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Kiff Bamford, *Jean-François Lyotard*. London: Reaktion Books, 2017. 176 pp. Images, notes, bibliography, and acknowledgements. \$19.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 10 1780238088

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Kiff Bamford's *Jean-François Lyotard* is a high quality, concise and tastefully illustrated intellectual biography of an important French thinker whose legacy is undergoing a constructive critical reappraisal. It is a text I wish had existed over a decade ago, and I have no doubt that the global community of Lyotard scholars would concur that a book of this kind is long overdue. Bamford's text is likely on order if it is not already in the hands of his fellow Lyotard scholars. In writing an intellectual biography of Lyotard for Reaktion's "Critical Lives" series, Bamford certainly had his work cut out for him. Though most commonly associated with the concepts of postmodernity and postmodernism, Lyotard is a notoriously heterogeneous thinker who is so difficult to approach precisely because he offers so many possible avenues of approach. When I was a doctoral student with an interest in the global drift and meaning of Lyotard's thought—a thought that strains precisely against summation and totalization—I could have benefited immensely from a brisk but high-caliber intellectual and biographical overview of the type Bamford provides. Though several good introductions to Lyotard existed, it was left to the scholar to piece together something of the highly compelling and historically rich biographical story from primary and secondary sources. Bamford has demonstrated an impressive ability to approach Lyotard both with sympathy and with something approaching a bird's eye view, and has contributed to filling the gap in the literature through access to documents and first-hand accounts that have been previously rare or unavailable.

In terms of what Bamford's text provides to the curious reader, I have few if any criticisms. I would go further and praise him on two counts; first, for his tasteful and understated impressions of the private life of the man; second, for his emphasis on comparatively under-studied and underappreciated entries in Lyotard's corpus. Regarding the first point, through the access and good will he evidently gained from Lyotard's family and friends, Bamford is able to provide previously unpublished details about the philosopher's childhood and youth, his family, his two marriages, his early political convictions, and the extent of the risks he took for Algerian independence. He weaves these details gracefully into the broader story of intellectual development and drift he is telling, painting a compelling picture of Lyotard the man as a curious blend of absolute devotedness, playfulness, and aloofness. Regarding the second point, i.e. Bamford's use of comparatively "minor" materials in exploring the drift of Lyotard's trajectory, the book is clearly to be lauded; competent consideration of such materials can only enrich the secondary literature, and attentiveness to the minor or the remainder is, after all, a hallmark of

Lyotard's own thinking. To take a salient example, Bamford devotes a chapter to Lyotard's collaborative 1985 multimedia exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, *Les Immatériaux*. Since the event does not commonly figure in introductory glosses on Lyotard, at least in any depth, this chapter alone should pique the interest of scholars. However Bamford also makes other brief but suggestive links to the arts throughout the text—for example, sketching the renewed interest in Lyotard's contribution to film, and insisting upon the political stakes of the figural during the period of political upheaval at Nanterre when Lyotard was a professor. The overall impression is that while he handles the more philosophical aspects of Lyotard's corpus with competence (if not always comfort), Bamford's own training and interests in contemporary and performance art help to make his text a unique contribution to the secondary literature.

This last point about the author's position warrants further discussion, since my one sticking point with the book is ultimately philosophical and boils down to a difference of opinion regarding the tortuous question of how, precisely, one is to approach Lyotard. The issue that arises for me in the reading is that, from the very outset of the book, it appears that the aforementioned uses to which I would have put Bamford's intellectual biography as a doctoral student—specifically, I would have turned to it to satisfy my drive to understand, to sum up so as to situate the thinker within a larger historical, intellectual constellation—would undoubtedly have troubled Bamford himself. To be clear, I am a scholar of Lyotard who has deeply imbibed his lessons concerning the constitutive role of ethical vigilance, uncertainty and the remainder with respect to how philosophy is actually practiced. But I do not believe I am a “Lyotardian,” for the technical reason that I claim that the prescriptive thrust of Lyotard's project runs afoul of what I will tendentiously refer to as its overall logic. Lyotard was a great champion of pluralism and of the minority voice, which is ethically (if not always tactically) salutary. But to the extent that this advocacy becomes prescriptive, it either founders in paradox or reveals itself to be strictly political, which is to say gratuitous. I cannot, in other words, offer compelling, rational grounds for the defense or adoption of a position that relativizes the philosophical importance of rational grounds in and of themselves—at least not without committing a performative contradiction and/or engaging in pure sophistry. Therefore being faithful to Lyotard in any meaningful sense is either sincerely philosophical, but therefore logically inconsistent, or it is political, but therefore arbitrary.

Expanding upon this last point, Lyotard remains highly important to me because he is, to my mind, an important philosophical as well as moral exemplar. To borrow freely from Wittgenstein, Lyotard appears to “show” what he cannot “say.” Specifically, he demonstrates both a militant practice of philosophy that is fearless and always willing to begin again, and an arresting and compelling personal style of hyper-vigilance, rigor, and integrity. But as noted, Lyotard's thought in general is vulnerable to its own critical weapons and this renders any strict fidelity to his ethics—something I have detected not only in Bamford, but in most of the specialized scholarly community in which the two of us labour—as either arbitrary, or paradoxical, or perhaps both. For the record, I am perfectly comfortable with claiming Lyotard in an arbitrary way, since his prescriptive philosophy can be read as a prolegomenon to politics, where the arbitrary holds sway in any case—i.e. in the ontological undecidability and unavoidable moment of decision that ultimately constitute the political. But to the extent that thinkers like Bamford remain committed to Lyotard's prescriptions in a sincere, more robustly philosophical way, then this is bound to generate a certain malaise for them because it is ultimately rationally (and perhaps psychologically) untenable. There are in any case two ways of betraying Lyotard: either one betrays him as I tend to do, by using his thought freely and for purposes or in ways

other than he may have intended; or, one betrays him by becoming something of a Lyotardian, and pinning to him a certain set of principles and intentions that are taken as prescriptive in the philosophical as opposed to political sense (in any case and as Bamford himself notes, Lyotard questions the very notion of a stable author who could be the bearer of such principles and intentions).

It appears that Bamford belongs to the second camp of betrayers, because he takes to heart and tries to measure up to what Lyotard never tires of repeating with respect to ontological pluralism and ethical responsibility. He apparently absorbs these as his own methodological and ethical first principles, tracking a life and an intellectual itinerary from beginning to end with a palpable air of bad conscience and apology. The philosophical issue of approach is of course to some extent detachable from the compelling story that Bamford is telling. It emerges at a “meta” level of reflection. But significantly, it is put on the table by Bamford himself and it crops up more than once. The Introduction to the book is subtitled “Warning”. Bamford is warning his readers that a) Lyotard’s life and work cannot be summarized, or in any case Lyotard would have resisted the idea that it could be summarized, and b) that he, Bamford, lacks a certain degree of competence to write the book at hand. These are both remarkable claims if taken at face value (what is so special about Lyotard’s life and work, as opposed to any other life and work, as to render them unsummarizable? And why should we take him at his word, or follow his lead in approaching him? Have biographers in general been going about things all wrong? And if Bamford lacks competence as he describes, then why am I reading his book?). However, and as I have indicated above, such worries make perfect sense in the context of Lyotard scholarship, where it is often taken for granted that the summarizing gesture would be in some sense antithetical to the philosopher’s own intentions. But since Lyotard is radical in his commitment to pluralism and the minor voice, we cannot without betraying him ascribe to him such intentions (he is, as noted, dubious of any fixed notion of the author; it is as though each writer contains multitudes). Possibly Bamford’s strongest statement of this methodological hesitancy and the bad conscience it entails is the claim at the end of the Introduction that “this book is not a step towards an understanding of Lyotard’s life and work, but an anxious passage through its fragmentation. It forces us to ask: in what ways can a life be traced without succumbing to a desire for fulfillment, or a melancholia ‘for the unfulfilled’” (p. 11)? Bamford is of course short-selling himself as any biographer worth his or her salt should do. But we should note the peculiarly radical way in which he is doing so: if his methodological sympathies are taken at face value, then it is unclear what claim his own “anxious passage” has over any others. Indeed, it is not clear why—if Bamford’s approach is the right one—it “forces” us to do anything, or for that matter whether it should.

My reading of Bamford, then, is as follows. I am put off by the methodological hesitancy, which seems not to flow from Lyotard’s life and work qua strict obligation. But this is hardly a sin, and if it were it would be forgivable, since it speaks to Bamford’s integrity as a biographer. And to the extent that he wishes to teach us something about Lyotard—particularly, about the man himself and about aspects of his life’s work less frequently visited, particularly in Anglophone scholarship—Bamford has achieved a great success with his small book.

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