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Roland Barthes, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xxxviii + 357 pp. Chronology, notes, and index. $35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780231179867.

Review by Callie Gardner.

The posthumous Roland Barthes has, in the years around his centenary, become as prolific as the living one. Appearing first in French then in English translation, the *Mourning Diary*, three volumes of lecture courses at the Collège de France, and five volumes of previously unpublished essays and interviews all arrived to expand our knowledge of the theorist who to many Anglophone readers is still primarily known as the author of "The Death of the Author." The *Album*, however, is a unique contribution to this new flowering of Barthesiana partly because it is designed to present a retrospective on Barthes's whole life and career, released for the centenary and beginning with the report of the death of his father, and also because it commingles correspondence and essays, facsimiles and notes. This is a particularly appropriate form for trying to achieve a biographical or intellectual-historical understanding of Barthes's work. Andrew Brown, in his book *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing*, refers to a "country" of Barthes, of which his readers generally feel they only really know a province or two.[1] Some will be most acquainted with the language and habits of Barthes-the-critic from *Essais critique* and *S/Z*, others the hedonistic theorist of *Le plaisir du texte*, who might be foreign to those who know him primarily as the student of photography in *La chambre claire* or the witty cultural commentator of *Mythologies*. The exhaustive gazetteer of Barthes-land may already have emerged—Tiphaine Samoyault's 2015 biography, or the four-volume Routledge critical compendium edited by Neil Badmington—but that is not the role of this *Album*. Instead, it serves as an account of everyday life in Barthes, and as with any country this might be less precise than the atlas but is usually more revealing.

This is the answer to the question that might be on our lips when we open the book and discover Barthes's life laid out before us in an introduction and chronology—hasn't this already been said before? By Samoyault, Louis-Jean Calvert, Andy Stafford, and others? But the biography here is partial, driven by interest and the irregular appearance of texts. As Barthes himself writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, "If you hammer a nail into a piece of wood, the wood has a different resistance according to the place you attack it: we say that wood is not isotropic. Neither is the text: the edges, the seam, are unpredictable."[2] The same is true of the wider "text" of the sources of Barthes's biography—parts are very transparent, yielding to interpretation very easily, while others are harder, more resistive. In this latter category are not only the elements of Barthes's life about which his correspondence is not very revealing,

but the unpublished texts, some fragmentary, and none of which fit so neatly into his overall intellectual project as the essay collections might have us imagine.

The texts presented make particularly compelling additions to the Barthes catalogue. Of particular note is "The Future of Rhetoric," which was written in 1946 and is part of a strand of thought in Barthes stretching from *Writing Degree Zero* in 1953 to "Linguistics and Literature," published in *Langages* in 1968 and only appearing in English in 2015 for the Seagull Press collection of previously untranslated essays. The essay argues for a materialist literary criticism based in linguistics, a space that was to be filled partially by semiology, but which also reflects a lasting tension between politics and aestheticism in Barthes' work. Another significant text is "On Seven Sentences in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*," an elaboration of discussions of Flaubert's novel from his 1971 seminar at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, in which we see a level of detail in Barthes's literary commentary unmatched even in *S/Z*. While largely clothed in the language of rhetoric, it also relies on a command of grammar, semiology, etymology, and that materialist, linguistic criticism which, even if not always entirely visible on the surface, underlies Barthes's enduring success as a critic.

Alongside these previously unpublished texts, the book contains a wealth of correspondence. The letters form the bulk of this volume, and are organised in a variety of ways—letters from Barthes' early life, correspondence with close friends, and correspondence with significant intellectual figures such as Georges Perec, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida. Section four, "A Few Letters Regarding a Few Books," presents correspondence on Barthes's books in the order in which they were published. Not only does this present a fascinating new narration of his reception and career, it also provides more information on Barthes's intellectual context than is ever revealed in his published work. He was clearly influenced by the work of Perec and also of Georges Perros, even though he does not devote to them the close critical attention he gave to other contemporaries, like Alain Robbe-Grillet or Philippe Sollers. The conditions which permit critical work to be authored about one's contemporaries are evidently more complex, economically and socially, than who has made the biggest impact, as the letters hint. His neglecting to fulfil his promise to write a text on Perec's work, while evidently disappointing to the latter, does not seem to have indicated a lack of esteem on Barthes's part, but rather the direction and tone of his project at that time—Perec's work would not, he writes in 1970, fit "*naturally* into the work I'm doing" (p. 265, emphasis Barthes's), and then in 1973 he says that he is reading *Boutique obscure* "quietly" (p. 266), without commentary. The letters also reveal Barthes's insecurities and sources of strength; while his has always been more of an approachable intellect than that of, say, Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze, it is Barthes in these letters who is still surprisingly, touchingly vulnerable—his careful deference to Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose full approval he never quite manages to win, his close intellectual camaraderie with Robbe-Grillet, his grief and depression following the death of his mother.

It occurs to me to make a last comment about Barthes's personal life. It might seem that drawing attention to Barthes' homosexuality, or lack thereof in this *Album*, is an act of prurient biographilia, but the queerness of Barthes is and must remain a crucial part of his theoretical recuperation. Pushed into shamed silence in his twenties and thirties, he found himself in a more accepting cultural climate in the 1970s, but in contrast with colleagues and friends like Michel Foucault, François Wahl, and Severo Sarduy, he did not come out publicly, although it was something of an open secret in his social circle. There are only a few references to homosexuality in the book—his identification of Jules Michelet as a fricatrice/lesbian (p.

44),[3] and his exchange with Michel Tournier regarding the homosexual "pick-up artist" (pp. 203-4), the latter a pursuit of which Barthes appears to have been a shy but generally successful practitioner, if his diary of his sexual exploits, *Incidents*, is anything to go by. As D. A. Miller, in the provocative *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, writes, "To refuse to bring Barthes out consents to a homophobic reception of his work."[4] That is, to continue to allow the social conditions under which Barthes lived to apply in the present is retrogressive. But as Miller shows, the discovery of a cache of secret love letters between Barthes and men is not going to transform our understanding of his work: "Even when not spoken about in this writing, homosexuality does not fail be spoken any the less."[5] Indeed, it is Barthes's very self-effacement that we can examine and learn from—he is "at once sublimating gay content and undoing the sublimation in practice of what he calls in the case of Proust 'inversion—*as form.*'"[6] Miller writes that, instead, "the novelesque emerge[s] in its radical askesis."[7] Barthes denies himself the personal, emotional indulgences of the realist novel in favour of a literary-critical practice, and that practice evolves over time into an analysis of culture which is sparse and formally fragmented. Thus, Barthes is able to access and express particular affective dimensions of his own experiences—pleasure in *The Pleasure of the Text*, desire in *A Lover's Discourse*, grief in *Camera Lucida*—using the subtle instrument of novel*esque* comment rather than the experiential sledgehammer of the novel itself.

This relationship is particularly relevant when we consider that the *Album* closes with eight pages of notes Barthes made towards a writing project he called the "Vita Nova," sometimes described as a projected novel. It is the work he was "simulating" in his final Collège de France lecture course, *The Preparation of the Novel*, but it would not have fit straightforwardly into the novel form. No plot is elaborated as such, but rather a series of lists of characters, references, and forms. In this way, the projected "Vita Nova" is/might have been much like the *Album* itself. It does not propose to tell a story, but picks out moments, connections, elements of a life, and this is its contribution, methodological as much as it is informational, to Barthes studies.

NOTES

[1] Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 3.

[2] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 36.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. 153.

[4] D.A. Miller, *Bringing Out Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 17.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

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