

Barthes's Return to Michelet and the Question of New Life

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“Je n'ai connu aucune vie 'nouvelle' qui ne fût
illusoire et compromise en ses racines”
(Cioran 1949 : 101)

Roland Barthes's second book was devoted to the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, under the title *Michelet par lui-même* (1954). Barthes's subsequent writing projects would take him in quite different directions, although he returned to this same book series for his own autobiographical project *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). Later that same decade, Barthes also returned to Michelet, and in this essay I trace this return in particular from Barthes's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (7 January 1977) and his further lecture of 19 October 1978, under the Proustian title “‘Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure’”, to his final lecture course at the Collège on *La Préparation du roman*, given between 2 December 1978 and 23 February 1980.

In focusing on Barthes's return to Michelet, this essay has four distinct aims. Firstly, I seek to redress a lack of attention to Barthes's relationship to Michelet, in particular by highlighting Barthes's engagement with Michelet not only at the beginning of his writing career but also at its end. While a handful of critics have considered Michelet's importance for Barthes (see especially Lombardo 1989; Thomas 1995; Villemur 1996; Stafford 1997; Petitier 2000 and 2019), the Micheletian inspiration of Barthes's *Vita Nova* demonstrated in his late lectures has until now been overlooked. Secondly, I show how Barthes's reading of Michelet is predicated upon creative misreadings. It is in this sense that this essay is *Contre Barthes*, since I demonstrate the need to read Michelet at times against Barthes. Thirdly, in following references to Michelet in Barthes's late lectures, I reveal inconsistencies in this material that relate partly to content and partly to form, particularly the contrast between written lecture notes and oral lectures (the latter available as recordings as well as as transcriptions in the case of the final lecture course, *La Préparation du roman*: see Barthes 2003 and 2015b). Accordingly, my focus on Barthes on Michelet ultimately raises questions about the differences in content of Barthes's late lecture courses across different formats and editions. Fourthly, as a result of this attention to multiple, inconsistent accounts of new life in Barthes and Michelet, my analysis calls into question the very possibility of any single, definitive moment of conversion.

Barthes's return to Michelet is intimately connected to his search for his own *Vita Nova*, a novelistic project that is promised in certain texts and also survives in partial, draft, note form (see Barthes 2002e and Barthes 2015a : xxxiii–lxiv, as well as Knight 1997, Coste 1999, Zorica 2009, and Samoyault 2015 : 649–85). I agree with Lucy O'Meara (2012 : 175) that “The question should not be whether Barthes *would* have written a novel [...]: the *Préparation* makes it clear that that is neither the most pertinent nor the most interesting question”. Instead, I am interested in the sources of inspiration for the very title of Barthes's *Vita Nova*.¹ Barthes presents his “new life” in the “‘Longtemps’” lecture and the first lecture of *La Préparation du roman* as “la découverte d'une nouvelle pratique d'écriture” (2002b : 467) and as a quest for “*une tierce forme*” (2002b : 461), neither essay nor novel (or perhaps both), inspired by Dante Alighieri and Marcel Proust respectively. The phrase *Vita Nova* is borrowed from the title of

Dante's first book, a prosimetrum on his love for Beatrice before and after her death, although Barthes more often cites from Dante's *Commedia* in relation to his own *Vita Nova* (see Rushworth 2018). The starting point for this essay, however, is an acknowledgement that interest in Barthes's relationship to Dante and Proust (the inspiration for Alfandary 2016 and Rushworth 2016) has obscured the importance of a third writer in the construction of Barthes's own *Vita Nova*: Michelet. Jonathan Culler does suggest that Michelet is "one of Barthes's great loves, along with Proust and Sade" (2002 : 31), but in this essay I am guided instead by the bolder claim of Patrizia Lombardo "that Barthes's author, his great passion, the one he identified with, was less Proust than Michelet" (1989 : xi).

I begin by following Barthes's various claims about Michelet in his late lectures, paying particular attention to the consistency of these statements. I then turn to Michelet's own use of the term *vita n[u]ova*, and propose that there is often a gap between Barthes's Michelet and Michelet in his own words. Finally, I reflect more broadly on the implications of these inconsistencies and discrepancies for the question of conversion which is at the heart of the concept of "new life". In focusing on Barthes's misreading of Michelet, I have in mind the argument of Harold Bloom's classic study *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Bloom reads literary history as a Freudian family drama, arguing that "*Poetic Influence — when it involves two strong, authentic poets, — always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation*" (Bloom 1973 : 30; emphasis in the original). The end result is that, for Bloom, "perhaps there are only more or less creative or interesting mis-readings, for is not every reading necessarily a *clinamen*?" (43), that is, a swerve away from the perused predecessor. We might, however, turn to Barthes's own work for a similarly striking formulation of the creativity of reading, here renamed not misreading but rather rewriting : "lire, c'est vraiment écrire : j'écris — ou je réécris — le texte que je lis, mieux et plus loin que son auteur ne l'a fait" (2002d : 71). In what follows, we will see how Barthes's reading of Michelet is both a misreading and a rewriting; whichever term is preferred, the emphasis is on readerly freedom and creativity. In this discussion of Barthes, I concur with Neil Badmington's assertion that Barthes was "first and foremost a *reader*" (2016 : 110). Yet I want to show that, at least in the case of Michelet, Barthes's reading is intriguingly inaccurate and inconsistent. Accordingly, while Badmington suggests that "Barthes wrote reading" and sees "in that gesture an invitation to read with him and to write in this wake" (2016 : 110), I think it is also fruitful on occasion, and on this occasion in particular, to read — and write — *against* Barthes.

Barthes's Michelet-inspired *Vita Nova*

In the aforementioned "Longtemps" lecture, which Barthes also gave in November 1978 in New York under the simpler title "Proust et moi", Barthes expressed the desire to write a novel. Both the projected novel and the desire for this novel are named by Barthes *Vita Nova*, "new life". Barthes takes this phrase from Dante, suggesting that new life is also the "le milieu de notre vie" (2002b : 465), referring to Dante-pilgrim lost in a dark wood at the start of the *Divine Comedy*. This middling moment, for Barthes, can be pinpointed to the death of his mother on 25 October 1977. Barthes identifies a similar moment in Proust, between the death of his mother (1905) and the start of the writing of his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1909). In Barthes's reading, the catalyst for Dante's *selva oscura* ("dark wood") is a similar experience of grief : grief after the death of Beatrice. In short, new life, for all three writers, is an experience of mourning that marks the middle of life. For Dante, this middle is mathematical as well as conceptual, situating his journey through the Afterlife in the Jubilee year 1300 at the age of 35, precisely half of the ideal human lifespan of three-score years and ten. For Barthes,

in contrast, the middle is an encounter with death that is not mathematically determined ; in his words, “le ‘milieu de la vie’ n’est peut-être jamais rien d’autre que ce moment où l’on découvre que la mort est réelle, et non plus seulement redoutable” (2002b : 467).

In Barthes’s interpretation, his own new life and the new lives of Dante and Proust are remarkably comparable. Yet on closer consideration the uniformity of these new lives nonetheless collapses. On the one hand, Barthes’s own introduction of Michelet into the comparison within the “‘Longtemps’” lecture suggests an alternative route to new life. On the other hand, looking beyond this particular essay, Badmington’s insight regarding the “possibility [...] that there is more than one *vita n(u)ova* in the late Barthes” (2016 : 36 n. 50) points us to invocations of new life on the part of Barthes that precede his mother’s death. In both cases, the association between new life and grief, so central to the “‘Longtemps’” essay, is undermined.

Following Badmington, the connection between Michelet and “new life” can be dated as far back as 1964, to a letter from Barthes to Michel Butor dated 19 February and included in the *Album* edited by Éric Marty (Barthes 2015a). In this letter, Barthes already connects new life to a change in writing style and already identifies a similar change in Michelet. The mournful context of the “‘Longtemps’” is, however, absent, the prevailing mood instead a sense of pervading academic *ennui* :

Depuis plus de deux mois, je suis plus que jamais abstrait de la vie, je ne dis même pas sociale, mais relationnelle ; je travaille beaucoup, à rien d’important d’ailleurs ; des tas de vieilles choses à liquider, mais tout de même je vais y arriver, et je crois que je vais enfin avoir un été libre, libre de faire (peut-être pour la première fois de ma vie) quelque chose *pour moi* ; c’est là mon grand projet. Michelet a eu sa *vita nuova* vers cinquante ans ; j’en approche et j’ai le même désir. Je considère, je décide que je n’ai pas encore écrit — que je vais écrire. (Barthes 2015a : 189–90)

This letter is an important sign that Barthes’s ambitions for a “nouvelle pratique d’écriture” (2002b : 467), expressed in the “‘Longtemps’” lecture, are far from new, although for the moment the reasons for Michelet’s new life are left unexplained.

A Micheletian new life unprovoked by mourning also recurs, with greater detail, in Barthesian texts of the 1970s, first in 1972 in Barthes’s seminars on *Le Lexique de l’auteur* and then at the start of 1977, in Barthes’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. The former is the most specific about Michelet’s new life, connecting it both to marriage and to a change in writing from history to natural history :

Cette Mutation est très importante pour moi : sorte de *vita nuova* (Michelet l’a eue à cinquante-deux ans en 1848 ; comparaison prétentieuse mais non gratuite : sa jeune femme Athénaïs et passage à une *autre* œuvre, éperdument placée dans la signifiante : *Histoire de France*, livres sur la Nature, *La Sorcière*. (Barthes 2010 : 51)

In “Leçon”, meanwhile, Michelet is strikingly the first and last author mentioned by Barthes. At the start, Barthes describes how “La joie, c’est de retrouver ici le souvenir ou la présence d’auteurs que j’aime et qui ont enseigné au Collège de France : d’abord, bien sûr, Michelet” (2002a : 429). At the end, he returns to Michelet :

À cinquante et un ans, Michelet commençait sa *vita nuova* : nouvelle œuvre, nouvel amour. Plus âgé que lui (on comprend que ce parallèle est d’affection), j’entre moi aussi dans une *vita nuova*, marquée aujourd’hui par ce lieu nouveau, cette hospitalité nouvelle. (Barthes 2002a : 446)

Once more, Michelet’s new life is defined for Barthes by marriage (“nouvel amour”) and by a change in writing (“nouvelle œuvre”). The parallel is heightened by their shared affiliation to the Collège de France.

These references to new life across a personal letter, a seminar at the École pratique des hautes études, and Barthes's inaugural lecture at the Collège de France precede the death of Barthes's mother and demonstrate a Micheletian conversion paradigm that is at odds with the mournful model found in Dante and Proust according to the "Longtemps" lecture. Michelet's continued presence in that same lecture represents, accordingly, a lingering sense of the prehistory of the Barthesian desire for new life, and more particularly the possibility of new life without grief :

il faut que je choisisse ma dernière vie, ma vie nouvelle, « *Vita Nova* », disait Michelet en épousant à cinquante et un ans une jeune fille qui en avait vingt, et en s'appêtant à écrire des livres nouveaux d'histoire naturelle [...]. Or, pour celui qui écrit, qui a choisi d'écrire, il ne peut y avoir de « vie nouvelle », me semble-t-il, que la découverte d'une nouvelle pratique d'écriture. (Barthes 2002b : 467)

Michelet is similar to Dante and Proust for Barthes in representing the possibility of a change of writing practice, yet also quite different in that the catalyst for this change is marriage rather than bereavement.

The "Longtemps" lecture is partly repeated in the opening lecture of *La Préparation du roman*, from 2 December 1978, but it is a later lecture in the same series that develops the connection between Michelet and *vita n[u]ova* most fully. In the lecture of 19 January 1980, Barthes again returns to the idea of new life, noting parenthetically his two literary sources of inspiration — "je connais deux *Vita Nova* : Dante, Michelet" (2003 : 280–81) — and once more retelling the story of Michelet's *vita n[u]ova* :

Michelet eut sa *Vita Nova* (le mot est de lui), à 51 ans, pour avoir rencontré une frêle jeune fille de 20 ans, Athénaïs (qui devint hélas, à sa mort, une veuve abusive, falsifiant ses manuscrits) ; il *changea* alors complètement d'Œuvre et écrivit ses livres sur la Nature (et non plus sur l'Histoire) : *L'Oiseau, La Mer, La Montagne*, souvent beaux et étranges. (Barthes 2003 : 283)

In many respects the account of Michelet's *vita n[u]ova* is remarkably consistent, insistently pairing marriage with a concomitant change in writing practice.

Nonetheless, some aspects of the account do change on each retelling. Less significantly, Barthes switches from spelling the key phrase in Italian (*vita nuova*) to spelling it in Latin (*vita nova*), despite having attempted to set out a clear distinction in the first lecture of *La Préparation du roman* between "*Vita Nova* (Dante) ou *Vita Nuova* (Michelet)" (2003 : 28).² As the editor of the 2003 edition of *La Préparation* notes, "Selon les textes, Roland Barthes use librement de la forme latine ou italienne" (Barthes 2003 : 28 n. 11). More significantly, the age at which Barthes says that Michelet experienced his *vita n[u]ova* is not stable. Most often, Michelet is described as aged 51 at that time, although he is also credited as being "vers cinquante ans" (in the letter to Butor) and 52 years old (in *Le Lexique de l'auteur*). The latter is most surprising, given that it is coupled with the date 1848, at which point Michelet would not have been fifty-two but rather only fifty. These discrepancies are especially surprising, if we consider that Barthes's *Michelet par lui-même* opens with a chronology divided into sections on "Études", "Carrière", "Amours", and "Œuvre" (Barthes 1954 : 7–15). Barthes's narrative of Michelet's new life proves to be in certain aspects surprisingly flexible and fluid, with the changing date and age in particular casting doubt on the very idea of a fixed, irreversible, definitive moment of change.

It is, moreover, uncertainty which comes through most strikingly in the oral version of the lecture from *La Préparation du roman* given on 19 January 1980 and transcribed in the 2015 edition of the lecture series. Where the 2003 edition had published Barthes's written lecture notes, the 2015 edition is based instead on a transcription of the oral recordings of the lectures. In spoken rather than written form, Barthes proves to be unsure of both date and

spelling of Michelet's *vita n[u]ova*, in stark contrast to his much briefer written notes, where he had stated quite confidently (as cited above) that "Michelet eut sa *Vita Nova* (le mot est de lui), à 51 ans" (2003 : 283). Here is the longer, oral version :

Alors *Vita Nova*, c'est l'expression latine, celle qu'emploie je crois Michelet, je ne me rappelle plus très bien, puisqu'il a eu, vous savez, sa *Vita Nova* vers l'âge de cinquante et un ans quand il a rencontré une jeune fille frêle, fragile de vingt ans qui s'est avérée être par la suite une veuve tout à fait abusive et animée d'une grande énergie pour corriger les manuscrits posthumes de Michelet, mais la rencontre de cette jeune fille, Athénaïs, a fait pour lui une véritable rupture de vie et aussi une rupture d'œuvre. C'est le moment, vers 1851 ou 1852, où il a été pour des raisons politiques destitué de sa chaire du Collège de France par Napoléon III et qu'il a donc connu une certaine pauvreté, une certaine difficulté de vivre ; et ses œuvres aussi ont changé, puisqu'il a abandonné en partie l'histoire pour se donner à l'écriture de livres dits naturalistes, sur la mer, l'oiseau, la montagne et la femme. Donc Michelet a connu cette *Vita Nova* mais on dit aussi quelquefois *Vita Nuova*, c'est l'expression italienne parce qu'il y a un livre de Dante qui s'appelle *Vita Nova* ou *Vita Nuova*, livre qui mêle d'une façon extrêmement passionnante des poèmes et le récit des circonstances biographiques. (Barthes 2015b : 379)

In this instance, orality introduces self-doubt and uncertainty : "je ne me rappelle plus très bien"; "vers 1851 ou 1852"; "*Vita Nova* ou *Vita Nuova*". And yet it is paradoxically in this passage, as will become evident, that Barthes also presents the most detailed and accurate description of Michelet's *vita n[u]ova*.

As we have seen, Barthes identified Michelet's "new life" with his marriage to a younger woman, Athénaïs Mialaret. The couple met for the first time on 8 November 1848 and were married on 12 March 1849. Barthes suggests that this moment coincides with a change in Michelet's writing, a conversion from history to nature or natural history, with the first published fruits of this conversion being Michelet's *L'Oiseau* from 1856. The story is different, however, if we turn more directly to Michelet rather than Michelet as mediated by Barthes.

Michelet par lui-même

Like Barthes, Michelet uses the phrase *vita n[u]ova* in a number of places in his voluminous *œuvre*. This is not surprising in an author so interested in death and rebirth and who is even credited with coining the term "Renaissance" to refer to a specific historical period (see Febvre 1993). In his *Histoire de la Révolution française*, Michelet for instance refers to life after the Revolution, marked by the Fête de la Fédération of 1790, as an "Étrange *vita nuova* qui commence pour la France" (2019 : I, 364). Nonetheless, the main references to a *vita n[u]ova* on the part of Michelet come not in his historical writings but rather in more personal texts, that is, in his *Journal* and in his nature writing.

Michelet's most striking declaration of *vita n[u]ova* comes in an entry in his journal dated 19 May 1852, a few years after his marriage to Athénaïs. To set the record straight, Michelet is at this point aged 53. *Pace* Barthes, the evident context of this statement is not a celebration of marriage to a much younger woman. Rather, the occasion is a much sadder one of exile. Michelet is writing having lost his jobs at the Collège de France and the National Archives in the aftermath of the *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851 and the ascent to power of Napoleon III. In addition to this difficult political context, Michelet's diary entry reminds us of a further, personal tragedy, the death of the only child of his second marriage in early infancy (d. 24 August 1850).³ The entry reflects retrospectively, one week on, on the life-changing event of departure from home on 12 May. The whole passage is a very striking intertext for Barthes's "Longtemps" lecture in its themes of breaking with habit and its brave desire to embrace newness :

Je quittai cette maison où ma chère Athénaïs fut établie le 12 mars 1849, où elle accoucha, où je perdis mon enfant, où j'écrivis en partie l'*Histoire de la Révolution*, mes *Légendes de Pologne et de Russie*, mes cours sur la femme et l'éducation, l'amour — cette maison où je fus frappé du 2 Décembre, où j'eus le bonheur et la gloire d'être destitué par le gouvernement nouveau. Je la quittai, gai et triste, plutôt plein d'une joie amère, me sentant en conformité avec la France, déchiré quand on la déchire, déraciné quand on la déracine et semblable à toi, Patrie !

Le brisement de mes habitudes, le dénuement nouveau où je me trouvai, sans papiers ni livres, l'insolite et l'étrange d'un appartement garni et déjà sali par d'autres, au milieu d'un quartier neuf, sans tradition, peuplé de femmes entretenues, — enfin tout ce qui sent son vrai Paris, mobile et fluide (en vue la figure fantasque des moulins à vent qui planent sur le cimetière Montmartre) : toutes ces circonstances tristes et sèches ne parvinrent pas cependant à entamer mon cœur.

J'avais, il est vrai, avec moi mon jeune trésor de vertu, de courage, de résignation pour charmer ces lieux arides. La voyant si patiente, comment n'aurais-je pas supporté ?

J'avais avec moi aussi une forte pensée d'espérance et de renouvellement. Changer d'habitudes, briser ses routines, c'est un pas sans doute pour dépouiller le vieil homme, en faire un nouveau, plus fécond peut-être, meilleur, plus utile.

[...]

Ce que j'avais de plus à craindre, c'est la stérilité de la routine, c'est l'endormante uniformité des habitudes bureaucratiques, c'est l'encombrement de la science, de l'érudition. J'ai souvent comparé les âmes des savants à ces îles, verdoyantes d'abord, que le corail envahit, belle et riche production pour laquelle on recherche ces îles ; mais par le progrès du temps, ce corail a tout couvert d'une surface sèche, dure, encombrante : pas un brin d'herbe ne pousse.

Ces pensées me firent supporter mieux que je n'aurais cru un si grand changement. Je trouvais quelque bonheur à enfermer sous la clef ces livres, ces papiers, ces instruments de tout genre qui m'ont si souvent servi, mais qui m'obligent aussi à suivre, quoi que je fasse, des procédés analogues à ceux que j'ai suivis toujours. J'arrachai donc vivement de dessous ces décombres, avec une sorte de joie violente, la racine de ma vie antique, le germe de ma *vita nova*. Je sentis et je me dis avec un sourire intérieur : *Le passé n'a rien pris sur moi. J'arrive à la nouvelle vie plein de bonne volonté, d'amour et de jeune espérance. Oui, d'amour encore, quoi que tu m'aies fait, quoi que tu aies fait à toi-même, peuple infortuné !* (Michelet 1959–76 : II, 191–92.)

This passage is long, and I can highlight only a few key moments here. Firstly, Michelet's marriage is touched by grief; his marital home is the same where he lost his child with Athénaïs in early infancy. Barthes oddly erases this grief from Michelet's new life. Secondly, Michelet's emotions are conflicting; he is "gai et triste, plutôt plein d'une joie amère". In particular, he is proud to share in France's suffering. Thirdly, like Barthes in the "Longtemps" lecture, Michelet finds academic life after a certain point worryingly repetitive. As Barthes writes of his own experience :

il arrive aussi un temps [...], où ce qu'on a fait, travaillé, écrit, apparaît voué à la répétition : quoi, toujours jusqu'à ma mort, je vais écrire des articles, faire des cours, des conférences, sur des "sujets", qui seuls varieront, si peu ! (Barthes 2002b : 466)

For Michelet, therefore, new life in a new location freed from books and papers is not only terrifying but also quite liberating, since it is a potentially productive way to break with habit and routine. Consequently, this *vita n[ova]* of exile and adversity is something that Michelet is able to embrace bravely, if somewhat masochistically, "avec une sorte de joie violente". Finally, the passage is suffused with natural imagery — in particular, the island battle of greenery versus coral and this *vita n[ova]* as itself a "germe" — which seems already to anticipate the change in writing style from history to nature writing noted by Barthes. Yet there is also a sense that this change in style is not complete; rather, Michelet is leaving his home with the *Histoire de la Révolution française* only partly written ("en partie").

It is evident that Barthes's version of Michelet's new life tends to tell a different and a happier story, obscuring the tale of mourning and exile expressed in this diary entry. Only once, in an oral digression in *La Préparation du roman*, does Barthes acknowledge the tense political context. In the words of the oral transcription of the lecture of 19 January 1980 cited above,

“C’est le moment, vers 1851 ou 1852, où il a été pour des raisons politiques destitué de sa chaire du Collège de France par Napoléon III et qu’il a donc connu une certaine pauvreté, une certaine difficulté de vivre” (Barthes 2015b : 379). Barthes’s written texts consistently repress this information; only this once and only in speech, freed from his lecture notes, is this information given. For me, this reticence (or even occlusion) bespeaks a discomfort over Michelet as an alter ego. In the ““Longtemps”” lecture and in *La Préparation du roman*, Barthes cites Michelet, alongside Dante and Proust, as a classic case of literary conversion to “une nouvelle pratique d’écriture” (2002b : 467). Yet he presents Michelet’s conversion as far too positive, in contrast to the new writing rooted in grief of Dante, Proust, and himself. I would suggest that what Barthes is trying to hide — consciously or unconsciously — is that Michelet’s new life is ultimately parallel but inverse to his own. That is, as the text of “Leçon” proclaims, Barthes’s new life begins at the Collège de France, whereas — as is only admitted in that one oral digression in *La Préparation du roman* — Michelet’s new life starts on being expelled from the very same institution. From this perspective, the reference to Michelet at the start and end of “Leçon” is very daring.

On closer analysis, much of Michelet’s *vita n[eu]ova* as presented by Barthes falls apart. The catalyst is not marriage, the dating is wrong, and, in the end, even the final aspect — new life as a change of writing practice — also proves to be a distortion of reality. Michelet does repeat the phrase *vita nuova* in his preface to *L’Oiseau*, seemingly in confirmation of Barthes’s identification of Michelet’s new life as a turn to nature writing : “Telle fut donc ma rénovation, cette tardive *vita nuova* qui m’amena peu à peu aux sciences naturelles” (1986 : 62–63). Here, Michelet is remembering his post-exilic life when he travelled to northern Italy and, in June 1854, experienced the reviving effects of mud baths at Acqui. As with Barthes, *vita n[eu]ova* as a unique turning point becomes problematic, since Michelet attributes this moment to two different times, the exile of May 1852 and the mud baths of June 1854, just as Barthes attributed *vita nova* both to his arrival at the Collège de France in January 1977 and to the death of his mother in October 1977.⁴ Equally, the modifier “peu à peu” here suggests a much more slow and gradual change than typically dramatic conversion narratives usually assert.

Moreover, despite Barthes’s claim, *L’Oiseau* does not represent a complete break with history for Michelet. As anticipated by the “en partie” detail of the *Journal* entry cited above, later volumes of Michelet’s *Histoire de la Révolution française* postdate his exile (the final volumes are published in 1853), while his history of France in the sixteenth century sits alongside *L’Oiseau* (1856). Successive later volumes of this *Histoire* (on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries) then occupy Michelet at the same time as his natural history books, up until his death in 1874. Once more, Barthes is at his most accurate in the oral version of *La Préparation du roman*. There, he admits that Michelet “a abandonné en partie l’histoire pour se donner à l’écriture de livres dits naturalistes” (Barthes 2015b : 379). This oral statement is again in stark contrast to the written notes of *La Préparation*, which at this moment record instead that Michelet “changea alors complètement d’Œuvre et écrivit ses livres sur la Nature (et non plus sur l’Histoire)” (Barthes 2003 : 283). In other words, Barthes’s oft repeated argument that Michelet turned at a certain moment entirely from history to natural history reveals a desire for a clean break that is not borne out on closer inspection. The definitive change is a myth that Barthes on only one rare, oral occasion undermines. Michelet’s writing life is too overlapping and non-linear, in short too messy to fit the conversion framework that Barthes predominantly seeks to impose on his work.

In this regard, we run into a very striking aspect of Barthes’s return to Michelet, namely the gap between the Michelet of the early Barthes and the Michelet of the late Barthes. The discussion of Michelet in the late Barthes is a return to Barthes’s earlier work and earlier interests, as the title of this essay suggests. As Barthes himself explains in that same lecture of *La Préparation du roman* on which I have already focused (the lecture of 19 January 1980) —

citing here once more from the oral transcription (Barthes 2015b) since this interjection is yet another detail absent from the written lecture notes (Barthes 2003) — “je cite souvent Michelet parce que vous savez que je travaillais sur lui dans ma jeunesse et que, par conséquent, c’est toujours la culture de ce moment-là qui est la mieux ancrée en vous” (Barthes 2015b : 399). What we find, however, is that Michelet is not really anchored (“ancrée”) for the late Barthes. Instead, Barthes’s reading of Michelet in these late lecture courses fluctuates. These fluctuations concern not only matters of spelling (*nuova/nova*) or dating, but also matters of greater significance : on the one hand, the claimed catalyst for this new life, whether marriage or exile; on the other hand, the absolute change, or not, in subject matter.

Thus, the posited return of Barthes to Michelet is also not a return, unless we understand it as a spiralling form of return as formulated by Barthes in an essay on Bernard Réquichot : “sur la spirale, les choses reviennent, *mais à un autre niveau* : il y a retour dans la différence, non ressassement dans l’identité” (Barthes 2002c : 386; emphasis in the original). In Barthes’s return to Michelet, we see a similar “retour dans la différence”. This difference may be partly attributable to the availability of materials; Barthes’s *Michelet* book precedes the publication of Michelet’s *Journal*, for instance (as noted by Barthes 1954 : 14), although as we have seen the late Barthes still diverges from the account in Michelet’s *Journal*. Yet the difference is, more strikingly, also methodological. In his *Michelet par lui-même*, Barthes warns : “On ne peut lire Michelet linéairement, il faut restituer ses assises et son réseau de thèmes” (1954 : 182). In his later writings, in contrast, Barthes is concerned to establish a linear narrative for Michelet’s work, even in the face of challenges to this narrative from inevitable repetition and from the temporal overlapping of different writing projects, as I have charted in this essay.

Concluding Thoughts

In exploring further Barthes’s reading of Michelet, I have demonstrated the importance of Michelet for Barthes’s *Vita Nova* project, elucidated Barthes’s vision of Michelet in his later texts, and shown how this vision contrasts both with Michelet’s own accounts and with aspects of Barthes’s early work on Michelet. More broadly, in focusing on Michelet I have discovered striking divergences not only between Barthes on Michelet’s *vita n[u]ova* versus Michelet’s *vita n[u]ova* in his own words but also between the written notes and oral transcriptions of Barthes’s late lecture courses. This second discovery has wide-reaching implications for the way we approach these posthumous publications of lecture materials that exist in different forms, where the differences have yet to be properly appreciated and accounted for (though see already, on matters concerning, for instance, the voicing of written punctuation, Bellon 2009 and 2012).

Reading Michelet against Barthes serves as a warning of the need to be attentive to difference, and especially to this “retour dans la différence” (Barthes 2002c : 386) represented for Barthes by the spiral. We need to be attentive to differences between Barthes’s Michelet and Michelet himself, attentive to the different Michelets adopted and imagined by Barthes at different points in his career, and attentive, finally, to the differences between the written and the spoken Barthes, as exemplified by the two editions of *La Préparation du roman*. Moreover, reading Michelet against Barthes also contributes to our understanding of Barthes’s *Vita Nova*. In particular, focus on Michelet might suggest that for Barthes new life is impossible partly because his own life is too comfortable, or at least (since grief is certainly not comfortable) because he lacks the catalyst of physical dislocation. As the example of Michelet proposes, new life is possible only outside the routine and safety of the Collège de France. This is an uncomfortable truth that Barthes seems to have suppressed at least publically on all but one occasion.

More broadly, the examples of both Barthes and Michelet call into question the very idea of new life. New life should ideally be definitive, absolute, and unique. Yet both Barthes and Michelet repeat the phrase at different moments. As Badmington has shown, Barthes proclaims new life more often (and much earlier) than we tend to allow; as I have shown, Michelet himself proclaims new life more often than Barthes allows. In Barthes's case, this multiplicity suggests that the desired new life of the "Longtemps" lecture and *La Préparation du roman* is situated within a series of new lives that undermine both the idea of a single, successful conversion in Barthes and, more particularly, the connection between conversion and mourning otherwise postulated by texts written in the wake of the death of Barthes's mother. In Michelet's case, new life is more successful and yet it, too, is both repeated and fails to institute a complete break with the past and with history. In both cases, we encounter the problem of iterability. Is *vita n[u]ova*, then, in the end a failed performative? My final conclusion is either realistic or pessimistic : new life is a fiction that even the fictions of Barthes and Michelet cannot uphold.

Notes

- 1 More generally, on Barthes's intertexts, in particular other French conversion narratives such as that of François-René de Chateaubriand, see Knight 2015 as well as Gil and Worms 2016.
- 2 See also the oral version for an even clearer statement of this distinction : "*Vita Nova* comme disait Dante ou *Vita Nuova* comme disait Michelet (*Vita Nova*, c'est latin, *Vita Nuova*, c'est italien)" (Barthes 2015b : 19). The argument between Dante scholars over whether Dante's youthful prosimetrum should itself be titled in Latin or Italian largely postdates Barthes's death, since it was ignited by Guglielmo Gorni's edition, which opted for the Latin (Dante 1996).
- 3 The reasons for Michelet's turn to natural history are also explored by Lionel Gossman (2001 : 288), with particular attention to the death of this child as well as to the subsequent death, in 1855, of Michelet's daughter Adèle (the daughter from his first marriage).
- 4 On the possibility of multiple new lives, see also Marie Gil (2016), for whom Michelet's *vita n[u]ova* is neither of these moments, but rather the earlier experience of the death of Mme Dumesnil (1842) and the writing of the *Histoire de France*. This dating allows Gil to argue of new life for both Barthes and Michelet that "le deuil de la femme en est le point de départ" (2016 : 223). In my analysis, however, this reading matches neither what Barthes claims of Michelet nor what Michelet himself claims in his *Journal* and in *L'Oiseau*, although it does fit Michelet into the Dantean and Proustian paradigm outlined by Barthes in the "Longtemps" lecture and elsewhere.

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Abstract

In this essay I investigate the role played by the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet in the late lectures of Roland Barthes. While it is well known that one of Barthes's first books was devoted to Michelet (1954), the presence of Michelet in the late works of Barthes has yet to receive due attention. This neglect is especially surprising, since Michelet is explicitly evoked repeatedly as a key model for Barthes's elusive novelistic project, his so-called *Vita Nova*. Firstly, I undertake a reading of Barthes's claims about Michelet's *vita n[u]ova* in his late lectures and seminars. Secondly, I look at Michelet's own use of the term *vita n[u]ova*, and propose that there is often a gap between Barthes's Michelet and Michelet *par lui-même*. Thirdly, I reflect more broadly on the implications of these inconsistencies and discrepancies for the question of conversion which is at the heart of the concept of "new life".

Keywords : Barthes; Michelet; *vita nova*; new life; Collège de France

Résumé

Dans cet article j'examine le rôle joué par l'historien français du dix-neuvième siècle Jules Michelet dans les cours que Roland Barthes a donnés à la fin de sa vie. Tandis que l'on sait bien que l'un des premiers livres de Barthes a été consacré à Michelet (1954), la présence de Michelet dans les œuvres tardives de Barthes n'as pas encore reçu l'attention requise. Cette négligence est suprenante d'autant plus que Michelet est évoqué explicitement et de façon répétitive comme modèle clé pour le projet romanesque de Barthes, sa soi-disant *Vita Nova*. Premièrement, j'entreprends une lecture des affirmations de Barthes autour de la *vita n[u]ova* de Michelet dans ses cours et séminaires tardifs. Deuxièmement, je considère l'usage que Michelet lui-même a fait du terme *vita n[u]ova*, et je propose qu'il y ait souvent un écart entre le Michelet de Barthes et Michelet par lui-même. Troisièmement, je réfléchis plus généralement sur les implications de ces incohérences et divergences pour la question de conversion qui est au cœur de l'idée de « vie nouvelle ».

Mots-clés : Barthes ; Michelet ; *vita nova* ; vie nouvelle ; Collège de France

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