

**Roland Barthes.** *“Masculine, Feminine, Neuter” and Other Writings on Literature.* Trans. Chris Turner. Seagull Books 2016. 168 pp. \$21.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780857422422).

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Volume three of Seagull Books’ five-volume collection of previously untranslated essays and interviews by Roland Barthes is called *‘Masculine, Feminine, Neuter’ and Other Writings on Literature*. Volumes Three and Four were published certainly with a mind to commemorate the centenary of Barthes’ birth that began in Autumn 2015 with the curious publication of Volumes One, Two and Five. The final two volumes were released in spring 2016. Part of what the publisher calls ‘The Essays and Interviews Series,’ this volume seeks to translate Barthes’ writings on poetry, narrative and theatre, and even includes what the French editor of Barthes’ *Oeuvres Complètes*, Éric Marty, in the dust jacket of the book, calls the ‘first outline’ of Barthes’ *S/Z*. The book collects Barthes’ thoughts regarding new French literature, as well as his rumination on new types of structural, historical, and psychoanalytic criticism (in ‘New Pathways of Literary Criticism in France’), or the nature of the novel and its relationship to society (in ‘The Two Sociologies of the Novel’).

The collection begins by suggesting that Barthes was thinking about the ideal novel as early as 1954, something that he calls ‘the innocent novel’. The idea of the novelist waiting to write—that this is what makes up the novel—is an idea that returns in Barthes’ latest writing, the lecture series *The Preparation of the Novel* (published by Columbia University Press, 2011). In the work of French author Claude Roy, Barthes seems to refer to the ‘writerly’ text, a text that changes, that experiences what Barthes calls ‘wear and tear’ (11) and follows history. In these essays, Barthes seems to wish to champion a new French literature, one that melds styles, and one that is alive.

Whether Roland Barthes is talking about fear and powerlessness in the books of Maupassant, or the notion of the epic story in the novels of Zola, he seems to move toward the tragic. Of Zola, he writes: ‘tragic heroes advance on two fronts: as they plunge deeper into misfortune, they gain a more intense awareness of their humanity; they discover their own worth and the very excess of their suffering in the end affords them wisdom and it is precisely this that represents their triumph over destiny’ (18). This resembles Barthes’ writing in the late 1970s after the death of his mother. He seems to be prescient here: in Barthes’ *Mourning Diary*, published in 2010, he appears as a kind of wise bard in the midst of intense mourning and, though he would not know it, his words overcame the destiny of his death. Barthes, like Zola’s Nana, is ‘a mere instrument, a detonating or corroding mechanism’ (18). These essays show us that Barthes was similar to authors like Maupassant: just as Maupassant’s physical sufferings in real life informed his novels about the French bourgeoisie, so do Barthes’ sufferings toward the end of his life inform his novelistic *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes and *Camera Lucida*. These early essays seem to tell us more about Barthes’ later works than about the subjects with which he engages; these essays show us a theorist without the theory to obfuscate his private self. The relatively short length of the essays does not allow Barthes to develop either a robust theoretical framework or a quick and witty—cutting and *punctum*-like—fragment for consideration. The reader experiences the Barthes of the everyday errand, the uncomfortable, impatient and short.

In the essay ‘Alain Girard: “The Diary”’, Barthes provides a compelling case for the posthumous publication of his own *Mourning Diary*: the paradoxical combination of the most social and most intimate forms in the published diary (as a genre) is a platform for ‘parental situation (premature death of the mother), religious education (Catholic or Protestant, but leaving the individual not fully

integrated into a definite religious system)' (64). It is as if Barthes is describing his own life, certainly in the case of his *Mourning Diary*. In an interesting passage, Barthes quotes, from memory, what he calls a 'remark' by Pascal: 'I had a thought; I've forgotten it; I write, instead, that I've forgotten it'. Chris Turner, the translator, suggests that Barthes is trying to remember the actual quote by Pascal, 'in writing down my thought, it sometimes escapes me; but this makes me remember my weakness that I constantly forget. This is as instructive to me as my forgotten thought; for I strive only to know my nothingness' (69). And, so, this is what *Mourning Diary* does: it allows Barthes (and his reader) to know his nothingness, the result of the death of his mother. These seem precious words, here behind Barthes' own. His erroneous quote points to the absent—actual—quotation from Pascal that holds so much power.

Over and over again, Barthes seems to give his readers advice as to how to engage with his own writing. In discussing Victor Hugo's novel, *Notre-Dame of Paris* (which has more commonly been called *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* in English translation), he writes: 'the best reader... is the one who isn't too concerned with untangling in this book the vulgar from the genuinely touching, the puerile from the sophisticated, the archaic from the avant-garde' (32). And so it is with Barthes' own work. For that matter, Barthes wants the reader to consider what constitutes literature itself: is it its structure, its function, or its moral or philosophical value?

In 1959, Barthes seems to allude to the idea of the 'grain of the voice'. About round table discussions between authors—which he did not like—and transcriptions of round table discussions—which he liked even less—he writes: 'for a writer to speak... has at least some value—you can always learn something from his breathing, the substance of his voice' (41). This substance is perhaps the 'grain'. This collection is astounding in that it includes such compelling sentences. For instance, Barthes writes that the literary work is 'both a *structure* and a *movement*. It is a structure in movement and that is why it is so difficult to analyze' (50). About the writing of author Jacques Prévert, he writes, 'texts and images are working towards the same goal—to break up the sequences of our habits of thought, rectify daily life, and give that little nudge to common places and conventions that upturns the whole landscape and casts Doubt on its rightness' (98).

Barthes seems to use these reviews and short essays as places to work out details that show up in his other work. For instance, in his 'A Personal Statement on Robbe-Grillet' from 1961, he commends the author: 'he has cleansed novel-writing of its adjectives' (52). Barthes revisits these ideas in *Camera Lucida* in 1981: 'I could not express this accord [his mother's true "presence" in the Winter Garden photograph and his grief] except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit' (70). His dissatisfaction is palpable.

Certainly, one of the most fascinating pieces in the '*Masculine, Feminine, Neuter*' volume is the essay which gives it its title, an early version of Barthes' *S/Z*, published in 1970, the same year as the later book. The analysis is simpler: Barthes explores four main questions or forces of suspense rather than the more complex dilatory morphemes or hermeneutic sentence of the later work. But the roots of *S/Z* are recognizable, and the enigmatic draw of Barthes' own writing on the writing of Balzac is present even in this work. Barthes' *S/Z* project is pointed to with his use of 'semes', elements of the narrative that stand alone, imbued with the enigmatic power to keep the attention of the reader on the story.

Here, Barthes also visits themes the reader encounters in his later works: fashion (la Zambinella wears clothes that mark him as a man and mark her as a woman) and the 'third term' or Neuter (la Zambinella either 'has need of a third sex or an absence of sex') (147). This is not as much an early version of *S/Z* as a worthy addition to it.

In the fourth volume of the series, entitled *Signs and Images: Writings on Art, Cinema and Photography*, the reader is treated to some theoretical writing that might be considered more direct. For instance, in an essay from 1960, Barthes wishes to establish ‘the frameworks—for the moment very crude and, naturally, hypothetical—a semiology of the filmic image’ (23). Here, Barthes provides an application of Saussurean semiology—the study of signs—to film, explaining how the signifier and its signified work specifically in this medium. This is a fascinating study no matter how crude or hypothetical he may claim it to be. For instance, Barthes suggests the filmic signified is everything that exists *outside of the film*. His reasoning reappears in his own later studies of photography: the photographic image, as the basis of cinema, is a signifier that equals its signified. There is no distance between these elements of signification: in these cases, Barthes writes, ‘we are in the order of expression, not of signalization’ (31). Later, he writes of the analogical relationship between photography and what a photograph signifies: ‘in this particular case, that relationship is very strong, very “verist”’ (72). For readers interested in semiotics, these particular writings are a treasure of both early Barthesian semiotic thought, and details in short pieces that contribute to a different—richer—conception of semiotics.

Like the previous book, the fourth volume similarly introduces Barthes’ ideas that appear in his later works: he writes on fashion in ‘Dandyism and Fashion’, five years prior to writing what was translated into English as *The Fashion System*, and introduces ideas regarding the image that end up reappearing in ‘Rhetoric of the Image’ in *Image-Music-Text*.

Much of his writing on media as ‘language’—and the nature of sign systems as kinds of complex organizations—finds some formation and nuance here. In an interview with Philippe Pilard (in Volume Four), Barthes suggests that ‘expression’ might be a better term than ‘language’, particularly due to the ‘double articulation’ of language, ‘the first time into *words*, a second time into *sounds*’ (72). In a wonderful turn of phrase, Barthes calls the systems of language a ‘*découpage* of reality’ (73). Speaking of the meaning of images in the context of film and television, Barthes says, ‘what images gain in *impactfulness*, they often lose in *clarity*’ (76).

Translator Chris Turner has done what must easily be considered a huge undertaking to choose from a number of available works to create five volumes that are cohesive, both in terms of the individual volumes, and to the set of new English translations; Turner does suggest, interestingly, that the final sorting of work into volumes was ‘a little arbitrary’. In an interview with Neil Badmington in *Barthes Studies* 1, Turner states: ‘My main aim in the whole exercise was to ensure that each of the volumes would be a worthwhile book on its own account. Looking back, I think Barthes’s voice actually makes this the case and I may have been worrying unnecessarily about that aspect’ (159). Interestingly, not all unpublished works were available to Turner for inclusion in the volumes.

This is not to say that all of the choices are unquestionable: there is a piece on Japanese cinema in Volume Four that seems far too specific and somewhat out of place with the rest of the volume. While Barthes’ ideas regarding Japanese cinema—and the taste of Japanese cinema-goers and cinema-creators—are interesting, they are so specialized that they might only cater to a reader’s fascination with the exotic.

Barthes’ work here, especially in Volume Four, is imbued with the concept of *desire*. He speaks of cinematic desire as ‘timeless’ (99), and photographic desire as perhaps manifesting itself in an ‘*amorous* relation we have to these photos’ (103). And in the photograph, Barthes finds what he seems to champion in much of his writing: ‘there is the greatest intensity of meaning in them and ultimately the very lack of meaning—something of a bliss [*jouissance*] unfulfilled’ (106), Barthes’ fabled ‘third term’ as a theoretical result of this dialectic of desire.

A relatively early piece on photography is printed in Volume Four with the title, ‘On Some Photographs by Daniel Boudinet’, which was published in the magazine, *Créatis*, in 1977. Turner explains in the helpful introduction to this piece (as are all of the introductions in the two volumes) that Barthes consulted Boudinet himself before beginning to write his own *Camera Lucida*. He writes, fittingly: ‘Everything D.B. photographs I desire—his work, at every moment, established the space in which I wish to live’ (115). This idea emerges again in *Camera Lucida* in discussing a photograph by Charles Clifford of a house in Grenada: ‘this old photograph... touches me: it is quite simply *there* that I should like to live’ (38).

The last piece in the last volume published (that is, Volume Four, in spring 2016) is one of the last pieces published before Barthes’ death. In this short essay, Barthes writes, ‘When a work exceeds the meaning it initially seems to convey, that is because there is a poetic element in it’. This is true for these translated volumes as well. They mean something much more than the individual parts. The reader finds a bit more of Roland Barthes here in these fragments, a real Roland Barthes that left the world some thirty-six years prior to these English translations. Barthes suggests that the photos of Clergue have within them a trace, ‘a transitory index of we know not what’ (145). With these works, like in Clergue’s photos, the reader has both a trace of the now-gone Barthes, but also a trace of ‘we know not what’: the reader experiences the beginnings of thought, sometimes the revisiting of ideas that are published in more substantial and better known works, as well as the start of a body of work that creates a new Barthes, something full of meaning, exceeding anything—or anyone—that was photographed so many years ago in the arms of his mother in Bayonne. The title of the first volume, published in autumn 2015, provides an accurate phrase to characterize the set: ‘A Very Fine Gift’. Indeed.

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