

Tuning In

Brian Blanchfield in Conversation with Kate Briggs

Introduction

Brian Blanchfield is a poet, essayist and educator. Reading Brian's book *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing* when it was first published in 2016, I felt immediately addressed – as if this open manner of thinking playing out over twenty-four single-subject essays (written without a single recourse to 'authoritative sources') were intended to initiate a conversation (with me, among many others). I have been writing toward Brian ever since. Without having met him; nor, until very recently, ever having written to him, at least not directly. This special issue on 'The Preparation of the Artwork' presented an occasion to finally get in touch; to invite Brian, a long-term, deeply invested reader of Roland Barthes, to think with me around the forms 'preparing' takes in his final lecture course. I wanted to know to how far the different actions, mental states and life-circumstances that Barthes describes under this heading resonated with his own writing practice, and / or the practices of others. Brian and I began corresponding in June 2024 and continued over a busy summer of house moves, fallen trees, school holidays, snatches of time to sit, concentrate and respond. Our exchange has been edited for concision and clarity.

– Kate Briggs

On Cultivating Dauntlessness

Dear Brian,

I have been making a small inventory of the places where Barthes uses the verb ‘to prepare’ in his lecture notes. To start with, there’s this moment from very early on, which has always struck me, where he writes:

Nor shall I let myself be daunted – at least not for the moment (= ‘Preparation’) – by the question as to whether it’s possible to write a novel *today* (that is, in historical and literary terms)...¹

I’m interested in the ‘equals’ sign here. As I understand it, not allowing oneself to feel daunted would *equal* preparing to write? For Barthes, not feeling daunted meant not thinking about the validity or the legitimacy of the big literary-historical categories such as the Novel, the Essay, the Poem. This presents the time and place of preparing as a kind of protected space, free from anxiety about precedents, or the legitimacy of a project. Does that speak to your experience? When starting new work, do your preparations involve a form of protection? Is it ever possible, I wonder, to simply *decide* to not feel daunted?

Dear Kate—

The task of cultivating, of contriving dauntlessness – let me just say from the outset – is only too alive to me in beginning a reply to you, a writer and scholar I have greatly admired for several years. It’s almost too fantastic to be in dialogue – about Barthes, his performances of preparation, the final fantasy of literary conversion, ‘those two very old words that occur to [him]’ (p. 8) – with the person who not only has lived most deeply in that work and delivered it in English but also has covertly, expertly exercised his pedagogy (run the program he drew from personal fantasy and availed to others to metabolize) to make two phenomenal works of literature: your book-length study of translation-as-idiorrhymy and now *The Long Form*, your daybook novel of flourished fragments. And, to have it all begin with the question of an amateur’s inoculations against comparison with seminal accomplishments in the field. Well. Here is a place I can enter.

I, too, am drawn to that early passage, opening the 12/9/78 session, in *The Preparation of the Novel*. After reminding his auditors that a ‘fantasy = a scenario with a subject (me) and an object (a part of the body, a practice, a situation) where pleasure is produced by that conjunction’ (p. 10), Barthes gives the premise of the organizing fantasy of the course, in which the structuralist semiologist lays bare his recent objective to write a novel: ‘Replacing “How something is made, with a view to finding out what it is” with “How something is made, with a view to making it again”’ (p. 13).

(He tells himself, and us, not just that he won’t be paralyzed at the outset by the greatness of authors with whom he identifies, but also, in your English, that Lukács and Girard et al. ‘shan’t intimidate me’, that discourses of the novel as, e.g., ‘the transposition of everyday life in an individualistic society created by market forces to the literary plane’ are irrelevant and don’t compete with the aims of his open study [p. 12]. He means to be a practitioner. And, as such, to embark on a Vita Nova, a ‘Complete Break’.)

Though I had begun writing the essays that became *Proxies* before I read any of the Collège de France lecture courses (your *How to Live Together* was first and most formative for me), my eventual understanding that lifewriting was part of his practice deepened a felt kinship that was key for me. I had understood my own project of discrete studies as centrally indebted to the ‘semioclastm’ of Barthes’s *Mythologies* (and *Empire of Signs* and *The Fashion System*) and had anguished a bit that it would be sloppy or garish, *American*, of me to include – indeed, to require – lived experience and personal memory as resources for my single-subject semiotics essays on housesitting, on peripersonal space, on the leave (the billiards term), on minutes (the clerical function), on frottage (the sex act), etcetera. My dual compositional constraint for the essays was, first, to suppress access to outside authority (internet off, books left on the shelf) and, second, to annotate and explore each essay’s subject until it revealed an area of personal inhibition – shame or guilt – and to continue to unpack from there. So my belated realization that Barthes, in the last phase of his career, was subordinating *discourse* to more open inquiry, intermixing objective analysis with autobiographical candor, was good fuel. If purists would object to my mode of cultural close reading, or to my aspectual memoir,

then they needed perhaps to quarrel also with who Roland Barthes wanted to be, where he was headed.

But as to the task of currying dauntlessness – I think in my own creative preparations, I usually require disinhibition more than self-protection. At least in part: the repeatable experiment of *Proxies* had me pushing past compunction, but the go-it-alone *que sais-je* aspect proliferated in conspicuous error, necessitated the long running endnote ‘Correction’, and thereby vaccinated against foreseeable accusations of diletantism.

By contrast, in my recent poetry, I have developed an interest in the daily and the contingent, not to mention the five-beat line, inviting a kind of low-stakes poetics (more porous, more subjective, less rhetorical, less formidable than my first two books), so occasionally I need to assuage my anxiety about tradition and its ideological baggage. What has happened to my commitment to avant-garde Black Mountain or New York School poetics? I recently wrote a poem that consciously worries that I am writing a *Was it for this*, à la Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* created a running practice (at its best) of simple noticing and lay ontology in blank verse. But mostly I look to forebears and fellow travelers for permission, rather than for prohibitively consequential achievements. It is James Schuyler’s daily heuristic – *differences from yesterday* – that is the engine of the book I am writing currently.

The other complication I might raise bends, I believe, into a question or two for you. It is that I doubt Barthes about his intentions to be a practitioner, his preparations to write a novel. Or, rather, I station myself immobile at the contradictions he embeds in the lectures. Unlike the anonymous composite figure he assembles at the subject position of the amorous speech in *A Lover’s Discourse* three years prior, Barthes seems in *The Preparation of the Novel* hewn to the premise that he himself is the developing novelist of the Writing-Tendency. And *Vita Nova* becomes shorthand for ‘the Work’ he claims to be initiating. But, as you and Nathalie Léger note in the front matter, there are, at the time of his death, only seven rather redundant pages of loose outline for his *Vita Nova*. Was he planning to produce a novel, as ‘everyone knew’ (p. xxv)? Presumably, no. As he underscores (or reverses himself) at the beginning of the course’s second half, his task is to ‘simulate the preparation of a work I’m putting myself *in the [position]* of producing’ (p. 171). Then, flat out: ‘I’m not

going to produce a work – other than the Course itself [...]. I'm playing a role, I'm exercising and revealing an imaginary' (p. 171).

And yet. While 'Vita Nova' may have been an exercise of that role-playing, it seems to me quite evident that his weeks of concentration on the benefits and problematics of the Notation – the 'tangibilia', the 'quiddity', the 'satori' moment well enough expressed that it 'sets a bell ringing' – which occur to the writer who seeks to lengthen such apt noticings into a narrative, are part of a personal, creative quest. If for no other reasons than that his posthumous *Incidents* and *Mourning Diary* – highly fragmentary, highly episodic – are being written during that time and that his bereavement after his mother's death and his experiences cruising are front and center in the Vita Nova outlines. Isn't he himself – having his hit-and-miss erotic encounters in Morocco, grieving the disappearance of his north star – more or less the lost character he would like to follow in a sensibility novel 'about nothing' (p. 177)?

I think my question, more refined, is: Is this fantasy-course a *paratext* to a composition he is undertaking? That is, borrowing from performance or conceptual art, are these notes notes *toward*, or score for, or documentation of, or text incidental to: a literary performance? The way his compatriot contemporaries, Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* or Francis Ponge's *The Making of the Pré*, are paratexts to an absent or deferred performance, paratexts satisfying in their own right, satisfying for their provisional, indexical qualities. Or, after his time, the way Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* or Erik Anderson's *The Poetics of Trespass* or Stephen Van Dyck's *People I've Met from the Internet* are paratextual to their authors' lived experiments. You might cite other examples. I wonder if you think of *The Preparation of the Novel* – for several reasons rather special among the three late lecture courses – as paratext, or as part of a performance.

And – I know you can see this coming – I wonder if you would write a bit about whether your own work, both *This Little Art* and *The Long Form*, are paratexts to your acts of engagement in Roland Barthes. Or, is there another way you prefer to discuss how they both are mapped onto his courses, particularly *How to Live Together*?

Finally, because of the two of us – the three of us, if you like – only you have written a novel, are there particular conceptions of Barthes's here that

are useful to you? For instance, his assertion somewhere that ‘the novel is a discourse without arrogance’ (p. 15) and, related, his wish borrowed from Flaubert to understand it as a form ‘dependent on nothing external [...] held together by the internal strength of its style’ (p. 177). To me, these formulations are descriptive of my experience tracking the subjectivity in *The Long Form*, which (would you say?) develops patiently, unpredictably into a portrait of an individuation, an infant’s from her mother, the post-partum narrator’s from her, well, her *vita nova*.

‘Practicing’ Writing, ‘Really’ Writing & ‘Disapprenticeship’

Dear Brian,

Disinhibition. You offer this as something (quite) different from self-protection. And now that you have, the distinction makes so much sense to me: they are quite different operations. To protect oneself, to withdraw like a snail into its shell. Alternatively, to cultivate disinhibition, which to my ear sounds like coming out into the open, becoming exposed, taking the great risk of vulnerability, and also failure, or harm. There’s a line from a haiku quoted in *The Preparation of the Novel* which describes a snail ‘baring its chest’. Such a precise and perfect image! I do feel like preparing to write involves getting myself into a place of baring my chest... But also creating the conditions wherein such self-exposure might feel possible, plausible. It can’t happen all the time, every day. Often, it involves tricking myself: telling myself that the stakes are far lower than they actually are or feel. It involves inviting others to write in unlikely ways (in teaching contexts) then forcing myself to do the same. Now I think of it, this to and fro between protection and self-exposure seems to me to characterize Barthes’s lecture course. On the hand, there are all these caveats: ‘I’m identifying with, not comparing myself to...’ he assures himself and his audience throughout, even as he cites Proust, Flaubert, Kafka.... This is a lecture course, not a novel, he reminds us. Perhaps there won’t even be a novel... This is a simulation... There is a great deal of hedging. And yet, running through that hedgy set-up there is also the expression of (what I read as) a strong, real, self-exposing desire. A chest-baring...

This touches on your question. I greatly appreciate this list of works which likewise exist in an intriguing documentary relation to an unrealised

project. To answer your question directly, I would say: I don't believe that it would have been possible to draft and then deliver and persist with the two-year lecture course had there not been a strong, undercurrent of desire for and conviction in the *chance* of a novel. Perhaps this is what Barthes was doing with his elaborate preparation: cultivating the chances of a work – which is of course what we all do when we start a project, and can even find ourselves still doing when we're close to finishing it. I believe in this: that Barthes didn't fully know what the course on preparing to write a novel would make happen for him. But was fully, deeply invested in testing what it *might* make happen. Will I pull a novel out my hat? He asks. I take him not-knowing the final answer to this question seriously; I also take his willingness to inhabit the space of not knowing over the long term very seriously. For it was, after all, a productive space, a generative space – it produced the notes for the lecture course, and also the audio recordings for the lecture course, which have since been transcribed and published in French. What is so interesting about the status of the paratext attached to nothing – as distinct from the ones attached to something, such as Henry James's prefaces to his novels say, or Gide's diary of *The Counterfeiters* – is how it feeds on the energy of the absent project. It's like a hole that the notes, the intentions all gather around, and get charged by. Unlike the Ponge text and others you cite – perhaps the point about Barthes's course is that it *isn't so* satisfying to read in its own right? It leaves you wanting: for the conclusion, for the novel that would help all the preparations to make sense. But that wanting, or dissatisfaction, is, also its source of energy... I think it is what makes me come back to the course, feel like I have not (yet) (still not yet) finished learning from it.

You ask about my own books, and I wanted to make clear how and in what ways they derive from other works – especially Barthes's lecture courses.

You know, with both, my ambition was to produce something like a 'multipurpose' literary object. I had a hope – I'm not sure if it has ever been used like this but – I had a hope that *This Little Art* could be read as a kind of primer for Barthes's late lectures. So, even if you had no interest whatsoever in the practice of translation, but you happened to be interested in Barthes's late work, you could enter the book at that level, and still get something out of it. Primer sounds a bit like a form of preparation? I like the idea of both the essay and the novel preparing the reader for their own acts of engagement with the lecture courses. I also love

this phrase: ‘acts of engagement’. I think both book projects for me were occasions, or spaces, plus tracts of time, in which or with which to prolong my own engagement with Barthes’s lectures – and in so doing to push the questions I found there through different sets of experiences, different (my own lived or imagined) materials, and see what happened. As for *How to Live Together*, it’s everywhere in *The Long Form*, even though the title of the novel borrows from *The Preparation...* I think of that novel as an effort to show and explore how this fundamental question of rhythmic compatibility – which I genuinely believe, with Barthes, to be the major compositional question, socially, politically and aesthetically – plays out in life. I do feel like I was annotating the course in some way, in my own way. For instance, Barthes’s short list of unequal but dependent pairs in *How to Live Together*. The whole project of *The Long Form* could be read as a late addendum to that list.

Imagining your daily writing makes me think of an academic article I published some years ago, about Leonard Woolf’s editing of Virginia Woolf’s *A Writer’s Diary* – a compressed version of the full volumes of diaries. *A Writer’s Diary* was, I think, explicitly intended as a kind of adjacent text, giving insight into the ‘real’ work of Woolf’s published novels and essays. Leonard Woolf’s criteria for what to include and what not to include in the edition fascinated me. He found that there were passages in diaries where Virginia was writing (her life) and others where she was ‘practising’ writing, and he decided to include both. This still flummoxes me – because, how you could tell? What counted as practice, and what didn’t? I wonder: are you conscious of this distinction in your own work? Are there times when you’re thinking ‘I’m just exercising poetry, practising’, and others when you’re thinking ‘now I’m *really* writing?’ Or is it all practice, all preparation and it’s more a matter of when we (or allow someone else to) introduce the frame of finishedness?

Kate,

This last paragraph of yours is so fascinating and pertinent, I couldn’t resist retrieving and reading your essay in *Textual Practice* on Leonard Woolf’s intentions, on *A Writer’s Diary* as problematic exemplar for ‘geneticists’ (a term you have taught me: critics disciplinarily interested in the sketches and ‘avant-texts’ of an author), and on the illusory line between writing as a practice and practice writing. Not incidentally, your piece also delivers a

deft reading of Barthes's 'The Writer on Holiday' in *Mythologies*, glossing and elaborating his exploration of 'why the writer's failure to holiday properly should "go without saying"'.² (It's not lost on me that I am typing this while cabinsitting in the Flathead Valley. A cold June rain outside helps.)

As it happens, we have together stumbled upon the three opening texts of my graduate seminar on 'the study' in contemporary nonfiction, which I teach as a techniques class for MFA writing students here at Montana. Not just *How to Live Together*, followed by *This Little Art*, but also – to open the course – Woolf's 'A Sketch of the Past'. I'm reminded of one of her announced compositional breakthroughs in that work (is the announcement of a breakthrough within a work itself a paratext, an 'avant-texte,' a nota bene?): '2nd May...I write the date, because I think that I have discovered a possible form for these notes. That is, to make them include the present – at least enough of the present to serve as platform to stand upon. It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast'.³ I consider that moment a formative 'moment of being' for the genre of lifewriting; but I introduce it here because these dated platforms of the present that precede/permit her continual resumption into memoir are categorically indistinguishable from the writing in the diaries, particularly the writing about writing. She's writing the memoir 'notes' largely during the summers of 1939 and 1940, so in each new entry (facilitating re-entry) she relates what is on her mind, on her desk, those seasons: she complains frequently of the dread obligation to finish 'Roger', her shorthand for the life of Roger Fry which she promised its subject, and registers the ambient news that France has stopped fighting and the air raids have begun over England, striking close some days. From both she expressly steals time to return to this sketch of her childhood homes and family dynamics, which is also her running study of the authorial act of memoir.

Forgive the continued digression, forstalling answer, but this formal quest to find the right lens or aperture through which to train an account or focus a study (or prepare a novel) brings to mind Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz*. Do you know it? Its premise is ingenious: it's a chronicle of four years in the Woolfs' life and times, ending on 'Christmas Day, the last year of peace', concentrated entirely on their cohabitation with Mitz, the maladaptive marmoset Leonard kept (often in his pocket) as a pet. If it doesn't concern Mitz, it's out of the frame of the author's attentions; but what makes it

into the frame, as if incidentally, are the Bloomsbury circle, Virginia's illnesses and turmoils, the mechanics of the marriage, the couples' trips (with the monkey) to the continent, Leonard's Jewishness, and the rise of Hitler. It becomes a concentrated (and triangulated) study of the Woolfs' relationality, and art's sensitivities to the pressures of war. Its selectivity is no less programmatic than *A Writer's Diary*, but it carries it off with the lightness of a more arbitrary consideration: that which pertains to the monkey. It reminds me of the difference Barthes marks – in his first 'fantasy' course – between the chrestomathic (the primer) and the anthologic, preferring the latter means of curricular organization – less obliged to offer an efficiently progressing education and more attuned to the actual, personal pleasure of a reader. (Try translating that into sound learning outcomes for the provost's office!)

Too, some projects have, in addition to a neat device, a definite span and a certain terminus: here, the marmoset's death amid the certainty of impending war. Others, ones to which you and I are apparently drawn, do not have a built-in 'finishedness', as you say. Neither Barthes's three courses (notational, unfastened, uncomprehensive, even unmethodical by design) nor 'A Sketch of the Past' (ditto all that, and literally incomplete to boot). The open experiment of their projects, the daily contingency of them, the sense of encroaching life hardly separable from them, is alluring, human, companionable. Is it because failure is a component? Certainly, in both, a sketchiness ('I'm merely opening a dossier...') and a processing – learning – subjectivity are elemental. In *This Little Art* you summarize a formulation of Barthes's from *The Preparation of the Novel*: you write, 'Barthes describes the project – in French the *pro-jet* – as a kind of projectile, something a person throws out ahead of themselves, as one way among others of organizing the days'.⁴ It has become so dear to me, I have it as a kind of working epigraph to the poetry manuscript I mentioned.

The truth is, the farther in I get, the less I know for sure about the distinction between daily writing as a practice (irrespective of product) and the daily practice of writing (as a process for generating poems, building a manuscript). About six years ago, mid-Trump, pre-Covid, while living still in Idaho, I started devoting a notebook to 'morning sensibility' (painter Fairfield Porter's term, which Douglas Crase applies to Schuyler), recording 'differences from yesterday' in the little thatchy yard we had, and in the news, and on the air. Stray cogitation or memory might pass through the poetry, no more prohibited than a skunk or raccoon or

cottonwood druff. One out of five might begin in dream, recording the narrative. (This is proportionally equivalent, I think, to the ‘I began the day...’ entries that formally organize Renee Gladman’s *Calamities*, a book that is also important to me – its mode is likewise paratextual, annotating the resumption of waking life like it were an experiment.) I fell into a five-beat line practice, for a little tension, an undercurrent requirement in the syntax to balance and suspend and turn. I had the loose goal, in language, to ‘make one thing happen’ at least, each session: some unforeseen effect of patterning, some association, some happy joinery. For years, this notebook practice might occasionally generate the seed of a poem, which I would extract and work on separately, elsewhere, resorting usually to a more rhetorical facture long familiar to me.

But then, two years ago, after having moved to Montana, I started trading ‘dailies’ with my friend, the phenomenal writer and artist Jess Arndt. They live on a tiny island in the San Juans west of Seattle, and their issuances we have come to call islanders. ‘Inlanders’ hasn’t quite stuck as nomenclature for mine. But, relative to your question, my complementary relationship to the quite different days (otters’ spraint under the barn, mailboat in from the mainland, e.g.) of a friend and, more to the point, the little keyturn of towardness to Jess – who responds especially to any embodiment, any queerness where it presents – in my notebook practice has made a change. The dailies themselves were delivering (written out, then transcribed, then adjusted in a send-window) as poems, and forming sometimes naturally into sequences and sets. Dates are working titles in many places. Geologic time and human history and my own dailiness are sometimes equally visible and present in the Flathead Valley, where my practice/s and I come to recharge. Thematically that has helped to shape the book in progress. It may well follow the path of the Glacial Lake Missoula flood, which shaped the landforms of the places I have lived these last several American years.

So, I have thrown ahead of myself the project/ile and its purpose. And I have made habit out of following it, organizing my days thereby, though sometimes I am equally led and lost in it. This summer I am actively rereading its spans, listening for arrivals, feeling the need to ‘introduce the frame of finishedness’. To this answer, too.

Having described what amounts to a kind of unlearning of poetry, I think one of my two questions in return is about the role of ‘désapprentissage’

for you. Away from my copy of *A Barthes Reader*, I think (you must know for sure) that is Barthes's term from his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France for the kind of jamming of the mission of the intellectual that he assigned himself to undertake. It meant not just forswearing 'chrestomathy' and rhetorical method, not just forgoing academic postures of bodiless objectivity – indeed permitting personal fantasy and pleasure as guides; it meant also that he was done with the production of a monograph 'holding forth' from each lecture course he'd give. Which had been his customary practice for a while. He'd already, just prior, in *A Lover's Discourse*, lamented, 'Ideally the book would be a cooperative'.⁵ In the late 1970s he invited his immediate auditors to mine more exhaustively or to instrumentalize the portals he was unlatching and the dossiers 'we are merely opening', as he often said.

In taking his invitations at face value, in 'prolong[ing your] engagement with that work', I've appreciated how, well, *punk* your furtherances have been. It seems to me that you understood that more jamming was – if not necessary, then – salutary. I love reading *This Little Art*, which is also a *taking* of his course, as a gradual dis-apprenticing, a growing independence, from Barthes, particularly at the gendered sites of his blindspots. It is, to me, one of the more thrilling moments in 21st-century essaying when your narrator, with her translation materials in tow, arguably by then more expert than he in the matters that concerned him, shows up outside what had been Barthes's Paris apartment – in the subject position of the 'bad mother' whose disrhythmy with her child (tugging him, requiring him to run at her walking pace) was germinal to his study of idiorrhymic arrangements of living-together. Walking where she had walked, she sees clearly as he could not the terrain and other forces that would have shaped the woman's concerns and her steps. It is, like so much in that book, breathtakingly subtle. As I take it, your departure from his findings is also your realizing his fantasy pedagogy wherein he needs others, others not himself, to explore and study in enriching detail the arena he has sketchily availed. If *The Long Form* deepens its engagement with a mother's subject position – and dilates and explores and animates and complicates his concession that in (any) life there are dependent pairings, couples, unnatural candidates for successful mutuality if idiorrhymy is the goal – can it be said to have continued a *désapprentissage*? And, if so, is it yours or his? (Any other way you might want to characterize your current trajectory is more than welcome.)

Preparing to Write and Organising a Life

Brian,

First, thank you for these beautiful descriptions of your morning-work: a morning practice of recording your morning-sensibility. In responding to the question of ‘actually’ writing and ‘practicing’ writing you have opened up a whole other dimension of the course for me, and answered a question I now realise I wanted to ask: about the relation between preparing to write and organising a life. So much of the course is about this: the practical concerns of how to open up time for writing, how to protect time for writing, how to manage your relationships around your desire to write, how and where to work, with what tools... There is a subtle sense (or hope?) in the lecture course that if one could just get this right – the right the pen, the right time of day (always the mornings for Barthes, too, I think) – then everything else would follow. And in a way I don’t think this is so wrong, at least it can’t be wrong to take a such an active interest in the social and material conditions of writing. Because when certain conditions are in place (concentration, quiet), writing does and can happen in ways that it can’t otherwise. I’m thinking of your long-term notebook practice (would you call it a ritual now?), but also about how you describe this transforming ever since you entered into a form of dialogue, of exchange – how writing towards Jess and the constraints of sending notes in an email were (it sounds to me) hugely significant in terms of the poems. It’s not unrelated to what we are doing here: I made an invitation, you accepted, and now, with this to and fro which I feel like could potentially go on forever, though I know we need to stop at some point (if this exchange is going to have meaning for others), writing is getting written, more lines added, but only because we put these conditions in place...

Désappointissage. Although I’d never thought to describe my relation in this way, I do think: yes, that’s it. Fundamentally, I am a learner. I like to put myself in the position of learning – far more than that of teaching. Because of this, when teaching, I am always trying to create the conditions for me to also be learning, which I know is not uncommon. I mentioned earlier my hope that the two books could function multi-purpose-ly. With *The Long Form*, I see it being read as, on the hand, a narrative about a day

of intensive co-living and, on the other, as a kind of manual – my own peculiar, unsystematic manual! – for novel-writing. It is a preparation-novel, I think. A kind of working-out, a setting-out of the components a novel might need and an effort to engage with what a novel (specifically, as a longer form) can do. I realise there is some hedging of my own going on here: calling it a preparation-novel, a manual written towards a future novel, not a ‘real’ one in and of itself. This comes back to Barthes’s distinction you flagged earlier: the difference between knowing what something ‘is’ and knowing what it is in order to do or make it again. I approached the novel from the latter direction: I wanted to write a novel that offered out its makings so that it had the chance of being made or written again, possibly by me.

The *désapprentissage*. I understand this term to mean affirming the right (my right) to activate my learning, apply it, make it meaningful and consequential in ways and contexts that make sense to me. This comes back to permission, to not being daunted, and also, to non-intimidation, which you mentioned earlier. But that in itself is a practice – something to work on or rediscover each day. It’s part of the morning work!

My last question to you is this: the last essay of *Proxies* is titled ‘On the Near Term’. It’s a profoundly beautiful piece of writing, so full of love. I want to quote this line in particular:

‘The near term’ is an expression whereby the open indefinite future is parceled so as to be more manageable [...] It brings the next while closer, into the subject’s domain. There is the soft suggestion that the near term *belongs* to the subject – as a sediment apron belongs to a volcanic event, after. To an extent.⁶

‘as a sediment apron belongs to a volcanic event’! comma: ‘after’! Then: ‘To an extent.’! I just want to emphasize these incredible moves because they seem to me to speak directly to preparation. As a moving mass that will eventually form a solid apron, yes, but only after the fact. As a spatial as well as temporal sphere that extends around a subject – but not indefinitely. It seems to me the time-space of preparing is ‘the near term’ as you describe it – what brings ‘the next while into the subject’s domain’. Would you agree? Could expand on the special case of ‘the near term’ in relation to preparing for me?

On 'the Near Term' & Answering the Call

Dear Kate,

Thanks for your attentions to that final essay in *Proxies*. Your framing of its formulations sent me back to reread it, first time in quite a while. It dawns on me, all over again, just how precariously we leave the narrator as we exit that book, now seven years ago: biking off into the desert rubble, an aging mercenary in the gig economy, an adjunct professor whose contract for the following term has been cancelled on the heels of his 'midcareer award'. But, yes, as you suggest, the majority of the essay is about my now-husband John and me, the idiosyncrasies and accommodations and cycles of our relational dynamic. Neither of us is each other's *type*, exactly, and that curiosity is detailed in the essay, as is the quality of our well-matched pace when we are at play together, in language or at the collage table or in (cruisey) regard of others. This would be the essay, I suppose, that someone interested in the idiorrhhythmic dyad would find magnetic.

But you identify it for its relationship to preparation, which is intriguing to me, productive. I suppose the root of the essay's study is the locution itself, the 'near term', as opposed to the 'short term' or the 'meanwhile'. I work a little at the difference – the deictic, proximal application of a span (near) to the subject whose time it is. Particularly for one experiencing acute precarity, the near term, if he can project or plan it, belongs to him preciously. And it can be, and was from the start for all of us, bodily, biological, personal, the span from now to soon. (I flash here on the beautiful passage in *The Long Form* about Winnicott, whose lectures your narrator listens to while walking, and the 'importance of a period of preparation in the lead-up to the arrival of someone new. A period of time [...] the duration of a pregnancy, for a person to ready themselves mentally, emotionally, materially'.⁷) That's perhaps an interesting correlative to what I, pushing well past compunction in 'On the Near Term', isolate and discuss: a man's – a partner's – period of sexual recovery after an orgasm, the denouement and reset to near term that inheres, experientially. What is it that begins again, and how and why does it belong to him – and is it to him alone that it belongs? What's the relationship between sex and writing, as regards expenditure and positive or negative anticipation? Merely opening a dossier here.

Except for my daily practice, I carry – still – a good deal of anguish about the next blank page of new writing. I seem to require on those sorts of writing mornings (those sorts of writing seasons) enough time to falter, to stumble into connections, to get arch and then relax, to force an idea and then trust musicality or extenuation of thought to take the lead. It does, yes, involve an ingathering, a privacy, an uninterrupted stretch, a door to close, an inbox to leave unopened, even if I don't or can't. Probably every writer identifies with the way you present it: there is a connection between organizing a life and preparing propitious conditions to write. And one can be obsessive about subsuming the one to the other and thereby lose out on the good (good for the person and the writer) of being adaptive to new circumstances, new discontinuities, novel experiences: falling out of a rhythm, adjusting, and falling in to another.

Schedules and solitude are key concerns of Barthes's study; but, when he further explores the 'methodical life' of the Writing-Tendency, why am I so embarrassed, so impatient with this aspect of his fantasy? Until recently, *The Preparation of the Novel* has been my least favorite of the three late courses, largely because of the extensive attention he gives in the second half to the material requirements and accoutrements of a novelist. I find I want him to return to 'the *work to be written, opus agendum*' (p. 224), and the crisis of developing a continuous 'long' form from fragments and notations and *satori*. I find I want to impugn as diversion his preoccupation instead with the writer's optimal setting (bed v. desk); time of composition (morning v. night); dress (dressing gown or robe or uniform or jacket with pockets for notebooks and pens); proxemics (supplies within reach, like staplers and index cards); intake of stimulants and/or soporifics, the epicureanism of a rounded life that includes writing as a component v. the piety of singular discipline, and so forth. If I may, I'll take a moment to chart out the evolution of my thinking about his concentration on the window dressing of novel-writing.

I've thought a bit (and written elsewhere⁸) about how *A Lover's Discourse* anticipates *How to Live Together* formally: both studies are presented aspectually as a set of the subject's 'figures' or 'traits', respectively – alphabetized to underscore the unmethodical and ateleological exploration of the topic – rotating attention throughout among a handful of 'guardian texts' (of amorous discourse) or 'tutor texts' (of communal living) where he locates particular settings – *terroirs* and maquettes,

respectively – where the subject is activated. *How to Live Together* surpasses its predecessor, in my opinion, because its study is open. Never meant to be a product, it feels ongoing. Of course, *A Lover's Discourse* also anticipates *The Preparation of the Novel* in its creation of a speaker whom we apprehend immersed in amorous positionality, forerunner to one immersed and shown in the 'writing-tendency'. As I mentioned before, the former is a composite person – a specimen – constructed by the kinds of things he says and moves he makes, and the latter is someone Barthes decides to perform himself. In that shift, too, the antecedent is exceeded. What has bothered me is the breakdown of this analogy or model in *Preparation*. Whereas the 'figures' of *Furtive Contact* or *Vexatiousness* or *Acedy* or *Absence* and the seventy-six others comprise the text of the heartsore lover (they constitute the subject Barthes wants to read and examine), the pen and the desk and the robe and the caffeine and the reclusion of the novelist of the *Work* are curiously beside the point, outside the *Work* and its planning, preparation, and practice.

During this catalog, he concedes before his students some of his own anxiety about it: 'Is all this trivial? A bit farfetched?' – But then, *now*, as he continues, I am disabused of my prejudice against what I have wanted to understand as shallow-end dabbling; he explains, 'I always look at things from the perspective of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*: postulation of a profound *Philosophy* linked to seemingly insignificant choices: the choices of the body' (p. 236). Especially now that I have experienced how *The Long Form* exercises and instantiates his anxious nest-padding and measurements and preliminaries, that remark, that self-consciousness, his late refusal to exclude the body – what is nearest soonest – from epistemology 'redeems' the effort for me. And affirms what perhaps other devotees of Barthes feel, too, (do you?) about the final courses and diaristic writing: he's already living (and delivering) his *Vita Nova*. Hasn't he, here, utterly changed his profession, sunseting the old mission of the intellectual? We are far, in the final course, from the textualist pursuits of *S/Z* or even *Mythologies*. Is this the Complete Break? We are far from the tabular structuralism of *A Lover's Discourse* and, even, *How to Live Together*. Isn't the long form – the fully subjective (where else does he write so openly about his sanatorium experience and origins as a writer?) and digressive and uncondensed and week-after-week unbroken and (what's his word?) *catalytic* consideration of his concern – the final two-term course itself?

Perhaps. And, if so, as you said at the outset, as a 'Work' it is unsatisfying. But, as you have shown me and many other readers, it is also admirable and galvanizing and permissive. His week-to-week cultivation of permission to undo disciplinary habit and to retrain purpose and to try enables others, forty years later, to cultivate permission.

The 'essay-novel', the 'preparation novel' you write (and, in writing, train to write, equip with parts) in his wake completes again his open-source pedagogy. He, unable to inhabit the parent's side of a mother-child dyad, requires you to imagine (and narrate) 'two possible people, one habituated to maintaining the edges of her body, the other like an open field' (p. 53). That given, that scenario, in essence, prepares a novel.

One lesson I, author and sometime apologist of a go-it-alone book of essays, take from you is that you can begin a work of great originality and lived experience and unpredictable contingency by answering the call of another writer, another teacher. Beginning by returning. Mapping by overlay on the circuitry they have lain (charged or driven by their fantasies, sometimes) and then extending, extrapolating the routes, following new colloquial byways, which become your own and reveal yourself. The gradual arrival is sensational. (I won't give away here how and why a simple smile late in the novel is so transformative.) Like other writers I treasure, you have a wonderful way of keeping discovery in the composition; but I can't think of anyone who more than you gives that discovery a social register. We are in it with you, collecting, co-creating. And, actually, that may be the aspect that makes the inherently paratextual *How to Live Together* a better and more engaging work than *A Lover's Discourse*, which we receive already converted to essay. Someone said, I believe it was no less an essayist than Guy Davenport, that everyone likes to learn, and no one especially likes to be taught. That's an ethos it would seem that Barthes – who in the beginning of his Collège de France pedagogy replaced method with culture – shared and spread.

Brian,

I don't quite know how to respond to this gift you have made me of your reading of my work, other than to re-state and insist on your phrase 'answering the call'. You've made an image for preparation: a picture of a thinking-feeling-desiring body, somewhat late in life, tuning into the

signals of the works he loves the most, however unlikely that collection of forms (haiku + diaries + the longest of novels). Of all the images for 'preparing-to-write' that figure in and around the course – like a dressmaker, laying out bits of cloth ready to sew, like a cook, prepping ingredients to make a meal – this is the one I'll carry forward. Preparing = opening the channels (the heart, the eyes, the ears, the books and the windows), switching oneself on, tuning in.

Notes

- ¹ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 12.
- ² Kate Briggs, 'The Making of *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*', *Textual Practice*, 25.6 (2011), 1033–50 (p. 1043).
- ³ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd edn (New York and London: Harvest, 1985), pp. 61–159 (p. 75).
- ⁴ Kate Briggs, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p. 238.
- ⁵ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 5.
- ⁶ Brian Blanchfield, *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2016), p. 150.
- ⁷ Kate Briggs, *The Long Form* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2023), p. 165.
- ⁸ Brian Blanchfield, 'The Postcure and the Lecture Well: *A Lover's Discourse* in Light of Barthes' Late Pedagogy', *CounterText*, 9.1 (2023), 162–77.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brian Blanchfield is the author of three books of poetry and prose, most recently *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing* (Nightboat Books, Picador UK). His scholarship and recent nonfiction appear in *Textual Practice*, *CounterText*, *Oxford American*, and *Best American Essays 2022*, and his newest poetry in magazines such as the *Harper's*, *Yale Review*, and *New England Review*. He lives in Missoula, Montana, where he is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at University of Montana.

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