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Lucy O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. x + 224 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-84631-843-6.

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A broad renewal of interest has brought Roland Barthes to center stage in the last eleven years, and a spate of good interpretations and commentary has emerged, gratifyingly so. This scholarship, taking many forms (critical, genetic, interpretive, biographical), comes not only from France, but from other parts of Europe and the United States as well. The posthumous publication of several books by Barthes, including his courses, has added impetus to this renewed interest.

After teaching for many years at the École pratique des hautes études (later the École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Roland Barthes was elected to the chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France in March 1976. He delivered his inaugural lecture in January 1977. Starting in autumn of that year, he taught four courses and taught or planned three seminars at the Collège, which have now been published in both oral and written form under the titles *Comment vivre ensemble*, *Le Neutre*, and *La Préparation du roman I and II*. The latter two have been translated into English. So detailed and “written out” are Barthes’s notes for the courses that they fully develop his thought—Barthes was essentially reading. Enthusiastic auditors also recorded him speaking, and those recordings form the basis for the CDs.[1]

A separate publication series under Éric Marty’s direction has brought out print editions of three of the courses taught at the EPHE called *Sarrasine de Balzac*, *Le Lexique de l’auteur*, and *Le Discours amoureux*. [2] These publications differ from the Collège de France books because Barthes’s notes for the EPHE classes are less developed on paper, and because the Collège courses were delivered ex cathedra to very large audiences, a quite different atmosphere and delivery from the “seminars” given in the EPHE (even though audiences there also grew unmanageably large). And, as O’Meara has made clear, the Collège courses were not intended to resolve into book publications, as did the *Sarrasine*, *Lexique*, and *Discours amoureux* seminars. (Other writers whose courses are also becoming available in print in that series include Foucault, Benveniste, Derrida, and Deleuze.)

Good readings of Barthes’s writing also have been emerging recently, of which I’ll mention only the books by Kris Pint, Andy Stafford, Diana Knight, Jean-Pierre Richard, Claude Coste, and Éric Marty. An extensive biography by Marie Gil, *Roland Barthes, au lieu de la vie*, published in 2012, elucidates both the life and the thought. Collective books have been published by Nathalie Léger and by Sémir Badir and Dominique Ducard. Two large collections of previously published essays have appeared, edited by Badmington and by Gane and Gane. The January 2009 *Magazine Littéraire* #482 devoted its forty-four-page dossier, with several unpublished documents, to “Barthes refait signe.” And new articles appear regularly now. [3]

This is the rich context in which Lucy O’Meara has offered the results of her close study of the four Collège de France courses. In a substantial introduction and five chapters, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* provides a thorough consideration of the facts (to the point of being repetitive on occasion). The

manner is serious, scholarly, highly principled; there are very extensive notes following each chapter. On occasion, O'Meara steps outside the French perspective, notably in chapter four, on *japonisme* and Eastern philosophy, and in chapter five, which gives a lot of play to German Romantics. Most importantly, her view of Barthes, stressing the aesthetic, the continuity of desire, the constant of anti-ideology, the pervasive recourse to essay form, matches that of the best readers of Barthes, like Philippe Roger, Bernard Comment, Diana Knight, and Éric Marty. I particularly welcome her repeated statements about the constants in Barthes's writing from the beginning to the end. For instance: "the fantasy of a space pure of the will to power that tends to be inscribed within language is one that has been constant in Barthes's work since his first book" (p. 98); "Throughout his career, Barthes worked towards 'the neutral'" (p. 91); "Barthes's new science is connected to his previous writing...this endeavor is an extension of his career-long uncovering of what lies beneath codes" (p. 53).

One measure of the value of this book is its attention to teasing out the links among several of Barthes's texts contemporaneous to the courses, such as "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure," *Leçon*, "Délibération," *La Chambre claire*, and *Journal de deuil*.^[4] Actual dates of composition make these continuities of thought with the courses acutely visible and help O'Meara make her argument that "the Collège de France lectures represent an important addition to Barthes's corpus which allows us to arrive at a new reading of his thought" (p. 2). The refreshing difference of the courses lies in the voice, the oral presence, felt not only in the CDs of the courses but also, as O'Meara shows, in the writing itself, not characterized by a capital-M Methodology but by the looseness and fragmentation of the essay form, a style that exemplifies the *literary* form of semiology that now allows Barthes to "evade...the crushing force of ideological language" (p. 2).

The introduction stresses the centrality of the subjective in all the courses while describing Barthes's non-magisterial style in spite of his monologism. He alone speaks, and to an immense audience that spilled out of the Collège's largest lecture hall and provided none of the feedback and dialogue Barthes preferred in his teaching. His idiosyncratic lecture style "constitutes its own dialogism, with Barthes constantly breaking up his own discourse...to underline the counter-ideological message" (p. 7). Pre-eminent is his essayism: the style that "accommodates the collapse of rhetorical codings...while providing an all-encompassing, permissive form" (p. 15). As O'Meara stresses, in her informative outlines of all the courses, the first two courses seek a retreat from the murmur of language and the last two propose stepping out toward a new direction, without however arriving at a goal.

The first chapter, "Barthes's Heretical Teaching," offers a very useful and indeed necessary contextualizing of his "marginal" instruction. With a history of the Collège de France (and of the *École pratique des hautes études* as well), O'Meara demonstrates how the venerable, non-*université* institution was the ideal place for Barthes to teach. Perfectly in line with Barthes's desire not to be the one to convey knowledge, the Collège's difference allowed him to be one who simply pursued his desired research in a public forum. For Pierre Bourdieu, writing in *Homo academicus*, Barthes's essayism combined with his public reputation made him an "*hérétique consacré*" whose writing is characterized by a disreputable, not serious, journalistic, fashion-oriented laxism (p. 28). O'Meara shows that Bourdieu's contempt for Barthes is undisguised, but seeing Barthes as heretical usefully describes how the courses refuse repressive authority.

Considering *Leçon* and "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure" in chapter two, O'Meara teases out the approaches that will allow a new kind of discourse in the courses. She discusses how the subjective and the particular (Barthes's subjective and particular) pass to the general and the universal by means of the literary semiology that Barthes focuses on the impure or the hybrid. O'Meara calls this new semiology a version of Kantian aesthetics. The presentation of the subject, "prioritizing a willfully individualistic disciplinary impurity" (p. 55) open to mobility and the heteronomy of meaning, will insure a morally superior aesthetics free of the "besetting norms of false objectivity and repressively authoritative metalanguage" (p. 56). With literature as the model for Barthes's practice (not an earth-

shaking conclusion), and a productive dialectic between totality and fragmentation, the “Longtemps” essay from October 1978 identifies the third form he needs and will seek in *La Préparation du roman*: a hybrid of novel and essay. Hence we have the idea of simulation, with Proust as model.

Chapter three on *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre* is in some ways less satisfactory than the previous chapters, delving less into the language and meaning of these first two courses. Because their style and content are similar, O’Meara treats them together. In both, Barthes’s presentation is “digressive, vague, and often inconclusive, the material includes many lists, excerpts copied from literary texts, and second-hand material gleaned from encyclopedias” (p. 88). *Comment vivre ensemble*, with its exposition and elaboration of the concept of *idiorrythmie*, is concerned with space, in the relations within the kinds of community Barthes examines in five literary examples and illustrates in the “aerated form of the lectures” (p. 90).^[5] The Neutral as long-sought goal (though by its very nature it is not an end point) is found in language momentarily free from ideology, as illustrated through wide-ranging examples in that course. To anchor Barthes’s reactions against the norms in these two courses, important points of comparison in the dominant discourses of politics and social and philosophical thought provide context and gloss. A surprising assertion is this: “[Pierre] Hadot’s detheorisation of philosophy and his focus on ‘le sentiment d’existence’ means that it is he, of all of Barthes’s contemporaries, who provides the most illuminating gloss for Barthes’s thought”; Hadot’s work provides “the scholarly elaboration” of “the ideas which Barthes seems to intuit with regard to the relation between the subject and its environment” (p. 109). O’Meara may well be the only Barthes scholar to have made this connection.

Barthes loved Japan and disliked China, but from both he took points of comparison, essentially finding in the “Orient” possibilities of the neutral, a language free from the logomachy and the duality of the West. The fourth chapter of *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* dwells extensively on what O’Meara calls *japonisme*, Zen Buddhism, and the Tao, which serve Barthes as systems of meaning that enable him to “move beyond merely ideological criticism and actually *into* a new mode of criticism” unlike the foundations of Western thought (p. 122). Key here is Barthes’s concept of the “*non-vouloir-saisir*,” one of the important figures of *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, also present in *L’Empire des signes* and a continuing ground of Barthes’s later writing. The courses are “*non-vouloir-saisir* in action”: let the listener decide how to engage with the material (p. 126). O’Meara devotes considerable space to the Japanese *Ma* and how this “consciential concept” (p. 132) permeates the courses, especially the first three, and to the comparable Chinese *wu-wei* or *existence minimale*.

The two courses on *La Préparation du roman*, structured sequentially, differ from the first two courses in that Barthes abandoned the apparent arbitrariness of fragments arranged in alphabetical order that had characterized *Comment vivre ensemble* and *Le Neutre*. As the first of these two courses treats the shortest possible literary form, the haiku, and the second one of the longest literary works in history, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it behooves any reader to understand the “productive tension” (p. 163) between them—and to discover what is produced. While the desired novel is never written, the courses are devoted to finding a new kind of writing, and O’Meara believes Barthes’s concept of the novel closely resembles that of the German Romantics of the Jena group. She makes convincing arguments about the importance of writers like Novalis and the Schlegel brothers for Barthes, even if they are sometimes overstated (see p. 177), but I find it puzzling that she ascribes more relevance to this influence than to Barthes’s thinking and teaching in his own past.

Most important in the new writing is the retention of the fragment as part of the form of the novel, even within the great work. The “romanesque” will remain fragmentary and opposed to the teleological conception of the novel. Haiku illustrate the desired *moments de vérité*, but Barthes realizes he cannot invent a form that will link these moments, because of his deep-seated, ethical resistance to fabulation. The figure of the “Retraite” in *Le Neutre* contains the fantasies of all four courses, O’Meara finds: “idiorrythmie, the neutral and the novel are all present in the fantasy of a room of one’s own, far

removed from one's normal tasks, in which everything is, spatially, *just right* for writing" (p. 94).

O'Meara is not alone in recognizing that the courses on *La Préparation du roman* are not intended to produce a novel. As she puts it, "much of Barthes's work from late 1978 is concerned with the planning and projection of a work which is not intended to be written" (p. 164). The novel is always ahead, never reached; the work of the courses is a simulation. To complete the discussion of the preparation for the novel, a section on the eight posthumously published sketches called "Vita Nova," in agreement with Diana Knight's important analysis, observes that the failure to write the Vita Nova is built in as part of the fantasy, part of the simulation of the intention to write a novel.[6] Discussing Mallarmé's distinction between the *Album* and the *Livre*, O'Meara concludes that, in spite of the desire for the *Livre*, everything ends up *Album*--and that is just what is needed in Barthes's literary semiology, the third form: "the *Album* [becomes] the form *par excellence* with which to render the multifarious aspects of its author's affective engagement with the world" (p. 189). This form is always in a state of Romantic and Nietzschean becoming.

Several typographical errors mar the otherwise fine physical presentation. O'Meara's book is more accessible and, as a guide to the nature and importance of the courses, more informative than Kris Pint's (see note 3). Her use of sources is skillful: detailed without being ponderous. The summaries found in the introduction and the brief afterword are useful in themselves. The bibliography lists most of Barthes's books and the many other references that O'Meara cites throughout.

NOTES

[1] *Comment vivre ensemble: Simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens*, ed. Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2002); *Comment vivre ensemble*, CD MP3 (Paris: Sonopress/Seuil, 2002); *Le Neutre*, ed. Thomas Clerc (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2002); *Le Neutre*, 2CDs MP3 (Paris: Sonopress/Seuil, 2002); *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); *La Préparation du roman I et II*, ed. Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2003); *La Préparation du roman I et II*, 2 CDs MP3 (Paris: Sonopress/Seuil, 2003); and *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[2] *Sarrasine de Balzac*, ed. Claude Coste and Andy Stafford (Paris: Seuil, 2011); *Le Lexique de l'auteur. Suivi de fragments inédits du Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, ed. Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Paris: Seuil, 2010); and *Le Discours amoureux. Suivi de Fragments d'un discours amoureux (pages inédites)*, ed. Claude Coste (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

[3] Sémir Badir and Dominique Ducard, *Roland Barthes en cours (1977-1980)* (Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2009); Neil Badmington, ed., *Roland Barthes. Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Claude Coste, *Bêtise de Barthes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2011); Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane, eds., *Roland Barthes*, 3 vols. (London: Sage, 2004); Marie Gil, *Roland Barthes, au lieu de la vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012); Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); Nathalie Léger, ed., *Roland Barthes au Collège de France 1977-1980* (Paris: Éditions de l'IMEC, 2002); Marielle Macé and Alexandre Gefen, eds., *Barthes, au lieu du roman* (Paris: Desjonquères, 2002); Éric Marty, *Roland Barthes, le métier d'écrire* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); Kris Pint, *The Perverse Art of Reading. On the Phantasmatic Semiology in Roland Barthes' Cours au Collège de France*, trans. Christopher M. Gemerchak (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010); Jean-Pierre Richard, *Roland Barthes, dernier paysage* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2006); Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

[4] Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 1995): "Longtemps je me suis couché

de bonne heure,” 3: 827-836; *Leçon*, 3: 799-814; “Délibération,” 3: 1004-1014; and *La Chambre claire*, 3: 1105-1200; as well as Barthes, *Journal de deuil* (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2009).

[5] Compare to Barthes’s own little circle of friends; see chapter one of Éric Marty’s *Roland Barthes, le métier d’écrire* for a description.

[6] Diana Knight, “Idle Thoughts: Barthes’s *Vita Nova*,” *Nottingham French Studies* 36(Spring 1997): 88-98.

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