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Roland Barthes, *“Masculine, Feminine, Neuter” and Other Writings*. Vol. 3 of *Essays and Interviews*. Translated by Chris Turner. London: Seagull Press, 2016. 162 pp. Bibliography. \$21.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8574-2242-2.

Review by Andy Stafford, University of Leeds.

In these heady days of gender deconstruction, from the current Claude Cahun exhibition in London to the growing confidence of LGBTI+ groups, the publication of the third translated volume of Roland Barthes's scattered writings by Seagull Press, *“Masculine, Feminine, Neuter” and Other Writings* might be viewed, at first blush, as a considerable contribution to the critique of gender binaries and normativity. Unfortunately, for those working in these areas, this collection of essays, appearing in English translation for the first time, by one of France's most important writers of the post-war period, has only one essay on gender deconstruction: the final essay used as the title of the collection. This way of presenting Barthes's scattered and (as yet) untranslated pieces, by elevating one of the pieces to eponymous status, has been the hallmark of the five volumes in the series and is driven more by marketing than fidelity to the writer's oeuvre.

Indeed, “Masculine, Feminine, Neuter,” written by Barthes in 1967 as a contribution to a homage to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss at the age of sixty, is more about Balzac and literature and the problem of literary interpretation than “gender trouble” *per se*, and has all the hallmarks of a period *before* 1968. That said, *S/Z* (1970), Barthes's radical reading of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*, often cited as an early example of gender studies in literature, is prefigured here, in 1967, as Barthes alights upon Balzac's curious tale of 1830 in which a sculptor is tricked into falling in love with a man. As well as showing the narrative intricacies of the tale, Barthes also impugns *Sarrasine*'s male ideology that blinds him (and us, implies Barthes) more and more to the obvious fact of the true gender identity of his cherished (seemingly female) singer, La Zambinella. Using both linguistic theory and psychoanalytical notions of the fetishized parts of the body, Barthes suggests that *Sarrasine*'s eye as sculptor and painter as told by the story's narrator to a young woman at a party is hoodwinked by the stereotypes of gender-divided reality, but also by the scandalous absence of the third term of gender (in French, at least) approximated by the castrato of which La Zambinella is the last living example in the story within a story of Balzac's tale. Thus, in less playful (that is, pre-1968) terms than in *S/Z* (published after the tumultuous events of 1968), Barthes's “Masculine, Feminine, Neuter” sets out the linguistic, narrative, and literary confusions of representing genders.

The other twenty pieces translated in this collection, all united by their interest in literature (prefaces, reviews, roundtables and interviews), have no connection then to questions of gender, and, if anything, show the huge range of literary interests in Barthes's work. Presented in chronological order from 1954 to 1979 (just before his death in 1980) the selection follows the historical development in Barthesian thought and essayistic practice. Although “Masculine, Feminine Neuter” should have been in the middle of the collection, the translator has simply followed the cack-handed way in which the *Complete Works* in French have been put together. Basically, the 1993-1995 edition was augmented by the 2002 edition,

with the addition of certain afterthoughts. We get early reviews of novels by concentration-camp survivor Jean Cayrol, *nouveau romancier* Alain Robbe-Grillet, and popular-theatre colleague and future sociologist Jean Duvignaud (“Pre-novels”). Barthes also displays his “pleasure in the classics” (as he famously called it in his very early writings of the 1940s) here in the 1950s. As well as (slightly surprising) praise for a volume of popular poetry in 1955, Emile Zola (*Nana*), Guy de Maupassant (various short stories), and Victor Hugo (*Notre Dame of Paris*) are all given the Marxist-narratological treatment often inspired (appropriately enough for nineteenth-century French literature) by the post-romantic optic of the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet whom Barthes had read extensively and in detail while in a sanatorium for tuberculosis during World War II. In the first of these, “The Man-Eater,” Zola’s prose is “epic,” *Nana* is even a “book of civic responsibility” (22); the second, on the “physics of misfortune” in Maupassant, is concerned with class (especially petty-bourgeois) alienation; the last, the most clearly inspired by Michelet, sets out how Hugo’s “Cathedral of Novels” towers over the subject-matter in a mobile and yet closely observed way “that accompanies with its dream the whole of human history” (37).

Thus, using trademark flourishes to end his 1950s pieces on literature, Barthes can be seen to be honing his essayistic skills. He is also beginning to theorize literary criticism. And, presenting pieces on Robbe-Grillet, on the Lukácsian Lucien Goldmann, and on trends in literary critical praxis, all published between 1959 and 1963, the volume shows that, alongside Barthes’s growing interest in semiology and especially structuralism, there is a parallel interest developing in how to approach the literary text. In this two-track approach to research and writing during the 1960s, Barthes widens his purview on literature, with pieces on the diary (on Alain Girard) and then on the literary biography of Proust by George Painter, before returning in 1967 to literature proper with enthusiastic pieces on the “baroque” writing of Italian Marxist poet and novelist Edoardo Sanguineti and of the Cuban novelist Severo Sarduy. The title of the latter piece, “Pleasure in Language,” shows how between the 1940s and the 1960s, Barthes had moved away from traditional and liberal-humanist views on “pleasure in the classics” of literature to a much more militant, semiological, and “Menippean” playfulness that highlights both the dialectics and dead-ends of language.

With his intellectual and essayistic career now taking off across the tumultuous events of May 1968 in France, Barthes is sought for prefaces: on Jacques Prévert’s poetry (the 1972 collection *Fatras*) and for an “interview-preface” on a book on Western literature (1976). He even publishes a letter to Philippe Roger on the latter’s book on the Marquis de Sade (also in 1976). But the para-literary of the social sciences is never far from his mind, and this volume contains two intriguing prefaces to the literature volumes of the *Encyclopedia Bordas* (volume eight in 1970 and nine in 1976). Finally—with the exception of the eponymous essay which, out of kilter as we mentioned, ends the volume—we see Barthes in the late 1970s at the height of his fame, writing on Voltaire and Rousseau in rather detached, sardonic, and even mythological terms, and then on Proust in a piece written at the same time as his very last lecture course at the Collège de France before his untimely death, which is a useful companion piece to *The Preparation of the Novel* (published in English by Columbia University Press in 2011).

So, we have here twenty-one highly varied and variable pieces, but all on literature, the literary and literary criticism, which, in their diversity, “merely” point to the skillful essayism, to the hesitant literary values, and to the friendly iconoclasm that characterize the work of Roland Barthes. Given the diversity of these pieces in terms of history and content, it is crucial that the translator has made a good job of briefly contextualizing all the pieces and that the translations understand, especially in relation to the gendering that operates in the French language and to some of the more recondite references, that the renderings into English need, periodically, the helping-hand of an attuned and scholarly—that is experienced—editor and translator of Barthes.

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