

BOOK REVIEW

A Lover's Discourse Through Fresh Eyes

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Patrick French and Timothy Mathews, eds, 'Roland Barthes' *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse: Translating Again, Writing Again*', special issue of *CounterText: A Journal for the Study of the Post-Literary*, 9.1 (April 2023).

CounterText's twenty-fifth number is host to a reinvigorating view of Barthes's *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, a hybrid amalgam of commentary and translation that could well illustrate the concept of the 'post-literary': 'For *CounterText*, the post-literary is the domain in which any artefact that might have some claim on the literary appears.' While there is a certain audacity in seeing the countertextual in the textual production of the premier definer of the text and its theory, this collection does not fit any usual moulds.

After a 'Guest Editors' Introduction' (pp. 1–7), Timothy Mathews has provided 'A Translator's Note: On the Voices of Love or, Why Translate Roland Barthes Again?' (pp. 8–18). There follows what brought the concept of this book into focus: Mathews's translation under the title 'Roland Barthes, *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse*, Selected Fragments' (pp. 19–79). Next there are seven essays (pp. 80–184) related to Barthes, which I will discuss below. And to finish, a conversation between the two guest editors that bookends the issue (pp. 185–95). Those are the varied and interesting contents, but there are paratexts as well: the title page, the contents; a few short paragraphs of 'Acknowledgements' (pp. v–vi); a brief 'Editorial' by the two editors of the journal, Ivan Callus and James Corby (pp. vii–viii); and to conclude, a substantial 'Notes on Contributors' (pp. 196–99).

The Introduction by Mathews and French seeks to justify starting again with Barthes's text; it sees '[t]ranslation as a form of love' (p. 4). The incompleteness of this new English version is touted as making 'a space for other voices and further engagements' (p. 4), and a single page coyly and anonymously summarizes each of the seven 'other voices' that will follow the translated selections.

Timothy Mathews's somewhat ponderous, introspective, and highly personal note about translating Barthes focuses intently on *voice, listening, and hearing* – ultimately *an idea* of music. He expects a great deal of the task of translating, even 'a perfect mime of the original' perhaps (p. 17). Unfortunately, for all their weight, his reflections are not easy to follow; they lack the clarity so characteristic of Barthes's writing.

The translated selections are thankfully much more readable. An immense effort of interpretation of the original French has resulted in a fluid, pleasant English text that manages to remain faithful. It is a pleasure to read Barthes with these fresh eyes. Though as a translator I may occasionally disagree with Mathews's choices, I recognize that they are well reasoned. Along the way, Mathews mostly solved the pronoun problem (to avoid gendering the 'other') by resorting to singular 'they' when English did not allow a workaround. (A couple of 'hims' and a 'her' crept in.) Timothy Mathews has brought new ideas to this much-read book; I would encourage him to translate the remaining figures and publish the whole book.

Seven writers now voice their absorption of Barthes's *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse*.

Agnès Thurnauer's 'Sylvia's Story' (trans. Mathews) tells of a brief encounter, a friendship discovered through viewing and making art. What connection to *Fragments*? I think it can count as an example of another kind of amorous discourse, in which the elusive Sylvia becomes a new figure.

Sophie Eager shares illuminating thoughts on 'The Crush: A Practice of Not-Wanting-to-Seize'. It is a desire that accomplishes what Barthes wished his readers to understand by his 'non-vouloir-saisir' – one that 'does not require a response from the other'. *A Lover's Discourse* is about love and desire, but Eager clearly conveys its role in reading (interpretation) as well: the 'gentleness and evasiveness' that characterize Barthes's view of the 'fluidity' of the literary text correspond to the not-wanting-to-seize in the relation to the other (p. 88).

The language in the twenty-seven pages of Sharon Kivland's contribution, 'Her Discourse', evokes the lover's discourse in a vocabulary that resonates brilliantly with Barthes's. I quickly found myself imagining that Kivland had somehow managed to make her essay entirely out of the writing of *A Lover's Discourse*, rearranged – as if she had digested Barthes's words and spit them out again in *her* form, to tell her highly personal story. For all its differences, I kept hearing Barthes in 'Her Discourse'. Perhaps a lover's discourse in the feminine.

Patrick ffrench in 'Translating Gradiva: Research Notes' provides a long analysis of the 'Gradiva' figure, citing Winnicott and Freud, and including a translation of several paragraphs from Barthes's seminar on the lover's discourse in 1974–76, which was published in French but remains unavailable in English.

When Jane Rendell's father died, he left thirteen books near the door to his study, each holding a bookmark, she writes in 'After He Had Gone'. Unwilling to 'turn his death, and her mourning, into "literature"' (p. 140), Rendell discovers the potency of the Barthesian fragment and treats the reader to a quirky choice of snatches from the thirteen books as indicated by the bookmarks, as well as excerpts from several books by Barthes and fragments of her own post-literary imagination.

In 'The Postcure and the Lecture Well: *A Lover's Discourse* in Light of Barthes' Late Pedagogy', Brian Blanchfield finds powerful links between the mature author of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* and the sanatorium resident of the 1940s. The young Barthes formulated concepts about the discourse of love, in letters to male friends, that would germinate and blossom in the 1977 book written while the author was teaching *Comment vivre ensemble* (*How to Live Together*), which Blanchfield calls 'cognate, coeval in [Barthes's] personal experience' with the *Fragments* (p. 169).

For Nathalie Léger, in 'The Dance of Barthes' (trans. Mathews), reading the *Fragments* (reading it again, after many other readings) is to drift, to let Barthes dance. It is above all a good way to see Barthes.

The personal and the individual are very much present in all the essays here, making a welcome change from the more stodgy and academic. Patrick ffrench and Timothy Mathews give of their persons too in the soul-searching exchange (presumably a barrage of ponderous emails) given lastly under the title 'The *CounterText* Conversation. Notes on "Agony": A Dialogue'. Here is Timothy Mathews:

I've always felt that for me the pleasure of translating has something to do with telling it like it is, in other words as I hear it, with my hearing re-stitched into the words I'm writing, and re-lost there, for who can point the finger at what? (p. 194)

And Patrick ffrench:

As if there is at one level a *nice*, happy Barthes, whose anxiety in love could be assuaged simply by telling him that he has already lost the loved one, the rupture he fears has already happened (see "Agony"), and at another level there is a Barthes of radical and fundamental primal absence, nothing happening when it should have, nothing "has been" there, nothing happening but the place, where there is absence, a Blanchotian Barthes for whom the disaster is already there without ever having taken place. (p. 193)

In all, this hybrid volume succeeds in its endeavour and provides interesting readings for any lover of Barthes. But typographical errors are more numerous than they should have been.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Armine Kotin Mortimer, emerita professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, holds the rank of Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques. She is the author of seven books and about eighty articles on French literature and theory, including several on Barthes. Her book *The Gentlest Law: Roland Barthes's 'The Pleasure of the Text'* (New York: Lang, 1989) provides a comprehensive commentary and explains the book's intertexts, clarifying its complex concepts while also correcting errors in the English translation.

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