Afterword

At the opening of *L’Entretien infini*, Maurice Blanchot points out that Nietzsche’s fragmentary approach to writing is inconsistent with the requirements of the academy, which demands that research be presented in a continuous and developmental form. ‘Nietzsche [...] fut professeur’, writes Blanchot,

[mais] il dut renoncer à l’être et pour diverses raisons, dont l’une est révélatrice; comment sa pensée voyageuse qui s’accomplit par fragments, c’est-à-dire par affirmations séparées et exigeant la séparation, comment *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* auraient-ils pu prendre place dans l’enseignement et s’accorder avec les nécessités de la parole universitaire?¹

The questions asked here of Nietzsche could equally be asked of Barthes. Nietzsche is an archetypal figure for Barthes in terms of both philosophy and poetics, because of his perspectivist approach to knowledge and his anti-systematic employment of the fragment. But unlike Nietzsche, Barthes ultimately enters into a successful negotiation with the academy. Barthes’s ‘pensée voyageuse’ managed to furnish a fruitful pedagogy without abandoning the ‘exigence fragmentaire’² which for Barthes is not only a formal but also an ethical issue.

Barthes’s lecturing style is inflected by the ethos of the Collège de France, an institution which favours the teaching of ‘la science en voie de se faire’. The process-based approach to knowledge implied by such an ethos is used by Barthes as the basis for his own non-teleological teaching. Added to this is Barthes’s self-definition, in his inaugural lecture, as an essayist. Many of the essay’s attributes are embodied in Barthes’s lectures: scepticism, an opposition to systems whether rhetorical or ideological, and a conviction that the act of criticism cannot take place without self-criticism. Barthes exploits his perception of the ‘uncertainty’ of the essay form in order to propose a digressive and pan-generic organisation of his material. The only sense of *certainty* comes from his refusal of dogmatic, ‘certain’ ideological discourses. Thus Barthes’s teaching unfurls, as he said that the text of *La Chambre claire* did, from ‘la seule chose sûre qui fût en moi (si naïve fût-elle): la résistance éperdue à tout système réducteur’ (CC, 794).
The fundamental preoccupation that links each of Barthes’s four lecture courses at the Collège de France to each other and to Barthes’s concurrent published work is the concern with fragmentation and divagatory exposition. *La Préparation du roman* reveals, within a discourse upon continuous, lengthy narrative forms, Barthes’s adherence to the relativised ‘vérité’ of short and fragmentary forms. These lectures, in their ‘preparation’ for a novel that is not to be written, proceed through a prospective method of endless deferral. *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre* also suspend any possible resolution to their exploration of social and ethical ideals. Barthes views the method that he employs in those lecture courses as constituting perhaps the most vital aspect of his teaching: ‘Quoi que je choisisse comme “sujet” [...] la pratique digressive, le droit à la digression. [...] L’indirect sera là, qui est d’ordre éthique’ (*CVE*, 184). Barthes’s lecturing methodology and the aesthetic fantasy of the *Préparation* are extensions of the anti-dogmatic, anti-systematic goals of his entire œuvre. The clearest rationale for Barthes’s ethics and aesthetics of the fragment, both before and after his accession to the Collège de France, is found in *Leçon*, where Barthes explains that he is impelled to try to attenuate (‘alléger’) the power inherent in language: ‘je me persuade de plus en plus, soit en écrivant, soit en enseignant, que l’opération fondamentale de cette méthode de déprise, c’est, si l’on écrit, la fragmentation, et, si l’on expose, la digression’ (*L*, 42).

As Montaigne did, Barthes opposes a discourse of personal experience and taste to authoritative and objective knowledge. His particularity is set out tactically, in order to demonstrate that a ‘universal particular’ is attainable. Barthes accomplishes this to extraordinary effect in *La Chambre claire*. The study of photography turns around the incomparable, banal twin fulcrum of love and death – what everyone experiences, and yet also what *I* feel in relation to this (this death, this beloved person, this sadness, this photograph; my own future death). Barthes can only do justice to the grief evoked by photographs by combining ‘deux voix: celle de la banalité (dire ce que tout le monde voit et sait) et celle de la singularité (renflouer cette banalité de tout l’élan d’une émotion qui n’appartenait qu’à moi)’ (*CC*, 851).

Thus the false generality of traditional, authoritarian criticism and pedagogy is lost, but only to be refound again at another level – that of the universal particular. Parataxis and fragmentation are pre-eminent for Barthes, but he remains determined nonetheless to gesture towards the possibility of a full, transcendent knowledge – even if that knowledge can no longer be fully attained. This determination can be inferred from his use of what he calls ‘le geste encyclopédique’ (*CVE*, 182) to inform the
methodology of Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre. In La Préparation du roman, the relationship between the ‘Album’ and the ‘Livre’ embodies the same tension. The minimalism of the haiku is part of the same problematic as the maximalist ‘grande œuvre’. The fantasised ‘roman’ of La Préparation du roman is a fragmented, poikilos, pan-generic work. This aesthetic ideal is an ideal of formal fusion, in which the ‘œuvre’ oscillates (in conceptual terms) between simplicity and complexity, between the ‘Album’ and the ‘Livre’, between aesthetic discourse and critical discourse, between the fragment and totality. As was the case for the German Romantics, this fantasy is unrealisable, but potent in its revelation of the view of literature as a system of total representation.

This is the crux of aesthetic discourse itself: the tension between atomised individual significance, and the possibility of general meaning or the sensus communis aestheticus. For Barthes as for Kant, the natural world has an important role to play. How does one organise one’s sense of being in the world, and how could the negative aspects of that world be imagined otherwise? This is a central question in the Cours, especially in Comment vivre ensemble and Le Neutre. As Pierre Hadot would put it, this is a philosophical act which is situated ‘pas seulement dans l’ordre de la connaissance, mais dans l’ordre du “soi” et de l’être’. Barthes’s interrogation of subjectivity using the device of the fantasme is a reflection on our capacities to think the world differently. This relates to our own nature, and to our surroundings. Barthes’s interest in the infinite, ‘delicate’ detail of life grounds his fantasy of an existence anchored by affective links but free of the coercion of discourse, and of language which institutes barriers between us and our environment. Guided by Japanese aesthetics, Barthes realises that satori is not the revelation of any mystical truth. Rather it is a full acceptance of the unity of the subject with his or her environment, and of the ‘intraitable’ of the world: ‘la brillance et la souffrance du monde, ce qui, en lui, me séduit et m’indigne’ (‘Longtemps’, 470). Barthes provides an account of his own ‘sorte de Satori’ (PR, 32) at the opening of La Préparation du roman I: the fantasy of fusion with one’s environment is for Barthes linked to the creative fantasy of the unification of his pedagogical and writerly goals.

Barthes’s fantasmes are expansive, dispersive, non-oppressive. In their contingency we find our own. But they are regulated too, by deliberation, self-criticism, scepticism. In this double articulation is the instructiveness of Barthes’s teaching – magisterial, in skill as in form, but laced with interstices. There is space for reflection, for Barthes’s subjectivity, for our own, and for uncertainty.
The assessment of Barthes’s pedagogy presented in this study represents an early stage of what will undoubtedly become an ongoing recalibration of Barthes’s legacy, given that material from a selection of Barthes’s seminars at the École pratique des hautes études is also being published. There is much work to be done in this area, and, though there are statutory similarities between the EPHE and the Collège de France, there are clearly some institutional and formal issues unique to the EPHE which will deserve analysis. There is a crucial difference, however, between the Collège de France publications and the existent and forthcoming EPHE material. The ‘Sarrasine’ seminars, the ‘Roland Barthes’ seminars and the ‘discours amoureux’ seminars each fed into the construction of a book by Barthes (S/Z, Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes and Fragments d’un discours amoureux respectively). For this reason, the material presented in the EPHE publications will primarily be of interest to genetic critics. However, the Collège de France lectures led ultimately to no book – and this is not merely because Barthes died before such a textual transformation could be undertaken. The lectures constitute an end in themselves, as the compagnon de route of his concurrent work and concerns. ‘Le Cours et le Travail’, as Barthes says at the opening of La Préparation du roman I, are invested in ‘la même entreprise’ in order to ‘faire cesser la division du sujet, au profit d’un seul Projet, le Grand Projet: image de joie’ (PR, 32). We must recognise the importance here of the term ‘projet’. At the Collège de France, Barthes teaches a way of reading and a way of living, and imagines a way of writing. Throughout, the most important focus is on activity rather than on product. Critical, interpretive, poietic and affective activity – on Barthes’s part and on his listeners’ – is ongoing, and by definition cannot be completed. Barthes sees this endeavour as furnishing an instructive ‘mathesis singularis’ (CC, 795). On the uncertainty of this singularity is founded the recognisability of this mathesis: ‘C’est ça!’ (CC, 876) we cry, as we see the universal particular. This is Barthes’s achievement at the Collège de France, where he unifies the goals of his teaching and his writing, and the formal and ethical imperatives dictated to him by the circumstances of his own life, into a hopeful project.

Notes

1 Blanchot, L’Entretien infini, p. 3.
2 Blanchot, L’Entretien infini, p. 525.
3 Hadot, Exercices spirituels, p. 23.