

The Absence of the Book: Preparing, Researching, Reading with Barthes

Bryan Counter

Lect. tout est là¹

Read.

all is there²

I never understood those writers who claimed to find in a moment of inspiration their immortal subject matter. The work finds us, not we the work, and the most we can do is not to turn and flee from it.³

Roland Barthes was a thinker of literature against the grain, and in his late lecture courses he was also a teacher of literature against the grain. Using at times chance and always his desire to structure the itineraries of the courses, the result is a set of sprawling, engaging, fragmentary ‘texts’ that cover an idiosyncratic array of historical, literary, and philosophical concerns. In a 1978 lecture given at the Collège de France, he muses (now portentously) with Dante, Michelet, and Proust about the course of life, death, and writing. It is to this lecture that we must return when thinking about Barthes’s final years and especially his teaching. But it is here that he also raises the question of writing a novel: ‘Je ne sais s’il sera possible d’appeler encore «roman» l’oeuvre que je désire et dont j’attends qu’elle rompe avec la nature uniformément intellectuelle de mes écrits passés (même si bien des éléments romanesques en altèrent la rigueur). Ce Roman utopique, il m’importe de faire comme *si* je devais l’écrire [I don’t know if it will be possible still to call a “novel” the work I desire and which I expect to break with the uniformly intellectual nature of my previous writings (even if a number of fictive elements taint their rigor). It is important for me to act *as if* I were to write this utopian novel].⁴ Baffling

to some, this ‘as if’ attitude with respect to writing takes the shape for Barthes of a singular project. We cannot think about the late Barthes without thinking of his fantasy of writing a novel, a fantasy that drove his 1978–1980 lecture courses, *La Préparation du roman*. In this article, I will explore the related acts of preparation, research, and reading insofar as they relate to a book that can only be described, with Barthes, as a fantasy. My aim, drawing from the *Préparation* but also from Mallarmé and Proust, will be to establish some of the positive, creative aspects of Barthes’s absent book. In addition to shedding light on Barthes’s work in these courses, doing so will also address the creative state of desiring to write and how such a state might stem from the experience of reading.

Preparation

To prepare means, of course, to ready oneself: to gather supplies, to equip oneself, to make plans. We prepare to leave the house on an errand, or for a party. In some cases, we must prepare for a test or to deliver a lecture. We prepare for some life events – those that can be prepared for, at least – and also to create art. A painter must prepare the canvas, mix the paints, ready the palette. Musicians prepare by writing and learning songs, practicing scales and rudiments. It is similar with any sort of writing project. We do research for an article, we brainstorm and draft for a work of fiction (another form of research). In fact, what is common among all artistic and writing projects is the preparatory work that must be done before we even break ground. But with all of this, a question arises: even with those things that we prepare for, particularly in the artistic realm, when exactly are we *done* preparing? If preparation prepares us *for* something, then how do we know that we are finally prepared? And in turn, what activities fall properly under the banner of preparation – especially when we concern ourselves with literature, which purports to exist as something that will engender a spontaneous aesthetic experience in the reader?

In *La Préparation du roman*, Barthes was concerned with exploring the state of desiring to write, just as much as he was concerned with the actual production of a novel. Indeed, this state of desiring is intertwined with what makes up the bulk of his ‘preparations’, given that any plan of research the

courses follow is an apparently nebulous one. This much is evidenced by several of his comments throughout the sessions, as well as much of the scholarly work on these seminars. Of course, he never did write or publish a novel, due in part to the material fact of his death in 1980, from injuries resulting from an accident. Fittingly, Barthes begins the first session of the *Préparation* with the acknowledgement of the incalculability of life, with reference to the opening of Dante's *Inferno* which calls upon the midpoint of life:

l'âge est partie constituante du sujet qui écrit. [...] le milieu du chemin de la vie, évidemment, n'est pas mathématique: qui le saurait à l'avance? Il se réfère je pense à un événement, à un moment, à un changement vécu comme significatif et solennel: une sorte de prise de conscience *totale*, celle précisément qui peut déterminer et consacrer un voyage, une pérégrination dans un continent nouveau, ce que Dante appelle aussi au début la *selva oscura*, la *forêt obscure*, ou si vous voulez une initiation, on peut dire que c'est en soi un milieu de chemin de la vie.⁵

Age is a constituent part of the subject who writes [...] that midway point clearly isn't mathematical: for who could calculate it in advance? It relates to an event, a moment, a change experienced as meaningful, solemn: a sort of "total" realization of precisely the kind that can determine and consecrate a journey, a peregrination in a new continent (*la selva oscura*), an initiation [...].⁶

Inasmuch as this lecture course is occupied with preparation, its opposite or impossibility is equally as important, and thus preparation is counterbalanced by a force that threatens to disrupt it at any moment. And the material fact of Barthes's early death must be supplemented by the question of whether, with infinite time, he would have produced a novel at all. Kathrin Busch writes of Barthes: 'Crucially, the process of theory becoming art delineated in the late texts does not mean that Barthes becomes a *littérateur*. His process of "becoming" remains unfinished, not only because his death abruptly put an end to his enterprise. He thought it was important to linger in this interim space.⁷ Barthes himself said that the conclusion of the course would be 'l'œuvre elle-même [The Work itself]', suggesting that the non-closure – both in terms of the absent work and in terms of his death – was, if materially unforeseeable, at least spiritually intended in his practice, and therefore

integral to his program of research.⁸ He intended to linger, to experience, and to investigate that experience, a practice itself that seems attuned to what he had explored already under the heading of *Le Neutre*. Lawrence Kritzman has suggested that ‘Barthes expresses ambivalence concerning the possibility of its realization [...] he suggests that taking theory as the starting point of this endeavor might ultimately lead to failure. [...] What Barthes’s novel wants and seeks is the impossible.’⁹ To be sure, the lecture courses bear the mark of experiment, as did his previous lecture courses and much of his writing around the same time. But his task, his experiment, has heightened stakes and implications in the final courses insofar as it is an *experiment* with the *experience* of literature. *Expérience*, in French, denotes both terms, and their near-identity in English will be important for what follows.

Éric Marty’s ‘Notice’ to the English edition of *The Preparation of the Novel* states that ‘this course is composed of an infinitely long speech that unfolds continuously’.¹⁰ While Barthes’s speech is not literally infinite, Marty here touches on the flowing, undemarcated nature of his lectures, and the fact that they can only be reconstructed and organised after the fact. This, paired with his absent novel, lends a further air of intransitiveness to Barthes’s preparations. ‘Le roman, effectivement, c’est ce qui est devant moi [The novel, indeed, this is what is before me]’.¹¹ If Barthes structures his inquiry specifically around the fantasy of writing a novel, it should be understood that insofar as the fantasy is sustained, the novel remains a desideratum – that is, as Lucy O’Meara argues, the novel ‘is something which, by design, will *always* be ahead for Barthes, no matter how far he advances’ – ahead in the sense that it is not only formally incomplete, but resists completion in some essential way.¹² Barthes mentions fantasising about ‘une fin finale, une fin définitive, une sorte de moment où l’on n’écrit plus, où enfin on se reposerait – moins d’écrire que de la perpétuelle remise en mouvement du désir [a final endpoint, a definitive end: a time when you’ll stop writing, when you’ll finally take a break, less from writing than from the perpetual reactivation of the desire]’.¹³ In other words, he is not simply *not* writing, and at the same time he is not simply *deciding* to desire to write. It is not only a question of preparing or desiring to write, because a more lasting philosophical question remains: what does it mean to desire to write? What does it mean to prepare to write? What kind of state does this put one in, and how does the writer then relate to the work to come? Are desiring and preparing sufficient to guarantee that one will write a completed work, or even write at all? Barthes’s gesture of residing in

the ‘as if’ of writing is aporetic, as Kritzman has argued.¹⁴ I wish to argue here that it also bears on the very possibility of literature itself as an aporetic, abyssal project that challenges the boundedness of the book. The book is not merely aesthetic, but bears on how we organize knowledge, how we understand time, and how we tell stories.

Accordingly, the limit of literature is troubled by many factors. Several of them are tangible or material: class, race, gender, access to resources, to name just a few examples. Several of them are related to genre: what is the border between fiction and non-fiction, fiction and autobiography, fiction and poetry, and so on. But more fundamentally, literature has an ontological limit that bears on its experience, which is at least double: the experience of the author, and the experience of the reader. We tend to approach literature, and all works of art, as if they were fully formed, self-contained products fashioned intentionally by some creator (and it is no accident that this sort of language might recall certain conceptions of the Earth or the universe). Often what is lost in our experience of the work – what the work intends to reproduce or convey, in many cases – is a version of the experience of the writer, which must include their preparation, at least in relief. This evocation can take many forms; to touch only on that of Proust, who is important for what follows, preparation is crucial for *À la recherche du temps perdu* in multiple ways. First there is Proust the writer, who did not embark upon his great work until his late 30s. Second is his narrator, whose many interruptions, digressions, and missteps along the path of writing make up the bulk of the novel. Neither write until it is nearly too late. And yet, the two must each be considered in their own respective contexts: their experiences of preparation are related, but separate, and as such do not map onto one another.

Partly for this reason, it may be more accurate to approach the work of literature as an incomplete thing, especially if we take texts to be singular works that activate different experiences upon each reading. We might recall Edmund Burke’s comments in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* regarding ‘unfinished sketches of drawing’ to tease this out: ‘I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing’.¹⁵ There is something to be said for the openness of unfinished works, or even of thinking of ostensibly ‘finished’ works as incomplete. Such works might already be considered as incomplete due to the invisible trace of the author’s experience and preparation that can be accessed only through the discrete act of reading or interpretation. The doubly troubled status of

Barthes's late lecture courses and novel, cut short because of his death, but also intransitive by their very nature, gestures toward the retention of the experience of the artist in the moment of writing, as well as its echo in the moment of reception.¹⁶

Artistic Research

Several threads of competing importance are imbricated in the absence of Barthes's novel to be. On the one hand, Barthes exercised a studied non-mastery both within and over his lecture courses more broadly; for instance, he did not want to publish *Le Neutre* as a book.¹⁷ This non-mastery is related to his concern for the neutral and for the operations of chance, which structured the organization of his lecture courses, up to and including the *Préparation* courses. And on the other hand, inasmuch as Barthes discusses various specific literary figures throughout those courses, it is important not to forget that they not only thematically put forth a theory of literature in general, but *perform* a theory of literature, even as this theory must be read interstitially, as his 'infinitely long speech [...] unfolds'. A case can be made that Barthes's 'preparation' in the late lectures takes the form of creative research. To be more specific, as Busch writes, Barthes was 'an author who does artistic research', and the qualifier 'artistic' bears just as much on his subject matter as it does on his method.¹⁸ Before proceeding, I wish to briefly examine the idea of research and how we tend to think of it in common parlance, as well as how it might be considered artistic.

As a way of preparing for a project, research is directed toward some projected object, whether it be the thesis or structure of an article or the ins and outs of prose in a work of fiction. But as all readers and writers know, research is prone to error, digressions, false starts. A novelist or short story writer may spend weeks or even months working on a story or chapter, trying out ideas only to find that those ideas do not work, or do not fit with the larger project. Those months spent preparing are preparations in a radical sense, as they are *pure* preparation: they result in nothing material. Even if we focus on academic research, we never know for sure if an article we are about to read will bear any fruit for our own writing. We may read dozens in hope of clarifying something for ourselves, and we may wind up even more confused.

Research does not occur in a linear, straightforward fashion; we stop in the middle of writing or reading, jumping from one idea or one text to another; we look back at old notes or revisit old texts in hopes of discovering new insights; we change directions midway through a project. And at the same time, as these digressions or missteps happen, we fine-tune what it is we were looking for in the first place, even as our 'preparations' seem to actively work against us and upset our project. The process of research shifts and, in shifting, alters the object of research itself. As we learn from Proust's narrator, the initial, preliminary approach to writing can be as long and arduous as the writing itself. This means that the one preparing or doing research must have a certain level of investment, a task. They can no longer hold a scholarly distance from the object of research – say, the authorship of a novel. This also means that research cannot be confined to a particular area of study, or even topic, hence the difficulty in summarizing a novel like Proust's *Recherche*. Research is wide-ranging and requires us to stretch beyond our normal comfort zones. Even if nothing is produced at the end, the research or preparation for a work takes on a life of its own. And at the same time, its orienting task cannot be allowed to instrumentalize the research, the preparation. Preparation takes time. Preparation demands that we avoid devouring each next bit of 'research', as we know that the next article – the next breath – can unravel the carefully woven threads of our project in a single blow.

Beyond research about art or literature, and beyond research to *create* art or literature, artistic research must have its own sense. Looking at two of Barthes's most prominent literary touchstones in the *Préparation* courses, Mallarmé and Proust, a complicated picture of this sort of research emerges. To be sure, Barthes is invested in studying their respective literary output. But it is no mistake that they are also both great thinkers of incompleteness. Not only was Mallarmé's *Livre* unfinished and perhaps unfinishable, but some of his other works were as well. Neil Badmington reminds us that even Mallarmé's *Tombeau d'Anatole* 'was never completed, and the preparatory notes did not come to light until 1961, over sixty years after Mallarmé's own passing'.¹⁹ Making a clear connection between the respective fragmentary writings of Mallarmé and Barthes, both of whom experienced similar losses that prompted similar writing projects, Badmington writes that 'there are similarities, curious connections, between the *Mourning Diary* and *For Anatole's Tomb*'.²⁰ But the influence of Mallarmé on Barthes is further reaching than linkages between particular texts. Though it was far from a pedagogical

text, *Le Livre* for Mallarmé was something alive, something autonomous. Yet any totality this would grant it must also allow for the book to remain fragmentary and elusive:

Le Livre, où vit l'esprit satisfait, en cas de malentendu, un obligé par quelque pureté d'ébat à secouer le gros du moment. Impersonnifié, le volume, autant qu'on s'en sépare comme auteur, ne réclame approche de lecteur. Tel, sache, entre les accessoires humains, il a lieu tout seul: fait, étant. Le sens enseveli se meut et dispose, en choeur, des feuillets.²¹

The Book, where the spirit lives satisfied, in cases of misunderstanding, one feels an obligation toward some sort of purity of delight to shake off the dregs of the moment. Impersonified, the volume, to the extent that one separates from it as author, does not demand a reader, either. As such, please note, among human accessories, it takes place all by itself: finished, it exists. Its buried meaning moves and arranges, into a chorus, the pages.²²

Such a book, by necessity, would have a very particular place on the scene of reading, and (non)relationship to author and reader. By conceiving of an unbound, variably ordered book that must by necessity be performed, Mallarmé attempts to rethink literary experience and the ontological status of the book. This book may be separated from its author and would not demand a reader, but I take this to mean that it would not demand – or even allow for – a reader, *the* reader, some ideal reader. Instead, through the aspect of performance, such a text would be experienced iteratively, interstitially, as its parts are recombined and new passages are formed.

Though it is a very different text, Proust's *Recherche* was still under revision when he died – from the middle outward, significantly, which arguably indicates an incompleteness at the heart of even what has already been 'finished', published, in addition to an incompleteness of never reaching the end. Recent studies of Proust have highlighted the fact – principally true of all reading, but worth highlighting for the *Recherche* in particular, since this idea is thematised by Proust himself – that every reading of Proust takes part in the production of a different work.²³ While it is hard to see how Proust's text might be 'performed', at least in its entirety, it represents the other end of the scale as far as unexcerptability: it is difficult to 'cut' Proust's text anywhere. This may seem like the opposite case to *Le Livre*, but it involves us in a similar

kind of experience. Confronted with floods of prose constantly shifting from the literal to the metaphorical, from narration to abstract philosophizing, from scene to scene backwards and forwards in time often with no clear demarcations, the Proustian text is one that overflows the written word and the boundedness of the book.

Both Mallarmé and Proust are linked by a chain of references and similarities throughout Barthes's late lecture courses, but an earlier comment by Barthes in a round-table on Proust in 1972 draws attention to their shared relevance. As he states then, to read is to 'opérer des variations [operate variations]' on the text at hand.²⁴ Blanchot, in the essay 'Le Livre à venir', takes up Mallarmé's use of this term and explores its paradoxical underpinnings:

Mallarmé appelle le lecteur «*l'opérateur*». La lecture, comme la poésie, est «*l'opération*». Or, il garde toujours à ce mot à la fois le sens qu'il tient du mot oeuvre et le sens presque chirurgical qu'il reçoit ironiquement de son allure technique: l'opération est suppression, c'est en quelque manière l'*Aufhebung* hégélienne. La lecture est opération, elle est l'oeuvre qui s'accomplit en se supprimant, qui se prouve en se confrontant avec elle-même et se suspend tout en s'affirmant.²⁵

Mallarmé calls the reader "the operator." Reading, like poetry, is "the operation." But he always uses this word in the sense it derives from the word "work" and the almost surgical meaning it ironically acquires from its technical aspect: operation is suppression; in some way it is the Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Reading is operation, it is the work that is accomplished by being suppressed, that proves itself by confronting itself and suspends itself while still asserting itself.²⁶

The performative and unfinished nature of Mallarmé's *Livre* interpellates the reader as having an active role in the process of reading, and thereby constituting, the text at hand. But the reader can only do so by placing certain parts of the text under erasure, or even in danger. In doing so, the reader not only operates, *handles* the written text, but in doing so, allows it to take on its form *as* a particular, ephemeral, yet substantial text. Perhaps this is why the Book would not demand *a* reader, but several, countless readers. This is not just a writer-reader relation. More fundamentally, literature itself participates in a back-and-forth, dialectical relation in the context of the writer's transformation of his or her experience while preparing and creating the work.

William S. Allen writes that ‘illegibility lies at the heart of a certain response to Hegel, in particular to the response by Blanchot who understood that philosophy, in concerning itself with its own language, was concerning itself with the limits of finitude, with death and the infinite, which is the experience that occurs when thought attempts to think its relation to language and is necessarily brought out not by philosophy alone, but through literature’.²⁷ It is clear that a similar process is occurring with any endeavor of artistic research: the writer has the double task of considering the reader on the one hand, and considering the translation of the world into language (and language into poetic or literary language) on the other hand. And with any text that places textuality, prose, and even the book into question, the autonomous text is at the same time moulded by each new encounter with it by a reader.

Despite Blanchot’s evocation of irony in the passage quoted above, this is related to Barthes’s aim of creating something ‘non-ironic’. Irony, a subjective doubling, haunts the process of writing. Irony is integral to literature, whether thematically as an expression of a narrator’s or character’s own subjectivity, or in the reading experience, keeping the equivocal nature of language in mind. Not only can one experience be understood in multiple ways, but a single passage, paragraph, sentence, or even word can. This is the basis for all meaning-making in literature. But, perhaps possessed by a sort of utopian literary fantasy, Barthes resists this. In a section under the heading ‘Alors, premièrement, la Simplicité [Simplicity]’, he writes:

Il faudrait entendre ce mot au sens fort, c’est-à-dire non pas comme une vague qualité de l’Œuvre, ce qu’on en dirait dans une conversation ou dans une critique littéraire de Journal, mais au sens d’un véritable principe esthétique, un principe d’École, fondant presque une nouvelle Esthétique qui serait une esthétique de la simplicité. Et il me semble que, *par rapport à certaines tentatives modernes*, la simplicité que je souhaite pourrait se définir par les trois comportements d’écriture suivants.²⁸

This is to be taken in the strong sense: not as a vague quality of the Work, the kind that might be remarked upon in conversation or a literary review in a Newspaper, but as a veritable aesthetic principle, a principle of a school a new Aesthetic → It seems to me that, *in contrast to certain modern endeavors*, simplicity would be defined by the following three writing behaviors.²⁹

These three characteristics of simplicity are readability (la lisibilité), non-irony, and being written and understood at face value. It is the second of these three that is of interest here. Under the heading of non-irony, Barthes writes that

il faudrait que l'œuvre à faire cesse d'être, ou ne soit que discrètement, *un discours de l'œuvre sur l'œuvre*; c'est cela qu'il faudrait ou stopper ou atténuer. C'est un procédé moderne extrêmement fréquent qui tient dans ce raisonnement: je ne peux pas écrire d'œuvre, il n'y a plus d'œuvre à écrire, c'est fini et la seule chose qui me reste à écrire, c'est qu'il n'y a rien à écrire.³⁰

the work should cease to be, or be only discreetly, a *discourse of the work about the work*; common modern procedure: I can't write a work, there's no longer any work to be written, the only thing left for me to write is that there's nothing to write.³¹

This statement is haunted by negativity, especially when we read the transcriptions of these lectures. But while Barthes was delivering these seminars, he was 'preparing' his novel, preparing *to write* his novel, and he was engaging in an intransitive philosophical questioning of what constitutes literature, what is the nature of writing, and what is the status of the literature in modernity. These questions revolve around the personal – the 'je' or 'I' who feels that there is nothing left to write – just as much as they concern the more objective situation of literature itself. Barthes believed that there was a 'Moment of Truth' afforded to us by literature, but this truth cannot be equated with mimetic or autobiographical verisimilitude: 'This truth travels from the book to the "within us", the "within me" that is present but not topical', as Rudolphus Teeuwen puts it.³² This insight reveals Barthes's deep affinity with Proust, whose first-person novels imagine a different manner of writing the self indirectly, *despite* some of their similarities with Proust's own biography. There is an irreducible strangeness to the fact that these ideas were expressed so potently by Barthes through speech in the present moment, as if the *Préparation* seminars are themselves a kind of shadow novel, a partner to the novel he did not write.³³

Reading, Writing

I touched above on the relevance of Mallarmé and Proust in Barthes's late lecture courses in particular. This has as much to do with their methods of translating their writing into a 'work' as it does with the work itself. *Le Livre*, consisting of Mallarmé's dream of writing a sort of *total book*, was envisioned as being unbound, so that it would be read in a different order each time, giving it an air of performance and improvisation. Blanchot comments that, because of this, 'Le livre est toujours autre, il change et s'échange par la confrontation de la diversité de ses parties [...] De plus, le livre, se déployant et se reployant, se dispersant et se rassemblant, montre qu'il n'a aucune réalité substantielle: il n'est jamais là, sans cesse à se défaire tandis qu'il se fait [The book is always other, it changes and is exchanged by comparing the diversity of its parts [...] Moreover, the book, unfolded and refolded, scattering and being gathered back together, shows that it has no substantial reality; it is never there, endlessly to be unmade while it is made]'.³⁴ Given Barthes's above comments about irony and simplicity, a more specific engagement with Mallarmé's work may be found wanting. For, if the 'making' of this book has a performative aspect, highlighting the importance of the reader's participation, what else is left besides, in Barthes's words, 'a *discourse of the work about the work*'? If this is partly what Barthes is preparing for, how might we imagine moving beyond this irony while still maintaining the openness and incompleteness of a book to come?³⁵

As Sylvia Gorelick writes in her introduction to the English translation of the *Livre*, the pages that make it up are 'both precise and nonlinear. Like the sessions that they envision and plan out, the pages of the manuscripts themselves proceed according to the logic, at once luminous and hidden, of an intricate staging'.³⁶ *Le Livre* takes decades to complete, and is still never 'finished', and yet somehow it arrives to us in the form of a book of sorts. Such a book, even in translation, would have no real original, and would always be in progress. This suggests also that, the book's possible 'completeness' or material existence notwithstanding, there still would remain an intransitive state of writing, of desiring to write, that is well worth examining in its own right. The same is true of Proust's *Recherche*, about which Barthes comments at one point 'c'est une œuvre qui constitue un véritable «mobile», c'est peut-être la véritable incarnation du Livre rêvé par Mallarmé [is a true "mobile",

and may in fact be the incarnation of Mallarmé's long-sought Book]'.³⁷ Approaching Proust as a reader is no casual task; furthermore, it is a task troubled from two sides. As Patrick Bray writes of this task: 'We are caught between, on the one hand, a pointless activity and, on the other hand, one of the greatest feats of intellectual endurance imaginable. The novel itself represents this paradoxically futile labour'.³⁸ Bray goes on to discuss the laziness of Proust's narrator, and perhaps of Proust himself, a key factor in the role of preparation in the life of the writer: *all* winds up being preparation. Discussing Deleuze's reading of Proust, Bray writes: 'The monotony of our daily lives, our relationship with immediate concerns usually prevents us from overcoming our laziness, and we quickly push away the disquieting feeling of the past's intrusion on the present'.³⁹ Here, Bray touches on what he calls 'the Proustian paradox of laziness': the things that we allow to take up our everyday time turns out to block our *real* work, since it 'fails to grapple with the work of time'.⁴⁰ The mimetic quality of the boredom and difficulty of reading Proust is of just as much interest here, as is the theoretical implications – doubled in his work – of the reading experience and his theorisation of literature. Whether in Barthes or in Proust, what brings together these ideas is not really laziness, but rather the status and philosophical implications of the book – whether Mallarmé's unfinished yet total *Livre*, Barthes's absent book, or Proust's incomplete, always contested *roman-fleuve*. Where I think these various gaps can be, if not closed, at least approached, is in the dimension of readerly experience.

In a recent essay on the experience of reading Proust, Virginie Greene argues that, while *François le Champi* is 'only one of George Sand's country novels', it nevertheless 'connects dramatically the first and last libraries of RTP, and opens the possibility of another kind of library, a library in which readers contemplate more than they read'.⁴¹ For Proust this is the way that literature not only connects writer and reader, but bridges art and life, production and experience. Indeed, the way this shows up the *Recherche* is from the dual standpoint of writer and subject. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust writes:

Quant au livre intérieur de signes inconnus (de signes en relief, semblait-il, que mon attention, explorant mon inconscient, allait chercher, heurtait, contournait, comme un plongeur qui sonde), pour la lecture desquels personne ne pouvait m'aider d'aucune règle, cette

lecture consistait en un acte de création où nul ne peut nous suppléer ni même collaborer avec nous.⁴²

As for the inner book of unknown symbols (symbols carved in relief they might have been, which my attention, as it explored my unconscious, groped for and stumbled against and followed the contours of, like a diver exploring the ocean-bed), if I tried to read them no one could help me with any rules, for to read them was an act of creation in which no one can do our work for us or even collaborate with us.⁴³

Before there is even the question of a material book, the book has its virtuality in terms of the very question of its coming into being by *being read*. And this reading, Proust avers, is a solitary, singular affair, where we must read (and eventually ‘translate’) our own inner book. At the same time, the author’s work is mirrored in the act of reading. This paradoxical way of figuring writing-as-reading as disconnected from the intellect also means that the process of reading/writing itself is at least as important as what is being read or written.

Aside from being generally unfinished, there are some crucial similarities between Proust’s ‘inner book of unknown symbols’ and Barthes’s absent novel. Greene writes that a ‘Proustian library comes into existence when certain books are related to affects, events, places, and people in one’s life, and tamed into items archivable in one’s memory’.⁴⁴ In turn, the presence or absence of the singular, quasi-material book – for instance, Mallarmé’s *Livre* or Barthes’s unwritten novel – concerns the instantiation of this library. But a little bit earlier, Green writes something about the passage near the end of the *Recherche* where the narrator undergoes a series of involuntary memories leading up to his aesthetic theory, something that may shed light on the idea of what it means to prepare for the book: ‘The trigger of the aesthetic revelation that the narrator will experiment in the library is a series of incidents which have nothing to do with books.’⁴⁵ I have preserved what I believe is a typographical error, where ‘experiment’ is substituted for ‘experience’. If this is indeed an error, it is a marvelous slip, especially in this context. The aesthetic experience associated with writing or reading – productive or receptive – can be conceived as a kind of experiment, and literature (as both Proust and Barthes show us) is one of the many sites where experiment and experience intersect. Even if we look to a more conventional text than Proust’s or Mallarmé’s – say, *François le Champi* – literature is not only about the words

on the page, and furthermore we cannot expect the same experience each time we pick it up. Literature – reading just as much as writing – is an experiment.

Greene does not mention Mallarmé in this essay, though she does mention the unbound book, which she refers to as the ‘uBook’ (as opposed to the bound book, the ‘bBook’). With reference to the ‘books piled and shelved around my desk’, she writes that if ‘I was to cut off their binding with a sharp and heavy blade and let their loose pages sediment like dead leaves on the floor, I would not create eBooks, but a mess in my room’.⁴⁶ Mallarmé’s *Livre* was intended to literally be unbound, but this unboundedness also has a philosophical thrust to it, even down to its relationship with the title. Naming a book *Livre* or *Book* seems in a way to indicate an ironic approach to the work: *this is the book, literally, but also figuratively: this is the work*. And, though they were not intended to take the form of a book, and were intended to be unbound in more sense than one (not bound within the covers of a book, and not bound even to the written word), the *Préparation* courses also carry this danger, as the lingering question of Barthes’s novel reminds us. But, as Greene argues, both the bound and the unbound book are ideal books.⁴⁷ The difference is that the unbound book is ‘unstable, open to later transformations even when it can be considered finished and ramified in multiple ways (not just along one singular subjectivity as books in a Proustian library are). It doesn’t have an author, but an originator, or first reworker (*premier remanieur*). [...] All eBooks are rooted in the culture, history, and imaginary of the book and the library.’⁴⁸

The *Préparation* courses can be considered an unbound book which is still being prepared. As already noted, Greene claims that memory – and therefore past time – is part of what makes up a Proustian library. This is true in an empirical sense: we create personal canons in a Proustian manner. But there is an additional aspect to the unboundedness of a book, and the related idea of the Proustian library. Allen, describing what he calls ‘illegible writing’, considers the difference engendered in the respective positions of writer and reader. These positions participate in a dialectic because they are two opposing, yet interrelated, moments in the experience of the work of literature. Such texts are *infinite*, according to Allen, meaning that they possess a ‘lack of boundary that needs to be considered, and that informs the problematic of its reading’.⁴⁹ Part of preparing to write, the research that comes before the work, is the writer’s attempt to address this gulf. And we must not forget that Barthes’s *Préparation* courses were pedagogical, even if in an unconventional

Bryan Counter

manner. The interrelated question of his book makes them doubly so for scholars today, as we puzzle out how exactly these lectures should be considered in light of his earlier work and his untimely death. We might imagine the ephemerality of Barthes's speech as an instrument of his unbound thinking, engendering traces that refuse to be confined to any book other than one still to come.

Notes

- ¹ Jacques Scherer, *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé: Premières recherches sur des documents inédits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 68 (B).
- ² Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Book*, trans. by Sylvia Gorelick (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2018), p. 73.
- ³ Gerald Murnane, *A History of Books* (Sydney: Giramondo, 2012), p. 117.
- ⁴ Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. V, p. 470; 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure . . .', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 277–90 (p. 289).
- ⁵ Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2003), p. 15.
- ⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 3.
- ⁷ Kathrin Busch, 'Phantasmagorical Research: How Theory Becomes Art in the Work of Roland Barthes', in *Artistic Research and Literature*, ed. by Tan Wälchli and Corina Caduff (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 185–193 (p. 185).
- ⁸ Barthes, *Préparation*, p. 542; *Preparation*, p. 298.
- ⁹ Lawrence D. Kritzman, 'Barthes's Death Sentences and the End of Literature', *MLN*, 132.4 (2017), 864–75 (p. 866).
- ¹⁰ Barthes, *Preparation*, p. xv.
- ¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Prétexte Roland Barthes: colloque de Cerisy* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1978), p. 366.
- ¹² Lucy O'Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 167.
- ¹³ Barthes, *Préparation*, p. 279; *Preparation*, p. 149.
- ¹⁴ Kritzman, 'Barthes's Death Sentences and the End of Literature', p. 872.
- ¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 70.
- ¹⁶ Barthes is well aware of this paradox, and articulates it with reference to Proust, whom he calls 'un cas limite [an extreme case]': 'si Proust n'était pas mort, s'il n'était pas mort en 1922, l'oeuvre étant alors terminée de justesse, *qu'aurait-il écrit ensuite?* Qu'est-ce qu'il *pouvait* écrire? [if Proust hadn't died, having only just finished the work, *what would he have written?* What *could he* have written?]' (*Préparation*, pp. 281–82; *Preparation*, p. 150).
- ¹⁷ See Barthes, *Préparation*, pp. 24–25; *Preparation*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Busch, 'Phantasmagorical Research', p. 185.
- ¹⁹ Neil Badmington, *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 13.
- ²⁰ Badmington, *Afterlives of Roland Barthes*, p. 14.

-
- ²¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'L'action restreinte', in *Divagations*, ed. by Eugène Fasquelle (Paris: Éditions Fasquelle, 1897), p. 261.
- ²² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Divagations*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), p. 219.
- ²³ In particular see James Dutton, *Proust Between Deleuze and Derrida: The Remains of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022) and Patrick Bray, *Retours proustiens: qu'est-ce qu'un événement littéraire?* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2022).
- ²⁴ Barthes, 'Table ronde sur Proust', in Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous: Textes et entretiens 1975–1995* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), p. 49; 'Proust Round Table', in Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews*, trans. by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina, ed. by David Lapoujade (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2006), p. 53.
- ²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 331.
- ²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 242.
- ²⁷ William S. Allen, *Illegibility: Blanchot and Hegel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 2.
- ²⁸ Barthes, *Préparation*, pp. 543–44.
- ²⁹ Barthes, *Préparation*, p. 299.
- ³⁰ Barthes, *Préparation*, p. 547.
- ³¹ Barthes, *Préparation*, p. 300.
- ³² Rudolphus Teeuwen, "What's Fragile Is Always New": The Truth of Literature in Barthes' *The Preparation of the Novel*, *symplokē* 28.1–2 (2020), 207–23 (p. 209).
- ³³ Jennifer Rushworth notes with respect to these lectures that 'writing and speech are inevitably "conjoined", even if they continue to refuse to be interchangeable'. Jennifer Rushworth, 'Barthes and *Mouvance*', *Exemplaria*, 33.3 (2021), 312–26 (p. 319).
- ³⁴ Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir*, p. 330, note 1; *The Book to Come*, p. 266, note 14.
- ³⁵ A recent article by Simon Reader addresses Barthes's ambivalence with regard to fragmentary writing, arguing for Barthes's Romanticism against the avant-garde embrace of the form. See Simon Reader, 'Idols of the Fragment: Barthes and Critique', *New Literary History*, 55.1 (Winter 2024), 1–19.
- ³⁶ Gorelick, introduction to Mallarmé, *The Book*, p. vi.
- ³⁷ Barthes, 'Table ronde sur Proust', p. 29; 'Proust Round Table', p. 29.
- ³⁸ Patrick Bray, 'Lazy Proust and Literary "Work"', *Nottingham French Studies*, 55.1 (2016), 18–28 (p. 19).
- ³⁹ Bray, 'Lazy Proust', p. 23.
- ⁴⁰ Bray, 'Lazy Proust', p. 23.
- ⁴¹ Virginie Greene, 'Contemplating a Proustian Library', in *The Proustian Mind*, ed. by Anna Elsner and Thomas Stern (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 218.

⁴² Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), vol. IV, p. 458.

⁴³ Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 274.

⁴⁴ Greene, 'Proustian Library', p. 218.

⁴⁵ Greene, 'Proustian Library', p. 217.

⁴⁶ Greene, 'Proustian Library', p. 221.

⁴⁷ Greene, 'Proustian Library', p. 221.

⁴⁸ Greene, 'Proustian Library', p. 221.

⁴⁹ Allen, *Illegibility*, p. 1.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Counter holds a PhD in comparative literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and teaches at Western New England University and Framingham State University. His work has appeared in *SubStance*, *symplekē*, *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*, and [Literature and Event: Twenty-First Century Reformulations](#) (2022). He is guest editor of a special themed edition of the *First To Knock* periodical on Maurice Blanchot (2023) and coeditor, with Nathan Wainstein, of a special issue of *Textual Practice* on "Mere Light" (2024). His book [Four Moments of Aesthetic Experience: Reading Huysmans, Proust, McCarthy, and Cusk](#) is forthcoming from Anthem Press.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2024 *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).