

Interrupting

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1. New Starts

Sometimes, in order to create something of your own in writing, it is more important to fantasise about failing than to fantasise about achievement. While writing the first version of this text, I fantasised a lot about not finishing it. Not an entirely groundless fantasy, if you consider security circumstances, the shelling, the power shortages, unsafety and uneasiness. Add to these the need for a protected place in which to write, arranged according to weird private preferences that are constantly changing due to the war. Now I have to start again. The opportunity to mourn the first ‘finished’ iteration of this text was a further chance to pause and start from a new beginning. For every time I expect a nighttime strike, pragmatism forces me to store all my texts (including this one) in several places and on several media: on a flash drive, in cloud storage, sent to myself by email or messenger, to hide my laptop closer to the front door of the apartment. Nights often confirm these rituals as not completely ridiculous. In the morning, when I re-open my files, texts frequently look as if they are not quite mine. By evening, I will have re-established a connection with my writing, regained control and even a sense of its ‘authorship’. But then, afterwards, everything is repeated.

In such conditions, mourning for unrealised or rejected texts interrupts life sporadically. This interruption, I believe, shows us our true ‘writing desires’. New thoughts can develop, leaving behind other people’s expectations, imposed demands, goals, or conventions. This is where Barthes’s words come in: ‘If the interruptions, the unwitting leaps toward something else, come from a worldly agitation, from an importunity, then the depression grows. But if these “changes” (that make up the sporadic) move toward silence and inwardness, then the wound of mourning moves toward a higher thought.’¹ I am inclined to assume that thought is always aware of what is pushing it. That is why it stops and pauses of its own accord, especially if the punctuation offered by the world is complex. It is

from the pause that something begins. This is how interrupted writing appears, in which a sentence begins with a full stop, with a *punctum*. Thus, interruption is *punctuation*, and vice versa. Though the noisy bustle, all the scary or irritating calls we hear from the world can turn us away from it, and move towards silence and numbness, it is still possible to back up or second the world, as Kafka advised, and allow tranquillity, albeit a bit of self-denial, to reign in writing.

So the question is not how to avoid interruption, but how to see it as (or to show someone else how it can be) a reversal figure – the possibility of a new beginning, reassessment, clarification, and adjustment, a *vita nova*. The interrupted often returns to us disguised as something else. The interruption might look like a sabotage, a check, an attention-grab, a sign of confusion and uncertainty, an excuse for laziness, hesitation, or a dismal sensing of misfortune. Of course, it can *also* be all of these things. There is a time for pretend (writing) and a time to act, to scatter and to gather words together. But is there a third phase between the two – between anticipating the great coming of the finished text and recognizing that you are failing to write it? Eventually, you can't fail without trying. That is, without starting.

So how do we start?

For Ukrainians, in the context of the full-scale Russian invasion which began on 24 February 2022, everything starts with the contents of their survival kits. Writers, activists, artists and intellectuals have expressed their feelings about their kits in interviews: 'I had everything packed in advance' or 'I had nothing packed.' Here, we encounter preparation as a form of anxiety regulation or its mollification, but there is also the issue of how to talk about it. Are we ready to describe our preparations, equalising all the fateful and foolish gestures that made them up and disclosing who/what we trusted? Would this make us feel less vulnerable while confessing?

Facing uncertainty and threat, you try to be on the side of things, to be somehow useful to them, to not interfere with them much, to not overreact, to express respect, to awe, to fear, to treat, if necessary, *sans façons*... Objects are all around: mangled, stained, wounded, but also formidably strong, lethal, and immortal. Like humans, material things become veterans, captives, witnesses, and living evidence of crime. Invaders declare themselves the masters of these things, while their true owners abandon them for something else.

Here and there, objects serve as beholders of affects; they become so-called 'sensitive objects' through use, not just in the stories that get told

after the war or conflict, but while the narratives are still forming.² Affective attachments, and afflictions, related to objects, put us ‘in the mood’ of togetherness: being with one another and as close as possible to ‘sensitive objects’ (your keys and notepads, cups and knick-knacks). Barthes’s words quoted in the now-classic book *The Affect Theory Reader* are accurate in this respect. Certain objects produce ‘a hyperconsciousness of the affective minimum, of the microscopic fragment of emotion [...] which implies an extreme changeability of affective moments, a rapid modification, into shimmer’.³ But what exactly are these affective moments all about? The deceptively effortless process of preparing a grab-to-go bag means interacting with ‘controlled’ objects, making decisions according to ‘need and necessity’. Therefore, ‘to pack a suitcase is, in a sense, to start from zero; it is an empty vessel ready to be filled to the brim’.⁴ While preparing a survival kit, you are haunted by a fear of this *zero-start*, by a kind of ideal packing, a shame about your ignorance about what you might need, the concern about the leaving things behind, of the emptiness eventually left behind and its fatal consequences. Is it possible to get even the slightest bit ‘creative’ in this nerve-racking process of packing? What mistakes could turn the contents of your kit into something limited at best and futile at worst?

The empty, unpacked kit is also already full of assumptions and conventions. Local hearsay, the story of someone else’s experience, or an ‘expert opinion’ can be equally proclaimed to be very important. I want to flag this place and turn to Barthes’s ideas of ‘zero degree’ and ‘neutral writing’. The solution Barthes put forward was ‘a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language’.⁵ His breaking of the binaries centered upon placing ‘a neutral term or zero element’.⁶ The zero element is an aspect of grammar, a term in the middle of the singular-plural binary. As Barthes explained: ‘writing at the zero degree is basically in the indicative mood, or if you like, amodal [...] a journalist’s writing’.⁷ Naturally, writing on object-oriented topics in the context of military actions is exactly like this.

The zero-start packing brings me to a private incident that I have been struggling to put down on paper for a long time. In March 2022 the Kyiv region was already partially occupied. I was dressed to leave my apartment for evacuation with nothing to take with me in the colors of Ukrainian flag. I took a pair of scissors and cut the yellow and blue ribbons off the golden medal I was awarded at school for high achievements and excellent grades. In 2024, from the distance of time, I suppose that I paused to make this affective gesture not so much out of patriotic feeling

or fear of uncertainty, but as a way of interrupting continuities and consistencies of being, and making a new start, which I could not imagine without a combination of these two colours, as much at risk as our past and future. The preparations I was trying to make as coherently and 'reasonably' as possible were broken by this impulse, by my confusion, my intuition if you like. Further instances of such unexpected gestures abound.

2. The Long Journey of One Book

When I first came across Barthes's idea of the contagiousness of writing, which his courses at the Collège de France are notably charged with, I was captivated by its simplicity and accuracy. What if the interruption provides the time to get infected by someone or something anew? Without a doubt, how one person exists in another's life is matter of interruption. But an interrupted presence or mode of being can be as interesting and as generative as an interrupted process. It is important to note that Barthes's presence in the field of Ukrainian academic and readership has been inconsistent.

The reception of Barthes in the Ukrainian humanitarian community has primarily been through Russian-language translations. Russia was long considered the center of decision-making regarding intellectual property; it exported famous works, translated, interpreted, and censored, to the republics. Barthes's texts were published in Russian more or less regularly from the late 1980s onwards. Almira Ousmanova and Veranika Furs provide a kind of literature review of the translations in the editorial preface to the thematic issue of *Topos* (Journal for Philosophy and Cultural Studies, published by the European Humanities University in Vilnius, Lithuania).⁸ In Ukraine, two texts were first published in Lviv in the *Anthology of World Literary and Critical Thought of the Twentieth Century*, edited by M. Zubrytska (Litopys Publishing House, 2001). The first one was 'From Work to Text' ('De l'oeuvre au texte') (translated by Y. Gudz) and the second 'Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe' ('Analyse textuelle d'un conte d'Edgar Poe') (translated by H. Sohotska and M. Zubrytska). In 2006, the first (and for a long time the only) Ukrainian-language book by Barthes appeared – *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (*Fragments d'un discours amoureux*), translated by M. Fil and I. Magdysh. (Excerpts were published in the *Ī* magazine two years

previously.) The Ukrainian translation is based on the first edition of 1977, since the text has been repeatedly supplemented and clarified in subsequent editions. Generally speaking, a translation process has two important aspects. Firstly, it represents a praxis stemming from the lived experiences of an individual or individuals, typically an impassioned scholar who has already accumulated many observations and individual translation notes that he or she has been tasked with turning into a coherent piece. Secondly, translation usually constitutes an integrative endeavor. No conversation about translation can take place without contextualisation and critical engagement. But it remains unclear how the reader should prepare themselves to read the *Fragments*, since the translators provide neither a preface nor an afterword.

This brings me to the publication of *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (*Camera Lucida. НОТУВАННЯ ФОТОГРАФІЇ*) (*La Chambre claire*, 1980) in Ukrainian in 2022.⁹ This highly anticipated event coincided with Russia's brutal invasion. For the translator and editor Olena Chervonik, who shared with me her reflections on the preparation of the book, the project was a logical consequence of all her scholarly work. She followed Barthes's syntax as if it was a score – for her, Barthes's language is a musical language. What is more, the book describes itself as a 'note', which further supported her sense that we are dealing with a kind of score. According to Chervonik, the design decision for the Ukrainian translation of *Camera Lucida* was a collaborative one – the team used a packet of photographic paper as a visual reference. Photographic paper in the Soviet Ukraine used to be wrapped in bright red or contrasting light packaging. *Camera Lucida* is designed after the model of such packaging: the kind produced by the Kyiv plant which made the photosensitive materials called 'Photon'. This visual allusion is reflected in the typographical and colour scheme of the cover. It indicates the book's dimensions and page count – akin to how old packaging denotes the size and number of sheets of photographic paper. As if this book should not only infect you with *writing on photography*, but also inspire you to *start doing photography*. Do I need to explain how much we needed *Camera Lucida*? Not only from the perspective of bridging a gap between academic and theoretical discourse but also as a people in the midst of a digital war, a war as a stream of images, which is often completely unbearable.

The printing of *Camera Lucida* was scheduled to start on 24 February 2022. Almost everything was ready (calibration, paper preparation, and adaptation to the temperature of the printing house). Nonetheless, the full-scale invasion dramatically interrupted the process.

Instead, evacuation ensued. While team members were relocated, the machinery remained in place, stationary and awaiting further action. The edifice's windows were fortified with sandbags. After the Russians left the Kyiv region, no one thought the project should be canceled or postponed. The team returned to work at the beginning of April 2022 to print the book.

When you open it, its piercing inscription stares back at you:

Published on April 7, 2022
in the city of Kyiv
during the Russia's war of aggression
against Ukrainian independence

On the back of the book, there is a time-line of the period between the first edition published by Le Seuil and the Ukrainian edition published by MOKSOP (Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography). *Camera Lucida* has long been operating within academic discourse almost as an 'invisible' reference. Ukrainian readers had already read it in French and English, but most of all – in Russian. The range of translations on which to rely has now expanded, and one can compare and contrast them, looking for different nuances and ramifications. Barthes's use of certain words is often marked by pedestals of footnotes, inessential outgrowths, and typographical excrescences. Sometimes he felt little or no obligation to explain things, presenting them in a distracted manner. But the fact that the Russian version is no longer the most affordable is only one episode in a large-scale process of liberation. After so many interruptions, this is only the opening of a preliminary work.

Nowadays, within the Ukrainian context, *Camera Lucida* itself is more aptly seen as a preparation for the reception of Barthes's courses at the Collège de France. It is an occasion to start a proper work on Barthes's biography, to present his drafts, archives, and drawings to a wide range of readers in Ukraine. Moreover, those who will be working on future publications in Ukrainian will be dealing with an interruption as a resistance to *arrogance*.¹⁰ For those who have relied on Russian translations for years, new and interesting tasks have emerged. In certain publishing projects and even linguistic gestures, if we feel the pressure of discourses of intimidation, subjection, domination, assertion or haughtiness, from now on we will have to deal with our *own* language challenges and reveal the desire to express Barthes, not the wish to free ourselves from someone else's influence. It is an opportunity to re-experience familiar discussions and discover those sincere Barthesians (not only from the academic field)

whom we may have overlooked or misjudged in our preoccupation with other matters: sometimes an interruption is an occasion for a brand new conversation.

3. Continuous and Discontinuous Forms of Writing

To be content with your fantasies about making an argument that proceeds page by page, line by line, wasting not a word, having one decent paragraph sit alongside another decent piece, becomes more difficult in the hectic, tense, and rough disturbances of warfare. Finding the most needed, most urgent writing becomes difficult. The Diary interrupts the Novel, the Novel absorbs the Essay, the Thesis defeats the Poem, but the latter eventually beats the Diary.¹¹ When I am not able to make a shift from preparation (preparatory notes, fragments of writing) to making any of the discursive units listed above (afraid of petty acting-outs, which Barthes was so wary of), there are at least two impulses in play, both of which require the intervention of someone else in my writing process. The first is being reminded not to be self-indulgent by default when it comes to organising the writing process. The second is simply expressed in *The Preparation of the Novel*: ‘To write – according to my desire and in my experience, at least – is to *see* the book, to visualize the book: *On the horizon, the book*.’¹² It is to get shown – by way of an example from someone else – what kind of text I want to write, to better imagine it, (*fore*)see it.

However, it is hard to not smuggle a version of your desired writing, which is not in demand, into another piece of writing that is more urgent, institutionally or professionally necessary, or just commissioned. When I think I won’t be able to write the text, or when I notice that others’ expectations of it are too hopeful, I accept failure with a sense of fatalism. Unexpectedly, this fatalism isn’t about the outcome, the final: I constantly ‘check’ in with it during the preparation process. Thus, the writing may become somewhat more responsible, a bit more melancholic, and, in the words of a friend of mine, even gloomy and decadently unique in its way (aesthetically, and only rarely ethically). The fantasy of failure releases, yet it sharpens the questions of ‘why’ and ‘how’, becoming my research-driven unease, my poetic exploration, attending to nuances and small differences without sparing concentration and fervor. Lately, the essay has become the model of author-topic symbiosis I have been looking for.

Frequently, didactic prejudice against writing that comes apart is a consequence of one's experience or high standards, a part of reputation. Occasionally, when we realize our right to stop a scattered process occurring with no rhythmic care, in a repetitive nonsensical pattern, we are doing a favor, relieving someone of inconvenience. The piecemeal writing tends to be suspicious and no one wants to fuss with such stuff, except for the one who writes. Even so, such writing can be extremely contagious. Once, receiving a comment that any incoherences in the text indicate that it is still a draft and not a final version, I was genuinely surprised. When commenting on the writing of another person, whether a student, colleague, or friend, I have decided to follow two principles. First, avoid referring to the text as a draft, even if the author uses that term. This isn't about devaluing the work; rather, it hinders the transformation of the written piece into a different form and keeps it confined within itself. Second, resist the temptation to accuse any fragment of purposelessness, meaning I won't apply parameters of usefulness and effectiveness of texts if such a request has not been made by the author.

When hypotheticality prevails over the final result, on the one hand, it increases attention to fragments and gives a sense of free reflection, weighing up individual parts of the thought. On the other hand, it contradicts the imposed logic of work, the rules of reporting and announcing the next move.

In the Ukrainian language, delving into the roots of etymology, the word 'to shimmer' (*мерехтиму*), means 'to be vaguely visible', 'to appear', but also 'to fade', 'to disappear'. It is related to the word 'to dream' (*мріяти*), to fantasise about something, perhaps something illusory (such as the novel – one might ask ironically). 'Shimmering' conveys a certain didactic and ethical attitude of the researcher. I am thinking of 'diaphorology', a term coined by Barthes in relation to his concept of the Neutral. It is an attitude whose efforts are to de-hierarchize, declassify, and deindividualize differences. The didactic power of diaphorology as a science of 'small differences' and 'nuances' ('moires') becomes a kind of invitation to resist discourses of intimidation, subordination, domination, self-assertion, and *arrogance*. The science of nuances (moires, shimmers) that Barthes claims to be seeking appears not only in 'Deliberation'.¹³ It was developed in the course on *The Neutral* and continued in *The Preparation of the Novel*. *The Preparation* is replete with a multiplicity of moires: 'l'affectif moiré', 'une moire d'énergies d'écriture', 'moirés dans l'écriture', 'la moire des instants', 'moire d'existentialité', 'une Moire, un différentiel des Intensités'. A significant approximation to the 'moire'

concept is made in the book *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, where the material-visual translation of ‘the watered silk’ for ‘moire’ is rather limited.¹⁴ For the crucial idea is that within the structure of multiple motifs (in text, language, reality), it is possible to single out, to isolate one, and, if necessary, to follow it, ignoring others, much as one can follow the chosen motif in Sade or Proust. This possibility reveals how fruitful ‘inconsistent’ or interruptive writing can be. Diaphorology never triumphs in any final textual form. It remains a kind of practice, a form of preparation. A fragment of writing has a special beauty of momentariness and inevitability and yet it is mobile and subtle, just like a moiré effect. At the same time, the realisation of each fragment, according to this understanding of diaphology, does not us bring any closer to ‘the great work’; rather it erodes it from within. Some colleagues of mine feel a solidarity with this way of working, but try to surpress it or surpass it by devoting themselves to a ‘great work’ – for instance, their scholarly endeavors. Sometimes the decision to conduct research appears reluctantly, as a statement about the unattainability of the object of research, or about what the research outcome should have been. An early-career scholar becomes the bearer of some unrealisable idea (not even a plan) that only he or she can understand and imagine. Turning the reality of research into a fantasy allows one to live with the doom of failure in one part of life, so as not to face all the failures in all those unsanctioned engagements you live with. The lectures on ‘la préparation du roman’ do not propose much about dissertation writing. But the few specific mentions are important. According to *The Preparation of the Novel* there are ‘continuous’ forms (including the Narrative and the Dissertation (the Treatise)) and ‘discontinuous’ forms (Fragments (Aphorisms, Diary, paragraphs à la Nietzsche), etc.). In Barthes’s explanatory mode, you might think it is a good idea to first plan the topic of the work (*le sujet de l’oeuvre*) you want to write. Without taking any of the possible positions, but only showing the state of affairs, when the content of the written work, quaestio, theme, subject of the work to be done may be projected according to the task but not necessarily according to desire. The ‘quaestio’ matter could be found in *all except you: ‘quaestio* is the point to debate, the “subject” (*topic*) that one needs to “treat” (like a mineral) or “beat” (like a recalcitrant infant)’.¹⁵ Sometimes the unlikeliness of the text has not only therapeutic or calming effect but becomes a part of *aveniromanie*, of insane future text designing (or desiring?).

In Marek Bieńczyk’s essay on Barthes, he repeatedly returns to the obsessive issue of Barthes’s novel: ‘you notice how the role of this question

grows, how it becomes an interpretive exercise, a necessary fantasy on the subject of Barthes'. Bieńczyk writes: 'There also lurks the shadow of our own fantasies or fantasm of the novel, longing for which (whether we are talking about Barthes himself or his readers), we betray our dissatisfaction, our sense of the impossibility of critical, theoretical discourse, even under the pen of such an outstanding author as Barthes'.¹⁶ The supposed text (the text-to-be, a text-utopia, a fantasm) is an imaginary goal, but not a real plan, and certainly not a part of the discourse.

Above all, interrupting is a matter of interaction with time: taking it away from yourself through inactivity, and then, often with a sense of guilt, trying to get it back, to regain time for yourself, even when the war keeps stealing it away. As for me, interrupted writing which exists in a mode of impossibility is always surrounded by idleness, *l'oisiveté* and a pleasant idea of possibility. The effortless experience of the world(ling), of doing nothing is a space in which effectiveness is undermined and evaluation-fatigue prevails. In any case, one must give way to time spent at the table, devoted to the hard pleasure of writing. Bieńczyk calls the word *l'oisiveté* a password, and he believes Barthes is rather a 'dreamer of inactivity': 'I would say that he is closer to the slow melting of a madeleine in his mouth than to reflecting on it,' admiring the minimum of the statement, the *anacoluf*.¹⁷ When Bieńczyk addresses the topic of the essay, I feel more convinced. An anxious premonition of defeat reduces the undertaking to nothing. But where the imagination of the text should finally cease, it begins to reside through alternative forms, such as essay writing in which the shift from preparation to making may be easier and more pleasant. As Marek Bieńczyk points out, it is a struggle for the syntax of the world, or, to paraphrase, an attempt to set your own *punctuation*. It may be worth at least trying.

Notes

¹ Roland Barthes quoted in Rudolphus Teeuwen, 'An Epoch of Rest: Roland Barthes's "Neutral" and the Utopia of Weariness', *Cultural Critique*, 80 (2012), 1–26 (p. 5). For the original, see Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, ed. by Natalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2009).

² Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman, eds, *Sensitive Objects: Affect and Material Culture* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2016), p. 24, pp. 90–91.

³ Roland Barthes quoted in Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 1–25 (p. 10).

⁴ Frykman and Fryhman, *Sensitive Objects*, p. 128.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 76.

⁶ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, p. 76.

⁷ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, p. 76.

⁸ Almira Ousmanova and Veranika Furs, 'Vremya (dlya) Rolana Barta: Predislovie redaktorov', *Topos*, 1–2 (2019), 7–21.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Notuvannia fotohrafii*, trans. by O. Chervonik (Kharkiv: Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography, 2022).

¹⁰ Here I must admit the great influence of the following text on me: Yves Citton, 'La nuance contre l'arrogance. Lectures croisées entre Roland Barthes et Gilles Deleuze', in *Empreintes de Roland Barthes*, ed. Daniel Bounoux (Paris: INA, 2009), pp. 147–83.

¹¹ In *The Preparation of the Novel* reflections on this seem to be scattered in different places, but we come closest to them in the session of 9 December 1978.

¹² Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 251.

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'Deliberation', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 359–73.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, *all except you*, trans. by Joe Milutis (Goleta, CA: Punctum Books, 2023), p. 44. Available online at <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/62557/0444.1.00.pdf?sequence=12> [accessed 7 September 2024].

¹⁶ Marek Bienchyk, *Knyha oblych*, trans. by Ostap Slyvinsky (Lviv: Pyramid, 2015), p. 306.

¹⁷ Bienchyk, *Knyha oblych*, p. 321.

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