

## *Barthes – The Early Years*

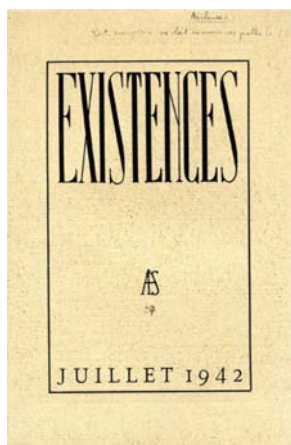
### **3. Tuberculosis – ‘A Substitute Existence’ (1934–1945)**

In May 1934, a few weeks before he was due to take the second and last part of his baccalauréat examination, Barthes was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and ordered to rest in bed. As his health did not improve, it was decided that he would sit his exams in the autumn and then interrupt his studies indefinitely. He spent the summer revising in Bedous, a small village in the French Pyrenees where his mother had rented a house in the hope that the mountain air might cure him; and returned there for the rest of the school year once he had passed his baccalauréat. To alleviate his boredom during the long winter, he read, plotted novels, wrote a short play, sent long letters to various friends, played the piano and even composed a ‘divertimento in F major’ bearing the playful dedication: ‘an extremely rare handwritten copy by the composer for his friend Philippe Rebeyrol.’ Meanwhile, Rebeyrol was following the academic path to which the two friends had aspired, but which was now most painfully out of the question for the young Barthes. On his return to Paris in 1935 with his mother and brother, he enrolled for a Classics degree at the Sorbonne, which he completed in the spring of 1939. Having been exempted from military service in 1937, he was declared permanently unfit for service at the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. He then spent the first two years of the war working in secondary schools in poorly paid supply jobs, as he had, as yet, no teaching qualification. His first appointment was in Biarritz where his mother and brother joined him, but the following year he worked in Paris where he enrolled for a postgraduate diploma in Greek drama.

Then, in October 1941, as his twenty-sixth birthday was approaching, he suffered a pulmonary relapse. This time he applied for admission to the Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet sanatorium near Grenoble in the French Alps, and arrived there at the beginning of 1942. Except for a short respite in 1942–43, when he was reunited with his mother and brother in Paris, and sat the examinations for the final certificates of his teaching qualification, he remained there as a patient for the next three years. At the time, before chemotherapy, tuberculosis was a life-threatening condition, and as Barthes points out in a 1977 interview, ‘a way of life. [...] A person with tuberculosis might seriously consider, as I did, the possibility of living all his life in a sanatorium or in a parasanatorial profession’.<sup>1</sup> The function of these institutions was to isolate the patients from the rest of the community in order to prevent the spread of the disease through contagion,

while attempting to cure them with a combination of rest, fresh air, healthy food and drastic surgical procedures such as the removal of one or more ribs. In 1945, Barthes himself underwent surgery and after the operation was handed the section of rib that had been removed from his body in a piece of gauze: 'For a long time I kept this fragment of myself in a drawer [...], not knowing quite what to do with it, not daring to get rid of it lest I do some harm to my person [...] And then, one day [...] I flung the rib chop and its gauze over my balcony into the rue Servandoni, as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes, where some dog would come and sniff them out.'<sup>ii</sup> The sanatorium was an 'essentially puerile' environment, a social microcosm fashioned by a bourgeois conception of childhood, Barthes would explain in an unpublished text dated May 1947.<sup>iii</sup> It was a life of isolation and invalidism, described by Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain* as 'a sort of substitute existence': 'it can, in a relatively short time, wholly wean a young person from actual and active life. Everything there, including the conception of time, is thought of on a luxurious scale. The cure is always a matter of several months, often of several years. But after the first six months the young person has not a single idea left save flirtation and the thermometer under his tongue. After the second six months in many cases he has even lost the capacity of any other ideas.'<sup>iv</sup> However typical of the workings of an inward-looking society, the sanatorium of Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet was a model of its kind, for it was an establishment founded in 1933 by the National Union of Students to enable young patients to pursue their studies there while undergoing treatment. During his stay, Barthes even considered taking up medicine to become a psychiatrist, briefly enrolling for a course. Although the patients' life was highly regulated and followed a strict schedule akin to the monastic regime, Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet offered a vibrant cultural environment; it also boasted an impressive library, of which Barthes soon took charge, demonstrating in the process 'considerable practical and organizational skills'.<sup>v</sup> There were invited speakers and the patients themselves were encouraged to give presentations; as one of the oldest, brightest and most intellectually advanced patients there, Barthes enjoyed a great deal of prestige and lectured on the poetry of Baudelaire, Whitman, Michaux and Valéry, as well as on music. There was also a students' magazine, *Existences*, to which he contributed several items between 1942 and 1945: film, concert and book reviews; a personal account of his trip to Greece with the Antique Drama Group of the Sorbonne in the summer of 1938; as well as articles drawing on his now extensive literary culture ranging from

the Classics to Proust and Gide, as well as the latest publications by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.



*Barthes's various contributions to the magazine Existences can be read on line:*

*[http://www.cme-u.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=164&Itemid=5](http://www.cme-u.fr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=164&Itemid=5)*

Glossing over the long periods of inactivity, boredom and gloom that he suffered, Barthes sums up his years in sanatoria as follows: 'I did not find it too difficult to spend those five or six years away from the world: my character was doubtless predisposed to 'inwardness', to the solitude of reading. What did I gain? A form of culture, surely. An experience of 'living together' characterized by an intensification of friendships, the assurance of having one's friends constantly close by [...]. And also, much later, the strange feeling of being always five or six years younger than I really am.'<sup>vi</sup>

By the end of 1944, the year that had seen the liberation of Paris and the retreat of the German army, Barthes was still a patient at Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvet. Although his health had definitely improved, he was told that he would probably have to spend at least another year in a sanatorium and that full recovery would necessitate a further period of convalescence.

In February 1945 he was transferred, with a number of fellow patients, to another students' sanatorium, this time in Switzerland: the Clinique Alexandre at Leysin. He had started reading the work of nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet as early as 1942 if not before. Until now, however, he had not been able to immerse himself in Michelet's complete works – some 60 volumes, including a 23 volume *History of France* – as these could not be obtained through inter-library loans in France where public libraries did not lend their books to tuberculosis patients for fear of contagion. Fortunately, this was not the case in Switzerland, and Barthes had access to all the books he needed to continue with the mammoth task that he had

undertaken. It was while reading Michelet that he developed a particular working method that would stay with him for the rest of his life: it consisted in making notes, on a daily basis, of his ideas and personal observations, as well as quotations with all relevant bibliographical references, on index cards; these were then filed meticulously and in such a way that they could be reassembled and combined differently, thus allowing themes, patterns and structures to emerge. By the end of his life, this body of work, the remnants of a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and understanding, would total some 12,250 cards.<sup>vii</sup>

No less noteworthy was Barthes's encounter, later that year, with Georges Fournié whose friendship would prove decisive both intellectually and professionally. Barthes was nearly thirty years old at the time and had lived in a protective environment for much of his adult life. The gap between his experiences and those of his contemporaries, which in normal circumstances would have been considerable, had been made even greater by the recent political events, as exemplified by Georges Fournié's life before his arrival at Leysin. Although three years Barthes's junior, Georges Fournié had been closely involved in the political turmoil of the previous ten years. Having started work in his early teens and furthered his education at evening classes, he had eventually become a proof-reader in the printing industry; through his political activities he had become acquainted with some of the young men who would play a significant role on the French intellectual and literary scene after World War II, such as David Rousset and Maurice Nadeau. At the age of seventeen, Fournié had joined a Trotskyist group to fight on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and had returned to France wounded. An active member of anti-fascist groups and later of the French resistance movement against German occupation, he was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, imprisoned in France and then deported to Germany. Following his return from captivity, in a weakened state and suffering from tuberculosis in 1945, he had been sent to Leysin.



*Leysin Switzerland<sup>viii</sup>.*

*The Clinique Alexandre is to the left of the picture.*

By all accounts, Barthes's and Fournié's temperaments could not have been more different, yet they obviously enjoyed each other's company and learned from each other: 'Barthes was the complete opposite of Fournié, the militant, who would initiate him into the previously unknown world of Marxist theory and the reality of the class struggle.'<sup>ix</sup>

As a Sorbonne student, Barthes had closely read the work of Jean Jaurès, the French Socialist leader assassinated on the eve of World War I, but his political culture did not extend much further. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not come to Marxism via the French Communist Party (PCF), which was to become after World War II, the largest political party in France. The fact that Barthes was introduced to Marxism by an anti-Stalinist and non-dogmatic Trotskyist is widely considered as the key to Barthes's 'happy' relationship with Marxism,<sup>note</sup> and his belief that freedom was possible in a genuinely socialist society.<sup>x</sup> Even after Stalin's crimes against his own people were publicly acknowledged and the Soviet army invaded Hungary in 1956, and at a time when the PCF's allegiance to the Soviet Union became problematic for Marxist sympathisers, most notably Jean-Paul Sartre,<sup>xi</sup>, Barthes could happily assert his conviction that Marxism offered a valuable intellectual framework and a powerful instrument for social analysis.

In a 1971 interview,<sup>xii</sup> he explains that with Fournié he discovered a singularly attractive form of Marxism: his friend's keen intelligence, sense of irony and moral freedom, as well as the flexibility and strength of his political analyses, gave Barthes the highest respect for Marxist theory, and dialecticism. Part of the attraction of Fournié's character and stance was, Barthes noted, that they were devoid of 'excitement' – or 'hysteria', the term he would later prefer. Those were the very characteristics that would draw him to Berthold Brecht in the following decade. Meanwhile, in 1945–46, Barthes's sympathies were primarily with Sartre and Marx.

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## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> ‘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. 259.
- <sup>ii</sup> *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. 61.
- <sup>iii</sup> ‘Esquisse d’une société sanatoriale’, manuscript reproduced in its entirety in *Roland Barthes*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by Marianne Alphant and Nathalie Léger at the Centre Pompidou (27 November 2002–10 March 2003), Paris, Seuil/Centre Pompidou/Imec, 2002, p. 171–177.
- <sup>iv</sup> ‘The tuberculosis I experienced is down to virtually the last detail, the tuberculosis of *The Magic Mountain*’, in ‘Leçon’ (1978), translated as ‘Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France’, in *A Barthes Reader*, edited with an introduction by Susan Sontag, Vintage, 1993 (2000), p. 477.
- <sup>v</sup> Jean-Louis Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, translated by Sarah Wykes, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 50.
- <sup>vi</sup> ‘À quoi sert un intellectuel?’ (1977), translated as ‘Of What Use Is an Intellectual?’, in *The Grain of the Voice*, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
- <sup>vii</sup> Nathalie Léger, ‘Immensément et en détail’, in *Roland Barthes*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by Marianne Alphant and Nathalie Léger, *op. cit.*, p. 91–94.
- <sup>viii</sup> My thanks to Maurice André who sent me a copy of this picture postcard of Leysin.
- <sup>ix</sup> Jean-Louis Calvet, *Roland Barthes: A Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- <sup>x</sup> See Philippe Roger, ‘Barthes dans les années Marx’ in *Parcours de Barthes, Communications*, no. 63, Seuil, 1996, p. 39.
- <sup>xi</sup> See Andrew Leak, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006.
- <sup>xii</sup> ‘Réponses’ (1971), *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Seuil, 1994, vol. 2, p. 1307.