

**Tiphaine Samoyault.** *Barthes: A Biography*. Trans. Andrew Brown. Polity Press 2017. 584 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781509505654).

The first thing that the reader will notice in picking up Andrew Brown's English translation of Tiphaine Samoyault's *Barthes: A Biography* is its sheer size. The text runs just shy of 500 pages (including black and white pictures), not including notes and indices that add another hundred to that. The work is substantial in scope as well as length, spending much textual space on the theorist's early life and many unpublished letters and documents. For instance, there is a black and white reproduction of a visa request that preceded Barthes' employment in Romania, requesting that he be allowed to travel with his 'wife.' Samoyault humourously adds a 'sic' to the description of the document, as the 'wife' is actually Barthes' mother. Early on, Samoyault writes, 'It is not absolutely necessary to produce a life story in order to shed light on Barthes's intellectual program and contribution, and people may wonder why there is any need for a new biography. Among the main reasons that make it difficult to relate his life story is the feeling that there is not a great deal to be learned from such a narrative today' (15). Samoyault cites Barthes' use of the term 'Marcelism'—referring to the interest one can take in Marcel Proust apart from his writing—to then use the term 'Rolandism,' where one sees life as a succession of written figures. This was, for Samoyault, 'a wish to turn his life into a "Life"' (18).

A reader familiar with Barthes might think that there is no need for yet another biography of the author—as Samoyault suggests—or perhaps that there was never a need for such a book after Barthes' own *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in 1975. Once Samoyault begins to outline Barthes' childhood in Bayonne, it is clear that her book is much more than a simple biography; rather, it can be thought of as a kind of companion piece to *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. In her book, she is like an observer to Barthes on a tour of his childhood town. The reader accompanies her accompanying him: while Barthes tells the reader about the perfection of his childhood town, Samoyault whispers in the reader's ear about how things had changed, and how the parks and air had moved Barthes in this way or that. She seems to open up Barthes' texts, writing them with more detail, allowing the reader to read *into* Barthes' life.

Samoyault as guide is the reader's constant companion, embarking on a sort of 'show-and-tell,' revealing Barthes' letters to his friends and lovers, and—in his younger days—to his friends that he loved as more than friends. She makes the point that Barthes embodies the later theoretical ideas that he proposed toward the end of his life: as he emerged from his struggle with tuberculosis (at the age of 31), he was a sort of *neutral*, a figure that was not well-defined. He was an adult whose youth was taken by illness; though his tuberculosis, and the experiences in the sanatoria, were formative, he was also lacking a young adulthood. Samoyault describes this part of his life well, with a kind of disjointed prose that perhaps mimics Barthes' own statelessness at this point in his life. But her voice is always sympathetic, especially to the young Barthes. The reader is carried through his ups and downs (almost literally in her vivid depictions of the treatments of tuberculosis to which Barthes was subjected, notably, the forced bed rest with his feet set higher than his head).

Fascinating facets of the younger Barthes are revealed early on: Samoyault lets the reader experience never before shared fragments of his letters which show an academic mind in formation, but already functioning at a level of criticism quite above that of his teenaged peers. In a particularly interesting passage, Samoyault compares Barthes' life-long relationship to the Protestant Christianity of his mother—a religious life punctuated by weekly Bible reading in the home of the local pastor—to the words of author Duhamel: 'We keep for him, within us, a place of honor and respect' (74).

While Barthes let loose the Christianity of his mother, he never let it go completely. Samoyault suggests that, even when he writes about ‘The Rib Chop’ in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he is actually exploring the idea of the relic, but doing so from a decidedly Protestant perspective (123).

Barthes was institutionalized for tuberculosis for a formative period in his youth, which resulted in him considering a book about the sanatorium—Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*—as ‘Heart-rending.’ He defines this in *How to Live Together* as making him ‘a historical witness to a fictional novel’ (125). Mann’s book removes him from present time and places him in the time of the novel; alternately, it conflates his own personal memory with the narrative world of the book in history. Samoyault’s biography is heart-rending as well: there are many moments where the reader might read their own life in the life of Barthes. And like the guide accompanying Barthes, Samoyault brings the reader to him, to his time, and resuscitates him to the reader in the present. The reader, too, has their heart rent.

Something present throughout Samoyault’s book is the notion that Barthes was never happy with his station in life. During his youth, he seems to be looking for adulthood: he constantly searches for a kind of stability in terms of relationships (particularly in terms of his emerging homosexuality—ultimately, he is able to ‘live freely,’ as he puts it, when in his 30s). He laments the ways that his life was arrested due to his time in the sanatorium in his 20s and seems defeated by the fact that he has not completed the equivalent to his doctorate well into his 30s. This uneasiness on the part of Barthes to his development as a person is perhaps what is most clearly described in this work. Barthes was not only dissatisfied with how his life was progressing—and how slowly he seemed to be achieving the goals he had set for himself—he experienced huge bouts of boredom with various elements in his life. These facets of his life are clear throughout Samoyault’s work. For instance, Samoyault makes sure to make clear Barthes’ relationship with his mother, with whom he lived for most of his life until her death in 1977: ‘Not only did he live without her for the entire duration of the war: in the sanatorium, he forged friendships that made him hope for a life shared with other people’ (138). This evokes Barthes’ later lectures, *How to Live Together* (2012). In a 2012 article, Richard Howard, translator of many of Barthes’ works, suggests that though Barthes lived with his mother, he had a room where he worked in the attic, in which he sometimes slept. According to Howard, he lived a satisfactory life, though not necessarily a completely happy one. Howard corroborates Samoyault’s description of Barthes’ dissatisfaction. Such sentiments humanize the theorist in a way that (perhaps) his own work does not: instead of hiding behind a neutral ‘third term,’ a semantic field of open meaning, the reader sees a Barthes that is (truly) *Roland*—a human being living a life that is not altogether of his own making.

Even so, Barthes here is a ‘muted light, as it were, more mysterious, more neutral... because it emanates not from life but from death’ (486). This is yet another symptom of Barthes’ own misfortune: in life, he achieved less than he desired, and only in death does his life take on more than even he hoped. In this way, the book embodies a strange tension in that it does what Barthes wanted without his involvement, and that it is both revelatory of a *real* Barthes and a ‘muted’ construction of a now-long-dead theorist. Samoyault, though, has been successful in not only accompanying the reader on Barthes’ life journey, giving a running commentary on the minutiae of his life, but also accompanying the reader on a sort of theoretical journey. She maps his theory onto his life experiences, linking how life inspires theory, and how theory does not always contribute to life (for instance, Barthes was never able to create his ideal novel, or *vita nova*). This is both the greatest strength of the book and its greatest weakness: Samoyault both elucidates Barthes’ life and theory while simultaneously ‘neutralizing’ these things. The book makes Barthes’ life into a ‘Life,’ certainly, and it is a very worthwhile read. But it is no simple task. The reader

might be dissatisfied with the progress with which they move through the book, but this should not detract from the 'muted light' that exists at the end of the process.

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