

Franked Letters: Crossing the Bar

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The discontinuity of consciousness in Freud's theory of memory which may lie "at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time" is manifest in Frank O'Hara's New York poems, especially his walking lunch-hour poems. The inscription of memory traces on the unconscious at the instant of perception (the model for which is the child's toy, the Mystic Writing-Pad) is homologous to the crowd's inscription upon the streets, the paving stones of the city. As Paris was the cityscape of Baudelaire's unconscious so was New York that of O'Hara's. The paper, the poem, is the Barthesian third term: a translation of the surface of the city onto that of the page, a translation into time, measure, number: from stone/city to paper/poem. Frank O'Hara's visible language is New York City on the page.

*The monument of psychoanalysis
must be traversed – not bypassed –
like the fine thoroughfares of a very
large city, across which we can
play, dream, etc.: a fiction.*

– Roland Barthes

*I am for an art that tells you the
time of day, or where such and
such a street is.*

– Claes Oldenburg

"By nature [he] was a city-dweller. . . . He loved the endless cavalcade of the boulevards, the midnight brilliance of talks in the artists' cafés. . . . The atmosphere of [the city] was the native element of his inspiration."¹ Christopher Isherwood might have written this about the New York poet Frank O'Hara, but, in fact, he wrote it about another poet [Baudelaire] who lived and wrote in another city [Paris] one hundred years earlier. Baudelaire and O'Hara were both unremittingly urban; both were poets and art critics, but one of the strongest links between them is incarnated in the figure of the *flâneur*: an idler, a stroller, a man about town. The work of Constantin Guys, a contemporary water-colorist and illustrator, inspired Baudelaire in his essay "The Painter of

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Modern Life” (published in 1863), to celebrate the *flâneur* as a uniquely urban figure. It was not just Guy’s finished works that interested Baudelaire, but his method of composition: “in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist.”² Speed of composition and movement in the poem through the city streets are cornerstones of O’Hara’s New York poems. He wrote “Adieu to Norman. Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” in forty-five minutes. It begins like a wire service bulletin clicking away time and place: “It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering/if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch. . . .”³ But that is not all, as Baudelaire pointed out about this kind of artist: “observer, philosopher, *flâneur* – call him what you will . . . sometimes he is a poet; more often he comes closer to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.”⁴ O’Hara pinpoints the passing moment, tells (recounts) the time, names it to the minute like a digital readout: “it is 12:10,” “12:20,” “5:30” and sets it into Time – all time, perhaps eternity. He does this most often in his walking lunch hour poems like “A Step Away from Them”:

*It’s my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among hum-colored
cabs. First down the sidewalk. . . .
Then onto the avenue. . . .*

On

*to Times Square where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. . . .*

Everything

*suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday. . . .*

*There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks. . . .*

*A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is poems by Pierre Reverdy.*

(SP, 110-11)

The vibrance of the passing moment is pitted against the finality, the

vation that "if a still picture is inserted in a film sequence, it will exhibit frozen motion rather than stillness," points out that "the flow of poetry prevents the image from conveying a static sense – it seems rather to be *suspended movement*."⁶ For O'Hara, death alone is unregenerative stillness: the stopped clock, the end-stop, end of the line, neither mess nor measure, the last number – "(no new poems for him)" (SP, 120).

O'Hara takes the past and the future with him into his captured moments, his *now*, where all the parts are in paratactic relation to each other, laid out flat on the surface of the poems, like the surface of the city, street after street after street. Nothing is hidden; there is no hierarchy of value or syntax of valuation in his lines. There is only the surface flattened out on the page like a cubist painting showing every plane at once. The reader is surrounded by the poem, that is to say, she is inside it moving on its surface as though on the city streets. It is the cumulative effect of the movement and the discontinuities that produce meaning for the reader who has to look back to see where she has been while continuing to move on.

In his work on memory, Freud theorized that in the process of perception there is a "flickering-up and passing away of consciousness," a result of "cathectic innervations that are sent out and withdrawn from within the system Pcpt.-Cs. [Perceptual-Conscious]." (The system Pcpt.-Cs. stands for the perceptual systems Freud postulated, others being the "'mnemonic systems' lying behind the perceptual system.") When the system Pcpt.-Cs. is cathected, consciousness is there to receive the stimulus, to cushion its shock by passing the excitation on to the unconscious mnemonic system where a permanent memory trace is inscribed. No traces are left in the system Pcpt.-Cs. which is once again ready to receive and parry stimuli. When the "cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system [Pcpt.-Cs.] comes to a standstill." Freud concludes his essay, "Note upon 'The Mystic Writing-Pad'" with a "suspicion that this *discontinuous* method of functioning of the system Pcpt.-Cs. lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time" (emphasis added).⁷

Baudelaire seemed to have a presentiment of Freud's theory when he wrote that poetic prose "would have to be . . . supple and resistant enough to adapt to . . . the *shocks of consciousness*" (emphasis added); it would be a kind of writing which "will grip especially those who are at home in the giant cities and the web of their numberless interconnecting relationships."⁸

Commenting on this passage in a signal essay on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, conversant with Freud, sees "close connections in Baudelaire between the figure of shock and contact with the metropolitan

masses . . . the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street.”⁹ Baudelaire writes of the *flâneur* that he “enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy.” He likens him “to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life.”¹⁰ Benjamin sees Baudelaire as always fencing with the crowd, parrying and thrusting his way into it, making a path for himself, for his poems – even when the crowd is not there and the streets are deserted:

*Le long du vieux faubourg, où pendent aux mesures
Les persiennes, abri des secrètes luxures,
Quand le soleil cruel frappe à traits redoublés
Sur la ville et les champs, sur les toits et les blés,
Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.*

*Along the old faubourg where the masonry is tented by
Shutters, sheltering secret pleasures,
When the cruel sun's redoubled beams
Are lashing city and field, roofs and grain,
I go, alone, to practice my curious fencing,
In every corner smelling out the dodges of rhyme,
Stumbling over words as over cobblestones,
Colliding now and then with long-dreamed-of verses.¹¹*

Like the evanescence of time and experience, the phantasmagoria of the crowd is within Baudelaire; the actual crowd is repressed. Its traces are etched in his unconscious. He has long forgotten it and is, thus, emancipated from it; rather, it flows in his bloodstream (Rilke), activates his muscles (Nietzsche), and is “imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure” (Benjamin). The “meaning of the hidden configuration,” Benjamin suggests, is “the phantom crowd of the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests the poetic booty.”¹² Writing is the appearance of consciousness, letter by letter, by imprint and space, the punctuation of time; movement and suspended movement bears time into space and place: Frank O’Hara’s visible language is New York City on the page.

A topography, from the Greek *topos*: place, locality and *graphos*: written and writing, is a writing of place, a place of writing, a written place. Freud laid out a topography of the psyche upon the Mystic Writing-Pad, an apparatus he found that served as a mechanical representa-

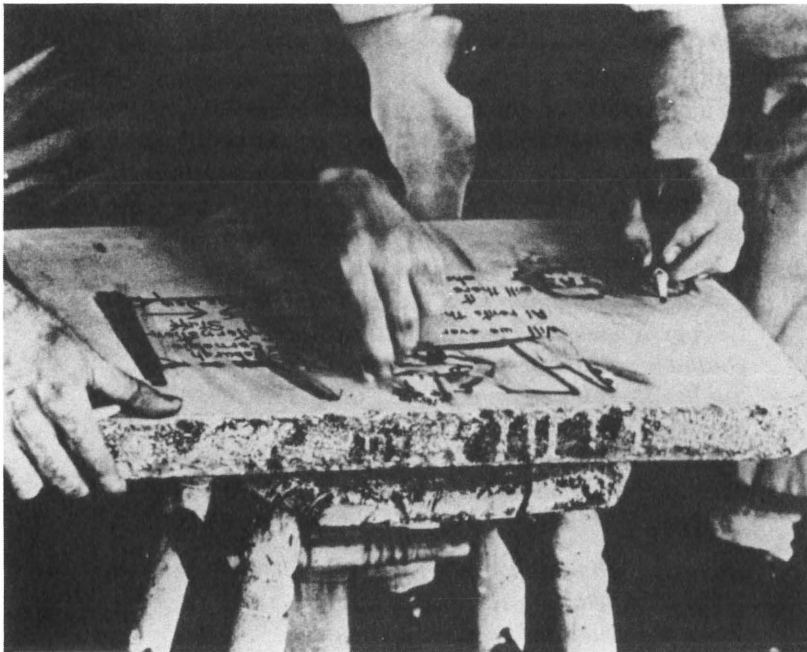


Figure 2: "The stone is a piece of paper."

tion of the way memory is constituted. The Mystic Writing-Pad (a child's writing or drawing toy still available today) consists of a block of dark resin or wax which has layered upon it, attached only at one end, a thin translucent sheet of paper followed by a transparent piece of celluloid. One can write on the pad with any pointed object (a stick is usually provided); customary writing implements are not necessary because the writing is made visible by the pressing of the paper into the wax surface. The celluloid protects the paper beneath it from tearing. When both sheets are lifted away from the wax, the writing disappears, leaving these surfaces blank and ready for further writing. The wax slab beneath, however, retains the traces, the impressions of the inscriptions that have been made. The construction of the Mystic Writing-Pad, Freud writes, "shows remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus; . . . it can provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it."¹³ There is an important limitation in the analogy that Freud, of course, recognized: lack of spontaneity – that is to say, the mechanism has no internal energy with which to activate itself. Once the writing has been erased, it cannot be reproduced from



Figure 3: “door to heaven? . . .” “A number is not simply a number.”

within; it has no memory. In the very limitation of the model, however, lies its demonstrative value.

“Imagine,” Freud writes, “one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax slab.”¹⁴ Because the writing can only be applied and erased manually, the principle of the discontinuity of consciousness is clearly shown; every trace has a temporal position on the wax slab. Moreover, the connection and separation of the layers is visible as writing. The tracery is produced by these relations. The wax slab is thus a topography of the unconscious. But while the analogy between the Mystic Writing-Pad and the unconscious may be exhausted here, its system of relations and Freud’s mapping of the psyche can be seen as corresponding to another system of relations of surface and meaning, that of Frank O’Hara’s topography of New York City upon the surface of the page: his lines – composed upon the sidewalks of New York (as Wordsworth composed his upon Westminster Bridge).

The stones of the city, that “does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the street, . . . every seg-

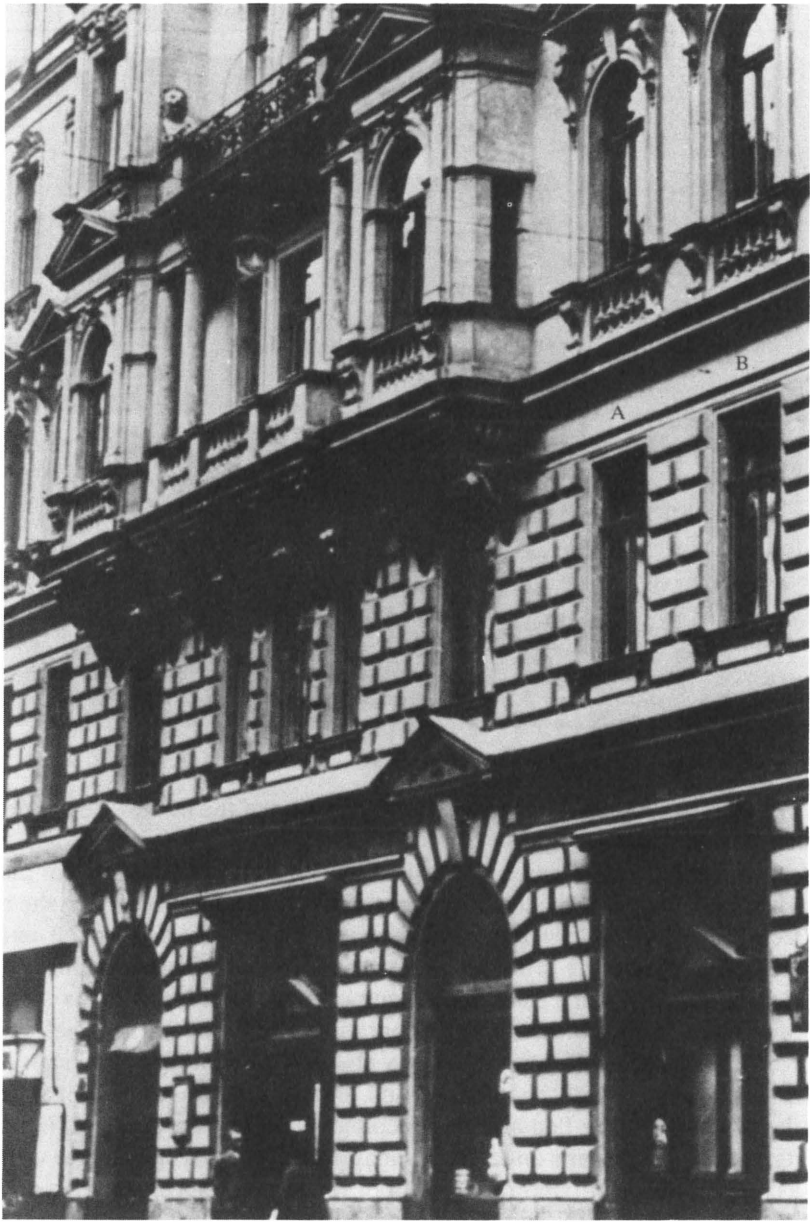


Figure 4: The Facade of Freud's house at 19 Berggasse. The windows of the consulting rooms are designated A and B.

ment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls,"¹⁵ are the sidewalks, the cobble or paving stones; *les pavés* (ripped out of the Paris ground and turned into barricades [standing stones] against the police in '68) that pave the way of and for civilization are written stones, not only as symbol or stele, but as invisible graffiti: stone written upon: lithograph. Barnett Newman, the painter, once said, "unlike Gertrude Stein's rose, the stone is not a stone. The stone is a piece of paper."¹⁶

While like Baudelaire, O'Hara's unconscious is inscribed by the traces of the crowd, it can be said further that O'Hara's unconscious, homologically, is the pavements of New York City, is its named and numbered streets whose surfaces the multitudes have etched and scored. The scoring of the city's surfaces is a numbering; number is an abstraction that allows the city to be erected stone after stone. Who can imagine a city without numbers? The least likely would be O'Hara for whom New York is a *mélange* of numbers:

515 Madison Avenue

door to heaven? . . .

while everywhere love is breathing draftily

like a doorway linking 53rd with 54th

the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s

o midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too, of Holland . . .

I am getting into a cab at 9th Street and 1st Avenue

and the Negro driver tells me about a \$120 apartment

"where you can't walk across the floor after 10 at night

not even to pee, cause it keeps them awake downstairs"

no. I don't like that "well, I didn't take it" (SP, 147)

A number is not simply a number; according to the Oxford English Dictionary a number is also a poem. (A number can be a work of art, too: *0-9*, a series of lithographs on Arabic numbers by Jasper Johns.)

O'Hara's page is a Barthesian third term that translates. Barthes considering dialectics writes: "Everything seems to suggest that his discourse proceeds according to a two-term dialectic. . . . The contradiction of the terms yields in his eyes by the discovery of a third term, which is not a synthesis but a *translation*: everything comes back, but it comes back as Fiction, i.e., at another turn of the spiral."¹⁷ Just as the imprinted paper is peeled from the surface of the marked stone, so is the printed page of poetry (numbers) wrested from the poet's inscribed unconscious. (Johns's *0-9* are both peeled and wrested.) The comparison here is once more homological. Barthes: "he enjoys *deporting* the object, by a kind of imagination which is more homologic than metaphoric (we compare systems, not images); . . . he functions by sliding over the entire surface, he caresses."¹⁸ As if skin, the surface

of the stone is the most flexible, responsive surface there is. As Robert Rauschenberg was moved to remark, "the stone is so heavy and clumsy and immobile, and yet at the same time. . . . It's like you're drawing on the skin of the stone."¹⁹

O'Hara did write on stone when he collaborated with Larry Rivers on a series of lithographs published as *Stones*. In his account of the collaboration, "Life Among the Stones," Rivers writes that

we were fully aware by now that Frank with his limited means [as a painter] was almost as important as myself in the overall *visual* force of the print. . . . Frank without realizing it was being called upon to think about things outside of poetry. Besides what they seemed to mean he was using words as a visual element. . . . If a self-conscious display of growing grass can be presented as an experience and shown in an art gallery and we seriously consider a composer's score as a visual phenomenon, it is apparent that a poet will begin to see his writing in a little wider scope than the level of his semantic struggle.²⁰

That this was indeed one of O'Hara's abiding concerns is evident from his "Notes on 'Second Avenue'" (some remarks on his poem of that name):

the verbal elements [of the poem] are not too interesting to discuss although they are intended consciously to keep the surface of the poem high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious. Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between surface and the meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words) and I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it. (CP, 497)

The letter insists in the surface and has to be read. If "the dream is the royal road to the unconscious" (Freud), so too is the city:

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.²¹

The writing that is visible on the page is a transference, a movement of meaning from one place to another. The transport of meaning (over royal roads) is the work of metaphor whose Greek root means to bear or to carry. Metaphor incites movement on the page, crosses the bar (Lacan), induces the production of meaning: *signifiance* (Kristeva). Fluidity, the freedom of movement, the right of passage is the superposition of the name on the surface – the privilege of the franked letter. Or

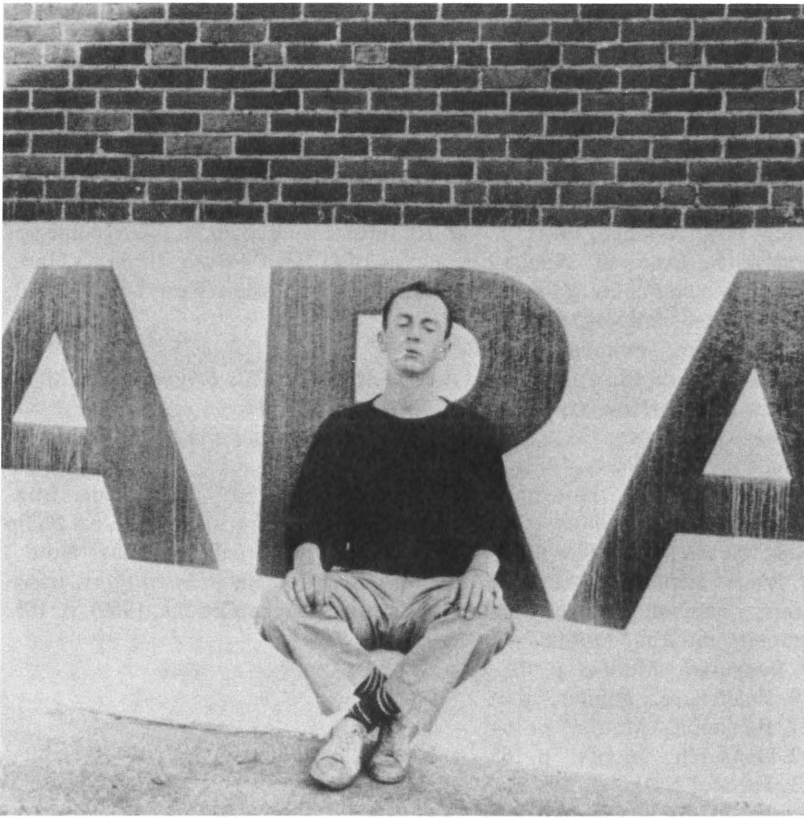


Figure 5: "Writing is the appearance of consciousness, letter by letter, by imprint and space. . . ."

AS PLANNED

*After the first glass of vodka
you can accept just about anything
of life even your own mysteriousness
you think it is nice that a box
of matches is purple and brown and is called
La Petite and comes from Sweden
for they are words that you know and that
is all you know words not their feelings
or what they mean and you write because
you know them not because you understand them
because you don't you are stupid
and lazy and you will never be great but you do
what you know because what else is there? (CP, 382)*

1. Christopher Isherwood, translator's pref., *Intimate Journals*, by Charles Baudelaire (New York: Howard Fertig, 1977), p. vii.
2. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1964), p. 4; hereafter cited as "Painter."
3. Frank O'Hara, *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 149. All further references to this volume appear in the text as SP. Another collection of O'Hara's work, Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1971) is cited in the text as CP.
4. Baudelaire, "Painter," pp. 4-5.
5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1949), pp. 138, 173.
6. Mary Ann Caws, *The Inner Theatre of Recent French Poetry* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 116, n. 5.
7. Sigmund Freud, "Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,'" trans. James Strachey, in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 211-12; hereafter cited as "Note."
8. Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 165; hereafter cited as "Motifs."
9. Benjamin, "Motifs," p. 165.
10. Baudelaire, "Painter," p. 9.
11. Benjamin, "Motifs," p. 164.
12. Benjamin, "Motifs," p. 165.
13. Freud, "Note," p. 209.
14. Freud, "Note," p. 212.
15. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 11.
16. Herbert Mitgang, "Tatyana Grosman: The Inner Light of 5 Skidmore Place," in *Artnews*, 73 (March 1974), p. 31.
17. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 69; hereafter cited as *RB by RB*.
18. Barthes, *RB by RB*, p. 58.
19. Calvin Tompkins, *The Scene: Reports on Post-Modern Art* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p. 78.
20. Larry Rivers, "Life Among the Stones," in *Location* (Spring 1963), pp. 94-96.
21. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p. 44.

Figure 1: O'Hara, Frank. *Standing Still and Walking in New York*. Ed. Donald Allen. Bolinas, California: Grey Fox Press, 1975. The cover photograph.

Figure 2: Berkson, Bill, and Joe LeSueur, eds. *Homage to Frank O'Hara*. *Big Sky* 11/12 (1978), p. 61.

Figure 3: Freud, Ernst, and Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis. *Sigmund Freud: Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976, p. 140.

Figure 4: Freud, Ernst, Lucie Freud, and Ilse Grubrich-Simitis. *Sigmund Freud: Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976, p. 141.

Figure 5: Berkson, Bill, and Joe LeSueur, eds. *Homage to Frank O'Hara*. *Big Sky* 11/12 (1978), p. 19.

THE CONTRACT

THE FIRST IMAGE

THE MASK

THIS MAKES MANIFEST THE EXCHANGE
ON WHICH COLLECTIVE LIFE IS BASED

BETWEEN PEOPLE THE CONTRACT REG-
ULATES RELATIONS, PROVIDES SECURITY,
LIBERATES THEM FROM THE IMAGINARY
EMBARRASMENTS OF THE ENCOUNTER

(WHAT AM I TO COUNT ON IN THE OTHER'S DESIRE?)
(WHAT AM I FOR HER?)

THAT OF THE EGOIST

WHO GIVES BUT FORBIDS HERSELF EVER
TO DEMAND

NO WILL-TO-SEIZE

THE SITE OF THE CONTRACT OF LANGUAGE
IS ELSEWHERE

THE CONTRACT

SIGN, LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE,
SOCIAL WRITING, SOCIAL FUNCTION

SINCE THE CONTRACT IS MASKED, THE
CRITICAL OPERATION CONSISTS IN
DECIPHERING THE CONFUSION OF
REASONS, ALIBIS, AND APPEARANCES

THE SHARED CONTRACT IS THE ONLY
POSITION WHICH THE SUBJECT CAN
ASSUME WITHOUT FALLING INTO TWO
INVERSE BUT EQUALLY DESPISED POSITIONS

WHO DEMANDS WITHOUT CARING THAT
SHE HAS NOTHING TO GIVE

THAT OF THE SAINT

IT OBSERVES THE RULE OF HABITATION

YET NO OBLATION

THE SITE OF THE CONTRACT OF LANGUAGE
IS ELSEWHERE



Overlay: *A Stele for Roland Barthes*

which is indeed his subject, to which he constantly returns.

I believe that Barthes, who relished being photographed among his students, for whom the seminar was a space filled with “‘the tangle of amorous relations’” (RB, 171), would have liked his stele: the finished form certainly, so uncannily like something out of his own image-repertoire, but more especially perhaps its production. Had he not, after all, defined meaning as

any kind of intertextual or extratextual correlation, that is every feature of the narrative which refers to another moment within it or to another locus of the culture required in order to read it. . . . Meaning for me (that is the way I live it in my research) is essentially a *quotation*, it is the point of departure of a code, that which allows us to set out in the direction of a code and what a code implies, even if the code has not been reconstructed or cannot be reconstructed (EH, 185-86).*

In other words, the name Roland Barthes led to no code for Jeanette's husband. It was for him, in effect, unreadable. This was not the case for Jeanette. For her “Roland Barthes” was a quotation: she had read it before. So too for readers of Barthes, the text of Lori and Susan's contract was a constellation of codes (Barthes speaks throughout *S/Z* of the “starred” text, in which the orbit of meaning is plotted) codes for which words such as “oblation,” “will-to-seize,” “alibis” are all points of departure.

Readability, the conditions of readability were Barthes' central concern. Reading is a “labor of language” and to read, for him

is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept towards other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. (*S/Z*, 11)

So too the world passes, the world which is for Barthes a vast text, hence reading is not and must not be limited to the printed word. Women's clothes, margarine, soap powders, plastic, strip tease are also signs or sign systems to be read. Reading therefore is seen to be a vital activity, passionate and political.

But so too life passes. The reading subject, “This ‘I’ which approaches the text,” in Barthes' words “is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost (whose origin is lost)” (*S/Z*, 10). Thus reading is always re-reading, recognition, in the same way that Freud tells us finding is always finding again. It is no wonder then that Barthes favors the word “text,” insisting on

its etymology, its derivation from the latin *textus*, tissue, suggesting weaving or braiding, as in the word “textile.” It is the play in the word “text” that allows Barthes to produce one of the most illuminating and thrilling descriptions of reading and its complement, writing, that have ever been given:

The text while it is being produced is like a piece of Valenciennes lace created before us under the lacemaker’s fingers: each sequence undertaken hangs like the temporarily inactive bobbin waiting while its neighbour works; then, when its turn comes, the hand takes up the thread again, brings it back to the frame; and as the pattern is filled out, the progress of each thread is marked with a pin which holds it and is gradually moved forward: thus the terms of the sequence: they are positions held and then left behind in the course of a gradual invasion of meaning. This process is valid for the entire text. The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (*text, fabric, braid*: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided – or braiding – voices from the writing: when it is alone, the voice does not labor, transforms nothing: it *expresses*; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. We know the symbolism of the braid: Freud considering the origin of weaving, saw it as the labor of a woman braiding her pubic hairs to form the absent penis. The text, in short, is a fetish; and to reduce it to the unity of meaning, by a deceptively univocal reading, is to *cut the braid*, to sketch the castrating gesture. (*S/Z*, 160)

What “nomination in the process of becoming” is involved in the production of that very text itself! The reader-producer, if she is truly to read, must pass from Valenciennes lace (Vermeer’s portrait of the lacemaker, bent over her pillow) to Freud (psychoanalysis—humbag or genial discovery, depending on the codes which constitute the reading “I” – his essay on femininity, for the “I” which recognizes weaving as the departure of a code) to fetish (the absent penis of the mother, that which is present and absent at once, if the code is Freud, object of unwarranted veneration if it is Le Président de Brosses: *Le Culte des dieux fétiches*, 1760).

The text as fetish is probably still one of Barthes’ most scandalous pronouncements, at least for Anglo-Saxon readers, yet which of us, student or teacher, has not asked ourselves “What to write now? Can you still write anything?” (RB, 188). The text, whether term paper or magnum opus is always woven over an absence. “One writes with

one's desire" (RB, 188) and where nothing is lacking, nothing is desired. How much of writing is intended to hide the scandalous fact that we have nothing to say? Like the cuttlefish, we eject our ink and dart away under its cover: writing as alibi: "The site of the contract of language is elsewhere."

And if we may have nothing to say, then how to begin? Barthes writes appreciatively of the rules established by classical rhetoric to facilitate beginnings: "In my opinion," he writes, "these rules are related to a feeling that there is an aphasia native to man, that it is difficult to speak, that there is perhaps nothing to say, and that it is necessary, therefore, to have a whole set of rules, a protocol, in order to find out *what* to say: *invenire quic dicas* (EH, 192).

Language is an infinite structure, how therefore justify beginning here rather than anywhere else? The anxiety attendant on beginnings is clearly related to the castrating gesture. One must "cut in," but at precisely the right point, and as it were, on the bias, lest the whole fabric (braid) come away in the hand, the threads (hairs) inactive, dead.

It is curious that there is one book in Barthes' corpus which is rarely commented upon (it is one of the two which have not been translated into English). I refer to his book on Michelet, number 19 in the series of which *Roland Barthes* is number 96. The format of this series is quite strictly homogeneous: the first image is always the subject's handwriting, the second his portrait. This is the order followed in Barthes' *Michelet*, but in *Roland Barthes* the portrait of the artist is supplanted by a photo of his mother, clad in a full-skirted dress. The last image in the book is an anatomist's sketch of the human body, showing only the veins and arteries; the effect is of a shaggy anthropoid. The accompanying text reads as follows:

To write the body.

*Neither the skin, nor the muscles, nor the bones,
nor the nerves, but the rest: an awkward, fibrous,
shaggy, raveled thing, a clown's coat*

The final words of the text, written in white on the black surface of the inner back cover are, "I am not through desiring." From the mother's skirts to the clown's coat, so passes Roland Barthes' text: a trajectory of desire, as all texts are, a quest for the object irremediably lost, the mother. Born naked into the world, we must write our garment, leap into language, weave our text. Barthes, by articulating his own metonymic process, his own text, provides us with a new rhetoric, a new code of rules, a safety net.

The consequences of Barthes' work for practice, both pedagogic and critical, are therefore enormous. He chose for his adversary Doxa, received opinion, "what goes without saying," the tacit tyranny of ideology. His goal, like Freud's, was articulation: speech, writing, movement. The contract whether social, personal, or pedagogic must be articulated, then labored over and transformed.

The epigraph to the book on Michelet is one of Michelet's own sayings: "I am a complete man possessing the two sexes of the mind." Let it stand as epitaph for the man who could read it in Michelet's text, for whom it was a quotation, the departure of a code, Roland Barthes.

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of the editors.)

RB: *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

PT: *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

WDZ: *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

SZ: *SZ* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

EH: *Exégèse et Hermèutique*, 1971.