

Barthes – The Early Years

‘Every biography is a novel that dares not speak its name’.ⁱ (*Réponses*, 1971)

1. Childhood in Bayonne (1915–1924)

Roland Gérard Barthes, the man who came to be regarded as the ‘Prince of the young’ in the late 1970s and was the symbol of everything that was new and modern even after his death in 1980, was born some fifteen months after the beginning of World War I, on 12 November 1915.ⁱⁱ He was barely one year old when his father, Louis, died in combat in the North Sea. This loss was to shape the child’s life, but perhaps not as one might have expected. In the writer’s unconventional and fragmentary account of himself published in 1975, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, there is no hint of mourning for the missing parent and the father figure that no-one would replace: ‘his memory – never an oppressive one – merely touched the surface of childhood.’ⁱⁱⁱ Barthes recounts that when one of his secondary school teachers listed on the blackboard the names of the pupils whose relatives had ‘fallen on the field of honour’, and singled him out as the only one whose *father* had died, this caused him acute embarrassment: ‘Yet, once the blackboard was erased’, he added, ‘nothing was left of this proclaimed mourning – except, in real life, which proclaims nothing, which is always silent, the figure of a home socially adrift: no father to kill, no family to hate, no milieu to reject.’^{iv} This absence of definitive social anchorage, associated here with the death of his father, is a recurrent theme of Barthes’s ‘reading’ of his own childhood.

Soon after Louis Barthes’s death, his twenty-two-year-old widow Henriette (née Binger), moved with her son from Cherbourg in Normandy, where her husband had been based, to Bayonne in South West France. ‘Bayonne, Bayonne, the perfect city’, Barthes writes next to one of the many pictures of Bayonne included at the beginning of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.

Bayonne, rue Port-neuf in the early 1920s. (Postcard.)





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While the frontispiece of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* shows the elegant silhouette of his mother walking along a beach in 1932, the book itself opens with a full-page view of the centre of the town. The following picture shows Roland Barthes as a seven-year-old in his mother's arms with the caption 'The demand for love'. His childhood, the 'prehistory' of 'that body making its way toward the labour and the pleasure of writing',^v is thus placed, from the very beginning, under the tutelage of his mother and the town of Bayonne, and steeped in the imagery and memories of nineteenth-century France as relayed by his paternal grandparents.

Bayonne, Porte d'Espagne. 'The myths of my childhood do not belong to the post-1914, but to the pre-World War I period, and even to the century before'.^{vi} (Postcard, similar to that included in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes.)



Henriette Barthes had moved to Bayonne to be closer, not to her own seemingly unsupportive family, but to that of her late husband. The two families were from opposite ends of the country: Catholic South-Western France on Barthes's father's side; Protestant Alsace-Lorraine on his mother's. Barthes's paternal grandmother, Berthe de Lapalu, was of provincial aristocratic stock and had married Léon Barthes, an inspector for the Midi Regional Railway

Company and descended from a family of notaries. Berthe was the ‘good’ provincial grandmother. In contrast, Barthes’s maternal grandmother was the ‘good-looking’ Parisian grandmother: the daughter of a smelting works owner, Noémie Lepet lived in grand style in the capital. Her first husband, Henriette’s father, was an officer of marine infantry descended from a family of glass-makers; following his exploration of the Gold Coast frontier in 1887–1889, Captain Binger was appointed governor of the Ivory Coast in 1893 – where a town, Bingerville, still bears his name – and later became Director of the African Department of the French Ministry for Colonial Affairs. The archetypal French colonialist, Louis-Gustave Binger was also the author of a two-volume book of exploration *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée* (Paris, 1891). Yet it is as if neither official honours nor book ever existed for Barthes, who only ever refers to his maternal grandfather as the ‘explorer’,^{vii} and relegates him to the background: ‘He had no part in language’. Léon Barthes, his paternal grandfather, fares no better: ‘He, too, had no part in language’. It is the women who introduce the young Roland to the symbolic order, that is language, society: ‘In both sets of grandparents’, writes Barthes, ‘language belonged to women.’^{viii}

The house of his paternal grandparents, whom he often visited, is at the centre of the writer’s early memories and provides the background to a happy, if solitary, childhood that he would himself describe as provincial, Southern, and bourgeois. It was in this house that his unmarried aunt gave him his first music lessons on the piano and his lifelong interest in music developed; it was here too that he witnessed at first hand the social rituals of provincial bourgeois life – his grandmother’s monthly tea parties, the tittle-tattle, the rivalries – that remained associated in his mind with the novels of Balzac and Proust: ‘the province as spectacle’, the ‘bourgeoisie as discourse’,^{ix} an *art de vivre* that no amount of financial difficulty could jeopardize. In a lyrical evocation of his gentle and genteel childhood in South-Western France,^x Barthes is at pains to explain that he was sensitive, from a very young age, to the discrepancy between the ideological stance of the old bourgeois families of Bayonne, including his own, and their impoverished economic status; although too young to be able to put it into words, he claims that he could ‘read’ the South-West, from its characteristic light, heat and landscapes to its social and provincial discourse long before he became a professional decipherer of signs.

NOTES

ⁱ Roland Barthes, Introductory Note to ‘Réponses’, transcription of an interview with Jean Thibaudeau, *Tel Quel*, no. 47, Autumn 1971; *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Seuil, 1994, vol. 2, p. 1307.

ⁱⁱ For detailed biographical information see Jean-Louis Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Sarah Wykes, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), translated as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* by Richard Howard, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977, p. 15.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 45.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 3.

^{vi} My translation of ‘le temps imaginaire de mon enfance n’a pas été l’après-guerre (de 14), mais l’avant-guerre, voire la fin du siècle dernier.’ (‘Lectures de l’enfance’ (1980), *Œuvres complètes* (1995), vol. 3 , p. 1247–1248).

^{vii} ‘Réponses’ (1971), *op. cit.*, p. 1307.

^{viii} *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 7.

^x ‘La lumière du Sud-Ouest’ (1977), translated as ‘The Light of the Sud-Ouest’ by Richard Howard in *Incidents*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.