

“Let that be known”: Knowledge and Narrative Order in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*

Alexandra Wagner

[T]he only biography is of an unproductive life. Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The Text can recount nothing: it takes my body elsewhere.

Roland Barthes

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century can be characterized as an age of experimentation in autobiographical genres and modes of self-expression. Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), as well as its sequel, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), and Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* (1938) are three of the best-known experimental autobiographies. Nowadays there are autobiographies and memoirs in the form of graphic novels, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006); highly fictionalized accounts, such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2006); and, not to forget, the brief, somewhat autobiographical statements on Facebook. One of the canonical texts that truly plays with the conventions of the autobiographical genre and disturbs our expectations and notions of what an autobiographical text may be is Roland Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* ([1977] 1989a). It was first published in France in 1975 and the

first English edition appeared two years later in a translation by Richard Howard. The French original was published in a series by Éditions du Seuil called *écrivains de toujours* (Smith 1994, 126). As Heinrich Detering (1998) has pointed out, Barthes' text was the only one in the series actually written by the author about himself—*par lui-même*, as the series' subtitle says (879).

Although neither the cover nor the text contains any generic description like "memoir" or "autobiography," *Barthes par Barthes* is usually read autobiographically. In fact, the text is frequently referred to for information about Barthes' life or his writing. Nonetheless, nearly all commentators and researchers agree on the unconventional and rather unusual way in which the text presents itself. For example, Paul Jay (1984) calls it an "anti-autobiography" and says that it does not belong to a genre (20); John Paul Eakin (1999) similarly describes the text as possessing an "antiautobiographical desire" (136), and Linda Anderson (2001) goes so far as to characterize the text as "probably the most famous attempt to write an autobiography 'against itself'" (70).

One of the main reasons for perceiving *Barthes par Barthes* in such a way is the rather atypical organization of the text—the order of its single elements and its structure as a whole. The rather large number of photos included is, by contrast, not so unusual. In fact, many recent autobiographies and memoirs by popular public figures feature numerous accompanying photographs. But Barthes's work deviates from these more conventional texts in the position of the photographs and the comments accompanying them: the pictures appear at the beginning, on about the first 40 pages of the book. They are followed by about 140 pages of fragments, as Barthes calls them, which are alphabetically sorted and vary greatly in length: some are only a few lines long, while others are up to two pages long. After these fragments, in the third and last part of the book (Thomas R. Smith distinguishes four parts in Barthes' text, while here it is analyzed as a three-part structure), there is another picture, a tabular curriculum vitae, a list of all the pictures, and a short epilogue. The original French edition also contains a table of contents that lists all the fragments and their titles. Considering all of that, it becomes clear that not only the alphabetically sorted fragments but also their relationship to the other textual and photographic elements of the book are unusual, so much so that it is necessary to ask what the function of the particular order of the text is with regard to the main topic of the text: writing and the writing process as a means for producing meaning and knowledge.

In contrast to most autobiographers, Barthes did not choose time or space as dominant principles of organization in his autobiographical text,

instead utilizing a particular arrangement of pictures and alphabetically sorted texts. Nevertheless, *Barthes par Barthes*'s overarching theme—writing—is not unconventional and is, to a certain extent, a typical subject in writers' autobiographies. Writing is the text's central subject matter and its repeated point of reference and in his text Barthes continuously discusses, negotiates, and speaks about its order. Writing and the order of the text are interrelated aspects of Barthes' attempt to write about himself. Barthes is concerned with the order of the single elements of his text because writing about oneself always is a question of selection, structuring what one remembers, and coherence. These questions are even more relevant for Barthes because he eventually aims precisely at *avoiding* an overall meaning and a coherent storyline about himself. In this regard, the alphabetical order of *Barthes par Barthes*'s main section plays a crucial role and creates a specific tension: while the alphabet has been *the* conventional mode for organizing knowledge from Diderot's encyclopedia until today's online lexica, Barthes uses an alphabetical order for structuring single texts about himself, his writing, and the writing process for exactly the opposite reason. He aims at avoiding totality; he wants to circumvent coherence and stress that 'last words' can never be spoken about oneself—or in Barthes' own words: "because we have different knowledge today than yesterday [. . . w]hat I write about myself is never the last word" (120).

Therefore, this essay argues that the order of Barthes's text is not only interrelated with his central concern (writing and the writing process), but that the organization of the text illustrates how autobiographical practices of knowledge production—or the attempt to avoid such knowledges—are especially and closely related to the form of the text and the genre in which that practice takes place.

"THE FIGURATIONS OF THE BODY'S PREHISTORY"—THE ORDER OF IMAGES IN *ROLAND BARTHES PAR ROLAND BARTHES*

After the very first image—a blurry photograph of the narrator's mother—and the title and copyright pages, Barthes advises his readers in an epigraph that what is to follow "must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel" (Barthes [1977] 1989a, 1). Barthes is very much concerned with how his text is read. Therefore, after the next picture—a photo of Bayonne where he spent his childhood—he explains the structure of his text. He starts with "To begin with, some images" (3) and directly after that refers to the very end of his text and describes how the pictures that will follow are "the author's treat to himself, for finishing his book" (3). Not only the

beginning and end of the writing process, but also the very process itself, are featured prominently in this first sentence. Writing appears as a kind of work (Barthes uses the word *labor*), something one rewards oneself for, and writing is staged as a practice different from that of presenting or taking photographs. Barthes makes another distinction of great importance for the structure of his book and for the order of its components: the photographs and the alphabetically-sorted fragments. He explains that he includes only those photographs in his book that feature “the figurations of the body’s prehistory—of that body making its way toward the labor and the pleasure of writing” (3). This means, as he explains further, that the section with the photographs only includes pictures from his “unproductive life” (3):

Once I produce, once I write, it is the Text itself which (fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity. The text can recount nothing. It takes my body elsewhere, far from my imaginary person, toward a kind of memoryless speech which is already the speech of the People . . . even if I am still separated from it by my way of writing. The image repertoire will therefore be closed at the onset of productive life . . . Another repertoire will then be constituted: that of writing. And for that repertoire to be displayed (as is the intention of this book) without ever being hampered, validated, justified by the representation of an individual with a private life and a civil status, for that repertoire to be free of its own, never figurative signs, the text will follow without images, except for those of the hand that writes. (3f.)

This passage is crucial with regard to the function of the order of the single elements in *Barthes par Barthes* for producing and/or avoiding the formation of knowledge and meaning. While other autobiographers may generally be motivated to make an example of their life story, to relate what they have achieved in a certain field or to describe as detailed as possible their memories of events, places, and people, Barthes’s aims are somewhat different. As he says in the passage quoted above, the first part of his book contains an “image-repertoire” while in the second part of the book “another repertoire will then be constituted: that of writing” (4). He finally stresses that it is his plan to “display” that repertoire. No word about telling a life story and nothing about the meaning of his life or similar inclinations that we find in many other autobiographies can we find here; only the wish to show or demonstrate his writing is particularly evident. As Nicole

Seifert (2008) argues with regard to the autobiographical genre of the diary, many diarists use their journals as notebooks or sketchbooks for trying out new ways or different styles of writing (192). Such a motivation is rather unconventional among writers of autobiographies, but Barthes seems to strive for something exactly like that: displaying what he is capable of as a writer and showing as much as possible the registers of his writing. In this respect, his text is also similar to the approach of an encyclopedia that aims at presenting and displaying (rather than evaluating or confirming) the knowledge available at certain times and in certain fields.

The quoted passage also links *Barthes par Barthes* with one of the author's first published texts that appeared in the same series, *Michelet par lui-même* (1992), which is written in a similar style and is also concerned with a certain way of speaking and writing—the Speech of the People. The French Historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874), who wrote the nineteen-volume *Histoire de France* (1833–67), differed from earlier historians because he always searched for what was termed the Speech of the People, though he never succeeded in accomplishing such a way of speaking. The last words Barthes ([1954] 2000) cites in *Michelet* illustrate what the writer described earlier as Michelet's "final failure" (188)—Michelet is not able to speak *how* he wanted speak:

I was born of the people, I have the people in my heart. The monuments of its olden days have been my delight. . . . But the people's language, its language was inaccessible to me. I have not been able to make the people speak. (199)

Why did Michelet not succeed? Why is, according to Barthes, the Speech of the People an "impossible language" ([1954] 2002, 188)? Barthes explains that speaking like "the People" is for Michelet "life reduced to its principles, the world unified in one incorruptible kind" (188); it is "the key substance, the life substance which permits overcoming contradictions" (187). The Speech of the People is in Michelet's writing and thinking "a superior means of knowledge" (187).

Barthes in *Michelet* displays the historian's "repertoire of writing" and notion of the Speech of the People in a similar ways as his own writing in *Barthes par Barthes* through the means of extensive quotations, pictures, and explaining commentaries. Mentioning the Speech of the People in *Barthes par Barthes*, the author not only references his own earlier piece of writing about Jules Michelet but once more links notions of knowledge

production with a particular kind of writing and speaking. While Michelet saw—as Barthes says—in the Speech of the People “a superior means of knowledge” (187), Barthes in his text about himself positions writing at the other end of this spectrum: in his opinion the “last text” is always “a *further* text, the last of the series, not the ultimate in meaning: *text upon text*, which never illuminates anything” (120). Barthes rejects the notion of an overall principle or a way of speaking that has overall validity and allows for deeper insights or greater knowledge just through the means of writing. More than two decades after writing about Michelet, Barthes is writing about himself. As Ben Stoltzfus (1996) observes, *Barthes par Barthes* has “a Lacanian flavor” (139) and the text proposes a notion of writing that includes the discourse of the other and as a highly desire-driven practice. Barthes appears to argue that writing (about oneself) “has a certain corporeality” (Stoltzfus 1996, 139)—that it is a bodily practice.

Nevertheless, the body is not simply there in Barthes writing, but he structures his text according to different representation of the body. While quotes from Michelet’s own texts, pictures of Michelet and his relatives, and passages written by Barthes himself alternate with each other in *Michelet*, the author in *Barthes par Barthes*, written after *Le Plaisier du Texte* (1973), carefully distinguishes the images of his body (first section of the text), from the pictures of the “hand that writes” (second section), and from those images showing the body and his notion of writing as a pleasure and a bodily desire in the last and third section of *Barthes par Barthes*. While the pictures seem to allow for “narrative continuity” (Barthes 1989a, 4), “the Text itself,” in contrast, “(fortunately) dispossesses me of my narrative continuity” (4). The text, as Barthes goes on to explain, takes his “body elsewhere” (4) before, eventually, the last section of the book opens with the phrase “[t]o write the body” (180), which does not contain any photographs but an anatomic drawing, facsimiles of doodles and a comment about desire in Barthes’s handwriting. Separating photographs, the text and “the writing of body” from one another, is a textual strategy that finally allows Barthes to withhold subjectivity from the second part of the text.

Writing *Michelet* was, in several ways, a bodily experience. As Jonathan Culler ([1983] 2002) argues, Barthes supposedly read all of Michelet’s writing when he was in a sanatorium, copying out all the passages and sentences that pleased him or struck him as important (30f.). Culler suggests that the “textual pleasure, which leads Barthes to write around and about these texts, is linked to the body. A link is posited between writing and corporeal

experiences of space and substance” (34). In *Barthes par Barthes*, the bodily experience is clearly expressed in the first part of the text—in the image-repertoire that ends with the “onset of productive life” (4), which serves as Barthes’s “treat to himself, for finishing his book” (3). The second part is supposed to display Barthes’s writing, whose meanings are endless and therefore are not shown alongside pictures that show bodily experiences such as pleasure (26), boredom, or distress (25).

The first forty pages containing photographs eventually start (after the introductory remarks I have just discussed at length) with a photograph of Barthes in the arms of his mother around 1923, as the list of illustrations in the very last section of *Barthes par Barthes* indicates (185), when he was about eight years old. Other images of his forebears and other childhood pictures, as well as pictures of houses and streets, follow. But the pictures are not arranged in a strictly chronological order that would be typical for a picture-section of an autobiographical text. The order of the pictures is, for example, interrupted on the pages where Barthes speaks about boredom in the annotation accompanying the photograph (24) and therefore found it necessary to also include two pictures from his later life that illustrate boredom and the distress it causes while lecturing (25) and at a panel discussion (25).

The last pictures in this section again feature Barthes later in his life, in 1970 (37) and at desks and tables that are “patiently adapted to the pleasure of painting, writing, sorting” (38). These images seem to introduce what is about to come—the texts about his productive life, as he calls them. After these pictures a photograph of palm trees follows (40) and we can read the words “[t]oward writing” (41), a phrase after which Barthes comments both on the Greek notion that “trees are alphabets” (41) and the love poem “Fichtenbaum und Palme” by the German poet Heinrich Heine in which a hemlock tree dreams of a palm tree. Two pages later, the writing finally begins with the first letter of the alphabet and the keyword “Active/reactive” (43).

The pictures and their descriptions and comments are thus much more than a framework for the “actual autobiographical account” in the second part of the text. On the contrary, the pictures—as Barthes himself says—*are* the actual autobiography because “the only biography is of an unproductive life” (3), whereas a productive life can only be represented in writing—which is to follow in the book’s second part.

The last photograph (42) was taken in Paris in 1974, at the time when Barthes was completing or had just finished his text. It shows the author lighting himself a cigarette with his left hand. The corresponding comment

tersely reads, “Left-handed” (42). This picture is not only another photograph of Barthes—positioned exactly at the boundary between photographs and fragments, between the first and second part—but rather, it introduces “the hand that writes” (4), or, to be more precise, the hand that has written what we as readers are about to read in the following pages.

**“AT CERTAIN MOMENTS THE ALPHABET CALLS YOU TO ORDER”—
THE ALPHABETICAL ORDER OF BARTHES’S FRAGMENTS**

As already mentioned, Barthes himself is very much concerned with the “order of things” in his text. Especially in the second part of his text, the order of its elements is a recurring subject. “At certain moments the alphabet calls you to order,” he explains in the fragment “*Ordre je ne me souviens plus*—The order I no longer remember” (148). Further on, he explains that the “alphabetical order erases everything, banishes every origin” (148). Because Barthes wants to make sure that the text’s elements do “not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning” (148), he uses the alphabetical order: “It is in order to halt, to deflect, to divide this descent of discourse toward a destiny of the subject, that at certain moments the alphabet calls you to order . . .” (148).

In these fragments—as Barthes terms them—he speaks about himself in both the third and the first person and repeatedly quotes from his own earlier works. Thus the fragments serve as a story of his writing rather than as a life story. Barthes investigates his own writings, the writing process, and knowledge as a result of this process. Writing is his recurring subject and many of the fragments contain references to the act of writing or are somewhat elaborate discussions of particular questions concerning the writing process, such as in fragments like “*La phrase*—The sentence” (104) or “*La machine de l’écriture*—The writing machine” (110). It is actually fairly convincing to look at these fragments as an exhibition or display of Barthes writing with regard to certain themes and formal aspects of the text: he tries out different voices and perspectives (third and first person), he covers a wide range of topics, and he quotes own older texts.

The seemingly random order of the alphabet serves such a purpose well—it does, at first glance, spare its author the effort of having to reconstruct their original writing date or to establish any other kind of order. Using the alphabet as sorting mechanism or ordering principle makes one compare Barthes’ text with other texts that usually employ such an order: telephone books, dictionaries, lexicons, or encyclopedias. In these kinds of texts, the alphabetical order serves as a means to order an overwhelming amount of

information. And the alphabetical order also is a reader- or user-friendly structuring principle that allows the readers or users of the text to find a particular piece of information rather easily. Alphabetical orders are usually considered objective and they seem to be impersonal and even not specific for a certain culture or ideology. But what about *Barthes par Barthes*? Barthes chose an alphabetical order to “display his repertoire of writing” not because he had forgotten the temporal order in which he wrote the fragments but because he was striving for an ordering principle devoid of meaning or at devoid of the (implicit) structures that allow for the (re)construction of meaning. Still, is this alphabetical order really ‘meaningless’ in itself?

Barthes repeatedly remarks that the alphabetical order also has its flaws and that he is sometimes forced to deviate from the alphabetical order because he wants to avoid connections and links between certain fragments. But Barthes also makes exceptions from this alphabetical order and in fact, the alphabet itself is not fully covered—there are no entries for *U* through *Z*. The first entries follow the alphabetical order: “*Actif/réactif—Active/reactive*” (43), “*L’adjectif—The adjective*” (43), and “*L’aise—Ease*” (43). Only one page later the fragment “*A tableau noir—On the blackboard*” interrupts the alphabetical order and again the following fragment titled “*Noms propres—Proper names*” (50) again breaks with a strict alphabetical sequence. Nevertheless, the order of the alphabet remains the organizing principle throughout the whole second part of the book.

After reading the first few fragments, we ask ourselves what exactly constitutes the position of a fragment at a certain place in the alphabetical order. Relatively soon we become aware that the headline of a fragment does not necessarily contain the word that defines the position of this particular fragment, as is the case with the fragment “*L’amour d’une idée—Love of an idea*” that follows after “*De la bêtise . . . —About stupidity . . .*” (51). “*Love of an idea*” seems to be another break with the alphabetical order. But by reading the whole fragment, the word *binarism* actually turns out to be the leading idea of the fragment and therefore perfectly fits into the alphabetical order: after “*bêtise*” (51) and before “*bourgeoisie*” (52). So it seems as if it is sometimes the idea of each fragment that instead defines its position in the alphabetical order rather than the first word or a word from its headline. Barthes himself comments on the internal organization of the fragments and, once again, stresses his desire to prevent meaning from coming into existence out of the connections and relations between the single textual elements:

[N]o more rhetoric of ‘development,’ no more twisted logic, no more dissertations! An idea per fragment, a fragment per idea, and as for the succession for these atoms, nothing but the age-old and irrational order of the French letters (which are themselves meaningless objects—deprived of meaning). It does not define a word, it names a fragment; it does precisely the converse of a dictionary: the word emerges from the utterance, rather than the utterance proceeding from the word. Of the glossary, I keep only its most formal principle: the order of its units. This order, however, can be mischievous: it sometimes produces effects of meaning, and if these effects are not desired, the alphabet must be broken up to the advantage of a superior rule: that of the breach (heterology): to keep a meaning from ‘taking.’ (147–8)

Gabriele Schabacher (2007) analyzes in great detail the alphabetical order, the deviations from it, and the words or ideas that are used to determine the position of the fragment in the alphabetical order, as well as why there are few aberrations from the A-to-Z order (298–312). Rather than analyzing the text’s structure in this way, it seems to be more useful in the context of this essay to discuss the function of such an order with regard to the rest of the text and in relation to the function of alphabetical orders in general. Barthes (1989a) himself perceives his fragments—although sorted alphabetically—as paratactic elements (93), each of them “cut off from its neighbors” (93). The alphabetical order is, nevertheless, rather unusual in an autobiographical text. And the question of order is an important question for Barthes; he mentions the alphabetical order several times. The (alphabetical) order of the (autobiographical) discourse becomes an intrinsic part of this discourse. It even seems that Barthes’s autobiographical discourse would not be possible at all without this particular order.

As already mentioned, the alphabet in *Barthes par Barthes* ends with *T*; “*Le monstre de la totalité*—The monster of totality” (179) is the last fragment. In this short piece, Barthes describes totality as a monster, which at the “same time inspires laughter and fear” (180)—bodily reactions that are usually not discussed in the second part of the book. Nevertheless, the order of the alphabet and the complete listing of the alphabet is put into question with this very last fragment about the “monster of totality” (179) and the unexpected omission of the last letters of the alphabet.

The fragments are not only intended to be paratactic elements: Barthes considers each of them a new start, a new beginning. He explains his

“[l]iking to find, to write *beginnings*” (94) and at the same time the fear of “not being able to resist the *last word*” (94). In the same fragment in which Barthes expresses his fondness of new beginnings (“*Le cercle des fragments*—The circle of fragments”), he also compares the order of the fragments with a song cycle, describing the ideal of such a fragment as “a high condensation, not of thought, or of wisdom, or of truth . . . , but of music” (94). Finally—and here the fragments are linked thematically and some kind of development or storyline is of course visible—the next headline, “*Le fragment comme illusion*—The fragment as illusion,” (95) forms a bridge of sorts to the next piece, “*Du fragment au journal*—From the fragment to the journal,” in which Barthes asks himself, “At which point, is not the point of all this to entitle oneself to write a ‘journal?’” (95). Does the alphabetical order of the fragments and the very nature of the fragments in the end change the genre of the text? Does Barthes in fact write a journal instead of an autobiographical account in a narrower sense?

Barthes, eventually, is well aware of generic conventions and the possible expectations of his readers. He anticipates the potential discrepancies that may arise and therefore states,

This book is not a book of ‘confessions’; not that it is insincere, but because we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is never the last word: the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: authenticity. Such examples are History, Ideology, the Unconscious. . . . my texts are disjointed, no one of them caps any other; the latter is nothing but a *further* text, the least of the series, not the ultimate in meaning: *text upon text*, which never illuminates anything. (120)

With this explanation, Barthes sets his text apart from the confessional tradition of autobiographical literature. While Saint Augustine believed that turning inward and believing in the Christian God would enlighten him on the meaning of his existence and Rousseau believed in the enlightening qualities of education and reading, Barthes argues that his fragments can never enlighten anything or anyone, and that there is no such thing as an ultimate meaning with regard to writing (one’s life story). The order of his text—far from resembling the order of his “real” life—underscores that as well. In contrast to Rousseau’s or Saint Augustine’s confessions, Barthes

stresses that there is always new knowledge, no ultimate meaning and no last word—just “text upon text, which never illuminates anything” (120).

The order of the text—its alphabetical order and its fragmentary structure—and the question of knowledge and knowledge production are closely related in *Barthes par Barthes*, especially because the alphabetical order is usually the ordering principle employed to organize knowledge and information to handle the sheer amount of information, to make that information easily accessible, or to display that kind of knowledge in the least biased or subjective way. Barthes, believing that every new text creates new knowledge, is not only unable (and unwilling) to produce another conventional autobiographical text as so many other autobiographers before him, but also he seems to be in search of a form that underscores his idea that a last word can never be spoken on any matter. Therefore, he is in a way forced to find a narrative order that does not implicitly bring such a moment of closure or a final meaning into the text. The alphabetical order obviously offers this possibility for Barthes—it does not necessarily offer closure and it remains open; it can easily be altered, for example, through deviating from the given order, and new texts (new knowledges and new meanings) may be added by simply adding another fragment.

Barthes par Barthes also follows a principle that the writer observes in other authors: “Let that be known” (157). Although Barthes does not adhere to confessional or other “traditional” principles of autobiographical writing, he presumes that every writer wants to be published and to make known what he is thinking and writing. Barthes—although he does not aim at closure or “the last word” about himself—wants his fragments (and presumably also his pictures) to be known. He wants them to be made public, and he wants to disseminate the knowledge—“to display his repertoire of writing”—although (or maybe because) this knowledge is different not only with every new text within *Barthes par Barthes*, but also with every text to follow. “Let that be known!” (157)—that is, Barthes thinks, that wanting what they have written to be known to others should be true for most writers. This is indeed the motivation for many writers, and Barthes does not consider himself and his own writings an exception—he also wishes that his writing is known and underscores that by using an exclamation mark.

Taking into account my reading of Barthes’ alphabetically-sorted fragments and his comments on knowledge and order in this text, it seems as if the dissemination of knowledge (“Let that be known!” [157]) and the way in which knowledge comes into being (“we have a different knowledge

today than yesterday”/ “text upon text” [120]) are closely related to the arrangement of the text’s three parts as well as to the alphabetical order in the second and longest part of his book. This relation also stems from the nature of the alphabetical order that usually serves as a means for structuring and organizing knowledge. The alphabetical order allows knowledge to be systematized without requiring the formulation of categories or a deep knowledge in a certain field. Usually, an alphabetical order is self-explanatory; this cannot be said of *Barthes par Barthes*. Not only does Barthes feel the need to repeatedly explain his order, but also the reasons why he chose it and its deviations; his alphabetical order is also not user-friendly, as with a dictionary or a glossary. But to what extent is Barthes’s order designed for a use other than that of presenting (“displaying”) Barthes’s writing or as a breach with the autobiographical convention of chronological storytelling? The rather complicated and at first glance inscrutable order of Barthes’ text eventually stresses the constructedness of any kind of order, even the alphabetical one. And the order of the fragments questions our reading habits and practices of sense-making at moments when our expectations are not met or conventional registers for presenting and communicating knowledge are used in rather unconventional ways.

As in “The Death of the Author,” where Barthes proclaims the death of the producing instance and the simultaneous birth of the reader, the alphabetical order in *Barthes par Barthes* seems to allow for a reading of such a kind, without foregrounding the body and the life story of the author and only perceiving the writing, the texts and, at the most, “the hand that writes” (4). Therefore, Barthes’s text is not so much an autobiography of Barthes himself (the person; his public and/or private life) as an autobiography of his writing: how he writes, thinks, and organizes his writing; what his writing looks like (note the many facsimiles that are included); or where he writes (as shown in the pictures of his desk, etc.).

The notion of an autobiographical and continuous life narrative is contrasted with the alphabetical order of the fragments. The knowledge about writing emerges at exactly this intersection between the (expected) generic conventions and the (contrasting) formal order in *Barthes par Barthes*. Therefore the texts themselves do not contain knowledge or communicate it; they may be read instead as performances of knowledge in and as writing. Hence, the production and the distribution of knowledge are taking place in the same medium. The alphabetical order—the traditional and conventional form for presenting, ordering, and structuring knowledge—is probably the strongest indication of Barthes’s concern with knowledge and

the production and organization of (autobiographical) knowledge. While writing he creates knowledge, knowing that with every new fragment, new knowledge emerges. This kind of knowledge is inextricably bound to the way in which it came into being in the first place—in and through writing—and to the way in which it is ordered and structured—alphabetically and as a series of photos and texts.

The very last fragment's concluding paragraph finally opens up, eight pages before the end of the book, a "[d]ifferent discourse" (180):

Different discourse: this August 6, the countryside, the morning of a splendid day: sun, warmth, flowers, silence, calm, radiance. Nothing stirs, neither desire nor aggression: only the task is there, the work before me, like a kind of universal being: everything is full. Then what would be nature? An absence . . . of the rest? Totality?

August 6, 1973–September 3, 1974 (180)

In this paragraph Barthes refers to the beginning of the writing process—as indicated in the dates given below this last fragment ("August 6, 1973–September 3, 1974" [180])—and it seems as if the entire fragment had actually been written at the very beginning when "the work"—the task to write a book in the *écrivains de toujours*-series—was not yet complete, but still lying before him (Wagner 2014, 80). The other fragments—which seem to have been produced after this first fragment—are already known to a reader who has read the text from beginning to end. This last paragraph draws once again on the text's first pages where the pictures are presented as the author's "treat" for finishing the book. And this fragment—positioned at the end of the book's second part—suggests that "the work" (180) is actually not what Barthes is interested in. Such a "work" would be the "[t]he monster of totality" (179), "the final word" (120). But he is interested in texts, in new beginnings, in open knowledges and infinite meanings. The totality that seemed to be looming when he started writing was subverted or even banished from the text with the choice of the form of discourse Barthes decided on: alphabetically sorted fragments, new starts and fresh beginnings with every new text. Yet a seemingly neutral order like the alphabet does not automatically fit in with Barthes' refusal to create an overall meaning in his text: even the alphabet establishes certain relations and a specific order and therefore, meaning and knowledge.

**“TO WRITE THE BODY”—THE THIRD PART
OF ROLAND BARTHES PAR ROLAND BARTHES**

All three aspects discussed so far—writing, knowledge, and the order of the textual elements in *Barthes par Barthes*—become all the more apparent with a look at the third, last, and shortest section of Barthes’s text. This last section, which consists (at least in the English translation) of only eight pages, is the book’s shortest, though it is a highly important section for the question on the relationship between the order of the text and knowledge in *Barthes par Barthes*. While the first section can be summarized as representing the way “[t]oward writing” (41) and the second section as actual *writing* or—in Barthes’s terms—as “display[ing] writing,” the third and final part finally allows him “[t]o write the body” (180).

The last part of the text particularly brings the body of the author—which played a role in the very beginning and was excluded from the fragments that were supposed to contain only ‘images of the hand that writes’—finally back into the text and into the discourse on knowledge. After the last fragment we read “To write the body” (181). That sentence eventually serves as the introductory line of the last and third section of the book. This sentence suggests that the body may only be constituted in writing. Here, we are not only presented with yet another photograph of Barthes but also, interestingly enough, with an anatomic study of the human body and the “stems of the vena cava with their branches dissected in an adult body” (186), as we read in Barthes’s list of illustrations three pages later, from Diderot’s encyclopedia. We are thus presented with an image taken from *the* alphabetically sorted reference text in Western culture: Denis Diderot and Jean Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, which was supposed to assemble all knowledge available at the time of its compilation. The written fragments in the second part of the book have—if we follow Barthes’s metaphor from his introduction—taken his “body elsewhere” (4). Now an anatomic drawing of a human body with its veins brings the body (back) into the text. With this drawing, Barthes not only relates to Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, but the *Encyclopédie* is also said to be the last text to make use of Francis Bacon’s idea of a “Tree of Knowledge”: the *Encyclopédie* structures knowledge in a treelike form, branches dissecting further and further from one origin, thus at the same time recognizes the limits of Bacon’s idea. Although Barthes uses the alphabetical order employed by Diderot and the encyclopedists, *Barthes par Barthes* is far removed from the idea of a “Tree of Knowledge” and the possibility of

assembling everything in a book or series of books. While such an idea still holds true for the structure of *Michelet*, Barthes rejects this notion in his autobiographical text. Instead of striving for completeness and full coverage like Diderot several hundred years ago, Barthes looks for the opposite: an open register of texts and images—“nothing but a *further* text . . . not the ultimate in meaning: *text upon text*, which never illuminates anything” (120). While Diderot’s encyclopedia marks the last moment in human history when conceptualizing knowledge in a tree-like form was still possible, Barthes’s text, in a way, transfers the metaphor of the tree into the body. He inscribes the notion of a tree of knowledge into the body, as the anatomic drawing of the “stems of the vena cava with their branches dissected in an adult body” (186) suggests.

Barthes par Barthes eventually can be read as an autobiographical performance of producing and distributing knowledge. It pays tribute to the French or Western European tradition of knowledge compilation but at the same time, with this very last and third part of his text, shows the limits and limitations of such an encyclopedic (or at least alphabetically sorted) attempt at writing one’s own life. Therefore, it is not at all astonishing that Barthes’s tabular biography (183–84), which follows right after the anatomic drawing, does not continue until the time of writing of this particular text—around 1974—but ends with the year 1962, when Barthes was “Director of studies at the École pratique des Hautes Études” (184) and, as he mentions in brackets, dealt with the “sociology of signs, symbols, and representations” (184). Dealing with or studying the ‘sociology of signs, symbols, and representations’ marks the moment when the clearly structured tabular curriculum vitae breaks up and apparently can only be complemented with another and even shorter summary of a life story:

A life: studies, diseases, appointments. And the rest? Encounters, friendships, love, travels, readings. Pleasures, fears, beliefs, satisfactions, indignations, distresses; in a word: repercussions?—In the text—but not in the work. (184)

These last lines, accompanying yet another unfinished listing—the tabular curriculum vitae that ends in 1962, once again bear an intertextual reference to one of Barthes’s most influential texts. Whereas in the beginning of *Barthes par Barthes* he referred to *Michelet* as one of his first texts, here he hints at his seminal essay “From Work to Text” (1971), in which he not only repeatedly makes use of the metaphor of the tree of knowledge and speaks,

for example, about the various “specialized branches of knowledge” (Barthes [1984] 1989b, 56) but in which he also introduces his notion of the pleasure of reading and the act of reading as an action “without the father’s inscription” (61). Referencing this essay at the end of *Barthes par Barthes*, which had begun with a photograph of his mother and other images of the little Barthes in the arms of his mother, describes evidently the text’s movement from the Lacanian notion of the desired other (the mother) toward a rather emancipated concept of an I that asks its readers “for practical collaboration” (63), as Barthes does in “From Work to Text.” It is precisely this triad—from the photographs of the mother and her child to the fragmented text to an account of the body and its (pre)history—that finally offers a text that is, as Barthes in “From Work to Text” concludes, a “social space which leaves no language safe, outside, and no subject of the speech-act in a situation of judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder” (64). Therefore, the theory of the Text Barthes develops in this essay “coincide[s] only with a practice of writing” (64).

Consequently, the last two pages of *Barthes par Barthes* consist of examples of this practice of writing. Before that, following the tabular curriculum vitae, we are presented with a list of illustrations which contains as its last entry the description of the origin of the anatomic drawing and therefore ends with a mention of Diderot and his encyclopedia. With this the encyclopedic approach of organizing knowledge is once again engraved into the text. In contrast to the ambitious, highly structured, and comprehensive project of Diderot and the encyclopedists, the next page contains two drawings from Barthes that are described as “Doodling . . .” and “. . . the signifier without the signified” (187) that both can be read again as images of the hand that writes, as opposed to the “monster of totality” (179) and the encompassing approach of Diderot’s lexicon. And finally, the very last page of the English edition contains a facsimile of several handwritten lines by Barthes and their English translations directly beneath:

And afterward?

—What to write now? Can you still write anything?

—One writes with one’s desire, and I am not through desiring.

(188)

Although Barthes spoke about the *fascination* with the pictures he included in the first section at the beginning of the book, he repeatedly mentions the *pleasure* of writing in the second part: it finally is his (bodily) *desire* that may lead to further texts after *Barthes par Barthes*.

CONCLUSION

The desire of the writer to continue writing and to go on with writing, mentioned at the end of the book, underlines Barthes's belief that there is never a last word and no final meaning—although there is a certain order and a text with a particular structure. Barthes's text may be designed and structured to be devoid of an overall meaning, but it nevertheless produces and distributes knowledge about writing and the writing process within and through its specific order, its overall structure, and the intertextuality and the interrelatedness of its single parts. With his unconventionally ordered autobiographical text, Barthes complicates our notion of autobiographical writing as well as he questions how to write and how to arrange an autobiographical text. Barthes's text does not only ask for its readers' awareness toward the influence and the effects of the order of a text and its single elements. Moreover, Barthes asks for his readers' collaboration because "the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least diminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice" (Barthes 1989b, 62). The pleasure of reading (and writing) eventually appears to be a "pleasure without separation" (64). *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* performs this "pleasure without separation" by means of its circular and intertextual structure in multiple ways: Its first sentence references the end of the writing process: "To begin with, some images: they are the author's treat . . . for finishing his book" (Barthes [1977] 1989a, 3). The last fragment refers to the beginning of the writing process—"August 6, 1973" (180). The author's last word is his announcement to still experience the desire to write other texts. The text's alphabetical order, which explicitly aims at disorder and openness, refers back to the most comprehensive arrangement of knowledge in the encyclopedia. And eventually, the overall composition of the book—from the images of the unproductive life, to the alphabetically sorted representations of the writing life, towards finally writing the body—exemplifies Barthes' attempt not to present the "ultimate in meaning" (120) but to simply "[l]et that be known" (157) and thereby offer his readers the full array of his intertextual writing, not for consumption but for their active collaboration. It finally seems as if Barthes, having proposed the "Death of the Author" (1967) several years before and with *Barthes par Barthes* as his most autobiographical text, performs what it means to write after the death of the author and allow for the birth of the reader—even in autobiographical writing.

NOTES

1. Hereafter abbreviated to *Barthes par Barthes*.
2. So, the first book in the series was *Victor Hugo par lui-même* and the author of the book—published 1951—was, of course, not Hugo himself, but Henri Guillemin. The subtitle more precisely refers to the extensive usage of sources from the person portrayed: quotes, photographs, and so on.
3. A detailed reading of the photographs in the first part of *Barthes par Barthes* can be found in Smith's (1994) essay "Roland Barthes Vu Par Roland Barthes."

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Linda. 2001. *Autobiography*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Barthes, Roland. (1954) 1992. *Michelet*. Trans. Howard, Richard. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 1977. "From Work to Text." In *Image, Music, Text*. Edited by Stephen Heath, 142–148. New York: Hill and Wang.
- . 1977. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*. Edited by Stephen Heath, 142–148. New York: Hill and Wang.
- . (1977) 1989a. *Roland Barthes*. 8th ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989a.
- . (1984) 1989b. *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Howard, Richard. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Culler, Jonathan. (1983) 2002. *Barthes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Detering, Heinrich. 1998. "Die Tode Nietzsches. Zur antitheologischen Theologie der Postmoderne." *Merkur. Postmoderne: Eine Bilanz (Sonderheft)* 52 (594/95): 876–889.
- Diderot, Denis, Jean L. R. Alembert, and Pierre Mouchon. 1966. *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné ses sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Stuttgart: Frommann.
- Eakin, Paul John. 1999. *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, .
- Jay, Paul. 1984. *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Schabacher, Gabriele. 2007. *Topik der Referenz : Theorie der Autobiographie, die Funktion "Gattung" und Roland Barthes' Über mich selbst*. Studien zur Kulturpoetik, Bd. 7. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Seifert, Nicole. 2008. *Von Tagebüchern und Trugbildern. Die autobiographischen Aufzeichnungen von Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf und Sylvia Plath*. Kaleidogramme, Bd. 34. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos.

- Smith, Thomas R. 1994. "Roland Barthes Vu Par Roland Barthes." In *Semiotics 1994*, edited by C. W. Spinks and John Deely, 118–134. New York: Peter Lang.
- Stoltzfus, Ben. 1996. *Lacan and Literature: Purloined Pretexts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wagner, Alexandra. 2014. *Wissen in der Autobiographie. Zur narrativen Konstruktion von Wissensordnungen in US-amerikanischen autobiographischen Texten*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.