

## **The Work as Will**

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## The Work as Will

Roland Barthes Reading Group

**The Work as Will**  
(will to begin)

[This is an extract of the full work.]

The Roland Barthes Reading Group has been parsing Roland Barthes's *The Preparation of the Novel* for four years. His is a text in which the novel is never quite begun; or rather in which the conditions for beginning repeatedly start to be laid out. Beginnings as iteration, as preparation, as speculation. Beginnings multiple – as metaphors for the work not yet done. Our stuttering synopsis of the chapter 'Session of December 1, 1979' collates our notations, our 'minimal acts of writing' in which we promise, soon, to start.

The members of the group participating here are: Emma Bolland, Julia Calver, Helen Clarke, Louise Finney, Suzannah Gent, Sharon Kivland, Louise Michaels, Hestia Peppé, and Rachel Smith.

There was the inability to plot – as reader – even a sentence.

'An event in language is to take one step, and then another.' I could no longer walk.

When the page is static (not static). Hum.  
Is grammar a compass?  
Are graphemes?  
Read a line then off, tangential, elsewhere, making a note, losing my place.

Kate Briggs, photograph of her personal copy of Roland Barthes's *La Préparation du Roman, I et II, Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980), traces écrites, Seuil IMEC*.  
"Having been shelved so close to the window for so long – for some fourteen years now, since I am fairly sure I bought the book the year Seuil first published it – the spine, if not the cover of the book itself, had been bleached by the sun, turning its original deep dark red into something closer to mud, the colour of unbaked clay."  
– Kate Briggs, translator of the English edition of Roland Barthes's *The Preparation of the Novel*.

1. All quotations and references that go unnamed throughout this text belong to, or have been appropriated, borrowed and paraphrased from: Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Course Notes and Seminars at the Collège de France 1978-1979 and 1979-1980*, trans. by Kate Briggs, ed. by Nathalie Léger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) (*La Préparation du roman, I et II, Cours et séminaires au Collège de France, 1978-1979 et 1979-1980*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995).

**Preamble**  
(Ace of Cups)  
A very bold colon:  
an overflowing vessel.

**Outline**  
(Six of Swords)  
A meta-text for the purposes  
of classification that will facilitate  
dissemination and the transfer  
of that which is classified.

**Epigraph**  
(Queen of Coins)  
Bringing the familiar to the far-  
away. Creating the conditions  
for memory. Scent.

abstract

outline underlined

show your edges

**Preamble**  
A preliminary or preparatory statement by which  
someone might make an introduction → leading to an

**Outline**  
Barthes lays out an overview of the beginning of writing  
a novel. To do this he must first understand the desire to  
write. 'I write to satisfy a desire.' And that this desire  
stems from reading: 'I write because I have read'. I lose  
count of the things I have read, but suppose that some  
of them must have inspired me to write.

A line or set of lines  
enclosing or indicating the shape of something –  
a general description showing the essential features,  
not the detail.  
A kind of abstract – a summary that, in all honesty,  
leaves me temporarily *panie stricken* – unable to classify –  
to find a phrase, a quote, or poem that might be set at  
the beginning offering an

**Epigraph**  
A summary of what it is I am trying to evoke –  
the scent, the odour of something. The panic  
continues into the

**Plan**  
Of the Work to be written. A detailed proposal for doing  
or achieving something – an intention or decision about  
what I am going to do.  
a) A point of departure →  
transpositions – the obstacles that will have to be  
overcome, the knots to be untied.  
c) And then, a final suspense rather than conclusion.  
But how to begin to write a plan when I don't know  
how it will turn out, but I do care.

**Parabase**  
The method of exposition – a comprehensive description  
and explanation of an idea or theory and the action of  
making something public that, at this moment in time,  
renders me paralysed.

reveal the thresholds  
trace  
a line  
Polytechnique Presentation – How will I speak – from  
where? Following Barthes;  
'Unable to classify is *panie stricken*.' (Where are we?) ...  
and I cannot even type up my notes without straying,  
fragile, breaking down when demarcation is subjective,  
narrow, where category loses the solidity of nameable  
entities from one another<sup>2</sup> (and who the fuck thought  
I'd ever be quoting Foucault – not me) are the terrifying  
here-be-monsters of the unmapped where identity  
crumbles.<sup>3</sup>

being  
unable to classify  
is the worst  
kind of social unease  
**Preamble**  
He makes a preliminary or preparatory statement;  
he introduces.  
**Outline**  
He shows the main shape or edge of something,  
without any details.

**Epigraph**  
He selects a short quotation or saying at the beginning  
of a book or chapter, intended to suggest its theme.  
**Plan**  
He produces a diagram or list of steps with details  
of timing and resources, used to achieve an objective.

Begin over

what are we doing?

**Parabase**  
He makes a direct address to the audience, sung  
or chanted by the chorus on behalf of the author.  
He digresses, addressing the reader.

**Bibliography**  
He lists the books referred to in a scholarly work,  
one that is typically printed as an appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*  
(London and New York: Routledge, 1980), 25, 281 [see *Le Mot et le Choix* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966)].  
<sup>3</sup> This paragraph is drawn in part, from Yenna Bullank, 'Category Error' (Category Error,  
in *The Blue Notebook*, 111 (2007), pp. 42-53.

Bibliography of those most frequently quoted authors presented in the form of a list of books – a *bibliographie*, one might say. A catalogue or record which, like history, constantly changes when viewed in the light of the present. Some remain constant in their presence, while others take a temporary leave of absence only to return again, and again, to the collection of objects that lay – in more or less orderly or chaotic fashion – one on top of the other. Or is it alongside?

**A Collective Bibliography of the Most Frequently Quoted Authors, Compiled by the Contributors.**

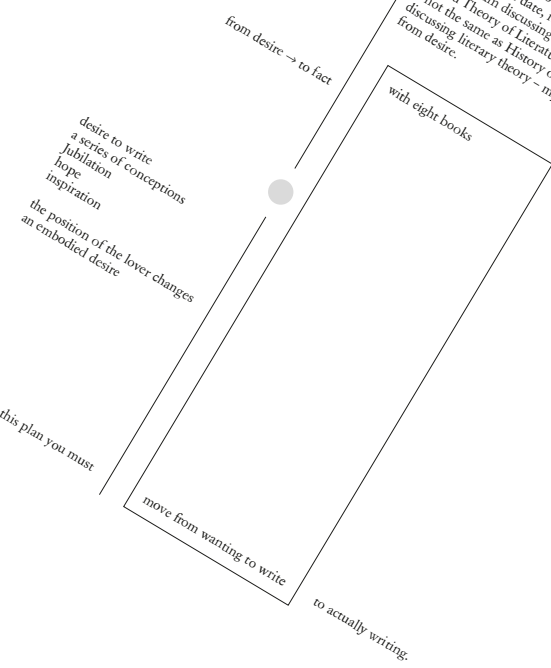
- BENJAMIN  
→ (1934) *Berlin Childhood Around 1900: Hope in the Past*, trans. by Howard Eiland, Harvard University Press, 2006.
- DELLUC  
→ (1923) 'Le Silence', in *Écrits cinématographiques III: Diaries de Cinéma, scénarios et projets de films*, Cinémaèque Française Cahiers du Cinéma, 1990.
- DERRIDA  
→ (1993) *Spectres of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, 1994.
- DIDI-HUBERMAN  
→ (2011) *Baroque*, trans. by Samuel E. Martin, The MIT Press, 2017.
- MOBERLEY & JOURDAIN  
→ *Obscure of the Tram*, self-published, 2016.
- SHAH  
→ *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, Octagon Press, 1989.
- TOWNSEND  
→ *Creative States of Mind: Psychoanalysis and the Artist's Process*, Routledge, 2019.
- WITTIG  
→ *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, 1992.
- WOOD  
→ *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

I have a plan.

This should be your plan

for although I have not put it to the test as such I know

**Most used bibliography authors**  
Perhaps I am behind – ten years. I can reel off authors (alive and dead) I would have referred to. But it is not me that's out of date, it is Criticism. Recently is not equal to retro. I am discussing books here not media and can tell you Theory of Literature (German and U.S. province) is not the same as History of Literature (France). I am discussing literary theory – my own theory that comes from desire.



it is at least a plan

To follow this plan you must

Perhaps a better word for the relation between the book read and the book to be written is:

HOSTILITY

in that having read the book I love I now hate it as it is not the book as it might have been written by me

in that it is allegedly difference that produces systems in that reflections

proliferate in that I am thoroughly sick of the brotherhood of important men

There is mania (of which I know something) but by which I think he means obsession – non-pathologised.  
There is ...  
I mean an injection of something by something else. Not to be another but to be other. The (beloved) author has put something in me. This new thing (not his dead-end originality) is the strange in me.

speaking tentatively into the pixelated fog

wait for a reply

CAN YOU HEAR ME?

[...] connecting to audio

the smell of dust and oil  
a swing machine  
flickering screen projections offer  
the same scent

A new me or another me.  
Other.  
From him.  
Parent / Father.  
Barthes introduces the session by likening its delivery to the treatment for a film or a book outline (which he will narrate). He explains that the session will have an Epigraph (which he insists is a scent); a plan a parabase, three chapters, and a conclusion; and as the author.

He goes on to consider the question 'Why do I write?' and notes that 'I write because I have read'. However, expressing the joy that he experiences from the production of a text, 'a jubilation, an ecstasy, a handful of his most beloved texts, 'Hope to write to rewrite his most beloved texts, 'Hope to write between reading and writing for him, is reciprocal, and distinct, the first of which is a kind of following of a book in real life.' The second is a more literal kind of copying, which he equates with an act of love.

The author must possess the desire to write and inhabit it. The author does not create the world: 'he enunciates helped or stopped or postponed – the true author must give in to the desire of it. Anxious=Desirous. Madness drives me to get out my pen in public. I am a man/pen. Flaubert is quoted – 'It is so personal and private, almost like an animal function'. Animal function=base function. Can one ever be a true writer without this consuming desire? Can the rest of us only imitate, or simulate?

6. For a recording of Walter Benjamin's *Paris Childhood Remind you*, see Helen Clarke, *Johns from Paris Childhood*, [Shards.tumblr.com/projects/2015/](http://Shards.tumblr.com/projects/2015/)

