 Kristeva, anticipating Barthes’s ‘science du particulier’, describes his desire for what she calls ‘eteros’ as ‘l’annonce de la réserve barthésienne qui rapproche le savoir du procès de la vérité’. In this ‘réserve’, she continues, ‘la connotation morale s’efface si l’on admet que l’irruption, dans la vérité neutre de la science, d’un sujet de l’énonciation n’ invalide pas cette vérité, mais rappelle son opération, sa genèse objective’.5

Kristeva’s rather oblique reference to a ‘connotation morale’ here in her description of Barthes’s methodology is interesting. For a moral connotation is heavily present in Leçon, brought about by the use of a typical inversion of terms. Just as Barthes had, in Le Plaisir du texte, claimed ‘perversion’ as a positive term in literary appreciation, he now claims ‘l’impur’ as a value. In terms of the thematics Barthes sets up in Leçon to herald his teaching, the most important idea is that of hybridity or impurity, which Barthes uses to explain his theoretical approach. Given that, for Barthes, literature is mathesis, or the multifarious repository of all knowledge (‘toutes les sciences’), thus a ‘sémiologie littéraire’, if it is to take in charge this multiplicity, must be hybrid by its very nature.

Barthes’s literary semiology, in its hybridity and prioritisation of personal response, will thus deploy a version of Kantian aesthetic judgement. Barthes’s ‘impurity’ is consonant with a continental reception of the Critique of Judgment, according to which the Critique constitutes a ‘radical undoing of the categorial divisions between knowledge, morality and aesthetics’.6 Barthes wants the ‘divisions between knowledge’ to be friable, and believes that aesthetic judgment has a liberatory critical power that complements the more deterministic type of thought to be found in cognition and morality.

Judgment is defined by Kant as ‘the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal’.7 The domain of the aesthetic involves a type of judgment profoundly different from the ‘determining’ (‘bestim mend’) judgment involved in the domains of rationality and morality. Knowledge and judgment proceed in these areas by subsuming particular facts and problems under pre-existing universal laws. But such judgments cannot account for the entirety of human experience – they leave out emotion and contingency, and instances where the particular does not slot easily into the universal. Hence the Critique of Judgment, with its account of another form of cognition, which occurs when, as Kant puts it, ‘only the particular is given, and the universal has to be found for it’.8

The important Kantian point is that judgments of taste, although they
arise from entirely subjective, contingent experiences, have a genuine claim to universal validity, via the ‘sensus communis aestheticus’. It is this passage from the particular to the universal, without the reduction and generalisation of universal laws, that is important for Barthes, as it is this possibility of having a non-reductive account of the subject’s particularity, without falling into self-indulgent personal accounts that have no broader applicability, that he feels is the imperative for intellectual writing. In fact, what is most valuable about the theory of aesthetic judgment is the way it permits a movement between, or a problematisation of, categories which in other discourses are considered to be entirely separable – subjectivity and objectivity; feeling and cognition; art and sociality. Kant describes aesthetic judgment as a ‘middle articulation’ (Mittelglied), which permits an articulation of the ‘gulf’ (‘Kluft’) that otherwise separates the faculties of cognition and morality. Occupying a middle position, aesthetic discourse is not concerned uniquely with taste. Its concerns are also linked to questions of ethics and morality. For Barthes, the incorporation of aesthetic discourse into theory is, essentially, a moral question: it is imperative that the writer avow her own personal investment in the topic under study, while also striving to render this investment instructive for the reader. The ‘sensus communis’ is presupposed, but this is not the same as a pre-existing concept which can be fallen back on. It is pre-supposed and also still to be made, by requesting that others acknowledge the validity of one’s own taste, and is therefore not grounded in what Barthes would call ‘myths’ of culture. A theory that proceeds using aesthetic judgment has to respond to contingency, and incorporate an avowal of pleasure or pain into all attempts at presentation of knowledge. Using aesthetic judgment foregrounds the difficult, processual nature of judgment, which ideological discourse tends to suppress.

In Barthes’s view, prioritising a wilfully individualistic disciplinary impurity will lead to a discipline which will end up being morally superior to a ‘pure’ science, precisely because of its explicit retention of the subject’s emotional response. ‘Impurity’, in other words, is the hallmark of an approach which, necessarily heterodox because of the subject-matter, also has the aim of seeking to uncover that which other disciplines wish to keep hidden. Adorno, the pre-eminent post-Kantian thinker of the aesthetic, articulates this in his essay on the essay form – a text remarkably similar to Leçon in many ways. As Adorno puts it, the ‘innermost formal law’ of the essay must be ‘heresy’, whereby ‘[t]hrough violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invis-
ble’. We find at the ‘innermost’ level of Barthes’s pedagogy – in his attitude to the epistemological status of his own thought – a heresy that mirrors the heretical licence provided by the institution of the Collège de France.

Barthes wishes to set himself up as deviating from what he chooses to see as the besetting norms of false objectivity and repressively authoritative metalanguage. In attempting to propose an alternative, he needs to demonstrate firstly that he has left his own ‘rêve de scientificité’ and its positivism behind. Secondly, he needs to show that his own new, looser values represent a new and improved way of ‘doing’ semiology, whose new methodology, because based on an up-front subjectivity, will be more thoroughly representative of truth than the positivist science against which he defines it. His manner of doing this is typically paradoxical. Throughout Leçon we see repeated rhetorical moves wherein Barthes re-valorises terms generally understood to be negative. In addition to the paramount term of ‘impur[eté]’, he arrogates to himself other terms that are deliberately distanced from ideas of rigour and precision, such as ‘indirect’, ‘fragmentation’, ‘fantasme’ and ‘oubli’. Linked to this methodological lexis is the term ‘artiste’, which Barthes uses to describe and valorise his own tactics, methodology and status. We shall look at these sets of terms in turn as we examine Leçon.

Leçon and the Impurity of ‘la sémiologie littéraire’

The opening of Leçon employs precisely the same rhetorical tactic as the early sections of La Chambre claire quoted above. Barthes presents himself as a hybrid subject who has always been choosing between various approaches to writing, and who is therefore of uncertain status. This presentation of himself has the benefit – as it does in La Chambre claire – of then making it seem a logical correlate that, in this morass of uncertainty, subjectivity must be used as the unifying principle for writing. Leçon opens with Barthes’s description of himself as a ‘sujet incertain’ who is inherently paradoxical: ‘chaque attribut [en moi] est en quelque sorte combattu par son contraire’. He states that his favoured form of writing in the past has thwarted his desire that his writing have scientific status: ‘s’il est vrai que j’ai voulu longtemps inscrire mon travail dans le champ de la science, littéraire, lexicologique et sociologique, il me faut bien reconnaître que je n’ai produit que des essais, genre ambigu où l’écriture le dispute à l’analyse’ (L, 7, my emphasis). In the recording of the lecture, Barthes uses the same adjective to describe both himself
and his genre of choice: ‘incertain’. Carlo Ossola in his article on the drafts of *Leçon* shows that the other adjective Barthes considered to describe the essay as genre was ‘tourmenté’.

All three adjectives – ‘incer-tain’, ‘ambigu’, ‘tourmenté’ – emphasise what Barthes chooses to see as the problematic status of his preferred form. He is in agreement with Adorno, who in the mid-1950s declares that ‘the essay is condemned as a hybrid, […] the form has no compelling tradition, [and] its emphatic demands are met only intermittently’. Adorno makes this declaration in order the better to frame his defence of the essay’s heterodox virtues. Barthes wishes to claim the essay’s tentativeness and hybridity as qualities that inhere in his own person, and that he will promulgate in his teaching. Capitalising upon the idea of the essay as genre, Barthes defines himself as an essayist (an experimentalist) in order to lay the ground for the rest of the lecture. Barthes is, as it were, the essay itself, with the term ‘essai’ having an important polysemy here. In Adorno’s formulation, ‘[t]he word Versuch, attempt or essay, in which thought’s utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates […] something about the form’. Anticipating what the *Leçon* wants us to think, Adorno writes that this ‘something’ is to be taken all the more seriously in that it takes place not systematically but rather as a characteristic of an intention groping its way. The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality.

Barthes emphasises his affinity with the essay genre at the start of *Leçon*, not only to describe his previous writing practice, but because, of the formal alternatives available, the essay is the one that best corresponds to the tentative, pluralistic nature of his thought and his pedagogy.

The opening of *Leçon* continues with Barthes saying that though his research has been linked to the ‘développement de la sémiologie’, he has little right to ‘représenter’ this discipline, ‘tant j’ai été enclin à en déplacer la définition’. To this image of his own inconstancy he adds a statement which implies that he has deliberately distanced himself from semiology as it has gathered momentum and become increasingly popular: ‘[J’ai été] plus proche de la revue *Tel Quel* que des nombreuses revues qui, dans le monde, attestent la vigueur de la recherche sémiologique’ (*L*, 7–8). Not merely a formulaic declaration of humility given the illustrious surroundings, this opening paragraph of the (published) lecture is a gambit aiming to prove Barthes’s credentials as a thinker who always challenged or ‘displaced’ the axioms of the fields he has worked within. Thereby, the
impurity of his thought is demonstrated, as well as his refusal of univocal meaning whether at the level of signs themselves, or at the level of the self-definition of disciplines. Listeners are prepared firstly for a new departure in Barthes’s thought, and secondly for an idiosyncratic programme of research whose status will be ‘incertain’. He declares that the disciplinary space that he is in the process, during the Leçon, of shaping for himself at the Collège de France, will be subjective, multifaceted, prone to displacement, and fundamentally opposed to the thetic and the univocal.

The lecture continues by showing that Barthes feels he has now sufficiently demonstrated his distance from positivist knowledge: ‘C’est donc, manifestement, un sujet impur qui est acceuilli dans une maison où règnent la science, le savoir, la rigueur et l’invention disciplinée’ (L, 8). Barthes’s own distance from rigorous science is later mirrored in the new semiology’s distance from a more axiomatic semiology. Barthes explains this by declaring that ‘la sémiologie dont je parle […] est négative […] non en ce qu’elle nie le signe, mais en ce qu’elle nie qu’il soit possible de lui attribuer des caractères positifs, fixes, anhistoriques, acorporels, bref: scientifiques’ (L, 35–36). This ‘apophatique’ semiology has no constancy. But its lack of integrity is, we are encouraged to believe, its most honourable quality, for it is in its refusal of any a priori articles of faith that it manages to track closely the mutations of the sign over the time; thus it is an ‘active’ semiology, as Barthes points out. It is fluid, and has an implied corporeality. Although what this corporeality might mean in real terms is unclear, the implication is that this semiology is at work, temporally, with the human subject. It evolves as meanings evolve through usage. Furthermore, this semiology is with the subject in that it refuses any false objectivity:

La sémiologie [maintenant] […] ne peut être elle-même un méta-langage. C’est précisément en réfléchissant sur le signe qu’elle découvre que toute relation d’extériorité d’un langage à un autre est, à la longue, insoutenable: […] je ne puis être à vie hors du langage, le traitant comme une cible, et dans le langage, le traitant comme une arme. (L, 36)

Barthes here mentions the belief that ‘le sujet de la science est ce sujet-là qui ne se donne pas à voir’ (L, 36). For the writing (or teaching) subject to make himself an overt part of the study at hand, then, would be counter-scientific – because, in Adorno’s words, ‘to the instinct of scientific purism, every expressive impulse in the presentation jeopardises an objectivity that supposedly leaps forth when the subject has been removed’.14 Like Adorno, Barthes shows that the equation of an impersonal discourse with authenticity of scholarly discourse may well be a
fallacy. He then goes further, by declaring that his recognition that the use of metalanguage in semiology is no longer relevant for his practice makes him in fact more advanced than those who would deny his semiology ‘tout rapport avec la science’. He is always already ahead:

Il faut leur suggérer que c’est par un abus épistémologique, qui commence précisément à s’effriter, que nous identifions le métalangage et la science, comme si l’un était la condition obligée de l’autre, alors qu’il n’en est que le signe historique, donc récusable; il est peut-être temps de distinguer le métalinguistique [...] du scientifique, dont les critères sont ailleurs (peut-être que [...] ce qui est proprement scientifique, c’est de détruire la science qui précède). (L, 37)

Having apparently played down the capacities of his semiology by describing it as negative and as being unqualified to stand as a pure metalanguage outside of any other language it chooses to critique, Barthes then uses precisely these qualities to exalt his discipline. For if he has defined this semiology as a negative space, then it follows that it can be filled momentarily and successively by all the possible fields of knowledge that it may find in the heterogeneous space of literature. His semiology proposes to marry a semiological analysis of the emotions, effects, and subjective energy of discourse with that infinite field of types of discourse which is literature. There is an explicit aestheticisation of the discipline. Here again we see the theme of impurity. Barthes describes the new semiology as working on ‘l’impur de la langue, [...] les désirs, les craintes, les mines’, everything that constitutes ‘la langue active’. This semiology gets its hands dirty, unlike linguistics, which Barthes describes as ‘travaill[ant] sur un immense leurre, sur un objet qu’elle rendait abusivement propre et pur, en s’essuyant les doigts à l’écheveau du discours, comme Trimalcion aux cheveux de ses esclaves’ (L, 31).15

The conjunction of literature and semiology will involve the best of both worlds, with ‘le retour incessant au texte [...]’, la plongée régulière dans la plus complexe des pratiques significantes, à savoir l’écriture’ preventing semiology from becoming dogmatic, while at the same time ‘le regard sémiotique’ will mean that the use he makes of literature will not fall back into indulgent stereotypes such as ‘le mythe de la créativité pure’ (L, 35). Thus each element of the partnership will correct the other’s faults, as well as leading to a productive symbiosis, as a note from Le Neutre shows: ‘chaire de sémiologie littéraire = 1) Littérature: codex de nuances + 2) Sémiologie: écoute ou vision des nuances’ (N, 18 February, 37). The impure new semiology is uniquely qualified, then, to deploy its activity in a multitude of spheres. Flitting here and there, it has a far greater mobility than other disciplines, and can draw meanings from
these other schools of thought in order to enrich itself. This semiology will use methods drawn from all of these fields to provide an illuminating temporary distortion (anamorphosis) of the materials it chooses to alight upon in its readings. Thus literary semiology can, in fact, constitute a global but unoppressive theory, because it recognises the heteronomy of meaning, having departed from linguistics to meet all the other discourses which generate meaning.

So this semiology, like the signs it studies, has no fixed characteristics, and therefore is not sufficiently pure or definable to be a discipline: ‘ce n’est pas une discipline’ (L, 37). This, of course, is only an apparent abasement: Barthes states this in order to exalt his semiology to a position of ubiquity: ‘J’aurais souhaité que la sémiologie ne prît ici la place d’aucune autre recherche, mais au contraire les aidât toutes, qu’elle eût pour siège une sorte de chaire mobile, joker du savoir d’aujourd’hui, comme le signe lui-même l’est de tout discours’ (L, 38). One early commentator on Leçon, Ian McLeod, feels that with this statement, Barthes has ‘thrown semiology entirely away’.16 But, though Barthes carefully expresses his hopes for literary semiology in non-hierarchical terms, he has actually elevated semiology to the ur-discipline.

Of course, precisely because of Barthes’s inversion of terms, there is no sense in Leçon of anything other than a retrenching into the personal: ‘Je sais ce qu’une telle définition a de personnel’ (L, 32), Barthes declares. McLeod quotes this declaration, saying that the weakness of Barthes’s conception of semiology ‘force[s]’ him ‘to resort to a claim for subjective privilege’.17 McLeod seems to have been hoodwinked by Barthes’s rhetoric. For in fact the lines of ‘force’ are held by Barthes himself and strengthened by the institution he is now part of, which encourages individualistic research. Thus, as Barthes points out, a ‘personal’ definition of his semiology is exactly what is required by the Collège: ‘Il me semble […] que l’institution d’une chaire au Collège de France entend moins consacrer une discipline que permettre à un certain travail individuel, à l’aventure d’un certain sujet, de se poursuivre’ (L, 32). Furthermore, though the overall tenor of Leçon, as we have seen, highlights the importance of subjectivity, the message of the lecture is by no means exhausted by the presence of that theme. For beneath the careful declarations of personal predilection, all the subjacent claims are on behalf, not of Barthes himself, but rather, of literature. ‘L’enseignement des lettres,’ says Barthes, ‘est déchiré jusqu’à la fatigue entre les pressions de la demande technocratique et le désir révolutionnaire de ses étudiants’ (L, 10). At this ‘moment historique’, therefore, it is literature, and how his new semiology can be attentive towards literature, that Barthes is
concerned with. Aesthetic response is pre-eminent. As Leyla Perrone-Moïses has pointed out, the necessity of attending to literature is the lecture’s main point, even though this tends to be obscured by attention to the lecture’s argument about language. ‘The lecture aroused strong objections,’ writes Perrone-Moïses, ‘mainly due to the assertion that “language is fascist”’:

What was less observed was that this provocative assertion [was] intended to prepare, in the discourse, the ascendency and definition of a word that he had himself depreciated in his previous phases. This word, placed at the most jubilant moment of the Lesson, is literature.18

It is an idea of literature (which is not quite the same as literature itself) that impels the methodology set out in Leçon and carried out in Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre. For if Leçon has demonstrated that Barthes’s new semiology, though not scientific in the strict sense, is more ‘scientifique’ than science itself in being protean and shifting, what the lecture also needs to do is to demonstrate in what way literature will guide the deployment of this semiology. It is the ‘mathetic’ nature of literature which will provide such guidance. ‘Mathésis’ is the first of three ‘forces’ that Barthes ascribes to literature, the other two being ‘Mimésis’ and ‘Sémiosis’ (L, 17). His only explanation of the term is to declare that ‘la littérature prend en charge beaucoup de savoirs’ (L, 17). Mathesis, the desire for knowledge, will always be fulfilled by literature.

**Leçon and the Encyclopedic Teaching of Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre**

The philosopher Frederick Van de Pitte, discussing Descartes’s use of the term, explains that mathesis, used in conjunction with the complement universalis, is often understood to refer to a universal method for mathematics. This is erroneous, argues Van de Pitte. Rather, ‘Descartes use[s] the term mathesis in its Greek […] sense’ as referring to the possibility of knowledge in or of any field (not just mathematics).19 Thus, if mathesis is ‘a science of necessary relations’, mathesis universalis is ‘the transformation of such systems of necessary relations into genuine scientia by providing the underlying conditions for the very possibility of knowledge: that general science which is the ground and source of all the particular sciences’.20 Van de Pitte’s understanding of the term accords with Barthes’s. Furthermore, it chimes to a large extent with Barthes’s conception of literature, and of literary semiology – the latter term being, as Michael Sheringham points out, ‘virtually a tautology’.21 both litera-
ture and literary semiology are the ‘joker du savoir’ (L, 38), providing a universal ground for knowledge. Barthes characterises literature in Leçon as that which makes all of knowledge possible in one discipline – for he states that ‘[s]i […] toutes nos disciplines devaient être expulsées de l’enseignement sauf une, c’est la discipline littéraire qui devrait être sauvée, car toutes les sciences sont présentes dans le monument littéraire’ (L 18). Barthes has not yet begun to hint at the elaboration of what in La Chambre claire is called a ‘Mathesis singularis’; the first intimations of this will be found in ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’

For the purposes of Leçon and the two lecture courses which precede the ‘Longtemps’ lecture (Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre), it is the more generalised idea of ‘mathésis’ which is important. The description of literature under the rubric of the ‘force’ of mathesis is, along with the theme of the ‘fantasme’, what forms the methodology of those lecture series.

Continuing his characterisation of literature as ‘mathetic’, Barthes employs the etymology of the first half of the word ‘encyclopedia’ to explain his veneration for literature and to hint at the method he will employ in his lectures. He points out that literature is ‘véritablement encyclopédique’ because it ‘fait tourner les savoirs[,] Elle n’en fixe, elle n’en féchise aucun; elle leur donne une place indirecte, et cet indirect est précieux’ (L, 18). The reference to the ‘turning’ of knowledge within literature calls to mind the first half of the Greek term ‘enkyklios paideia’, which gives us the word ‘encyclopédie’. ‘Enkyklios’ means circular or cyclical – i.e. recurring, but also everyday.22 Barthes’s image, then, of literature ‘turning’, in an egalitarian fashion, the wheel of ‘les savoirs’, corresponds – as Barthes the classicist was undoubtedly aware – to the classical understanding of ‘enkyklios paideia’ as an unspecialised, general, everyday education. As Maarten de Pourcq tells us, the term ‘is used [in classical Greek] to signify a kind of general education, before one goes to the [more specialised] schools of rhetorics or philosophy’.23 The fact that literature was ‘put forward as an encyclopedic source of knowledge’, says De Pourcq, led to its being denigrated by some classical philosophers as having ‘polymathia’ without the necessary ‘control or mastery’ over this ‘multi-knowledge’.24 Barthes makes a similar point about literature holding all knowledge only very loosely in its palm, when he describes it as giving ‘les savoirs’ ‘une place indirecte’. Far from agreeing with those who would reproach literature’s lack of systematic knowledge, though, this is of course what Barthes sees as the most ‘précieux’ and important aspect of literature. As De Pourcq says:
It is exactly this encyclopedic and non-controlling aspect which brings Barthes to literature[;] [...] it is precisely as a remedy for the fragmentation of the sciences and their distancing from life that Barthes wants to posit his [...] literary semiology.25

For it is literature’s indirect presentation of ‘les savoirs’ that allows it to work ‘dans les interstices de la science’ (L, 18) and to resist ‘la pureté’ of ‘[les] discours typés qui l’entourent: les philosophies, les sciences, les psychologies’ (L, 25–26). A teaching method that is guided by the literary, then, would be one that would overcome the limitations of the ‘typé’ or scientific approach to knowledge, and allow the indirect presentation of ‘les savoirs’, in a manner which will be general, non-specialised. Literature is thus the model for Barthes’s practice. For Barthes’s understanding of literature is that it traverses many forms of knowledge. If Barthes can mirror this active power of literature in his own pedagogy, then, he can ‘reveal and thus neutralis[e] the Cyclopean arrogance of singular disciplines, and, more widely, the power of language itself’.26 A place for singular expression would thereby be created. Thus perhaps the question of how Barthes’s ‘discours’ is to become more ‘humain’ is answered.

The encyclopedic nature of literature cannot be fully replicated in Barthes’s cours. This is firstly because Barthes cannot – and does not wish to – present himself as having sufficient authority to expound all the multi-faceted aspects of knowledge he finds within literature. Secondly, according to Barthes, our current society, saturated by information overload and fragmented into hermetically sealed idiolects, can no longer produce a holistic work: an encyclopedia of our world is no longer possible. He points this out at the end of Comment vivre ensemble, saying that we cannot, as Diderot and his team did, ‘maitriser['] all knowledge, because ‘aujourd’hui: plus d’exhaustivité possible du savoir, entièrement pluralisé, diffracté en langages incommunicants. L’acte encyclopédique n’est plus possible’ (CVE, 4 May, 182). However, through ‘indirect’ methods, the encyclopedic nature of knowledge (which Barthes favours over ‘typé’ or specialised knowledge) can be hinted at. Literature inaugurates this method. As Barthes wrote in 1967, ‘il n’est certainement pas une seule matière scientifique qui n’ait été à un certain moment traitée par la littérature universelle: le monde de l’œuvre est un monde total, où tout le savoir [...] prend place’. Literature thereby gives us ‘cette grande unité cosmogonique dont jouissaient les anciens Grecs, mais que l’état parcellaire de nos sciences nous refuse aujourd’hui’.27 So, accepting the ‘parcellaire’ nature of knowledge in our time, but desiring nonetheless somehow to reflect the ‘cosmogonique’ potency of literature in his
teaching, the imperative for Barthes is that ‘soit en écrivant, soit en enseignant’, he employs the ‘opération[s] fondamentale[s]’ of ‘la fragmentation’ et ‘la digression’ (L, 42). Literature inspires a productive dialectic between totality and fragmentation. In this manner, Barthes explains in his retrospective account of his method in *Comment vivre ensemble*, one can perform the ‘acte encyclopédique par excellence’ of opening a folder of knowledge: ‘À tout instant j’ai dit (presque à chaque figure): “Nous ouvrons seulement un dossier”’. In this manner, ‘[un] geste encyclopédique’ is made, which for Barthes has ‘sa valeur de fiction, sa jouissance: son scandale’ (CVE, 4 May, 182). Mathesis can still be sketched out, but not filled in – permanent filling in being neither possible nor desirable any more. In *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*, with their plethora of ‘figures’ drawing on ethnological, theological, literary, anthropological and other discourses, one does indeed have the impression of a series of ‘gestes encyclopédiques’.

The second half of the term ‘encyclopédique’ is, of course, ‘paideia’, from the word for ‘child’. Barthes does not overtly mention the idea of ‘paideia’ in *Leçon* – we have to wait until the first lecture of *Comment vivre ensemble*, five days later, for the use of this term. There is, however, an important set of references to the child and to fantasy towards the end of *Leçon*, which provides an extra gloss to the ‘paideia’ set out in the opening *Vivre ensemble* lecture. In that lecture of 12 January 1977 – which sets out the methodology of *Comment vivre ensemble* that will also be carried out in *Le Neutre* – ‘paideia’ is explained as belonging to the Nietzschean distinction between ‘méthode’ and ‘culture’, as set out in Deleuze’s *Nietzsche et la philosophie*. Deleuze describes Nietzsche’s conception of ‘method’ as an aprioristic philosophy: ‘La méthode suppose toujours une bonne volonté du penseur, “une décision préméditée”’. Culture, on the other hand, is ‘essentiellement dressage et sélection’:

> Un dressage qui met en jeu tout l’inconscient du penseur. Les Grecs ne parlaient pas de méthode, mais de *paideia*; ils savaient que la pensée ne pense pas à partir d’une bonne volonté, mais en vertu de forces qui s’exercent sur elle pour la contraindre à penser.”

Barthes points out that the difference between ‘méthode’ and ‘culture’ is essentially a difference concerning the idea of one’s journey through knowledge: if one uses ‘méthode’, there is a ‘chemin droit’, a ‘démarche vers un but, protocole d’opérations pour obtenir un résultat’. ‘Méthode’, therefore, is concerned with ‘généralité’, ‘moralité’ (CVE, 33) – or in Nietzsche’s words, ‘cette contrainte à former des concepts, des espèces, des formes, des fins, des lois...ce monde des cas identiques’ (L, 34). This,
for Barthes, is problematic, because it engenders a false objectivity, and because it skips over everything which does not lead to a pre-defined goal. ‘Méthode’ leaves out vital areas of the subject (‘subject’ in both senses here of the *topos* and the individual): ‘Le sujet, <quand il suit la méthode>, abdique ce qu’il ne connaît pas de lui-même, son irréductible, sa force’ (CVE, 33). Implicit here is the Nietzschean idea of ‘truth’ as a repressive levelling of something which, in reality, is a-systematic, recal-citrant, contingent. The ‘truth’ in language, in Nietzsche’s view, compels us to identity-thinking. This suspicion is also a powerful idea in *Leçon*. ‘Méthode’ assumes a knowledge in advance of where the investigation is to lead, and a (false) mastery over oneself and one’s topic. Little wonder, then, that Barthes uses the Nietzschean paradigm here in order to reject this term. Barthes wishes to disqualify all claims to mastery. This disqualification can be accomplished, as *Leçon* has already told us, by means of fragmentation. In order to ally himself to the term ‘culture’ (as set out in the Nietzschean opposition), Barthes must allow his thought – and his exposition of his subject – to fragment into multiple directions and roles. Towards the end of *Leçon*, Barthes mentions the gift-giving games of a child. He wishes to model his teaching upon the erratic, repetitive journeys of a child that offers a series of mundane gifts to its mother. Note the references to circular (*kyklios*) movements in this description of the child (*paidos*):

J’aimerais donc que la parole et l’écoute qui se tresseront ici soient semblables aux allées et venues d’un enfant qui joue autour de sa mère, qui s’en éloigne, puis retourne vers elle pour lui rapporter un caillou, un brin de laine, dessinant de la sorte autour d’un centre paisible toute une aire de jeu, à l’intérieur de laquelle le caillou, la laine important finalement moins que le don plein de zèle qui en est fait. (*L*, 42–43)

Just as the mother receives the heterogeneous and often banal gifts proffered by the child, the ‘auditeurs’ at the Collège will be presented with a set of encyclopedic ‘gestes’ in which bits and pieces of knowledge will be touched upon. This is what it means to ‘se placer dans la paideia’. Barthes’s explanation in his first ‘proper’ lecture of what this means, in terms of methodology, recalls the terms used at the end of the inaugural lecture: ‘Culture, comme “dressage” (≠ méthode), renvoie pour moi à l’image d’une sorte de dispatching au trace excentrique: tituber entre des bribes, des bornes de savoirs, de saveurs. […] Culture, ainsi comprise comme reconnaissance de forces, est antipathique à l’idée de pouvoir’ (CVE, 12 January, 34). Barthes’s taking of a Nietzschean *paideia* as his methodological model means that the lectures are to be ‘imprévisible’, without a teleology. The thinker’s mastery is deliberately undone by his
willingness to proceed *un*methodically, flitting – as the ‘*chaire mobile*’ ([L], 38) of literary semiology does – from one area of interest to another, staggering between snippets of information in the manner of a small child. The deliberately aleatory construction of the first two lecture courses is of course a cognate tactic. The lectures, therefore, are as erratic as a child might be – and as ‘*incertain*’ as the essay as genre is. ‘The essay,’ Adorno tells us, ‘does not develop its ideas in accordance with discursive logic. It neither makes deductions from a principle nor draws conclusions from coherent individual observations. It coordinates elements instead of subordinating them’.30 The many directions of thought are retained as an ideal, rather than being organised into one single direction by a *terminus a quo*. Thus the polymathic nature of the endeavour is made present as a selection of ‘moments’ which are ‘interwoven as in a carpet’ – or ‘*tissés*’ as in a text. ‘The thinker,’ says Adorno, ‘does not actually think[,] but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unravelling it’.31

To undo ‘*maîtrise*’ is to undo authority. With the renunciation of authority comes the willingness to cede authority to others. Given that Barthes states at the end of *Leçon* that his Collège de France teaching will be placed under the aegis of ‘*désapprendre*’ and ‘*oubli*’ ([L], 46), it is no coincidence that, as Claude Coste points out in his preface to *Comment vivre ensemble*, ‘Barthes accumule les savoirs, multiplie les références souvent érudites, les emprunts au grec ancien, mais ses connaissances, le plus souvent de seconde main, ne valent jamais pour elles-mêmes’ ([CVE], 25). A large proportion of the material he uses for *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre* is secondary, and reference works such as the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* and the *Dictionnaire des sciences sociales* crop up frequently in the margins. The ‘encyclopedic gesture’ is thus made in a very literal sense. This is a tactic not so much of innovation but of recycling. Barthes is aware of the banality that this may lead to, and states this as his aim: at the end of *Comment vivre ensemble*, he declares that within the lectures’ ‘symphonie de propositions’, ‘le rêve’ would be ‘une sorte de banalité non oppressante’ ([CVE], 181). There is no oppression – though of course there may be frustration on the part of those expecting a more sequentially erudite discourse – because there is no demonstration of authority. The responsibility (or authority) is delegated away from Barthes himself and given to the material; this is precisely the point of *paideia* as force. As De Pourcq puts it, *paideia* ‘selects, disturbs, distorts and forgets’.32 All of those processes are to be viewed as positive. In *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*, the encyclopedic, aleatory staggering (‘*tituber*’) between discourses, opinions,
and facts constitutes an ‘aire de jeu’ in which, just like the pebble and the stone which the child offers its mother, the ‘propositions’ are ultimately less important than ‘le don plein de zèle qui en est fait’ (L, 43).

Another important aspect of the renunciation of authority foregrounded at the end of Leçon is the idea of the fantasy. This is thematically linked to the childish-ness of paideia through the mention of the child, or rather the son: when he outlines the importance of the ‘fantasme’, Barthes says that to use the fantasy as the basis for teaching is to elude capture, as a child does:

C’est à un fantasme, dit ou non dit, que le professeur doit annuellement revenir [...]; de la sorte il dévie de la place où on l’attend, qui est la place du Père, toujours mort, comme on le sait; car seul le fils a des fantasmes, seul le fils est vivant. (L, 44)

Interestingly, with the ‘fantasme’ we are returned to Barthes’s tricksy tactics of asserting the ‘scientifique’ nature of a methodological procedure that appears to be anything but scientific. Barthes sets up his defence of the fantasy as being ‘scientifique’ by asking the rhetorical question ‘comment oser parler, dans le cadre d’une institution, si libre soit-elle, d’un enseignement fantasmatique?’ (L, 43). Barthes is clearly pleased to be able neatly to answer this question by referring to one of his illustrious predecessors at the Collège de France, Jules Michelet:

Si l’on considère un instant la plus sûre des sciences humaines, à savoir l’Histoire, comment ne pas reconnaître qu’elle a un rapport continu avec le fantasme? C’est ce que Michelet avait compris: l’Histoire, c’est en fin de compte l’histoire du lieu fantasmatique par excellence, à savoir le corps humain; c’est en partant de ce fantasme [...] que Michelet a pu faire de l’Histoire une immense anthropologie. (L, 43–44)

This proves it, Barthes concludes: ‘La science peut donc naître du fantasme’. If science springs from fantasy, then, quod erat demonstrandum, ‘c’est à un fantasme, dit ou non dit, que le professeur doit annuellement revenir’ (L, 44) in order to guarantee his discourse.

The justification of the use of fantasy here is interesting in that it runs counter to the values that one might expect such a justification to mobilise – values such as the ‘mythe de la créativité pure’ mentioned earlier in Leçon, for example. Rather, fantasy is unexpectedly defended on the basis of its scientificity. This is in line with Leçon’s concerted effort to establish Barthes’s new semiology as being ‘scientifique’ at another turn of the screw, because of its recognition of the subjective investment that occurs in the investigation of any apparently objective phenomenon. In his use of fantasy, then, Barthes makes the same point as Adorno when the latter points out that
in order to be disclosed, [...] the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time. 33

Barthes, though, is even more trenchant than Adorno in arguing that the subjective is objective, and in invoking illustrious names in order to make this point – which is not fully argued, but merely presented as given. In the first Vivre ensemble lecture, explaining the use of the ‘fantasme’ as principle, Barthes once again points out that the fantasy is scientific, this time using Bachelard:

Science et fantasme: Bachelard: intrication de la science et de l’imaginaire. [...] La science se constituerait par décantation des fantasmes. Sans discuter ceci (on pourrait dire qu’il n’y a pas de décantation, mais surimpression du fantasme et de la science), admettons que nous nous plaçons avant cette décantation.

Barthes concludes this point by saying that we can – or should – view ‘le fantasme comme origine de la culture (comme engendrement de forces, de différences)’ (CVE, 34).

Though he is never mentioned, it must be the historical philosophy of Giambattista Vico that Barthes has in mind here – more so in Leçon than in this first lecture of the Vivre ensemble, because Leçon refers to Michelet. Michelet was heavily influenced by Vico and almost single-handedly introduced Vico to French readers with his translations from the Scienza Nuova and selections of Vico’s other work. 34 Familiar with Michelet, Barthes would also have been familiar with Vico’s principle of the fantasia. For Vico, human thinking begins initially with the power of imagination (‘fantasia’ in Italian). It is the use of this fantasia that leads to the founding of society itself. Early in the Scienza Nuova, Vico explains this as follows:

We find that the principle of [the] origins both of languages and of letters lies in the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. This discovery [...] is the master key of this Science. [...] The poetic characters of which we speak were certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes, formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus; exactly as the fables of human times [...] are intelligible genera reasoned out by moral philosophy. [...] Since these genera [...] were formed by most vigorous imaginations [fantasia] [...], we discover in them true poetic sentences... 35

For Vico, fantasia is the force by which man originally moulded the world itself to his understanding, and is therefore the primal form of knowl-
edge. Donald Verene shows how *fantasia* is key at every stage of Vico’s account of the development of civilisation. He writes that for Vico, ‘all nations begin in the same way by the power of the imagination (*fantasia*) to *make* the world intelligible in terms of gods’. This age then ‘gives way to a second age, in which *fantasia* is used to form social institutions and types of character or virtues in terms of heroes’. Verene shows that, in the last stage, Vico believes that false objectivity triumphs – wrongly – over the more subjective and productive force of *fantasia*:

Finally, these two ages, in which the world is ordered through the power of *fantasia*, decline into an age of rationality, in which the world is ordered in purely conceptual and logical terms and in which mental acting is finally dominated by what Vico calls a barbarism of reflection (*barbarie della rifles-<start溆>si<end*>).³⁶

This dovetails neatly with what Barthes implies both in *Leçon* and in ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’ when he valorises the use of subjectivity and of fantasy in his teaching as being more ‘scientifique’ than the positivist ‘science des signes’ from which he distances himself. At the heart of all four lecture courses is a fantasy: in *Comment vivre ensemble*, it is the fantasy of idiorrhythmie; in *Le Neutre*, the fantasy of a neutral or non-arrogant mode of being; and in *La Préparation du roman I* and *II*, the fantasy of ‘le Roman pas comme les autres’ (*PR*, 38). The use of *fantasia*, coming back on on a Vichean spiral, is – in accordance with Barthes’s defence of the ‘fantasme’ in *Leçon* and the first lecture of the *Vivre ensemble* – only apparently anachronistic and only apparently self-indulgent: in fact, this tactic returns to the first principle of the *scienza nuova*.

A ‘poetic’ fantasy, which in Vico’s sense is rather more *poietic* than generically poetic, thus intermingles art and science. It is as such impure, and may even be childlike (‘seul le fils a des fantasmes’). We have seen that Barthes characterises himself and his thought in *Leçon* as impure and childlike. He uses the figure of the artist in the same way. The theme of the artist forms the strongest link between *Leçon* and the lecture ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’, which sets out the preoccupations of Barthes’s final two years of teaching at the Collège de France.

**The Literary Semiologist as ‘artiste’**

The term ‘artiste’ is drawn from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*. After the death of God, Nietzsche needs to come up with emblems of a new,
anti-paternalistic way of thinking. The alternatives to religious authori-
tarianism are precisely those figures invoked by Barthes in *Leçon* – the
artist and the child. These figures are valuable because they have the
capability of imagining a non-hierarchised mode of being. The artist and
the child, in their curiosity, do not respect the order of things. They are
happy to ‘émietter l’univers, perdre le respect du Tout’ – that is, to
affirm the death of God in their independent thinking. If Barthes takes
the child and the artist as models for his thought, he thereby inaugurates
a deliberately wayward methodology of fragmentation, chance,
curiosity. We have already seen how the idea of the child feeds into
Barthes’s use of *paideia* as a strategy in his teaching. In ‘Longtemps, je
me suis couché de bonne heure…’, we will see how Barthes explains his
fantasy of a ‘Roman’ which would manage to express ‘pathos’: the
Nietzsche quotation concerning ‘émiettement’ is of vital importance for
Barthes in this context.

‘Longtemps’ is the manifesto for the final two years of Barthes’s
Collège de France teaching, which are radically different in methodology
and in content to the first two years of lectures. In *Leçon*, Barthes defines
his new non-discipline, literary semiology. By the time he delivers the
‘Longtemps’ lecture in October 1978, it seems that semiology has fallen
by the wayside, as Barthes is now describing only his fantasy of a novel.
However, there is a continuity of theme between *Leçon* and ‘Longtemps’;
this continuity is provided by the figure of the Nietzschean artist and the
thematic importance of hybridity, invoked initially by reference to the
essay genre. In ‘Longtemps’, Barthes decides that the form he is searching
for is a ‘tierce’ (or hybrid) form that combines the best attributes of the
essay and the novel; this work would be, ‘selon la typologie niet-
zschéenne, […] du côté de l’Art, non de la Prêtrise’ (‘Longtemps’, 470).
This ‘typologie’ has already been mentioned in *Leçon*, when Barthes uses
it to describe the new semiologist. The semiologist’s role changes because
of the nature of the new semiology, which, as we have seen, is constantly
mutating as the signs it studies shift their connotations. If the semiolo-
gist thus treats the sign as ‘un spectacle imaginaire’ – and if he has
renounced the practice of metalanguage – his task is of a new and
different order: ‘Le sémiologue serait en somme un artiste’. Barthes
quickly points out that this is not a value-judgment: ‘(ce mot n’est ici ni
glorieux ni dédaigneux: il se réfère seulement à une typologie)’ (*L*, 39).
This is disingenuous, as elsewhere he turns the Nietzschean ‘typologie’
to which he is referring (which he does not explain here) into a paradigm
in which the ‘artiste’ represents the positive pole, and the ‘prêtre’ the
negative.
Barthes understands Nietzsche’s ‘artiste’ as representing a creative and active force, in opposition to the ‘prêtre’, who is a reactive representative of oppressive morality. In the final lecture of La Préparation du roman I, Barthes says that for Nietzsche, the ‘Artiste’ is ‘un type absolu que l’on ne peut réduire’, whereas the ‘Prêtre’ is associated with ‘Politique, Ressentiment’ (PR, 23 February 1980, 383). The ‘prêtre’ is linked to asceticism, purity, and, of course, Christianity. Barthes makes it clear that he associates the ‘prêtre’ not only with religious authoritarianism, but with any orthodoxy which promulgates a reductive or repressive understanding of the world. So a priestly world is the world Nietzsche diagnosed – a world of unquestioned norms: ‘nous sommes,’ Barthes declares at the end of the Préparation lecture of 8 December 1979, ‘dans l’Ère générale du Ressentiment: des Prêtres, Papes, Ayatollahs, Moralistes du Politique’ (PR, 218). By contrast, the ‘artiste’, free of ‘ressentiment’, has the ability (like the child) to interpret the world in accordance only with his own imagination and desire, without any hidebound set of moral prescriptions. The ‘artiste’, thus conceived, is therefore the ideal emblem of Barthes’s new semiologist in Leçon. For this semiologist will deploy no set of rules but that dictated to him by his own fantasme. There is no deduction and no extrapolation; the semiology wanders where it will:

La sémiologie de celui qui parle ici n’est pas une Herméneutique: elle peint, plutôt qu’elle ne fouille. [...] Ses objets de prédilection, ce sont les textes de l’Imaginaire. [...] J’apprêterais volontiers ‘sémiologie’ le cours des opérations le long duquel il est possible – voire escompté – de jouer du signe comme d’un voile peint, ou encore: d’une fiction. (L, 39–40)

There are several terms here that appear at first glance to imply a light-hearted or casual approach to the study of signs: ‘peindre’, ‘prédilection’, ‘jouer’, ‘fiction’. Like the term ‘fantasme’, however, these terms are only apparently self-indulgent. Beneath this veneer lies an imperative (‘escompté’): viewing the sign as a fiction is necessary in order for this semiology to evade and erode the discourse of power. This is in accordance with Barthes’s career-long demystificatory effort. It is only if one can recognise that the meanings with which signs are invested are to a certain extent arbitrary – or rather, historical as opposed to natural – that one will be able to reserve independence of judgment and exist free of ressentiment. For to elude the ‘discours de pouvoir’ (by treating the sign as a fiction) is to elude ‘tout discours qui engendre la faute, et partant la culpabilité, de celui qui le reçoit’ (L, 11).41

Barthes has demonstrated, ever since Mythologies, that the ability to read the layers of ideological connotation that lie on top of the sign is the
critic’s most important role. He reiterates this in *Comment vivre ensemble*, saying that for a ‘pensée critique’, ‘toute coutume est une forme déguisée de loi’. He quotes some lines from Brecht which he had considered using as the epigraph for *Mythologies*: ‘Sous la règle découvrez l’abus’ (CVE, 20 April, 165). Twenty years after *Mythologies*, the same ‘pensée critique’ remains – but in different terms: the ‘critique’ is now an ‘artiste’, who deploys a critical creativity in viewing the sign as a ‘fiction’.

This is made clear in Barthes’s tribute to the film director Michelangelo Antonioni, written in January 1980. The text begins as follows: ‘Dans sa typologie, Nietzsche distingue deux figures: le prêtre et l’artiste’. Barthes will examine Antonioni under the rubric of the ‘artiste’. He lists the ‘forces’ or ‘vertus’ of the artist: ‘la vigilance, la sagesse et […] la fragilité’. ‘Sagesse’ is also used at the end of *Leçon* when Barthes describes how he will use ‘sapientia’ as a principle in his teaching (L, 46). Barthes describes in ‘Cher Antonioni’ what this ‘sagesse’ means. We discover here the imperative that, in the quotation from *Leçon* above, is cloaked in the words ‘jouer’ and ‘fiction’:

> J’appelle sagesse de l’artiste, non une vertu antique, encore moins un discours médiocre, mais au contraire ce savoir moral, cette acuité de discernement qui lui permet de ne jamais confondre le sens et la vérité. Que de crimes l’humanité n’a-t-elle pas commis au nom de la Vérité! […] L’artiste, lui, sait que le sens d’une chose n’est pas sa vérité; ce savoir est une sagesse, une folle sagesse, pourrait-on dire, puisqu’elle le retire de la communauté, du troupeau des fanatiques et des arrogants.

The ‘artist’ practises the ‘moral’ task of differentiating between meaning and would-be truth. There is a slippage of terminology – from mythologist to critic to semiologist to writer to artist – but no fundamental change in Barthes’s conception of the task at hand. Only the status of the discourse changes. For whereas the mythologist is ‘condamné au métalangage’ (*My*, 232), the discourse of the ‘artist’ is primary. As we have seen, *Leçon* announces Barthes’s renunciation of metalanguage, in accordance with his growing conviction that it is necessary to use subjectivity as the founding principle of criticism. This criticism, changing the ‘degree’ of its language, would thus become an ‘art’, as we have seen that the semiologist becomes ‘en somme un artiste’.

The term ‘artiste’ mainly serves to underline Barthes’s distancing of himself from ‘scientific’ studies of the sign. But the term is also employed to denote a rarity: there are few artists, and their combat against the ‘troupeau des fanatiques et des arrogants’ is heroic, because the numbers are so unmatched. Barthes writes at the opening of ‘Cher Antonioni’ that ‘we’ are surrounded by ‘prêtres’: ‘Des prêtres, nous en avons aujourd’hui
à revendre: de toutes religions, et même hors religion; mais des artistes?45

The essay ends on the same note: having explained the implications of the artist’s third ‘force’ – that of ‘fragilité’ – Barthes concludes that one’s situation, ‘dès lors qu’on n’est plus prêtre’, is ultimately a situation of solitude: ‘être artiste aujourd’hui, c’est là une situation qui n’est plus soutenue par la belle conscience d’une grande fonction sacrée ou sociale; ce n’est plus prendre place sereinement dans le Panthéon bourgeois des Phares de l’Humanité’.46 This passage is strikingly similar to the passage in *Leçon* in which Barthes elegiacally – but artfully – describes literature after ‘mai 68’ as a deserted landscape: ‘la littérature est désacralisée, les institutions sont impuissantes à la protéger et à l’imposer comme le modèle implicite de l’humain. Ce n’est pas […] que la littérature soit détruite: c’est qu’elle n’est plus gardée’ (*L*, 40–41). This is not merely a regretful postmodern assessment. It is a stratagem which allows Barthes to set out a neat position for the new semiology which he has, up to this point in the lecture, been defining. The next sentence of the lecture makes this strategy clear: ‘La sémiologie littéraire serait ce voyage qui permet de débarquer dans un paysage libre par déshérence: ni anges ni dragons ne sont plus là pour le défendre’ (*L*, 41, my emphasis). The post-’68 climate, in which ‘la maîtrise littéraire’ (*L*, 40) has ‘dispar[u]’, provides a conveniently untenanted location in which Barthes can practise his un-masterly pedagogical discourse and his predilection for literature: ‘[mon] regard peut alors se porter, non sans perversité, sur des choses anciennes et belles, dont le signifié est abstrait, périmé’. This smacks of defiance. By this stage of his career Barthes is willing to scandalise his former admirers by abjuring his previous, transgressive theoretical positions, and allying himself to what could be perceived as a reactionary emphasis on literature. The institutional ethos of the Collège de France licenses this, by allowing Barthes to pursue an ‘enseignement que […] rien n’est appelé à sanctionner, sinon la fidélité de ses auditeurs’ (*L*, 41).

By sleight-of-hand, then, Barthes has by the end of *Leçon* constructed a rhetorical stage upon which his ‘artistic’ claims to subjective privilege are demonstrated to be, in fact, moral imperatives in a society dominated by (plural) ‘discours de pouvoir’. ‘Cher Antonioni’ shows how Barthes views the situation of the ‘artist’ he claims in *Leçon*, however subtly, to be. Whereas the first two years of Barthes’s teaching at the Collège de France employ an aleatory and encyclopedic approach to material from many disciplines (works of fiction, religious treatises, ethnological works, dictionaries, letters, etc.) in order to illuminate the ‘fantasmes’ of the ‘vivre ensemble’ and the ‘neutre’, it is in the final two years of teaching that the idea of a primary discourse (a writing that is ‘du côté de l’Art’
‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’: From the ‘incertain’ to a scienza nuova of the ‘intime’

The lecture entitled ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’ was delivered at the Collège de France on 19 October 1978, and given again in November at New York University, this time under the title ‘Proust et moi’. The lecture is quite obviously placed under the sign of Barthes’s affinity with Proust. I shall discuss the lecture further in Chapter 5 in the context of my examination of Barthes’s fantasy of the ‘Roman’. Barthes identifies with Proust, because, like him, after his mother’s death he feels an urgent desire to practise a new form of writing: ‘je m’identifie à lui’, he writes: ‘confusion de pratique, non de valeur’ (459). The choice to be made is the choice between ‘l’Essai (la Critique)’ and ‘[le] Roman’ (460). Barthes is intrigued by the manner in which Proust managed, in 1909, finally to start the Recherche, having resolved the hesitations that had dogged his work since the death of his mother four years previously.47 It is the prolongation (from Leçon) of the theme of the ‘incertain’ that is of interest in ‘Longtemps’, along with the manner in which Barthes uses Proust as a keystone in his argument that subjectivity, fantasy and simulation must form the basis of a new science (a new mathesis).

At the start of the lecture, Barthes carefully points out that his ‘identification’ with Proust does not represent his own self-elevation to the same level as ‘l’auteur prestigieux d’une œuvre monumentale’. Rather, his identification is with ‘l’ouvrier […] modeste, qui a voulu entreprendre une tâche à laquelle […] il a conféré un caractère absolu’ (459). Barthes openly identifies aspects of his personal life with aspects of Proust’s: a major intermediary here is George Painter’s biography of Proust, a clear source of fascination for Barthes.48 There is a willed provocativeness about Barthes’s identification with Proust, despite the disclaimer that this is not a preening comparison of himself to the great novelist. The provocativeness inheres in identifying, as Barthes claims, with ‘Marcel’ rather than with ‘Proust’: ‘marcellisme’ is a wilful abandonment to a personal investment in literature and a quasi-biographical interest in the
compositional dilemmas of the writer. This is part of the exercise in
detheorisation that Barthes undertakes throughout much of the Collège
de France teaching. Indeed, though Proust is, throughout Barthes’s
career, a writer of talismanic importance, it is only once Barthes begins
sloughing off the theoretical moulds he had done so much to form in the
1960s that Proust assumes more of an explicit presence in Barthes’s
writing. As Kathrin Yacavone has pointed out, ‘it was only after Barthes
turned to a specific “writerly” practice of reading, namely one rooted in
the pleasure-seeking subject as discussed in, and exemplified by, Le
Plaisir du texte (1973), that Barthes’s identification with Proust finds a
theoretical justification in his work’.

Barthes has always been interested in the mystery of the composition
of the Recherche: how did Proust finally manage to make it work? In this
way, Proust is the gateway to the coverage, in La Préparation du roman
II, of the obstacles which writers must overcome in order to write the
desired works: ‘le choix’, ‘le doute’; ‘la patience’; ‘horaires, régimes’;
‘démarrages, crises, freinages’. Jonathan Culler is critical of the way this
approach mobilises what he considers to be regressive biographism,
obseving that it ‘involves a turn away from reflection on language’. However, Culler also points out that Barthes’s focus, in La Préparation
du roman II, on how the Recherche finally took shape is in some respects
innovative: ‘This discussion involves an interesting shift in ways of
thinking about the novel in general and Proust in particular: vision from
the beginning rather than the end, where the finished work is a given and
one analyses the significance of different elements in that context’.

In the ‘Longtemps’ lecture, Barthes explains that Proust, like himself,
is torn between the essay (defined as being characterised by metaphor)
and the novel (characterised by metonymy): ‘Proust est un sujet divisé
[…]; il sait que chaque incident de la vie peut donner lieu ou à un
commentaire (une interprétation), ou à une affabulation qui en donne ou
en imagine l’avant et l’après narratif’ (460). From 1905 until the summer
of 1909, Proust is uncertain. Barthes’s description here of Proust’s
hesitation is remarkably similar to his description of himself at the start
of Leçon, where, as we have seen, the adjective ‘incertain’ is used
strategically: ‘L’indécision de Proust est profonde […]; il a déjà écrit, et
ce qu’il a écrit (notamment au niveau de certains fragments) relève
souvent d’une forme mixte, incertaine, hésitante, à la fois romanesque et
intellectuelle’ (461). Compare this to the successive versions of the
opening of Leçon, in which Barthes defines both himself and the essay
in the same terms, as ‘incertain’, ‘ambigu’. For Barthes as for Proust,
‘[l’]indécision est profonde’, but also ‘elle est peut-être chérie’
Barthes explains that Proust clearly is attached to generic indecision given that ‘[il] a aimé et admiré des écrivains dont il constate qu’ils ont pratiqué, eux aussi, une certaine indécision des genres: Nerval et Baudelaire’ (461). For Barthes, the attachment to the ‘incer-tain’ is due more to his sense of its poietic and pedagogical value. A teaching which is ‘incertain’ in its method is true to the mathetic qualities of literature, and also manages by virtue of its impurity to evade the ‘discours du pouvoir’. This teaching ‘dévie de la place où on l’attend’ (L, 44).

In Leçon, then, the ‘indécision’ that Barthes later realises that he shares with Proust is positive and enabling. However, by the time of the ‘Longtemps’ lecture, the change in Barthes’s personal circumstances caused by the death of his mother means that he is no longer contented by the analytical nature of his writing. He wants his writing now to become primary: ‘quoi, toujours jusqu’à ma mort, je vais écrire des articles, faire des cours, des conférences, sur des “sujets”, qui seuls varieront, si peu! (C’est le “sur” qui me gêne)’ (‘Longtemps’, 466). His ‘indécision’ must somehow be transmuted in order to lead to a ‘forme nouvelle’ (467). It is precisely because Proust managed to alchemise his ‘indécision’ that he is an important figure for Barthes. Proust’s ‘indéci- sion’ is the basis for a profound generic innovation. Barthes explains that it is the manner in which the narrator describes sleep – at the opening of Du Côté de chez Swann – that permits the synthesis of writing styles from which the whole work issues forth: ‘Le sommeil fonde une autre logique, une logique de la Vacillation, du Décloisonnement’ (462). For the ‘immense édifice du souvenir’ can only be articulated if chronology is interrupted. Thus the thematic importance of sleep provides Proust with the means to construct his work. Sleep will ‘ouvrir les vannes du Temps: la chronologie ébranlée, des fragments, intellectuels ou narratifs, vont former une suite soustraite à la loi ancestrale du Récit ou du Raisonnement, et cette suite produira sans forcer la tierce forme, ni Essai ni Roman’ (463).

Barthes therefore locates Proust’s transmutation of his writerly dilemma in his discovery of the myriad possibilities inherent to a state (sleep) normally considered as unproductive. The narrator’s confinement to the ‘self-cancelling impossibility’ of the phrase ‘je dors’ at the opening of the Recherche is the key that unlocks the subsequent enormous flow of recollection, just as in ‘Combray’, the work is seen to emerge from the narrator’s cup of tea. Apparent reduction leads, in fact, to creative expansion, because a ‘nouvelle logique’ is at work. Barthes needs to discover a similarly enabling ‘logique’. Thus he concludes the first part of the
‘Longtemps’ lecture by demonstrating how Proust is in this way a tutelary figure for him: ‘Si j’ai dégagé dans l’œuvre-vie de Proust le thème d’une nouvelle logique qui permet – en tout cas a permis à Proust d’abolir la contradiction du Roman et de l’Essai, c’est parce que ce thème me concerne personnellement’ (465). Drawing upon Proust, Barthes’s own ‘nouvelle logique’ is to consist in a reduction – which is to be considered as an expansion – to his own self:

Je vais […] parler de ‘moi’. ‘Moi’ doit s’entendre ici lourdement: ce n’est pas le substitut aseptisé d’un lecteur général […]; ce n’est personne d’autre que celui à qui nul ne peut se substituer, pour le meilleur et pour le pire. (465)

The desire to speak personally is, paradoxically, not egotistical. Proust is a vital catalyst for Barthes because he is the paradigmatic writer of ‘la vérité de l’affect’ (PR, 10 March 1979, 155). Novelistic language, for Barthes, is a way to bear witness to the lives of those one loves. Proust’s writing about Marcel’s grandmother is Barthes’s model for his writing about his own mother in La Chambre claire. Thus what appears to be a dual egotism – the desire to speak personally, and the identification of himself with Proust – is in fact the expression of a generous, even a desperate, longing to do justice to other, beloved people. Proust is the emblem, for Barthes, of the consecration of one’s own life to the project of writing an affective work, and thereby perhaps attaining a ‘vita nova’.

Speaking personally would rebuff any mathesis universalis: ‘C’est l’intime qui veut parler en moi, faire entendre son cri, face à la généralité, à la science’ (465). The second part of the lecture will indicate that a particular ‘science particulière’ of ‘simulation’ will constitute, as Proust’s tierce forme does, an innovative method. With this method, Barthes can synthesise his ‘indécision’ on a new plane, beyond the territory of the ‘sur’ (‘c’est le “sur” qui me gêne’). Simultaneously, he can construct a pedagogical landscape in which he can obey his own most personal conviction – that he must somehow express his love for his mother in writing.

Part two of the ‘Longtemps’ lecture begins with Barthes using Dante to explain that he feels he has reached the ‘mezzo del camin’, a sense of mortality and urgency which inaugurates a profound change in one’s life. For Proust, this mid-point was ‘certainement la mort de sa mère’. For Barthes it is the same event, though he does not name his mother, for whom he is experiencing ‘un deuil cruel, […] unique et comme irréductible’. This grief, he says, ‘peut constituer pour moi cette “cime du particulier”, dont parlait Proust; quoique tardif, ce deuil sera pour moi le milieu de ma vie’ (467). It is from this most intense point of grief – the
‘cime’ – that his future work must depart.

Proust knew that it is ‘à la cime du particulier qu’éclot le général’.\(^5\) This phrase, partly quoted by Barthes in ‘Longtemps’, is glossed at greater length in the sixth Préparation du roman I lecture (20 January 1979), when Barthes is discussing the haiku’s ‘individuation’ (PR, 77). The haiku outlines an utterly ephemeral event, viewed by an individual at a given brief moment. The conditions that give rise to the haiku are fleeting and always past. It is a form which, for Barthes, is the ne plus ultra of ‘individuation – de la Saison, du Temps qu’il fait, de l’Heure comme individuation’. One important aspect of ‘individuation’, Barthes points out, is that of ‘[l]’individu contre le système’. The haiku draws him into thinking about individualistic philosophies, which in a post-Sartrean liberal climate of intellectual engagement are frowned upon: ‘Il faut partir de ce vieux cheval de bataille: l’individualisme discrédité (cf. critique sartrienne de la démocratie bourgeoise […] + critique marxiste + critique gauchiste: vraie conjuration contre l’individualisme!)’ (77). From this point, Barthes states, he can imagine operating his usual ‘tactique du déplacement’ when thinking about the ‘rapport entre le monde de “systèmes”, c’est-à-dire des discours réducteurs (politiques, idéologiques, scientifiques, etc.) et l’étouffement de “l’individu”’. A general or ‘scientifc’ discourse, then, is one which, unlike the haiku, accords no importance to the quiddity of the individual. The Proust quotation – ‘cette très belle expression: “C’est à la cime du particulier qu’éclôt le général”’ (PR, 78) – is one of several ‘références’ he provides here as examples of ways to re-examine the problem of how the subject can fit without distortion or reduction into the ‘système’.

It is when we read the full Proust quotation in the context of a défense of ‘individuation’ that the use of the words ‘cime du particulier’ in the ‘Longtemps’ lecture becomes clearer. Proust’s declaration to Halévy suggests precisely the conjunction that Barthes has been working towards since he posited, in Leçon, that ‘la science peut naître du fantasme’ (L, 44). The conjunction of the utterly individual with the universal brings about a new understanding of the term ‘scientifique’: the ‘cime du particulier’ is ‘scientifique’ in the sense that – according to Barthes – it leads to the mobilisation of a generally worthwhile knowledge. But it is not ‘scientifique’ insofar as it is not a ‘discours réducteur’. Rather, writing from the ‘cime du particulier’ means rendering, as the haiku and the Recherche do, the emotion of the individual in a way that, while (ideally) as universally recognisable as love and death, is also extraordinarily private and ephemeral: the haiku tells of moments that are long vanished; Proust’s narrator describes his childhood; and following these models,
Barthes wants to ‘dire ceux que j’aime, [...] [afin de] témoigner qu’ils n’ont pas vécu [...] “pour rien”’ (‘Longtemps’, 469). This is writing that, in refusing the old ‘science’, refuses the discourse of analysis (the ‘sur’), or the discourse of intelligence. At the start of Contre Sainte-Beuve, Proust writes:

Chaque jour j’attache moins de prix à l’intelligence. Chaque jour je me rends mieux compte que ce n’est qu’en dehors d’elle que l’écrivain peut ressaisir quelque chose de nos impressions, c’est-à-dire atteindre quelque chose de lui-même et la seule matière de l’art. Ce que l’intelligence nous rend sous le nom de passé n’est pas lui.56

Barthes, by 1978, concurs. The death of his mother has altered his intellectual investment in the world of ‘idées’, and now he wishes to examine instead a ‘Roman (fantasmé, et probablement impossible)’ whose ‘vérité’ is ‘la vérité des affects, non celle des idées’ (‘Longtemps’, 469) – which, to bring us back to Nietzsche again, makes of the ‘Roman’ an instance of ‘l’Art, non de la Prêtrise’ (470). The new science is an art of the individual.

As the quotation from the Préparation has already made clear, Barthes is aware that such an apparently indulgent ‘art’ sits badly with the tenets of the theoretical and political climate. It also does not chime with perceptions of the role of the intellectual, if the intellectual is s/he who speaks truth to power in order to uncover injustices. We have already seen, though, that while Barthes believes his teaching – by virtue of both its methods and the location in which it now takes place – is ‘hors pouvoir’, he conceives his intellectual effort, characterised as ‘indirect’, as being more a flight away from (ahead of) power, than a direct combat with the orthodoxy. This has been his explicit conviction at least since 1971, when, in the preface to Sade, Fourier, Loyola, he points out that in the absence of any language that is truly external to ideology, the ‘seule riposte’ available cannot be ‘affrontement’ or direct opposition, but rather, theft: ‘fragmenter le texte ancien de la culture, de la science, de la littérature, et en disséminer les traits selon des formules méconnaissables, de la même façon que l’on maquille une marchandise volée’. Referring to the texts of Sade, Fourier and Loyola, he declares that their ‘intervention sociale’ consists in the manner in which they ‘excède[nt] les lois qu’une société, une idéologie, une philosophie se donnent pour s’accorder à elles-mêmes’ (SFL, 15).

Barthes’s ‘intervention sociale’ in 1978 consists precisely in the belief that a focus on the particular is what is required in a climate that figures such retrenchment into the self as shameful or irresponsible. In an interview given a few weeks before the ‘Longtemps’ lecture, Barthes makes
this position clear. ‘Depuis deux cent ans,’ he says, ‘nous sommes habitués par la culture philosophique et politique à valoriser énormément, disons, le collectivisme en général. Toutes les philosophies sont des philosophies de la collectivité, de la société, et l’individualisme est très mal vu’. There is no longer ‘ou très rarement’ a philosophy ‘de la personne’. Thus, he says,

Peut-être faut-il justement assumer cette singularité, ne pas la vivre comme une sorte de dévalorisation, de honte, mais repenser effectivement une philosophie du sujet. Ne pas se laisser intimider par cette morale, diffuse dans notre société, qui est celle du surmoi collectif, avec ses valeurs de responsabilité et d’engagement politique. Il faut peut-être accepter le scandale de positions individualistes.

Asked by the interviewer whether individualism is really such a ‘scandale’ as he implies, Barthes rather defensively replies, ‘Oh, si, c’est un scandale pour tout ce qui pense et théorise, disons, depuis Hegel! Toute Philosophie qui essaye de se soustraire à ces impératifs de collectivité est extrêmement singulière, et [...] a une mauvaise image’ (553). He needs to assert (if not demonstrate) this ‘scandale’ in order to construct a valorisation for his own individualistic practice.

At the end of the ‘Longtemps’ lecture, such a valorisation is provided by reference to Vico. It is here that Barthes sets out his idea of ‘simulation’. For, though it is unlikely that he will actually write a novel, ‘ce Roman utopique, il m’importe de faire comme si je devais l’écrire’ (470). This simulation will lead, he implies, to a new order of knowledge: ‘Je me mets en effet dans la position de celui qui fait quelque chose, et non plus de celui qui parle sur quelque chose.’ Vico is latently present here, just as he is when the principle of ‘fantasme’ is discussed in *Leçon*. The close of the lecture is indebted to Vico’s philosophy of knowledge. For it was Vico who argued that we can only have true knowledge of something that is humanly made or practised; this is the meaning of his ‘verum factum’ principle. He positions himself against Descartes’s mathematical method. A Cartesian philosophy inspired by mathematical method is prone to lead to what Stephen Toulmin calls ‘[an] idea of timeless, eternal standards, applicable to arguments-in-general in abstraction from their practical contexts’; this is in Vico’s view a ‘Cartesian delusion, [...] [a] dead end’. Vico believes that, when one is speaking of what he calls the ‘civil world’, it is only the knowledge of making something that can count if one is to arrive at an understanding of that thing. Thus, as Peter Burke tells us in his study of Vico, with the ‘verum factum’ principle, ‘Vico turn[s] Descartes on his head. Descartes had argued, in his *Discourse on Method*, that the study of history was a waste of time
because we cannot acquire any certain knowledge of the human past, as we can (he claimed) of mathematics and the world of nature. The equivalent Cartesian argument to be levelled at Barthes – which Barthes seems to have in mind at the end of ‘Longtemps’, given his evident desire to prove the status of his own discourse – would be that his postulation of an impossible novel, to be discussed without recourse to metalanguage (‘j’abolis le discours sur le discours’), can have no epistemological or ‘scientifique’ value. Vico’s and Barthes’s riposte would be that knowledge based on human creation is ‘actually more certain than the [scientific] principles governing the natural world’.

The simulation of practice leads to a new way of looking: ‘le monde ne vient plus à moi sous la forme d’un objet, mais sous celle d’une écriture, c’est-à-dire d’une pratique: je passe à un autre type de savoir […] et c’est en cela que je suis méthodique’. Furthermore, Barthes defines this methodology as being – in the manner of the ‘fantasme’ in Leçon – more ‘scientifique’ even than science itself:

‘Comme si’: cette formule n’est-elle pas l’expression même d’une démarche scientifique, comme on le voit en mathématiques? Je fais une hypothèse et j’explore, je découvre la richesse de ce qui en découle; je postule un roman à faire, et de la sorte je peux espérer en apprendre plus sur le roman qu’en le considérant seulement comme un objet déjà fait par les autres. (‘Longtemps’, 470)

So Barthes has constructed a reasoning whereby the element of ‘analyse’, which partly made up his ‘incertain’ writing, can be excluded from his pedagogy and discourse, in order to allow him to focus fully on the ‘romanesque’ aspect that he desires for his writing. However – and here is where the reasoning really licenses itself – this does not mean that the new writing and pedagogy are robbed of analytical teeth. Rather, the analysis is folded into another level of the discourse, such that, like the ‘fantasme’, beneath the appearance of extreme individuality it has the capacity to make valuable comment about generality, or, as Barthes describes it, ‘[le] monde’ itself. The lecture ends as follows:

Peut-être est-ce finalement au cœur de cette subjectivité, de cette intimité même dont je vous ai entretenus, peut-être est-ce à la ‘cime de mon particulier’ que je suis scientifique sans le savoir, tourné confusément vers cette Scienza Nuova dont parlait Vico: ne devra-t-elle pas exprimer à la fois la brillance et la souffrance du monde, ce qui, en lui, me séduit et m’indigne? (‘Longtemps’, 470)

Barthes has used Vico to cunning effect to back up his claim that his writing and teaching henceforth, though appearing to have nothing to say beyond referring to himself and his desire for a novel, will thereby,
precisely, be saying something new and different in an intellectual context in which such individualism is (in Barthes’s view) a ‘scandale’. The ‘scienza nuova’ will involve the principle of ‘identification’: as we have seen, the ‘Longtemps’ lecture begins by explaining Barthes’s ‘identification’ with Proust’s ‘pratique’. It is then the listeners’ decision as to whether or not they wish to identify with Barthes. Barthes points this out again in the second Préparation series: ‘Ce cours […] n’aura rien, hélas, d’un thrilling, puisque ce sera l’histoire intérieure d’un homme qui veut écrire […] et délibère des moyens d’accomplir ce désir’ (PR, 15 December 1979, 234). This man is not only Barthes himself, but also all of those writers to whom he will refer during the lectures. The principle of the general in the particular is clear here: ‘Cet homme, dont le récit commence, sera tous ces noms: eux, moi. Mais sera-t-il vous, ou même l’un d’entre vous?’ Barthes is well aware that the identification may not take place: ‘peut-être peu à peu [le Cours] se dépeuplera, de quoi lasser la curiosité des uns et la fidélité des autres’ (PR, 235). This is not his concern, however. The important point is that the cours has been established on a ground which employs a methodology of ‘simulation’ defined as ‘scientifique’ (at another turn of the spiral). Thereby, Barthes has given himself a rhetorical warrant for the work that he wants to do in the wake of his mother’s death. This work (travail) involves the gesturing, through personal divagations and poietic preoccupation, towards a work (œuvre) which would manage to articulate ‘la vérité des affects’ (‘Longtemps’, 469). The idea of the making is nourished by the desire for this truth; a much-reduced verum factum.

There is little doubt that, in his teaching at the Collège de France, Barthes uses his sense of the uncertainty of his status to his advantage. Setting out the methodological programme for the four lecture courses, both Leçon and the ‘Longtemps’ lecture employ uncertainty as an enabling principle. Also common to both is a deft treatment of ‘l’opposition des sciences et des lettres’ (L, 21) which enables Barthes to defend a literary teaching on the basis of an idiosyncratic conception of ‘science’. Barthes wishes to use aesthetic judgment to shuttle between both sides of the paradigms he sets up, and at the same time to end up beyond them, in a position that he conceives to be methodologically and epistemologically superior. He wishes to synthesise and depart from any binarism which reduces him to being one or the other. This is the essayist’s prerogative. According to Pierre Bourdieu, Barthes had been employing this synthetic method in his work ever since Sur Racine (1963). Even then he wanted to have it all,
Bourdieu comments. This passage from Bourdieu is remarkably prescient of the preoccupations of the ‘Longtemps’ lecture:

En s’affirmant capable de réunir l’imagination scientifique du chercheur […] et la liberté iconoclaste de l’écrivain […], d’annuler l’opposition sociologiquement si puissante entre les traditions et des fonctions jusque-là incompatibles, Sainte-Beuve et Marcel Proust, l’École normale et les salons, la rigueur désenchantée de la science et le dilettantisme inspiré des littérateurs, il joue évidemment sur les deux tableaux, essayant ainsi […] de cumuler les profits de la science et les prestiges de la philosophie ou de la littérature. Comme si, à l’âge de la science, l’aggiornamento passait inévitablement par cette sorte d’hommage que le vice essayiste rend à la vertu scientifique.63

Bourdieu disapproves of Barthes’s deliberate disciplinary impurity. Barthes is aware that both the ‘impureté’ and the ‘individualisme’ that he wants to mobilise are ‘un scandale pour tout ce qui pense et théorise’. This is at least partly why he believes his procedure is worthwhile. The deliberately ‘scandalous’ procedure brings about an apparently harmonious methodology which enables him to explore the objects of his own ‘fantasmes’. But it also obeys his deeply felt imperative of producing a discourse which is untouched by – though not actually standing up to – the ‘discours de pouvoir’ (L, 11). That he can set about such an idiosyncratic ‘new science’ is of course thanks to his privileged position at the Collège de France, which allows him to pursue this intellectual ‘aventure’ (L, 32). The effects of the institution on Barthes’s writing are to be found in the way that the ‘essayism’ of the Collège de France lecture notes involves digression, self-effacement, and an emphasis on the provisional. In response to the magisterial position which he occupies, Barthes focuses on imbuing his pedagogical writing with unmagisterial qualities. Andy Stafford has written about this, pointing out that for Barthes, ‘the more “institutional” or more constrained the context, the more corrosive and provisional the writing that emerges’.64 These tactics are also, perhaps, the privilege of the older thinker: the savour of the term ‘scientifique’, employed in a new and looser way, derives from the tension between its new meaning and the older one that was employed in Barthes’s structuralist work. Barthes’s endeavour is then, in Culler’s words, ‘provocative precisely because familiar terms are being used in new ways – to loosen the theories they once helped to build’.65 What we see, in the Collège de France teaching, is Barthes employing the privilege of age; as he says at the end of Leçon, ‘vient peut-être maintenant l’âge d’une autre expérience: celle de désapprendre, de laisser travailler le remaniement imprévisible que l’oubli impose à la sédimentation des savoirs, des cultures, des croyances que l’on a traversés’ (L, 46). After this point, it
is up to his listeners to decide whether such a tactic is one of self-indulgence or of intransigence.

Notes

1 References to _La Chambre claire_ are to the text as it appears in OC, V, 784–892.
2 _Mathesis_: mental discipline, learning or science, especially mathematics (OED). _Mathesis_ is defined in Liddell and Scott’s _Greek-English Lexicon_ as the act of knowing, but also the desire for knowledge and education. It also has a Foucauldian inflection: Foucault used the term in _Les Mots et les choses_ to mean ‘science universelle de la mesure et de l’ordre’. _Les Mots et les choses_ (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 70. Barthes views literature as ‘mathesis’, a means to understand the world. See ‘La littérature comme mathèse’ in RB, OC, IV, 694. In _Le Lexique de l’auteur_, he defines mathesis as ‘un savoir sans scientificité’ (LA, 333).
3 Jonathan Culler, _Barthes_ (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 120.
5 Kristeva, ‘Comment parler’, p. 49.
7 Kant, _Critique of Judgment_, p. 15.
8 Kant, _Critique of Judgment_, p. 15.
11 Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’, p. 3.
12 Claire de Obaldia’s chapter on Barthes ‘the encyclopedic and the novelistic’ in _The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay_ (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) (pp. 146–80) provides an inspiring account of Barthes’s use of the generic uncertainty of the essay. The first chapter of her study is also extremely useful in this regard (pp. 1–64). Marielle Macé provides an assessment of Barthes as essayist in her _Le Temps de l’essai_ (pp. 207–62).
21 Sheringham, ‘Seminal Digressions’, _Times Literary Supplement_, 17 March 2006,
pp. 7–8 (p. 7).

22 See the Chambers dictionary entry for encyclopedia: ‘enkyklios paideia general education (opposed to professional or special education), from enkyklios circular, recurring, everyday, from en in, and kyklos circle, and paideia education, from pais, paidos a child’.


28 The section occurs in Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie, pp. 123–26.
29 Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie, pp. 123–24.
34 The bibliography of Barthes’s Michelet gives the dates of Michelet’s translations of Vico in the 1820s and ’30s. For an account of the influence of Vico’s theory of history on Michelet, see Patrick H. Hutton, ‘Vico’s Theory of History and the French Revolutionary Tradition’, Journal of the History of Ideas, 37.2 (June 1976): 241–56. Somewhat in line with my discussion of mathesis singularis, Edmund Wilson discusses the manner in which Michelet managed in his work to combine general historical overview with a focus on individual historical objects. See To the Finland Station (London: Collins/Fontana, 1974).
37 Nietzsche, quoted in Deleuze, Nietzsche et la philosophie, p. 26, and by Barthes in ‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure…’ (OC, V, 463).
38 See Ch. 5 below.
40 The third essay of the Genealogy of Morals looks at the ‘ascetic ideal’ and how it is viewed by different groups, of whom ‘artists’ and ‘priests’ are only two; the other four are philosophers, women, physiological casualties and saints. See On The Genealogy of Morals, trans. and intro. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 77–136.
inherent in Barthes’s desire ‘to free discourse from power’ – which, as Holland points out, ‘is not to eliminate power from discourse’ (p. 164). See also Mary Bittner Wiseman’s discussion of Leçon in The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 38–64.

42 Coste’s note gives the full Brecht quotation from L’Exception et la règle: ‘Sous le familier, découvrez l’insolite,/ Sous le quotidien, découvrez l’inexplicable./ Puisse toute chose dite habituelle vous inquiéter./ Dans la règle découvrez l’abus/ Et partout où l’abus s’est montré,/ Trouvez le remède’ (CVE, 165 n.32).

43 ‘Cher Antonioni’, written for the ceremony in which Antonioni was presented with the ‘Archiginnedio d’Oro’ prize, 28 January 1980, in Bologna. Published in Cahiers du cinéma, May 1980. OC, V, 900–905 (p. 900).

44 ‘Cher Antonioni’, p. 901.
45 ‘Cher Antonioni’, p. 900.
46 ‘Cher Antonioni’, p. 904.
47 The article ‘Ça prend’, published in Magazine littéraire in January 1979 (OC, V, 654–56), treats the same mutation.

50 Éric Marty has pointed out that although – or perhaps because – Proust is the major intertext for Barthes, Proust is very rarely analysed directly in Barthes’s work. Apart from the ‘Longtemps’ lecture, the only texts devoted to Proust are ‘Une idée de recherche’ (1971; OC, III, 917–21); ‘Proust et les noms’ (1967, anthologised in Nouveaux essais critiques in 1972; OC, IV, 66–77); the session on the ‘discours Charlus’ in the seminar Tenir un discours (CVE, pp. 203–18); and the short article ‘Ça prend’ (1979; OC, V, 654–56), the ideas in which are discussed in PR, 2 and 9 February 1980, pp. 328–33. Marty characterises all the published interventions on Proust as ‘très timides’. Marty, ‘Marcel Proust dans “la chambre claire”’, L’Esprit Créateur 46.4 (2006): 125–33 (p. 125).

53 Culler, ‘Preparing the Novel’, p. 117.
54 Hill, Radical Indecision, p. 145.
58 All subsequent citations from ‘Longtemps’ in this chapter are from OC, V, 470.
59 This principle is set out in a work from 1710, De Antequissima Italorum sapientia. The ‘verum factum’ criterion is important in Vico’s later work, including the Scienza nuova.

62 Burke, Vico, p. 78.
64 Stafford, “‘Préparation du romanesque’”, p. 105.
65 Culler, Barthes, p. 121.