

## BOOK REVIEW

### ‘Et tout le reste est littérature’

Andy Stafford

Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes. Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015). 719 pp. 28€.

In what is set to be a momentous ‘année barthésienne’ this year – that is, the centenary of his birth – Tiphaine Samoyault’s magisterial biography, published in February 2015, has kept Barthesians working hard. At over seven hundred pages, this huge *pavé* of a study of Barthes’s life and work is an impressive re-reading of his work through his life. Not so much a return to *l’homme et l’œuvre* of nineteenth-century approaches to literature, her detailed account is more *l’œuvre et l’homme*, that is, an acceptance (with regard to Barthes at least) that the writer’s life proves to be as interesting as the writings that remain. Indeed, picking up Barthes’s 1978 reference to Proust’s ‘marcellisme’, Samoyault borrows Claude Coste’s neologism ‘rolandisme’ (pp. 37-38) as an illustration of the fascination evident in the work of many critics, researchers and novelists for Barthes’s existence since his death in 1980.

Once she has discussed the (superficial) irony of writing a lengthy study of the life of *the* modern writer to have questioned the value of any writer’s biography in relation to their written production, Samoyault deploys a sober but incisive methodology for seeing (and then showing) how publications and life-trajectory coincide. In this way, her work stands in marked contrast to the forthright ‘essayistic’ approach in Marie Gil’s recent biography, *Roland Barthes. Au lieu de la vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), the publication of which, by all accounts, nearly caused Samoyault to abandon her authorised project. But that, in the end, is the huge difference between these two biographies. Whereas Gil puts into practice a type of ‘rolandisme’ – trying her utmost to be ‘parametric’ with the subject of the biography, in an *essai biographique* that reads Barthes’s life as if it were a text, a ‘fiction’ – Samoyault, by contrast, has been granted almost unlimited access to, and (more importantly) permission to quote from, a huge volume of personal

papers, including diaries and correspondence, that Barthes accumulated across his life. So hers is the 'official' biography, with all that this entails in the positive, and negative, senses of the word.

This is the novelty of Samoyault's biography, not just in relation to Gil's but also to the earlier, and much criticised, one by Louis-Jean Calvet (Paris: Flammarion, 1990; translated into English in 1994). It is the regular incorporation of correspondence and Barthes's diaries, above all, that demarcates hers from the two earlier biographies both published by Flammarion, a clear rival to the Seuil publishing house that was Barthes's publishing stable for all of his career. Samoyault's incorporation into the analysis of the recently published lectures and seminars that have appeared, systematically since 2002, is augmented and complemented by her study of manuscript versions of Barthes's books, and richly contextualised by much wider (too many?) literary parallels.

However, there is one key area which she shies from investigating; that is, the temptation of parametrism. To her credit, Marie Gil has indeed taken the risk, noticed by the reviewer in *Le Monde* of her 2012 effort (9 March 2012, p. 9). Here Jean-Louis Jeannelle asks whether one can really 'write a "Barthesian" biography of Barthes without pastiching him', and believes that the writer pre-empted this option: 'Barthes deploys such a reflexive consciousness of his own analyses', suggests Jeannelle, 'that his commentators risk imitating it without being able to claim to overtake or identify in him any levels of meaning that he might not have anticipated'. This catering for posterity – which, despite Barthes's claims otherwise, is a key element in his continued popularity – is a thorny issue for the biographer, and one which Samoyault, largely, ducks. Hers is, instead, a bald (and bold) statement of the biographical facts, coupled with a helpful and authoritative reading of the writings in parallel with the life. In this way, Samoyault's is a perfect complement, and not a competitor as such, to Marie Gil's (and Calvet's) earlier works. Indeed, she hits the nail on the head when discussing why the life of both Barthes and Foucault, in contradistinction to that of, say, Deleuze, is considered 'inseparable from their intellectual production': 'This is explained in part by the biographical constellation that is deployed around them', she insists, 'as if understanding their life could provide access to their thought' (p. 596).

However, despite the deep similarities and parallels in Barthes's and Foucault's trajectories underlined by Samoyault (repeated in her account of Barthes and Sollers, and Barthes and Gide), Samoyault shows convincingly how Barthes differs from Foucault. Where the latter

‘denounces the all-encompassing power of the order of discourse’ but does so ‘by remaining inscribed in its laws’, the former, thanks to ‘perhaps his freedom as a writer, strives to undo them’ (p. 597). Similarly, she deploys extensive discussion of Maurice Blanchot’s differences with Barthes’s concerns; the neat 1941 definition of the ‘essai’ by Blanchot (p. 387) notwithstanding, Barthes is shown to be less tempted by nihilism (pp. 387-88), figuring that the only way out of the alienations of language is through language.

Samoyault also supplies good accounts of the fascinating work of the early Barthes. Reading his card-system from 1951 and 1952, she investigates the extensive research that Barthes carried out for the early stages of his unfinished doctoral thesis on the language used by the French State, including bosses and workers, in the socially and politically tumultuous years between 1827 and 1834 (p. 239). She reveals – intriguingly for the future research programmes of British academics – that, as early as 1954, Barthes worked very briefly at the BBC (p. 286); importantly, that the erstwhile theatre enthusiast was invited, in a letter from Jean-Paul Sartre in December 1955, onto the editorial board of *Les Temps modernes* as theatre critic, following his spirited defence of Sartre’s cold-war play *Nekrassov*, an offer that Barthes declined (p. 328). She analyses correspondence between Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, as well as with Michel Butor; and follows very carefully Barthes’s extensive travel activities, especially between 1960 and 1970 (amounting to five trips on average per year), including an unknown visit to Algeria. Furthermore, we knew already that Barthes developed a deep friendship with the Germanist Marthe Robert, but less so that her husband, Michel de M’Uzan, helped Barthes develop his interest in psychoanalytical theory. Samoyault is not shy of suggesting criticisms of Barthes’s failure to respond politically, for example when solicited by Franco Fortini to react to the massacre of Algerians in Paris on 17 October 1961. By the same token, Samoyault reads Barthes’s writing in the wake of May ’68, and sees it less as a reflection of these events than as an acting back on the topsy-turvy world of early 1970s France. ‘Utopia’, she asserts in relation to Barthes’s provocative 1971 essay, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, ‘is better understood in the quotidian, in minor events, rather than in big changes’ (p. 446).

Samoyault has taken this idea to heart in considering Barthes’s daily and personal activities. Diana Knight has noted (in *French Studies* in 2004 – and part of a corpus of writings on Barthes that has been helpfully opened up for free during this centenary year) that, following the polemic around the 1990 biography by Calvet, Barthes’s half-brother

tried to control research on Barthes's private life. Michel Salzedo insisted that the line between public and private life should be respected, an injunction which has held (including in the Beaubourg exhibition of 2002-2003); that is, until now. Indeed, with Samoyault's approach – including her no-holds-barred information on regular visits to 'cabines pornographiques' in Paris and Barthes's fastidious noting down of all of his sexual activities (dates, times, places, people) – we now can see a sexually prolific Barthes: no aphanisis for him! She is good on François Braunschweig too, who was not only a former lover, but a crucial player in photographic culture in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, her minute accounts of Barthes's sexual proclivities are always used to reconsider his writing. For example, she argues that *Incidents* was not necessarily written during his stay in Morocco in 1969-1970, but conceived and noted earlier in the 1960s when Barthes was regularly visiting Morocco with Severo Sarduy, Michel Foucault and François Wahl (p. 452). Needless to say, the biography also contains photographs galore. Samoyault also shows how Barthes, completely unegotistically, investigated human emotions. Indeed, it is strange and disappointing to hear the odd comment on Barthes's posthumous account of his suffering following his mother's death, in the *Journal de deuil*, to the effect that this shows how 'emotionally illiterate' Barthes was: as if he hasn't earned the right *not* to incarnate his writing in this moralistic way. She also reveals that Barthes was worryingly ill during the pre-revolutionary events of May '68 (but she does not go as far as to wonder why Barthes fell ill at key moments in French twentieth-century history: the failed fascist putsch of 1934, the Occupation period, as well as '68).

Despite the comprehensiveness, strange, small gaps do – almost inevitably – appear. Samoyault makes no mention of 'Emile Ripert', Barthes's pen-name in the journal *Existences* whilst in the sanatorium; of the Sartre interview Barthes conducted in *Théâtre Populaire*; of the fact that the 'Letter to Sollers' that she finds in Barthes's papers was actually published in *Tel Quel* 43, in Autumn 1970, following Jean-Pierre Faye's notorious accusation that the journal had supported the right-wing generals in Algeria during the war of independence (p. 483). The one other area we might gripe about is the question of political culture. In a recent interview in *Le Monde* (21 January 2015, p. 2), Samoyault regretted that, having been born during it, that she did not actually see the explosion of May '68; I think that this shows. Whereas Calvet discusses at length Barthes's fascination with Georges Fournié and his Trotskyism, and shows Barthes reading Marx extensively in the immediate post-war period, one glance at the index of Samoyault's

biography indicates her blindness in this respect: a mere eight references to Marx in seven hundred pages, and no mention of Trotskyism at all. Then again, Freud gets only seven entries. This suggests that hers is on the biography side of 'intellectual biography' (Gil fares no better, it has to be said, excepting a couple more pages on Freud, whereas Calvet, part of an earlier generation that 'saw' '68, is much better on the political influences, but much weaker on psychoanalysis). This is important at the level of analysis. There is an important contradiction in Barthes's thought that is not really picked up, whereby he deems the paradox as positive in intellectual and literary discourse, but as negative in revolutionary discourse (see Samoyault, pp. 446-47).

These gripes are no doubt personal to this author and are not intended to detract from the enormous aid that Samoyault has brought to Barthes studies. Apart from the odd set of correspondence (for example, with Bernard Dort), and the huge amount of teaching and preparatory papers, outlines, background material, that will doubtless make themselves into published form – witness, Eric Marty's edited collection of correspondence and varia, *Roland Barthes. Album*, published by Seuil recently this year – all (!) that is left, now, of RB is (his) writing.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Andy Stafford's latest book is a *Critical Life of Roland Barthes* published by Reaktion Press.

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