ADEFFI annual conference, October 2016

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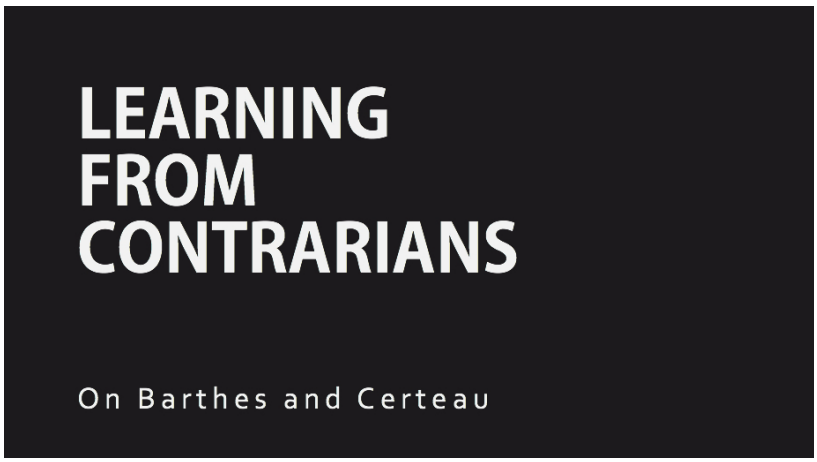
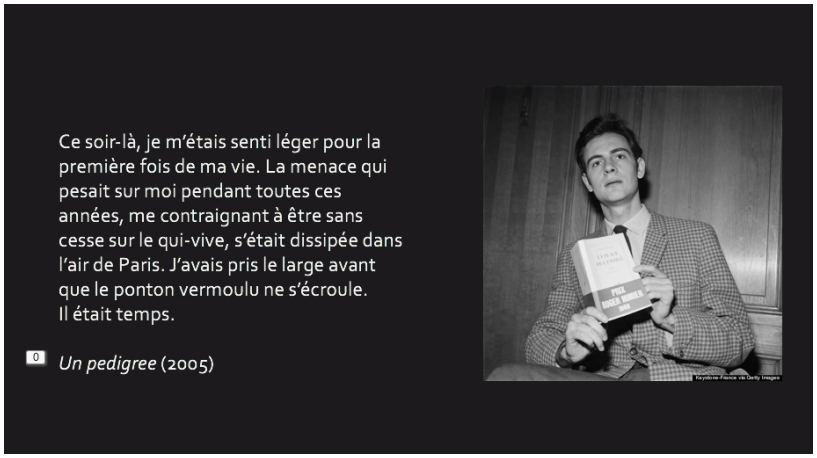
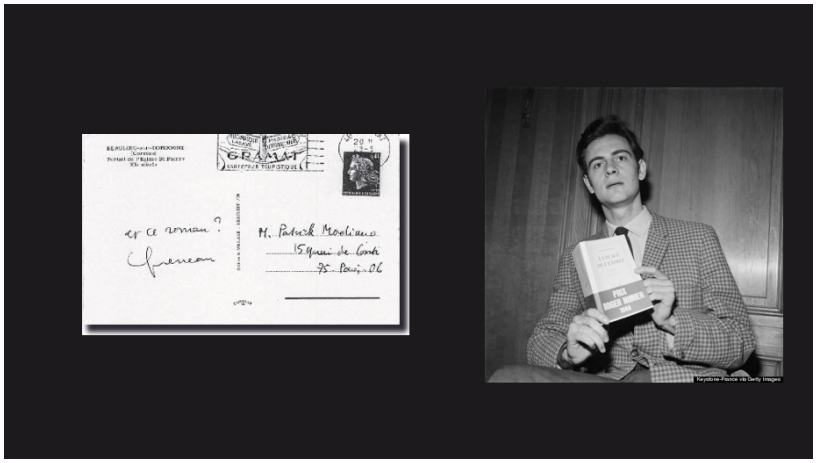


Is it the vocation of literature to be disobedient? This is the question from which I start, but it is not one to which I hope to resolve, in part because too decisive an answer is likely to be something of a betrayal. Nonetheless, the question is a pressing one and to address it I will explore some cases that may have a productive bearing on our thinking — not least because, however powerful the incitements embodied in their works, they follow a practice of learning, rooted as Barthes will say in a 'distance difficile', that is of real interest when it comes to thinking about the issue of obedience.

That there is a connection between literature and the issue of obedience is something that Barthes recognizes in a brief text from 1975, a preface to a graphic novel published by Guido Crepax based on the *Histoire d'O*. But the depiction of a highly loaded ritual of obedience is at the same time no more than a lure. There is indeed an *histoire* that is rendered here — but it consists in what we can discern in, what we can infer from, the shared discourse of two human subjects, as Barthes says. The ritual of obedience is perhaps nothing more than a marvellous device, a supreme fiction in that to grasp it we must learn to see through it.



All of that said, there are what seem to be exemplary moments where the urge to write is indissociable from an attitude of disobedience that is overtly assumed. Or so it may appear in retrospect. Patrick Modiano published *Un pedigree* in 2005. The account he gives of the years in which he began to work on *La Place de l'étoile* is one where the liberation of writing is rooted in his defiance of his father's efforts to remove him from Paris. But it is retrospectivity that gives this salience to disobedience, connecting it in the process to adolescence (and making of it a therapeutic recreation of the liberation of Paris in 1944). After all, Modiano was still a juvenile when the novel was completed and was unable to sign a contract with Gallimard for its publication (a transaction complicated by the fact that he had falsified his identity papers and had inserted 1947 rather than 1945 as the year of his birth).



At the same time, the writing of the novel was shaped by the same dynamic of obedience and disobedience: thus, Queneau becomes a surrogate father in summoning the young writer to bring 'ce roman' to completion.

I come now to two older writers, both active in the years that witnessed Modiano's emergence, but who broach the social and political challenges of *l'après-mai* on the basis of long years of writing and teaching through which they seek to rethink what their lesson might be.

I'll argue in a moment that we can identify key postulates in the work of Barthes and Certeau alike in a gesture of refusal, an overt negation, if not an act of disobedience. What I want to highlight at the outset is not only their shared engagement in the same historical and cultural field (though the paths they take through it are different), but also a common reflection on the category of the lesson as a means of reflecting on what is at stake in doing so.

'Learning', then, is one of the preoccupations that Barthes and Certeau have in common. This in a period of substantial change of what 'learning' entailed, in the context of which each displays an equal commitment to teaching and education as the basis of an ethics of transformation. On this one could say a lot more. This paper is purposefully a prolegomenon, in that I am concerned to work out something of the conditions under which this transformation might come about and to see also how the problem of disobedience might shed light on it. This is a preoccupation which for each of them is massively intensified in the aftermath of 1968 and I'll come back to say some more about it. At this point, however, I'll continue to take the double scene of obedience and disobedience as my reference point and turn now to Barthes first of all.

Barthes too represents obedience as a preoccupation of adolescence. It matters most of all, though, as a marker of a veiled dissidence and as a factor in the emergence of the writer's subjectivity. The traces that the half-remembered scenes leave prompt a persistent questioning, itself the means of articulating and displaying a contrariness that permeates *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* in particular.

It is discourse above all that is the site of a contrarian struggle, one that is in large part internal, one in which a simple gesture of refusal, a decisive act of disobedience is beside the point. The sense of being on a threshold is something to which Barthes gives expression in particular in what could be termed the scene of the lesson, as he makes the transition from the École pratique des hautes études to the Collège de France. Thus the introduction of the restricted seminar to begin with, and then the reinvention of the course and the lesson in the much larger context of the last years.

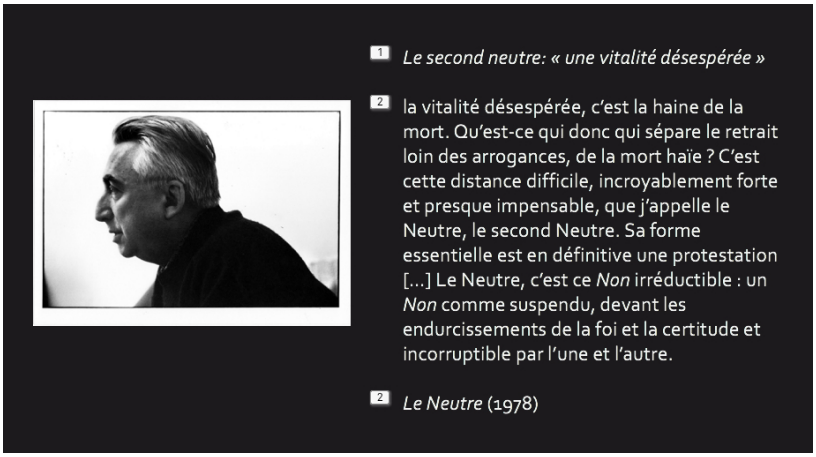
More and more in these years, literature was to be the medium of a transformed life. This is the outcome of decades of thinking and engagement centred on what the teaching of literature should entail. ~~Tiphaine Samoyault's biography is a decisive contribution in showing how at each stage of his work Barthes drew on new intellectual resources to redefine the task of criticism, often making sharp interventions on political and cultural issues of his day in the process. I shall comment on Barthes at some length not least because last year's anniversary has considerably renewed the resources at our disposal to re-engage with him.~~

What might Barthes's centenary lesson be for us? It turns out that it is to Barthes himself, speaking on the grand occasion in his personal history to which I alluded a moment ago, that we can look for answers.

Barthes did offer a relatively explicit formulation of his own historical position, in the inaugural lecture he gave as professor in the Collège de France in 1977 (published soon afterwards under the title: *Leçon*). He pointed to a shift that made it possible to formulate a new historical understanding of culture, one that prompted in turn a new statement of the task of the intellectual. In the aftermath of the Second World War (and, one might add, of decolonization), literature came to be desacralized as a culturally privileged statement of human aspirations, so precipitating, as Barthes says, 'un moment d'apocalypse douce'. The conclusion that Barthes drew for himself was that it was now possible to engage with the imaginary sign in all of the risky force of its uncertain truth value. At the same time, he does point to the work of the critic as it is newly defined by this transformation: her object is language and her task is to inhabit this same medium in such a way that the practice of teaching or criticism ceases to be a pretext simply to reinstate the authority which the historical changes referred to by Barthes have annihilated.

Barthes brought his *leçon* to a close by mentioning that he had just reread Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* — a novel with a particular meaning for him, as he had suffered from tuberculosis in the early 1940s. He reports his astonishment as he grasps that his own body is a historical object: because he lived through the same now superseded treatment as Mann's protagonist, he finds himself projected back into the period before his own birth. Thirty-five years later, he feels that time to be very remote, just as he sees his own historical body to be rooted in a past that is even remoter. His sole option? To seek a kind of rebirth in the midst of the younger individuals who now surround him,

in the wilful forgetting of what lies in the past and — even more provocatively on the occasion of an inaugural lecture in the Collège de France — an unlearning of what had already been formulated.



So Roland Barthes in what were to be the last years of his life. He gave the name 'la vita nova' to the sense of rebirth that he experienced and this was to be his last great project, one that informed, precisely, his teaching. He derived a novel intellectual impetus from an attempted self-reinvention in which life and writing merge.

Barthes's long century, extending from twenty or more years before his own birth to the present, is the one that we continue to inhabit. It defines our several histories, be they political, cultural or national, and the disasters and dislocations to which Barthes referred are those to which we too must find our own responses. In doing so, we might again take a cue from Barthes, and from Pier Paolo Pasolini, to whom he owed the of the stance that he made his own in the 1970s — a 'desperate vitality'. Even the despair we feel in the face of historical catastrophes is a sign of vitality, in that it is our means to distance ourselves from the forces that bring them about. To answer the questions that Barthes poses to us even with a tentative 'yes' is a way of perpetuating what was to be his salutary and 'irreducible *No*'.

I'll be briefer on Certeau. In each of the two interventions that I'll cite, Certeau is more explicitly focused on what he sees as the reasons to adopt an attitude of resistance in the present. I refer to Certeau because of the prominence he gives to a sense of risk that he shares with Barthes in taking this contestatory stance. Where he and Barthes converge is in the espousal of existential risk as a veiled act of disobedience, though they theorize this possibility somewhat differently. This is also an aspect of the work of each that has had a considerable influence in the thirty or more intervening years. Beyond a sustained

contestation of the category of authority, what connects Barthes and Certeau is a shared exploration of a discursive practice which, in drawing on the peculiar mode of negation that is for each of them a more and more crucial dimension of their writing, seeks to articulate its claims today to be seen as an exemplary kind of 'fable indéterminée', to quote Certeau, and thus in its way, an enigmatic lesson.

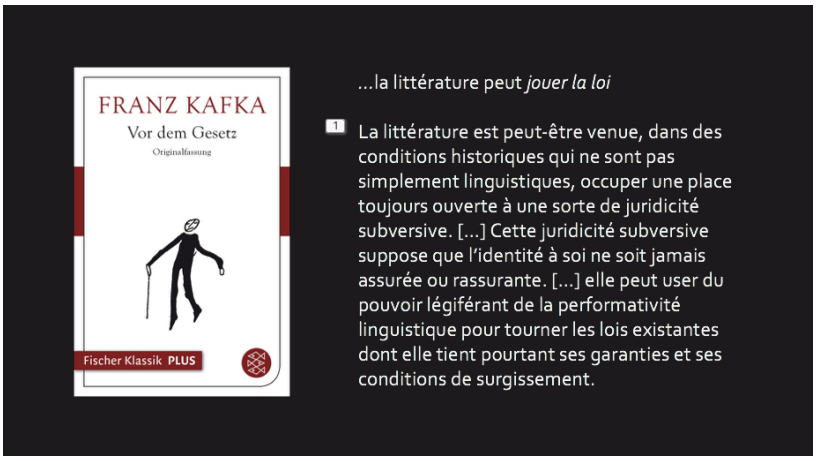
Thus, Certeau closes *La Culture au pluriel* by urging a much more acute awareness of the unmeasurable impact of 'un désir de vivre en perdant les assurances que multiplie chaque société — une folie d'être' (p. 222). There is more than a gesture here to the situated and embodied agent. What this brings him to is a series of thresholds — a move away from the negative characterization of the causes of a crisis of meaning in the direction of the virtuality of action and, as he says here, of being. This same anticipatory mode of thinking is one of the key lessons that Certeau will seek to illustrate in *L'Invention du quotidien*. The 'folie d'être' implies an openness to what the future may hold, and implies also that the future is in principle a non-redemptive zone of adventure as well as risk. Ultimately, this is a future from which the inquiring explorer of the everyday will be divorced. What is transmitted is something of the actual and also something of the attitude that makes such a transmission possible. Effacement is the condition of possibility of a future shaped by risk and adventure, and it will also be the fate of any testimony to it that may emerge. Or so it seems. The future is also a matter of the connections to it that our resistant projections — however imaginary, however fictional — prove to be able to sustain.

Near the end of his inaugural lesson in the Collège de France, Barthes again broaches the interrelation of 'parole' and 'écoute', comparing them unexpectedly — in so august a setting — to the peaceful play of a child protected by his mother. This is a miraculous scene in that, unlike the memories triggered by left-handedness, it is devoid of the anxiety

that accompanies the compulsion to obey. And yet the image has its bearing on the gesture that Barthes is seeking to perform, precisely on the threshold, the 'seuil', of this new phase of his teaching. Even if we missed these lessons, we do have the means to catch up, and not simply because so many of Barthes's notes have been republished. If we ask what lessons Barthes's teaching might hold for us today, the question prompts us to revisit and reactualize his teaching, and also to acknowledge what have been its exemplary outcomes.

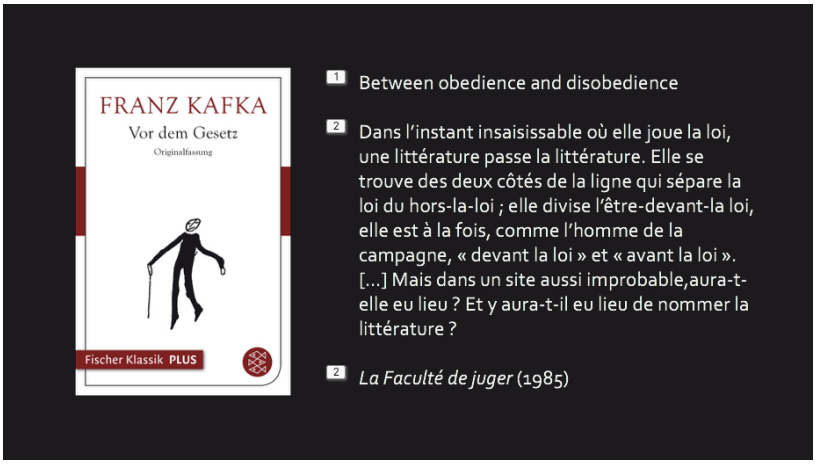
Colette Fellous's recent book, a self-conscious pendant to Barthes's *Préparation du roman*, testifies to these. She draws retrospectively on these lectures, which she did not attend at the time, though she knew Barthes well from having participated in his seminars in the École pratique. What she learnt from him at the time was indeed the 'préparation' for the life she was to lead and which she recalls forty years later, but also the lesson on which she draws at the moment, the much later moment, of writing. Barthes's 'préparation du roman' becomes the preparatory framework to the writing of Fellous's *récit* and is itself reactualized in the process.

Barthes's lesson inheres, then, not only in his voice, but, for Fellous, in the memory of his scent (Cabochard, as Fellous recalls) and for others, perhaps for us too, in yet other associations.



These lessons, however powerfully we may still feel their rhetorical pull, testify to all of the latency of a disobedient literature, so much so that the label itself does not disclose much. Where else, then, in what other space might we situate the late work of Barthes and Certeau? I'll sketch a response by drawing briefly on Derrida.

Derrida's statement forms part of his legendary seminar on Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz*. Because literature particularly reveals that the identity of discourse with itself is never something that can be assumed, it discloses also a peculiarly ambiguous mode of disobedience, specifically disobedience vis-à-vis the provisions of law (for instance, those relating to institutions of authorship and copyright) that give literature its 'juridicité'.



Literature is poised, then, between obedience and disobedience, and in the process it exceeds itself — just like the lessons that Barthes and Certeau seek precariously, though defiantly, to elaborate.

Barthes and Certeau disclose something of a form of writing that is obedient and disobedient all at once. We can speak only of the latter attribute if we grasp just why it cannot be dissociated from the former. In the case of both writers, this is so because each finds himself compelled to embrace a future that is one of risk, that demands a prolonged preparation into which the desired future will eventually be merged. In Barthes, in particular, we have seen that the attitude that informs this outlook is one that inhabits past, present and future, and in so doing goes some way to liquidate the binary conception of obedience that is a perhaps inevitable by-product of beginnings. From a still magnificent displacement of the scene of the lesson we can learn something of the ground of our own unsuspected possibilities, of the possibility above all of our own future exploits before and beyond the law.