

BOOK REVIEW

Concise Portraits

Sam Ferguson

Roland Barthes, *'Masculine, Feminine, Neuter' and Other Writings on Literature: Essays and Interviews, Volume 3*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2016).

Roland Barthes, *'Simply a Particular Contemporary': Interviews, 1970-79: Essays and Interviews, Volume 5*, trans. by Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015).

The completion of Seagull Books' five volumes of translations by Chris Turner is a milestone in the publication of Barthes's works in English, as now almost the whole contents of the Éditions du Seuil's *Ceuvres complètes* are available in translation. The only substantial area of Barthes's work that is not yet fully accessible to an Anglophone readership is his teaching in seminars and lectures, and this editorial process is not yet completed in French either. As Chris Turner acknowledged in an interview for *Barthes Studies* 1 (2015), this editorial tidying up has led to an eclectic group of texts and a somewhat arbitrary division between the different volumes. Nonetheless, the two volumes reviewed here – featuring critical writing on literature and a selection of interviews respectively – not only present some valuable texts translated in a proficient and appropriate manner, but also possess a meaningful coherence of their own.

Turner's translation is to be commended for capturing Barthes's gentle humour and his sensitive parody (or 'theft') of reactionary, stereotypical language. Most importantly, the translation is scrupulously faithful to the subtleties of Barthes's argumentation. Turner has remained consistent with the translation of Barthesian terminology previously established in English editions of his other works, but he has also clarified the use of certain key terms by placing the original in brackets in addition to his translation (such as *langue* and *langage*, *écrivain* and *écrivain*, *parole* and *écriture*). On just two occasions, both of them in Volume 3, I found myself significantly disagreeing with Turner's

interpretation.¹ The brief introductions to each text and the translator's footnotes efficiently provide useful contextual information that is often lacking from the *Œuvres complètes*. Again, in the case of the interviews, Turner has taken the trouble to check the existing transcriptions against the audio recordings, and has therefore produced a text that is occasionally more accurate than that of the *Œuvres complètes*.

The various critical texts gathered in Volume 3, in chronological order, provide an insight into Barthes's use of commissioned articles on diverse topics to reflect on his current theoretical concerns, and to put them to work. The collection offers the pleasure of seeing Barthes shift, over a few pages, from a vocabulary of Marxism towards structuralism and, later still, his own distinctive semiology. It can also be surprising to see just how consistent Barthes is across the years, at least in certain respects: this includes his impatience with the arrogant assumptions of a critical status quo, his focus on processes of signification (described as the text's 'surface' in the earlier years), and his eclectic, undogmatic approach that makes him such an appealing critic. The articles on classical works include discussions of Zola, Maupassant, and Hugo. Although there are no examples of Barthes's early theatre criticism or his later defence of the *Tel Quel* group, several articles related more or less directly to the *nouveau roman* demonstrate his close engagement with the literary avant-garde, and also his defence of an avant-garde per se in the face of reactionary charges against an 'inhuman literature' (p. 6). Some articles address the general direction of literary criticism at a particular moment in time (particularly 'New Pathways in Literary Criticism' from 1959 and 'The Two Sociologies of the Novel' from 1963). Several of the texts are of considerable importance in relation to specific areas of Barthes's thought, and are indeed long overdue for translation. The 1966 article 'Alain Girard: "The Diary"' is crucial for understanding Barthes's relation to diary-writing, a form to which he returned in the late 1970s. 'Argument and Prospectus' (1976) and 'Parallel Lives' (1979) are important parts of Barthes's writing on Sade and Proust respectively, and 'It All Comes Together' (1979) is one of the key texts in his reflection on the novel and the novelistic. The text 'Masculine, Feminine, Neuter' (written in 1967) is principally of interest as an early product of Barthes's work on Balzac's *Sarrasine*, which would lead to the publication of *S/Z* in 1970. Although it contains nothing of the elaborate demonstration of a possible reading that is found in *S/Z*, we already find the conviction that many readings would be possible ('there are many ways in to this novella', p. 150), and we already see some of the codes that would be developed in *S/Z*: the hermeneutic, the

semantic, and the symbolic. It gives a particular insight into the way this project developed from 'The Death of the Author', whose opening paragraph is reused here with minimal changes (p. 160). After writing this text, Barthes pursued his work on *Sarrasine* in his 1967–69 seminar series, which was published in French in 2011 but unfortunately has not yet been translated into English.

The interviews in Volume 5 touch on a wide range of topics, but their coherence as a collection is due to Barthes's interest in the form and conventions of the spoken interview itself. The four interviews span from 1970 to 1979, a period when Barthes's growing fame compelled him to address his status as a writer and public intellectual, and this was complemented by his theoretical interest in biography and the relations between a writer's life and work (issues developed most notably in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, and the lecture course on 'The Preparation of the Novel'). The first interview, from 1970, promises the greatest degree of irony towards the generic conventions of the interview, as Barthes comments in his introduction: 'This was, of course, a game by which neither he [the interviewer, Jean Thibaudeau] nor I could be taken in, coming as we did from a theoretical place where biography is held in low esteem' (p. 2). The interview addresses these conventions at length, and particularly the nature of the interview as a spoken genre (*parole* rather than *écriture*), which places it in the realm of the Lacanian Imaginary. Yet it also fulfils these same conventions admirably, and while providing genuinely interesting insights into Barthes's life and work, it also anticipates the pleasurable process of exploring the Imaginary which was to be found in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The second interview, conducted for radio broadcast in 1975, more or less coincides with this work, and shows Barthes's (slightly embarrassed) approach to his own public image at this time. The interview is more conversational than the others, with the result that Barthes is rarely given time to develop any idea fully. The third interview seems to have been the most enjoyable for Barthes himself. Interviewed by Shigehiko Hasumi for publication in Japanese in 1972, Barthes repeatedly thanks his interviewer for the unexpected insight of his questions ('you're a very perceptive critic', p. 95) and his eagerness to discuss where Barthes's work is heading, rather than where it has been ('it really seems you have some magical intuitions and premonitions', p. 105). The interview addresses a number of issues with a good level of depth, most notably the distinction between influence and intertext, and Barthes's general strategy of subverting bourgeois language by a 'theft' of that language. In contrast to this warm, stimulating conversation, the

final interview is rather disappointing. It was conducted in either late 1978 or early 1979, when one might hope for discussion of the direction of Barthes's work on the 'Preparation of the Novel', but instead the conversation leads to rather predictable statements (largely repeating what has already been written) on his previous work on the neuter and *A Lover's Discourse*.

Overall, this series does more than just fill the remaining gaps in the translation of texts from Barthes's *Œuvres complètes*, although this is a worthwhile goal in itself. The five volumes also offer concise portraits of Barthes at work in the various fields of his thought and professional activity, including his considered engagement with the genre of the spoken interview. It will be interesting to see what use Anglophone critics will make of these texts, and we can hope that the still untranslated parts of Barthes's seminar teaching will eventually be handled just as proficiently.

Notes

¹ In 'Alain Girard: "The Diary"', the 'problematic of the person' was not 'undermined by private diary-writing', but rather instigated by it (in French, 'mise en branle', p. 68). In a text on Sade from 1976, in which 'Sade's lightning [...] runs through us from mouth to sex', this should be, less abstractly, something along the lines of 'from mouth to genitals' ('de la bouche au sexe', p. 102).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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