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Towards a Non-hierarchical Space of Thought: Reading Roland Barthes' The Neutral

The article is devoted to *The Neutral*: the 1977-1978 lecture course developed and taught by Roland Barthes at the Collège de France. I argue that *The Neutral* is firmly rooted in the tradition that Brian Massumi defined as “nomad thought” in his foreword to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*. The essay traces the genealogy of this tradition and the term of the neutral, beginning with Maurice Blanchot’s work and his own concept of the neutral and ending with Barthes’ so far largely unexplored engagement with the texts of Deleuze. Elusive as the neutral figure is meant to remain, it emerges as a theorist’s effort to exercise a form of non-dualistic and non-hierarchical thinking.

key words: nomad thought, neutral, space of literature, non-dualistic thinking, writing

He found it good to talk about everything, to write on everything: thus the scattered totality of the world distracted him from the unique and rigorous totality of the work, from which he amiably let himself be diverted.

- Maurice Blanchot *The Space of Literature*¹

The epigraph from Maurice Blanchot’s famous work was not, but could have been written about Roland Barthes’ project of *The Neutral* developed in his 1977-1978 lecture course at the Collège de France. If Barthes ever had a desire for producing “the work” in the Blanchotian sense, the thought of the neutral, overgrown with layers of digressive reflexivity, could have easily prevented him from writing a theory rigorously complete or self-contained. Nonetheless, as Barthes said in *The Pleasure of the Text*, the neutral, which stands for the pleasure and freedom of unbounded “textual practice,” does not lend itself well to the rigid protocols of well-charted theoretical terrains, disciplinary divisions, and conceptual boundaries; rather, it reaches towards a non-hierarchical horizon of thinking and affirmation of difference (65). In this brief essay I propose to situate the neutral in the philosophical tradition of “nomad thought” defined by Brian Massumi in his foreword to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. Massumi wrote about “nomad thought” in the context of Deleuze and Guattari’s *oeuvre* as an example of “a smooth space of thought . . . [that] goes by many names. Spinoza called it ‘ethics.’ Nietzsche called it the ‘gay science.’ Artaud called it ‘crowned anarchy.’ To Maurice Blanchot, it is the ‘space of literature.’ To Foucault, ‘outside thought’” (xiii). As I intend to show, Barthesian figure of the neutral emerges as yet another expression of “nomad thought” that, to quote Massumi again, “does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference. It does not respect the artificial division between the three domains of representation, subject, concept, and being; it replaces

¹ p. 21

restrictive analogy with a conductivity that knows no bounds" (xii). In the following sections of the paper, I will trace the neutral's genealogy as reflected in Barthes' work in and around *The Neutral* lecture series to the influence of some of the thinkers mentioned in Massumi's definition above, whose work Barthes chose to engage with most intensely, seeing in Blanchot, Nietzsche, Foucault, Spinoza, as well as Deleuze, contemporary exponents of unfettered, unorthodox thought free from dogmatism and academia's institutional pressures. Blanchot's meandering, exploratory work on some of the most influential figures of world literature, such as for instance Franz Kafka or Stéphane Mallarmé, provided Barthes with groundwork for how to approach the realm of the literary in a philosophical manner. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* offered him exuberance and salubriousness of non-dogmatic thinking, Foucault's famous writings on power, in turn, imparted an awareness of one's inescapable implication in the often intractable orders of subjection to be found in deceptively sheltered domains. Spinoza's work on embodied ethics may have served Barthes as an impulse for advancing his own anti-dualistic argument regarding the body and mind that informs *The Neutral*. Finally, Deleuze's radical positive philosophy of difference, his famous nomadology, imbued Barthes' work with intensity and its characteristic affects. *The Neutral*, an impressive archive of Barthes' lifetime dialogic engagement with the interrelated ideas of these and many other major thinkers, emerges as a celebration of the active mind and its emancipatory potential; the will to freedom.

To begin with, if the text's marginalia are at times capable of disclosing more than the text itself, the occasional references to French philosopher's Maurice Blanchot's work on the margins of Barthes' *The Neutral*, buried under architectures of intertextual digressions, bring back Blanchot's own thought of the neuter, which germinated in his 1955 *The Space of Literature* to be developed in the 1969 *Infinite Conversation*, particularly in the section "The Absence of the Book" of the latter. Blanchot's influence on Barthes can be seen particularly in the latter's preoccupation in *The Neutral*, and elsewhere in his work, with the inexhaustible potential of writing; indeed, Blanchot's paradoxical sense of writing as an enigmatic task that is simultaneously self-consuming and self-sustaining. The way in which Blanchotian neuter is deployed in Barthes' lecture series evokes a palimpsest; a manuscript whose original text has been effaced in an effort to create space for other writing to come. In *The Neutral*, Blanchot's thought of the neuter is at the same time present and effaced in a move that could perhaps be traced to Derrida's figure of *supplement* seen as inessential but subversive surplus of meaning. In one of the actual supplements to *The Neutral*, Barthes remarks: "I realize that if I drift too complacently, soon there will no longer be a course, nothing but supplements. Supplements to nothing: that's the ideal Neutral!" (69). Along the same lines, in his characteristically metaphysical style, Blanchot writes: "The neutral is always separated from the neutral by the neutral, and, far from allowing itself to be explained by the identical, it remains an unidentifiable surplus" (*Infinite* 305). While Barthesian neutral derives from Blanchotian discourse on the neuter, Barthes' *The Neutral* is neither a sustained critique nor a faithful continuation of Blanchot's thought; rather, it is a playful dialogue with the dialectical mode of thought that Blanchot practiced in his work. To begin thinking about how Blanchot's neuter informed Barthes' neutral, let us first turn to Blanchot's thought as it was reflected upon by Foucault in his well-known essay on Blanchot "The Thought from Outside," where Foucault ponders on the uncontainable "solitary sovereignty of 'I speak'" that overcomes the paradox of self-expression, and sees language as "an unfolding of pure exteriority," to further write that "what gave rise to 'literature' is only superficially an interiorization; it is far more a question of a passage to the outside" (11-12). For Foucault, Blanchot's work rests on "the experience of the body, space, the limits of the will, and the ineffaceable presence of the other," where the other, that "background

figure of a companion who always remains hidden but always makes it patently obvious that he is there," is the Foucauldian limit, the perpetually deferred disappearance and return of the self-identical and at the same time always differentiating discourse (21, 47). Blanchot emerges here as a model for the Foucauldian "thought from outside"; a dialectical space of insistent negotiation of difference between the one who writes (the I that speaks), language, meaning, and being:

It is as if this withdrawal, this hollowness that is perhaps nothing more than the inexorable erosion of the person who speaks, cleared a neutral space of language. The narrative plunges into the space between the narrator and the inseparable companion who does not accompany him; it runs the full length of the straight line separating the speaking *I* from the *he* he is in his spoken being; it unfolds a placeless place that is outside all speech and writing . . . (Foucault 52; emphasis original)

Foucault sees in the self-effacement and withdrawal of Blanchot, a gesture toward the neutral space that "frees the space of the image" (Foucault 57). Blanchot's neuter is the literary space wrapped up in metaphysics of nonbeing, absence, and ultimately death that paradoxically releases the I. His neutral is a pure literary outside—a paradoxical and ambiguous metaphysical territory of shimmering *différance* where being unfolds only to fold back upon itself in perpetual self-effacement. Blanchot describes his neuter as "being in parentheses," and something that puts one in the position of "quasi absence" (*Infinite* 303). It is a space where the I enters into a relation with the unknown; the relation which is paradoxically neither a negation of meaning nor affirmation of its presence: "With the thought of the neutral the unknown escapes every negation as it does every position. Neither adding to nor withdrawing anything from what affirms it, it is neither negative nor positive" (*Infinite* 301). How are we to construe the elusive meanings that underlie Blanchot's figure of the neuter in relation to Barthes' neutral? Is the paradoxical opacity of the Blanchotian/Barthesian *différance*-ridden palimpsest decipherable? Whereas Blanchotian neuter certainly informs Barthes' mode of reflexivity, *The Neutral* pushes past Blanchotian metaphysical ground towards a different landscape: a nondialectical affirmation of difference as an expression of intellectual nomadism:

[D]ifference, that much vaunted and insistent word, prevails because it dispenses with or triumphs over conflict. Conflict is sexual, semantic; difference is plural, sensual, and textual; meaning and sex are principles of construction, of constitution; difference is the very movement of dispersion, of friability, a shimmer; what matters is not the discovery, in a reading of the world and of the self, of certain oppositions but of encroachments, overflows, leaks, skids, shifts, slips... (Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 69; emphasis original)

In the article on Blanchot and Heidegger titled "The Secret of the Neuter," Pascal Massie observes that the meaning of Blanchot's neuter can be construed as the "passion of the outside," and at the same time the site of indefinite articulation of the play of possibilities "pointing both to the limitlessness of language and to the limit that gives rise to meaning" (49). Massie's observation that Blanchot's neutral is a space of both the origins and the limits of language and meaning leads us directly to Barthes' project. Through a number of playful gestures, Barthes gleefully takes over a number of Blanchotian binaries deploying them in much less abstract ways as articulations of his own thought of the neutral. Indeed, the familiar binaries of presence and absence, memory and forgetting, difference and indifference, passive and active voice, affirmation and negation, as well as action and nonaction, become for both theorists targets of their deconstructive efforts to free meanings from the trap of Occidental dualistic thought fraught by ideology and conflicts of power.

Writing about Blanchot's self-effacement and withdrawal into the manifestation of his work, Foucault writes that "for us he is that thought itself—its real, absolutely distant, shimmering, invisible presence, its inevitable law, its calm, infinite, measured strength" (19). For Blanchot, presence and absence always inform each other, potentialities of presence always reside in his idea of "the absence of the book." In Barthes' thought of the neutral, moments of desire for withdrawal into a space of anonymity are also present, but, since Barthes' entire project is marked by self-reflexivity and affect, the metaphysics of self-effacement that one finds in Blanchot does not belong to Barthesian neutral. Instead of Blanchotian preoccupation with transcendence, Barthes relies in his theorization on the immanent perspective. The signature of the writer is always explicitly marked on the text, the presence of his voice is always strong, and his emotions are sometimes disclosed to the reader. And yet, *The Neutral* playfully explores all the delights that the occasional self-effacement offers. Barthes traverses the text of *The Neutral* in a series of appearances and disappearances through which his voice is constantly displaced resonating only through the voices of others, including Blanchot himself. In the Session of May 13, 1978, Barthes writes about the figure of "retreat" as a possibility of a temporary suspension of writing, but also as a way of questioning the public/private binary; "(historical) myth of two men in one subject" versus his own "fantasy of split personality" that always falls in the middle of the apparently irreconcilable dualism of "the exterior man, social, worldly, alienated by the constraints of worldliness (hypocrisy, etc.) and "interior man, true and free man → man of words/man of silence (or of pleasure = of the beyond or of the before language)" (141). In *The Neutral*, like in his famous essay "The Death of the Author," Barthes' authorial identity is accompanied by a simultaneous desire for the nomad freedom offered by disidentification, which hails the author's belonging to the becoming of the multiplicity of different voices.

In both Blanchot and Barthes, the notion of non-identity is further complicated by memory as counteracted by forgetting. In his essay on Blanchot, Foucault writes about Blanchotian forgetting (synonymous with the outside and evocative of Foucauldian conceptualization of "countermemory") as a state of "extreme attentiveness" and "wakefulness" characterized by great lucidity and directed towards the future (56). As Foucault has it, forgetting becomes a particular mode of counter-reflexivity, or a necessity for refiguration of reflexive language toward the outside. Foucault writes:

To negate one's own discourse, as Blanchot does, is to cast it ceaselessly outside of itself Not reflection, but forgetting; not contradiction, but a contestation that effaces; not reconciliation, but droning on and on; not mind in laborious conquest of its unity, but the endless erosion of the outside; not truth finally shedding light on itself, but the streaming and distress of a language that has always already begun. (22)

Traces of the kind of forgetting that Foucault has in mind can be found in *The Neutral* when Barthes writes about "nonarrogant memory," and reminds us that memory is never "an act of pure recollection of the past" (158, 39). He evokes the condition of anamnesis; "a mixture of pleasure and effort—performed by the subject in order to recover, *without magnifying or sentimentalizing it*, a tenuity of memory" (221; emphasis original), which Barthes relates directly to the process of writing as an "erratic, chaotic recall" (39). Elsewhere in *The Neutral*, he says that such a "nonarrogant memory" is postulated in the space of writing (158).

The nomad thought that Barthes enacts through his own style of *écriture* is a practice that Stamos Metzidaki defines as "an on-going quest for a 'subversion générale'" (335). What brings about the most subversive textual effects in Barthes' project of *The Neutral* is deconstruction of the binaries of active and passive voice, difference and indifference, action and non-action, and

finally affirmation and negation. Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation* again offers an interesting context for thinking about subversion in connection to Barthes' anti-dualistic conceptualization of the neutral:

Can one write: the neutral?; what is the neutral?; what can be said of the neutral? Certainly one can. But the neutral is not broached by this questioning that leaves it and does not leave it intact, that traverses it through and through or, more probably, lets itself be neutralized, pacified, or passified by it (the neutral's passivity: the passive that is beyond, and always beyond, and passive voice; the passion proper to it enveloping its proper action, an action of inaction, an effect of non-effect). (305)

There is uncanny progression in Blanchot's train of thought from the neutral's self-neutralization, and therefore self-pacification, through its idea of passivity itself, to, rather perversely, passion. The passivity of the neutral entails a certain degree of passion, or rather; the passivity of the neuter appears to acquire a particular intensity that opens up a space of difference in each of the binaries. The neuter's passivity becomes its active voice. Blanchot further provocatively writes that the neutral is that which "carries difference even to the point of indifference" (305), but elsewhere in the text clarifies that neutral is not indifferent, "but haunting the possibility of meaning and non-sense [but not nonsense] by the invisible margin of difference" (304). A very similar dynamics of *différance* can be observed in Barthes' lecture course. The effects that are most frequently achieved throughout the text by way of the workings of the neutral, such as suspension, interruption, and displacement, point to subversion as its underlying trait. It is through the deferral of meaning implicit in the concept of *différance* that the neutral baffles the paradigm. It is also *différance*, therefore, that the neutral insistently activates, perhaps in quest of what Barthes famously called "the middle voice" in his essays "To Write: An Intransitive Verb"; the now extinct grammatical voice capable of overcoming the negativity implied in the work of binary oppositions in language.

Reflections on neutrality in Barthes' project take a different turn in *The Neutral's* annex, in the spirit of venturing beyond the scope of the magisterial format of a lecture course. This shift shows Barthes' abandonment of Blanchotian metaphysical discourse and moving towards a different, immanent horizon of thought evocative of Deleuze and Deleuzian nomadism. The intractability of the Blanchotian neuter ("always elsewhere than where one would situate it" (*Infinite* 305)) is replaced by Barthes with the questions of spatiality and intensity of the neutral. In the Session of May 13, Barthes says: "The Neutral would be a subtle art of keeping the good distance between landmarks (including human landmarks of emotional space). . . . Neutral = spacing (production of space) and not distancing, distancing" (146). Initially discussing these issues via Blanchot and Derridean figure of "spacing," he proceeds to discuss the spatial quality of the neutral in relation to alterity and ethics. What strikes me as particularly interesting in Barthes' description of "spacing" (the figure he clearly uses via Derrida) is the fact that he defines the neutral in Deleuzian terms as "production of space." The neutral postulates a reconceptualization of space in the sense of accounting for the radical difference between self and other as well as conceptual space in which objects of thought are constantly repositioned and refigured.

In Barthes' lecture notes, the neutral is also described as a horizontally-oriented "transformation scene" (190). Barthes reflects on the notion of perspective as supplemental to the panoramic and apical vision, and then suddenly baffles his own classification by shifting to the imaginary field of "schizomorphic (heterogenizing) structures, evocative of the Deleuzian machine of schizotext (166). He further destabilizes the notion of spatiality by problematizing

and subverting *The Neutral*'s underlying figure of a palimpsest on which his entire heterogeneous text relies. Barthes writes: “[I]mage of the palimpsest: interesting, because it’s an image of complexity but not of depth strictly speaking: the multiple remains a question of surfaces: . . . the palimpsest reads from a single surface like a panorama whose planes are stacked up: without substitutes, without masks, and, one could say: without symptoms” (168). The palimpsest is turned into a panoramic view of a single immanent surface upon which all the complexities and multiplicities are simultaneously displayed. In this elegant play, the distribution of and relations between all the elements become of equal value and the neutral emerges as a non-dialectical and non-hierarchical space of thought. As a site of transformation, it comes close to Deleuzian conceptualizations of pure intensity and conductivity of “nomad thought.”

Insofar as *The Neutral* derives from the Blanchotian neutral *space of literature*, for Barthes literature “opens up an infinite, shimmering field of nuances, of myths, *that could allow the Neuter, fading within language, to be alive elsewhere,*” with the emphasis put on the joyous nomadic practice of writing and reading (190; emphasis added). In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes reflects on the idea of “elsewhere” as the scene of writing upon which language “reconstructs itself . . . under the teeming flux of every kind of linguistic pleasure” (8). In *The Rustle of Language*, Barthes’ neutral is identified as the space of writing: “Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (49). Writing “unfailingly baffles the arrogance of discourse,” and becomes a nomadic quest for itself through the constantly fluctuating and changing mythologies and intensities of the everyday (162). In Barthes, the ordinary is what creates the strongest resonance for the thought of the neutral. At the same time, for all the repertoire of the figures of benevolence, weariness, tact, and silence that is undeniably crucial to Barthesian project, the neutral is also a figure of great vitality and force that relentlessly “plays on the razor’s edge” of ideology and constitutes “a strong, active value” (73, 211).

In the annex to his lecture course, entitled “Intensities,” Barthes roughly delineates the figure of “Neutral-intensity-structure,” situated somewhere between his “*écriture zero degree*” and what he calls “the complex degree”:

As for intensities: intensity matters for the Neutral because it’s a concept that is allergic to the paradigm → we therefore call neutral the field of nonparadigmatic intensities (those introducing a trick into the paradigm), and in consequence we ask that the Neutral not be conceived, connoted as a flattening of intensities but to the contrary as a bubbling us {émoussillement} (<champagne foam). (197)

In Barthes, intensity is related to the linguistic process through affect, which in turn effects “semantic individuation.” *Écriture* is performative and affective writing *par excellence*. In the Session of June 3, he reflects upon the relationship between the neutral and discourse suggesting that “discourse comes to the Neuter by means of the affect” (190). It is through *affect*, as James Michels aptly observes in his essay “Roland Barthes: Against Language” that *écriture* turns discourse into “a mere backdrop or occasion for the play of *signifiance*” (155; emphasis original). Michels further explains *signifiance* as “closely allied to what in *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes termed ‘style,’ a certain something which is outside of Art. . . . It is the grain of the voice. It is ‘obtuse’ as opposed to obvious meaning” (166). In Barthesian thought of the neutral, therefore, affective *signifiance* emerges as the indelible signature of the writer’s textual practice that baffles the paradigm of discourse, and, as Michels remarks, “escapes the endless deferral of meaning” (165; emphasis original). “The grain of the voice” is the underlying quality of Barthesian *écriture* that determines his position as a nomad writer who simultaneously participates in the

poststructuralist discourses of his time and refuses to accept their insistence on the erasure of emotion.

By way of conclusion, I turn to Deleuze's essay "Nomad Thought" to examine the extent to which Deleuzian understanding of nomadism corresponds with Barthes' textual practice of both writing and reading (after all, *The Neutral* was intended to be "a research seminar on the theory of reading" (212)). Deleuze's essay was written as a tribute to Nietzsche, whom the author of *Anti-Oedipus* considered to be the main exponent of his nomadology—a thinker who expressed "something that can not be codified, confounding all codes" (143). Reflecting on Blanchot's "thought of the outside," Deleuze writes: "Now, to hang thought on the outside is what philosophers have never done, even when they spoke about, for example, politics; even when they treated subjects as walking or fresh air. It is not sufficient to talk about fresh air or the outdoors in order to suspend thought directly and immediately upon the outside" (145). Deleuze arrives here at the onset of the idea of nonphilosophy that, as he further argues,

is a kind of nomadism, a perpetual displacement in the intensities designated by proper names, intensities that interpenetrate one another at the same that they are lived, experienced, by a single body. Intensity can be experienced, then, only in connection with its mobile inscription in a body and under the shifting exterior of a proper name, and therefore the proper name is always a mask, a mask that masks its agent. (146)

The nomadic intensity of the outside that permeates Nietzsche's writing is also an underlying trait of Barthes' writing. The work in which Barthes comes closest to Nietzsche's thought is *The Pleasure of the Text* and its treatment of textual *jouissance*, written, characteristically for Barthes, somewhat in the spirit of and yet somewhat at a remove from *The Gay Science*. Barthes only comes thus far in his engagement with Nietzsche, and it is precisely the distance he maintains towards the thought of other writers and philosophers he references so profusely throughout his entire *oeuvre*. Barthes' nomadism, like Nietzsche's, was not so much practiced on the move, but rather, as Deleuze puts it, was one of those "voyages [that] take place *in situ*, are trips in intensity" (149).

The final sections of *The Neutral* indicate Barthes' so far largely unexplored engagement with Deleuzian thought, affect, and ethics. Barthes makes a foray into the territory that Deleuze and his student Claire Parnet delineate in their *Dialogues*, where they speak about "[i]ndividuation without a subject"; a mode of subjectivity that rests on disidentification as well as intersubjective reciprocal "collections of intensive sensations" that produce "so many 'unique chances'" for a multiplicity of ongoing dialogues that become "acts which can only be contained in a life and expressed in a style," which could have easily been articulated by Barthes himself (*Dialogues* 40, 3). Engaged in the daily practice of bringing writing to the surface of everyday life and thought, the fleeting "punctums" of which Barthes wanted to capture, thought is refigured in the non-hierarchical space where it "assumes an air of freedom" and "gives birth to Dionisian laughter" (*Nomad Thought* 147). Poised somewhere between the paradigms of structuralism, which his *écriture* challenged, the emancipatory potential of poststructuralism, and boldly unorthodox Deleuzian nomadism, Barthes continues to be read today as a nomad thinker whose intellectual play is inextricably linked to the future-oriented semiotics of the everyday and ordinary, perpetually adrift, and "always on the blind spot of systems" (*Pleasure of the Text* 35).

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