

BOOK REVIEW

À la recherche du temps retrouvé

Ruth Daly

Roland Barthes, *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*, ed. by Éric Marty, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Éric Marty's careful compilation of Roland Barthes's previously untranslated correspondence and unedited essays in *Album* facilitates vicarious access to a *temps retrouvé* without veering into mere biographical renderings of a life. Divided into five sections, *Album* takes the form of the Barthesian concept of the 'album,' which Barthes in turn takes up from Stéphane Mallarmé. Late-nineteenth-century collecting in Paris focused on the creation of an ensemble which saw the generation of metaphorical modes of knowledge, and the structural framing of *Album* is thus a conceptually crucial element of the text, signalling its inevitably incomplete form which asks the reader to engage with its textuality. In *Album*, Marty presents a rich archival resource which celebrates the art of the letter, preserving Barthes's deeply philosophical musing on and play *within* language.

The letters, biographical writings and unedited essays in this collection demonstrate the philosophical underpinnings of a life-long metaphysical, theoretical engagement with language, from its erasure and inscription of meaning, the shifting of old rhetorical traditions to an 'elsewhere' from which 'the new' emerges, to language as *continuum*, as *supplement*. Marty does greatest justice to Barthes's analytical engagement through his careful tracing of exchanges which preserve Barthes's fidelity to language, not only a fidelity to intellectual rigour, but to the play engendered by the word.

Album traces Barthes's letters beginning from his adolescence including his time spent in a sanatorium, his brilliant 'Sketch of a Sanatorium Society', offering a critical analysis of a societal desire to repress the realities of illness and death and thus wield power over its inhabitants through a regime of oppression:

Paternalistic, feudal, or liberal, bourgeois sanatorium society, through various pretenses, always tends to revert to the irresponsibility of childhood. It is an essentially puerile society, corresponding in its various facets to the bourgeois image of childhood. [...] This place lives for itself; it is given over to those who inhabit it, even as it still belongs to an external presence that justifies it. (p. 67)

The letters that precede 'Sketch,' as with the other exchanges included in *Album*, offer glimpses into Barthes's thought processes as well as his personal relationships, though the omissions, notably present throughout, prevent an overstating of the personal.

Translated works by Jody Gladding each offer insights into the literary and cultural writings Barthes was reading and drawing upon at particular moments in his life, playing their own part in igniting conceptually rich discourse and debate and making their way into some of his literary theorisations. Among his correspondents are Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marthe Robert, Jean Starobinski, Georges Perec, and more. Of particular note, though the brevity of this exchange as it is included in *Album* may make it appear less significant, are the two letters exchanged between Barthes and Julia Kristeva. These betray in their expression the deep fascination Kristeva's work held for Barthes's throughout his intellectual life. Somehow, this profound respect and fascination is captured in the small space this relationship occupies in the text. 'In naming [Kristeva] a foreigner', Marty notes,

Barthes also says something about himself, his own quest, and in this sense clarifies the fact that, from his first intellectual act, in 1947, it is also from a foreigner, Viggo Brøndal (1887-1942), that he borrowed a major and, for him, essential concept, 'the degree zero of writing', thus shifting the very old French rhetorical tradition over to an elsewhere alone from which 'the new' can come. (p. 269)

Barthes's commitment to the study of rhetoric and style is carefully traced throughout *Album*, the poetic fabric of the text – its textuality – always engaged.

Does *Album* present us with a new way of reading and understanding Barthes's rich textual oeuvre? *Album* is an important contribution which might be read as a project reflecting the very fidelity

to language that is encapsulated in Barthes's critical writings. Herein lies another subtle yet crucial strength to the idiosyncratic compilation of *Album*, that is, the blurring of the lines around what might be constituted as criticality in writing by figuring the biographical as text. The letters in particular point to the thought processes engaged in the conceptual, theoretical and literary formulations worked and reworked, played with, in Barthes's published texts. *Album* thus allows us to 'read on, look up, dip in again', to encounter these letters with a Barthesian rigour and delight.¹ Perhaps Marty has presented a new understanding of the letter as a companion to those texts. It is notable then that *Album* ends with a section dedicated to 'Vita Nova', signalling the unresolvable ambiguities and contradictions of the word. *Album* is an immersive and engaging text which formally plays with the concepts Barthes spent his intellectual life dedicated to.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 11-12.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Daly is a PhD candidate in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds. She is an associate editor with *parallax*.

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