

## RMIT University

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#### After Barthes: the preparation of the memoir

Abstract:

This paper examines, in the context of the creative practice of writing a ‘negotiated memoir’, the strategy of Roland Barthes, who in his final lecture series (1978-80) at the College de France (Barthes 2011) travelled step by step through an extended ‘thought experiment’ exploring the issues (or ‘trials’) he confronted *as if* he was writing or about to write a novel.

The paper represents an initial testing of the ‘trials’ articulated by Barthes, as a framework for reflection and analysis of the issues confronted in my own writing practice, issues at the intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical. I am embarked on a project I have described as a ‘negotiated memoir’, having been approached by a former asylum seeker (an Ethiopian-Australian woman whom I know through a previous professional relationship at a contemporary circus) to ‘write her story’. In this circumstance, she is neither employing me as a ghostwriter or official biographer, nor am I approaching her as a documentary subject. What does she mean by ‘write her story’ – what are her expectations? She has a desire to have her story told: she has no desire to write. What sort of story would I desire to write *in negotiation* with her, and what would be the texture and terrain of those negotiations?

The co-option of Barthes’s method proves productive, I argue, providing an original prism through which the problems the creative writer faces in the practice of his or her craft can be refracted.

Biographical note:

David Carlin lives in Melbourne. He is a writer and Senior Lecturer at RMIT University. His memoir book *Our father who wasn’t there* (2010) is published by Scribe; his essays and articles have been published in *Griffith Review*, *Overland*, *Text*, *Continuum* and *Senses of Cinema*. He has previously worked in film, theatre and circus.

Keywords:

Memoir – Barthes – reflective practice – practice-led research – creative writing

### **The book I desire**

There are two books I desire, which answer to my fantasies: the book I am writing and the book I discover that has been written for me. I will discuss the latter first, because by its nature it leads back to the former, enabling it, so I fantasise, to exist.

The book I discover that has been written for me: in reality, of course, it hasn't been written for me, since its author has no idea I exist. However, in my fantasy, it comes along just in time as the helper I need to complete or understand or think about my own writing project. This time (in 2011), the book I discover is by an old favourite, Roland Barthes. Newly translated into English as *The preparation of the novel* (2011), the book meticulously documents what became Barthes's final course of lectures at the Collège de France, delivered across the span of two years and completed just two weeks before he died in 1980. I came across this book quite by chance in a bookshop.

Barthes's course of lectures took as its premise a subjective investigation: 'the internal story of a man who wants to write' (Barthes, 2011: 171). Or, as he describes it elsewhere in less embodied terms: 'the subject of the course: the whole mythical space of Wanting-to-Write' (238). Barthes, the famed essayist and critic, had reached a point in his life where for various personal ('intimate') reasons, he wanted to make a 'complete break' (212) with his earlier writing practice, and set out to write a work of literature. He chooses to call this work of literature a 'Novel' but at several points in the book circles back to make clear that he is speaking of a utopian Fantasy: an 'act of love' (14), 'less a fixed literary form than a form of writing capable of transcending writing itself' (165).

Barthes did not plunge directly into writing his 'Novel'. Instead he brought together this impulse with his obligations as a teacher to deliver a course where he aimed, through the method of 'simulation' (168), to investigate all that would be involved, the various 'trials' he would face, *if* he were to write a Novel. He says:

'Will I *really* write a Novel? I'll answer this and only this. I'll proceed *as if* I were going to write one → I'll install myself within this as if: this lecture course could have been called "As If" (20).

### **My pro-ject: the negotiated memoir**

Barthes highlights the etymology of the word 'project' to think about the nature of the fantasised 'final endpoint' of his 'preparations': 'the logic of the Pro-ject', as he says, is of 'throwing something out ahead of you' (149). The preparations are the path (20) one follows along the way, drawn on always by the promise of finally catching up with, completing the pro-ject.

So to my own current pro-ject, the book I am writing, the other book I desire. It is not a novel but a type of memoir, which I am calling a *negotiated memoir* since it attempts to negotiate an extended encounter between myself (generic features: white, Australian, middle-aged, male) and someone who could be easily constructed as my *exotic* Other, my friend Sosina, an Ethiopian/Australian circus performer and former asylum seeker.

One could say that all memoirs are negotiated, since in each case they involve an ethical negotiation between the writer and the world. Whereas the writer of fiction is an absolute monarch whose word or veracity can never be doubted – if Lewis Carroll tells us the Mad Hatter is having a tea-party who are we to argue? – the memoirist operates in a more democratic space in which the reader (who may even find him or herself to be a character in the book) can always argue or doubt the writer's word. As Janet Malcolm puts it, channelled by the collagist David Shields in his manifesto for 'reality' based artforms, *Reality hunger*, 'In imaginative literature we're always constrained from considering alternative scenarios; there are none. This is the way it is. Only in nonfiction does the question of what happened and how people thought and felt remain open' (Shields 2010: 132).

It is not unusual for the memoirist to contend with the conflicting memories or wishes of family members, or to take into account the privacy of individuals by changing names or identifying details – this we know because the memoirist tells us, wanting the reader to know exactly how the truth has been adjusted (cf Blain, 2008; Hemley 2009). However in my project with Sosina, the negotiation extends to another level, since the primary content of the book is her leading me into and through stories from her life, and since the idea of the book in the first place was hers as much as mine. She thinks of it as her book; I think of it as mine. She talks, she takes me places. I listen, I ask questions. I read, I write. We both think of it as a shared endeavour. In this risky shifting territory (we have no written contract and neither of us, I believe, will need or want one until we get to the pointy end with the publisher) we negotiate.

### **Investigating a writing practice**

Barthes's book offers a model for thinking through the various problems I encounter with my writing project, for his attention is on the *Techné* (2011: 13) of creative practice: how to do it.

He proposes:

(on a provisional, initiatory basis) a distinction between: (1) wanting to know how something is made, *in itself*, on the basis of an essence of knowledge (= Science); [and] (2) wanting to know how something is made with a view to making it again, to producing something of the same order (= Technology); here, bizarrely, we'll be setting ourselves a "technical" problem, we'll be regressing from Science to *Techné*. Replacing ... the Essence with the Preparation ... (12-13).

In this light, I propose, Barthes offers in his own 'unmethodological' (160) style an approach to the theorising of creative practice that might be both refreshing and useful for writers and artists who articulate positions as reflective practitioners (see Schon 1983) or practice-led researchers (see Green and Haseman 2006). Certainly, as I will seek to test here, I believe his approach might prove refreshing and useful for this writer.

Barthes describes his Course as 'investigating a practice... situated at the point where the Aesthetic and the Ethical intersect, overlap' (Barthes, 2011: 21). The Course ran for many weeks, across two years; here I will simply highlight one of the key structures of his argument, and use that structure as an entry-point for reflection on

the various problems, aesthetic and ethical, I face in the ‘preparation’ of my negotiated memoir. Barthes speaks of the problems of the ‘would-be writer’ as ‘three trials’ (172) he (or she) will encounter; these are ‘the obstacles that will have to be overcome, the knots that will have to be untied in order to write the Work’ (128). My analysis in this article will focus for reasons of space upon the first two of those trials, leaving the third to be examined at a later time.<sup>1</sup>

The first trial is that of Doubt: ‘An abstract (mental) trial: deciding *What to write...* the *Tendency (Writing)* must fix upon an Object’ (173).

The second trial is that of Patience: ‘a concrete, practical trial: the step-by-step management of *Writing* (the writing of the chosen object)’ (173).

### **The first trial: doubt**

In the first trial, Barthes asks: ‘What does someone who wants to write fantasize about in the work to be written? What kind of work is envisaged?’ (174) It is a matter of how to choose and plan the work (199), facing up to the ‘vertiginous freedom’ (198) of writing. These are matters of content, form, indecisions and necessities (193).

The project I am working on now is my second book. My first was the memoir, *Our father who wasn't there* (Carlin, 2010). The Object of that first book, like that of many first books, sought me out as if unbidden. As I have described elsewhere, *Our father who wasn't there* is ‘the chronicle of an obsession’ (Carlin, 2008: 1) with discovering who my father was; he died when I was six months old and was (symbolically and almost literally) never spoken of again. It is an intensely personal story, the liberation from a prohibition, self-imposed but grounded in my family and the culture and society surrounding us, on speaking of such ‘shameful’ matters as sexual violence, mental illness, suicide.

Having finished the first book I found the will to write remained. But having told the story that in some ways was foundational to my identity, where would I turn for the next book, the next Object of my desire? As concerns content, I chose my own ‘complete break’: Sosina as a subject was – or so it would seem – everything I am not. Her life experience, her family, her culture is far away from mine. As I have written in the prologue of the first draft manuscript: *I always thought of this as the ‘not me’ book*. I took some comfort in this ‘not me’-ness of the project. An escape from what might be solipsistic tendencies, and a grounding in ethical care, not of the self (cf Foucault, 1997: 226), but of the world. Sosina, as a former ex-asylum-seeker and an African immigrant to a first world country, has a story that is valuable as an intervention within ongoing transnational conversations on immigration, racial prejudice and respect for different cultures. If the book can generate empathy and insight for the (Western) reader towards the Other, towards those *Othered* within dominant popular tropes of Western societies (‘boat people’, ‘queue jumpers’, ‘poor/helpless/hopeless Africans’, etc) then it will have been worthwhile to write it. Therefore what I am doing, I tell myself, has in Barthes’s term, some inherent ‘Necessity’ (Barthes, 2011: 194).

What's more, had Sosina not chosen me, and therefore absolved me of taking responsibility for my choice (of her)? In my weaker moments I thought that this would make somehow the first trial simpler, that I could slip past some of its difficulties. And yet stubborn also, I was not prepared to simply embark upon a work of service: either a ghost-written autobiography or what I thought of as a straightforward or unreflexive biography. I was determined that the work would be mine, even as I knew she too would need to be satisfied that it was hers; in fact it must be somehow ours together.

The question I hoped in some sense to avoid returned, and still returns: what is the book to be for me: what is my place in it and what is its place in me? Why am *I* the one to write it? How is it *my* story too? In order to write the book I need to try to particularise the question Barthes poses: 'why it [is] necessary [for me] to tell that story?' (192) It is not enough, if I am to take the position of the writer, that Sosina wants her story told: I must choose and plan on the basis of negotiating between our two desires, and to do so I have to continue to investigate my own, since it feels no more self-evident to me – and perhaps less so – than hers.

Sosina is *not* the Object of the book: this is precisely what, ethically, I need to avoid in writing it. The Object I am fixing upon, rather, is the negotiation of this space between us, this gulf of history and memory and language and experience that we are attempting to bridge. This is what the book has to be about, on some level, and the tensions, the bumps, the uncertainties in that negotiation all need to be laid bare, somehow, within the fabric of the book itself, in its meta-story of the telling and the listening, the travelling together, the writing and the reading. It cannot be simply that I am the writer and she the written; both of us must be the storytellers and both of us must be implicated in the story told. By virtue of my role and my relatively privileged background, it might be assumed that I have the power in the relationship, and certainly this is something that I need to be mindful of, but on the other hand I would never underestimate Sosina's powers: this, in the end, is what draws me to her story. There is nothing – almost nothing – she can't do, when she puts her mind to it. And I am aware, too, that readers will judge the book in no small part by their perception of how well these ethical considerations are addressed.

Doubts remain and will remain; this is the nature of the First Trial.

### **The second trial: patience**

To this there are two parts, according to Barthes:

- A. The material organization of the life of writing, what could be called a *methodical life*...
- B. The *praxis* of writing: its obstacles, its resistances, its internal threats, *its stallings*... (200)

The first part is a more mundane trial than that encountered so far, but crushingly familiar. Barthes puts it this way: in the writer's life, it is the world against the work. One's day-to-day work responsibilities (epitomised by those of Kafka at the insurance company office (Barthes, 2011: 200)), the pull of loving relationships, of social

outings: all of these things tend to drag the writer away from his or her work. Barthes examines this trial with his customary rigorous but idiosyncratic method, delineating the various defenses one must make against the onslaught of, for example, administrative tasks.

The book I am writing will be written, if I am successful, in the face of my day job as an academic. I must find strategies to refuse or cast aside the dead weight of university administration (budgets, timetables, reports, grants, workplans, meetings) that could otherwise blot out any writing time. Academics in Australia are generally allotted one day per week to advance their own research. In a suggestive inversion of this rhythm, Barthes says he toyed with the idea of an ‘administration workshop’ with a friend where they would spend a day a week ‘blitzing our administrative tasks side by side’ (Barthes, 2011: 222).

When I do have time to write, my energies are torn by the demand to write critical works that, no matter how enjoyable and worthwhile they may be, still mean time not spent directly on my *project*. Nevertheless, an academic life can have many advantages to the writer. There is the opportunity to shape one’s time outside of the teaching semesters. There is the opportunity to develop and share one’s work within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Increasingly, there is the opportunity to think about one’s projects as ‘creative works’ of research and therefore a legitimate part of one’s paid activity (although there is always a tension within this latter – book of my desire ≠ Research?).

My first book began as a creative project PhD, developed within the cloisters of an academic context that allowed me the freedom to experiment, to imagine what Umberto Eco called my ‘Ideal Reader’ (Eco, 1979: 9) free from commercial pressures. But when I look back, I think that perhaps the greatest thing I learned through my PhD was how to discipline myself to a ‘methodical life’ as a writer; how to make the most of a week of early mornings at a rented beach-house while my family slept in, how to shut out the ‘bustle’ (Barthes, 2011: 215) of the world for two hours to write five hundred words.

Barthes suggests a way to circumvent the ‘conflict between the World (Life) and the Work’ (207) is to bring the world *into* the work, to mesh the two together in some way. For an academic, conceiving of one’s project as practice-led research might be one way to achieve this. But also, for a memoirist, one can immerse oneself (Hemley, forthcoming) and to some extent merge Life and Work. In 2009 I spent an intense week visiting Sosina who was staying at the time with her family in Addis Ababa. Soon we will embark on another trip together, back to Ethiopia and to visit the other places haunted by her dead brother. These all-consuming life experiences, among others, will be central to this work of writing.

The second part of this trial, the praxis of writing, involves for Barthes, ‘*day after day... two “regimes”*’, these being how to *start* the flow of writing and how to keep it going at ‘cruising speed’ (Barthes, 2011: 252), overcoming the internal and external obstacles that stop us.

How to start up – the book, the chapter, the section, the paragraph – this is the trial of the blank page. My first ‘start-up’ with the Sosina project was the sentence: *The*

*cigarette seller of Addis Ababa works her corner, near the entrance to the compound.* The cigarette seller is Sosina as a child, but I didn't want her called Sosina straightaway; I didn't want her image clear and indexical like a photograph, but rather more elusive, allusive, painterly. The narration is third-person, the tone gesturing to an orientalist (cf Said) fable. I didn't think any of this consciously at the time, but the idea of calling Sosina *the cigarette seller of Addis Ababa* came to me as a 'find' (256) that triggered a certain direction to the subsequent writing. Afterwards, having attained 'cruising speed', I had to face up to the consequences of this particular 'inauguration' (252). How would I braid this type of narration with the other types of writing I was doing, in which by contrast my own position as a white man entering Sosina's world as she in turn entered mine was made explicit? It may be that I end up throwing that sentence away, but for now I will respect it as an important stylistic marker to be puzzled over, a 'find' to be set aside carefully and returned to, just like an archaeologist (an apt metaphor considering my themes).

Finally, in this trial, keeping going: the planning, the 'brakings', the interruptions, breakdowns ... (260-68). I will only highlight for now Barthes's definition of the writer's Breakdown: 'the sudden realization that writing is difficult to the point of impossibility ... or else suddenly discovering a difficulty in writing of *indeterminate origin and nature*' (268). I know this feeling well, but in particular with the Sosina project it plays out as an anxiety that writing on the surface – serviceable, workmanlike – is very possible but 'true' *writing* (of any greater affective and intellectual impact for a reader) may not be possible because, simply, I am too lazy or risk-averse to do battle (with myself) in that 'indeterminate' space. Here, in discovering strategies and tactics for this battle, I draw inspiration from the experimental flexibility, the formal openness of the genre I am writing in, the memoir, which is arguably a kind of extended personal essay. To borrow from Phillip Lopate's foundational introduction to *The art of the personal essay* (1995: xxvii), I am emboldened, within the text itself, to 'follow the clue of [my] ignorance through the maze'. In other words, within this form of writing, I can essay to make the problem also part of the solution. For as Shields puts it: 'Essay: theatre of the brain' (Shields 2011, 131)

## **To end**

My aim with this paper has been to make a first sortie into Barthes's (2011) method in *The preparation of the novel*, a first experiment with applying his schema of the writer's 'trials' to gain perspective on my own practice as a writer. I have not sought here to critically analyse Barthes's framework, rather to take the first two of his trials on their own terms and test their power as reflective tools. I have found them to be a productive *and* playful stricture within which to reflect upon the questions I am facing in my current project. By necessity, my discussion here has been brief, leaving many questions only touched upon and many more completely unexplored; it is an initial marker laid down towards further encounters with this book of my desire.

## Endnotes

1. Barthes's 'third trial' he calls the trial of Separation, because it involves the writer separating out her place within the 'historical social' world she inhabits: 'the problem of how the work *fits in* [or doesn't fit in] with the social' (Barthes 2011, 173)

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