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Charles Coustille, *Antithèses. Mallarmé, Péguy, Paulhan, Céline, Barthes*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, Bibliothèque des Idées, 2018. 309 pp. Bibliography and index. €24.00 (cl). ISBN 978-2-07-275590-3.

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Not long before the pandemic lockdown, I went to the *soutenance* in Paris of a friend and colleague who was hoping to receive their ‘HDR’ (Habilitation à diriger des recherches), an honorary award in France which, once conferred, allows academics to apply for a professorial chair. The event itself was no different from the hundreds of *soutenances* for the degree of doctorate that take place in France every year (in 2018, there were apparently 65,000 students “inscrits” for a PhD in France!). Before an assembly of friends, peers and colleagues—but not the candidate’s family (we will come back to this in a moment)—hopeful researcher and established academic alike have to present briefly their written work submitted a few months prior; after which the members of the jury, in turn, give their opinion. What is striking about all of the *soutenances* I have attended is not the length and earnestness of the experience—each jury member, of which there are normally six including the chairperson, speaks for at least fifteen minutes about the candidate’s work—but the coordinated nature of the whole procedure. In a manner that would please any Hegelian worth their salt, the whole event is structured in a classic dialectic: detailed praise of the work; complete demolition of the same work; and finally, some kind of formal—normally positive—resolution. Sometimes, it seems so clear to me that, before the start of the *soutenance*, there has been a dividing up of these jobs, with the first intervention heaping praise (no doubt, partly, to settle the candidate’s nerves); the second weighing in without pulling any punches (I am sure French academics are even expecting this section), only for the remaining interventions to retrieve the whole situation with a flourish of suggestions, reservations, and elucubrations. Any candidate with young family, or even partners who do not know the French academic way of working, will therefore decide not to bring them along for an event that, on the outside, should be a celebration: such is the vertiginous shift between praise and then demolition that few non-cognoscenti would understand the stakes or especially foresee the resolution to come.

Though his book is about modern French writers and their unending battles with academia and with the PhD thesis in particular, and even has the playful title *Antithèses*, Charles Coustille mentions Hegel only once, to explain that France inherited the idea of a doctorate from the Prussians in the wake of Napoleon’s victory. Indeed, Coustille’s analysis barely reaches the *soutenance* stage, with many of his reticent luminaries failing (willingly mostly) to submit the damn thing. The volume delves deeply into published and unpublished material—diaries, letters, scribbles, and even formal thesis reports of work-in-progress—to show the productive tension

between academic research on the one hand and creative forms of writing on the other. In Coustille's overview, Stéphane Mallarmé's notes on a putative but elusive science of language give way to Charles Péguy's published notes that summarily reject the scientism of the Sorbonne's History department. In preparing his early thoughts on his thesis, Péguy the poet and journal editor rapidly comes up against a rigid, self-assured and conservative faculty. His solution is to seek to speak truth to power (as we call it now, and what Michel Foucault, in his later lectures, called *parrêsia*), by asking, in effect, if his thesis can be a question about whether a thesis could be written in this way. Long before René Lourau's *soutenance* about the *soutenance* (during the heady days of May 1968), Péguy had already played out the intellectual and institutional reservations towards the thesis; not surprisingly, Péguy did not get far with his doctorate.

Paulhan's early work on Madagascan proverbs, by contrast, is much less terroristic, is constructive even. Between 1904 and 1925, the *éminence grise* of the NRF makes more than a serious stab at submitting his semantic account and explanation of popular sayings on the Indian-Ocean island. In many ways anticipating the post-war socio-linguistic "turn" in France, Paulhan hesitates, in the end decisively, to submit his thesis, not through a lack of documentation and material to work on; rather, despite Lucien-Lévy-Bruhl's patronage of the project, Paulhan becomes one of the first writers and thinkers in France to cry foul over the ethnocentrism inherent in all sociology, linguistic or otherwise. Coustille's argument is that Paulhan has so frittered and undermined his own place of observation that a thetic approach to maxim-led popular speech becomes unthinkable. However, even though a relaunch of the doctoral work between 1936 and 1952 was doomed to failure, there is little doubt that the life's work on the semantics of proverbs underpins his critique of misology in his famous 1941 essay *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*. There are walk-on parts in Coustille's history for Michel Leiris (who inverts the traditional route for the ethnologist-*littérateur* such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alfred Métraux and Marcel Griaule who published an austere thesis and then wrote more freely thereafter); and for Jean-Paul Sartre whose mistrust of the doctorate is fictionalized famously in his 1938 novel *La Nausée*. Then there is the case of Céline, who in 1924, under his real name Louis-Ferdinand Destouches, completed a medical doctorate at the Sorbonne on the Hungarian hygienist IP Semmelweiss, which is described by Coustille as a hagiographic thesis and was refused for publication by Gallimard in 1928. Comparisons with Hitler's rejection by the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts notwithstanding, the implication is that this experience became a spur to Céline's checkered, and at times shameful, literary career to follow.

The final case study is Roland Barthes, who occupies the curious position of both examiner on the one hand, and examinee *manqué* on the other. Coustille moves swiftly across the false starts on a doctorate that the budding journalist Barthes made in the 1950s--on a range of topics, from nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet (inspired by Roquentin's friend Anny in *La Nausée*?) to the history of work-clothing, through the socio-political language used in France between 1827 and 1833--to arrive at the post-1968 academic who, between 1968 and 1980, was a jury-member for over 150 doctorates. Here Coustille investigates a fascinating evolving set of notes that details, with names, Barthes's objections to the investments or lack of investment made by each aspiring *doctorant*. Above all, in these heady and decadent days of the early to mid-1970s, Barthes is looking for an erotics of writing in the manner the candidates present their object, method and results. In this period when the "subject" was seen to be returning (after its hollowing-out by the "high" structuralism of the 1960s), Barthes's injunction is that a thesis interests him only in as much as it avoids scientific writing in favor of an individual (and writerly)

investment of desire. And hence the *thésards* who worked under his supervision—Colette Fellous, Chantal Thomas, Michel Chaillou, Luc Weibel—who have become, since, important writers of fiction and auto-fiction. Coustille ends his survey by looking at the poet-*thésard* represented by Jean-Michel Maulpoix, the “fictional” thesis by Jean-Benoît Puech and finally the thesis as a subject of a *bande dessinée*. In her 2015 graphic novel, *Carnets de thèse*, Tiphaine Rivière features the fictional *thésarde*-martyr Jeanne Dargan, who, whilst working as a school-teacher in a school in a ZEP, tries to write a thesis on the (real) author Albert Cohen (which Rivière had herself abandoned as a PhD topic); we are close, as Coustille points out, to the French version of the Anglo-American tradition of the campus novel.

Written itself as his doctorate, Coustille’s *Antithèses* betrays its own institutional blindness. The book itself is an excellent survey of various writers who have grappled with researching and writing a doctorate. However, the narrative is purely intellectual, showing how History in particular (but not only) has inhibited writers by placing impossible constraints on the attempts to satisfy the academic rigor of the *jury*. Though Péguy, Paulhan, and Barthes did not ever submit, Coustille does not consider what exactly entering academia means. As someone with close to 30 years of service in the university sector, I do wonder whether some sensitivity to the political economy of any university system, in all countries, needs to enter the equation. If not, any attempt to show how writers have critiqued, contested and rejected the PhD thesis is surely doomed to be recuperated. Indeed, in the end, the narrative of Coustille’s book follows the procedure of the *soutenance* that I outlined above: praise of the writer’s stance; deep reservations, even demolitions, of advanced research in French academic institutions; only then for the whole system to be saved by the overall liberal conclusion that what defines a thesis is the “pluralité des formes” rather than any “essence.” Thus, the involved discussion that Coustille sets out for why the above writers resisted the pull of submitting their research to a learned PhD jury, and then how figures such as Barthes, especially after May 68, tried to change radically how the doctorate is written and presented, ends with a fudge. Should we be surprised by this, given that this *is* Coustille’s own thesis turned into a book? One cannot help feeling that he—unlike the writers whose thesis plans and criticisms about doctoral work feature in his research—has never considered not submitting. This performative contradiction in Coustille’s book notwithstanding, the discussions are nevertheless a fascinating survey of the hesitations that writers feel once confronted with the Institution. By the way, my friend was finally awarded their HDR. Of course.

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