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Roland Barthes. By ANDY STAFFORD. London: Reaktion Books. 2015. £11.99. 191 pp. ISBN 978-1-78023-495-3.

Neil Badmington

Seventeen years is a long time *chez* Roland Barthes. In 1998, a little under two decades after Barthes's death, Edinburgh University Press published Andy Stafford's *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography*. Emphasising the "dialogue" between Barthes and French culture', the book traced 'the *circulation* (rather than ownership) of ideas which he favoured' (p. 6) and avoided the pitfalls of conventional biographical criticism, which Barthes denounced as 'tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions'. It remains one of the finest studies in the field.

Posthumous texts bearing Barthes's name existed at the time, of course; the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1993-95), for example, had been published earlier in the decade. But since 1998 there has been a transformative flood. As the *Los Angeles Review of Books* put it in 2012: 'Lately the posthumous corpus of Roland Barthes has been growing at a rate that rivals Tupac Shakur's. (Can a hologram Barthes be far behind?)' This body now includes: six full volumes of teaching notes; two diaries; notes and drafts for *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover's Discourse* and *Camera Lucida*; the letters and short texts of *Album* (Paris: Seuil, 2015); and an expanded *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 2002). By the time we reached the centenary celebrations in 2015, earlier accounts of Barthes work no longer seemed sufficient; there was, and still is, a need to reconsider the landscape.

Andy Stafford's new book, *Roland Barthes*, responds to this need. Published in Reaktion's 'Critical Lives' series, it reckons with not only Barthes's life, but also explicitly with 'Barthes' posthumous life' (p. 9). It is, at the time of writing, the only English-language work of its kind, but it follows two major recent French biographies: Marie Gil's *Roland Barthes: Au lieu de la vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012) and Tiphaine Samoyault's *Roland Barthes: Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015). (Stafford discusses both of these volumes and often engages in a critical dialogue, both explicit and implicit, with Gil.)

Roland Barthes weaves together with great skill Barthes's life, his writings, and 'the social side of his work' (p. 11). This, Stafford explains, 'involves not simply emphasizing the collective, group-oriented Barthes', but also attending to 'the very act of writing, in all its material, ideological and pleasurable dimensions, in its deep relations to society, to friends and detractors' (p. 11). Drawing upon material and facts which were not available

in 1998, Stafford moves seamlessly through Barthes's early years as a war orphan and a victim of tuberculosis; the 'false starts' (p. 40); the engagements with Marxism, popular theatre and structuralism; May 1968; the Collège de France years; the period of mourning following the death of his mother in 1977; and the 'posthumous life'. As in his earlier book, Stafford stresses the political elements of Barthes's writings, and he concludes that the author 'might be placed in a much wider tradition of moralists (Nietzsche, Sartre and even Lacan and Lévi-Strauss) who want to explain, philosophically, how we behave as humans' (p. 156). The mention of 'moralists' might, particularly in the anglophone context, connote a figure of prim piety, but Stafford instead likens Barthes to Houdini, 'as this implies, in his attempts to break out from institutional and societal closure and control, a notion of creativity', in which we find 'a highly original critique of self and personality' (p. 158).

Samoyault's biography of Barthes runs to over 700 pages; Gil's is only a little shorter. Stafford's book contains fewer than 200 pages, but this should not be taken as a sign of slightness. *Roland Barthes* is an illuminating, readable work of concision and precision by one of the most knowledgeable figures in the field.

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