

The Art of Resistance in Roland Barthes' *The Neutral*:

Silence, Answer, and the Wou-Wei

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Tiohtiá:ke is the unceded Indigenous land on which much of this project was developed. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of those lands and waters.

I dedicate this project to my friends, family, and teachers, whose belief in my ability has made this possible. To Dr. Angelova, whose unwavering support, guidance, and patience went entirely beyond what I could have hoped for in an advisor. To my parents and siblings, whose affectionate care was always a home to return to. To Christine Sedge, who throughout this process was a steady and brilliant cross-continental confidante. And to all members of *T.I.M.B.*, whose limitless friendship provided inspiration through their spirit of curiosity and pursuit of the impossible. Above all, to Gigi, min älskling, I cannot imagine having done this without you. Loving you is loving the world.

Abstract

If political engagement is to take seriously the complexity and subtlety of power's mechanisms, it must extend to the level of language to destabilize the binary systems that undergird hegemonic power. Within the ideosphere, the dialectical and conflictual modes of discourse result in the establishing of *doxa* as a seemingly natural law for the parameters of meaning. For Roland Barthes, the difficulty of confronting such binarisms is that attempts to problematize result in an aporia of language, whereby the positing of interrogation and doubt towards the assertive, attributive structure of language automatically reinstates another opposition, thus reverting to the very paradigm it seeks to overcome. In Barthes's *The Neutral*, a lecture series delivered towards the end of his life, he offers the theoretical foundations for a third way beyond the paradigm. The Neutral is the liminal plane of relativity that will suspend meaning in order to allow for a reassessment of the relation of the base to the superstructure. In this paper, I offer a hermeneutic exposition of the veritable power and benevolent persuasion of Barthes' method and introduce three figures of the Neutral, Silence, Answer, and the Wou-wei, as possible ideal means of resistance. Ultimately, I argue that the novelty of *The Neutral* lies in its more subtle and sophisticated methodologies that can offer us hope when attempts of subversion through dialectical critique, demystification, and revolutionary protest fall short.

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I. Introduction

This paper gives an interpretation of the question of resistance as a tactic within the pure discourse of opposition, as found in the late work of Roland Barthes. Since it involves a semiotic element, language imposes a subjectivity, as the late Barthes explores, while discourse is made of naturally declarative propositions. In the tradition of Saussure, meaning-making relies upon conflict, whereby the opposition of definitive, stable identities produce the paradigms of rationality that shape our world and discourse, for example, masculine/feminine, active/passive, or high/low. For Saussure, through this conflictual interplay of oppositions meaning is produced, resulting in a linguistic system with a sense of totality. (This is not yet on the level of *différance*, which would refute such unity, instead recognizing infinite shifts of meaning). Such structures can be rigid and limiting, and, when posed as deterministic choices, can impose a violence when one is forced to choose what they might not accept. This linguistic violence often goes unnoticed in the Western tradition, but since German idealism, it has been problematized nonetheless. Specifically, after Hegel, the end of the nineteenth century brought about an acceleration of the so-called philosophies of conflict: namely, Marx, Freud, and Darwin (Barthes 2005, 126). While conflict in itself is not an evil, the heightened prevalence of such doctrines demonstrates how conflict within *language*, as something profoundly unstable, has masqueraded as a naturally occurring cultural value that surpasses conscious reflection (ibid). Barthes does not accept this implicit assumption. The semiotic problem in Barthes can be articulated as heeding an aporia of language. We can formulate Barthes' problem provisionally as follows: How to achieve nuance, introduce interrogation, hyperbole, and doubt into the assertive, attributive structure of language without automatically reinstating another opposition, thus reverting to the very paradigm it seeks to overcome (43-5)?

While the early Barthes centered upon exposing myths and making explicit meaning-production through a literary theory of semiotics, the lesser-known late work departs from the structuralist thesis. He offers an assertive semiotic project oriented at eradicating the binary oppositions vital to structuralism, thereby seeking to minimize the conflictual nature of intellectual discourse (Krauss 2015, 340).

The Neutral¹ is a theory that counters fascism within language, a persistent theme in all of Barthes' lifetime's work. As he famously and provocatively puts it in the inaugural lecture, "the performance of a language is neither reactionary nor progressive, it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech" (Barthes 1979, 5). Put differently, there is always present an arrogance within language, inviting ossification in all mechanisms of social exchange, but that often goes unnoticed. This mastering, assertive quality inherent in language needs to be opened up to vigilant investigation.

To clarify. Language is fascist in the sense that in order to communicate, the individual is coerced into submitting to external paradigms. These predetermined positions lie beyond one's subjectivity (which does not reduce to the atomic individual). Poets, philosophers, and novelists alike can fall victim to the domineering and authoritative tendency of language. With the Neutral, Barthes proposes a mode of inquiry aimed towards consciously resisting language's power, through the literary minimalism of subtlety and tact.

Accordingly, I claim that the intricacy of outwitting, as method and system, forms the most unifying strand of Barthes' thought throughout, and the Neutral presents its culmination. From this vantage point, the problematic of the Neutral invites reconsideration and repositioning of Barthes' legacy. I cannot undertake to study this larger theme here. This paper develops a specific methodological introduction into the large project for repositioning Barthes. To do this, I

specifically use three of the proposed semiotic figures in the second half of the paper to illustrate the theory of my method. This exhausts the overall original contribution of the present paper.

My argument is that *The Neutral* is particularly qualified to counter the problem of rigid binaries within the discourse of our present moment ongoing since the 1970s. Today, not unlike fifty years ago, we in the West continue to be faced with binaries that only too quickly invite dogmatic, even fascist thought. The innovative concept of the Neutral is that it offers a dynamic of a ‘neutral’ semiotics. For Barthes, this broaches a third way, beyond pure negation and identity thinking, and toward fostering a resistance not subsumed by Hegelian synthesis. The dynamic envisioned in the Neutral urges for more than merely conditioning the affirmative within language through negation since, in the first place, it refuses such expected paradigmatic formats (Barthes 2005, 45). Second, through challenging the dominant discourses of power, the Neutral instead seeks a hyperbolic suspension of all categories. That is, it perverts the very structure of meaning, exposing how the “paradigm” is badly put (45-6). Third, Barthes’ method, embedded in the immanent conditions of resistance, I contend, offers useful methodological approaches towards discourse. Think, for example, about such cases as when confronted with the demand to choose rigidly (between ‘us’ and ‘them’). The Neutral’s modest yet novel contribution is to refuse the terms of the question, thereby opening up the possibility for a new and original response. As I will later demonstrate, the theory avoids being either blind abstinence or escapism and nor is it a metatheory (e.g., of “death of the author”) or an aesthetic postulation. It is a benevolent utopian ethics of desire for a Neutral *life*, one of nuance (Manghani 2020a, 21). Ultimately, I seek to emphasize the importance of the Neutral as a theory worthy of our attention; in our increasingly hyper-polarized world, it offers a glimpse of benevolent utopia (Knight 1997).

I will take two steps to make this point in the main exposition of my paper. The first section explains the novel conceptual background of *The Neutral* and explicates its main ideas through the use of historiographic material. *The Neutral* builds upon conceptions of *le Neutre* from Maurice Blanchot and other structuralists and earlier iterations of neutral “writing” found in Barthes’ earlier work. However, *The Neutral* lecture series takes these conceptions of neutral thought further by staking existing binaries and conventions, or *doxa*, to use Barthes term, as its adversary, and then articulating a Third way to overcome the paradigm of discourse and introducing a myriad of ways in which to do so. I argue that the Neutral, as an ethical project targeting dogmatism, succeeds in two unique ways. First, by displaying Neutrals as suggestive fragments or “twinklings” the theory can remain in a state of continuous flux, rather than gesturing towards a final meaning, which would lead to reconstituting the very paradigm the Neutral seeks to dissolve (Barthes 2005, 10-11). Second, by drawing from a multiplicity of traditions, Barthes creates an interdisciplinary semiotic that frees the Neutral from succumbing to the *doxa* of a singular position.

In section two, my original contribution is to take up three distinct figures of *The Neutral*, namely, “Silence,” “Answer,” and the “Wou-wei,” to illustrate how the thought and practice of the non-conflictual operates. Although the selected three are just some of many forms of Neutrals, I include them here to demonstrate the ease of applicability and the value they bring as a unique tool towards combating discourse that is found wanting. Silence, when employed intentionally, destabilizes the dialectical format of questioning, whereby the answer one expects is temporally denied. Therefore, silence can introduce “the minimal expenditure of a speech act” and open up precious moments of time (Barthes 2005, 27). There are also non-traditional forms of answer that can demystify the arrogance of the question at hand more subtly than silence (107, 112). Questions

demand precision, but beside-the-point answers, or imprecise answers, through their deviation from the stifling trap of the yes/no model, muddle the logic and relevance of arrogant, pedantic questioning (117). A final strategy lies in the fundamental idea of the Tao: Wou-wei, or the profound attitude of non-choice (176). Since the whole of the Western ideology lies with dominating and imposing “truth,” the non-action of Wou-wei is a potential for powerful subversion of the West’s values (177). This willful, self-disciplined form of abstention creates an atmosphere of inactivity and indifference, an inexistence of the desire, or ‘refutation’ that conflictual paradigms require (177). Through my explication, I aim to show that all of these iterations of the Neutral can offer hope towards dismantling binarisms and introducing nuance; they each offer a reminder that it is always possible to denaturalize questioning, shatter the boundaries for the limits of conversation, and generate opportunities to reflect and redirect course.

II. Context

There is new interest in the late Barthes in the current conjecture, and some call it the ‘Renaissance of Roland Barthes.’² This paper positions itself amongst the revival studies. Until recently, Barthes’ legacy had been primarily defined by the success of his earlier work, while his late writings have been overshadowed by the curious sustained popularity of *Camera Lucida*, an inquiry into photography, which Barthes admits he was not particularly interested in (Manghani, 2020b). With the recent wave of *rolandisme*, as evidenced by several significant publications on Barthes’s late work, the received view of Barthes is changing.

Posthumously published in 2005, Barthes’ lecture course of 1978, *The Neutral*, is the heart of this revival. It is the main text which this paper studies. Despite being in note format, the lectures

nonetheless present a fully developed project, one of Barthes' most ambitious and affirmative in semiotics (Manghani 2020a, 3). The lectures are meticulously researched and spanning multiple fields, a masterwork. It is no surprise, then, that *The Neutral* should be where the revival directs its attention.

In this section, I outline the historical context of the Barthes revival and then the philosophical relevance of Barthes today. I draw from recent Post-structuralist and historicist debates to show why the emerging interest in *The Neutral*, distinct from all of Barthes' early work, is essential.

The scarcity of Barthes' scholarship until now can be explained in part by the hostility of François Wahl, Barthes' editor, and later literary executor. Barthes' accidental death came in 1980 at the age of 64, when he was run over by a laundry truck in front of the Collège de France. For years after his death, Wahl refused to allow publication of Barthes' widely attended lecture courses from the period of the end of his life, 1977-1980 (Manghani 2020a, 7). This was a hindrance for Louis-Jean Calvet, who was denied access to critical private collections while writing the first biography on Barthes ten years after his death, and for Diana Knight, author of a significant study, *Barthes and Utopia*, who was also unable to gain access despite the explicit utopian themes in his late work (Knight 1997, 17). When transcriptions from tape recordings of *the Neutral* were published in 1991 without the consent of Wahl, the issue was taken to court by Barthes' half-brother, where French law stated that pedagogical lectures belong to the author's estate, thereby *The Neutral* was swept back under the rug (18). Maddeningly, the judge used the words of Barthes ("writing is the loss of every origin, of every voice") as a way of attempting to prove his intentions, when, as Diana Knight points out, it is clear that Barthes, in his "death of the author" era, sought to "undermine the property rights over intended meanings of their authors" (18).

The breakthrough of revival subsequently began in 2005, directly following the release from Columbia University Press of a three-volume collection of Barthes' lectures and seminars at the Collège de France, translated into English in 2005, 2011, and 2013. The outpouring of academic interest in the past decade includes the journal *Barthes Studies, Theory, Culture & Society* Special Issue on Barthes, Tiphaine Samoyault's biography *Barthes*, and the 2015 exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France commemorating the centenary of Barthes birth, among other works. These include, but are not limited to, works such as *Album* (2018), a book of previously unpublished correspondence and essays from Barthes by Columbia University Press. I mention as well *This Little Art* (2017) by Barthes' translator Kate Briggs, *The Friendship of Roland Barthes* (2017) by Philippe Sollers, and *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (2016) by Neil Badmington. In 2013, City University of New York's Graduate Center hosted a conference titled *The Renaissance of Roland Barthes*, which aimed to bring international attention to his late work; Jonathan Culler and Rosalind Krauss were keynote speakers. This amounts to a veritable Barthes industry, with an influx of scholarship focusing on the late Barthes (Culler 2015, 26).

Barthes' role as a cultural critic has been repositioned through this new scholarship, away from the one of *Mythologies*, who wishes to recognize signs to unmask bourgeois myths. The critic that emerges through *The Neutral* is instead a philosophical "Platonic" thinker who seeks the dislocation of the sign, at once committed to his *jouissance* for language and yet deeply concerned with how we might live outside of conflict (Badmington 2020, 68).

The recent revival problematizes the longstanding myth that Barthes had resigned himself to death from one point in his life onward. When Barthes' mother died in the autumn of 1977, less than a year after Barthes was elected to the Collège de France, it had an enormous impact on him. He wrote that it "profoundly and obscurely altered my desire for the world" (Barthes 2011). In his

diary, on May 12, 1978, he writes of wavering between the observation that he was unhappy only by moments, “and the conviction that deep down, in actual fact, I am continually, all the time, unhappy since maman’s death” (Samoyault 2017, 436). Before he died, friends who saw Barthes in the hospital were said to have concluded that he had lost the will to live (Culler 2015, 34).

On the other hand, it has been said that the hypothesis that he gradually let himself die after the traumatic death of his mother is likely a “narrative needed to tie up a life’s loose ends and give it shape” (Samoyault 2017). This view is reinforced by comments made by Michel Foucault, who saw Barthes a week before his tragic accident. He said that the rumors that he wanted to die were completely false; rather, he was “in his element,” and “his essays were the preliminary sketches of something that would have been very important and interesting” (Foucault 2006, 188). He also said that he recalled thinking then that, “He’ll live to be ninety years old; he is one of those men whose most important work will be written between the ages of sixty and ninety” (Foucault 2006, 188), and that he seemed “completely developed” in his lecture series. These remarks could be double-edged; as Calvet suggests, Foucault had also referred to Barthes’ work as trendy and faddish and emphasized the importance of hearing from “outside the university” (Manghani 2020b). Jonathan Culler agrees, maintaining that Foucault’s “ostensible praise was doubtless a way of slyly denigrating the structuralist Barthes” (Culler 2015, 34).

Regardless of Foucault’s intent, there is a case to be made for the years leading up to Barthes’ untimely death as indicative of a Barthes of renewed purpose. He believed he was entering his “vita nova,” an affirmative period of profound meaning; he sketched an outline for a novel titled of the same name (Barthes 1979, 16). In his final lecture course (1978-1980), Barthes refers to himself as experiencing the “middle-of-the-journey” of his life (Barthes 2013, 3). Susan Sontag wrote of the emergence of a vision of “Platonic wisdom” and the worldly wisdom in the themes

that come to define his late work: “skeptical of dogmatisms, wistfully attached to utopian ideas” (Sontag, 2002, 87-8). *The Neutral* emerges amidst this time of great grief and newfound purpose.

I seek to emphasize four possible philosophical directions, in which to take *the Neutral*, as follows. Barthes is well situated if we keep in mind several indicators of affinity yet difference along these lines: a) the critical relation to committed literature in Sartre; b) the affinity with the doctrine of phenomenological *epoché*; c) the paradox of asserting true knowledge; and d) the space of the psychoanalytic unconscious as experimental. I seek to demonstrate that each of these directions, while generative, does not offer a comprehensive overview, extrapolate the ethical dimension, and offer insight into his fragments.

A) Scholars argue that early iterations of the Neutral, in the form of “white” or “neutral” writing, can be found in early articles and his first book, *Writing Degree Zero*. Barthes was initially transfixed with Camus’s “white” writing in *L’Etranger*, which elegantly used short-cut writing, fragmentation, and silence (Zhuo 2020, 81). For Barthes, the pleasure in reading *The Stranger* comes from the synonymous feeling of both movement and stagnation—the work can be clear and straightforward yet offers the reader an ambiguous opacity (82). Ultimately though, it is not Camus but Sartre’s theory of committed literature that offered more substance towards a neutral writing. Sartre’s direct, “innocent” writing, which contained the “absence of secret,” was meant to appeal to all classes (83). However, Barthes goes beyond Sartrean dialectics of language and style to posit writing as a third term in *Writing Degree Zero*. Barthes’ view on neutral writing, begun in *Writing Degree Zero* and expanded upon in *The Neutral*, located writing and literature as the site from which to displace the assertive power of language and ultimately represent the impossible, which would be artistic expression free from doxa (Zhuo 2020, 91).

B) Some scholars emphasize the influence of the Greek Skeptic notion *epoché* on Barthes' Neutral. *Epoché*, the technique of bracketing and suspension of judgment, acts like the neutral to form a utopian desideratum and guiding ethical principle, whose object turns away from discursive logic towards a kind of weariness of the meaning of language (Teeuwen, 2012, & 2020). *Epoché* serves to provide a solution to the problem of defining the Neutral. As the Neutral cannot be given a positive definition, Barthes alludes to the desire *for* the Neutral (124). Within this desire, distance offers a removal from the assertiveness of language.

C) *The Neutral* offers a rich display of how intellectuals might express their desire amidst the paradox of master/ disciple in teaching. As Barthes wishes to bring the neutral into a paradigm against arrogance, he thinks through the act of teaching as the performance of an aporia: to speak of the neutral requires a course of attention to be taught. Inevitably, through the assertion of true knowledge, the teacher takes up the arrogance of the assumption of authority to speak the truth. Barthes, uncomfortable with his own position of institutional authority, aims for a middle path through suggestion. His suggestions or fragments are more adequately understood as representing a *passing through* of the Neutral (Parvulescu, 2007).

D) Beyond literary theory, in the field of psychoanalysis, scholars suggest that neutrality is a necessary experimental and creative space upon which psychoanalysts might project their concepts (Schwartz, 2013). Traditionally, it was difficult to determine if an analyst was exhibiting signs of neutrality in their practice, and the role of neutrality in the practice has not been sufficiently explored (488). Barthes' tactics within the Neutral of never attempting to authoritate a final truth

and never interpret, preferring instead to create and invent new meaning, prove fruitful for the analyst's approach, who holds an open space as a channel for the unconscious (509).

III. The Novelty of the Neutral: Overcoming the Aporia of Language

3.1 Overview of Section

In this section, I ask methodologically: How should we understand the Neutral? In my view, the central problem of the Neutral is dealing with the aporia of language. Barthes wishes to suspend the referential function in discourse to introduce the non-declarative. Yet, he is always aware of its limitations, noting the difficulty in maintaining the position at, or on both sides of, a boundary. The introduced third term seeks to annul or overcome the binarism of the paradigm, but in breaking away, it can easily slip into its own assertion, reconstituting the paradigm. The question becomes, how to challenge doxa without putting forth another form of doxa?

This section unfolds with the question of the Neutral's novel theoretical foundation at the forefront. I begin by explaining the origins of Neutral thought, articulating the shift in Barthes that led him away from structuralism to search for ways in which to suppress the force of meaning. My intention here is to demonstrate how the events of Paris in 1968 marked a dramatic shift in Barthes which was both ethically and personally motivated; the new direction reconciled with his previous work, which he believed failed to go far enough to address the subtle power of ideology.

I then emphasize the exemplary theoretical qualities of the Neutral, explaining how it takes up the question of the aporia of language that Barthes wrestled with previously. I articulate how it achieves its goals by setting up a new paradigm. At its core, the Neutral must be unstable; it is destabilizing, disruptive, and as such, is momentary. The desire for it, then, may mean that it is not

fully realizable. To keep the tension alive, the Neutral may have to remain as a glimpse into utopia to retain its effect. Barthes says at the beginning of his lectures; “We will have to hold on to the unsustainable for thirteen weeks: after that, it will fade.” (Barthes 2005, 13) The slippery quality is perhaps what makes it one of our most valuable tools to destabilize the power of language.

3.2. A New Barthes

The Neutral descends from the problematic of the primacy of language substantiated within the Post-structuralist tradition. Barthes was an early advocate of semiology; at the College de France, he chose literary semiology as the title of his Chair. On a structural level, works such as *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and *Mythologies* (1957) were grounded in the position of Saussure, that “meaning is generated by the friction of one binary element against the other, which forms the fundamental oppositions that are implicit within any speech act” (Barthes 2005, xiv). This interplay of difference inside a distinct linguistic system captivated Barthes. He writes of himself that, “for a certain time, he went into raptures over binarism” and that “the idea seemed to him inexhaustible” (Barthes 2010, 51). His early work centered upon the demystification of doxa, as he sought to make explicit the cultural conventions and implicit knowledge within the assimilated ideas of the mind of the majority in quotidian life. While working within structuralism, particularly a semiotics of literature, Barthes’ Marxist-oriented work was characteristically disruptive, and some argue his most radical: always intent on revealing, critiquing, and satirizing (Culler 2013). *Mythologies*, perhaps his best-known work from this time, corresponded with the Marxist theory of ideology as false consciousness, with discourse theory acting as “therapy for the myopia of the masses” (Wermer-Colan 2019, 139).

This allegiance to the semiotic field of binarisms would not last, however. Around 1970, Barthes, together with Maurice Blanchot, begins to develop work aiming to sidestep structuralism's tireless demand on language for definitive meaning and thence move towards aesthetic resistance. Demystification for mythologies is no longer effective for Barthes. He turns his back on the systematic projects he had previously championed—semiology and narratology—at times even mocking his previous ideas (Samoyault 2017).

The change in thought was undoubtedly largely in part due to Barthes' reaction to the events of the student protests of May 1968 in Paris and internationally.³ While members of his cohort, such as Deleuze and Foucault, were ardent supporters, Barthes—himself a committed Marxist—was wary of the student movement and its “common man” populism. The latter was quick to reject structuralism as bourgeois culture (Wermer-Colan 2019,135). To Barthes, this was an unwelcome signal that the academic left, and not only conservatism, tended to become militant and ideological and rely too heavily on the reductive language of power relations. In his view, the movement demonstrated properties which his work set to counteract; the anti-intellectual, arrogant, and reactionary (135). Furthermore, Barthes was dismayed with the negative backlash to the protests, which led him to believe that social change, and the intervention of doxa, required more nuance and sophistication than could be achieved through mere “Event” (136).

Barthes' response should not have been surprising, as the dissociation from the protests, which emphasized the spoken word, was in line with his career-long commitment to the primacy of the written word.⁴ However, his writings at the time were interpreted as proof of Post-structuralism's betrayal of structuralism's political commitment (134). This was misguided—Barthes' critique of the left's arrogance was due to his sympathies to its cause and his desire to rectify its methods, which he believed failed to address the seriousness of the threat it confronted (154). In

addition, he identified in the movement a failure to recognize the severity of the threat it confronted, an underestimation of the complexity and subtlety of power's machinations, be it through ideology, society, technology, or capital (154).

To this end, there is a new Barthes that emerges, one remaining committed to resistance but interested in strategies that delved deeper towards disrupting the powers of the hegemonic structure itself. ⁵ “Barthes realized that his mode of analysis must become far more nuanced and multifaceted” (152). Reflecting upon his contributions to semiotics, Barthes finds that identifying myths is not enough; signs are too cunning, too subtle, too strong (Badmington 2020, 72). The focus must move from “the sign, the union of signifié and signifiant, to a science of the signifier, whose goal is not so much the analysis of the sign, as its dislocation” (72). For material conditions to change, in *Barthes on Barthes*, written in 1975, he declares that one “must sever oneself from the science of semiologists” (Barthes 2010, 74). Barthes continued to believe in language as a privileged instrument of power—but his grave respect was two-fold. On the one hand, Barthes felt “caught up between the exaltation of language (pleasure taken in its drive)”; on the other, he felt “the desire, the great desire for a respite from language, for a suspension, an exemption,” in particular from its violent potential (Barthes 2005, 93).

In response to this, he wrote *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), a study on hedonism within literature, which he believed would be one way out of doxa. In the book, he goes beyond his previous work on doxa to identify a “two tense dialectic” between doxa and paradox (dispute) (Barthes 1975, 18). Doxa's contrary paradox creates dichotomies, which are in themselves necessary for the resistance of dogma. However, Barthes runs into an aporia of reactive formations, when, “a doxa (popular opinion) is posited, intolerable; to free myself of it, I postulate a paradox; then this paradox turns bad, becomes a new concretion, itself becomes a new Doxa, and I must seek further a

new paradox” (Barthes 2010, 74). For all of the resistance the paradox constitutes, it easily reestablishes itself as doxa and ultimately serves to limit the planes of discourse for modern consciousness and preclude divergent individual thought.

As we will come to see, this paradox or aporia is typical of Barthes (Culler 2013, 34). In fact, he identifies the problematic as a consistent obsession since *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), how what is explicitly produced against and outside signs so quickly becomes recuperated into a sign (Barthes 2005, 26). Barthes, as a critic, was constantly evolving and turning on himself; his biographer describes him as a “fundamentally unauthoritarian person” who is “really not afraid of contradicting himself” (Samoyault 2020, 51). He is wrestling between dualisms at every point in his work, finding opportunities for slippages towards freedom. Freedom in this sense does not mean the opportunity to put forth a new idea; rather, it could mean an opportunity for a moment of nuance, of respite.

What is difficult for writing to overcome is the perpetuity of language within the ideosphere. Barthes realizes that “its infinite perpetuation somehow stands for the very hardness of power: it’s the inexorable” (Barthes 2005, 92). Undoubtedly, as the source of all meaning-making, language is unavoidable—attempts to counter its force must be made through the tools of language. In *Barthes on Barthes*, he indicates addressing the claims head-on; “One must traverse...the whole meaning, in order to be able to extenuate it, to exempt it. Whence a double tactic: against Doxa, one must come out in favor of meaning, for meaning is the product of History, not of nature, but against Science (paranoiac discourse), one must maintain the utopia of suppressed meaning” (Barthes 2010, 87). Exhausted from the force of language, Barthes “dreams of a world exempt from meaning,” a mode in which the endlessly churning, exhausting perpetuity of ideas will be extinguished (87). In 1975, three years before *The Neutral* courses began, that Utopian mode as yet is unclear; Barthes writes, “Where to go next? This is where I am now” (74).

3.3 The Conceptual Foundations of the Neutral

Barthes arrives at *The Neutral*, his second series of courses since his election to the Collège de France, in February 1978.⁶ His mother's death had occurred only a few months before, on October 25, 1977.⁷ Barthes is addressing in this series how "Western tradition transforms conflict into a nature or value" (Barthes 2005, 126). He wishes to explore how might this naturalization be countered and neutralized so that the value of doxa is diminished" (126). For the first time, with the Neutral, Barthes can put forth a theoretical account to challenge the obligations of logos, of discourse.

Let us first recall and summarize the points made in the preceding portion of the argument on doxa and paradoxa. Addressing the aporia of language posed in *Barthes on Barthes*, the central argument of the Neutral's function is about how to resist doxa without reinstating another form of doxa. To step outside the active/reactive positions staked in discourse (i.e., doxa and paradox) and embrace the non-conflictual third term is paradoxically still a desire that stakes another position.⁸ For the thought and practice of the non-conflictual must nevertheless be bound to assertion and conflict to make itself heard (44). Thus, the non-conflictual can still be a stance replete with the narcissism of one's image and the will-to-possess.

Regarding the late Barthes method, below we add to the preceding argument that what constitutes resolution outstrips the conflict structure for him. Importantly, the instability is part of the novelty. The novelty of Barthes' move is that, rather than search for a third term to reconcile this conflict, as he might have attempted in previous works, he posits a new paradigm. The new paradigm is the site in which arrogance, or what is at times referred to as violence, is the primary term.⁹ This violence is the ideology that depends on giving a 'Name,' giving stable signifieds to

signifiers, and as such is inherent to all language due to its assertive, definitive properties (Allen 2004, 100). The Neutral then becomes this giving a 'Name.' With the term 'Neutral,' Barthes introduces something new internally from within, to this paradigm, and over and against the externally imposed violence of language.

Let us contextualize and gradually introduce the move in this novelty. "Neutralization ... (at the level of phonology) (The Prague School and Louis Hjelmslev) is the eradication of binary oppositions crucial to structuralism" (Krauss 2015, 340). Maurice Blanchot introduced *le Neutre*, translated as "the neuter" in English, in some early texts before developing the term in his book *The Infinite Conversation* (1969). For Blanchot, the neuter is the nameless background of thought that brings the differential relations of signs into play, a principle of a kind of "original" difference (Kuzma 2016). In semiotic terms, The Neutral is a rework of the Third Meaning, an obtuse meaning which disrupts meta-language (criticism) by suspending the referent linguistic sign (Krauss 2015). It is a signifier without a signified, functioning in language as a mere metaphor (Barthes 2005, 17). Much like in Blanchot, for Barthes, the Neutral is a liberation of the subject from the structured, dogmatic thought of *doxa* towards a field of infinite creative potential.¹⁰ The hope is that by introducing and occupying a liminal state, the function of subjectivity is restored. However, unlike Blanchot, it is not a "retreat" into "uncommunication" where language is alien and uncommunicative, but rather a turn away from the discursive and into communion, towards an intuitive intellect where the individual is preserved (Teeuwen 2012, 4).

The Neutral aims at a complete recess from meaning and from the demand to choose between positions that feel socially, culturally, and politically predetermined. As a consequence of this demand, Barthes felt that intellectual language was submitting too easily to moralizing imperatives (Barthes 1985, 205). Barthes identifies the problem as an increasingly urgent and

prescient, writing: “I would say: the more information grows, the more knowledge retreats and therefore the more decision is partial (terroristic, dogmatic)” (Barthes, 2005).

It is worth amplifying Barthes’ poignant position on this. In our contemporary world, he observes, bad-faith arguments and false choices are commonplace; one “is required, summoned to have an opinion on everything, which is to say to be interested in everything” (204). In addition, he thinks, because we are experiencing an era of hyper-demand, we are never allowed not to reply (205). Refusal is permitted within the code, but no response, or an “I don’t know,” is as scandalous for the intellectual “as an agrammatical sentence” (205). Such statements do not “belong to the language of the discourse,” and it generates a devalued image in which “you are demoted to the contemptible mass of the undecided, of those who don’t know whom to vote for” (203-4). As can be seen, for Barthes, the Neutral attempts to restrict some of this arrogance in the world, in what might be read as a kind of ethical minimalism. But Barthes recognizes this challenge as an uphill battle, he writes:

A political minimalism? This obviously would go against the grain of our current political ideology- in fact, we are in an era of political maximalism: a) politics invades all phenomena, economic, cultural, ethical; b) political behaviors are radicalized: arrogance of the languages, violence of the acts: political totalism all over (without necessarily speaking of totalitarianism). This maximalism is to be found in capitalism (shaping demands through the logic of the market: the whole subject imprisoned in his very own desire) and in State socialism (gregariousness, repression of individualisms, of dissidence) (200).

So, to Barthes, it is clear from the start that what is required to address this excess within language will be an *ethical* theoretical project, a proposal of “an ethics of language” (60). However, what the Neutral appears as, definitionally, is no easy task to explain. For one, Barthes himself refuses a singular stable definition, for “the exposition of the non-dogmatic cannot itself be dogmatic” (10). This is why Barthes has so much difficulty concretely claiming what the Neutral *is*, wary that “the Neutral would become discursively the term of an antithesis: in displaying itself, would consolidate the meaning it wanted to dissolve” (11). Notably, Rudolphus Teeuwen writes of this difficulty Barthes encounters due to the fact that the Neutral, as a radically negative form, cannot be given a positive definition (Teeuwen 2020, 124). It can only be expressed through limited acts of negation or the logic of desire. When Barthes refers to the Neutral, it is really his desire for it: “I desire the Neutral, therefore I postulate the Neutral” (Barthes 2005, 12).

I now can offer a few reflections, then, on the method of the late Barthes, directing attention to the latent concept of ethics as well as “nuance.” Perhaps it is better to think of the Neutral as a category or a field, which, as it relates to the paradigm, will be dealing with, in general: “ethics, that is, the discourse of the “good choice”... or of the “non-choice,” or of the “lateral choice” (8). Broadly, this field confers recognition upon the concept of “nuance.” What Barthes seeks in the course is “an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance” (11). This nuance is grounded in the semiotic, and the ultimate teacher of nuance, for Barthes, is literature.¹¹ For it is through the written word, where writing is not “connected with imagining scenarios of action, endings, outcomes”—that true nuance can occur (Barthes, a biography). Crucially, this nuance is not grayness or mindless abstention or indifference, nor is it “neutrality” in the political sense. “The Neutral does not necessarily correspond to the flat, utterly depreciated image that the doxa assumes but could constitute a strong, active value” (211). It is

synergistic like a field, an “ardent, burning activity” that requires active commitment (7). One must take an attentive, vigilant stance and ceaselessly fight to bring awareness to the forefront to practice the non-conflictual consciously. So that, if done right, the Neutral will bring harmony between “the maximum internal intensity (cf. Hyper consciousness) and the minimum external” (200).

To assess the method more fully, we will do well to understand why Barthes integrates the figures of resistance in this posited semiotic field. While Barthes refuses to offer a singular definition, instead, throughout the lecture series, he posits twenty-three figures, or “twinklings”; a gathering of instances that he explores as possible embodiments of the Neutral (Barthes says of the decision: “I don’t construct the concept of Neutral, I display Neutrals” (11)). Such examples of the Neutral include Sleep, Tact, Weariness, and Retreat, and, as I will explore in greater detail, Silence, Answer, and the Wou-Wei. What is at once arbitrary (the Neutral is non-exhaustive and could appear in a myriad of ways) is also intentionally presented, stipulated to remain resistant to arrogance. The twenty-three fragments are presented in an entirely happenstance order, with no hierarchy or thematic planning, to allow for freedom from any pre-established meaning. Barthes’ biographer explains this necessity of non-identification: “In refusing (by means of thinking the Neutral) to assign an identity to a being or a thing, by refusing to define through contrast, he inscribes movement and prevents any process of essentialization or universalization” (Samoyault 2020, 51).

In addition to the figures, Barthes further frees his theory by drawing from diverse interdisciplinary theoretical grounds. There are a multiplicity of schools of thought and philosophers referenced in *The Neutral*, ranging from Post-structuralism, French anti-Hegelianism, Zen and Daoist thought, and Greek skepticism. Barthes writes of his process:

I took the Neutral for a walk not along the grid of words but along a network of readings, which is to say, a library. This library, neither analytical (I didn't follow a bibliographic program: cf. the intertext that is handed to you) nor exhaustive: infinite library: even now, I can read a new book in which certain passages will crystallize around the notion of Neutral as a whimsical *source*: I read, the water-divining rod rises: there is Neutral underneath, and for this very reason, the notion of the Neutral expands, inflects itself, modifies itself: I persist, and I transform myself at the same time (Barthes 2005, 9).

The rich breadth of these sources points to The Neutrals suggestibility, such that the process of uncovering Neutral thought can be an ongoing one and found throughout any number of traditions.

In sum. It is important to bear in mind the notion of utopia when considering the Neutral. Barthes' later work was concerned with "formulating and experimenting with alternative modes of aesthetic persuasion and resistance" (Wermer-Colan 2014, 9). Like good theory and criticism, it works through the "implicit image" of a social utopia, in relation to which discourses can be found wanting (Knight, 1997). Such utopia is neither a fantastical nor a purely literary operation- it consists of a diagnostic criterion of societal problems and offers anticipatory counter-hegemonic practices for the desired world. The ultimate standard of utopia may never be fully realizable, even an "empirical impossibility"; Barthes is searching for "a non-propositional truth, a non-dialectical negation of given possibilities." (Teeuwen 2020, 124). At the same time, this utopia might be the very reason why Barthes' work has stood the test of time and retains its "active" status, unlike some other contributions from that era. The enduring prescience of Barthes is because political engagement must extend to language and take on the relentless work of uncovering the fundamental

operations of language that make it a privileged instrument of power, of lies and reification (Samoyault 2020, 61).

IV. Fragments for Resistance: Silence, Answer, and the Wou-Wei

4.1 Overview of Section

In this section, I take up three distinct figures of *The Neutral*, namely, “silence,” “answer,” and the “Wou-wei,” to illustrate how the thought and practice of the non-conflictual operates. Although the selected three are just some of many forms of Neutrals, I include them here to demonstrate the ease of applicability and the value they bring as a unique tool towards combating discourse that is found wanting.

4.2 Silence

For Barthes, the desire for silence is an insistent figure in the Neutral—it introduces the right to keep silent amongst the exercise of speech. If the Neutral aims to outplay speech and sidestep the demand for meaning, silence seems an apt figure, for it is not a sign and does not refer to a signified (with the exception of within music, in which silence is as important as a sound) (Barthes 2005, 24). In the world of strong sociality, an external silence can be utilized as a weapon, for due to its “speakerly” substance, it is always understood on the implicit level (24). When used effectively, an unexpected period of rest could create a “neutral awakening” (37). (Barthes, quoting Gide, writes that “Most often he understands with a great delay” (37)).

Several remarks are in order. For Barthes, emphasizing as choice, the figure of silence is directed at a particular *kind* of speech—dogmatic speech. Hypothetically, Barthes would permit mindless “chatter” as it outplays words, though he is reluctant, as he says those who chatter are “bores” (26). Against powerful, dogmatic speech, however, silence has an implicit use, for; “In every totalitarian society ... the implicit is a crime, because the implicit is a thought that escapes power; thus, it’s the zero degree, the signifying place, the joker of all crimes” (24). Naturally, there is also a particular kind of silence Barthes wishes to emphasize: “to oppose dogmatic speech, one must not produce equally dogmatic silence” (28).

Silence, then, is closely related to tact or discretion; the Neutral requires thoughtful restraint and ruses to manifest itself in a sufficiently discreet manner (10). Think of the skeptic; the one who utilizes silence not to search “for a comfortable refuge in the midst of doubt or for a means of avoiding error. To the contrary, he is only reflecting on the state of balance in his soul,” when presented with two equally opposite positions (25). We can see that for the speaker, silence operates in three modes; psychological (concerning the soul), logical (inferred from the contradiction between “truths”), and ethical (aimed towards rest, as in the Greek *ataraxia*) (25). Thus, as a fragment, silence is, in my view, one of the strongest Neutrals.

As a Neutral, the aforementioned *aporia*, the heart of Barthes’s method, is present within silence. Silence is difficult, as the Neutral cannot be a permanent silence, which would be absolute, a signifier of affirmation. Further, despite intending to resist signs, it very quickly can be recuperated as a meaningful sign of its own. Instead, it must be but a minimal expenditure of a speech act (27). The subject must use caution, for silence becomes a sign if one “makes it speak” by following it “with a caption that gives it a meaning” (26). One calls to mind, here, numerous religious and ceremonial references. Think, for example, of the meaning inferred through a collective “moment of

silence.” In another scenario, Barthes quotes Blanchot on a dilemma posed by Kafka: “Kafka wondered at what moment and how many times when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent” (27). Here the question of repetitions of silence becomes one of quantity, and if it surpasses itself in quality: how many repetitions are required to constitute a sign?

Barthes does not offer an exact resolution in his course for a singular correct function of silence. However, it can be effectively utilized to baffle the paradigm as a “non-reply” when one is forced to speak or choose a side. A final thought we can add before concluding is critical to keep in mind. When one thinks of silence’s so many “productive” qualities, such as opportunities for reflection and re-generative thought, this cannot be the intention, though certainly, such a suspension could create desirable outcomes. For the Neutral must always be void of the will-to-possess and any ulterior motives, it is “nonmarketable” (13).

4.3 Answer

A second strategy the Neutral offers is through the use of certain answers. I begin by briefly describing this figure first. For Barthes, the act of questioning always contains the implication of power; there is always a “terrorism,” for “The question denies the right not to know or the right to the indeterminacy of desire” (107). He writes that for himself, “every question sets off a certain panic; even more so if the question claims to be precise,” for imprecision is perceived as a weakness (107). As a result, “every question transforms me into a trapped rat” (108). One finds themselves forced to answer questions they may not even accept, either well or badly.

What do we glean from this figure? The strategy here is to denaturalize questioning in order to expose and undermine the implicit power within it (108). As mentioned before, the silence of the non-reply could be one such effort. Humorously, forgetting could be another. Yet Barthes takes special delight in the deviance of the besides-the-point answer. There is a particular resistance with immense potentiality that can be achieved with this form. He asks us to imagine a scenario in response to one of those “large, pompous, arrogant, pedantic questions” that dominate intellectual and academic life. Think about questions like ‘Is there a writing specific to women and a writing specific to men?’ ‘Do you think that the writer seeks truth?’ ‘Do you think that writing is life?’ etc.” (118). In response, one could answer, “‘I have bought myself a shirt at Lanvin’s,’ ‘The sky is blue like an orange, ‘or... if this question is put to you in public, you stand up, take off a shoe, put it on your head, and leave the room...’” (118). Such playful absurdity destabilizes the power posed in the question and baffles the paradigm. Barthes seeks to denaturalize the signified and, to a high degree, the signifier.

Although not referenced in *The Neutral*, Deleuze’s work on Melville’s character of Bartleby could be a relevant example of what Barthes is trying to accomplish. The character of Bartleby repeatedly utters and infuriates with his non-answer, “I would prefer not to.” Deleuze notes that it is neither affirmation nor negation. Bartleby never submits to the yes/no paradigm that governs questions, instead using a linguistic strategy that refuses the terms of the question itself. The splendor of this formula is “devastating,” it truly baffles and “ravages language as a whole” (Deleuze 1997, 71). For all language contains assumptions, and the question assumes a desirable response. So one might ask, is Bartleby a madman or a lunatic? No, he represents “being as being, nothing more” (Deleuze 1997). Through deviant answers, one can dodge the confines of the paradigm, creating a new scenario in which the subject will participate, but not as asked. Assessing Barthes’ move on this

figure, we need to observe that the situatedness of the question matters a great deal to the being able to bring 'to' awareness the mode of canceling, denaturalizing the circumstance of the question.

4.4 Wou-Wei

Throughout the course of *The Neutral*, Barthes finds rich inspiration in Eastern negative theology, according to which nothing can be affirmed of God. For Barthes, such thought seems to counter the entire moral ideology of the West; that of domination and the imposition of one's truth (177). The Tao, literally "the way," represents a philosophical quietude or pure idleness or ease which is not in view of a final destination; rather, it is the goal in itself. With its "unknowable" property, the Tao manages to achieve not being subjected to affirmation and negation: for, if nothing can be affirmed, modifications must be made to stretch language to express such limitations. In the Annex of *The Neutral* Barthes notes that when one attempts to speak of God in Taoism, the believer uses words such as "more-than-good, more-than-god, more-than-alive," which indicates an awareness of the distance to the signified (Teeuwen 2012, 125).

We may begin introducing this figure by asking: What sort of negation is the Tao? Barthes's answer lies in the fundamental idea of the Tao- that is, the non-action of Wou-wei. Wou-wei, which means "non-action" or "non-doing," is a way of living through minimizing the directing or aiming one's strength and inspiring others not to act (Lübecker 2009, 125). The Wou-wei advocates for the principle of do not harm- one must live in an attempt not to disturb anyone or anything. One Taoist, Yang-tzu advises: "Do nothing evil, for fear of being punished; do nothing good, for fear, having acquired a good reputation, of being charged with time-consuming and dangerous functions....Act as if you were good at nothing" (Barthes 2005, 179).

The Wou-wei as a form of resistance is perhaps most curious as it appears as non-resistance, as if “tossed by any waves whatever” (182). However, unlike pure apathy, this is an active refusal of the Western demand always to be doing something, the idea that one always must be available to something or someone (186). For Barthes, this is not a “sublimating abstinence,” not a mindless way out, or a denial of the world (177). It is only a “suspension of judgment, not of impression” (201). Put differently; it is a unique form of empiricism, which does not let itself be burdened with meanings and interpretations (178).

In a significant manner, we are invited to delve into the method of aporia understood to stipulate the semiotic, quietly assertive authority of the refutation, including inverting thinking and its field from being pre-eminently a style in the Western category. While the Wou-wei is a spontaneous, free-flowing way of being, it also requires self-discipline, as it can only be achieved through thoughtful, controlled non-exertion. The Wou-wei, being a figure of “profound attitude” of peaceability, discretion, and tact, becomes a powerful subversion of the West’s moral values- that one should always strive to fulfill the will-to-possess.

V. Conclusion

While the search for “nuance” can be taken to mean a turn away from the political, Barthes’ novelty of the Neutral, as the clearest affirmative project of his career, directly confronts intersections of power in an unexpected way. In our present time of reactionary new media, several forms of existing strategies have been posed as potential resistance, yet Barthes’ Neutral goes further to offer an alternative, counter-intuitive form, which seeks to go beyond paradigmatic discourse to

dislodge the slick, tricky force of ideology itself. As Barthes himself speculated, it might not be enough to expose surfaces and objects. What is necessary is uncovering the more subtle mechanisms which give language itself its authority.

In place of concluding on the method of the late Barthes and his choice for new semiotic figures of resistance, suffice it to look around ourselves and the various crises of the voiding of meaning we are confronting, whether we will it or not. I defer to the critic's words: "If, today, the term intellectual is somewhat emptied of its substance because few figures offer true alternatives to the dominant order, Barthes' attentive, vigilant stance, which rejects overbearing positions, can serve as a model" (Samoyault 2020, 61). Barthes' work reminds us that there is always an alternative to any system that demands one to choose between unsatisfactory oppositions.

Endnotes

1. When I am referencing *The Neutral* as a book title, it is in italics. When I am using the Neutral as a technical term, it will be without italics and capital letters. This is similar to Heidegger using Being, or Deleuze, the Plane of Immanence.
2. In Spring 2013, City University of New York's Graduate Center hosted a conference titled *The Renaissance of Roland Barthes*, which aimed to bring international attention to his late work.
3. Barthes was also like many French intellectuals, deeply influenced by the atmosphere in France during the Cold War (1944-63). Corina Stan notes that Barthes' Neutral may have

been in part a desire to preserve human individuality and the integrity of human life from the surveillance and control of the Iron Curtain (Stan 2020). The Neutral occupies the position of neither/nor, (as in, neither communism nor fascism), as he viewed the Left and Right's political stances equally compromised (Stan 2020).

4. On Barthes' politics, his biographer Tiphaine Samoyault writes: "On the one hand, he was strongly Marxist and remained that way throughout his life. On the other hand, he still believed in critical power. But he was political in a different way to his contemporaries. Without vocal engagement, he was always convinced that he could only resist and assert through his own means: criticism, Writing." (Tiphaine Samoyault, 2020, 45)
5. With this being said, the distinction between early Barthes and late Barthes should not be too emphasized. As Rosalind Krauss warns, a historicist approach that seeks to pinpoint the exact moment of Barthes's departure from Structuralism into Poststructuralism may serve to underplay continuities throughout his work (Krauss 2015, 333). For this reason, though I am writing about late Barthes, I emphasize the continual thread of animus towards fascisms' "discourse of power" in Barthes's work, which is evident even in earlier works such as *Mythologies* (Barthes 2009, 142).
6. His first lecture series, "*How to Live Together*," explored the concept of "idiorrhymy," a productive way of living together in which one respects the unique rhythms of the other and acknowledges the need for distance. Here Barthes dreams of a community-dwelling in a 'commonplace' without clear borders. Sunil Manghani points out a new ethic emerges when reading this lecture series in conjunction with *The Neutral*, an ethic not of time and telos but space and distance (Manghani 2020, 3).

7. In the first lecture, he addresses this in a section titled “Weariness,” where he laments how society “codifies mourning in order to assimilate it,” such that one could not cancel a lecture for weariness, as one would take sick leave for depression. In today’s society, the appropriate time to take leave for grief, or the right to mourning, is reduced (Barthes 2005, 17).
8. Interestingly, Barthes will take up a similar iteration of this structural paradox in his later book, *Camera Lucida*, where the problematic takes on an ethical dimension in photography. When one attempts to be “neutral” “objective,” one strives to “copy reality meticulously, as though the analogical were a factor of resistance against the investment of values (such at least is the definition of aesthetic realism)” (Barthes 1980,199). He asks, how can a photograph be simultaneously objective and natural while also having cultural and aesthetic investments?
9. As previously referenced, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) dealt with hedonism as a way beyond doxa, but also *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) could be said to be an attempt of neutral writing.
10. Barthes’s reliance on Blanchot and his contemporary Gilles Deleuze show that the Neutral can also be understood as a project deriving from the currents of anti-Hegelianism in French thought. The 1960s were the height of the struggle between Hegelianism and Anti-Hegelianism in French thought, primarily brought upon by the work of Kojève, to whom both Blanchot and Deleuze are indebted. To overcome Hegel’s absolutism, both Blanchot and Deleuze turned to Nietzsche, confronting the all-totalizing fascist appropriation of the thinker that had occurred post-WWII and breathing new life into his thought. Barthes draws heavily upon Deleuze’s interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy, as evidenced through multiple annotations in The Neutral lecture series. Deleuze’s Nietzsche looks beyond struggle in his conception of the will to power, as he does not see it as creative of values.

Barthes will take up Nietzsche-via-Deleuze themes of affirmation/negation, active/reactive dyads, which will play into the aporia of language.

11. Regarding literature, Barthes writes that the task is not to “express the inexpressible,” but to “unexpress the expressible” (Barthes preface to *Essais critiques*, p. 15 xvi). That is, to problematize the meanings our cultural codes present to us and “unwrite” the world as it is written by prior discursive practices (Culler, 2002,129).

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