

DEADLINE

by Stewart Lindh

For me, it's the memory that surges up when I'm trying to comprehend galactic irony, or when I'm attempting to convince my students of the necessity to follow through.

It concerns Roland Barthes, the great literary critic with whom I had gone to study in Paris in 1974. Only fifteen students were accepted into his weekly seminar that met in a 17th Century building on the Rue du Tournon – just down the street from the Luxembourg Gardens.

I was the lone American in the primarily French group. One woman was from Italy, another from Quebec. A young graduate student had come from Mexico City. We were all there to learn from a genius. And we did.

What was most remarkable about Barthes' presence was his voice. His soft, deep timber seemed to rub the words he spoke, making them almost tangible.

He spoke magic to our minds – from describing the difference between horizontal and vertical corrections in writing, to making such startling statements as no matter where one sits in a Zen garden, one stone is always hidden from view. His words roamed into our thoughts, opening imaginary spaces that would be forever dedicated to his insights.

Each of us was enrolled to write a *Doctorate du 3ème Cycle*. I decided to do mine on language and death, on the discourse on death in the American media. I don't know why I chose such a morbid subject. Death I had seen in the Marine Corps, but there was another form of death that I wanted to understand – the death present in life, in all the unlived moments, the death that saps life.

I began doing research at the Bibliothèque Nationale, compiling reference material on 5 x 8 cards. Although I couldn't get started on my thesis, I assumed I merely had a temporary writer's block. Surely, it would dissolve as I persisted.

Try as I could, I couldn't get past the first sentence.

I didn't know exactly what to think. Maybe my writer's block had something to do with the fear of writing in a foreign language. But as fluent as my French became, it never reached the page.

Five years passed.

All I had to show for my thesis was a cardboard box filled with 5 x 8 cards, secondary material from reference books I had read. Of my thesis on death and language, not a word.

My life felt bifurcated between the silence-stuffed reading room at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the noisy Montparnasse nightclub where I would work until dawn.

Every morning I walked home over the Pont Neuf, and every morning I gazed down at the Seine, realizing that another day was gone. I hadn't begun to write my thesis on death and language -- and what was happening to my life?

I felt trapped inside a prolonged parenthesis.

Sensing that I was deluding myself, that I would never write my thesis, I went to see a psychoanalyst who surmised that Barthes was the father I had never known, and that by not writing my thesis I was remaining symbolically attached to him -- as his son.

The theory sounded too easy, depriving me of all responsibility. Maybe, I thought, I simply wasn't intelligent enough to face the work.

In June 1979, I left Paris, returning home to San Francisco without saying farewell to Barthes. Why advertise my failure? I left Paris without fulfilling my reason for coming. His letter arrived in October.

Barthes explained that he was retiring from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes at the end of the year. If I wished to complete my thesis under his direction, then I would have to have it written and in his hands by the 15th of December.

No extension was possible. The date was a deadline.

"A vous de jouer," he wrote. "Your move."

I pulled down the shades in my apartment, sat down at my desk and decided it was time to face the thesis.

I removed the box of note cards.

Sweat ran down my back as it had in the library in Paris when I vowed, daily, to write. Anxiety bolted through me – but I knew this time the thesis had to be confronted.

It was my last chance.

Eight weeks I wrote morning to night.

The first page gave birth to another, and another.

Soon, a chapter appeared.

Then came the great moment when the thesis began writing itself.

At four a.m. on December 13th, “The Representation of Anonymous Death” was completed.

The thesis was ready.

As I had quit my job to write, I had no money to speak of, certainly not enough to fly to Paris. Express mail couldn’t get the package to Barthes by the deadline.

It was already December 14th in France when I telephoned the airlines to see if there was a flight to Paris. Although no scheduled flights were listed, a woman at TWA informed me a charter flight to Paris was leaving from the Oakland airport that evening.

I drove over the Bay Bridge clutching my thesis on my lap.

Entering the airport lobby, I saw a long line of passengers checking in for the flight. I scanned the faces, then in one woman’s aquiline features found the look I was searching for: pensive, warm, open.

I introduced myself, explaining that my thesis needed to be in Paris the following day, and I only had \$50. Would she deliver it for me?

She glanced at the name and address on the package, then smiled. “I know Roland Barthes. I’ll be happy to take it to him.”

I waited until the plane lifted from the runway, then turned and walked back to my car. What a moment of moments: the thesis was done. All that remained was for me to go to Paris and take my oral exams, *la soutenance de thèse*.

Barthes wrote within a week, congratulating me on completing my work, and added that my thesis jury would convene at 2:00 on, February 27th at the Sorbonne on Rue des Ecoles. “*Bravo, Stewart. Félicitations,*” he wrote in closing.

Paris was still in the midst of winter when I arrived.

I tried to reach Barthes at his apartment, but there was no answer. Later, I telephoned the École des Hautes Études and spoke with his assistant. Barthes was at a meeting, but left word saying how pleased he was with the thesis and how much he looked forward to seeing me the following day.

The secretary explained that three professors would compose the jury. Each would ask me questions pertaining to my thesis. At the end of the examination, I would be asked to wait outside the examination room – while the jury determined my grade *très-bien, bien, passable, or refusé.*

His assistant requested that I telephone the following morning to make certain there had been no change of plans. University authorities were notorious for shifting examination rooms at the last minute.

At eleven a.m., I stood inside a telephone booth at the Atrium Cafe on Boulevard St. Germain, staring at a print of Van Gogh’s “Sun Flowers,” while waiting for a secretary to find Barthes’ assistant.

He came on the line. “Stewart, I have very bad news. Roland has been hit by a truck and is in a coma.”

I don’t know how long I stood in the booth – but it was not the same person emerging who had stepped inside.

The next morning I was glad to get on a plane to San Francisco and put Paris behind me.

The city hurt to be inside.

A month later the phone rang in my apartment. It was Paris. “*Roland est mort,*” his secretary uttered.

I shut down. The universe no longer made sense.

Three months later, in a somber letter, his assistant wrote to say that the soutenance de thèse would be reconvened for the following February.

I had to return. There had to be an ending to the thesis, and I didn't want it to be Roland's death. Yes, he had become Roland after his death; never when alive in Paris, for, among his friends, I was never more than a distant moon in the galaxy of his sun.

Arriving at Nanterre University outside Paris, I was shown into an amphitheater with hundreds of seats, all empty. Three professors, all long-time friends and colleagues of Roland Barthes, were waiting behind a long table. An empty chair sat to the side.

The first professor began appraisal of my thesis, all the while glancing at the vacant chair. The second professor made a few critical remarks, then paused to study the empty chair before posing his questions.

As the last jurist offered his critique of my thesis, his gaze wavered from me to the silent presence in our midst. My answers to their questions were addressed to the chair, for I, like the others, knew whose absent presence filled it.

No more than five minutes after I stepped outside, I was called back in. "Doctor Lindh," explained the head of the jury. "Vous avez reçu la mention très bien."

Well, there we have it, I thought. My little thesis on death and personal pronouns would slip into the wall of academia where it would gather dust for years, occasionally to be taken down by a student of thanatology writing his or her own thesis.

Returning to San Francisco, I kept Barthes with me – his books on the shelf, his photograph on in a trench coat, head lowered in the rain to light a cigarette on the wall, and the congratulatory letter – relics of the most remarkable man I have ever known. He became the museum of my memory.

Recently, out of the vast silence of the unexpected, a friend in Paris sent an article that began "Fifteen years have passed since the fateful day Roland Barthes stepped off the curb of the Rue des Écoles and was hit by a laundry truck."

But it wasn't until reading through the article that I learned that clutched under Barthes' arm was a thesis on language and death.

That's why I tell my students not to listen when someone says it's never too late. It is always too late – but try anyway.

The End