

Andy Stafford. *Roland Barthes*. London: Reaktion Books, 2015. Pp. 192. 15 illus. £11.99.

Seventeen years after his intellectual biography *Roland Barthes: Phenomenon and Myth* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), Andy Stafford makes a timely return to his subject for Reaktion's Critical Lives series. Like most biographers of this key 20th-century critical thinker, Stafford contextualizes his approach with reference to Barthes's own self-reflexive (auto)biographical probing, epitomized by *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). This unconventional autobiography, he suggests, launched a subsequent 'use of teaching and lecturing that inscribes the Self, [Barthes's] self, into the analysis' (p. 8), resulting in an exploration of the 'utopias of the "self"' as unstable and 'unclassifiable' (p. 144). Stafford sees this notion of the fundamental ambiguity of the self as a main characteristic of Barthes's entire oeuvre and emphasizes Barthes the "oscillator", a term borrowed from Marie Gil's 2012 French-language biography *Roland Barthes: Au lieu de la vie* (Paris: Flammarion) (p. 26), which serves Stafford as a stable, albeit somewhat ambivalent, reference point. Barthes's well-known teasing out of dualisms and binaries and his adoption of very different, even apparently contradictory positions, in individual texts and over the course of his career, is innovatively juxtaposed with an exploration of what Stafford calls the 'social side' of Barthes's writings (p. 11). The seven short chapters of this biography, which chronologically move through Barthes's life – from his childhood as an impoverished war orphan, his battle with tuberculosis as a young adult, his activism and engagement with theatre, his semiotic and structuralist endeavors, to a new phase marked by biographical concerns, and the final years of his life, profoundly impacted by the death of his mother and occasioning new conceptualizations of the Other – are interposed with lucid consideration of the oft-neglected social dimension of Barthes's work. This is most

originally explored in relation to the French theorist's texts on literature and language (*Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* and *Critique et vérité*), his rarely analyzed social commentary on sport in the context of his cinematographic involvement with Hubert Aquin, and finally his intellectual withdrawal from public discussion, following his visit to China in 1974, which Stafford interprets as a 'social' performance of his experiences with communism (p. 122). In these and other ways, Stafford's biography of Barthes as a 'social psychologist' (p. 159) is more than the narrative of the life of one of the most important intellectual figures of post-war France, shedding new light on the social, collective, and, by extension, ethical aspects of Barthes's œuvre. And although experts and readers already familiar with Barthes's life and work may find more uncharted territory in the recent French biography by Tiphaine Samoyault (*Roland Barthes*, Paris: Seuil, 2015), which exploits Barthes's correspondence and archive and also includes an indispensable index that the Critical Lives series regrettably lacks, Stafford's clear and succinct account will undoubtedly serve as an excellent starting point for readers who have yet to discover the continually rich and fascinating life and work of Roland Barthes.

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