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### Notation After “The Reality Effect”: Remaking Reference With Roland Barthes And Sheila Heti

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## Notation After “The Reality Effect”: Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti

Flaubert’s Barometer, Michelet’s  
Little Door: “The Reality Effect”

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT’S BAROMETER, Jules Michelet’s little door: these are the once insignificant details that Roland Barthes’s “The Reality Effect” (1968) made famous.<sup>1</sup> In turning his attention to them, Barthes saves the barometer on the wall in Flaubert’s novella *A Simple Heart* and the little door behind the death-sentenced Charlotte Corday in Michelet’s *History of the Revolution* from the threat of insignificance not once, but twice. He saves them first theoretically, by revealing that *all* such “insignificant” details in realist fiction are in fact significant.<sup>2</sup> “Apparently” functionless, these stray details seem to the naive reader encountering them in the flow of the novel like meaningless narrative “fillers” (11). But in fact, Barthes reveals in a now familiar twist, they enact the important ideological function of signifying “the real.” In this sense, *all* such apparently meaningless realist detail ascends to the privileged status of signification. Giving up their denotative capacities, barometers and little doors succeed to a single, powerful connotative meaning: “We are the real.” And in a second sense, Barthes saves the barometer and the little door from insignificance in literary-critical history by canonizing them in the critical literature as examples of “*l’effet de réel*.” Their insignificance now exemplary, Michelet’s door and Flaubert’s barometer can no longer go un- or undernoticed by readers of *The History of the Revolution* or *A Simple Heart*. By inquiring into the “significance of . . . insignificance,” to use Barthes’s words, “The Reality Effect” made “notation . . . *notable*” (11). Transforming mere notation into something really

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ABSTRACT In “The Reality Effect,” Roland Barthes reveals notation’s ideological function within the realist novel; a decade later in *Preparation of the Novel*, Barthes reconsiders notation as the practice by which the writer provisionally makes literary meaning. Barthes’s revision of his claims for the reality effect helps us see how an emerging genre—the novel of commission—pulls referential, preparatory materials into the novel in order to reimagine the sociality and institutionality of the writing process. REPRESENTATIONS 125. Winter 2014 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 80–102. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2014.125.5.80.

noteworthy, Barthes's essay is a virtuosic demonstration of literary criticism's ability to conjure significance out of the least promising of materials, making major meaning out of the most minor textual traces.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout, "The Reality Effect" testifies not just to the ideological power of the realist novel, but also to the power and scope of the literary critic. Barthes begins the essay by promising to best structuralist critics at their own science.<sup>4</sup> For these critics, devoted though they are to achieving a total account of the narrative work, have not been "truly exhaustive" according to Barthes.<sup>5</sup> The structuralists have completely ignored those apparently throwaway "*notations* which no function (not even the most indirect) will allow us to justify" (11). By allowing such insignificant details to remain scandalously outside the purview of semiotic analysis, structuralist critics have, Barthes suggests, colluded with the realist novel itself, which presents such "useless details" as having arisen from an innocent place outside the novel, from the domain of "concrete reality" and "'what is' (or was)" (14). By presenting and accepting these details as referring to reality, the realist novel and the structuralist critic alike reflect the "ideology of our time," which holds that "what is truly alive could not signify—and vice versa" (14). Both the novel and the structuralist critic thus confirm the "mythical opposition between the true-to-life (the living) and the intelligible" (14).

For "The Reality Effect"-era Barthes, of course, there is no gesture more ideological than innocently referring to "what is." Barthes refuses the mythical opposition between the living and the meaningful that realist details like the barometer and the little door create; instead, he pulls reference and notation firmly back into the realm of signification. Exactly "at the very moment when these details are supposed to denote reality directly," he endows them with meaning by revealing that "all that they do, tacitly, is signify [reality]" (16). In the end, there is nothing more fantastical, weighted, and replete with signification than this ambient feeling of the real—that world of "casual movements, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words" that seems all the more present for being only "tacitly" signified (14). Structuralist narratologists stop short at the borders of this world of significance, but Barthes fearlessly presses on. And so an essay that begins as a bit of household tidying—a neat sweeping up of the "irreducible residues of functional analysis" of the novel—ends by throwing open the windows and even knocking down the walls that divide the signifying from the real (14). The apparently meaningless welter of detail we thought was the mere "residue" of the realist novel transforms, over the short course of six pages, into the novel's most prominent—and meaningful—characteristic. Yet in its masterful transformation of insignificance into significance, "The Reality Effect" in one way rebuilds the walls that divide the meaningful from the real. For in removing the possibility of insignificance, it reduces the horizon

of meaning such that all realist details mean the same thing. And in making all realist details mean the same—in allowing for no differential of meaning between barometers and little doors, or between peonies and white Pomeranians—the difference between the living and the meaningful looms up, always ready to reappear as a division structuring our writing and our lives.

**From Notation to *Notatio*:  
*The Preparation of the Novel***

Ten years after “The Reality Effect,” Barthes returned to the topic of notation, but with a radical reorientation: as a writer rather than as a critic, in the classroom rather than on the printed page. He began his 1978 Collège de France lecture course “The Preparation of the Novel” by describing the moment of the “‘literary’ conversion” precipitating this shift of position from critic of canonical novels to writer of a potential novel.<sup>6</sup> After the death of his mother and the completion of his course “The Neutral,” Barthes explains, he made a “decision” to “enter into literature, into writing; to *write*, as if I’d never written before: to do only that” (8). Barthes adopts a state of being that he terms “Wanting-to-Write”—a state of being that, he explains, entails a reorientation toward the novel (8). Asking himself rhetorically “Will I really write a novel?,” he will answer only that “I’ll proceed as if I were going to write one” (20).

The “Novel” one wants to write is not equivalent to the novel one critically analyzes, according to Barthes; it belongs to a different order. “For the moment,” he explains, the “Novel” that he wants to write is a “fantasmatic object that doesn’t want to be absorbed by a metalanguage (scientific, historical, sociological)” (12). Hence, he explains that his “Preparation of the Novel” lectures will not cover any “historical sociology of the Novel” as practiced by “Lukács, Goldmann, Girard,” nor will he address the question of “whether it’s possible to write a novel *today* (that is, in historical and literary terms)” (12). Writers may dream at the outset of “producing a ‘literary object’” such as the ones that critics analyze and value, but “*writing* is not fully writing unless there’s a renunciation of metalanguage; Wanting-to-Write can only be articulated in the language of Writing” (9). Critical metalanguage engages a finished, canonical novel the outlines of whose literary form and cultural value are fixed by virtue of its being an object of criticism. And critical metalanguage, for the Barthes of *Preparation*, itself assumes and produces an opposition between the replete-with-meaning novel and the “real,” meaningless world in which the critic lives and works. If, in “The Reality Effect,” a skeptical Barthes takes a metalinguistic critical position outside the “narrative fabric” (of which notation is one discrete element

amongst many), *Preparation* finds him considering notation as the practice of a writer—a writer believing in the reality of subjective experience, in its communicability, a man planning to write a novel.

Reorienting himself from critic to writer allows Barthes to return the undernoticed detail of the realist novel to the moment it was first noticed, the moment when a writer took note of something and then made a note. As he describes his own “Daily Practice of Notation,” “I simply take note of the word (*notula*) that will remind me of my ‘idea’ (let’s say no more on that for the moment) which I then copy out onto a piece of paper (*nota*) at home the next day” (90). Unlike the finished reality effect, significantly “insignificant,” notation may yet yield nothing stable or lasting: “I don’t want to play down the *inconsequentiality* of this micro-technique of *Notatio*” (90). Barthes slows down even the note-taking act into its component parts—the on-the-spot *notula* and the only very slightly weightier after-the-fact *nota* written down at home (rather than out in the world) the next day.

As if to underscore the weightlessness of his of note taking, Barthes describes the slimness of his notebook and the speediness of his ballpoint pen. Barthes’s Biro and his thin notebook feel even more casual next to the beautiful *moleskine* notebooks of Flaubert and Marcel Proust, the latter tucked away in formal jackets worn in a century gone by, their literary consequentiality now well established. Barthes considers his note-taking instruments:

the notebook, not very thick (→ pockets? Modern clothing, no one wears jackets anymore ≠ Flaubert’s notebooks, oblong, in beautiful black moleskin; Proust’s. Summer: fewer notes!) → Pen: a Biro at the ready (speed: no need to take the lid off): this isn’t real (weighty, muscular) writing, but that doesn’t matter because *Notula* is not yet writing (≠ *Nota*, copied out). (90–91)

The notebooks and composition practices of Flaubert and Proust are now viewed by critics as “weighty, muscular” “writing,” part of a canon-building narrative supported by a literary history and a practice of genealogical criticism designed to retrospectively fix and reinforce the canonical novel as a complete object (91). By contrast, Barthes emphasizes the momentariness of his own writing in order to help suspend the canon-making, meaning-diffusing moves of “scientific” criticism like “The Reality Effect.” As Barthes transforms himself from critic to writer, he abandons the critic’s object of study—the finished “literary object,” the canonical novel—to focus instead on how writers prepare to write things that are not even novels yet, that are only distantly and potentially novels.<sup>7</sup>

It is therefore tempting to see *Preparation* as Barthes’s *correction* of “The Reality Effect,” a nostalgic attempt to reclaim some kind of naive, pre-ideological position. And, yet, looking closely at how notation functions in *Preparation*, we see that *Preparation* does not so much abandon the insights

of “The Reality Effect” as dereify them.<sup>8</sup> In the opening lecture, Barthes tells a generational story about this switch from the objectivity and metalanguage of the literary critic to the embodied subjectivity of the writer. “I belong,” Barthes explains,

to a generation that has suffered too much from the censorship of the subject, whether following the positivist route (the objectivity required by literary history, the triumph of philology) or the Marxist (very important—even if it no longer seems so—in my life) → Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity (3).

Barthes does seek a certain correction, a correction of his generation of critics who, enthralled by Marxism and structuralism, banished the subject in pursuit of critical power.<sup>9</sup> Because of this, it is possible to see Barthes (as others have) as circularly returning to notation armed with an account of the subject that structuralism so signally lacked in order to replace structuralism’s vision of a world made of *langue* with an account of the subject’s meaning-making capacities and embodied practices.<sup>10</sup> But by retelling the critic’s story of the finished and fixed notable notations of “The Reality Effect” from the note-taking potential writer’s point of view, Barthes actually allows us to imagine and experience the process of the formation of individual novelistic details, to view the series of junctures at which they might add and subtract different forms of meaning, without jettisoning his vision of an already-meaningful, already-linguistic world.

This might be imagined as ideology critique from the side of the producer rather than the consumer. Instead of merely showing that the distinction between the meaningful and the living is socially constructed and has a politics, in *Preparation* Barthes provides us with a more sensitive instrument for looking at how the reality effect came to be. And instead of preserving the divide between the living and the meaningful that “The Reality Effect” unwittingly replicated in the very act of critiquing it, *Preparation* offers a model—complementary to “The Reality Effect” and building, as we will show, on structuralism’s insights—for viewing realist detail as subject to change. Out of *Preparation*’s voluminous, fragmentary sets of notes thus emerges a slowed-down, unshocking, unscandalous version of the reality effect.<sup>11</sup>

Notation, for the Barthes of *Preparation*, still presents “the problem of realism” (18). In “The Reality Effect,” what at first seems to be referential meaning turns out to be ideologically laden meaning designed to produce the effect of a meaningless, found world whose “resistance to meaning” lies apart from language and signification (14). *Preparation* shares this hard-won knowledge that there is no life that is not already meaningful. So, for instance, when the note taker makes a note he is not giving linguistic form

to meaningless reality—he is not using language to represent reality or impose a shaping significance over a meaningless real. Crucially, the “life” that the note taker encounters in *Preparation* is exactly “a river of language, of uninterrupted language,” “a continuous, ongoing, sequenced text and a layered text, a histology of cut-up texts, a palimpsest” (18). Yet where “The Reality Effect” rests at this insight—in fact, this is the central, illuminating insight of “The Reality Effect”—*Preparation* slows down in order to press on.

So both “The Reality Effect” and *Preparation* know that the subject is constituted through language. The difference is that in “The Reality Effect” (as well as in *Mythologies*) the subject’s constitution through language is an ideological misrecognition of subjectivity’s relation to the real.<sup>12</sup> That is, in “The Reality Effect” the uninitiated subject imagines some of the world as meaningful and some of the world as meaningless and “live”—for this subject, the sense of the live, real world can be experienced only in opposition to meaning. Experiencing this opposition forces him or her to accept history as natural and the “real” as given. He or she then imagines that meaning making is a secondary operation that seizes upon elements of this natural, real world in order to pull them into an ideological realm of constructed meaning. Such an experience of the world precludes the possibility of the subject’s participation in the construction of the world. (This is the way bourgeois subjectivity saps you of a certain kind of agency—a sense that history is made by people. And on this model, what it offers in recompense is the mere sheen of agency, the sense that it is possible to transform the raw, meaningless material of “life” into a meaningful product, a deeply “human” ordering of the world.) In this view, the subject processes disorder into order, a really-existing world into a meaningful, cultured one. But behind all this stands an original vision of the world as real, concrete, given, and—crucially—prior to the subject. “The Reality Effect” expertly unmasks this apparent truth as an illusion, converting innocent subjects into knowing ones. In “The Reality Effect,” what you (the critical reader) know (and you learn it as though you already know it) is that there is no existence or reality prior to language. And for “The Reality Effect,” this is enough to know, the essay’s final insight.

But in *Preparation*, Barthes offers us a note taker who knows that he or she is already living in a fully meaningful world already, and knows this in a way that does not necessarily hurt, does not necessarily entail an enormous loss. His or her encounter is an encounter with surroundings that are meaningful in so far as they subjectify you. As Barthes puts it, “What happens surrounds the subject—who, moreover, only exists, and can only claim to be a subject, through this fleeting and mobile surrounding” (52). *Preparation* seeks a new account of how the subject’s everyday experience adds up to a kind of reality effect. This new reality effect might be ideologically freighted



and weighted in any imaginable way, but the bare fact that it is meaningful is no longer a scandal. In this regard, *Preparation* begins where “The Reality Effect” ends, but with a new assumption: that we might be able to trust the evidence of our senses and our experience. In *Preparation* Barthes suggests that our customary distrust of experience might be a product not of ideology critique itself, and not of the revelation that we are always already living in a fully meaningful world, but of the opposition between the living and the meaningful that “The Reality Effect” inadvertently rebuilt.

*Preparation*'s revision of “The Reality Effect” is most dramatically demonstrated (if anything in the accretive, rambling, fragmentary *Preparation* can be called dramatic) in its revisions of the exemplary details of the earlier text. Flaubert, whose *A Simple Heart* stands as the exemplary realist text in “The Reality Effect,” reappears here as a fellow note taker. The finished form of his novella gives way to the color, texture, and shape of his notebooks' covers, “oblong, in beautiful black moleskin” (91). Throughout *Preparation*, such references from “The Reality Effect” reappear in ghostly, transmuted form. Michelet, whose “little door” served as another example of realist detail, resurfaces in *Preparation* as a writer who, like Barthes, undergoes a kind of literary self-conversion when he resolves, after a “sort of flash of inspiration, or of radical impatience,” to cease work on the monarchy sections of his *History of the Middle Ages* and start “writing the *History of the Revolution* straight away” (266).<sup>13</sup> The barometer also reappears in *Preparation*. This time it is not the matter-of-fact barometer hanging on Mme Aubain's wall in *A Simple Heart*, but Proust's barometer, which morphs from the father's tool to the son's subjectivity. As Barthes quotes Proust, “And if it were not enough that I should bear an exaggerated resemblance to my father, to the extent of not being satisfied like him with consulting the barometer, but becoming an animated barometer myself” (43). From the reality-effect barometer attempting to install the illusion of the real in the unsuspecting reader, we move to the subject as a barometer, a finely attuned measuring instrument, aware of subtle changes in the environment around it, constituted—but not determined—by them.<sup>14</sup> The barometer recast offers a vision of a subject defined through its attachments, a focus not on subjectivity but intersubjectivity, on “individuation” rather than the individual.<sup>15</sup> In his revision of the details of “The Reality Effect,” Barthes develops a less terrifying and paralyzing—though not celebratory—account of the subject's constitution in language.

Was Barthes “really” writing a novel? This is the question many ask upon reading *Preparation* (and the question was in the air even before the beginning of the lecture series in 1978), but to ask it is to mistake Barthes's point.<sup>16</sup> For Barthes, the “Grand Project” of the seminar is not to write a novel, but rather to become a writer by reimagining the university as a part of his writing

life rather than a block to it.<sup>17</sup> When he first undergoes his conversion experience from critic to writer and decides to make writing his life—to emerge into writing instead of regarding it from the outside—Barthes first imagines that he will need to resign from the Collège: “to write, as if I’d never written before: to do only that → First, all of a sudden, the idea of resigning from the Collège in order to settle into a life of writing (for the lecture course often comes into conflict with writing).” But another idea quickly follows: what if, instead of setting institutional demands against a classically pure and apparently uninstitutional writing life, he could “invest the Course and Work in the same (literary) enterprise”? Such a solution, Barthes imagines, would “put a stop to the division of the subject.” He would “no longer have to keep up with all the work to be done (lectures, demands, commissions, constraints)”; instead “each moment of [his] life would henceforth be integrated into the Grand Project” (8). *Preparation of the Novel* thus introduces itself as a grand project in two senses. It documents Barthes’s “literary conversion” from critic to writer, and it provides the record of how he entered into writing by reattaching himself to the Collège—reimagining the institution as part of his self-transformation rather than experiencing the institution as a perpetually pre-existing maker of canons and obligations with which one must “keep up.” What links the two projects is Barthes’s return to notation as a practice—a practice that is not yet, and may never be, objectified by metalanguage or canonized by institutions in the form of a novel. Whereas the notation of “The Reality Effect” referred to an “outside”—of novelistic meaning, of human-made history—*Preparation* relocates notation at the contingent beginnings of novels and histories and allows us to see, in notation’s tentative form, the attachments that more finished forms belie. And where “The Reality Effect” speaks to the knowing, disillusioned reader but imagines that most of us naively live out our days in a world falsely structured by the opposition between the real and the meaningful, an opposition guaranteeing that our most cherished objects and experiences mark us out as victims of ideology, *Preparation* credits the experience of anyone who, like Barthes, may later write a novel.

### *How Should a Person Be?*

#### **Sheila Heti’s Novel of Commission**

The shift from “Reality Effect” to *Preparation* illuminates a new genre of novel emerging in the last decade: the novel of commission. As we have just argued, for Barthes the reorientation of his position from critic of the finished reality effect to writer involved in the creation of realist detail (“wanting to write”) involves a renegotiation of the way he imagines his

relationship to institutionality, a freeing of his sense that institutional bonds are fixed, external to the subject, and compulsory. For Sheila Heti and other novelists like her, successfully writing the commissioned work—the twenty-first century version of Barthes’s “Wanting-to-Write” novel—involves a similar renegotiation of the terms of novelistic realism in order to reconfigure their imagined relations to literature’s commissioning and canonizing institutions. By adding *How Should A Person Be?* to Barthes’s catalog of “Wanting-to-Write” novels, we will show how these recent novels, like Barthes in *Preparation*, focus on the process of writing rather than the finished, canonical work. This dereification of the novel, in turn, allows them to experience writing as a process that is already social and institutional in ways that do not necessarily exert a determining force on the final product, the finished novel.

Novels of commission consider the institution’s presence in the writing process, we argue, to reimagine rather than evade their institutional bonds. Novels of commission do not attempt to transgress institutionalized novelistic conventions or win freedom from the institutions of which they are a part, as do the metafictional or campus novels that Mark McGurl analyzes in *The Program Era*, his study of the post-World War II novel’s adversarial relationship to the institutions of literary culture on which it depended.<sup>18</sup> Featuring plots centered around artists who have been commissioned by various institutions (a “feminist theater company” in the case of *How Should A Person Be?*, the Fulbright Foundation in the case of Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*, a second novel we will discuss), the novel of commission suggests instead that one can only begin writing the commissioned work of art by renouncing metalanguage, including any attempts at a detached analysis of institutions. Moving from the fantasy of writing a canonical work to a realization that the preparation for writing the work in fact slowly and over time comes to constitute the work, the novel of commission follows Barthes’s own trajectory from critical position to writing position, from a form of representation defined by finished notation to a kind of writing engaged in the process of *notatio*.

*How Should A Person Be?* tells the story of how “Sheila” (the Sheila Heti character) fails to write the “play about women” commissioned from her by “a feminist theater company.”<sup>19</sup> Published by House of Anansi Press in Canada and Henry Holt in the United States, Heti’s novel itself comes, over the course of the novel’s plot, to replace the never-produced play. Instead of writing the play, Sheila begins to take notes about her everyday life, recording the series of conversations that she has with her new friend Margaux. Sheila describes the parties she attends and the walks she takes; she archives long e-mails to and from her mother, lover, and friends. Divided into five acts that are further subdivided by chapters rather than scenes, the book

preserves the ghostly form of the originally commissioned play within the novel that eventually replaces it. Toward the end of the novel, in act 4, Margaux in effect recommissions Sheila's play, commanding her to "finish it." When Sheila, "remembering my exchange with the producer" who originally commissioned the play, asks Margaux, "Does it have to be a play?," Margaux "thought for a moment, then smiled, 'No'" (236). The transcriptions of this and other conversations then become the foundation of *How Should A Person Be?*

For Barthes, the "engine" of writing can be the fantasy of a finished, canonical work—but that work is never what you really write. In *Heti*, the commissioning by a "women's theater company" of what Sheila calls "a real play, a true work of art" proves overwhelming. At the beginning of *How Should A Person Be?*—whose title encloses several subtle double meanings that flicker between product and process—Sheila's commission immobilizes her precisely because her understanding of her relationship to the commissioning institution requires the romantic, whole-cloth production of an already-canonical, expressive work of literature. Working with this model, Sheila thinks that literary production happens in two separate steps, steps that divide the living from the meaningful: first you authentically "live some," and then you go into your room and artistically write about it. She thinks that in order to write she must "cocoon herself" from the world, "leave the world for my room and emerge with the moon" (39).

While this fantasy of the finished work could be imagined as a problem for any type of art, it is particularly a malaise of the commissioned artwork, for the commissioning institutions can seem to require an impossibly pre-canonized work. Instead of the novel making its way in a literary world whose standards it might at the same time revise, the commissioned artwork in the novel of commission feels called upon to measure up to preexisting standards of representativeness and exemplarity. We might think of this as a demand for representativeness related to the genre of the novel specifically, but *How Should A Person Be?* reverses this logic: the play is discarded in favor of the novel. Further, the play was commissioned to be "about women," not even "feminist," and thus representative and exemplary rather than explicitly ideological. *How Should A Person Be?* links Sheila's new relationship with Margaux to Sheila's rediscovered ability to write. In place of a play about "women," a play that would take certain examples of women as representative of all women, *How Should A Person Be?* pursues the singularity of Sheila's experience of being *related* to Margaux, rather than regarding Margaux as a model or a copy. How to represent Margaux without making Margaux representative? This is a crucial question for *Heti's* novel.<sup>20</sup>

In attempting to give an answer, *How Should a Person Be?* suggests that relatedness is the antidote to representativeness. Sheila abandons the

commissioned play “about women” by writing a novel with Margaux rather than about her. This is not to say that *How Should a Person Be?* is co-authored in the traditional sense. Rather, Sheila begins to recognize that “Margaux was not like the stars in the sky. There was only one Margaux—not Margauxs scattered everywhere, all throughout the darkness. If there was only one Margaux, then there was not going to be a second one” (260). She understands, finally, that Margaux is valuable because Sheila values her. As Sheila explains in the novel’s closing pages, “I had never wanted to be one person, or even believed that I was one, so I had never considered the true singularity of anyone else” (260). With this renewed experience of the sociality of meaning- and value-making comes a reevaluation of their shared time together. Sheila and Margaux’s brunches, drug sessions, and idle conversations—what once seemed so many postponements of Sheila’s writing obligation—now come to constitute the preparation for this novel. In other words, Sheila solves the problem of how to represent Margaux not by locking herself in her room to craft an innovative novelistic form—one that would capture Margaux’s singularity—but by entering, like Barthes, more fully into the attachments that individuate her.

As we read about Sheila’s struggle to relate to Margaux rather than take her as representative and see how it is linked to Sheila’s struggle to write *How Should A Person Be?*, we are encouraged to move easily between “Sheila” the character and Sheila Heti the novelist. Whereas a metafictional novel might present a character’s struggle with representativeness as evidence of the author’s knowingness about the conventions of realism, Heti’s novel, like *Preparation of the Novel*, explores its own renunciation of metalanguage. In refusing to signal an outside of Sheila and Margaux’s lives, the novel dissolves the hard division between life and literature, between living in the world and writing in your room, between preparing for the novel and the finished novel itself, between a classical writing life and an embodied social life. Barthes uses the idea of notation and “the present, structurally mixed with the desire to write it” to discard this very idea (17). As he writes in *Preparation* of “the writing of the present,” “Present: to have your eyes glued to the page; how to write *at length, fluently*. . . with one eye on the page and the other on ‘what’s happening to me’? This is actually to go back to that simple and ultimately uncompromising idea that ‘literature’ . . . is always made out of ‘life.’ . . . What is intense is the life of the present, structurally mixed . . . with the desire to write it” (17). Sheila also comes to adopt this idea of structural mixing, discarding the living/meaning divide and replacing it with the idea that living and writing are the same thing—so much so that the preparation she thinks she is doing both to write the play and to avoid writing the play evolve—relatively painlessly and without “difficulty”—into the novel *How Should A Person Be?* Significantly, Barthes picks up a

poststructuralist problem here, the problem of the impossibility of immediacy and immanent meaning, and suggests that notation provides a way out, a solution to the problem. Immediacy is also a problem for Heti, central to her paralyzing conception of romantic authorship, and notation for her also turns out to be the solution.

The story of *How Should A Person Be?* thus unfolds as the story of how Sheila moves away from her reified idea of her work of art and her paralyzing relationship with the commissioning institution by joining her everyday life (hanging out with her friend Margaux, eating at the diner, going for walks and to parties, attending the celebration of “three more books of poetry in the world”) with the preparation for writing her novel (68). She does this through developing a series of techniques of what Barthes identifies as *notula* and *nota*. Eventually, this “preparation” becomes the novel—in the plot, and in real life. A central device for pulling “preparation” for the novel into the novel *How Should A Person Be?* itself consists of the transcripts Sheila makes of audio recordings of her conversations with Margaux. The transcripts are awkward and redundant, and accordingly read like talk. For example, here Sheila and Margaux discuss Sheila’s inability to finish her play:

SHEILA

(miserable) Too late now. Oh my God, Margaux, what am I going to *do*? The play’s never made any sense. It’s nonsense!

MARGAUX

How is that *possible*? You’ve been working on it for years!

SHEILA

I should have totally fucking never agreed to do this in the first place! Oh my God. Maybe I could go into our studio and just spend all day . . .

MARGAUX

I mean, I *guess* you could spend all day . . .

SHEILA

But I can’t fix the play in one day! If I can’t fix it in three years, I can’t fix it in a day! I have a real psychological block! I haven’t been able to bring myself to finish it or work on it—I don’t know why!

MARGAUX

Oh, it’s so scary. Maybe you could come up with an alternative to the play. Maybe you could think of an alternative. (61)

The prose of the transcripts is riven with unclever redundancies (“The play’s never made any sense! It’s nonsense!”), clichés (“I have a real psychological block!”) and conversational lazinesses, shortcuts, and filler (Margaux’s

echoing “I *guess* you could spend all day”). Though the novel begins with Sheila resolving to “cocoon herself” until she can produce the “true work of art, a real play,” hanging out with Margaux and having conversations like this one become more compelling to Sheila than the proposed writing regime. Eventually, the transcripts of their conversations come to replace the “real play” that Sheila never writes. Along with the many e-mails included in the novel about topics such as cleaning out the garage, personal relationships, and sex (e-mails that Heti pulls away from the literary tradition of the epistolary novel by numbering each sentence or thought like so much mere information), the transcripts enact the process of notation. Recorded with the shiny tape recorder Sheila impulsively buys from a pawn shop, transcribed into the text we find on the page, the transcripts let us watch Sheila’s—possibly Sheila Heti’s—writing process. (In an interview with the *Spectator*, Heti explains how the tape recorder allowed her to blend her living and her writing; rather than attempting to write later about experiences that she would “forget . . . before I got home,” the recording “was a way of [writing] in the moment” that introduced “a different kind of discipline and sensitivity to the world.”<sup>21</sup>)

As the transcripts slowly come to form a novel, Sheila’s friend Margaux ceases to be just a character in the novel and becomes a collaborator in its writing. *How Should A Person Be?* records the evidence of this collaboration not only within its pages but also in its paratext, the space that conducts the reader into the text, the usual space of the literary institution’s expression of rules for reading and signaling of genre. The cover wrapper of the Canadian edition of *How Should A Person Be?* includes similarly sized photo images of Margaux Williamson and Sheila Heti, suggesting a link between the Margaux and Sheila characters and the historical Margaux Williamson (whose last name appears only once, on the lips of a fan, in the novel) and Sheila Heti (whose last name appears only in the novel’s paratextual material). The novel’s cataloging-in-publication subject categories printed on its copyright page clearly mark the novel’s transcripts of conversations between Margaux and Sheila as the most important, subject-defining element. The novel’s author name authority information in this page is standard: “Heti, Sheila, 1976–.” But the novel’s two subject fields are “1. Heti, Sheila, 1976—Fiction” and “2. Williamson, Margaux—Fiction” (see fig. 1). Both cases suggest not the postmodern questioning of the fact/fiction divide, but instead an expansion of the territory in which a transition from an already meaningful life (signaled here by the already meaningful, institutionalized, and encoded standard name authority designed to unify all instances of the producer “Sheila Heti”) to a differently meaningful literary work occurs through the notation and transmission of certain details (the shift of “Sheila Heti” from author to subject).<sup>22</sup>

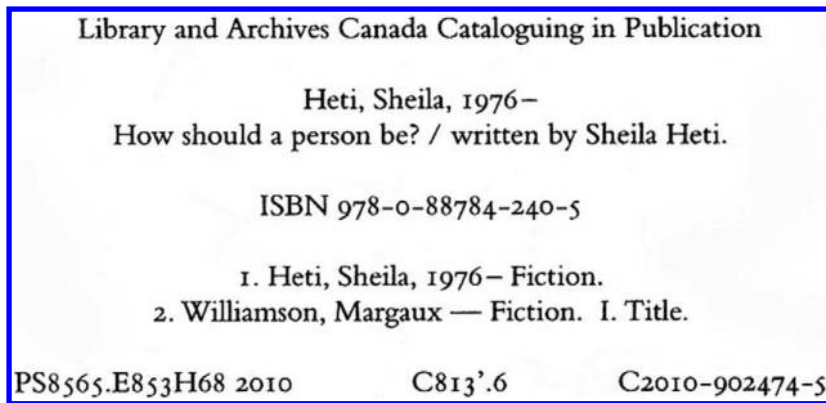


FIGURE 1. Image of the library cataloging-in-publication information from the Canadian edition of Sheila Heti’s *How Should A Person Be?* In this edition, published by House of Anansi Press (2010), subject fields contain the names of the historical Sheila Heti and Margaux Williamson with the subfield indicating “Fiction.”

### **Institutional Bonds and Preparatory Notation**

In August of 2012, the *Paris Review Daily* published an article by Anna Altman titled “Two Versions, One Heti” that compared the differences between the Canadian and the American editions of *How Should A Person Be?*<sup>23</sup> In the comments under the end of the online version of the article, a reader named tony barake dismisses Altman’s interpretations of the differences and suggests instead that Heti’s motivations for revising the American edition of *How Should A Person Be?* were entirely determined by the demands of her American publisher Henry Holt: “She changed it because the American publishers would not publish it if she did not. Simple as that I think.” The next commenter is Sheila Heti; Heti clarifies that in fact it was her idea to revise: “Hi Tony, When the American publisher (Henry Holt) bought it, they bought it intending to publish the Canadian edition. Many months later I brought up the idea of revising it and they were hesitant, liking the book as it was. So your conjecture is wrong.” In contrast to tony barake’s world, in which strong institutions determine authorial choices (in a way that renders critical commentary such as Altman’s unnecessary), Heti describes a moment of reimagining institutional relations—even though the institutions themselves might be “hesitant” about the effects—to produce a new artwork, one that doesn’t discard the previous Canadian edition but instead works in tandem with that edition to give a sense of the novel as living, changing, and responding to new institutional contexts, if not in



a direct or prescribed way. Heti uses the occasion of the American edition of her novel—a moment that could easily be represented as a battleground between authorial intention and publisher's profit-making imperative—as an opportunity to use an existing institutional apparatus to make the already-published Canadian edition of her novel even more preparatory. And she reminds us of this in the form of a very small yet radical reorientation of the critical apparatus itself, the author intervening in conversation around a critical essay on her life and works.

Both Barthes's *Preparation of the Novel* and Heti's *How Should A Person Be?*, we have argued, seek to redescribe and relive the process by which people imagine their relationships to institutions, a process that also potentially reimagines the composition of those institutions. A publishing house can potentially enforce oppressive social norms, but Heti can also imagine it as concretely and materially accommodating her vision of her novel as a preparatory, living, changing work; an institution can be imagined to include faceless administrators, but it can also be imagined to include one's friends and one's self. These projects poise themselves—like Heti's online comment on the *Paris Review Daily* article on her work—as corrections to mindsets that attribute totalizingly deterministic power to social structures and institutions. Barthes begins *Preparation* by describing his generation's reception and practice of Marxism and literary critical positivism in these terms, but he seems most interested—as does Heti—in how the budding novelist may suffer from a similar tendency to remain in thrall to institutions to the detriment of her own “wanting to write” and, indeed, her own ability to experience personhood through her relations with the world. In place of this tendency to regard—either critically or admiringly—institutions as deterministic commissioners and canonizers, Heti and Barthes attempt to reimagine institutions as accommodating the preparations of their work. Barthes dubs this recalibration the “Grand Project”—grand not in the scope of its design, but in its attempt to dissolve and rewrite the conceptual boundaries by which we organize our lives. It would be much easier, perhaps, to revalue the humanist individual and her luminous work of art as a check on overweening institutions. Instead, Barthes and Heti explore the lived relationship between individuals and their surroundings—writers and the institutions of which they are a part—an exploration requiring a more hesitant and preparatory form.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* suggests why this “Grand Project” of reimagining our relationships to institutions is so crucial for the novel today. McGurl describes the increasingly central role that literary institutions—particularly the university—have played in the post-World War II literary world. Not only are many post-World War II American novelists graduates of MFA programs, but English departments have also provided those novels with their readerships by taking them as objects of research and criticism.

McGurl describes how postwar novelists have struggled with the shame of their institutional sustenance, and attempted to reach “outside” the university, either by writing “real life” instead or by producing knowing, self-reflexive campus novels. Yet, as McGurl explains, these novelists’ disdain for their institutional origins ironically confirmed their institutionality, since the university (run by a similar class of intellectuals) had long since internalized anti-institutionality as a core institutional value (48). To deride the institution or attempt to escape it is to be institutional.<sup>24</sup>

Another recent novel of commission, Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*, opens with a scene that illustrates this historical impasse of institutional critique.<sup>25</sup> Lerner’s protagonist, Adam, arrives at the Prado museum high on hash—part of his slacker morning routine during his Fulbright-funded year in Madrid—and is flustered to find that a strange man has taken his usual place in front of Rogier Van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*. Adam watches as the man stands looking at the painting before suddenly bursting into tears and “convulsively catching his breath.” A few minutes later, the man moves to the next room and, Adam recounts, “totally lost his shit” in front of a Bosch painting (9). Adam observes the man with growing skepticism, never having had what he refers to as a “*profound experience of art*” himself (8).

Unable to identify with the crying man, Adam identifies instead with the nearby museum guard who, like Adam, nervously wonders whether the man is crazy or aesthetically moved. Adam empathizes with the guard, whose job requires him to regard oddly acting museum patrons suspiciously, as potential threats to the works of art, even as the prestige of his job derives from the possibility that these paintings can provoke profound, dramatically expressed experiences. Like the guard, Adam’s institutional position as a poet and a Fulbright fellow derives its prestige from the possibility of art’s profundity. At the start of the novel Adam can only experience his institutionality as disenchanting—indeed, this disenchantment gives him the knowingness to place “*profound experience of art*” in italics. The novel suggests that Adam’s Bourdieuvian self-reflexivity—his awareness that any profound experience of art he might have could be interpreted as merely serving to bolster his own prestige—presents an obstacle that Adam must overcome in order to write his commissioned poem.<sup>26</sup> Further, Adam’s skepticism and the “*profound experience of art*” that he has never had come to seem like two sides of the same coin—both derive from reified visions of institutions as either producing the illusion of art’s value or objectively recognizing it when it shines out from within the artwork.<sup>27</sup>

Lerner’s novel of commission, like *How Should A Person Be?*, begins with Adam’s paralyzing idea of the absent, inaccessible real work of art—and the reified ideal of the institution that creates it—and then moves toward a more uneven and lived experience of institutional bonds. *How Should A Person Be?*

models this less reified vision of institutions in a scene where Margaux and Sheila visit Margaux's exhibit at Art Basel Miami Beach. At Art Basel, Sheila becomes overwhelmed by the sheer volume of art "just laid out to speak for itself like cereal boxes on supermarket shelves, but without even the words" (94). Absent the "words"—those critical judgments and contextualizing materials through which we typically approach artworks—the "art and artists" start "blurring together" for Sheila (94). She suggests that they haven't yet seen any "truly great" work. Margaux vehemently disagrees: "Well, *of course* there are people here that are really truly great! But how could you see that? Like, for instance, if Takashi Murakami had one of his sculptures here, you wouldn't know how good it was" (94). "You don't think?," asks Sheila. Margaux's reply dismantles Sheila's myth of the "real" work of art whose greatness shines out of it like the moon: "No! Both of us have read these extensive articles about him. Like of course if you saw *one piece* by Takashi Murakami—but we have such nuances because of articles and context and because we've seen his past work and, you know" (95). For Margaux, the surrounding activity and output of critics, commentators, interpreters, viewers, fans, and readers—and the fact that this work, together, produces artistic greatness—is not a Bourdieuvian scandal to be disavowed (as it is for Sheila at this point in the novel), but a part of the social life of artistic production. "These extensive articles" on Murakami have been part of a social process through which Murakami has been built into a "truly great" artist.<sup>28</sup>

Margaux has an account of how Murakami's work becomes valuable and meaningful through the collective operations of groups of people. Margaux sees "these extensive articles" on Murakami just as Heti sees the e-mails and transcripts that form the body of her novel: as preparatory work offering a view into the production of literary and artistic works as we encounter them. This is not to say that *How Should A Person Be?* celebrates the social process through which hegemony is reproduced. Margaux as a character and *How Should A Person Be?* as a novel are quite aware of the problematically differential power relations involved in the social production of artistic and literary value. But by refusing to be sidetracked by the scandal of these relations into the loop of the metalanguage required to analyze them, and by tracking how meaning and value accrue around artworks and models of personhood through the ways that people take note of and pay attention to them, this novel offers the possibility of what Barthes terms "a differential in referential resonance" (34). In other words, for both Barthes and Heti, preparatory notation makes visible how things become ideological on a local rather than a global scale. It shows us the specific, varied, paths through which details, references, and symbols become conventional or canonical.

In "The Reality Effect," what we gain in critical power over the ideological nature of meaning we lose in detail. As we argued in our opening

section, once Barthes raises the realist detail to the level of the rest of the novel, the result is an undifferentiated order of meaning; all detail simply says “I am the real.” Barthes’s structuralist criticism pauses, for a decade, with this revelatory insight—that what seemed simply to belong to a found world was actually meaningful. Not until *Preparation* can we begin to see how things in the world (and not just the novel) can be differentially meaningful. In *Preparation* Barthes returns the details of Flaubert’s barometer and Michelet’s little door to us in idiosyncratic, changed form—he notices the barometer now in Proust, and takes Michelet as a model for entering into writing. These details, presented in the form of notes from a course instead of a polished critical article or a published novel, release us from the canonical weight of Flaubert, Michelet, and “The Reality Effect” itself to explore instead a “minimal act of enunciation, ultrashort form, an atom of a sentence that *notes* (marks, delimits, glorifies: endows with a *fama*) a tiny element of ‘real,’ present, concomitant life” (23). *Preparation* suggests that rather than rejecting ideology critique, we can instead isolate more precisely what has come to trouble us about some forms of ideology critique in recent years: their tendency to reinstall the opposition between the living and the meaningful, the opposition Barthes so clearly identified in “The Reality Effect” as an operation crucial to the functioning of ideology itself (and crucial also to its accompanying need to operate in a framework defined by an opposition between individuals and institutions). Rather than seeing *Preparation* as a rejection of some of Barthes’s major theoretical contributions, as have some, we see it offering us a slowed-down, more durable reality effect, a reality effect that takes literally and seriously the insight “The Reality Effect” offers us into the preexisting meaningfulness of our—or the novel’s—encounters with the world. Preparatory, institution-revising novels of commission like *How Should a Person Be?* are not the fulfillment of Barthes’s failure to write a novel. He didn’t fail, because *Preparation*, like *How Should A Person Be?*, reimagines its relations to the institution that initiates it and offers a different—preparatory—work in place of the more canonical one originally imagined. But in their incorporation of preparatory materials these novels of commission, like Barthes’s *Preparation of the Novel*, let us experience representation as a part of life in a way that leaves us wanting to write.

## Notes

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We wish to thank the American Comparative Literature Association 2013 “New Sociologies of Literature” seminar, organized by David Alworth, for their

- generous engagement with the earliest version of this article. Nicholas de Villiers put his Barthes expertise at our disposal. Eric Song, Elaine Freedgood, and Cannon Schmitt provided careful and generative feedback on our later drafts.
1. The barometer in “A Simple Heart” was then also taken up by Fredric Jameson’s “The Realist Floor-Plan,” in part a rejoinder to “The Reality Effect.” See “The Realist Floor-Plan,” in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore, 1985), 373–83.
  2. Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge, 1982), 12.
  3. If for Fredric Jameson the emulation-inspiring properties of Barthes’s sentences tend to “a virtual canonization of the fragment,” we might read this as a similar move. Fredric Jameson, “The Ideology of the Text,” *Salmagundi* 31/32 (October 1975): 209.
  4. Jameson notes “the tension between the semiotic and semioclastic aims in *S/Z*,” a tension also characteristic of “The Reality Effect”; *ibid.*, 212.
  5. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 11. At this point Barthes, ventriloquizing the structuralists, asks rhetorically, “What would any method be worth which did not account for the whole of its object?”
  6. Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs, ed. Nathalie Léger (New York, 2011), 8. Barthes taught four lecture courses—“How to Live Together,” “The Neutral,” and “Preparation of the Novel I and II”—at the Collège from 1977 to 1980 as Chair of Literary Semiology. These courses were open to the public. In 2002–2003 Eric Marty oversaw the publication of these courses using Barthes’s handwritten lecture notes and student audio recordings of the lectures. (Throughout this article we will use “Preparation” to refer to the historical event of the lectures and *Preparation* to refer to the published edition of Barthes’s lecture notes.) For background on the Collège and Barthes’s teaching style, see Lucy O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool, 2012). As O’Meara argues, all of four of Barthes’s lectures see him turning away from criticism toward expressive writing: “By 1977,” O’Meara writes, “the status of Barthes’ writing was no longer considered to be purely critical” (167).
  7. For more on the materiality of Barthes’s own writing practices, see Jean-Louis Rambuere, *Comment travaillent les écrivains* (Paris, 1978), translated into English as “An Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments” in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews, 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley, 1991). Cited in *Preparation*.
  8. Some of Barthes’s claims in *Preparation* seem to align him with a whole range of variously framed turns away from “ideology critique” and historicism toward “form” and “literature” in Anglo-American literary criticism of the past ten years, assertions like his claim that he is doing literary theory but not a systematic theory, that “I’ll be speaking for myself and not in the place of science, I’ll be asking questions of myself as one who loves literature” might superficially remind us of these debates (130). But as we show here, Barthes’s 1979 text in fact suggests a major reframing of these debates. First, it suggests that we jettison the critique/postcritique opposition structuring these debates (since these are disclosed by Barthes to be merely two sides of an argument that can’t escape a static model of representation, as evidenced by its obsession with the surface/depth metaphor) in favor of a model that can build on the insights of structuralism and the ideology critique it enabled—that we are always already in a world of meaning—without constantly lapsing into the revelatory mode of the repeated insight that what you thought was real is actually representation. This is what is at

- stake for Barthes when he emphasizes that he will be speaking for himself as one who loves literature, and that “Ideology is always Other People.”
9. In *Empire of Meaning*—a title that suggests a turn to the world after Barthesian semiotics—one that we argue Barthes himself inaugurated in *Preparation*), François Dosse describes the generation of intellectuals after poststructuralism as concerned with “the search for a third way between the prevalence of pure lived experience and the priority of conceptualization” (xvii); François Dosse, *Empire of Meaning: The Humanization of the Social Sciences* (Minneapolis, 1999).
  10. Thus Jurgen Pieters and Kris Pint see the late Barthes of the lecture courses as attempting to take the “desiring and enjoying body of the individual reader” as the basis for a new semiology. Jurgen Pieters and Kris Pint, “An Unexpected Return: Barthes’s Lectures at the Collège de France,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 2.
  11. In this we depart from the assessments of critics like Jonathan Culler and Antoine Compagnon, who have read *Preparation* as Barthes’s rejection of the most radical and promising aspects of his earlier thought. Opening his essay “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” Compagnon sees Barthes at the end of the lecture course as admitting his own failure: “What should the conclusion to this course be?—‘The Work itself,’ Barthes asked and answered on February 23. . . . But the course ended without the work: ‘Alas, as for what concerns me, there is no question of it: I cannot pull any Work out of my hat, and most obviously not this Novel, whose Preparation I wanted to analyze’” (23). For Compagnon, these words “amounted to an admission” that Barthes had attempted and failed to pen an actual novel (23). To us, they suggest an untriumphant triumph, for to produce the “Work” as a neatly packaged product punctuating the end of the course would be exactly to surrender preparation to the canonical literary work. Antoine Compagnon and Rosalind Krauss, “Roland Barthes’s Novel,” *October* 112 (April 1, 2005): 23–34. For Jonathan Culler too, *Preparation* represents a renunciation of *écriture* in favor of the work, the writerly in favor of the readerly, and an unambiguous repudiation of the primacy of language. As he concludes his essay “Preparing the Novel,” “In *La Préparation du roman*, language, the sense that engagement with language is what is crucial, has dropped out and Barthes now seems to champion literature, *l’oeuvre*, against *texte*” (119). Jonathan Culler, “Preparing the Novel: Spiraling Back,” *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 109–20. For both Compagnon and Culler, the fact that in his final lecture Barthes describes the novel he might one day write with the terms “simple,” “obedient,” and “desirable” seems like a major betrayal of his earlier work. And more broadly, for Compagnon *Preparation* reads as part of a larger narrative of Barthes’s turn at the end of his life to a conservative position on the preservation of canonical, classical French literature against the incursions of modernity.
  12. Even in *Mythologies* we find the beginning of a (slightly embarrassed) sense that some myths are better than or preferable to others, a sense that requires a bit of a producer-side, *Preparation* view of meaning: preferring butter over margarine, wood over plastic, as Barthes does, is an indication that one can to some degree choose one’s ideologies.
  13. Barthes quotes Michelet on this shift from more objective history writing to subjective experience: “I will not understand the centuries of monarchy if first, above all, I do not establish within myself the soul and the faith of the people” (*Preparation*, 267).
  14. Eve Sedgwick, in “The Weather in Proust,” considers the barometer passage as characteristic of Proust (and evocative of Melanie Klein’s object relations

- psychoanalysis) in that “a creature is seen as plunging vitally into, navigating through, or resting in the midst of an element—water, air—that constitutes as well as surrounds and supports it” (13). Though Sedgwick’s reading sounds very much like Barthes’s sense, quoted earlier, that one is subjected by one’s “fleeting and mobile surrounding” (and though Barthes likewise discusses the weather in *Preparation*, 34–44) Sedgwick does not appear to have read *Preparation*; Sedgwick, “The Weather in Proust,” in *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, 2011), 1–41.
15. Barthes, *Preparation*, 43, 52.
  16. Barthes first publicly mentioned his intention to write a novel at the 1977 conference “Prétexte: Roland Barthes” (*Preparation*, 411n3). He kept a red folder titled “Vita Nova” containing eight sketches for a novel at the time of his death (included in *Preparation*, 389–406). Yet we agree with Diana Knight that Barthes’s novel existed primarily as a fantasy that belonged to the order of the *Plus tard* rather than the present. See Diana Knight, “Idle Thoughts: Barthes’s *Vita Nova*,” in “Roland Barthes,” ed. Diana Knight, special issue, *Nottingham French Studies* 36, no. 1 (1997): 88–98.
  17. In her introduction to *Preparation*, Nathalie Léger speculates about how much more “impersonal,” and “institutional” Barthes’s teaching must have felt after his move to the Collège de France (*Preparation*, xxi). But Lucy O’Meara describes Barthes’s attempt to make the Collège seminar collaborative, writing that “the attempt at a collaborative activity cannot truly be accomplished within the monologic lecture format, but it is important to Barthes to insist that his lecturing is discreet, incomplete, and non-didactic”; O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France*, 10.
  18. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).
  19. Sheila Heti, *How Should A Person Be?* (Toronto, 2010), 39–40. Except where we specify otherwise, we refer throughout to the Canadian edition of the novel first published by House of Anansi Press in 2010. At the beginning of section four of this essay we briefly discuss questions of variations between the Canadian and American editions of the novel.
  20. The novel presents Sheila’s struggle to relate to Margaux (rather than copy her) as both a living and a writing problem in chapter 10, “Two Dresses.” Sheila and Margaux’s relationship is endangered when Sheila buys the same yellow dress as Margaux. Sheila connects her embarrassing social mimesis with her use of Margaux’s words (“her words”) to write her play. In the aftermath of the yellow dress incident, Sheila temporarily gives up on her play and Margaux temporarily gives up on her painting. As the novel continues, Sheila comes to relate to Margaux—to care about her, to see her as special and valuable not for her qualities but because “there was only one Margaux”—rather than see her as representative or exemplary just as Sheila herself begins to feel like a person. See “Two Dresses” in *How Should A Person Be?*, 106–7.
  21. Jonathan McAloon, “Sheila Heti: ‘I did worry that putting sex in the book would eclipse everything else,’” *Spectator*, May 31, 2013, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2013/05/sheila-heti-i-did-worry-putting-sex-in-the-book-would-eclipse-everything-else/>.
  22. By contrast, in the US Henry Holt edition the subject category draws from the content of the novel, whose subject is now considered to be—ironically given that the novel’s narrative about the failure of Heti’s play—“Women dramatists—Fiction.” See figure 2.

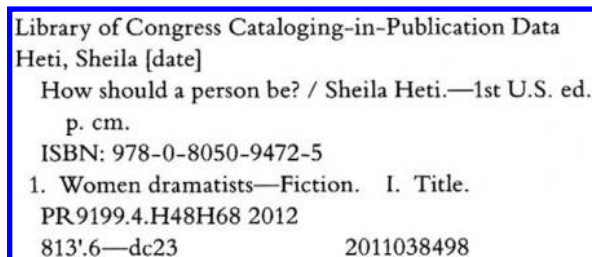


FIGURE 2. Image of library cataloging-in-publication information from the US edition of Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person Be?* published by Henry Holt (2012). The subject field here has now become "Women dramatists—Fiction."

23. Anna Altman, "Two Versions, One Heti," *Paris Review Daily*, July 27, 2012, <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/07/27/two-versions-one-heti/>.
24. Like novels of commission, McGill's *The Program Era* itself may be seen as attempting to consider the institution's role in the writing process as crucial but nondetermining. Even as it documents the post-World War II novel's institutional shame, *The Program Era* attempts in its own method to see institutions not as marginal and embarrassing but as constitutive of our selves (xii).
25. Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis, 2011).
26. Like Heti's novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station* preserves traces of the form and genre imposed by the commissioning institution. As Heti's novel is divided into acts that echo the never-finished play, Lerner's novel is divided into five sections, while its protagonist, Adam, organizes his time in Madrid into successive "stages of research." Adam's "stages of research" ironically emphasize the research on the Spanish Civil War he fails to undertake but also suggest a sense of everyday experience as a kind of research into the world. And like Heti's novel too, Lerner ends on a note of recommission, in which the institutional relations between artist and commissioning or sanctioning institution are remade as a friendship. After Adam's embarrassing failure to name more than two Spanish poets at his official Fulbright-sanctioned end-of-fellowship reading, a more informal launch of a chapbook of his poems "letterpressed on Italian paper, hand sewn" (with translations into Spanish by his friend Teresa and published by Adam's chance-met wealthy Italian friends at their gallery), includes the Fulbright officer Maria Jose. ("I'd received an e-mail Maria Jose sent out to all the fellows informing them about the event. Come celebrate a wonderful accomplishment, etc." [179].) The novel ends with Teresa agreeing with Adam to "swap parts in the reading" and a prospective fantasy about what is about to happen: "Teresa would read the originals and I would read the translations and the translations would become the originals as we read. Then I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends" (181).
27. James Wood, in his *New Yorker* review of Lerner's novel (republished as a blurb on the back of the paperback edition), regards this loop as a tribute to the novel's intelligence, rather than an impasse Adam must overcome; he writes that "it is one of the paradoxes of this cunning book that what might seem a skeptically postmodern comedy is also an earnestly old-fashioned seeker of the real"; James Wood, "Reality Testing," *New Yorker*, October 31, 2011, 96.



28. Sheila and Margaux's conversation might return us to the museum scene in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. For while Adam worries that he is incapable of having "a profound experience of art" and feels "intensely suspicious" of people who themselves claim such experiences, he does have one zone in which he can experience the aesthetic beauty of poetry: the academic critical essay. He explains, "I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility" (9). Though Adam reports this as evidence of his inadequacy as a poet, in light of Heti's Art Basel scene it begs for redescription. Encountering lines of poetry held within the embrace of prose written in codified form and then institutionally assigned in the context of the literature course gives Adam an experience of the way institutional bonds and practices build, in his own words, the "possibility" of literary meaning. But caught within a Bourdieuvian framework for understanding the individual's relation to the institution, Adam can only interpret his experience of aesthetic appreciation through literary criticism as an embarrassing failure. Adam fails entirely to see what Margaux sees so clearly (and what Lerner and Heti see at different focal lengths), that the critical apparatus surrounding the work of art offers us access to the durable, everyday ways art comes into being in tandem with the creation of that art's socially, collaboratively created meaning and value.