

Steven Ungar /

From Writing to the Letter:
Barthes and Alphabetese

“ABCDEF GH
IJKLMNOP
QRSTU VW
XYZ”
(ALPHABET)

The alphabet is a universal ordering system within our culture and an arbitrary one. Practically everyone knows the order of the letters of the alphabet. It is one of the first things a child is taught and yet there is no inherent logic to the actual ordering of the letters. Nevertheless, the alphabet is a useful system for manual retrieval of stored information and a useful memory device. Anything that has been named or can be placed in a category can be alphabetized. The alphabet assumes spoken language and is the basic code for written language, although in English phoneticism is chaotic.

the more one falls in love with it, a discourse on writing. And when Barthes writes that “there is always, in discourse on love, a person to whom one is addressing oneself, whether this person be a phantom or a creature still to come” (*FDA*, 88), the amorous reader begins to see that he is himself that future phantom, addressed in ignorance by an author who has provided for such an eventuality by setting up his text to “turn like a perpetual calendar” (*FDA*, 10), a device capable of providing for future events without specifically predicting them.

“Rolling here and there,”³ said Socrates in his denunciation of writing in the *Phaedrus*, a text wanders aimlessly like an errant orphan, liable to fall into the wrong hands, unable to defend itself without parental assistance. It is in just such weakness that Roland Barthes finds the discourse that constitutes the *Fragments*: the roll of the bobbin of the child who takes himself for an orphan. Socrates can argue that writing is but the faint imitation of speech because he assigns its origin to a father whom it may unfortunately outlive, but Barthes’s discourse originates in the orphan, and not the father. There is no father to guarantee a correct reading of the text, or verify its canonicity. Orphancy and errant rolling—no longer reasons not to take writing seriously—thus become precisely what make such a discourse possible.

Barthes was always an orphan; his father, a naval ensign, died in combat at sea when Roland was less than a year old. This paternal absence seems to open up the first break in the alphabetical order of the fragments that make up the autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975): *Actif/réactif, L’adjectif, L’aise, Le démon de l’analogie, Au tableau noir, L’argent, Le vaisseau Argo*. . . . For it is in *Au tableau noir*, the title that does not really fit between *analogie* and *argent*, that the father’s name first appears, inscribed on the lycée blackboard along with all the relatives of students who “had fallen on the fields of honor.” Uncles and cousins abounded; only Barthes could announce a father: a source of embarrassment, “an

Figure:
John Perreault, in Ursula Meyer, ed.,
Conceptual Art. New York: Dutton, 1972.

Roland Barthes's career as a critic can be measured by the various definitions and functions which he has given to writing.

Ungar

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excessive mark." When the chalk was erased, Barthes writes, there remained of this proclaimed grief nothing but "the figure of a hearth with no social anchorage: no father to kill . . ." (*RB*, 49). The absent father is equivalent to a missing *ancrage*—the word that really fits the alphabetical sequence, the word that should have figured in the title but is suppressed, as the father's name was erased from the other *tableau noir*.⁴

There is another *ancre*, one that fulfills the same role towards the missing father that the bobbin's course plays in the absence of the mother: *encre*. In the *RB* fragment *La seiche et son encre* he says of his text, "I write this day after day . . . : the squid produces its ink: I spin out [*ficeller*] my *imaginaire* (to defend and offer myself at the same time)" (*RB*, 166). He spins such threads of ink, as the child spins out his reel, to fill up an absence; the lover does the same, faced with the silence of the one he loves: "*Je t'aime, je t'aime!* Welling up from the body . . . does not this paroxysm of a declaration of love conceal some lack? One would not need to say it, if it were not to obscure, as the squid does with its ink, the disappointment of desire under the excess of its affirmation" (*RB*, 116).

These three models of discourse produced in the solitude of an endured absence (the mother: the child's bobbin on a string; the tie of a paternal anchor: filaments of underwater ink; the beloved: repeated declarations of love, like a squid's smoke-screen) are joined by a fourth: the reader, whose absence the author overcomes by writing a discourse that is true to its etymology: "*Dis-cursus* is, originally, the action of running *courir* here and there . . ." (*FDA*, 7). The fragments of *Fragments of an Amorous Discourse* invite the reader to join is, originally, the action of running [*courir*] here and there . . ." (*FDA*, 7). *Fragments of an Amorous Discourse* offers an invitation to the reader to join and pass from hand to hand, behind their backs, a ring; they sing a round, and when the music stops the one in the center must guess who has the

While his earliest works emphasized its social and institutional dimensions, he has more recently sought to develop a revised

furt. Each fragment of Barthes's book is "offered to the reader so that he can seize it, add to it, subtract from it and pass it on to others." Sometimes in this game, Barthes continues, "by a last parenthesis, one holds on to the ring a second more [*une seconde encore*—a richly suggestive pause: a second encore, *bis*? Or, like the resurgent father (this Louis Barthes who, though erased from the *tableau noir*, resurfaces in the name of the lycée: *Louis-le-Grand*), a second anchor?] before passing it on. (The book, ideally, would be a cooperative: 'To the Readers—to the Lovers—Reunited')" (*FDA*, 9).

What is written here is of course situated in that delaying pause, *in loco parenthesis*. In the same figure (*Absence*) where he speaks of the U^{bis} bus and of the child's game that defers the death of the mother ("To manipulate absence is to stretch out the moment, to retard as long as possible the instant when the other must topple brusquely from absence into death" [*FDA*, 22]), he also tells the Buddhist parable of the master who holds the disciple's head under water, for a very long time. Little by little the bubbles become rarer; at the last possible moment, the master brings him to the surface: "When you have longed for truth as you have longed for air, then you will know what it is." The absence of the other, Barthes continues, "holds my head under water; little by little I suffocate, my air rarefies; it is through this asphyxiation that I reconstitute my 'truth'" (*FDA*, 23-24). Like the Buddhist master, Barthes bathes the reader in an airless expanse; his book threatens to overwhelm, to smother the reader ("Writing is . . . a kind of steam roller . . . It suffocates the other" [*FDA*, 93]) by the fragmentation of its discourse. Its four score topics have no definable beginning or end, no apparent direction. "To discourage the temptation of sense, it was necessary to choose an absolutely meaningless order" (*FDA*, 11): that of the alphabet.

To realize the "truth" that is at issue here, one must undergo this threatening experience: to be held

Ungar

version of Saussurian semiology into a social critique which he terms semioclastics. In his 1970 preface to the alphabet of the

below the surface of the text until that penultimate moment when one nearly perishes. "Truth would be that which, once removed, would leave nothing else uncovered but death," Barthes writes in the figure *Vérité*, using as an illustration the story of Emeth, the man of clay whose name meant "truth." He was used as a domestic servant, never allowed to leave the house. His name was written on his forehead. Each day he grew stronger; out of fear, the first letter of his inscribed name was erased, so that all that remained was *Meth*: "He is dead"—and he crumbled into dust (*FDA*, 272). Like Emeth, the reader of the *Fragments*—fascinated by the text, in love with it, believing it somehow to be addressed to him—is a prisoner. And his movements within this house that he is not allowed to leave begin to resemble Barthes's description of the *discours amoureux*: "a dust-cloud of figures agitated in an unforeseeable way like the coursing of a fly in a closed room" (*FDA*, 233).

If only a letter separates truth from death, then what is that letter? What happens when it is discovered? What would happen if it were erased?

II

From the beginning, the front cover of the *Fragments* both attracts and puzzles, beckoning the reader with a visual fragment, as though offering a glimpse of what lies within. Below the title, and above the threshold of the publisher's name (*Seuil*), a detail of a painting in color: two intertwined arms, the hands delicately, barely, touching; a thumb centered precisely on the border between sleeve and wrist: Are these two lovers? Are they not both male?

A primal scene? Writing in the figure *Image* of the wounding experience of seeing the beloved engaged in tender conversation with someone else, Barthes almost seems to be describing what is visible here: "The image is outlined in relief, pure and clean as a letter . . . I am excluded as if from a primal scene that exists only in so far as it is out-

fashion designer Erté, Barthes finds a semiotic system which allows him to combine these int erests in an extended commen

lined by the contour of the key hole" (*FDA*, 157). Yet beyond giving the feeling of having stumbled across a scene of desire that was already going on before one arrived, this image can itself become an object of longing—not only evoking the reader's desire to know what is really going on, to complete the puzzle of which this is only a piece, but also charming him, capturing him as one is enthralled by the first sight of the beloved.

The first stage in love's course, Barthes writes, is "instantaneously, capture (I am ravished by an image)" (*FDA*, 233). Consider, for example, Goethe's young Werther, to whom Barthes returns for 49 examples of the gestures of the *amoureux* and who sees his beloved Charlotte for the first time "framed by the door of her house." Barthes comments on this scene: "We love first a *tableau* The immediate is worth the whole The tableau consecrates the object I am going to love" (*FDA*, 227). Both fragmentation and framing play a role in the mystery of love at first sight; it is possibly because one can see only part of that person that one is free to fall in love—yet somehow the very part that is framed by that glimpse responds in a marvelous way to one's own desire. A great deal of chance and "many surprising coincidences (and perhaps much research)" are necessary, Barthes writes, before he can find the one image in a thousand that suits his desire. "It is a great enigma to which I will never know the key." What do I desire in this person—"a silhouette, a form, an air"? (*FDA*, 27).

An *R*? (pronounced in French as *air*): its *P* formed by the figure on our left, its remaining limb by the arm of the other, best seen by turning the book at a slight angle: Is that what so attracts us to the image, the key to the enigma of our love at first sight, silhouetted in the key hole ("an entire scene through the key hole of language" [*FDA*, 35]) through which we view this primal scene, "outlined in relief, pure and clean as a letter"?

What does it stand for? *Roland*?

Ungar

tary on the alphabetical letter an d on alphabetism as an autonom ous semiotic entity.



Perhaps—but we would like to propose another solution:

Truth, we have seen Barthes say, is that which, once removed, would leave only death. Despite the arbitrary exigency of his alphabetical ordering of topics, *Vérité*, true to its name, occupies the penultimate position. The only one to follow it is *Vouloir-saisir* (“The Will to Seize”), where what is really discussed is *non-vouloir-saisir*, the decision to cease the expression of one’s desire, equivalent in this context to the death of the text, to the end of amorous discourse. Truth does in fact stand last before death.

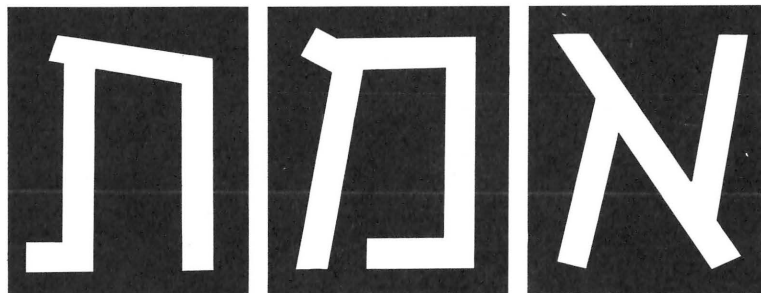
But it is what stands just before *Vérité*, that which would take its penultimate place were truth to disappear, that interests us here. In the game of

the *uret* to which Barthes likens the way his book might be read, one may hold on to the ring—to one of the eighty figures of the *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*—a second longer, if one desires, before passing it on: *Union*, the antepenultimate figure, will be our *uret* here.

Each of the figures is preceded by an “argument” that defines the area of the topic: “UNION. Dream of total union with the beloved.” If an amorous reading of the text leads us to see “the reader” where Barthes says “the beloved,” if indeed one remembers that he describes the book as a co-

operative venture in which readers and lovers are reunited, then this figure, speaking of *union*, suggests *reunion*. The difference between these two words, which can stand here for the difference between reading the book as a discourse on love and reading it as a discourse on writing, is practically

Ungar



The terminal function of Z as the letter announcing death in the *Erté* needs to be qualified in the light of what happens in the current *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* to the alphabet's first letter. Alluding to the Hasidic legend of the Golem, Barthes suggests that the ultimate truth—that of life's completion in death—may be contained in a simple letter: "Truth would be that which, being removed, would leave only death to be uncovered (as is said: life would no longer be worth living). And so it is with the name of the Golem: *Emet*, it is called. *Truth*, amputated by a letter, becomes *Met* (*Death*)."¹⁴

reducible to one letter, the same letter the cover frames.

Our holding on to the figure *Union* "a second more" will extend this parenthesis just enough to include the cover's letter, enabling us to read each in light of the other. The first of the four sections into which *Union* is divided speaks precisely of just such a superposition: of *frottis* (scumble), the

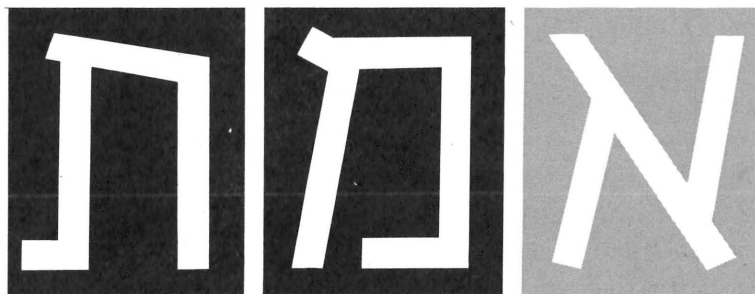
Allegro ben marcato. N° 84 LE FURE

thin, opaque layer of color that a painter sometimes applies to his canvas to change, ever so slightly, the appearance of the colors underneath, while still allowing the grain to show through.

... fruitive union, the *fruition* of love (a pedantic word? With its initial

frottis and its rustling stream of acute vowels, the ecstasy of which it speaks is augmented by an oral delight; saying it, I take pleasure from this union in my mouth). (FDA, 267)

Ungar



The symbolic profusion of death associated by Barthes with alphabetism may well provide the strongest evidence of the fallibility of systematic ordering, so that an intentional use of alphabetism becomes a destructive purging of the claims to scientificity which Barthes finds intolerable. For at least one other writer, alphabetism may be fatal and its proponents open to a kind of (systematic) suicide.

What might be the discourse of a frustrated artist? It is almost as if Roland Barthes has had to repress a potential for graphic or plastic invention in order to write. When, in the recent *Roland Barthes* (1975), he admits that he cannot help but *see* language where others might simply hear it, we really ought to take his statement—and Barthes himself, for that matter—literally or, as the French say, *à la lettre*. In a sense both literal and metaphoric, Roland Barthes is *pris aux lettres*; that is, “taken” by letters as one is said to be caught up or smitten by infatuation. In this, he is far from alone. Readers of Geoffrey

The best name for the dream of total union with the beloved, Barthes has been saying in what leads up to this passage, is “the *fruition* of love.” He can taste the union it denotes already, before its fulfillment in reality, just by saying it. The initial sensation, in turn, of this prior pleasure is *fr*—itself named best as *frottis*, which bears the same relation to *fr* as *fruition* to *union*. For it not only names the sound, it embodies it as well in its own enunciation.

T DU BOIS JOLI.



The cover of *FDA* bears the same *frottis* in the first two letters of the title, *FRagments*. . . . And it displays a more literal *frottis* as well: that splash of color that catches our eye the first time we see the book, and that cannot but color, however faintly, our reading of what follows.

Figure:

A piano transcription of the *ronde enfantine*, taken from *Album National Français*. Braunschweig: H. Litolff, n.d.

Ungar

Hartman's *The Fate of Reading* (1975) and viewers of television's *Sesame Street* alike agree that a new romance of the Letter is now in full bloom and many a pre-schooler recites or writes letters with an intense pleasure and play unknown to most adults.

If you have been reading Roland Barthes, you may have noticed a refined version of that play at a number of levels in the prolonged attention paid to the term "writing" (*écriture*) throughout his own writings (*écrits*). In keeping with my opening characterization of Barthes as a frustrated artist become writer, it would be suitable to see the play between the French terms *écriture* and *écrits* as something more than embellishment or a pedant's stratagem. Critical attention and verbal play would appear to be polar opposites pointing to respective attitudes of gravity and levity. On its own, a certain gravity is necessary to critical thinking, particularly when a single medium serves as both means and ostensible object of study. For most critics, this complexity precludes any kind of levity; the play factor is displaced and ultimately repressed. Not for Barthes, however.

For those acquainted with the recent writings, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) illustrates Barthes's passage away from a practice of reading predicated on assumed objectivity (gravity factor) toward something more

There is a text behind the painting of which this is a detail. The back cover of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* permits us to begin the reconstruction of that larger context, telling us the source of the cover's fragment: a painting by Verrocchio (or by one of his students—authorial attribution is a continuing problem here), *Tobias and the Angel*. It depicts a scene from the Apocryphal Book of Tobit. A man of good works, in particular the surreptitious burial of persons put to death by the state, Tobit was about to sit down to dinner one evening when he learned that a corpse had been thrown into the street. He left immediately to attend to it, but after burying it could not return home until sunrise because of his defilement. He therefore slept outside, in the courtyard. But there were sparrows sitting on the wall near where he was sleeping, and their dung fell into his open eyes, forming an opaque white film that blinded him.

He prayed to God for deliverance. At that very moment, in a distant city, a woman named Sarah was praying for release from an affliction of her own. She had been given in marriage seven times, but each bridegroom was slain by an evil demon on the wedding night, and she was despairing of ever finding a lasting husband.

The same day Tobit remembered that he had left a sum of money in trust with a friend in another city. Because of his blindness he could not make the journey, but he decided to send his son, Tobias, to claim the money. The trip would be long and difficult, and the boy did not know the way. Tobit therefore chose to hire a trustworthy traveling companion for his son. The man who presented himself for the job was none other than the angel Raphael, sent by God to answer Tobit's prayer, but neither father nor son knew his true identity.

Tobit's fatherly benediction ironically invokes the angelic guide: "Go with this man; God who dwells in heaven will prosper your way, and may his angel attend you" (Tobit 5: 16).⁵ Tobit is in that extraordinarily lucky position, although he does not yet

Photo:
Tobias and the Angel, School of Verrocchio.
The National Gallery, London.



Ungar

intimate which replaces scientism with value. What distinguishes Barthes's practice of critical thinking and writing from those of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic is a unique evolution in the perception of language and writing whose impact on our own attitudes makes it exemplary of critical theory and practice since World War II. Of a kind with the principles which supported the Pop Conceptual Art movements over the last twenty years, Barthes has questioned and ultimately rejected the traditional distinctions between artistic and critical activities. In fact, his writings since *The Pleasure of the Text* are closer to the creative or artistic side than to the (serious) evaluation and hermeneutics at the forefront of earlier texts more fully devoted to the serious business of criticism. That transition, and the value which it has placed on the play factor as antidote to illusions of objectivity, is a kind of regression which I want to explore in terms of Barthes's role in the romance of the Letter. In order to see that transition, in order to see that Barthes's writings about writing are something more than the critical *entreglosement* which Montaigne found intolerable close to 400 years ago, it is necessary to trace the origins of that transition and clarify the assumptions and values which Barthes has brought to bear upon language. Barthes's return to the Letter begins with a return to writing.

know it, of being able to cause something to come about just by naming it. Barthes, similarly, can enjoy the dreamed-of total union by pronouncing the right name for it, *fruition*; one might well wonder if something akin to this is going on in the evocation of the Tobias story itself by the fragment on the cover: Tobit had no idea that his prayer that an angel accompany his son was at that very moment being answered: Do the *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* betray an awareness that they are accompanied by the apocryphal Book of Tobit?

Barthes surrounds his amorous discourse with a certain aura of innocence. Like Socrates's errant, rolling orphan-text, it does not really know where it is going:

... a constraint characteristic of amorous discourse: I cannot myself (enamored subject) construct to the very end my love story: I am the reciting poet only for the beginning; the end of this story, just like my own death, belongs to others; it is for them to write the novel, the exterior, mythical narrative. (FDA, 117)

Any reading of the *Fragments* must therefore run the risk of being noncanonical, of standing outside the text—as the books of the Apocrypha rest precariously on the edge of the Bible. Yet the author sanctions precisely this activity, asking the reader to continue the story he has begun: "Only the Other could write my novel" (FDA, 109). One is asked to accompany the text, to guide its desire, to play a role curiously akin to that which Barthes attributed to Fourier's *Angélicat*, which "conducts desire: as if each man, left to himself, were incapable of knowing whom to desire . . . blind, powerless to invent his desire" (SFL, 119).⁶ *Fragments*, indeed, is dedicated to an angel:

... I dedicate the dedication itself, in which is absorbed everything I have to say: