

BOOK REVIEW

Detours All the Way

Neil Badmington

Claude Coste, *Roland Barthes ou l'art du détour* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs, 2016).

When George Smiley goes to visit Connie Sachs in Oxford, he is careful to make 'detours all the way'.¹ This, the seasoned spy knows almost instinctively, is how one reduces the risk of being hunted, captured, stilled, caught in the sights, added to the dead. Tradecraft.

I do not know if Roland Barthes ever read *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, but Claude Coste's rich new book reveals that Barthes was, like George Smiley, well versed in 'l'art du détour'.² In his opening lines, Coste proposes that understanding the notion of the detour is best accomplished by turning to a late line in Barthes: 'j'ai toujours eu envie d'*argumenter* mes humeurs'.³ Richard Howard translates this phrase as 'I have always wanted to remonstrate with my moods',⁴ but his rendering turns away from the finer nuances of the French, for, as Coste points out, the signifier 'humeurs' flows back to ancient medicine and names the corporeal fluids which determine disposition (p. 8). In Barthes, Coste stresses, 'humeurs' are (like the English 'humours') of the body, and 'not just the purely material body, but the body as the totality of the human individual, that is to say, the body considered in its physical, sensory, and intellectual dimension' (p. 8).⁵ They correspond 'to the "effects" which events, minor or major, produce in the subject' (p. 8), and they designate 'the reactions, sometimes impulsive, of an individual' (p. 9) before the world, before others. *Détours*, in a word.

The volume's nine chapters have all appeared previously in print, but have, Coste explains, 'for the most part, been largely rewritten for the publication of this book' (p. 26). The chapters are divided equally into three sections. The first turns its attention to the detour of Barthes's teaching; the

second and third parts are linked and are on 'Barthes's readings, that is to say, the manner in which his reading is transformed into writing according to a double process of appropriation and transformation' (p. 21).

Chapter 1 considers Barthes's move to the Collège de France in 1977 and attends to the fact that, after a productive period at the École pratique des hautes études in which teaching had led to major publications, none of Barthes's four years' teaching at the Collège gave rise to a book. In the physical space of the new institution, Coste sees a different ethical relation from the 'phalanstercic' setting of the École, but he concludes that the Collège years did not, contrary to first impressions, mark an exclusion of the book from Barthes's thinking: the Collège course, he proposes, can be seen as 'a detour towards literature as art of detour, that is to say, fundamentally, a detour of the detour [*un détour du détour*]' (p. 52).

Chapter 2 turns to the pre-Collège seminar of 1974-76 devoted to the 'discours amoureux'. Coste discusses here how the 'two years of the seminar alternate between, and often mix, progression and repetition, advance and retreat' (pp. 58-59). But 'to repeat is not to duplicate', he adds, and he proceeds to examine how Barthes's teaching at the École 'opens repetition to novelty' (p. 59). Coste is never abstract in his propositions, and his delicate supporting analysis of Barthes's work turns upon the two discussions of 'Je t'aime' found in the published seminar notes on 'le discours amoureux' (which were, of course, edited by Coste himself in 2007).

The third chapter goes back further still, to the unpublished notes relating to Barthes's teaching in Morocco in 1969-70. Coste presents the professional turning, or detour, away from Paris towards Rabat as part of a wider 'quest for elsewhere' and desire for a *vita nova* in Barthes's life and work (p. 88), and he wonders why Barthes signed a contract to work in Morocco – a country that he knew and admired – for three years, but ended up staying for just twelve months. Why, in other words, was there a sudden detour from the detour? In discussing how Barthes 'conceived of teaching and his relationship to foreign cultures', Coste positions the Moroccan notes (and related materials from a period in Geneva in 1971-72) within 'a new relation between the microscope and the panorama' (p. 98) which emerged in Barthes's work at the time, most famously in *S/Z*. This is the moment of 'textual analysis', of the triumph of the *lexia*, of polysemia and *signifiance*, of the break with scientific structuralism (p. 92); this is also the

moment at which Barthes turns from Paris to Rabat, but then turns away from Rabat much sooner than expected.

The second section of Coste's book opens with what, for me, is the strongest chapter in the volume. 'Le Proust radiophonique de Roland Barthes' tunes in to the three hour-long instalments of 'Un homme, une ville: Marcel Proust à Paris' which were broadcast on the France Culture radio station in late 1978, and which found Barthes and Jean Montalbetti walking and talking their way around some of the locations frequented years earlier by Proust. Coste observes in his preface that Proust was 'the novelist of choice' for Barthes (p. 22), but the object of discussion here is the spoken word, not the written. Supremely attentive to the nuances of speech and to what writing cannot carry, Coste presents the 'Proustian strolls' as 'a unique document' in Barthes's *oeuvre* (p. 116). Unique – but not unconnected. As the chapter unfolds, Coste makes a series of suggestive detours through other texts – *written* texts – by Barthes, before concluding that, '[a]ccepting radiophonic speech, Barthes experiments with a genuine [*véritable*] mode of expression, a sort of pre-writing which precedes writing as speech precedes the written. [...] The radiophonic stroll becomes phantom or novelistic sketch' (p. 131).

Chapter 5 considers Barthes alongside Sartre and places the latter's early *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* 'at the heart of the dialogue between the two men' (p. 136) – a dialogue that also involves *The Imaginary*, *Saint Genet*, and *Baudelaire*. What Barthes finds in these 'four essential books', Coste proposes, is a way to theorise emotion and 'the rehabilitation of literature as magic' (p. 158). Tiphaine Samoyault noted in 2015 that Sartre and Barthes both exhibited '*art*' in their echoing surnames; Coste's sharp analysis examines what comes to light when the art is that of the detour.⁶

If Sartre and Barthes were '[s]imilar and different at the same time' (p. 151), Georges Bataille and Barthes are more strikingly at odds with each other: in Bataille, 'the brutality of transgression'; in Barthes, 'the refinements of "subtle subversion"' (p. 171). But Barthes did devote pages to Bataille, and Coste examines how these writings are effectively *rewritings* in which Barthes 'readily uses the vocabulary of the adversary in order to redefine it in his own way' and to, among other things, set the scene for the discussion of the *discours amoureux* (p. 181).

Roland Barthes ou l'art du détour concludes with three linked chapters in which Coste examines Barthes's intellectual dialogues with, in turn, Jean-Pierre Richard, Bernard Dort, and André Pieyre de Mandiargues.

These dialogues differ in depth and demeanour. Richard and Barthes knew and wrote about each other, for instance, but the relationship between Barthes and Mandiargues seems non-existent and 'improbable' (p. 239). With Dort and Barthes, meanwhile, an initial proximity turns over time into distance as the two 'grow apart from each other' (p. 213). While the shape of these dialogues is not singular, what is constant in the final section of the book is Coste's fine eye for detail, for what links Barthes to his three contemporaries, sometimes against all odds.

Speaking to Jean-Jacques Brochier in 1975, Roland Barthes, on being asked to discuss 'a few important names', remarked that '[o]n each page of Marx, there is a detour into the unexpected and the penetrating'.⁷ In *Roland Barthes ou l'art du détour*, Claude Coste establishes persuasively that something similar might be said of Barthes's own pages, with their recurrent 'passion for the detour' (p. 7). I would add, in conclusion, raising things to the power of three, that Claude Coste, when writing about Barthes, demonstrates the same kind of skill when he turns from text to text in order to reveal unexpected points of connection within the *œuvre*. Coste is one of our most perceptive and informed readers of Barthes, and it is precisely this which makes him a master of the art of the detour.

Notes

¹ John le Carré, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (London: Sceptre, 1999), p. 105.

² A brief detour before we have even really begun. It should be borne in mind that the English term 'detour' performs far fewer linguistic turns than the French 'détour'. While the anglophone ear will hear in 'detour' little more than what the OED calls a 'turning or deviation from the direct road; a roundabout or circuitous way, course, or proceeding', the French 'détour' goes considerably further. It can, as a noun, correspond with its English counterpart, but it also identifies a bend, a curve, circumlocution. ('Expliquez-vous sans détours.') To call something 'détourné' is to describe an indirectness, a touch of the oblique; to hear news in a roundabout fashion is to learn of it 'de façon détournée'. A 'détournement' can be a simple diversion or rerouting, but when applied to an aircraft it signifies a hijacking, and a 'détournement de fonds' is embezzlement or misappropriation of monies. To be guilty of a 'détournement de mineur', meanwhile, is to have corrupted or abducted a child, and the 'détournement' of a book is its defacement. Finally, the verb 'détourner' can mark a warding-off or averting, a distraction ('détourner l'attention'), a turning away (of the eyes or head, for instance), the act of dissuading, a leading- astray ('détourner quelqu'un du droit chemin'), a changing of the subject (détourner la conversation), or, in sport, the deflection of a ball ('détourner la balle'). When I translate 'détour' into English as 'detour', then, I inevitably lose or miss something. Detour ends.

³ Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, p. 801.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Flamingo, 1984), p. 18.

⁵ All translations from Coste's book are my own.

⁶ Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015), p. 253.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. by Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 224.

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