

Roland Barthes

The Preparation of the Novel, trans. Kate Briggs.

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xxx + 476 pages

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The Preparation of the Novel consists of lectures from Roland Barthes's last course at the Collège de France, delivered from 1978 to 1980. In a way, these lectures are the last of a recently published trio of collections: they were delivered after *The Neutral* (published by Columbia University Press in 2005) and after *How to Live Together* (published in 2012). The publisher's decision to publish the three courses out of chronological order is a curious one. For some reason, the middle course was published first, followed by the final course (which is, of course, *The Preparation of the Novel*) and then the first course.

Barthes's work begins as something quite personal: he writes about his age, and where he is situated at present, well past middle-aged. He ponders the days left to him before death and suggests that the repetition of past days needs to change. He writes, 'When this text, this lecture course is over, there'll be nothing else for it but to start over again, to begin another one?' (4) He concludes, 'I have no time left to try out several different lives: I have to choose my last life, my new life,' which he calls *Vita Nova*. (5) For Barthes, this is manifest in a new writing practice.

It should be noted that this is in fact a collection of lectures, and that it perhaps needs to be understood as part of a larger project at this stage of his career (and life). The three courses are presented in lieu of writing; Barthes did not produce major written works during this time. His autobiography of sorts, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* was written in 1975, and *Camera Lucida* was published only in early 1980. In the first lecture of *The Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes mentions the importance of his not publishing the previous year's lectures (that is, those that were part of his course on *The Neutral*). In fact, at the start of these lectures, he expresses his displeasure with the notion of publishing his lectures at all. He feels that some things should 'be set aside for the Ephemeral,' but he also points out his reluctance to 'manage the past.' (7) Even so, these lectures should be treasured for what they are; like photos, they are ephemera arrested in the form of the printed page. The reader is reminded in the preface that 'those who attended the course recall the remarkable fluidity of his delivery, the deep and enveloping timbre of his voice, the warm phrasing that endowed his authority with infinite goodwill.' (xx) Some of these sentiments come through when reading the text but, as with all ephemera, no snapshot can capture the full essence of being there in person.

The crux of the first lecture: 'at a certain point in a life ... The Desire-to-Write (*scripturire*) can present itself as the obvious Recourse, the Practice whose fantasmic force would enable a new beginning, a *Vita Nuova*.' (10) At the time of these lectures, Barthes was rumoured to be writing a novel of his own, which he denies: 'I'm at the Fantasy-of-the-novel stage, but I've decided to push that fantasy as far as it will go, to the point where: either the desire will fade away, or it will encounter the reality of writing and what gets written won't be the Fantasized Novel.' (11-12)

What is particularly interesting is the interpretation that Kate Briggs, the translator of the text, makes of the book. She suggests that the text, while dealing with decisive shifts in one's life which allow for a new outlook on writing to emerge, is in itself a 'break with previous intellectual practices.' In an interview with Scott Esposito in April 2011 she says, 'it's a novel experiment in how to integrate teaching and writing, a test to see whether it's possible to make those two activities into one and the same project.' (<http://conversationalreading.com/four-questions-for-kate-briggs-on-roland-barthes-preparation-of-the-novel/>) If this was, in fact, a new kind of project for Barthes, it is unfortunate that he was not afforded the chance to embark on further studies, due to his demise just after the delivery of these lectures. Briggs suggests also that the allure of this new way of thinking, for Barthes (and, of course, those who enjoy Barthes's work), is the potential of a longer piece by the author, rather than the fairly fragmentary though novel works that constitute his later *oeuvre*.

Barthes spends a large number of lectures on the haiku, a surprising move since the short and formal haiku seems antithetical to the long narrative of the novel, which, it is suggesting, its preparation is what he is mapping out. It seems that Barthes is trying to stress the importance of notation in the preparation of the novel, the transcribing of everyday occurrences that then mean something. These would be sprinkled throughout the text and then interweaved with the actual narrative (since they would be too emotionally powerful to make up the totality of the text for the novel). For Barthes, the haiku is the most efficient and effective example of this 'notation.'

This collection serves as an excellent presentation of the last phase of Barthes's work. It is intrinsically a part of a trio of works, that is, one of the three courses delivered at the Collège de France. But it is important to note it as such: while the courses focus on different subjects, their methodologies are similar. Beginning with *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in 1975, Barthes was trying to conceive of a novelistic work. These lectures are simply that – lectures (rather than a novel) – but they point to the creation of the novel. In other words, if one considers *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* as a beginning in 1975 and *Camera Lucida* as an ending in 1980, with the courses filling in the middle, *The Preparation of the Novel* is the focal point of his project. It is the clearest reflection of his later work, the ultimate insight into what was predominantly on his mind at this time. This is not to say that the text is not extremely complex; it would have been quite challenging to sit in on his lectures, without the ability to refer back in his presented text. But the reader does glimpse something of the person of Roland Barthes here. This is what makes Barthes' later works so valuable as well. The reader is afforded a genuine look behind the enigmatic curtain of Barthes' writings; here the physical, spacial, vocal Roland Barthes is arrested – captured – for all to experience. While challenging, the lectures collected in *The Preparation of the Novel* are fundamental to any study of Roland Barthes as a writer and thinker.

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