

Following Barthes and *Inspiration*: An Exploration of Photography, Notebooks and the Beginning of Writing

David Johnson

Let's begin with this photograph taken of a printed article that I have read many times, an article, however, that I can barely read with my notes and underlining now much more visible (Figure 1). I've also photographed the next page where the text, while worn as well, is a bit more readable (Figure 2). Part of the wear is probably from carrying it in my bag with this first page on the outside; the other comes from a particular reading practice where, after a swim in the leisure building of my housing estate, I read in the sauna. Probably not a proper thing to do but generally I am alone and after a swim my concentration is typically never more focused. I sit in the sauna for fifteen minutes, then by the side of the pool for even longer, then finally back to the sauna where eventually the heat does begin to affect my reading ability. Needless to say, this is not a completely dry endeavour and the wrinkled surface of the paper speaks to that.

This article by Kate Briggs, entitled 'Practising with Roland Barthes', is not the only printed article that has endured this treatment: Michael Sheringham's 'Writing the Present: *Notation* in Barthes's Collège de France lectures'; Elena Oxman's 'Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes and the Affect of the Visual' and Barthes's own lecture '*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*'.¹ I gather these articles around me now. There is an account that can be told merely from the condition of the front page of each of the articles, evidence of wear and a story of multiple readings and countless Barthes words and phrases circulating within the mind and body and as refrains written in the margins: 'I write because I have read' and 'un peu léger' (a little light) from Briggs; to 'write the *present* by noting it' and the haiku as 'incident' from Sheringham; 'obtuse meanings' and '*signifiance*' (Lacan) from Oxman; and 'the pinnacle of the particular' (from Proust) and 'the *intimate* which seeks utterance' from Barthes's '*Longtemps*'.² And even longer, as in 'the world no longer comes to me as an object, but as a writing, i.e., a practice: I proceed to another type of

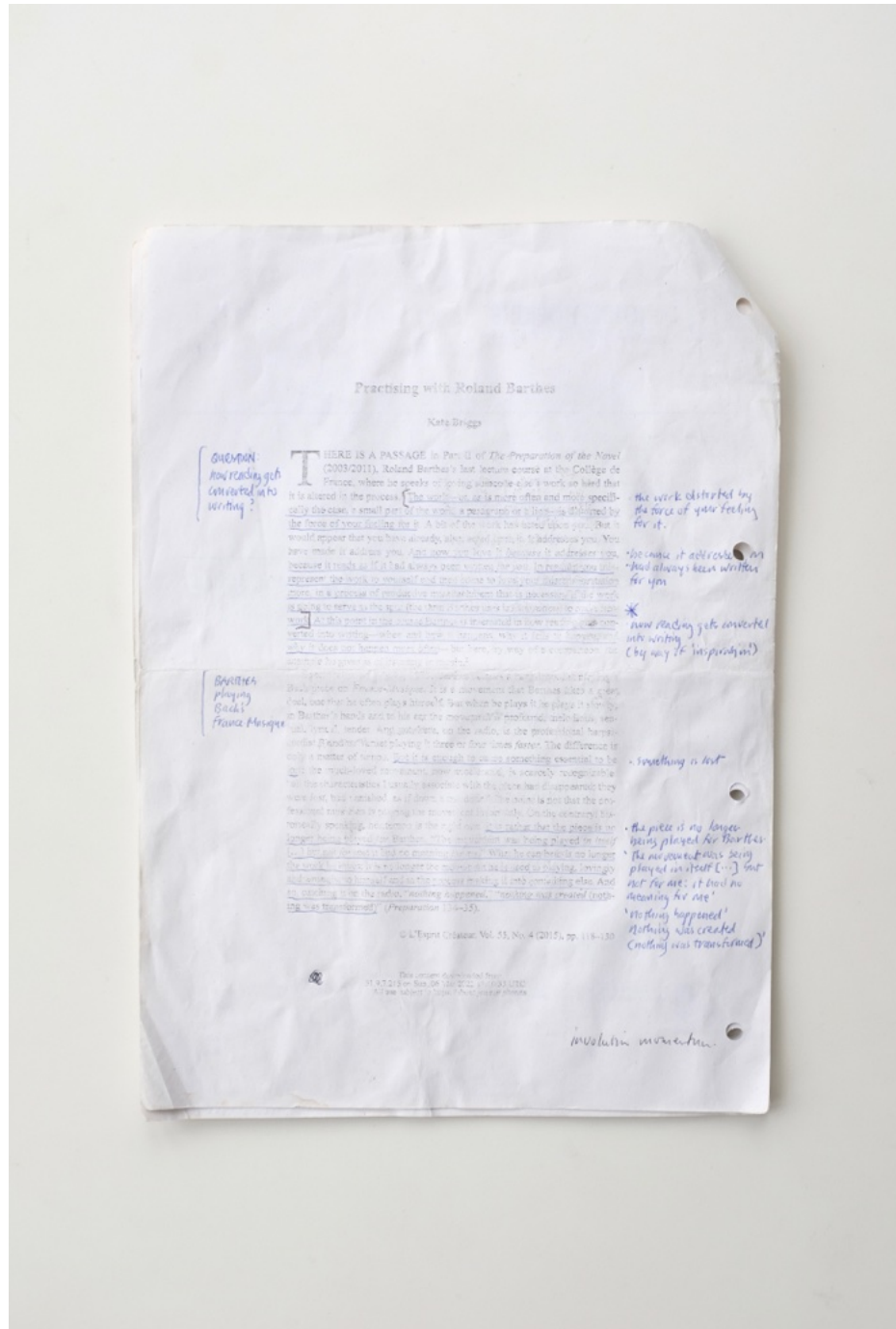


Figure 1: Kate Briggs' 'Practising with Roland Barthes', opening page (p. 118) (Fuji digital photo / 31 Jan 24).

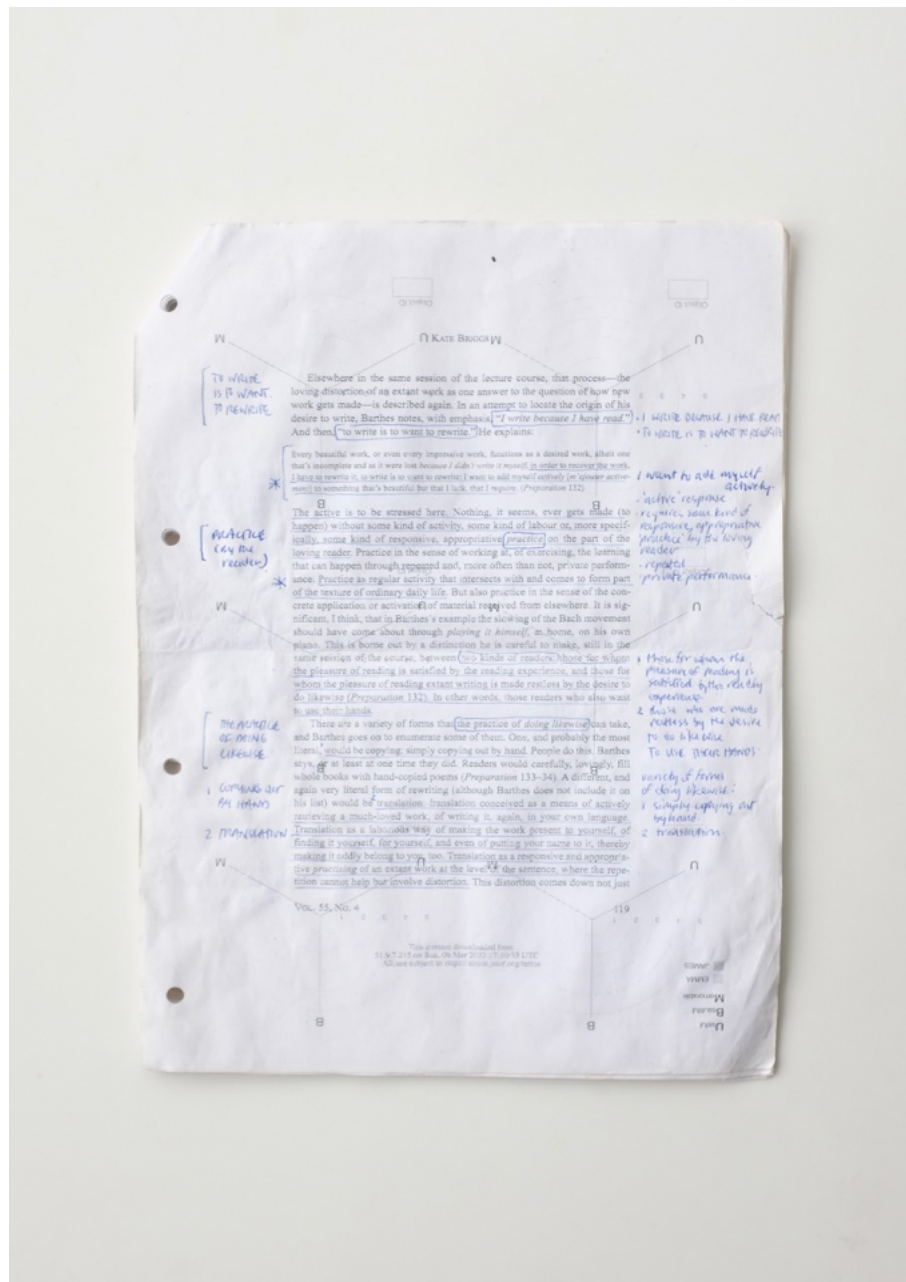


Figure 2: Kate Briggs’ ‘Practising with Roland Barthes’, second page (p. 119) (Fuji digital photo / 31 Jan 24).

knowledge (that of the Amateur) and it is in this that I am methodical', from both Briggs and its original appearance in '*Longtemps*'.³ But this is only a handful and as always with Barthes one could keep gathering. This inevitably leads to another photo of all of these articles, front sides and then back; an image of once again being with these physical printouts, this time collectively (Figures 3 and 4).

These articles, written of a 'late Barthes', appeared at a moment where I was beginning to grapple with the question of how to represent myself in my own writing: the role of autoethnography and the location of my writing voice—its justification and what form it might take. *Camera Lucida*, his last book, has always been a touchstone and my entry point to Barthes with its subject matter of photography and the personal—a search for his mother's photo following her death—and how these become intertwined.⁴ These articles become essentially my first attempts at contextualising *Camera Lucida* within this period of his life, to essentially expand beyond this. A particular focus emerges upon Barthes's last two Collège de France lecture series, entitled *The Preparation of the Novel*, where Barthes declares a radical change in his life to embark upon a singular endeavor—a 'Grand Project'—towards the writing of a hypothetical utopian novel: 'Will I *really* write a Novel? I'll answer this and only this. I'll proceed *as if* I were going to write one → I'll install myself within this *as if*: this lecture course could have been called '*As If*'.⁵

My own PhD research, which follows an ongoing photographic practice, draws inspiration from this, to stage its own search for an appropriate writing form, in no ways a novel, but my own bespoke form of writing—one that aspires to be both investigative, towards my objects of interest and theoretical concerns, but equally creative and experimental as a writing form.⁶ It's the staging of this endeavour at its very beginnings that this essay intends to present.

Collectively, alongside the first two Collège de France lecture series of *How to Live Together* and *The Neutral*,⁷ Barthes puts forth a form of 'fantasmatic teaching' as he announces in his inaugural lecture to the Collège, as both 'fragmentary' and 'digressive' where very personal and idiosyncratic points of view are extended with an immense range of literary and philosophical references.⁸ Within these lectures, as Sheringham describes, Barthes is 'always present as a singular human being, speaking in the first person with specific memories and desires', and as such, continues his movement away from the early semiological projects that examined more normative and systemic meaning systems as in *Mythologies* or *The Fashion System*.⁹ In a significant earlier text, he begins to set this out

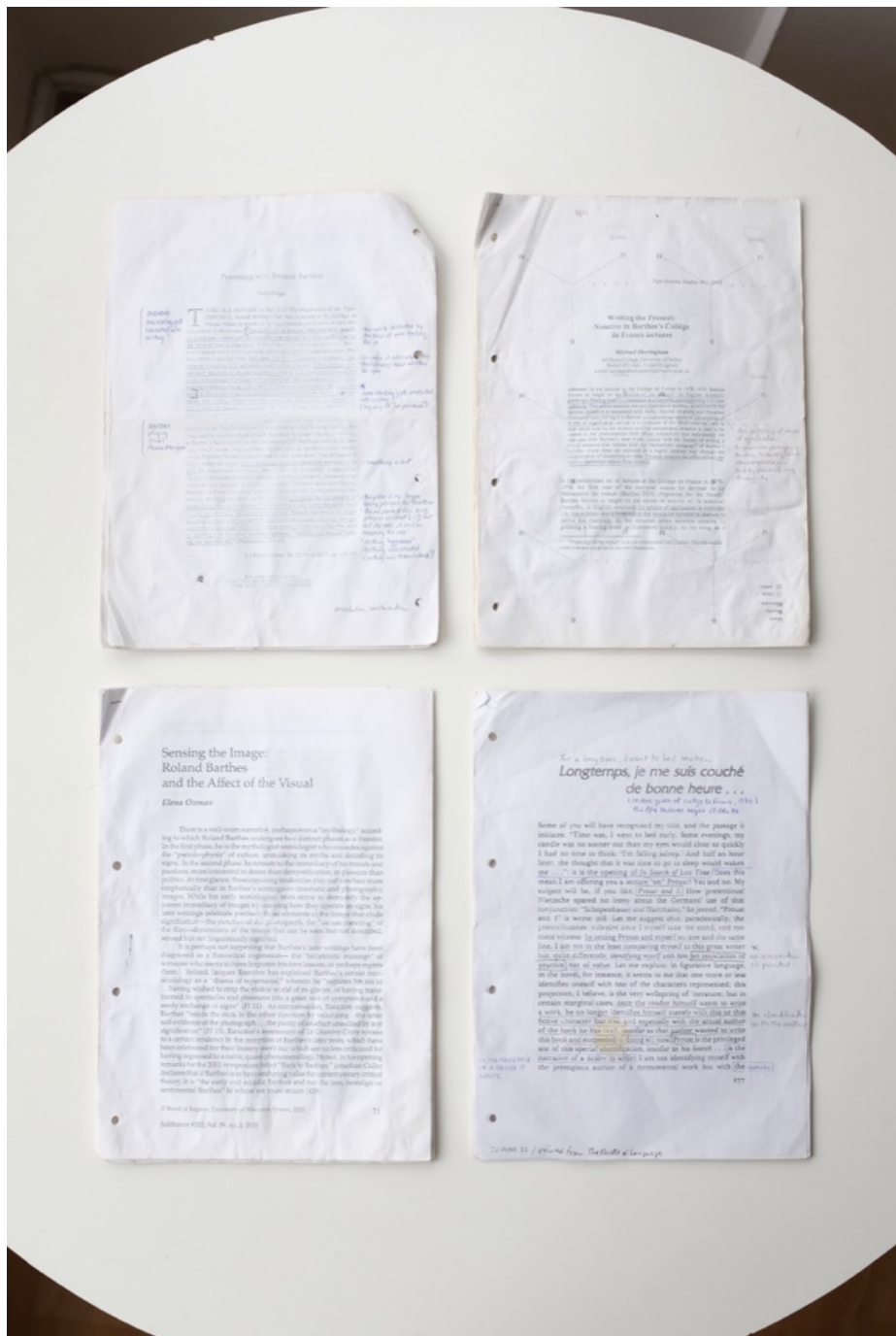


Figure 3: First page of Briggs' 'Practising with Roland Barthes', Sheringham's 'Writing the Present', Oxman's 'Sensing the Image', Barthes' 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...' (Fuji digital photo / 31 Jan 24).

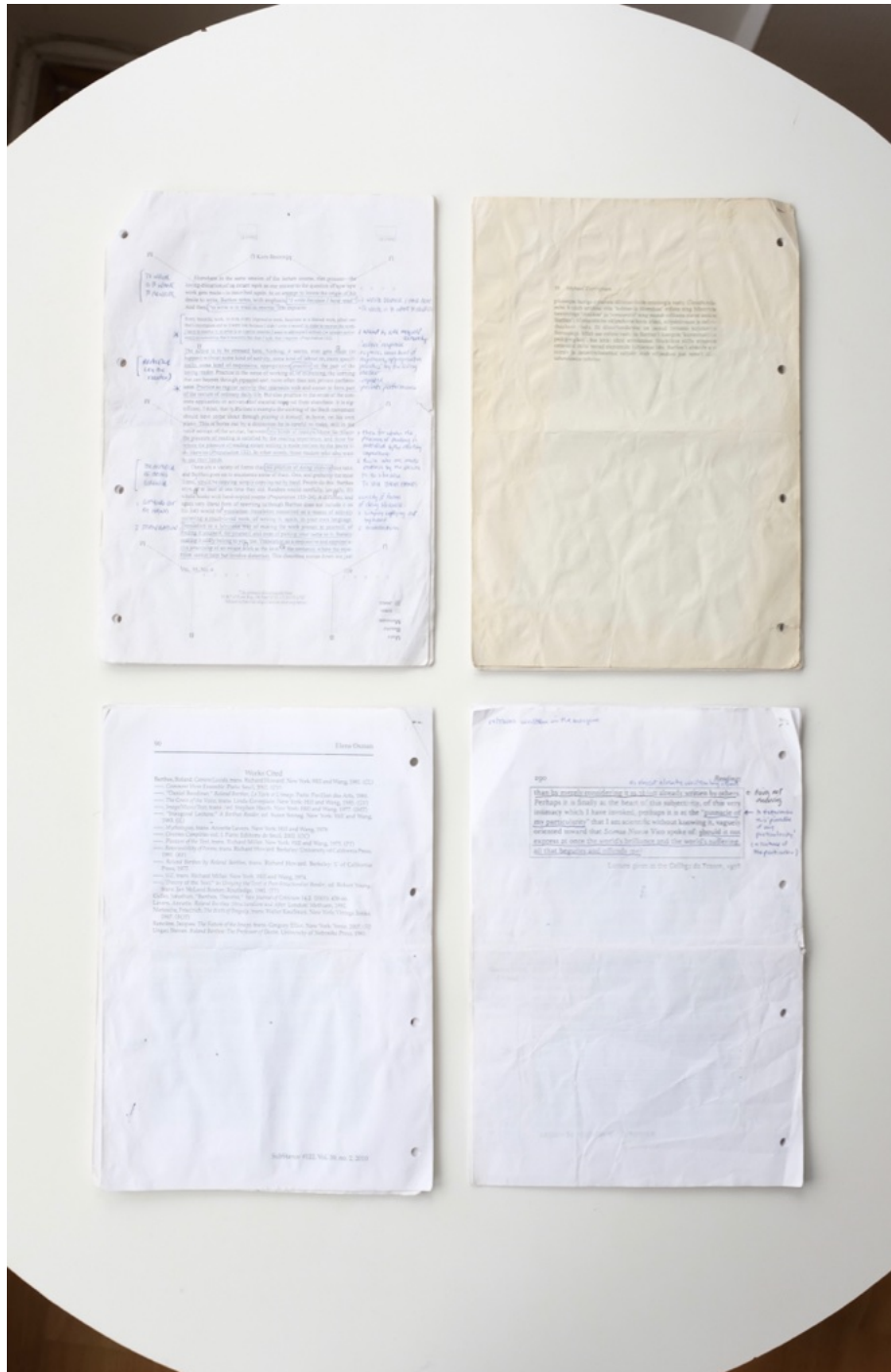


Figure 4: Reverse side of Briggs' 'Practising with Roland Barthes', Sheringham's 'Writing the Present', Oxman's 'Sensing the Image', Barthes' 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...' (Fuji digital photo / 31 Jan 24).

explicitly, speaking of a ‘third meaning’ that falls within the gaps of the direct message or its symbolic/connotative sense—an *obtuse* form both for ‘its wide compass’ of real and concrete moments that are ‘very hard to grasp, or to found anything on’ and because it is ‘only there in the first instance for the singular, embodied individual—not the intellectual subject but the obtuse one, the idiot in us’.¹⁰ *Camera Lucida* posits a similar distinction between the *studium*, the obvious messages of a photograph, ‘the ones we are supposed to see’ and the *punctum*, ‘the stray detail that makes an impact on me here and now when I look at the image’.¹¹ In *The Preparation of the Novel*, these details in their minutiae and proliferation get further voice where an elaborate system of *notation* is put forth as a means for gathering the day-to-day experiences in one’s life—experiences not necessarily autobiographical but experiential. For Barthes, it is from this gathering of personal experiences that one is able then to effect a transition from ‘life to work’ as a key first stage in the preparation of writing one’s novel.¹²

My own investigation follows a series of photos of all of my personal possessions that I began as I was moving from London to Manchester to start my PhD. Not fully completing this endeavour, I continue to take these photos, while transitioning from an ‘archaeology’ of a flat, where I lived for nearly ten years, to that of daily object encounters with a continual record of things that ‘enter’ and ‘exit’ the flat—as forms of both personal stasis and everyday life, looking back while moving forward. These are photos very much like the ones of these four articles: taken from above my table with the objects arranged and illuminated via natural light through the windows of my current flat here in Manchester; and always of the front of the objects as well as the back (or of multiple faces, if existing). Through this photography practice, which enacts its own particular form of *notation*, I attempt to explore the affective connections that I have with these everyday objects as they come into view, displaced from typical usage or brought forward from storage or neglect, where one begins to ask: *what is this object and what does it mean to me?*¹³ Simultaneously a personal memory project, an art practice, a research investigation, all within an everyday environment where I both live and work, I am currently exploring how these endeavours might be presented as a form of creative writing, both in word and image, while attempting to align this with the writing project of *The Preparation of the Novel* and this Barthes proposal, where encounter, via technical and material means, immediately becomes memory and hence a form of immediate archive. In my own exploration, *notation* takes a dual form—with the object

encounter photos themselves (the practice) and in further moments of encounter that become written (as PhD dissertation)—with the latter undertaking an experimental journal form that seeks to explore the boundaries of how ‘*preparation*’, *as writing*, might directly align with its final form as ‘oeuvre’ and dissertation.

This research investigation has sought within its objectives not shared commonalities but rather ‘the extremes of particularity’, as the material culture anthropologist Daniel Miller once described, or these expressions (‘confronting generality, confronting science’) of the ‘*intimate*’ that Barthes declared for himself in ‘*Longtemps*’; and in this way, articulations not only of my own experience, within myself, but shared amongst the material relations that make up my everyday with its neverending set of encounters and queries that emerge: *what connects me to this? why do I see it now? and not before? why these intensities?* and so on.¹⁴ As though to apprehend something within these relations, is to begin to understand something of the self and its affective dimensions—a reciprocity of ‘it animates me, and I animate it’ as Barthes applied to those photographic images which gathered his attention and scrutiny in *Camera Lucida* and a principle that will become continually articulated and explored in these proceedings; a reciprocity and animation that offers the potential for response and narrative *and a possible writing* that enacts a further authoring of object and self.¹⁵

Inspiration

Of these articles, the Briggs printout is certainly the one that has undergone the most wear. I can see from the JSTOR cover that I downloaded the article nearly three years ago, and from my notes began reading it a week later. Three years of age and wear (and water) and fortunately all but this first page continue to be readable. It’s this page however (and I have to go to my computer to open up the PDF) that opens quite memorably, both in Briggs’ presentation and in the fundamental principle that Barthes attempts to put forth. I will attempt to capture this here: taken from the second lecture series of *The Preparation of the Novel*, which Briggs translated herself, a conception of *Inspiration* is put forth through a Barthes anecdote that seeks to demonstrate how one moves from a mode of ‘reading’ to ‘writing’. It begins by speaking of loving another’s work so thoroughly that the work is altered in the process, in a form of

‘narcissistic distortion’ (as the section is entitled within the lecture).¹⁶ Briggs compellingly introduces this:

The work—or as is more often and more specifically the case, a small part of the work, a paragraph or a line—is distorted by the force of your feeling for it. A bit of the work has acted upon you. But it would appear that you have already, also, acted upon it. It addresses you. You have made it address you. And now you love it *because* it addresses you, because it reads as if it had always been written *for you*. In reading you misrepresent the work to yourself and then come to love your misrepresentation more, in a process of productive misattachment that is necessary if the work is going to serve as the spur [...] to make new work.¹⁷

The example Barthes offers to illuminate this is musical: when listening to the radio in late December 1979, he hears a Bach piece, played on the harpsichord by a professional musician, which at first he doesn’t recognise. Slowly over time he realises that it is a movement that he likes very much and even plays himself but on the piano. The tempo by the professional musician however is three to four times faster, and evidence for Barthes of this ‘contemporary obsession’ with period instruments and historical ‘truth’. Barthes alternatively plays it slowly, as he is able, and despite admitting to play it poorly, ‘the movement is profound, soft, melodious, sensual, lyrical, tender’—all characteristics that on the radio that day ‘had disappeared’ and ‘were *lost*’, having ‘vanished, as if down a trapdoor’.¹⁸ He continues expressing even more directly the subjective principle of this ‘*Inspiration*’:

([...] What a shame! What a disappointment! This isn’t conceitedness, but an Amateur’s truth, for his Desire is indubitable). The movement was being played *in itself* [...] but not *for me*: it had no meaning *for me*—and so *nothing happened, nothing was created* (nothing was transformed).¹⁹

Thus this distinction, opposition even: the movement that is historically and technically correct, ‘in itself’ but apart from Barthes, removed from his ‘Desire’ and its meaning for him—as a fundamental separation of the work and the self. And what is this ‘Desire’, this ‘Amateur’s truth’ that has become lost? In this case, it is the pleasure of oneself playing and experiencing music on the piano; and while this incident isn’t textual but musical, Barthes offers it as an illustration of this

principle of transformation of ‘a loving reading to a writing productive of a work’.²⁰ Might we then extend this even further? To include other objects and other practices or really anything we might engage and dedicate ourselves towards—just as Barthes, as amateurs and in the everyday. And in this aspiration of writing, what in the operation of *Inspiration* is the relationship between the writing and the objects of its writing? Might *Inspiration* derive equally from the experiences of ‘loving reading’ *as well as* the experiences of objects, events and practices that make up that writing? And perhaps it is precisely that which Barthes’ system of an everyday *notation* proposes to provide:

Now, what I’m looking for, what I want from the work I desire, is for something to happen: *a love affair*, precisely the dialectic of a conjunction of lovers whereby their love for one another will distort them both and create a third term: either the relation itself, or a new work, *inspired* by the old.²¹

I find this important; firstly, in this direct characterisation of a relationship as a direct dynamic between the work (as object of Desire) and person (who experiences), as relative equals, without hierarchy; then secondly, in this desire ‘for something to happen’ that enacts forward movement where both the work and the person are transformed and in such a way as: to embed and to engender the relationship further; and/or to create a ‘new work’ as a something else or in addition to, beyond this relationship. In this we return to Barthes’s principle of mutual animation (‘it animates me, and I animate it’) which is precisely that moment of encounter that Briggs captures so well in her opening passage, becoming a kind of refrain from which to carry forth: ‘*A bit of the work has acted upon you. But it would appear that you have already, also, acted upon it. It addresses you. You have made it address you. And now you love it because it addresses you, because it reads as if it had always been written for you.*’²²

From this ‘dialectical passage’ of *Inspiration* where one simply allows oneself ‘to be inspired by’, what becomes significant for understanding my practice and for writing the PhD are these moments that enact this passage: moments of encounter that lead to further thoughts, further moments, forward movement.²³ For my endeavours, these might be musical as in the Barthes example or textual like my Briggs/Barthes encounter or everyday as objects and images of objects—with too many possibilities here to describe or attempt to itemise. To encounter something is to allow oneself to be moved, with insights or indications of a possible next step, or the creation of new thoughts or

further images (as possibly drawings, diagrams, photos, and so on); the singular moment that becomes the fundamental unit which combines with other moments as part of a larger process that continually evolves and builds upon itself—a process of engenderment from one moment to many. To be mindful of these transformations—as passages of *Inspiration*—is to assume a posture of openness and responsiveness to these moments where there is no correct or right moment, only intensities within the self (yourself/myself): moments just large enough to be moments to moments of genuine, sometimes staggering, emotional import.

The opening of the Briggs article is one such moment: textual at the outset (read on the computer), becoming material (printed out), carried about and read again (with passages underlined and notes written in the margins), extended to other sources (more printouts, more reading, more annotation), then made into an image (photographs taken) (Figures 5 and 6). And as such my own version of a reading that becomes other forms of engagements and if not yet writing then the beginning of an extended reading and immersion into the late works of Barthes (a mapping that only becomes fully apparent to me once its written about and visualised). In short, a desire created through reading and the beginnings of a practice which will develop to become an attempt at writing (for the PhD). Of equal importance is that while enacting my own form of a 'loving reading', these engagements are also physical, material and relational, participating in these concerns that form the foundations of the larger PhD investigation while becoming manifestations of the journal writing to come. These moments, in this emerging writing practice, will not always follow this trajectory but largely this configuration of object encounter first, then a photograph—as encounter + photograph as central gesture of my practice—will become the primary figure of concern that carries the writing. What it relies on less so, and in contrast to Barthes point of view in *Camera Lucida*, is the moment of encounter with the photographic image (from which his concepts of *studium* and *punctum* derive) and in this way, I am more of an *Operator* (as photographer) than *Spectator* as Barthes distinguishes; and thus, photography less as an object of reception and more as an act of doing and alternative mode of writing—a *notation* even, to return it again to Barthes, not in words but through captured images.²⁴ In essence, however, the investigation doesn't discriminate within this emerging writing approach—ideally all of these moments, whether photographic or direct, might be available from which to experience and respond.

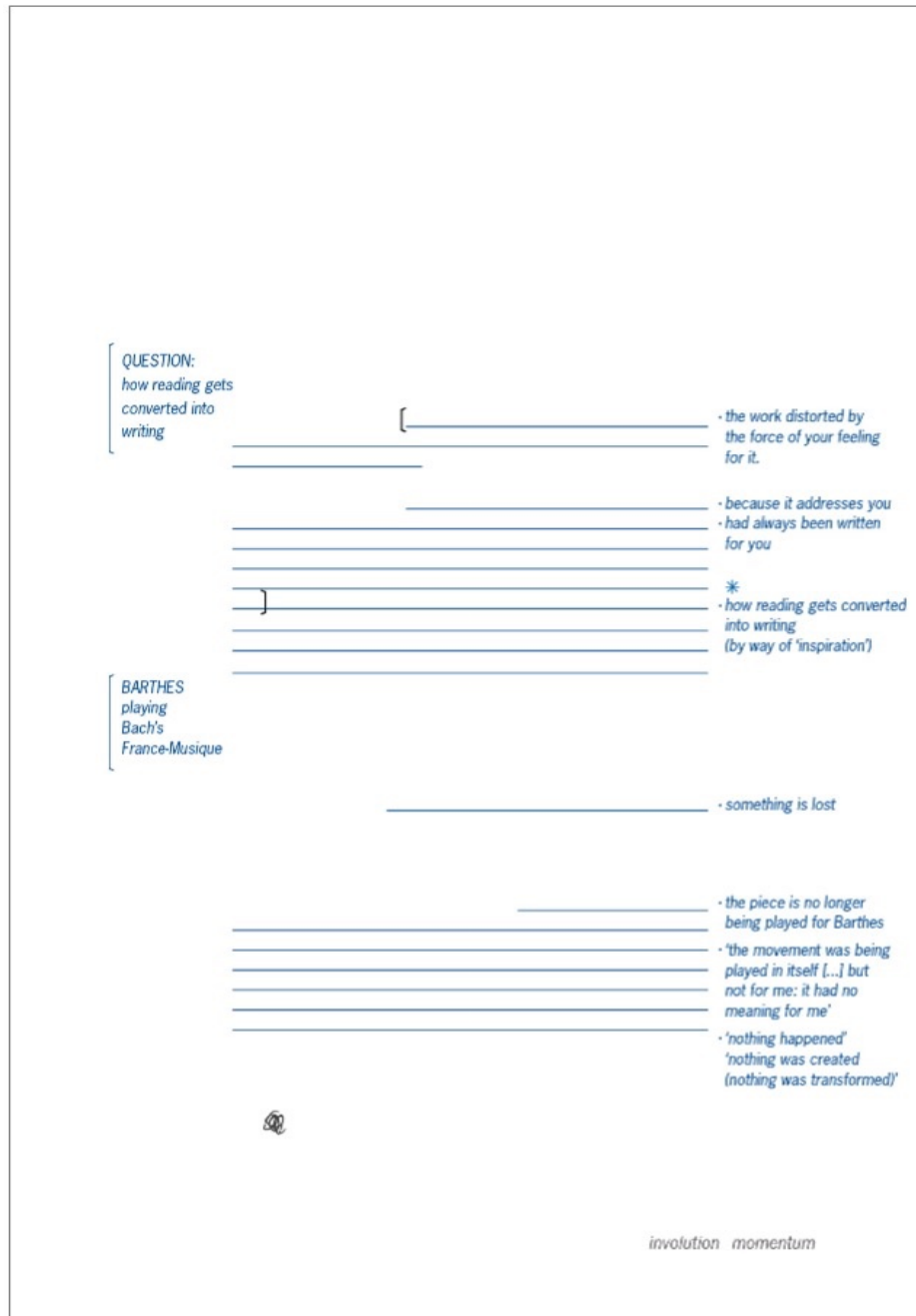


Figure 5: A digital record of my annotations on the first page of the Briggs article 'Practising with Roland Barthes' (as taken from Figure 9.1).

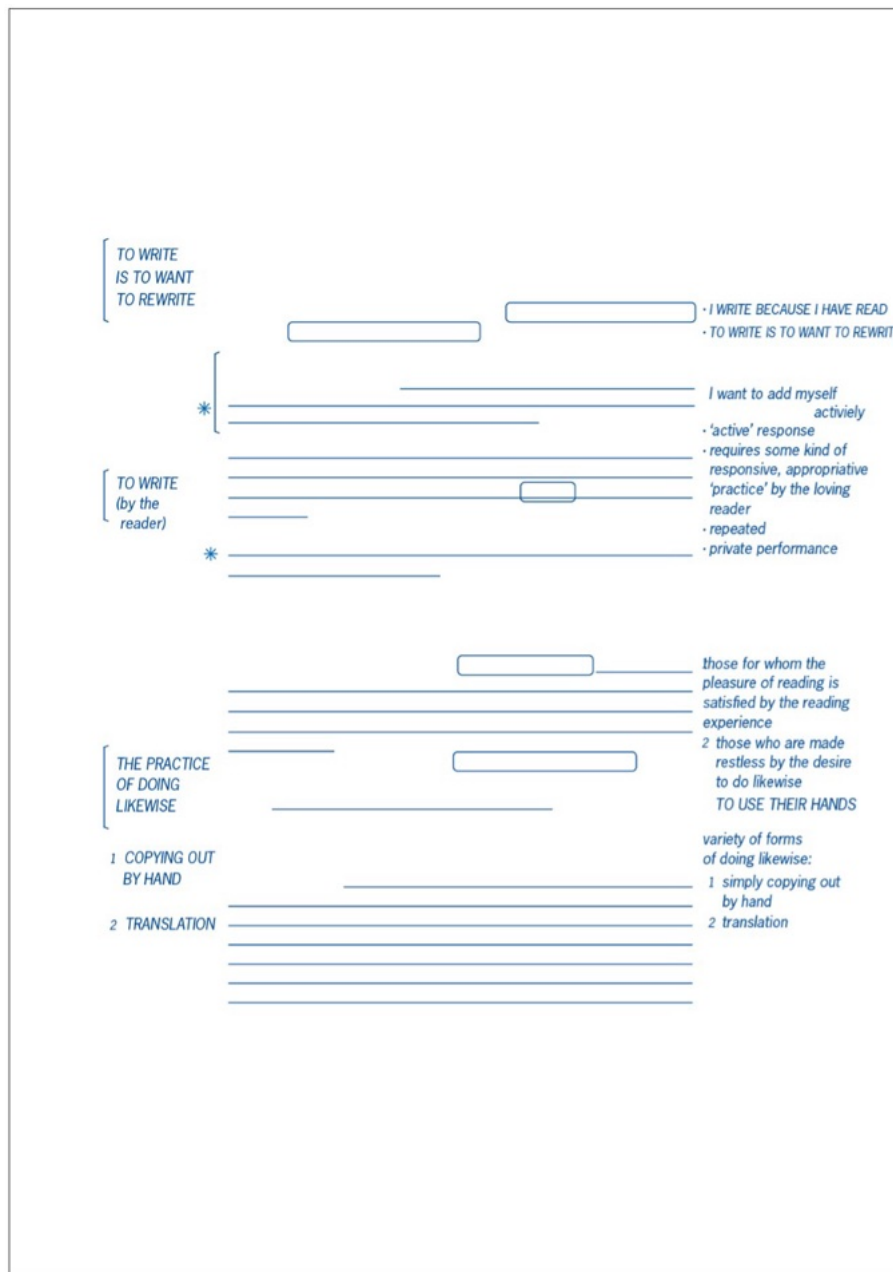


Figure 6: A digital record of my annotations on the second page of the Briggs article 'Practising with Roland Barthes' (as taken from Figure 9.2).

So how do I begin? How does this somewhat elaborate machinery begin to become writing? To follow, I would propose to take you through the initial steps of this writing process and how this emerges from these distinct moments of encounter—a writing process invariably personalised and subjective but equally engaged and responsive to these ‘*preparations*’ that Barthes puts forth. I commence with the aim of organising these moments into shorter chapters (with the structure of *Camera Lucida* very much in mind here if only intuitively so) with this developing to become a journal form of writing, of short entries sequentially written. This is an idea however wholly unsure of itself, to be negotiated and tested, with the ambition of discovering its means and methods self-reflexively as it proceeds.²⁵ Although already undertaken (as part of the writing of my PhD dissertation), I attempt to recount this in as live a way as possible, as if unfolding now in the present tense but with the realisation that to discuss it now, in this essay, is invariably adding a further layer with its own set of discoveries to these proceedings—or more concisely even: to write this now is *to write of a writing seeking to discover itself as writing*.²⁶

In these journal entries, one particular object emerges at the outset: that of my notebook, a relationship which I begin to recount for you here and a further participant in this evolving practice. While a singular object, this notebook is one that continually changes—moving from this word to the next word, this page to the next page, this notebook to the next notebook—as an ever-shifting set of physical, emotional and cognitive relations. In this way and just as Barthes distinguished in ‘Longtemp’, following Proust,²⁷ this is a notebook that I aspire to describe less metaphorically, as ‘what it is’, and more metonymically, in ‘what it does’; not as ‘commentary’ or ‘interpretation’ but as ‘an affabulation which produces or imagines the narrative *before* and *after*’, whereby

to interpret is to take the Critical path, to argue theory [...]; to think incidents and impressions, to describe their developments, is on the contrary to weave a Narrative, however loosely, however gradually.²⁸

I will go on to describe the notebook through a continually building set of encounters with it eventually featuring in four separate journal entries within my PhD dissertation; and in this way, the writing becomes less concerned in defining itself at-large and more in its specific operations within these affective encounters.²⁹ This begins with an initial encounter, its bookmarks (made of ribbon), a further one with a drawing of moving boxes in storage, and then eventually the notebook completely

filled up, to be replaced by a new notebook. These are moments that initiate questions towards what the notebooks mean to me, the affective dimensions shared and their larger relationship to the writing work (of the dissertation) itself; a storyline that continually intersects and becomes narrated visually through my photographic practice. It is this initial encounter with the bookmarks of the notebook however that will become our concern and the means to think further of this Barthes aspiration towards ‘thinking incidents and impressions’ and their ‘developments’ and how this begins to render a possible means towards writing.³⁰

Beginnings

My first journal entry opens with a passage taken directly from my notebook, one I had written a number of months earlier and in all-caps:

TO BE IN THE SPACE OF THE NOW³¹

TO HAVE THE PRESENT SELF SPEAKING

PERCEIVING

THINKING

IN THE WRITING

OF THE PAST

(is there not truth only in the now?)

I had these thoughts after waking up just now.

[Notebook entry: 25 Jan 23, p. 87]

Almost like a dream, this notion of *the now* is not an immediate realisation but one that had been developing over many months (as initiated by these readings of Briggs, Sheringham, Oxman and ‘*Longtemps*’). Early within *P/N*, Barthes introduces his still-to-be fantasized ‘Novel’ with an admission: of a ‘certain constitutive weakness’ towards ‘Memory’ and ‘the ability to remember’. This is a deficiency standing in contrast to ‘the novels he loves’—novels made of the material ‘*recalled* from childhood’ and ‘the life of the writing subject’, as in his most specific

and fundamental works of reference, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.³² From this, an essential question emerges: 'Is it possible to make a Narrative (a Novel) out of the Present?'—a '*present*, my present', in all of its 'affective, relational, intellectual dimensions'.³³ Thus becoming a condition for a form of writing made from life (as a requirement of 'literature') that will orient and animate the remainder of the course:

My problem is that I don't think I can access my past life; it's in the mist, meaning that its intensity (without which there is no writing) is weak. What is intense is the life of the present, structurally mixed (there's my basic idea) with the desire to write it. The "Preparation" of the Novel therefore refers to the capturing of this parallel text, the text of "contemporary," concomitant life.³⁴

From this initial notebook passage, which I begin to recognise as a form of my own declaration, an observation arises: this one drawn from the notebook itself, a Moleskine brand sitting on the table before me, *of the two ribbons which allow me to mark places in my notebook* (Figure 7). One of these (and this seems obvious) marks the latest notes written as well as the next available page to be written upon. The second marks what would have to be a past entry in the preceding pages to the left (as opposed to a future blank page, right? as no point in that?). The ribbons—one black, the other purple—are bound into the notebook with the purple ribbon to the left of the black one; hence, black (left), to indicate an event in the past; purple (right), to indicate the most recent past—the where to begin now and potential future of the notetaking.

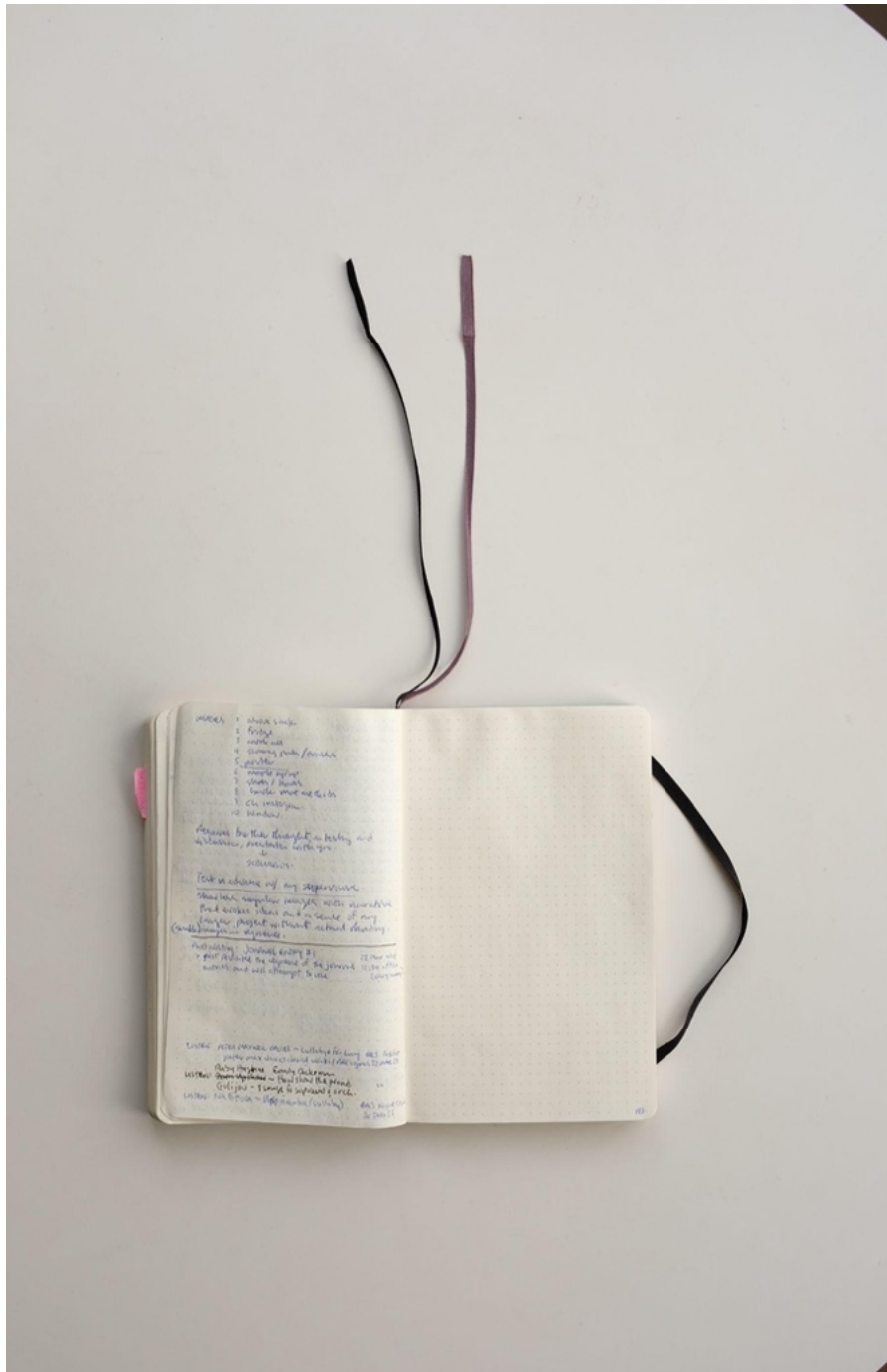
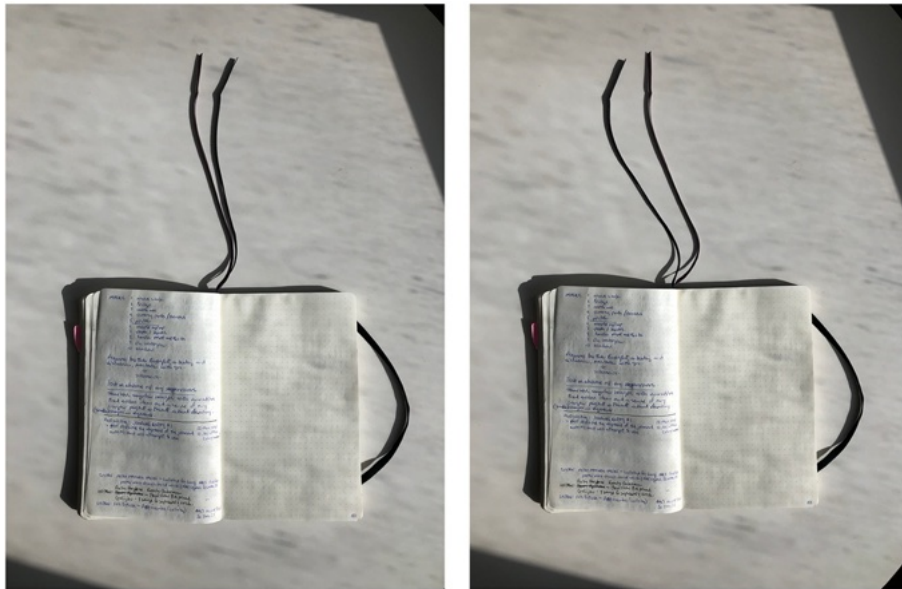


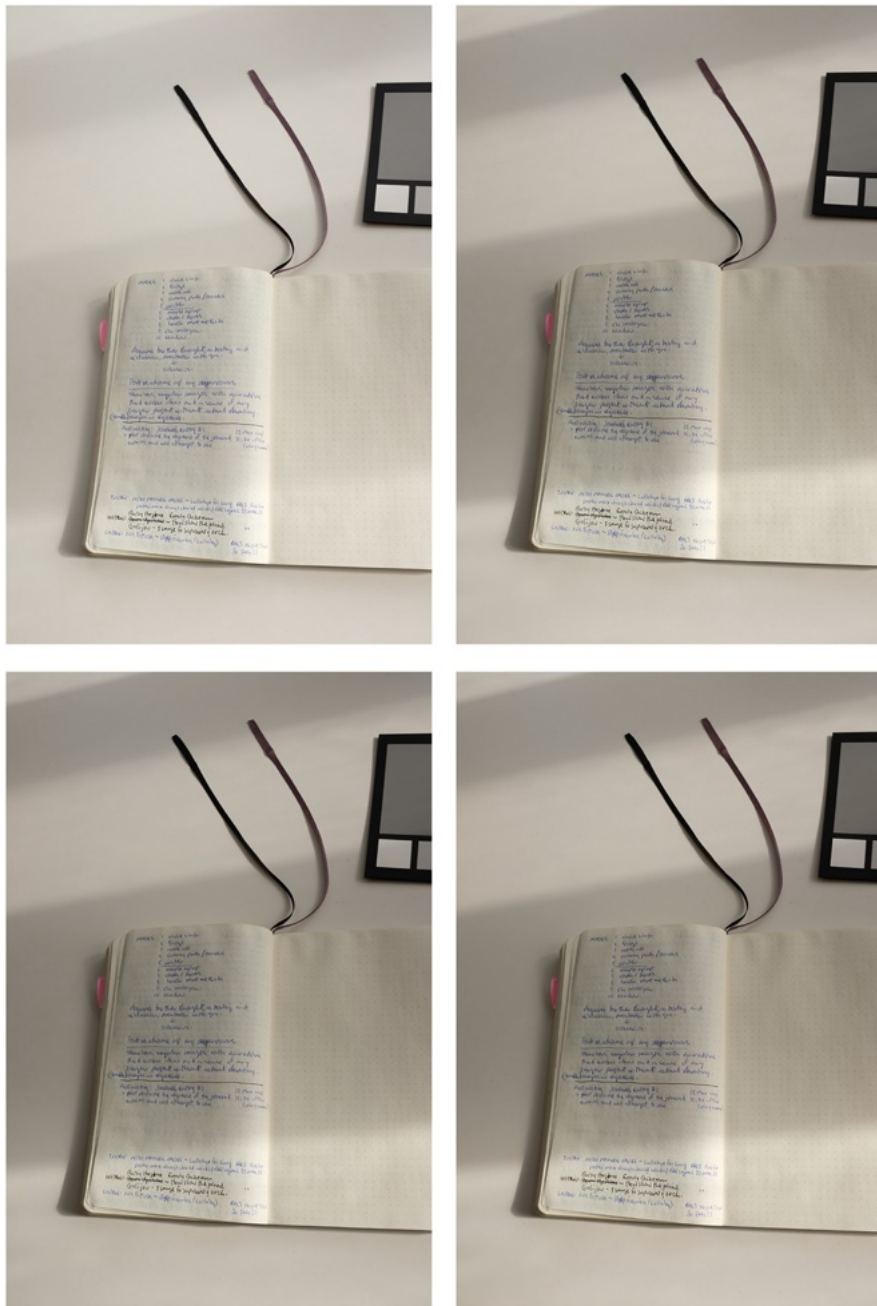
Figure 7: My everyday notebook with bookmark ribbons extended upwards (Fuji digital photo / 22 Mar 23 at 15:35).

I take a number of photos of my open notebook with the ribbons extended upward: a series first with my iPhone camera, as an immediate record of these ribbons and this encounter (Figures 8 and 9). The sun is out, placing the notebook in heavy shadows as well as the bits of shadows from the dirty window, creating a dappled lighting effect.



Figures 8 and 9: Digital photos taken with my iPhone (22 Mar 23 at noon).

Later I take photos with my Fuji camera in my now standard way: the white balance controlled, the notebook in the centre of the table, myself on a ladder above the notebook. As I take these, the sun gradually begins to come out, creating more articulated shadows from the windows again, this time with shadows of the mullions being visible. I take a series of these as the sun increases its directness, despite these distinct shadows being atypical of my tabletop photos and generally what I avoid (Figures 10–13).



Figures 10–13: Digital photos taken with my Fuji digital camera (22 Mar 23, beginning at 13:24)

Later again, I take more images of the notebook: late afternoon now, partially cloudy with the sun nearly behind the building and more consistent, controlled light. I take 45 shots of this trying to get the framing with my handheld camera as centred and frontal as possible. From this, the primary image of DSCF4730 is selected (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Additional photos taken with my Fuji digital camera with DSCF4730 selected (22 Mar 23 beginning at 15:34)

This purple ribbon, it seems to me, is significant—placed between a page just written and the blank page. *In this writing on the page that you read here now, might it be possible in a similar way to locate you at this juncture (that I experience) between past, present and future?*

Taking a photo itself is rather like this, always on the edge of the now with the press of a shutter; a mechanical, physical gesture (with the finger) and sound; an image (what I see), now becoming the past, captured. Barthes speaks of this in *Camera Lucida*: the child pointing their finger and saying: '*that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else';³⁵ the essential gesture of to 'take' (or to 'surprise');³⁶ its physical aspect of the photographer's finger and the 'trigger of the lens'; the 'almost voluptuous' aural accompaniment; the 'abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose'; the camera as 'clock for seeing'.³⁷ This (for me) yields an interval and rhythm (inside of one's self) that is temporal, physical, aural and steady: this, this, this (now, now, now).

This rhythm takes me to the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey: '*that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship' from his fundamental definition of an *experience*:

An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, *that* storm, *that* rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it.³⁸

Is not a photograph a visual capture of some *experience*? Something has happened, something has been seen (whether 'emotional', 'practical' or 'intellectual'). Perhaps in a photograph there is a beforeness even prior to its naming; a *that, that, that* as a form of visual 'unity' that Dewey speaks of, where inevitably, something (of an encounter) is captured (as satisfactory or not as that might be for the would-be photographer). And this for Barthes describes an essential mediated transference ('a tireless repetition of contingency') of an event to image: 'Show your photographs to someone—he will immediately show you his: "Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child", etc; the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "See", "Here it is"; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language.'³⁹

These many 'experiences'—how then to do this in writing? To bring you to this point of 'capture'; a form of writing to accompany the act of photographing.

Notation as Haiku and Photography

We'll return to the journal entry but let's continue from this final question of a form of writing that might emulate the immediate 'capture' of present experience by returning to *The Preparation of the Novel*.⁴⁰ While this initial exploration within the entry has been undertaken almost exclusively through the act of taking a photograph, I find Barthes asking an analogous question that becomes essential in formulating his proposed system for writing the 'Present':

Is it possible to make a Narrative (a Novel) out of the Present? How to reconcile—dialecticize—the *distance* implied by the *enunciation of writing* and the *proximity*, the transportation of the present experienced as it happens? (The present is what *adheres*, as if your eyes were glued to a mirror). Present: to have your eyes glued to the page; how to write *at length, fluently* (in a fluent, flowing, fluid manner) with one eye on the page and the other on 'what's happening to me'?⁴¹

In this 'Present' that Barthes speaks of, is it possible *to write and experience at the same time*? From this desire and question emerges his essential proposal for 'capturing' this 'parallel text of "contemporary", concomitant life':

Now, although at first glance making a novel out of present life looks difficult to me, it would be wrong to say that you can't make writing out of the Present. You can write the Present *by noting it*—as it 'happens' upon you or under you (under your eyes, your ears).⁴²

With this approach of '*Notation*' as a 'practice of "noting"' (or '*notatio*' in Latin) comes the central idea for enacting a transition from 'Life to Work' as the first part of the lecture course is entitled.⁴³ For Barthes, two fundamental issues, or questions, follow from this: the first being the conditions under which this practice of '*Notation*' is to take place and how this moves between the 'uninterrupted language' of '*life*' and the fundamental 'sacred gesture, *to mark* life'; from the continuous to its articulation as fragmentary enunciation and hence the question of 'how to organise' and 'sustain *Notatio*' – in its 'level of "reality" (what to choose)' and the 'level of the "saying" (what's the form, what's the product of *Notatio*)'.⁴⁴

The second issue that follows is ‘how to pass from Notation, and so from the *Note*, to the Novel, from the discontinuous to the flowing’—and as such enacting a movement from continuous life to the fragmentary and back again to the continuous in writing. This for Barthes involves ‘changing [his] relationship to writing’ and ‘to enunciation’, which ‘is to say the subject which I am: fragmented subject’ as standing apart from ‘the effusive subject’. A ‘conflict’ he describes between ‘the short form and the long form’.⁴⁵ While less concerned with my own particular subject position at this point, this distinction becomes a fundamental question for us to pursue in this emerging writing practice.

Barthes, in response to these questions, proposes not an example drawn from a ‘novelist’s notebooks or a biographical diary’ but one drawn from a ‘personal preference’: the haiku, as ‘the short form that I love more than any other’ and ‘the very essence of Notation’; and as such, an offering that becomes the extensive account of the haiku’s forms and expressions which will take place over his next several lectures.⁴⁶ Just as he aspires in his system of notation, the haiku offers the ideal means for minimising this distance between an ‘enunciation of writing’ and this continual, happening ‘Present’ as he concisely defines it here:

Haiku = exemplary form of the Notation of the Present = minimal act of enunciation, ultrashort form, an atom of a sentence that *notes* (marks, delimits, glorifies: endows with a *fama*) a tiny element of ‘real’, present, concomitant life.⁴⁷

In this ‘writing of perception’ and ‘of affect’ (‘Pathos’), a complete value system is put forth but one that tends towards the briefest of moments and lightest of touch—both in the event itself and in its enunciation—as though it’s not what happens but the fact of happening that becomes of importance.⁴⁸ Barthes sees this moment as an ‘*Incident*’ that is

simply *what falls*, softly, like a leaf, onto the page of life. It is this fleeting, weightless fold in the fabric of days; it is what can *scarcely* be noted: a sort of zero degree of notation, just enough to enable *something* to be written.⁴⁹

The haiku is also a mode of writing that offers an absolute immediacy, a conversion of immediate sensation into memory, which Barthes distinguishes as the ‘Instant’. This is an operation opposite to that of Proust, which ‘through the sovereign action of involuntary memory’ seeks ‘to “recover” (lost) Time *later on, after the event*’ (while ‘shut up in the

cork-lined bedroom’); but rather ‘Time *at once, as-it-happens*’ in present life acquired with a ‘concomitance of the note (of the writing) and what incites it: immediate *fruition* of the sensible and of writing, the one taking pleasure in the other thanks to the haiku form’.⁵⁰ Not only a writing but a ‘philosophy’, Barthes offers this haiku as exemplary of an ‘absolute writing of the instant’:

A dog barks
At a peddler
Peach trees are blooming⁵¹

Continuing to refine further this exchange between experience and writing, its idealised form then becomes

this *pure*, that is to say, *uncompromised* Instant, which doesn’t appear to be compromised by any duration, any return, any retention, any saving for later, any freezing (an absolutely *fresh* Instant: as if we were eating the thing noted down straight from the tree, like an animal grazing on the living grass of sensation).⁵²

An instantaneous moment, written as though ‘for the record’ and as a prompt in one’s return, thus becoming the

Instant that aspires to be Treasured: ‘Tomorrow, memory’ → This contradiction would be expressed in the following way: haiku: a new and paradoxical category: ‘immediate memory’, as if *Notatio* (the fact of noting down) enabled *instant* remembrance.⁵³

It is at this point that a question emerges: is this not also what a photograph enacts? *The notebook and ribbons seen and immediately photographed*. Or even at a further level of precision: *The open notebook and ribbons, centred within the viewfinder, with a steadying of the hands and body, held breathe, the shutter is pressed*. Is not this moment, at the click of the shutter, a visual version of the ‘Instant’?

Barthes brings these forms together in *The Preparation of the Novel* at a moment that anticipates *Camera Lucida*, which would be written a few months later. Stating what he believes to be the fundamental essence (or ‘noeme’) of photography as ‘*That has been*’, it is the writing form of the haiku that best approaches this. While not able to offer the degree of ‘certainty’ of the photograph, the haiku is able to comparably give the

‘*impression*’ that what is spoken has taken place, ‘*absolutely*’, as Barthes offers in this example:

Spring breeze
The boatman
Chews his pipe⁵⁴

In this reading that is absolutely contingent between the ‘individuation of the moment’ (springtime) and the ‘action in the present’ (chewing of pipe), we are offered a ‘very powerful present that effectively *guarantees* the “That has taken place”’. At the same time ‘a transcendence emerges’, that speaks to all past springs, ‘never to return’, and in this, the haiku ‘presents the life of the Event and its abolition simultaneously’.⁵⁵

This last statement describes this operation at its most poignant: the ‘Event’—that person, that day, experience, emotions—immediately captured and becoming the past, all in the same instance (or ‘Instant’ as Barthes has so designated). But in this bringing together of the haiku and the photograph, it is the ‘That has been’ aspects that are predominately brought forward here: as an ‘effect of the real’ and its ‘*readability*’ with this sense of reality being an experience of the haiku/photograph as a reader or ‘Spectator’ respectively (and not ‘Operator’); a ‘That has been’ as principle figure carrying the proceedings throughout *Camera Lucida*. In this comparison of forms, what Barthes speaks of much less however in *The Preparation of the Novel* is their shared ability for both to *designate, point, capture* and hence convey, for the would-be writer or photographer, the firsthand experiences of the event—a comparison however he does make in his earlier *Empire of Signs*:

Neither describing nor defining the haiku (as I shall finally name any discontinuous feature, any event of Japanese life as it offers itself to my reading) the haiku diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It’s that, it’s thus*, says the haiku. Or better still: *so!* it says, with a touch so instantaneous and so brief (without vibration or recurrence) [...] Here meaning is only a flash, a slash of light [...] of a photograph one takes very carefully (in the Japanese manner) but having neglected to load the camera with film. Or again: haiku reproduces the designating gesture of the child pointing at whatever it is (the haiku shows no partiality for the subject) merely saying: *that!* with a movement so immediate (so stripped of any mediation: that of knowledge, of nomination, or even of possession) that which is designated is the very inanity of any classification of the object: *nothing special*, says the haiku.⁵⁶

Here again, as in *Camera Lucida* and as I drew attention to in my journal entry, is the ‘designating gesture’ of the pointing child and a movement ‘so immediate’ and without ‘mediation’: are we not able to speak to this equally or even more so with the act of taking a photograph? But in saying this, perhaps we have to recognise that there exist other possible forms of notation in its *execution* (in contrast to its *readability*), and while not replicating a camera, nonetheless offer their own gesture for *marking* an event: the pointing of a finger, the enunciation of a word, whether spoken or written, the initial strokes of a pencil or brush; and therefore the photograph as not unique in this, and while fundamental to its coming into being, not an aspect that distinguishes itself (as its noeme) apart from the others.

In this return to ‘readability’ and the ‘effects of the real’, Barthes offers one further comparison between ‘Photography’ and ‘Haiku’: the photograph is ‘*bound to say everything*’ and were it to speak of the boatman, ‘it would have to tell us what he was wearing, how old he was, how dirty’ and so on; an excess of meaning that the abstract haiku is able to avoid.⁵⁷ It’s here, although not directly described in these terms, that we begin to see the divisions that would become the ‘*studium*’ and the ‘*punctum*’ in the forthcoming *Camera Lucida*. But despite the fact that the photograph is ‘full of, saturated by *inevitable* details’ and the haiku is not—in both, ‘*everything is given straight away*’. The haiku cannot be ‘developed any further (be enlarged)’, nor can the photograph (albeit developed in another sense):

You can’t add anything to a photograph, you can’t *prolong* it: the gaze can linger, it can be repeated, renewed, but it can’t *change over time*.⁵⁸

‘Nothing but the *exorbitant thing*’ as he memorably describes in *Camera Lucida*, while with his ‘Winter Garden Photograph’; the photograph hence as an ‘enigmatic point of inactuality, a strange stasis, the stasis of an arrest’; and a ‘violence’ even: ‘because on each occasion *it fills the sight by force*, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed’.⁵⁹ And similarly, this is a haiku which assumes a ‘destiny of “*That’s it*” as ““*That’s all it is, it’s not more than that*”’,⁶⁰ where ‘its very definition’ is ‘to designate’ and then ‘fall silent’;⁶¹ a practice seemingly conceived to bring ‘language’ to a ‘halt’, returning us again to *Empire of Signs*.⁶²

Standing opposite to the photograph then is film, an experience, which ‘like the real world’, will ‘constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style’ (taking a quote from Husserl) but the

Photograph breaks the ‘constitutive style’ (this is its astonishment); it is *without future* (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no protensity, whereas the cinema is protensive, hence in no way melancholic (what is it, then?—It is, then, simply ‘normal’, like life).⁶³

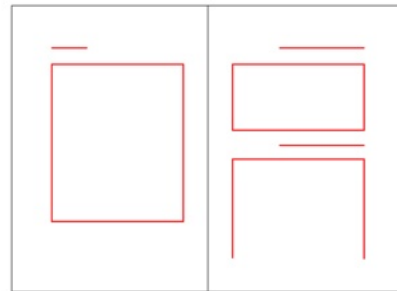
As such, the haiku and photograph act inflexibly, as ‘pure authorities’, which ‘aren’t required to ground their authority in anything other than this: *that has been*’—an essential existence, as Barthes surmises, deriving from ‘this power’ of ‘the short form’;⁶⁴ this figure of condensation with ‘its own necessity and suffic[iency] in itself’, unable ‘to be stretched’.⁶⁵

So where does this leave us, and ‘what seems to be the inherent impossibility of *extending* the haiku in the form of a story’ as Barthes would admit? ‘It’s as if there were an invisible, insurmountable wall between the two—or, put differently, as if their waters didn’t mix’.⁶⁶ As such, how does one move from the short form (of notation) to allow writing and flowing text to begin? And how do I move from the singular event that becomes a photograph to continuous writing?

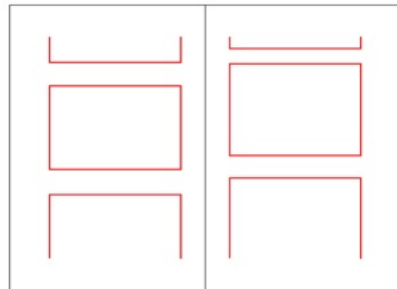
Experience, Notation and Reception

In closing my journal entry, I begin to compare a number of short form writings that I had been reading to these initial formulations on the haiku as we’ve been discussing above: the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects*, the novelist Annie Ernaux’s *Exteriors*, James Joyce’s ‘Epiphanies’ (as Barthes will go on to mention in *The Preparation of the Novel*), Georges Perec’s *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, as well as Barthes’ own *Incidents*.⁶⁷ These are writings of concise singular moments of encounter, carefully crafted and distilled to a paragraph, or even a sentence or phrase; pictures of each within their book are offered, alongside a diagram, becoming less about writing technique and more about its overall length, brevity and economy of words (Figures 15–23). While all in their own way convey this sense of immediacy and an unfolding moment, each nonetheless are still products of technique and

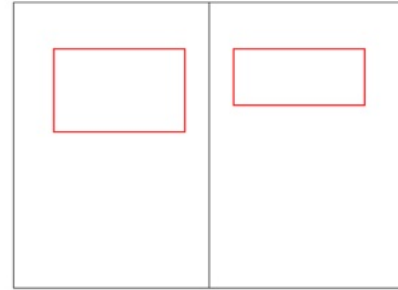
fabrication *for the experience of reading* and not as demonstrations of how these authors might have written them—a distinction we also witness above in Barthes presentation of the haiku: as short as they are, these writings, and these haikus, do not emerge instantly as fully formed responses to experience.



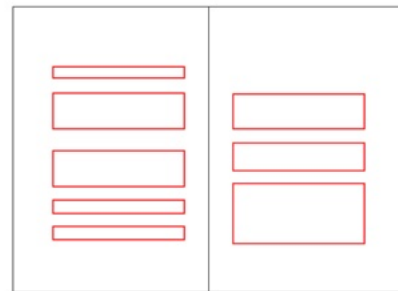
Figures 15 and 16: Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, pp. 60–61 (iPhone photo).



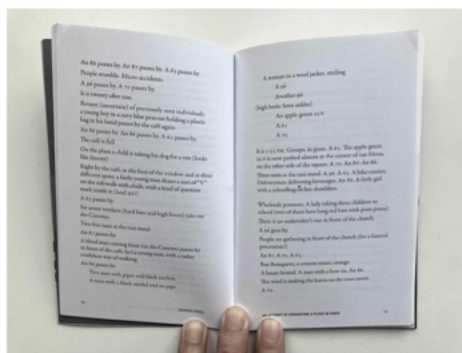
Figures 17 and 18: Annie Ernaux's *Exteriors*, pp. 28–29 (iPhone photo) and layout diagram.



Figures 19 and 20: James Joyce's 'Epiphanies' from James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings, pp. 186–87 (iPhone photo) and layout diagram.



Figures 20 and 21: Barthes' Incidents, pp. 28–29 (iPhone photo) and layout diagram.



Figures 22 and 23: Georges Perec's An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris, pp. 12–13 (iPhone photo) and layout diagram.

Of these examples presented, Perec's writing exercise over a weekend in *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* offers us the most exemplary form of experience and immediate notation. We can imagine sitting in a cafe as Perec was doing and possibly writing these words, directly and as quickly as we can, into our notebooks:

An 86 passes by. An 86 passes by. A 63 passes by.
The cafe is full
On the plaza a child is taking his dog for a run (looks like Snowy)⁶⁸

Or even shorter:

A 63.
A postal van.
A child with a dog
A man with a newspaper⁶⁹

All present tense sentences, or even phrases in some instances, of a moment in time and a single observation written in words immediately. Maybe in this short form, these short sentences/phrases are the closest to what might be achieved with a photograph in words, not with click of the shutter button but the scribble of the pen to paper. Furthermore, there is a sensibility here, as well as technique—of *always writing in present tense*—that describes what I begin to discover in this first journal entry. Take these passages for instance, drawn from my journal entry writing above:

I take a number of photos [...]. The sun is out [...]
Later I take photos [...]
I take more images [...]. It is late afternoon now, partially cloudy [...].

This present tense writing strategy connects to my initial overall aspiration that opens the journal entry for being in 'in the space of the now' as it inaugurates my writing endeavour. A simple fact nonetheless remains: no matter how I might write *I see this now* or *I do this now* I am always describing something that I have already experienced—no matter how fast I write it or how short I make the line of its phrasing. The experience will always be anterior to the moment of writing, and, of course, never as immediate as pressing a shutter button; but in either case, whether written or photographed, an experience in its reception of '*That has been*'.

Barthes speaks to the grammar of this dividing line, between the moment of experience (in the past) and its presentation as writing (in the now), as *present perfect* tense, or as he describes here:

Perfect: establishes a vital connection between the event that occurred in the past and the present in which it is evoked = tense of the person relating the facts as a witness, as a participant; tense chosen by someone who wants to make the narrated event resonate today, to link it to our present.⁷⁰

This present perfect tense in the first person then becomes ‘the autobiographical tense *par excellence*’ where ‘the point of reference is the point of enunciation’ and that moment in which it is received. For Barthes, the haiku (as ‘*That has been*’) exemplifies this, no matter if written in past tense or present tense grammar. ‘The boatman chews his pipe’ clearly refers to the past but to one *present perfect* in a ‘tense of evocation, of the affective link between what has taken place and who I am as I remember it’—or equally who you are in the present as you read it.⁷¹

What I have begun to realise in these comparisons of short forms is that this movement from initial observation to eventual presentation and reception is essentially, regardless of whether written or photographic, never direct but a series of steps—as technical process and system even, or a possible practice. Thus to fully understand how each achieves its final form, we must take account of each of these steps, occurring in time sequentially, as summarised as follows:

- 1 – the experience itself;
- 2 – the act of noting (writing/drawing/photographing) this experience;
- 3 – the reception (reading/seeing) of the notation of experience.

Distinguishing these steps, however, is to realise it’s never as straightforward as this. Even the camera and what has served as a metaphor for the immediate capture of an *experience* (Dewey) or an *Instant* (Barthes) is actually when we stop to think about it an exceedingly complex technical device (both as instrument itself and in its operation) which negotiates this immediacy for us seamlessly—at the click of a shutter button.⁷² Similarly in notation (writing or drawing), there is always some distance, or more precisely, a time interval, and possibly a series of even further steps, between experience/event and its recording—it’s rarely as simple as ‘A 63’ as Perec has written above; and as such always a question as to what must

occur for this final form, whether haiku, single paragraph or other, to be achieved.

Barthes himself in *The Preparation of the Novel* will go on to speak of his own 'Daily Practice of Notation' beginning with his "*Instrumentation*". Fundamental to this 'long established practice' will be his 'Notebook' and how he will use this to 'captur[e] a *sliver* of the present as it jumps out at observation, at consciousness'.⁷³ Two components of this, *notula* and *nota*, become important in this practice:

I simply take a note of the word (*notula*) that will remind me of my 'idea', [...] which I then copy out onto a piece of paper (*nota*) at home the next day.⁷⁴

This is 'noteworthy' for Barthes as it sets in motion a movement towards the beginning of what he will consider the first step of '*writing*':

if I don't make a note (*notula*) of it, even one that's absolutely elliptical, I forget the idea; on the other hand, once the *nota* is taken, I can easily recall the whole idea and even its form (its sentence) → Quite a vertiginous sensation: that an 'idea' should be of no more importance, no more *necessary*, than the very short time it takes to remember it? It can return to nothingness, having had no effect whatsoever?⁷⁵

This 'technique of *Notatio*' extends to his notebook, 'not very thick' as his 'Modern' clothing may not have 'pockets' ('no one wears jackets anymore'), which also means in summer there might be 'fewer notes!'.⁷⁶ And then there is the pen, a 'Biro' which is 'at the ready' (equipped for 'speed: no need to take the lid off') which is all that he needs as

this isn't real (weighty, muscular) writing, but that doesn't matter, because *Notula* is not yet writing (=/ the *Nota*, copied out).⁷⁷

This is a system that in its ideal form produces for Barthes

the image of a single, fluid gesture whereby a notebook would be instantaneously produced, open at the right page, with the scriptor ready to write *like a gangster pulling a gun*; [or] the *pen-camera*; though it's not a matter of showing but of hatching the germ of the *Sentence*.⁷⁸

Hence, an image which then becomes condensed to this:

Notebook = observation-sentence; what's produced in a single movement as *Seen and already a Sentence*.⁷⁹

For Barthes, the sentence then becomes this essential component and product of Notatio that is achieved, which enacts this movement, as above, from (1) experience to (2) the act of noting/notation—with the act of noting (or capturing the 'idea') essentially a two-step process of writing a word (*Nota*) in a notebook and then a sentence the next day to paper (*Notula*).⁸⁰ Barthes himself expresses further this aspiration for the 'Sentence' as

the sudden bursting forth of the Notation is the sudden bursting forth of a Sentence → drive, physical pleasure taken in Noting
Down = drive, physical pleasure taken in producing a sentence.⁸¹

In this account, we are able to see here how this formation of a theoretical system of notation begins to connect to his already existing practice of notetaking: a desire and a pleasure that Barthes can't help but reduce to a single gesture: '*Seen and already a sentence*', just like the camera: *Seen and already an image*. Or perhaps we should think of this as an aspiration of Barthes to simply make this pen to paper moment as streamlined and efficient as possible, in a collapse of that distance between an experience and its mark.

At this point in my emerging writing practice, I have no comparable writing system/notetaking system to compare to this—and certainly nothing I can convey in a single gesture (aside, possibly, from the many, many gestures of reading that the Briggs printout bears witness to). But I do have an ongoing photographic practice, which my initial journal entry and images begin to introduce; and in a similar way, returning to the photographs taken that day to open my journal entry, a single image emerges of my seeing these bookmarks: the full-page photo (Figure 24) that is presented at the outset of the writing. Essentially, a *this photo is best*—but in reality, however, a *day-long process of multiple photos and photo-taking sessions*: awaiting suitable lighting conditions, shooting multiple images, selecting the final image; and as such, far from an instantaneous image capture. Thus a series of responses or 'steps' as follows:

Original ENCOUNTER

Step 1: initial images taken by iPhone at noon (Figures 8 and 9).

Step 2: the first round of Fuji camera photos, beginning at 13:24, interrupted by sunlight (Figures 10–13).

Step 3: the second round of Fuji photos, beginning at 15:34, from DCSF4721 to 4765. (Figure 14).

Step 4: the selection of the final presentation image DCSF4730 (Figure 7) to be presented (which occurs in the ‘Photos’ application on my desktop computer once the images are uploaded and processed in post-production).

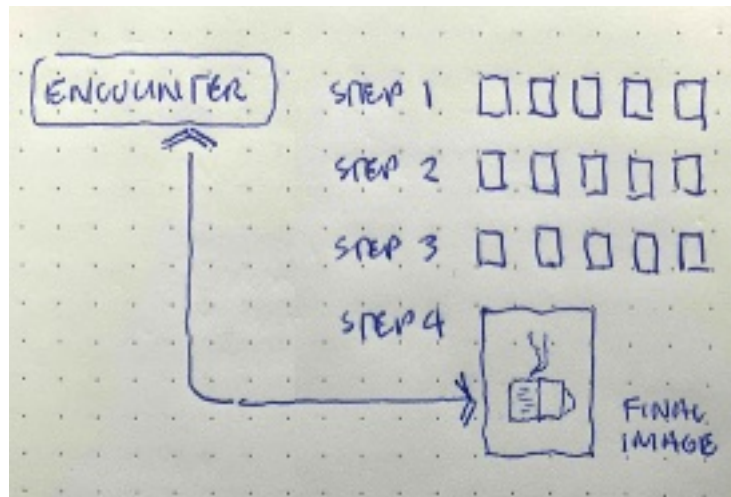


Figure 24: Notebook diagram of photography steps arriving at a final image (iPhone photo).

Furthermore these steps, as described in the journal entry, only summarise that movement from (1) experience to (2) the act of noting (photographing) and do not yet begin to engage with the further activities (of ‘post-production’) required to reach the final step (3) of its reception (within this essay) and your experience (of this image) of these bookmarks visually extended above the notebook.

If I consider this from the point of view of my photographic practice, these more informal images taken by the iPhone (Step 1) are the closest I will get to a Barthes notion of an ‘immediate memory’, but this is

a set of additional photos I don't typically take. Generally, an encounter occurs and the object is placed aside somewhere in the flat to be photographed at a later date, whenever time is set aside, weather conditions allow (cloudy skies), the table cleared.⁸² This does however lead me to question this, as it pertains to my practice: why wait to take these more *formal* photos rather than an *immediate capture* with the iPhone?—a question I don't attempt to answer but leave for another day.⁸³

In reality what I've done here and made into writing is the opposite, and rather than attempting to idealise this line between experience and notation and reduce it to a singular image, I've opened it up, blurred and extended it; or more specifically, exposed how this final image emerges. And thus, returning to Barthes' earliest provocation and question for 'mak[ing] a Narrative (a Novel) out of the Present' and how then 'to reconcile—dialecticize—the *distance* implied by the enunciation of writing and the *proximity*' of this to 'present experienc[e] as it happens'—I've taken this at face value and done exactly that: *given this 'gap' between experience and notation a visible presence in both word and image*.⁸⁴ Perhaps then, in this telling of notebook and bookmarks, I render something more akin to a film and ongoing narrative, or possibly something in between: a moment of encounter and a series of returns (further encounters) within the continuity of time, continuing experience and the ongoing world.

A Writing that Continues

For Barthes, this question of 'moving from the discontinuous to the flowing' only remains speculative as he concludes the first lecture course for *The Preparation of the Novel*. In the second lecture course, entitled 'The Work as Will', he will, following Proust, Kafka and a number of other significant authors, turn to the practice aspects of becoming a writer and move away from the mechanics of its operation; and with his death shortly after, we won't be left with anything resembling a Novel or any other long form of writing. And while we've spoken about a few of his thoughts towards this 'passage' between the 'Notation and the Novel' (his 'Daily Practice of Notation' and the 'Sentence') in these last two sessions, his commitment in closing will remain firmly with the former, becoming even a form of ethical opposition, that seeks somehow to coexist:

Indeed, the Novel (since it's a question of the novel), in its grand and extended continuity, can't sustain the 'truth' (of the moment): that's not its function. I see it as an interweaving (= Text), a vast, extended canvas painted with illusions, fallacies, made-up things, the 'false' if we want to call it that: a brilliant, colorful canvas, a veil of Maya punctuated by, scattered with Moments of Truth that are its absolute justification. [...] When I produce Notations all of them are 'true': I never lie (I never make anything up), but the point is: I don't produce a Novel; it's not that the Novel would start out from *falsehood* but rather from the point at which truth and falsehood mingle without warning: the true (striking, absolute) and the false (colorful, brilliant, of the order of Desire and the Imaginary).⁸⁵

And then finally this concession, which leaves the writing project and lecture course at a moment of doubt:

Perhaps, then: managing to write a novel (such is the *prospect*—the vanishing point—of our lecture course) comes down to conceding to lie, to being capable of lying (it can be very difficult, lying)—to telling that second-order and perverse lie that consists in mingling truth and falsehood → Ultimately, then, the resistance to the novel, the inability to produce a novel (to engage in the practice of writing one) would be a *moral* resistance.⁸⁶

Fortunately, not writing a novel, I am not faced with this ethical demand and my aims here are much more rudimentary: to understand how the singular moment of encounter (its experience) might be written (its notation) while reflective of this in its execution. This is also a moment that seeks other moments to continuously engage with, in this back and forth between encounter and notation, as an ongoing series that begins to create a narrative; an ongoing series that doesn't attempt to describe what that initial moment is (as metaphor) but looks for that next moment to succeed it in the before and after (of metonymy) that Barthes describes.

Furthermore, a significant difference will ensue to that of Barthes which allows me to extend this narrative and that is *its singular focus on a primary object and relationship, between myself and my notebook*. Increasingly intertwined as the PhD progresses, further moments of encounter will continue to arise *to both photograph and speak of*, whether in its outward form (moving from an old notebook to a new one) or within it (in passages of the past written or drawn). These are moments where I will once again see my notebook and it will stop me, but always within a continuity of us continuing to engage and 'work together' in this emerging

writing practice. Describing it in this way returns me to Barthes' conception of '*Inspiration*' but in this instance, not with a 'loving reading', but with a material object, my notebook, as 'a dialectic of a conjunction of lovers whereby their love for one another will distort them both and create a third term'—in this case a writing practice.⁸⁷

Lastly to close, if I haven't then written anything resembling a novel what have I written? I have only shared the beginnings of this journal and the 1300 words of the first entry, an initial opening that has taken these words in this essay, outside of the PhD, to expand and give further meaning. I will go on to describe this writing as *autofiction*, a characterisation that I am still exploring, but one that offers a form that can be both experiential and theoretical, while at the same time, speculative and forward moving, material and situated.⁸⁸ This is an endeavour that allows it to be as much of a practice as a form of writing—a doing invariably personal that, in my version, begins with a continually repeated photographic gesture which seeks to express itself both visually and in words; a doing that is not only about media but the other aspects of practice—the sitting at one's desk, the atmosphere of the room, the negotiations of reading (from outside sources) and writing (from one's own head and body); a doing that attempts to enact a multi-media process of encounter and response; a doing and a writing that continues to organise and formulate itself even as these words are written.

Notes

¹ Kate Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 55.4 (2015) pp. 118–130; Michael Sheringham, 'Writing the Present: Notation in Barthes's Collège de France lectures', *Sign Systems Studies*, 36.1 (2008), pp. 11–30; Elena Oxman, 'Sensing the Image: Roland Barthes and the Affect of the Visual', *SubStance*, 39.2 (2010), pp. 71–90; Roland Barthes, '*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure ...*', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1989), pp. 285–88.

² Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', pp. 119, 120; Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', pp. 16, 17 (Barthes's emphasis); Oxman, 'Sensing the Image', pp. 76, 78; Barthes, '*Longtemps*', pp. 284, 284 (emphasis in original).

³ Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', p. 127; Barthes, '*Longtemps*', p. 289.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (Vintage, 2020).

⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*, trans. by Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 3.

⁶ My thesis, entitled 'Photo encounters with my personal possessions: a material autofiction of attachment, care and grief', is being undertaken as a PhD in Architecture at the University of Manchester with supervision by Professor Stephen Walker and Dr Leandro Minuchin.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. by Kate Briggs (Columbia University Press, 2013) and *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, ed. by Thomas Clerc, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁸ Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 14. Barthes in his inaugural lecture characterises this mode of teaching as an 'excursion' where the 'speaking and the listening' are drawn from a place of 'desire' and resemble 'the comings and goings of a child playing beside his mother, leaving her, returning to bring her a pebble, a piece of string, and thereby tracing around a calm center a whole locus of play within which the pebble, the string come to matter less than the enthusiastic giving of them'. Roland Barthes, 'Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France', trans. by Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (Hill and Wang, 1983), pp. 457–78 (pp. 476–77).

⁹ Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 14. The Barthes books cited here are *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, 1972) and *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (Vintage, 2010).

¹⁰ Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 13. The Barthes text referred to here is 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills', in *A Barthes Reader*, pp. 317–33.

¹¹ Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 13.

¹² Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 15. This first step, entitled 'From Life to Work', constitutes Barthes's first lecture series of *The Preparation of the Novel*.

The second series, 'The Work as Will', considers the next stage and how the desire to write a novel is converted into the novel-writing itself by asking the question of what kind of life the writer must choose to make writing possible. It draws from bibliographical details (letters, diaries, work plans, etc) from a number of writers, including Chateaubriand, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust and Kafka.

¹³ Or alternatively, moving from *metaphoric* forms of questions to ones more *metonymic*: *what have you done to me? where did you come from and what do I do with you now?*—an important distinction emerging over the course of my PhD investigation, drawn initially from Barthes in 'Longtemps' (pp. 278–79) and discussed further below.

¹⁴ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Polity Press, 2008), p. 9 and Barthes, 'Longtemps', p. 284.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 134.

¹⁷ Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', p. 119. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 134.

¹⁹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 134–35.

²⁰ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 134.

²¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 135.

²² Briggs, 'Practising with Roland Barthes', p. 119.

²³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 134.

²⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 12–13. In attempting to 'make [him]self the measure of photographic "knowledge"', Barthes asks, 'What does my body know of Photography? I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives [...] But of that emotion (or of that essence) [of the Operator's Photograph] I could not speak, never having experienced it; I could not join the troupe of those (the majority) who deal with Photography according-to-the-Photographer. I possessed only two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing...'

²⁵ In this way, I think of myself undertaking the writing in the spirit of Barthes' own personal injunction, this 'desire' that he announces in 'Longtemps' and one that has left its mark with me, here now in its fuller form: 'Does all this mean I am going to write a novel? How should I know? I don't know if it will be possible still to call a 'novel' the work I desire and which I expect to break with the uniformly intellectual nature of my previous writings (even if a number of fictive elements taint their rigor). It is important for me to act as if I were to write this utopian novel. And here I regain, to conclude, a method. I put myself in the position of the subject who makes something, and no longer of the subject who speaks about something: I am not studying a product, I assume a production; I abolish the discourse on discourse; the work no longer comes to me as an object,

but as a writing, ie. a practice: I proceed to another type of knowledge (that of the Amateur), and it is in this that I am methodical.' Barthes, '*Longtemps*', p. 289.

²⁶ As I will go on to discover, Barthes describes a method of 'simulation' in *The Preparation of the Novel* of the 'maquette' where the work is presented as a simulation of itself, in that the writing 'stages a production', presenting itself 'as its own experimentation', or if not fully that, a 'strategy to facilitate actual production (rather than just the vague compulsion to produce)'. Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 169–70

²⁷ An emulation mirroring Barthes' own to Proust as he sets out in some detail in both *The Preparation of the Novel* and '*Longtemps*' and a further layering of influences: Proust to Barthes, Barthes to Briggs, Barthes and Briggs to myself.

²⁸ Barthes, '*Longtemps*', p. 279. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ In this way, I don't begin with a particular writing style in mind, but there is an imprecise notion of the writing as 'autoethnographic' (following Deborah Reed-Danahay's definition) in its concerns with the photographic practice that I engage in, and equally with the theoretical concerns that I have just described in these moments of material encounter, with the desire to write of these components of practice and theory not independently but intertwined. And then to do this with the (PhD) imperative of *doing something, to just begin*, and once that something emerges potentially then giving the writing a name or style of address that associates it with similar forms of writing, something which I do as the PhD progresses (and which I make further comment upon as I close the essay).

³⁰ Barthes, '*Longtemps*', p. 279.

³¹ And with this passage, the writing process of journal entries for my PhD commences (following a writing submission days earlier to formally end the third year of my PhD, allowing me to move forward into my final period of 'submission pending'). All of the original text from the journal entry, which appears directly in my dissertation, is shown, as it is here, in red.

³² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 15–16.

³³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

³⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

³⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 5, Emphasis in original.

³⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 11.

³⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 18–19. In the full passage, Barthes describes this under the uncomfortable experience of being photographed: 'Hence, strangely, the only thing that I tolerate, that I like, that is familiar to me, when I am photographed, is the sound of the camera. For me the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing—and the only thing—to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. For me the noise of time is not sad: I love bells, clocks and watches—and I recall that

at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.'

³⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigree Books, 2005), p. 38. This theoretical reference to Dewey and his aesthetic treatise *Art as Experience* will be one that develops further within the PhD.

³⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ This initial writing attempt begins with the aspiration of keeping these journal entries shorter rather than longer with this first entry remaining the shortest (at 1300 words). Following this, I began allowing them to be as long as needed in an attempt to convey some sense of fruition or arrival, which I think of as akin to Dewey's description of an 'experience' that achieves 'a culmination of a continuous movement' like a stone rolling down a hill that has 'come to rest'; a 'completing' or 'consummation' (Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 40–41). In more direct terms, this has often meant the realisation of significant point to be made or a question that emerges and/or becomes sufficiently explored to some degree.

⁴¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

⁴² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

⁴³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 18. The fragment, as both subjective position and writing form, is significant, with Barthes continually revisiting this short form of writing throughout his life (e.g., *Mythologies*, *Critical Essays*, *S/Z*, *The Pleasure of the Text*, *A Lover's Discourse*). His autobiographical work *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* exemplified both sides of this, as a series of short writings, or 'repertoire', alphabetically arranged, where, as he describes, 'the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?'. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 92–93.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 55–56.

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, 'Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*', in *New Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1980), pp. 105–21 (p. 108). Emphasis in original. Cited in Sheringham, 'Writing the Present', p. 21.

⁵⁰ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 48. The haiku is written by Buson and translated in R. H. Blyth's *Haiku*, 4 vols (Hokuseido Press, 1949–52). Barthes uses this haiku as 'it clearly implies that the privileged art of the instant is music'; whereby 'sound = the *eidos* of the Instant', as taken from the avant-garde composer John Cage who 'stakes everything on the Instant' and from which this metaphor derives: 'the haiku *sets a bell ringing*, a sort of short, unique, and crystal-

clear *tintinnabulation* that says: something has just moved me' (pp. 48–49; emphasis in original).

⁵² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 49. Emphasis in original.

⁵³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 49. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 72. Emphasis in original. The haiku is written by Basho and drawn from the collection of Kikou Yamata in *Sur des lèvres japonaises* (Le Divan, 1924) with translation by Briggs.

⁵⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 72. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 83.

⁵⁷ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 73. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 73. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 110–11. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 82. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 81.

⁶² Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 74.

⁶³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 108–09. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 73. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 89. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 88. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007); Annie Ernaux, *Exteriors*, trans. by Tanya Leslie (Fitzcarraldo, 2021); James Joyce, *James Joyce: Poems and Shorter Writings* (Faber and Faber, 2001); Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, trans. by Marc Lowenthal (Wakefield Press, 2010); Roland Barthes, *Incidents*, trans. by Teresa Lavender Fagan with photographs by Bishan Samaddar (Seagull Books, 2010).

⁶⁸ Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, pp. 16–17.

⁷⁰ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 74.

⁷¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 74.

⁷² I will go on in future journal entries to describe in more detail how I use the camera operationally, using this not only to further describe my practice but as a writing device to carry the narrative.

⁷³ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 90. Emphasis in original. 'Sliver?', Barthes will go on to ask. 'Yes: my personal and internal *scoops* (*scoop*: to shovel, bale, action of lifting with a spade, to swipe, to scoop into a net, the first news in)' as used for 'the (very insignificant) bits of news that I consider sensational and I want to "swipe" directly from life'.

⁷⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 90.

⁷⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 90.

⁷⁶ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 90–91.

⁷⁷ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 91.

⁷⁸ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 91. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 98. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ An even further layer can be described here in Barthes' practice for notetaking which utilised slips of paper cut from a piece of typing paper into four. Over 13,000 slips in total, these were stored in a filing cabinet and were reordered throughout Barthes writing career in a process of 'perpetual recomposition' and used to produce his collection of 'fragments'. Valérie Marin La Meslée and Nathalie Léger, 'Journal de deuil: "Chaque fiche est une figure du chagrin"', *Magazine Littéraire*, 482 (2009), pp. 84–86, as cited in Sam Ferguson, 'Diary-writing and the Return of Gide in Barthes's "Vita Nova"', *Textual Practice*, 30.2 (2016), pp. 241–66 (pp. 245–46).

⁸¹ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 97. Barthes will go on in *The Preparation of the Novel* to speculate about a future lecture course on the 'Short Form' of the 'sentence-object' and will even outline over a few pages the 'coordinates' of such an object (pp. 97–100). This section of the lecture in the end, however, was never actually delivered as this was the final session of the first course and for the sake of remaining time in the session Barthes will skip over it, as Briggs describes in the footnotes.

⁸² An exception to this will be the occasions when I am doing more significant cleaning or arranging of things within the flat and I will use the iPhone as a means to remember the original setting of the object(s) displaced.

⁸³ I do have an ongoing practice of immediate photos, or 'Instants', taken whenever I turn on my iPhone which constitutes the most instantaneous moment *of experience to photo* that I might achieve and one entirely undeveloped by further thoughts or a memory; an aesthetic/affective moment that occurs, essentially as an interruption (where the image 'grabs my attention'), followed by an almost immediate 'press of the shutter button'—after which I will then proceed to use my camera for whatever purpose I had in the first place for turning it on (and the capture of some other visual experience).

⁸⁴ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 108. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, pp. 108–09. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁷ Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel*, p. 135.

⁸⁸ Originating in France in the mid-1970s with the 'return of the subject' and a renewed concern in forms of autobiographical writing, autofiction is a literary genre that has become increasingly widespread in contemporary writing, both in France and beyond. See, for instance: Sam Ferguson, 'Autofiction: Writing Lives', in *The Cambridge History of the Novel in French*, ed. by Adam Watt (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 671–87 and Shirley Jordan, 'Fictions of Self', in *Contemporary Fiction in French*, ed. by Anna-Louise Milne and Russell Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 152–66. Proposing the fundamental idea that fiction and autobiography inevitably overlap, I will follow an essential definition offered by Johnnie Gratton where in this alternative mode of self-narrative writing 'the promotion of act-value' is offered at 'the expense of truth-value', as he distinguishes further: 'For the purveyor of traditional truth-value, the ideal autobiography is a transparent medium, a window on the past. The

parameters of act-value, on the other hand, stress that autobiography is a personal performance.’ From this emerges a broad understanding of fiction as ‘the result of an act, of making (as opposed to making up)’ which becomes commensurate with a larger notion that all acts of enunciation, of ‘putting into words’, regardless of form and authorial intention, are forms of social/relational construction; thus, providing a context of self-narrativisation that offers a productive paradigm ‘no longer subversive of that context’ and a growing sense even of ‘a necessity to be conjectural and conditional’. Accordingly, these offerings of autofiction characteristically follow no generic model and are exemplified by highly individualised responses discovered through a process of subjective exploration and experimentation. Johnnie Gratton, ‘Autofiction’, in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. by Margaretta Jolly (Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), pp. 86–87.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Johnson is currently a PhD researcher in Architecture at the University of Manchester. His thesis, entitled ‘Photo encounters with my personal possessions: a material autofiction of attachment, care and grief’, is supervised by Professor Stephen Walker and Dr Leandro Minuchin. David also teaches at the Manchester School of Architecture and previously practised in the United States, South Korea and United Kingdom with a focus on cultural and educational projects. He has been part of the artist collective Compulsive Holding since 2008 which seeks to understand the impulse to read, record, and collect the never-ending stream of images and objects within daily life.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2025 *Barthes Studies* and is distributed under a CC–BY–ND licence. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as no changes are made to it and the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).