

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Voice of a Friend who has Gone

Nicholas P. Greco

Philippe Sollers, *The Friendship of Roland Barthes*, trans. by Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

The death of Roland Barthes, on 26 March 1980, came as a terrible shock to me, and it's still with me, it just won't go away' (p. 3). Thus begins Philippe Sollers' remembrance of *The Friendship of Roland Barthes*. Originally published in French in 2015, this collection includes two longer pieces by Sollers, the first of which is entitled 'Friendship', the second using the common designation of 'R.B.', referring to an invented version of Barthes on the part of Sollers. The pieces evoke Barthes' fragmentary style, with somewhat rambling memories of the writer, his sorrow (and that of Sollers upon his death), the political (and combative) nature of literature, as well as the particular relationship between Sollers and Barthes. He writes this memoir as a sort of monologue: a rambling remembrance of sometimes quarrelsome writings and differing opinions. Sollers makes the strong claim that he was the only heterosexual that Barthes loved. The first piece here is full of memories: Sollers uses humour to show his love of Barthes, and in this humour, Sollers' anger peeks through. Sollers comments on the posthumous publication of Barthes' works (referring in particular to *Incidents*, *Travels in China* and, to a much lesser extent, *Mourning Diary*) and states that he wishes these works were not published. He seems to be upset at the death of his friend: if Barthes had not died so early, these works would remain unpublished, and perhaps a personal side of Barthes would remain within the realm of Sollers' personal experience, rather than in the public eye.

This book can be seen as a companion piece to both Tiphaine Samoyault's extensive biography of Roland Barthes (also published in a translation by Andrew Brown in 2017) and Barthes' own *Mourning Diary*,

except that it is now Sollers who is mourning, and the 'diary' proper consists of facsimiles of letters (Sollers might contend that they are 'love' letters) from Barthes to Sollers. These letters serve to reinforce the sense of sorrow that Sollers experienced at the death of his friend. The reader is thrust into this stream of sorrow in the form of these letters, beautiful in both form and content. In terms of form, they are reproduced in full colour and at such resolution that they are a pleasure to look at. Like the *punctum* in Barthes' favourite photos, the photographic reproductions prick the reader, reminding them that these letters are like photographs which point to 'what-has-been'.

What is most striking about the letters is how Barthes imbues them with affection. He seems so very invested in his relationship with Sollers (and, by extension, his relationship with Kristeva). The book features only one side of this correspondence, and so, on the one hand, it might appear that Barthes is continually looking for Sollers' affection or acknowledgment. On the other hand, the facsimiles demonstrate an *active* Barthes, a truly human figure that is pursuing a loving relationship with his friends. In 2014, Sollers wrote, 'In his death, I was so full of sorrow that I wasn't able to say or write anything.' One line later, he abruptly writes, 'I didn't go to his funeral', and thus ends the essay (p. 32). Seemingly, Sollers was unable to speak properly of his friend's death until some thirty-four years later. The suddenness of the end of the essay, and his admission that he did not attend the funeral, shows Sollers' continued sorrow; the bottom half of that printed page is empty, echoing the silence that the reader feels after the sudden end of the work, evoking the sudden end of Barthes' existence.

Included at the end of the work are two very short essays: in the first from 2009, Sollers remembers Barthes during the 1974 trip to China he organized (and which was documented in Barthes' *Travels in China*, published in English in 2012); the second is a note on how Barthes might react to contemporary society (written in 2015). In this second piece, Sollers suggests that Barthes was concerned with the question, 'How does society clothe its lies in this outpouring of fashion?' and that he would have great concern for how contemporary society 'lies to itself through the ways it spreads information and rapidly evaporating news' (pp. 162, 165-66). It is fascinating to read Sollers resurrecting Barthes from the dead years later, not forcing him to speak, but letting the figure who is still so alive in his mind have his say.

Nicholas P. Greco

\*\*\*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas P. Greco is Associate Professor of Communications and Media at Providence University College in Otterburne, Manitoba, Canada. He is the author of *If only you are really interested: Celebrity, Gender, Desire and the World of Morrissey* (2011), and *David Bowie in Darkness: A Study of 1. Outside and the Late Career* (2015). He lives in Southern Manitoba with his wife and daughter.

## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2017 *Barthes Studies* and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).