

Barthes – The Early Years

2. Teenage Years in Paris (1924–1933)

In contrast to his early childhood in the South-West, which became the symbol of a kind of lost paradise, Barthes's teenage years in Paris, from 1924 onwards, are only remembered in the stark light of poverty. Three years after their move to Paris, Henriette Barthes had a second son, Michel, by André Salzedo, an artist and ceramicist whom she had met some time before in the South-West. Little is known about their relationship except that it appeared strained, wholly negative, and that they did not live together as he was a married man; later, according to Barthes,ⁱ his mother helped André Salzedo, a Sephardic Jew, hide from the Nazis occupying France. How the family of Henriette Barthes's dead husband and her own reacted to the affair and illegitimate birth is unclear; but the way she conducted her life must have been considered at the time a serious violation of the standards of bourgeois respectability, and might explain why she brought up her two sons on her own in relative isolation and poverty. The young Roland continued to visit his paternal grandparents three times a year during his holidays while his mother and brother spent part of the summer in rented accommodation nearby. By all accounts, if there was a rift between his mother and his paternal family, Barthes never discussed it openly. But his resentment and bitterness towards his maternal grandmother was unreserved. Whether out of moral hypocrisy or, as Michel Salzedo has claimed, out of jealousy for Henriette's youthful looks and for her grandson's academic achievements which dwarfed those of the son she had by her second husband, the wealthy Noémie offered no support to her daughter.

To supplement her meagre widow's pension and feed her children, Henriette Barthes worked as a book-binder – an occupation to which, according to her elder son, she was totally unsuited.ⁱⁱ Barthes would later take on the role of wage earner, supporting his mother and younger brother until such time as Noémie's death and the protracted settling of her estate in the mid-1950s finally brought financial security to Henriette Barthes. It enabled her to purchase the fifth-floor flat at 11 Rue Servandoni, close to the Jardin du Luxembourg, that the family had occupied since 1935. Later, in 1961, she also bought a house in the village of Urt, just twenty kilometres from Bayonne, which became the family summer residence and where both Barthes and his mother are buried.

Throughout their lives, the two brothers lived with or close to their mother, whenever possible. Visitors to the Rue Servandoni all recall the trapdoor and ladder between the fifth-floor flat and Barthes's 'quarters' above, that allowed him to work undisturbed without being

altogether isolated from the rest of the household – small items could be hoisted in a basket through the opening in the ceiling when required. As is still often the case in Paris, there was no lift in the old apartment block. By late 1976, climbing the four flight of stairs presented great difficulties for the elderly Mme Barthes, whereupon Michel Salzedo and his wife of three years became the sole occupants of the fifth-floor apartment while Barthes and his mother rented a flat on the second floor.

Rue Servandoni today



Given that Roland Barthes and Michel Salzedo lived for so long side by side and were clearly supportive of each other, it may come as a surprise that some of Barthes's closest long-term friends, such as Philippe Sollers, only met his half-brother at Barthes's bedside shortly before the writer's death. Whether due to the twelve year age gap between them, or differences in temperament, or both, the two brothers had clearly led completely separate lives with their own particular set of friends from the start. Thus Michel Salzedo is never mentioned in any interviews.ⁱⁱⁱ When asked to describe the socio-cultural milieu in which he grew up as an adolescent, Barthes replied that he lived alone with his mother and only socialised with his classmates. Significantly, he added that if the term 'milieu' was understood as referring to a network of relations, of models, with a common language, then he was a teenager 'without milieu', 'de-socialised'. He further explained that while his formal education was bourgeois by definition, his mother herself was distanced from her traditional middle-class background and thus acted as kind of social filter. In that sense, Henriette Barthes provided a precious point of anchorage not only in emotional terms but also in socio-cultural terms. She was much more than a mother figure. It was as if, to use a biological metaphor, she was the active culture from which he was made; as if, to quote Éric Marty's 'Mémoire d'une amitié', 'she really was the mother tongue upon which Barthes drew when he wrote'.^{iv}

Éric Marty, who later became the editor of Barthes's complete works, was a young man when he first met Henriette Barthes in 1976, the year before she died aged 84. The

impression she made upon him at the time is all the more remarkable: 'She was sitting at the table in the dining-room. Barthes had just served her her evening meal. The first thing that I want to say about her, is that she was very beautiful.' She owed her beauty to her natural elegance and her refined femininity, to the way she held herself, to her 'luminous and captivating eyes'. Marty was particularly struck by her vivid gaze and youthful voice as she engaged him in a conversation much more penetrating than was required by mere courtesy. As an example of her charming graciousness, Marty recalls that she said a few words about the film that Barthes and he intended to go and see that evening, suggesting thereby not that she knew that film, as other people might have done, but that they had chosen well. Commenting on Barthes's relationship with his mother, as he came to understanding it over the years, Marty explains that it could not be described as a standard mother-son relationship or reduced to that of a homosexual living with his mother: 'Somehow, and *even if the essential [sexual] component was missing*, I was under the impression that Barthes loved and admired his mother as one loves and admires a woman. And [...] that if Barthes loved his mother so very much, it was because she deserved it as a woman.' Originality, imagination, great intelligence and freedom were the hallmarks of her personality for Marty. There was nothing 'mothering' about her, and, out of the two, he felt that it was Barthes who was the mother. This may have been the result of the old lady's frailty at the time, as her son suggests in his last published work, *Camera Lucida*: 'During her illness, I nursed her [...] she had become my little girl.'^v It is not inconceivable, however, that the wish to protect her might date back to their life of hardship in Paris as Barthes was growing up.

Revisiting his past in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, he explained that money played a more important role than sex in his formative years.^{vi} The day of the month when the rent was due loomed large in the family calendar. At times there was no food in the house and they would have to rely on credit from the corner shop for their supplies. This obviously marked Barthes for life, ensuring that his political sympathies always remained firmly with the left, but also accounted, he claimed, for his 'extravagance' in later life,^{vii} notably his taste for Havana cigars.

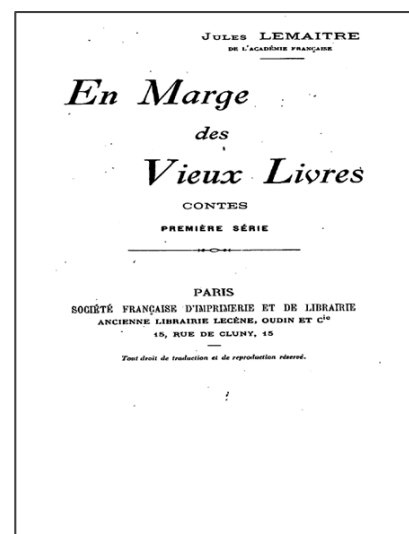
The start of every school year was particularly difficult as there was not enough money for textbooks, stationery and proper clothes. Barthes had started his secondary education in Paris at the lycée Montaigne and then, in 1930, joined the prestigious lycée Louis-le-Grand, where the elite of the country had been educated for several centuries (and still are). He was a good student and planned, with his lifelong friend Philippe Rebeyrol, to take his baccalauréat and the competitive entrance examination to the École normale

supérieure or ENS, as had a great many French intellectuals and literary figures. Once selected, he would complete his first degree within a couple of years before taking France's highest competitive examination, the *agrégation*, which would be his passport to an academic and/or literary career. In the meantime, Roland Barthes and Philippe Rebeyrol devoted their holidays to various writing projects, which they discussed at length in their letters to each other.



Bayonne, Allées marines (postcard). 'Tall trees, abandoned boats, unspecified strollers, boredom's drift: here floated the sexuality of public gardens, of parks.'^{viii}

Barthes's first fully-fledged text, dating back to the summer of 1933, gives us an idea of his preoccupations and literary aspirations in the weeks that followed his passing part one of the baccalauréat. This text was entitled 'En marge du Criton' ('In the margins of *Criton*'). It was intended for publication in a journal that Barthes was planning to set up with fellow pupils at Louis-le-Grand; however, as their energies were diverted towards the creation of an anti-fascist group following the accession to power of Hitler in Germany, Barthes's piece remained unpublished until 1974 when it appeared, with a short introduction by the author, in an issue of the prestigious quarterly literary magazine *L'Arc* that was entirely devoted to his work. Barthes explains that the title referred to a 1905 book by Jules Lemaître entitled *En marge des vieux livres* ('In the margins of old books'), in which the author undertook to 'rectify' the great classics of literature. Having come across the book in his grandparents' house after he had studied Plato's *Criton* in his Greek class, Barthes wrote a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of it in the manner of Lemaître. 'En marge du Criton' shows Socrates wavering in his resolve to accept his death sentence as a succession of young men visit him in his prison with offers of escape; he eventually chooses freedom and the pleasures of the flesh, leaving Plato to sort out the



historical details. There is obviously something of the school exercise in this piece, but one is struck by the manifest appetite for life of the seventeen-year-old Barthes. The sensuality and erotic quality of the descriptions of the figs that Socrates cannot resist, thus signalling his willingness to escape, is clearly reminiscent of André Gide's *The Fruits of the Earth* (1897), and suggests a young man at ease with his homosexuality: 'I never really suffered from sexual prohibitions, even though they were stronger forty years ago than they are now', Barthes would declare in 1977. 'Frankly, I am sometimes surprised at the way some people rage against the iron grip of normality. I am not denying the power of that regime, of course, but there are always gaps to slip through.'^{ix}

The contrast between the mood of the summer of 1933 and that of the following year could hardly be starker...

NOTES

ⁱ Éric Marty quoting Roland Barthes in 'Mémoire d'une amitié', *Roland Barthes: le métier d'écrire*, Paris: Seuil, 2006, p. 62.

ⁱⁱ 'À quoi sert un intellectuel?' (1977), translated by Linda Coverdale as 'Of What Use Is an Intellectual?', interview conducted by Bernard-Henri Levy, in *The Grain of the Voice*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 266.

ⁱⁱⁱ The only mention of Michel Salzedo in Barthes's complete works is as 'M.' in the posthumous 'Soirées de Paris': 'M. is so affectionate and so naive, so sensitive to anything lovely, as Mam used to be' (*Incidents*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p. 60).

^{iv} My translation of 'Comme si, au fond, elle était réellement la langue maternelle où Barthes puisait pour écrire', Éric Marty, 'Mémoire d'une amitié', in *Le Métier d'écrire*, *op. cit.*, p. 57; other quotations relating to Henriette Barthes are from p. 56–64.

^v *La Chambre claire* (1980), translated as *Camera Lucida* by Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993 (2000), p. 72.

^{vi} *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. 45.

^{vii} 'À quoi sert un intellectuel?' (1977), translated as 'Of What Use Is an Intellectual?', in *The Grain of the Voice*, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

^{viii} Barthes's evocation of the Allées marines in Bayonne, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

^{ix} 'À quoi sert un intellectuel?' (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 262.