BOOK REVIEW

The 'Unclassifiable' Barthes

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Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes* (London: Reaktion Books, 'Critical Lives' series, 2015). 192 pp. £11.99.

Compared to the three existing, rather lengthy biographies of Roland Barthes in French, Andy Stafford's new biography on Barthes is an elegant and compact volume of less than two hundred pages.[1] It offers, however, one of the most lucid and subtle understandings of Barthes' life and work. From the onset, Stafford is warned by a preemptive *daimon*, brought forth not by Socrates' gods, but by a reviewer of the work of his predecessor, Marie Gil. Jean-Louis Jeannelle, in his review of Gil's biography of Barthes for *Le Monde*, France's most prominent daily newspaper, asks if one can really 'write a "Barthesian" biography of Barthes without pastiching him'. For Stafford, this provoking comment translates into a demand for sobriety and self-conscious distance *vis-à-vis* the multifarious biographical material at hand. Throughout the book, he walks a fine line between deploying the maximum plurality of the personality and work of Barthes and not 'over-signifying' them in favor of any particular approach (say, shyly Marxian), between leaving ample room for fantasy and utopic impulses (both from Barthes's perspective and his own) and not letting oneself go, as Gil claims to have done in her book, into the 'passion' or 'fiction' of biography.

Stafford achieves this by presenting a paradoxical Barthes, or, rather, 'two' simultaneous and contradictory Barthes who do not aspire to a synthesis: the one who loves cataloguing and arrangement yet is socially 'unclassifiable' (as exemplified, for example, by his status of '*pupille de la nation*' [war orphan] and '*Tubard*' [a TB patient], by the lack of job security for a significant part of his adult life, hence the contingency of experiences and of research disciplines); the one who is deeply sensitive to

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popular culture and cultivates at the same time *délicatesse* and 'aristocratic' values (flight from gregariousness, search for singularity, resistance to social normalization); the one who has been weighed down by the proximity of death and remains active in social circles and combative in fighting the 'malady' of language. Most of all, it is a Barthes who 'oscillates' yet stands voluntarily on an open dialectic: he does not need a final say on his life, neither after his mother's death (an inconsolable event in his life), nor after his own death. Objecting to Gil's 'total' psychoanalytic approach that locks Barthes' life in a dark hole created by a 'family structure', Stafford prefers to see 'two' parallel Barthes progressing together in life, one utopic and one practical, one 'essential' and one 'social', one concretized through *writing* and the other through his relation to others.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that Stafford proceeds through a dualism. One of his main arguments in the book – emphasizing the 'social' side of Barthes's life and work (p. 11) – collapses the notions of 'individual self' and the 'social human' (p. 79). If the idea of the 'social' is briefly fuzzy, it becomes quickly clear that it refers to an extendable realm rather than to a specific setting. By 'social' Stafford means not only Barthes's activism and collective endeavors (for example, his involvement in the French popular theater movement, his participation in demonstration and petition-signings), and his ability to create and live intellectual communities (the 'Alpine Oxford' in the sanatorium, the journal *Communications*, the seminars at the École pratique des hautes études), but also foldable categories such as 'social psychoanalysis', 'sociability of writing', 'investment of self in the research'. The 'social' is simply the interrelation between writing and life, the way in which Barthes 'think[s] through others' and 'others think through him' (p. 12).

It is here we encounter one of the most captivating theses of the book, that behind the 'diffuse and disseminated Barthes, whose ideas seem to float in the culture wind of the *zeitgeist*' (p. 12), there is a Houdini-magician Barthes who manages to unbind the societal fetters and dissolve the 'self' into nothingness. The 'self' in Barthes, it then seems, not unlike the concept of the 'real' in Clément Rosset, is colorless and impalpable, it 'brackets' itself more than asserting itself, and it can only be realized through a social and institutional 'inflection'. A second, more 'essential', more 'critical' Barthes, however, gets 'sedimented' in writing, but it is never dissociated from the first one, because it is both its extension and its evaluation.

The idea that the self can be the starting or end point of a social experiment, or that the (institutional) 'self' always needs an outside 'self' to complete the circuit of subjectivity, offers stimulating new readings of *Mythologies* and of some of Barthes's reputedly unwaveringly 'structuralist' texts. In the case of *Mythologies*, Stafford sees Barthes performing a form of social psychoanalysis on a phenomenon he himself is not free from, namely, the self-delusion of petit bourgeois ideology. Barthes assumes thus, according to his biographer, his own social imprisonment, sharing with the object of his critique the common fate of a 'dead end'. In the case of 'The Introduction to Structural Analysis of Narratives' and *Elements of Semiology*, Stafford ventures to argue that at the very moment when Barthes applies strictly systematic analyses to 'scientific' objects such as narrative and linguistics, a Houdini-Barthes has already played another role on another scene (in the preface to *Critical Essays*), that of the 'critic-writer-creator', by calling for an 'oblique way' (*une parole indirecte*) to interpret the literary texts. Stafford comes thus close to saying that Barthes has never been a 'committed' structuralist, because while he is engaged with the 'Structuralist Activity' (the title of a 1963 essay by Barthes) and uses structuralist tools (its lexicon, its methodology, its vision) with ease, there is always already another Barthes, essayistic, creative and 'parametric', in the making, undermining the very 'academic' subject that begins to catch institutional attention.

Early in the biography, Stafford points out that Marxism and psychoanalysis played a major role in Barthes' early career, but because of his fundamental ambivalence toward both, they entered into a competition and ended in an 'unhappy marriage' (p. 28). In this light, Stafford's book offers an interesting response to Marie Gil's psychoanalytic reading of Barthes. Drawing many of his sources from her impressively well-documented work and rewriting some of her ideas (such as the importance of the figure of 'oscillation', structuralism/binary opposition as 'solution', the backward stance of an older Barthes scrutinizing a younger Barthes), Stafford shows bewilderment at his predecessor's ability to encapsulate her rich findings with just a few categorical conclusions. His goal, consequently, is not so much to outdo her psychoanalytic framework, but to bring back a '*soubassement marxiste*' (Marxist underpinning) that he sees as lacking if the 'paternal', the symbolic and the social were completely erased from the dynamics and the structure of Barthes' *Bildungsroman*. This Marxist/Marxian approach (briefly defined as conceiving the self, the capital

and language as social relations), however, is only explicitly acknowledged at the very end of the book. Is that because Barthes himself had preempted such an ideological hoist by a Brechtian distancing effect?

In a conference paper he gave at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1977, later published as 'Image', Barthes acknowledges he had been intimidated by both Psychoanalysis and Marxism in his youth, but it is now their turn to appear 'foolish' (*bête*). As if wanting to dissolve this 'unhappy marriage', he puts on stage a different 'couple', less conflictual, less gender-specific, that of *Maché* (combat) and of *Acolouthia* (the natural sequence, succession, order).[2] The combat here is the combat of language, or of the images that society imposes on him through its language, as it is so vividly conveyed in the metaphor of the potato chip: '"what I believe the other thinks of me" is just like frying chips – put a bit of potato into a frying pan and watch it being not destroyed, but "hardened, caramelized, made crisp"' (Stafford, p. 133). All societal languages are perhaps boiling microsystems; they harden the 'image', or what we call today 'identity'. The only way not to become a potato chip is to dissolve the self through writing before the language of others 'takes over'. This *Epoché* of self, however, can only bounce back into the real world as a delicate being with the support of an intimate social circle, what Barthes calls *Acolouthia*, that 'cortège of friends who accompany him'.[3] Stafford has painted two Barthes alongside the guiding metaphors of *Maché* and *Acolouthia*: one combative and one non-conflictual, one elusive and one assertive, one solitary and one social. Barthes is 'unclassifiable', because he has never let himself be hardened into a potato chip.

Notes

[1] The first biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet's *Roland Barthes, 1915-1980*, was published by Éditions Flammarion in 1990 (339 pages); the second, Marie Gil's *Roland Barthes, Au lieu de la vie*, was published by the same press in 2012 (562 pages); the most recent one, Tiphaine Samoyault's *Roland Barthes*, was released by Éditions du Seuil earlier this year (720 pages).
[2] *Prétexte: Roland Barthes*, *Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. by Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), p. 299.
[3] *Prétexte*, p. 308.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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