

BOOK REVIEW

The Bud Equals the Flower

John McKeane

Andy Stafford, *Roland Barthes Writing the Political: History, Dialectics, Self* (London: Anthem, 2023).

This book sets out to make a major contribution to our understanding of Barthes's work, a contribution summarized on the book's cover as follows: 'the aesthete is dead – long live the political Barthes!' This is certainly the direction in which Stafford's work travels, although it is canny enough to avoid any 'perceived dichotomy' (p. ix) between the political and the aesthetic. Indeed, the unsatisfactory nature of straightforward oppositionality – or dialectic – is surely the central one on which the author reflects.

The work surveys Barthes's entire career, whilst managing to avoid being summary or reductive. The reader is given a sense of the interpenetration between what we know today as Barthes's books, and the backgrounds from which they emerged, be they in journalism, teaching, studies, illness, travel, amorous encounters.... Stafford also engages, in detail and right until the end of his book, with other readers of Barthes, and we see him returning regularly to debates with other scholars, amongst others the gently sceptical Claude Coste and the 'psychoanalytical' (p. 197) and 'teleological' (pp. 133, 134, 144) Marie Gil.

Drawing on no fewer than sixteen of Stafford's previously published or forthcoming pieces on Barthes, this text demonstrates a longstanding commitment to this thinker. This does not prevent the writing retaining an exuberant quality. Nor is the author afraid of an illuminating detour through the work of Barthes's interlocutors (Brecht, Morin, Said, Benjamin, Nietzsche, Michelet, Glissant...), although as we push our way through the luxuriant foliage, we also encounter some surprising figures. Although Barthes's liberality and free-thinking are never in doubt, the book cites Lenin (on human knowledge as a spiral, p. 3),

Trotsky (on art for art's sake, p. 183), Stalin (on language's imperviousness to ideology, p. 37), and Mao (on the unity of opposites, p. xx; and as a proponent of 'dialectical innovation', p. 207). Perhaps it is simply a bourgeois qualm to wonder how such thinking fits alongside these figures' murderous brutality, or was able to do so little to prevent it.

Alongside the requisite Marx, Hegel is also addressed. It might have been possible to explore this thinker by way of his interactions with his idealist (Kant, Fichte, Schelling) and romantic (Hölderlin, Schlegel, Novalis) contemporaries. Such an angle was being explored in 1970s France by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, who in so doing interacted with the theoretical avant-garde (Derrida, Genette, Todorov, *Tel Quel*), and at whose Strasbourg seminar Barthes spoke. Although Stafford touches on such thinkers, it is true that to explore this angle in greater depth might have pushed him towards comparativism, and too far away from the exegesis of discussions explicitly taking place within Barthes's work. And beyond any simple dialectic of loyalty/disloyalty, the task of *amplificatio* is both worthwhile and ably carried out here.

The book's discussions cover the entirety of Barthes's 40-year career, and as such provide a useful corrective to accounts which focus predominantly on his late period. Instead, we encounter a writer who spent three quarters of his career writing before the perhaps distractingly totemic events of May '68. Barthes became a writer, then, before the fragmentation of the intellectual scene, and can be better approached as someone spectating at (or participating in) a dogged, decades-long wrestling match between *Weltanschauungen*. Stafford reads Barthes non-linearly, and on occasion backwards, in what he calls a 'dog-leg structure' (p. xxii). This involves generally moving forwards in time, but with the first and final chapters being out of chronological sequence. Along the way we are presented with readings of the major phases in Barthes's career, from *Mythologies* to *S/Z* to the China and Japan writings, and much more. We can particularly underline Stafford's reading in Chapter 3 of what he convincingly contends are Barthes's ekphrastic captions for a 100-photo series based on Roger Pic's production of Brecht's *Mother Courage* for the Théâtre National Populaire.

The obvious objection to such a non-linear method would be that it is always already gainsaid by the development of Barthes's career. Alternatively, in less author-focused and more Marxist terms, it shares characteristics with a timeless, structural approach, and in doing so steps out of the all-important flow of history (on which topic, we encounter the highly stimulating statement, ventriloquizing Barthes, that 'when two

systems meet – there is history’, p. 42). In any case, on a model clearly recalling that used by Barthes himself, not only is there no teleology, there is no centre: no moment is more important than any other. Here we can recall what Hegel wrote about the dialectic:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead.¹

For Stafford writing about Barthes, on the contrary, the bud equals the flower which equals the fruit. Of course, Hegel had also got there before us, and continues the passage above, speaking of the bud/blossom/fruit as ‘moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole’. The way the point is couched seems to speak to Stafford’s work, with its project of reading Barthes’s development non-teleologically.

To close, let us come to the question of the dialectic, which is sliced and diced in various ways, but without its importance ever coming into question. Given the book’s focus, the chapter on dialectic is rightly reserved until last, but in a sense we have already been at the (anachronous) end all along, insofar as Barthes’s thought is repeatedly shown to be other than the infinitely malleable, protean, re-composable entity it might appear if we only read his later works. Instead, Stafford shows that Barthes’s thinking rarely completely cuts off communication with the tradition of dialectical thought, one that finds rigour in refusing to let itself be turned inside out. Instead, it always retains a degree of systematicity, or resistance, or straightforward heft. It springs back into shape.

As Stafford shows, Barthes’s work explores a large number of permutations in relation to this dialectic. Of course, this does not mean simply adopting it – we are rightly told (p. 207) that a reticence to do this is a major trope of French theory. This reticence gives rise to a shifting constellation of quasi-dialectical models, then: “the two-term dialectic” (p. xx); “amputated synthesis” – the overall method of Barthesian analysis for the rest of his career’ (p. 40); ‘the “new dialectic” that Barthes finds in Japan’ (p. 144); and a ‘dialectical mix’ of objective reality and subjective experience (p. 160). We learn that ‘this book moves therefore through three types of dialectic: the double; *dédoublement*; “undialectics”’ (p. xxii). Stafford writes that ‘between Michelet’s “double grasp” in the 1950s and

the “no-wish-to-grasp” in his Japan of 1970, Barthes brackets, if not overturns, all notion of “grasping” (p. 174). This confirms the trend – the capital letters perhaps hinting at exasperation – that ‘if there is ONE thing that Barthes IS telling us, it is to double-grasp everything’ (p. 225, *sic*).

While there are clearly nuanced differences between these and other ways of being undialectically dialectic, or dialectically undialectical, it would be missing the point to ask Stafford to systematize them for us. Indeed, it is a positive aspect of his exuberant, generous, and rejuvenating book that he does not. We must let these notions breathe – a metaphor used in the book to express its structure (p. xxii), and one that places us firmly back in the idealist-romantic era in which Hegel was writing. He and his contemporaries did not shy away from identifying something like a spirit or a life-force at work in the world, an outside that wants to come inside. In the words of poet Novalis, ‘the proper philosophical system must bring freedom and infinity, or, to put it more paradoxically, systemlessness into a system’.²

Notes

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 2.

² Cited in Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 412.

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John McKeane is associate professor of French studies at the University of Reading. He is the author of *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: (Un)timely Meditations* (2015) and is currently writing a book on Sarah Kofman and ancient thought. He co-edited *Blanchot romantique* (2010) and *Sarah Kofman and the Relief of Philosophy* (2021), and is also a translator, for instance, of Jean Luc Nancy's *Adoration: the Deconstruction of Christianity* (2013) and Christophe Bident's *Maurice Blanchot: a Critical Biography* (2018)

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