

We Must Imagine Barthes Happy: An Interview with Joe Milutis

Neil Badmington

NB: Your translation of Roland Barthes's little-known volume about Saul Steinberg, *all except you*, was published earlier this year by punctum books.¹ What are the roots of the project, and how did it develop?

JM: It was very much a pandemic project. I guess you are seeing a lot more of those start to come out of the woodwork now. For a window of time, we might forget already, there was no library access and so any scholarly reading was limited to what you had in the house, or already checked out or what you could buy on Amazon. Since I'm not a pack rat and I use the library to the nth degree, this presented a challenge. What would keep me engaged through the shutdown that I already had? At first, I had the bright idea of reading Proust again, in its new translation. That turned out not to be the vibe, and I'm team Moncrieff, anyway. Reading the New Testament for the first time, linearly and not homiletically as it were, was terrific, in a copy picked up from the local vacuum store. Of course, there were the less exalted activities like binge-watching *Kath and Kim*, but there was the sense that you had to choose things that were not mere distractions from the void, but somehow would have the ability to create or enhance the texture and rhythm of life itself, despite isolation. I had already checked out Barthes's *all except you* from the university library, intrigued by its oddity, to read but not necessarily to translate it, compelled by what it had to say, but more importantly how it said it – mostly because my practice has centered around, or perhaps better stated, been caught between the sometimes-agonistic worlds of image and text (and sound for that matter). Barthes knew this conflict needn't exist, was purely a function of ideology and institutions, and unfortunately in my career I have felt the brunt of the artificial division. So, there was the existential element that kept beckoning, and at a certain point I decided it would be a good daily exercise to translate each phylactery (Barthes's term for his theoretical vignettes), while also recording my impressions without too much forethought or revision. *Uno tenore*, as Barthes likes to say. One of the things I discovered as I got more enmeshed in the book, and later when

faced with the consequences of its weird neglect, is that it is an index or even a performance of the very failure for the world of text to accommodate the image and vice-versa.

NB: This origin story certainly resonates with me: the list of all the English translations of Barthes's work that I put together for volume 7 of *Barthes Studies* came out of life during the various pandemic lockdowns, when, as you say, working in the usual way was impossible. But enough about me... In her biography of Saul Steinberg, Deirdre Bair notes that William R. Olmsted (whose surname she doesn't get quite right) produced an unofficial, unpublished English translation of *all except you* some years ago and that he presented a copy to the Saul Steinberg Foundation in 2003.² I've never seen Olmsted's rendering, and I don't even if know if it's accessible to the public. Did you consult that translation while working on yours?

JM: I wish my unpublished works would be given such authority and precedence! But no, that would not have made sense to me, and as I said I was already limited to whatever was at hand, to improvisation, and generally to the Barthesian sense of text. Sifting through the labyrinths of hearsay and confusion around the trajectory of this text and its translations happened during the distinctly un-Barthesian task of puzzling out who held the rights to the original.

Because I am not a professional translator, and since it is a labor of love, if published only by happy accident, I have to get a feel upon first reading that I have an innovative way through, that it's worth my time and yours. It is important to have a poetic ear with Barthes, to read between the lines, not to impose any violent clamping onto the text, which is why translator-poets like Richard Howard were so crucial to our reception of him. And one must have a patience for and familiarity with the poetics of theory. All this is much more important than native-speaking competence for me, and I'd much more gladly admit to consulting Google translate and Context Reverso at times than use someone's unpublished manuscript as a pony.

For *all except you*, I can actually identify three concepts or concept-words that helped crystallize my translation, since I think a good translation is more of a crystal than a copy. These were words I identified that couldn't be taken for granted, would pose a difficulty to translation, but which also were key to Barthes's poetics, subtending each phylactery: the deceptively simple phrase *ça ressemble*, the neologism *simili-écriture*,

and the loaded word *type*. The last of these, if I wished to give it the erotic connotations it deserves, could only be done with a footnote, hence launching the *en face* commentary, and adding a ghostly third party, which may be my imposition (literally and figuratively), but which highlights the unstable binarisms Barthes creates between himself and Steinberg, text and image. ‘*Ça ressemble*’: a phrase that Barthes posits at the onset as the quiddity of Steinberg’s universe becomes ‘it seems like’. There’s nothing exceptional with this choice other than to notice that in English the two becomes three again (unless we wanted to keep ‘it resembles’). Another possible triad would be ‘it looks like’ but breaking resemblance into ‘seeming’ and ‘liking’ is a little more appropriately uncanny – semic and slippery. This ‘seems-liking’ that constitutes for Barthes the *sine qua non* of Steinberg’s drawings is also the corrosive method of Barthes’s text – he *seems* to proliferate the *likes* in order to break analogy itself. Consequently, when *simili-écriture* finally is introduced, it becomes alternately ‘like-writing’, ‘it-seems-like-writing’ or even ‘homo-writing’, the last of which brings us back to the insinuations bound to the word ‘*type*’.

It’s a great trick that turns the symbolic realm inside-out. One might (as one always does) question the imposition of language onto the world of image, but Barthes seems to imply that his writing is not really writing but shares something with Steinberg’s elaborate asemic calligraphs. But even this analogy is broken and fraught. Why break analogy? Why break writing itself? Sure, it’s a way to resist the impositions of language, but it also directs us to some notion of authorial and existential uniqueness, which feels like a recantation of his much-abused concept of ‘death of the author’.

NB: You’ve just mentioned the *en face* commentary that runs right through the book alongside your translation of Barthes’s words. One of the things that really struck me as I was reading your interventions is the way in which you find yourself repeatedly struggling to figure out precisely which drawings by Steinberg Barthes is referring to. The original edition of the book contained nine Steinberg images,³ but, as you point out, those reproductions don’t really illuminate much for us as readers because ‘*Barthes’s descriptions are only tenuously related to them*’.⁴ You then call this book, a little further down the same page, a ‘*somewhat abandoned text*’, which is certainly true when it comes to the thousands of pages of criticism devoted to Barthes’s work: *all except you* is very rarely discussed in detail by anyone. Could I ask you to talk a little about this baffling quality of the text and the legacy – the almost-abandonment – of *all except you*?

JM: There is still much mystery around this abandonment, and it's not just an issue of the lack of translation into English. When I mentioned the project to some Parisian literary scholars, the first thing they asked me was whether it was an elaborate hoax on my part. So, it's obscure even to the French. The easy answer is that it was originally an artist's book, which has a completely different economy of scale than a trade book. Limited print run, special paper, yadda yadda. But as you and I puzzled out over email this spring, Barthes's Arcimboldo book also started as a similarly lavish undertaking, but has made its way into various reprintings and translations, with and without the images, and is now reduced to a collected essay for English audiences.⁵ Why not *all except you*? The title seems to be its own answer.

As to the (non)relation of Barthes's text to Steinberg's images, I think the more interesting question is *do the images matter to Barthes* or even *can Barthes cope with the image*? Let's think about this issue in relation to his writing on Arcimboldo. There's a point where it's clear that Barthes chose to write about those baroque paintings because they are composed of objects that can be enumerated. He performs the same sort of enumerations while describing Steinberg's drawings, at which point, one can't help but thinking '*quelle bêtise!*' Is he only choosing artists whose work can be reduced to a list of objects? Despite attempts throughout his career to include the image in his analyses without resorting to the sin of pleading ineffability, one wonders whether he is ultimately insensitive to the image. But then again, his point is that we all are. The inevitable demands of the symbolic close down the potentiality of the image, just as they rein-in textual bliss. Eventually, however, Barthes's steady enumeration works its magic – what T.J. Clark in another context calls 'Hegelian prevarication, a waiting and hoping for the moment at which the addition of units turns quantity into quality'.⁶ We are suddenly convinced that he has brought us to the threshold of an image's unstable materiality by exhausting its symbolic content, leaving us with the satori of what remains.

Regardless, he continues to work towards what he calls a 'generalized "ergography"' that will dissolve the boundaries between text and image.⁷ Perhaps the enforced scarcity of an artist's book makes *all except you* more like a painting – but in a way that doesn't help his cause. Such experiments are still much too rare and rarefied to become generalized cultural activity. Sure, the Internet has helped deliver us to a kind of Barthesian singularity, but the institutions still have their way,

whether through publishing economies, university disciplines or intellectual property rules, all increasingly lean, mean and paranoid. And as we know there are also very real, or unreal, psychic mechanisms at play.

Isn't it perhaps better that he eludes these systems? Despite the quest for completism that this book may satisfy, Barthes remains somewhat otherworldly, and his method one of self-erasure. Consider the distance from the original publication of his *Michelet* book in 1954 to its posthumous translation into English by Richard Howard in 1987 (33 years) and the distance between the original publication of *all except you* (1983) and my translation today (40 years). There is an untimely aspect to our reception of Barthes that extends to Barthes's traversal across history itself, or even to his very notion of history (these paradoxes are explored in *Michelet*, at the onset of his career). Joy is ahistorical, and *jouissance* the game. Is there also something inexplicably weird about these two books? I think so. Listen, we have been unfortunately caught between those prominent American academics who would rather Barthes stayed the dutiful Brechtian Marxist of the 1950s, and those who can't imagine him as more than the melancholy-mourning-mamma's boy. These attitudes determine much of how Barthes gets read (or doesn't) today.

Of course, Barthes is complicit in the latter, and there is the sense – Tzvetan Todorov points this out – that his last books were deliberately released not only as mourning books for his mother but as a premonition of his own premature death, and then maybe also AIDS. (While reading his cute letters to Hervé Guibert, it's hard not to reflect upon the harsh reality of three generations disappearing in such a short time.) So, it is not inconceivable that Barthes himself suppressed *all except you* because it was not appropriate to the bibliographic cenotaph he wished to create. Like *Michelet*, it seems a little more outside of time, and consequently on the side of joy, even if tinged with melancholy. I think we must imagine Barthes happy.

NB: Let me come at the question of mystery and where *all except you* sits in Barthes's body of work from a different perspective. At the end of the version in the *Oeuvres complètes*, a note states that Barthes dated *all except you* 23 December 1976. This is why the text is included in volume 4 (covering 1972-76) of the complete works, even though, because it was unpublished until 1983, it might have been placed in the 'Textes posthumes' section near the end of volume 5, along with pieces like 'Incidents'. In your commentary, however, there's a fascinating moment where you pick up on the point at which Barthes writes, 'On the day I

write these lines, we just found the heads of the twelve Kings of Judah, sculpted in the Middle Ages; it was believed that they had been decapitated and thrown into the Seine'.⁸ You note that those sculpted heads weren't found until early 1977, which means that dating *all except you* 23 December 1976 is inaccurate. What led you down this road?

JM: That's simply Google plus curiosity. If a text leaves this kind of evidence, one should follow it, especially given that it is our unique historical privilege to do so immediately. I think digital literary scholars sometimes underplay the impact of these simple but profound digital affordances, in favour of glitzier but ultimately gimmicky tools. My book *Failure, A Writer's Life* addresses this issue in the context of a discussion of virtual literature, following the French Bergsonian virtual rather than the American technocratic virtual.

At one point in *Failure*, I make a similar Googlistic find with André Breton's book *Nadja* (translated, incidentally or not, by Richard Howard).⁹ There's a photo of Breton, in addition to the many other photos in the book taken by Breton himself. But this personal photo – very official like a passport photo – has a photo credit. Who is its unremarkable author, Henri Manuel? A quick search reveals that Manuel took over one million photos for the French government. And to me, that is extremely significant. Imagine, a million photos! There's something natively surreal about him that must have fascinated Breton, in his search for a new mechanics of literature, and resonates now with the current surrealism that has us scrolling through vast junk yards of virtual data. Digital junk is not only more honest than overweening and proprietary virtualities, but in the Barthesian sense it is also more *textual*, amenable to our eros and reverie.

Breton's fascination or envy towards what a photo could do in comparison to literature is still very much with us, and this brings me back to *all except you* as an image-text book – maybe a failed one – and our collective failure, almost a hundred years after the publication of *Nadja*, to really have a robust literature and scholarship that writes with or through the image. I've been thinking about this a lot because for the past five years I've been working on a long poem called *The Veridencies*, which is an art history lecture in rhymed verse about green-fleshed bodies in the history of painting. It seems to have no hope as a book, simply because the only art history books that shoulder the expense of these types of colour images are straightforward art monographs. This limitation is nothing new to me; *The Veridencies* may just be added to what I call my parabook output,

already extensive. Maybe it will remain a PowerPoint performance. Who knows? Or I will throw a lot of money at it to self-publish, because I think it deserves physical manifestation. Nevertheless, these are the types of questions that face any writer who decides to work directly with the image. Sebald was smart: his crappy xerox photos are conceptually apt but they are also the only types of images that work within the economic model of the literary mass-market paperback.

The point is, the market does not really exist for this type of work even though the desire and readership are there. And since a readymade market does not exist you have people only thinking about image inclusion after the fact, rather than developing a practice of writing that works in constant collaboration and interplay with the image. I'm enjoying T. J. Clark's new book on Cézanne (quoted above), and that type of minute textual reading is possible because the publisher is willing to print high quality colour images exactly choreographed to the pace of the text, rather than taken on faith, the whims of *écriture*, or left to Google. I can't tell you how satisfying it is to reflect on, for instance, a blue square of paint hovering over a cabbage field, immediately available to the probing and textually-instigated eye in *If These Apples Should Fall*. Didi-Huberman's work is similarly remarkable, and he directly addresses this issue as early as 1990 in *Confronting Images*; Carol Mavor, too, is someone whose books have been allowed to faithfully reproduce a Barthesian attentiveness to images. And yet, as noted, part of Barthes's method is a productive *inattentiveness* to what is actually there ('impertinence' is the word in *all except you*). Should we carry forward his mode of forgetfulness towards the object, or is it an artefact of economic, legal and technological limitations? This Barthesian inattentiveness or impertinence would leave the text open to an *exegesis* of the image, as Didi-Huberman describes it, in contradistinction to a *reading*: 'an infinite arborescence of relations, associations, and fantastic deployments wherein everything, notably things not in the "letter" of the text [...] could flourish. [...] an openness to all the winds of meaning'.¹⁰ Maybe, in the end, asking too much of the publishing apparatus is in effect a desire for order over these winds of meaning: a literal papering-over of the reality of *rending* rather than *reading*.

NB: If Barthes is inattentive to images in *all except you*, one of the things that you're attentive to in your running commentary is what you call, early on, '*the erotic charge that will fuel this experiment*' that Barthes is conducting.¹¹ On the very same page you refer to 'Barthes's "type", *what*

engages his eros'. Perhaps I could move us towards the end of this conversation by asking you to talk about this aspect of the book.

JM: There's a stupid idea that returns with a vehemence every decade or so that claims that the poststructuralist are, to a one, racist, sexist, homophobic – you name it – because they resist the representational tropes of identity. But this gives stupidity a bad name. Let's say it's based on a *surly knowingness*, which seeks to annihilate an entire school of thought based on insinuation. Usually it's just flat-out anti-intellectualism masquerading as political concern. Nevertheless, what can we make of claims that Barthes refuses to 'write as a gay man'? (Even in saying this, I feel I am indulging in a little stupidity myself, as if I knew what that could or should look like, 'as' *ça ressemble* infinitely recedes.) Barthes and Foucault had a completely different way of writing through sexuality than our current volubility demands, and of course Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' warns of the ideological dangers of this excessive volubility and knowingness about sex. Barthes refusal to mythologize sex is an extension of the poststructuralist tendency – shared variously by Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, and Foucault – to put eros in the register of the semiotic, beyond representation yet diffused in writing itself. Ultimately subversive of monological meaning, decentering the sexual relation from its structuring principles. If you don't get why that's important, *tant pis*.

Before *all except you*, the artists Barthes chose to write about had famously ambiguous sexualities (Arcimboldo, Schumann, Balzac, Eisenstein, Twombly), when, somewhat less often, they were not pointedly gay (Erté, Von Gloeden, Proust). In *all except you*, Barthes enters company that clearly seems to exclude him. The choice of the straight artist Steinberg as the object of his textual desire is, I feel, part of the presumed failure of the text. Steinberg is clearly not his *type*. There is some hubris here – a rare modality for Barthes, but it must have been part of what compelled him to collaborate with this kitchen-table-famous, womanizing New Yorker. How to deal with this fact, both at the level of translation and commentary: to honour Barthes's characteristic discretion and stylistic nuance, while also honouring his tendency to impertinence, especially here? We can think of the relation of Steinberg to Barthes as a kind of failed critical transference, yes, or despite Barthes's modesty, we can go a little further and call it brazen – emphasis on the zen: an attempt to liberate the drawings from their author. *all except . . . whom?*

At least some of the younger generation is finally catching up with Édouard Glissant's notion of the 'right to opacity', which shares in the

poststructuralist resistance to the prying demand for self-representation or self-reification in art. With Barthes it seems to me stunningly obvious why this right is important. To resist mythologizing sex means to resist naturalizing our knowledge of it – a difficult and counterintuitive operation when so often homophobia acts by way of determining what is ‘unnatural’. But there is nothing natural about sexuality. Keeping it strange lays the path open for the unforeseen, and perhaps that’s why he was open to writing on Steinberg. Barthes has managed to stay pertinent as queer culture expands precisely because of this resistance to naming. Consider that there are at least *three* books in which what we would now call ‘non-binary sexuality’ is central. *S/Z* is the most obvious, with its slow crawl through a story about a famous castrato. *Michelet*, his rarely read but strikingly contemporary psychobiography of the French historian, describes the veritably alchemical process whereby Michelet becomes the complete author because ‘*doubly sexed, genitor of Justice at the heart of female Grace*’.¹² *The Pleasure of the Text* has as its core Severo Sarduy’s *Cobra*, a neo-baroque Cuban novel about transvestites, complete with a bizarrely inflected theory of *écriture*. (Barthes does not belabour this fact, to the point of perversity.) And, of course, there are his theorizations of the neutral or the neuter, which makes one think that he might have had a thing or two to say about asexuality, even while not saying it.

I’m currently reading Lorene M. Birden’s very good translation of Cixous’s *Neuter* and her equally masterful introduction in which she drops the mind-blowing fact that in Latin *ne-uter* means ‘neither one nor the other’.¹³ Barthesian eros, then, is an attempt to create, through language, this *ne-uter* – text as a space of transformation beyond male and female, an affective fabric that might be more aptly be called a landscape (or langscape?) of what Cixous calls the *Neuterre*.

Notes

- ¹ Roland Barthes, *all except you*, trans. by Joe Milutis (Goleta, CA: punctum books, 2023).
- ² Deirdre Bair, *Saul Steinberg: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), p. 689.
- ³ Roland Barthes and Saul Steinberg, *all except you* (Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1983).
- ⁴ Barthes, *all except you*, English translation, p. 33.
- ⁵ For the English translation, see ‘Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriqueur’, in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 129–48.
- ⁶ T.J. Clark, *If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022), p. 129.
- ⁷ Roland Barthes, ‘Is Painting a Language?’, in *The Responsibility of Forms*, pp. 149–52 (p. 152).
- ⁸ Barthes, *all except you*, English translation, p. 80.
- ⁹ Joe Milutis, *Failure, A Writer’s Life* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2013).
- ¹⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. by John Goodman (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 22.
- ¹¹ Barthes, *all except you*, English translation, p. 13.
- ¹² Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), p. 59.
- ¹³ Lorene M. Birden, Introduction to Hélène Cixous, *Neuter*, trans. by Lorene M. Birden (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 9.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joe Milutis <www.joemilutis.com> is a writer, artist and Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and the MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics at the University of Washington-Bothell. He is the author of various books, parabooks, expanded essays, and translations.

Neil Badmington is Professor of English at Cardiff University, UK, and is the founding editor of *Barthes Studies*.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2023 *Barthes Studies* and is distributed under a CC–BY–ND licence. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as no changes are made to it and the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).