

Reflexive Essay

Collaborative Nuance: Citation, Difference, and the Friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy

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Collaborative Nuance: Citation, Difference, and the Friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy

Katie Grant & Maxwell Hyett

The works of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy are each marked by the inclusion of friends and lovers, expressing a shared resistance to the norms of impersonal, impartial critique and scholarship. Following Barthes and Deguy's affectionate position, this article troubles the limits of scholarly citational practices by identifying latent collaboration in the sources and language shared among friends. The incomplete record of Barthes and Deguy's friendship is complemented by a brief sketch of their pursuits of nuanced, indecisive writing, especially evident in the handling of pre-texts like lecture notes and conference talks. The ongoing exchange between this article's co-authors—preceding and including this collaboration, and, similar to that between the two French thinkers, written and spoken in various forms and proximities—explains and performs the generative nature of Barthes and Deguy's joint commitment to difference, as shared expertise and political alignment are bracketed in favor of social postures and the possibility of playful connection. A reading of Barthes's late attraction to the haiku and Deguy's commentary on this development puts forth poetic or fictive language that is distinct from the arguments and language systems of philosophy, a significant matter as they each pursue nuance in mourning. Taking these systems to be presently and perhaps necessarily incomplete, the co-authors gesture to a collaborative practice that is drifting and active, privileging the social over 'loyalty to the idea' as the basis of creativity and community.

Keywords: citation, collaboration, friendship, Michel Deguy, Roland Barthes, writing

This text began as a traditional essay proposed as an offshoot of Katie Grant's doctoral research on mourning and weather, in response to Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Trefyakova's Call for Papers on 'Method as Play / Play as Method' (collaboration 1). In the spirit of this journal's issue on collaboration, it changed under the guidance of editorial advice from Pasha (collaboration 2) and led to me, Maxwell Hyett, joining the process (collaboration 3), as an echo of the relationship between Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy. Below is an experiment that aims to perform as much as explain the citational practice of making connections and actively thinking before and behind the polish of formal academics. In other words, this is a record of sharing information—not data, but logics and ways of thinking—that leaves fissures, which, for me, is a sign of something living and waiting to be taken up again.

We speak to the reader as well as to one another. In other words, 'It must all be considered as if spoken by a two characters in a novel play' (Barthes 1994: 1; Grant 2025²).

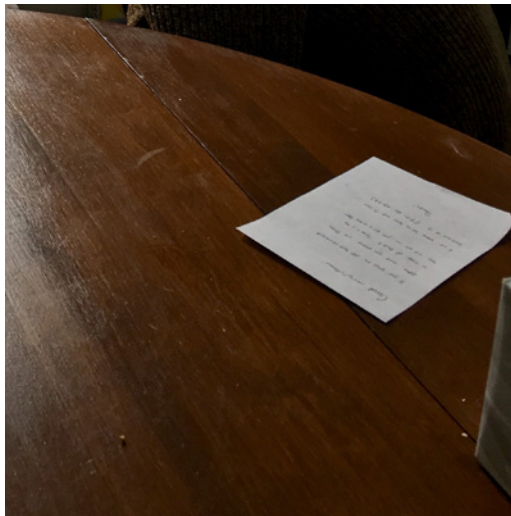


Figure 1. Katie Grant, a note for cohabitants at 416 Oxford Street, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

This collaboration is a delayed gesture of reciprocity, as Maxwell once asked me to contribute to a since-abandoned project inspired by a course on Byung-Chul Han. I lacked expertise but had sat in on the course because Maxwell and I were friends and, briefly, roommates. I doubt that this brief study of Han influenced me much, but I am realizing now that I have repeated Maxwell's invocation 'fissures' elsewhere and hear his voice in it. To cite him for the term ready to hand would be overdone according to scholarly standards. However, like Deguy's (1971) framing of 'the thought of poetry as the very work of poetry' (p. 407), I am interested in writing that self-consciously reveals the thought and work of collaborations such as these—not the deliberate language-sharing of intellectual and political allies, but the polyphonic expression of sources and language shared between friends.³

And I arrive already interested in the practices, efficacy, and myths of creativity. The modern 'genius,' for example, always begrudgingly stands on the shoulders of giants, while their legacy is more often than not carried forward by friends. The movement of thought, it is easy to forget, is often allegorical; it moves by association.

The friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy falls somewhere in the middle of this spectrum between warmth and utility. Although they belonged to the same post-war French intellectual culture marked by its keen skeptical writing on writing itself, among 'the star-names of the "time of theory,"' Deguy and Barthes are each recalled more often for their relationships with others from this milieu, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and

Jean-Luc Nancy (French and Lack 1998: 245). The two nonetheless shared a working relationship on the editorial board of the journal *Critique* for sixteen years—positions that they, along with Foucault, inherited from Georges Bataille—and travelled to conferences with mutual friends like Derrida and Tzvetan Todorov, thus spending many hours together in the 1960s and 1970s prior to Barthes's death in 1980 (Marty 2018: 156–157; Patron 2004: 18, 23; Samoyault 2017: 272). When remembering their friendship, Deguy admits that he 'was not among the *closer*' (2001a: 485, original emphasis), and he is a marginal presence in reviews of Barthes's life and work, if he is mentioned at all. The estimation of Deguy's importance in connection with his more famous colleague is perhaps epitomized by his characterization as 'one of Barthes's admirers and disciples' (Thody 1977: 65), rather than a translator and well-published poet in his own right, whose essays Barthes looked forward to reading (Barthes 2018: 161). This qualified intimacy motivated my collaboration with Maxwell, too: mutual friends were accrued before our first meeting, when we were enthusiastically introduced by a well-meaning colleague at a bar and made to hold hands all evening. We have discussed politics sparingly; our research is complementary at most. But we have worried over friends together, and further negotiated our shared social world. A minor friendship organized by others has outlasted its original context but still rests on social qualities—postures, refusals, senses of humor and play—more than unified knowledge. By examining the analogous nuance between Barthes and Deguy, we can draw out that which takes place in the margins of scholarly texts, which resists the conventions of citation, and which constitutes a type of informal, unacknowledged collaboration.

In the literal sense of a marginal reading, I find evidence of the friendship discussed here in a footnote of an essay on Barthes's teaching in the United States. There, I learn that on at least one occasion, Deguy knew Barthes better than he knew himself, predicting that the latter would withdraw from a teaching appointment well before the resignation letter had been posted (Culler 2020: 56, footnote 57). Jonathan Culler (2020) gathered this from a similarly obscure source: an unpublished dossier on Barthes filed away in the State University of New York at Buffalo's library archives. This material element encourages an extension of my marginal reading, pointing to those circumstances underpinning a work that lie further beyond its main text, typically referenced at most in the bracketed spaces of acknowledgments pages and footnotes. For instance, despite his humble portrayal of their closeness, Deguy (2001a) shares a knowledge of Barthes's manner that betrays a familiar, if largely spoken, relationship: his voice with its 'resonance and diction,' his 'gentleness,' his ways of laughing and smoking (pp. 485–486). Together with Deguy's (2001) reference to the images printed in Barthes's *Œuvres complètes* as 'his photo album and mine,' I find enough to take Deguy at his word when he says of Barthes that 'there was some "us" between us,' even if it was sparsely written (pp. 485–486). I imagine how this relationship would have been otherwise generative, with different focuses and preferences helping with the editorial division of labor at *Critique*, and we can guess at how shared time and friends

might have bred generosity between them as they exchanged opinions and ideas over dinner at 'good restaurant[s]' (Deguy 2001: 486).

The 'us' of Barthes and Deguy also includes a shared commitment to difference. I tell Maxwell in an email how 'my primary interest in Deguy and Barthes as a pairing is for their respective rejections of religion in mourning, and for Barthes's arrival at Deguy's specialty, poetry, when thinking about what kind of writing suits the mourning of his mother and corresponding *Vita Nova* project—a "new life" with a writing to match' (Grant 2025⁴). My research shows me how nuance becomes an object of postmortem desire as we attempt to remember the late beloved in their abundant singularity and protest against the prescriptive types of mourning, especially religious or clinical, that flatten the contours of their memory. These impulses are present in Deguy and Barthes—especially in the former's *To That Which Ends Not*, *Desolatio*, and *A Man of Little Faith*, and the latter's *Mourning Diary* and *The Preparation of the Novel* lectures—and add personal urgency to arguments that might otherwise be framed as matters of aesthetics, such as Barthes's evasions of genre and disciplinary boundaries, or Deguy's insistence on translation's endlessness. It is fitting that I am most attracted to Barthes's commentary on such nuance in the lecture courses that have been controversially committed to text, as this quality prevents the obfuscation of writing's fraught production and expresses instead the conditional manner in which thought is transferred onto the page. The final two courses are of particular interest, as *The Neutral* (1977–1978) recounts many themes and figures from Barthes's career—like the zero degree, Jules Michelet, and the lover's discourse—before *The Preparation of the Novel* (1978–1980) attempts to distill his thought project(s) into an active practice: the *vita nova* and an imagined but unfinished written work. At the start of the *Preparation* lectures, Barthes (2011) writes against the publication of his course from the previous year, arguing that difference is preserved in 'what happens only once and vanishes' (p. 7). However, in *The Neutral*, Barthes (2005) also imagines a writing that would not be decisive or 'arrogant,' but would rather share in the ephemerality of speech as it is produced by 'a breakneck [with] a stubbornness in practice, not in conviction,' where the physical intervention of writing disrupts any 'loyalty to the idea' (pp. 162–163). As the various preparatory notes, archived audio, and transcriptions of the lectures attest, Barthes's work is imbued irrepressibly with difference.

For Deguy, too, difference proliferates in writing, as 'the dictionary is at one and the same time the thesaurus, the treasury, and the enemy' (Deguy and Maulpoix 2003: 6). He provided an 'objective reminder of the differences' between writing, reading, criticism, and teaching at the conference that sprung from Barthes's conflict with Raymond Picard—with one of the mutual friends listed above, Todorov, who co-directed the event—where their circle aimed to organize their thinking on 'the teaching of literature' (Deguy 1971: 402).⁵ It is difficult to say if this 1971 speech, 'Enseignement—Philosophie—Poésie,' has been faithfully reproduced in the book of conference proceedings, considering that Deguy's presentation on Barthes

from November 2000, 'R.B. par M.D.' has since been published in three variations (Deguy 2001a, 2001b, 2007). Some editing seems to be apparent especially in the second half of the 1971 talk, where it is thick with citations. It alternates between references integrated into the prose, like 'à la page 58' and 'la note de la page 43' (Deguy 1971: 411–412), and the bracketed page numbers of written scholarship, like '(p.119)' (p. 413). This gives the impression that Deguy fluctuated between a systematic close reading of Picard, signaled by his thorough citations, and the omission of un-poetic data which would hamper his spoken delivery but could be added later. This should not be taken as a matter of uncertainty or contradiction, though. The accumulation of difference in the reproductions of both 'Enseignement—Philosophie—Poésie' and 'R.B. par M.D.' is consistent with Deguy's ethical project and is foreshadowed in the earlier talk, where he says: 'A sentence is an alloy, more or less refractory; it must not break at its first handling' (Deguy 1971: 408).⁶ The capacity for difference in language manifests materially, as Deguy and Barthes oscillate between the speech of interviews, lectures, and conference presentations, and the writing of published texts.



Figure 2. Katie Grant, a reflection from the kitchen window, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

It thus seems inevitable that a phrase would appear differently after being 'handled' by these two thinkers. They exert their writerly influence on a passage from a speech by Leon Trotsky (1979): 'Comrades, we love the sun that gives us light, but if the rich and the aggressors were to try to monopolise it we should say: "Let the sun be extinguished, let darkness reign"' (p. 332). In an interview peppered with uncertainty, first televised and later transcribed, Barthes (2015) recalls the speech and says,

'Someone [(Georges) Gurvitch, I think] once quoted this quip by Lenin or Trotsky (I don't remember which <...>) "And if the sun is bourgeois, we'll stop the sun." <...> What Marxist today would dare to proclaim: "And if death is bourgeois, we'll stop death"?' (p. 43).

Deguy is attracted to this notion, too, and cites it in his talk on 'R.B.' and in *A Man of Little Faith*. In its first instance, the citation is rigorous: Deguy (2001a) quotes at length, gives a page number for Barthes's *Œuvres complètes*, and omits the uncertain reference to 'Lenin or Trotsky' (p. 492). In the latter, more recent publication, however, the speakers of Trotsky and Barthes are melded together. Deguy (2014) writes: 'Trotsky, cited by Roland Barthes, said: "Will there not be one day a socialist revolution against the horror of death? <...> And if death is bourgeois, we will *stop death*"' (p. 53, original emphasis). In Deguy's retelling, either Barthes's hypothetical Marxist of today is given the name Trotsky, or else the person named Trotsky is given the words of Barthes's anti-death Marxist. It is possible that in the meantime, Deguy had located the Gurvitch or the Trotsky, finding the correct attribution but citing them badly. It could also be that he assumed the correct speaker from a knowledge of Barthes's Trotskyite roommate at the tuberculosis sanatorium (Barthes 2015: 9). In any case, Deguy's altered citation can be contextualized by a reading of the friendship between Barthes and Deguy, with their written alloys bending and twisting with the introduction of difference.

Can you tell me more about how Barthes came to poetry through Deguy? And what constitutes a new life and new writing in this context?

Barthes wrote very little about poetry, relative to his interest in literature more generally, and this seems to be a sore point with Deguy as he reflects on their friendship after Barthes's death. Deguy (2001a) says at a colloquium dedicated to Barthes: 'In today's conference I am identified as a poet. Let's begin with this. Barthes doesn't like poetry' (p. 488). In broad strokes, Barthes deals more with the novel and criticism, and Deguy with poetry and translation, but theater was a shared interest, and they are both extremely sensitive to the role of the writer.

Barthes had a long-held interest in Zen Buddhism (Briggs 2011: 409–410), and he comes to poetry this way, becoming more intensely attracted to haiku late in life. This is somewhat similar to his de-faithed Christian aesthetics, though,⁷ as he does not take up Buddhism as a spiritual practice or even one of mindfulness, and what he likes most about haiku is its graphic quality, its 'aeration' from the white gaps or 'plugs of air' on the page (Barthes 2011: 25–27). It might seem incompatible with Deguy the poet to emphasize so much the formal quality of the poem rather than its text—and contradictory also to Barthes's obsession with language—but what Deguy repeats often about the poem, and of his style as a poet, which blends verse, prose, and theoretical writing, is that they do not aspire to the authority of philosophy. In other words, 'the poem is less credulous than philosophy' (Deguy 2014: 41), and Deguy calls even his most rigorous theoretical writing 'pensive prose' to suggest an element of fiction, artfulness, or being creative rather than decisive (Deguy and Maulpoix 2003: 7). Deguy is thus satisfied with Barthes's apprehension of haiku's ephemeral nature and how its formal elements indicate that the poetic

language is not binding or prescriptive—it is rather ‘a disappearing language that favors a certainty of reality’ whose reader uses its aeration to drift away, unbound by logical constraints (Deguy 2008: 61).⁸

Barthes (2011) seeks a new life following his mother’s death, the ‘decisive fold’ or irreparable cleavage which demands a writing that would favor this drifting and avoid the domination of aggressive language systems (p. 5). Haiku is one of his models for this. Another strategy he suggests to this end is quoting from memory rather than going back to a source (Barthes 2011: 300), since he is interested in how fragments can be carried forth with the trace of ephemeral truth that is lost to commentary and critique. Similarly, Barthes (2005) discusses mourning and weariness, arguing that new paths can be found after moments of rest, paths that are freer and more productive than the language systems trapping one with their inner logics, like those of Marxism, religion, and psychoanalysis (pp. 20–21).

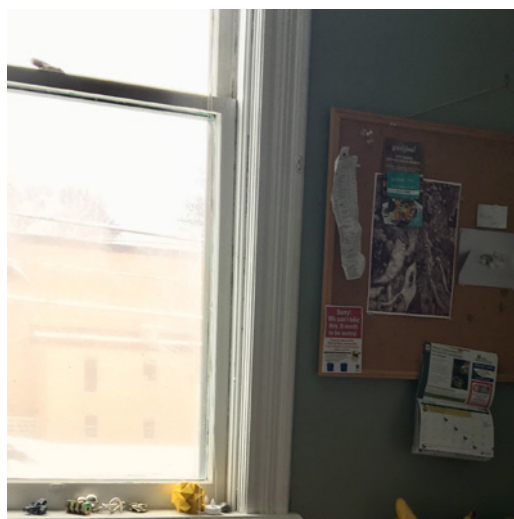


Figure 3. Katie Grant, puzzles on the windowsill and a bulletin board of fragments, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*What I see here is an approach to writing as an act of thinking rather than a record of thought, though the act obviously generates the record too. The haiku is an interesting point because it seems to act as a springboard for contemplation. It is neither the conclusion nor the bridge to the conclusion, but a ‘hey, that’s weird’—which is my favorite kind of comment, something inspirational and aspirational. As you have noted, there are numerous Western theoretical traditions that seem intent on stilling these thoughtful waters in order to ‘know’ them. This reminds me of McKenzie Wark’s (2020) introduction to *Sensoria*, which is basically a series of book reviews or summaries attempting to ‘capture’ the state of contemporary theory. It has really stuck with me because she argues that the general shape of contemporary thought seems to be incomplete, which is to say that the project of Enlightenment systemization has failed and we now seem to be trying to grapple with the consequences of perhaps never being able to ‘truly’ ‘know’ but just project, gesture, and assume*

portions of the knowledge we need to operate in the world, in our world. As you suggest later in this document (Grant 2025⁹), it seems like this may require a different relation, maybe a more personal relation to metaphysics.

Mourning, including compulsions to mourn more globally (as you read in Deguy), is a compelling call to feeling, and I wonder about the way in which emotion rolls around the planet like a weather front. There is a kind of harmony there with Immanuel Kant's notion of beauty as a subjective universal—something that must be arrived at individually and subjectively but understood as a sharable experience. We often feel things together; sometimes we even empathize. Though mourning, in particular, casts us closer to sublimity, as individual experience overwhelms us at more-than-human scales. Perhaps this can be useful for articulating the creative potential of putting faith in friends and their difference; perhaps the space between individuals, new ideas, and different perspectives is sublime, such that it requires an undulation between understanding and discomfort with the fundamentally other. Something ought to come out of that fluctuation.

I think I am now seeing your project more clearly with the idea that 'writerly mourning' (Grant 2025¹⁰) is or can be the underwriting and overwriting of religion. Through writing we can potentially create new narratives that escape or complicate religious structures, so that mourning can be a 'practice' in the sense of becoming proficient. To put this a different way, the actual experience of confronting death and loss is messy, forking, and may require some process of becoming equal to religious habit, in which a purportedly more bespoke practice can emerge amongst loved ones.

For now, you mentioned that part of this citation passed between Barthes and Deguy had to do with play, right? Where do you see play fitting into these quotes?

In remarks leading up to his defense of Barthes contra Picard, the literary historian who wrote against Barthes's *On Racine* and related essays critiquing 'academic criticism' (Samoyault 2017: 285), Deguy (1971) says that it is not scholarly reading that is the 'most decisive reading,' but 'reading-thinking, which we can call hermeneutics or writing <...> which makes works in a singular genealogy' (p. 406).¹¹ For Barthes (1987), this genealogy includes his friends, as he insists on his right to affectionate, *partial* criticism and the inextricability of his reading and friendship (pp. 91–92). In the vague memory of Trotsky, Barthes's (2005) affectionate reading means that 'loyalty to the idea' is superseded by loyalty to Trotsky the person, or perhaps to Barthes's old roommate who discussed him (p. 163). It seems that in his ephemeral writing where movement outweighs rigor, the repeated choice to carry forward the source's author instead of its content means that Barthes prioritizes a 'playmate' or collaborator.

I also see the quality of the Trotsky citation in all of its haziness as analogous to the verse form that allows Deguy to be artful, fictive, or playful rather than to engage in the arguments and positions of philosophy. More generally, the shifting of the citation as it passes from Barthes to Deguy

suggests to me that this haziness, drifting, and fiction may be better fostered or energized in the informal or less-formal spaces that Barthes and Deguy shared together. A good portion of the background for my thinking here comes from lecture courses and conference presentations whose reproduction in text has been tenuous, but I think it unwise to discount such things.

Why do you think it is unwise to discount these reproductions? Can you give an example?

I think we should be attentive to these less-formal texts and pre-texts because of their propensity to show the social qualities of intellectual-creative life. Barthes's lecture courses have a distinct nuance, relative to his monographs, from the presence of his students or audience, who sometimes intervene. Deguy's presentations cited here show his thinking, but also his dedication to a friend. The citation that transforms as it moves from Barthes to Deguy shows how something of thought gets left behind as it is carried forward, but even these fractures reveal social nuances, like the trust that stands in for an exhaustive record of knowledge. Without discounting the value of rigor, which is arguably a defiant practice in its usage of focus and time, I think we ought to be transparent about the conditions in which these distortions or nuances arise in our work. Both Barthes, a 'breakneck' writer in mourning, and Deguy, an endless translator who honors difference, could be denounced for shoddy scholarship where they inaccurately or incompletely cite other writers. Their motivations for doing so, however, make their nuanced citations a matter of ethics and creativity rather than carelessness, with the desire for collaboration overriding fidelity to thought and reflecting a commitment to sociality and plurality. Barthes especially was criticized for refusing to organize politically based on identity, for instance denying any 'duty to say, to express, to write' his homosexuality as part of any 'generalization' or 'science,' while friends and acquaintances converged in more militant activism (Barthes 1979 cit. in Samoyault 2017: 480, original emphasis). Another kind of organization is brought to light, though, when Barthes and Deguy tell us about their friends.

As thought is allowed to drift and aerate, as you say, 'it serves as the foundation for community, common sense, and a shared reality. <...> Trust in your friends' citations so that you can play in the space between' (Hyett 2025¹²). I read Wark's (2020) introduction from your mention of her and find how she stresses the word 'common' but follows it repeatedly with 'different' or 'difference' (pp. 2–8). In Deguy (1993), the '*comme-un*' ('like-and-as-one') captures the moment when identity is troubled and likeness generates difference: 'nothing shows itself by itself except with, by, like, other things' (p. 82).¹³ I want these 'other things' to appear clearly, but I also want the labor of the 'showing' to appear in a nuanced portrayal of collaboration. We have shared sources that remind us of one another with little context, talked with the distraction of mechanical puzzles, and while catching up over tea and dumplings at a struggling restaurant with menus layered with washi tape instead of white-out, you asked my opinion of *S/Z*. I had not read it

recently, and I think I suggested some unforgotten Barthes that I thought you might like instead. This, too, could be called shoddy scholarship, as could the writing here derived from my fallible memory. I could have interrupted our conversation to give a more thoughtful answer, but the tea would have gotten colder, and it would have ended the play. Instead, the practice of asking, replying, and sharing repeats itself here as a collaboration inspired and generated by difference.

I wanted your answer, anyway. I imagine it will be different next time.

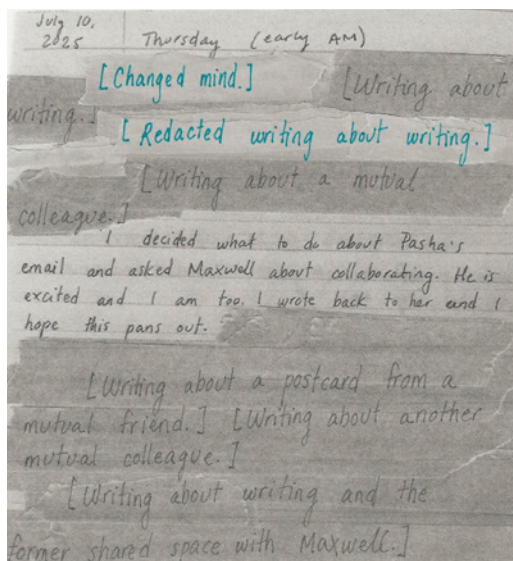


Figure 4. Katie Grant, mimicry of the restaurant menu with a diary page and tape, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

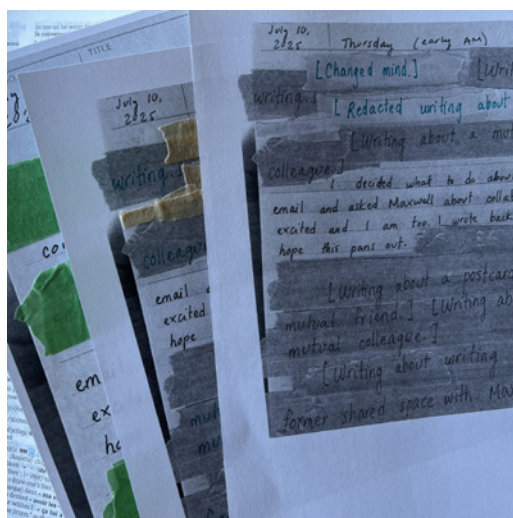


Figure 5. Katie Grant, layers of nuance, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

1. CfP. 'Method as Play / Play as Method,' edited by Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Tretyakova, *The February Journal*, <https://thefebuaryjournal.org/index.php/tfj/announcement/view/11> (21/10/2025).
2. Grant K (2025) Author's intervention.
3. Grant's translation. '...la pensée de la poésie en tant que travail même de la poésie...'
4. Grant K (2025, 19 July) Personal communication, e-mail.
5. Grant's translation. '...rappel objectif des différences.'
6. Grant's translation. 'Une phrase est un alliage, plus ou moins réfractaire; il ne doit pas casser à la première manipulation.'
7. A reference to an e-mail whose contents were omitted here.
8. Grant's translation. 'Le haiku, poème bref de la co-présence et de la liaison instantanée, est langage évanouissant au profit d'une certitude de réalité.'
9. Grant K (2025, 8 August) Personal communication, e-mail.
10. Grant K (2025, 8 August) Personal communication, e-mail.
11. Grant's translation. 'Il est bon de rappeler que la lecture la plus décisive qu'attendent les œuvres n'est pas la lecture scolaire, ni savante, mais cette lecture-pensante, que nous pouvons appeler herméneutique ou écriture ... qui produit les œuvres dans une généalogie singulière ...'
12. Hyett M (2025, 9 July) Personal communication, text message.
13. Grant's translation. 'Rien ne se montre par soi-même mais avec, par, comme, d'autres choses.'

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Authors' bios

Katie Grant is a PhD candidate at the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada, where she is completing a dissertation on mourning with weather based on the work of Roland Barthes and involving his friends and influences like the little discussed colleague, the poet-thinker Michel Deguy. Her essay 'Barthes's Blue:

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