24. Ink on Paper

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Introduction

What materials mark the life of the intellectual? As I write this chapter at my desk at the university, I have my laptop in front of me. A white rectangle digitally mimics a piece of paper. The words I type appear in black, in a font my handwriting could never equal. If I'm lucky, these sentences will someday materialize as ink on paper. For me, the work does not take on meaning or feel "real" until it is printed. However, the ink itself is not tangible once it is dry—my fingers touch the paper, but they cannot feel its contents. This does not mean there is no ink spillage before the work reaches its final stage in print. During the writing process, my hands are often marked by the involuntary traces of a blue ballpoint pen. I wear them as a badge of honor, for they signify my work. Academics deal with ink constantly. As researchers and teachers, we are pen-pushers, ink-slingers, *scribouillards*; endlessly scribbling notes in the margins of books; grading papers with plastic red ballpoints; editing articles by drawing big black crosses over the freshly printed pages we no longer find necessary. Pencil can be erased too easily; it does not have the same gravity.

It is only when words are inked on paper that they become tangible texts. What does it mean for a text to be tangible? How does ink's material effect of tangibility—a particular effect that only surfaces in its "social life"—relate to the material qualities of ink itself (Drazin xxvi)? I will propose that ink offers a point of connection between the material and the affective elements of academic culture by exploring this material through Barthes's notion of *tangibilia* (*The Preparation of the Novel* 56). In the first half of this chapter, I will explore "tangibility" as one of ink's most interesting material properties. The second part will focus on Roland Barthes's affective description of writing with ink to explore the relationship between writing materials and style. The last part of this chapter will evoke Barthes's concept of the *tangibile* to draw a parallel between ink's ability to attach itself onto paper on the one hand and readers' experience of attachment to the words on the page on the other.

Material Properties of Ink

For over three thousand years, ink has been paramount for recording and disseminating knowledge. It was discovered by several ancient civilizations roughly around the same time, as some of the earliest known examples stem from Egypt, China, and Greece (Britannica). Early types of ink were made from soot and water and, in some cases, a binding agent such as gum Arabic, egg whites, or glue. This mixture resulted in a black substance that was either liquid or solid and would lend itself well to be transferred onto flat surfaces made from natural fiber, such as wood, cloth, silk, paper, and papyrus (Needham 3).[1] Different materials were used for the black pigmentation, such as lampblack, bone black, or carbon black. While blue pigments such as Han Blue, Egyptian Blue, or Maya Blue were already used in dyes for fabrics, blue ink was developed later by the incorporation of indigo made from plants or by incorporating minerals such as azurite and lapis lazuli.[2]

Tim Ingold uses the example of pen and ink to highlight the historical process of production, rather than consumption, of material culture ("Materials" 8–9). For far too long, he argues, the focus has been on the "thingliness" of objects instead of the raw materials they are made of (9).[3] From this perspective, the material turn has overlooked the materials themselves by privileging reflections on their materiality on a metalevel (3). Ingold aims to rectify this by offering a brief history of the production of gallnut ink—a type of ink made from the oak apple, which became especially popular in Europe from the twelfth century onwards but is still used today (9). Unlike types of ink that do not have strong binding agents and would cause the liquid to sit on top of the parchment, gallnut ink sinks into the fibers of the parchment and is absorbed by it. As the ink attaches itself to paper, it gains in longevity. Inversely, this type of ink could not easily be erased and wiped out and would, in some cases, even burn through parchment because of its high levels of acidity (Gilbert Redman). Even though methods of writing and printing have since taken on many different forms, ink remains the dominant material for the written word worldwide. Inventions such as Gutenberg's printing device (1440), the fountain pen (1827), the biro (1931), and inkjet printers (1976) have also had an impact on the consistency of ink, as these different tools require different levels of viscosity and fluidity.

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1 While ink may have been discovered simultaneously in ancient Egypt and ancient China, Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin and Joseph Needham argue in their book dedicated to paper and printing in Chinese civilization that "there is no doubt that paper-making originated in China" (3).

2 Many different plants were used to make indigo, such as the *Indigofera tinctoria* in parts of Asia, *Polygonum tinctorum* in East Asia, *anil* in Central and South America, *Natal Indigo* in India, and *woad* in Europe (Paul et al.).

3 Also known as "thingness," following Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" (4).

Ink is something of a shapeshifter, as it can be both fluid and solid. By adding water to the solid substance, ink can be turned into a liquid with varying degrees of thickness. By letting the ink dry, it becomes a solid, fixed agent again. Ink flows; it follows the movements of my hands and reveals the deeply personal aspect of my writing—my body has determined its shape. Ink spills; it is tangible only in its fluid form, either at the moment of production, when tragedy strikes and water hits the paper, the ink pots fall, or the pen bursts.[4] Several phenomenologists have drawn attention to the tangible material quality of ink. Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida have both explored ink's fluidity as a metaphor to liquefy meaning by placing words "under erasure" (*sous rature*), that is to say, by crossing out certain words ~~like so~~. The thin line indicates a removal or revision but paradoxically allows the words to remain on the page. This practice has therefore been used to emphasize a certain aporia in a text, highlight the inadequacy of language or concepts to convey knowledge (Heidegger), or question the distinction between absence and presence and the system of signification as a whole (Derrida). In cases like these, an extra layer of ink drawn through a word or sentence is used to point toward the limits of language and signification. It is a thin line between the spillage of ink and the slippage of meaning.

Thinking From the Materials

A thinker who has described his physical engagement with ink and pens in great detail was Roland Barthes. His love of blue ink and fountain pens is well-documented. Many of his handwritten notes and manuscripts have been exhibited in the 2015 retrospective *Les écritures de Roland Barthes* at the Bibliothèque National de France in Paris (Badmington 48; Budelis; Gallix). The following ink-related anecdote will serve as a brief case study of writing as an affective practice. When, in September 1973, an interviewer for *Le Monde* asked Barthes whether he had a "method of working," Barthes gave him an intimate description of his preparation for writing and the act of writing by hand (*The Grain of the Voice* 177). He details how the consumption of pens has become something of an addiction for him, an act not just of habit but of *craving*:

> Take the gesture, the action of writing. I would say, for example, that I have an almost obsessive relation to writing instruments. I often switch from one pen to another just for the pleasure of it. I try out new ones. I have far too many pens—I don't know what to do with all of them! And yet, as soon as I see a new one, I start craving it. I cannot keep myself from buying them. . . . In short, I've tried everything . . . except Bics, with which I feel absolutely

4 Neil Badmington has written extensively about several "Inkidents" (61), most notably the anecdote Barthes tells in his courses on "The Neutral" of knocking over a bottle of pigment in the shade "Neutral."

> no affinity. I would even say, a bit nastily, that there is a "Bic style," which is really just for churning out copy, writing that merely transcribes thought. In the end, I always return to fine fountain pens. The essential thing is that they can produce that soft, smooth writing I absolutely require. (178)

Barthes's affectionate description of fountain pens versus Bics reveals a particular kind of pleasure connected to the act of writing, as is signaled by the words he uses that are all connected to *jouissance*: "almost obsessive," "pleasure," "craving," and a lack of inhibition ("I cannot keep myself from buying them"). The last ambiguous phrase emphasizes the relation Barthes observes between tool and style, as "that soft, smooth writing" refers to the touch of the pen, the paper, and the style of prose he aspires to. The fountain pen's agency is particularly poignant compared to his musings on the ballpoint pen, or Bic. For if the ballpoint "merely transcribes thought," the fountain pen apparently does more than record information. The particular distribution of ink through a fountain pen adds a surplus value for Barthes, as handwriting is part of the writer's style. *Style* is a technical term in Barthes's oeuvre connected to the bodily and cognitive act of writing and to writing as a personal signature. As it is intimately connected both to the body and to personal style on the one hand and to the language system on the other, *writing* can never be completely neutral or objective (*Writing Degree Zero* 12). Even typewriting, an ostensibly "neutral" movement of the body, generates a certain type of text: "Every day I practice typing for half an hour, in the fond hope of acquiring a more 'typewriterly' writing . . . (with two fingers, because I don't know how to type)" (*The Grain of the Voice* 179).

In short, Barthes theorizes that different writing tools produce different types of writing—in terms of style and content. His affectionate description of writing tools is a testament to the approach that Deleuze and Guattari have advanced, namely "to follow the materials." Ingold refers to this as "thinking *from* the materials, not *about* them," akin to how Merleau-Ponty viewed the entanglement of subjects and objects through his concepts such as "flesh" and "intertwinement" (Ingold "Toward an Ecology" 437; Merleau-Ponty lxxxiv). In line with Heidegger and Derrida, Barthes speculates that different writing tools and how they distribute ink impact how we think. Barthes's reflections on his "almost obsessive relation with writing instruments" (*The Grain of the Voice* 178) reveal that the objects that are used as writing tools, as well as their materiality, "matter" more to his conceptual framework and the production of his critical thinking than has been acknowledged so far.[5]

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5 A notable exception is Liedeke Plate's "New Materialisms," which discusses the material context of the publication of Barthes's "The Death of the Author": the experimental, multimedia issue of *Aspen 5+6*, which consisted of white boxes filled with all kinds of different objects—such as texts, photographs, film, records, artworks, etc. De Pourcq further discusses the implications of the multimedial context of Barthes's essay (344).

Tangibilia

Barthes's interest in the sensual aspects of reading and writing in later works such as *The Preparation of the Novel* (2010) and *The Neutral* (2007) increasingly reveal a phenomenological stance. In his lectures and seminars for the Collège de France from 1978 to 1980, published posthumously as *The Preparation of the Novel* (2010), Barthes unfolds the concept of *tangibilia*:

> In narrative or intellectual texts, I've long been alert to the presence of words with concrete things, objects as referents—let's say, broadly: things you could touch, *tangibilia*, cf. Plates in an Encyclopaedia. Succession of sensual objects—it's rare to find tangibilia in classical texts (*Dangerous Liaisons*, for example); they play an important role in the *Life of Rancé* (orange trees, gloves). (Personally, I always put them in […]). (56)

In this example, Barthes does not distinguish objects, things, or matter, as would be the case in a more Heideggerian approach (and subsequent fields such as object-oriented philosophy or thing theory). We can gather that Barthes's concept of the tangibile refers to literary descriptions of the material world, to stuff that can be touched. In this sense, *tangibilia* are "micro hypotyposes" (57), referring to the rhetorical practice of elaborate visual descriptions of a thing, event, or phenomenon. Within the figure of hypotyposis, something is depicted so vividly that the reader almost feels its presence and imagines they could almost touch it (Sintobin 20). Etymologically, tangibility refers to two qualities: firstly, it is "easy to see or recognize," and secondly, it is "able to be touched or felt." In its first meaning, tangibility refers both to visual perception in a strict sense and to recognition as a cognitive process. In its second meaning, the tangible refers both to the sense of touch and to emotional receptivity. Barthes also refers to this double meaning when he connects the materiality of objects described in literature to the sensual impact they make on him as a reader. This double meaning becomes apparent when Barthes describes an example of a "failed" haiku that fails precisely because it does not include a sensual object: "it doesn't take, it doesn't come together, it doesn't cut into me: no *Tangibile*, no hypotyposis" (*Preparation* 58). Tying in with the second meaning of tangibility, the *tangibile* thus also refers to the ability of literature or poetry to "touch" or affect its reader, in this case, to "cut into" him.

This inherent potential of texts to wound their readers is described as the key feature of the work of art that manages to create a "Moment of Truth" (*Preparation* 106–07), the phenomenon when a textual fragment captivates the reader, absorbs them, and engenders a strong attachment based on its emotional force. It is "the conjunction of an overwhelming emotion (to the point of tears, to the point of distress) and a self-evident truth giving rise, within us, to the certainty that what we're reading is the truth (has been the truth)" (104). A truth that "we can neither interpret

nor transcend nor transgress," it is a matter of acute *presence*, captured best by the realization that "Love and Death *are here*, that's all that can be said" (107). In his analysis of the grandmother's death as a Moment of Truth, Barthes stresses again that the concrete elements in this description contribute to this affective experience. He praises Proust for the fact that "he always adds in something concrete, as if he were going to the root of the concrete":

> The little attack on the Champs-Elysées: the flushes, her hand in front of her mouth; during her illness: it hurting when Françoise combs hair, etc. Why is this *true* (and not just *real* or *realistic*? Because the more concrete it is, the more it is alive, and the more alive it is, the more it will die; this is the Japanese *utsuroi* a kind of enigmatic surplus value bestowed by writing. (105–06)

The descriptions of objects, things, and materials make them present and reveal their transient nature. This tangible quality of the text, in turn, determines its "aliveness," pointing to its equal footing with other subjects and objects in the world. In this sense, these concrete details serve as "impressions" in multiple ways.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sara Ahmed uses "impression" as an analytical tool to describe how "emotions are shaped by contact with objects" (6). I feel this term is very useful to explain the multifaceted nature of Barthes's notion of *tangibilia* as a similar analytical tool that describes the circulation of emotion, in this case, between reader, writer, text, pen, and paper. I will directly relate the several different meanings of the term "impression" Ahmed describes Barthes's notion of the *tangibile* to reveal some striking similarities: first, *Tangibilia* convey the impressions of a character or author of a specific phenomenon, revealing their cognitive and bodily experiences; second, they allow their readers to form an impression of a particular scene, to imagine a reality; and third, they make an *impression on* readers, leave a mark on them, as these *tangibilia* both convey an affective value and can have an affective impact on readers. As ink presses on paper, it, in turn, leaves its mark on us. As Ahmed states, "We need to remember the 'press' in an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace" (6). Barthes's notion of the *tangibile* hints at a similar theory of emotion through his discussion of the importance of material qualities as markers for a circulation of affect.

Final Thoughts

Ink is a "sticky" substance. As it flows through the pen I wield, ink follows the movements of my hand. My movements determine its shape, but the instrument I hold, in turn, determines my movements. Together, the writing instrument and I create

a style and produce a personal signature. As ink attaches itself to the fibers of paper or the skin of our hands, its stickiness becomes more than a material property; it becomes an effect of "a relation of 'doing" (Ahmed 90). This sticky quality of ink can be viewed as an "effect of the histories between bodies, objects and signs," blurring the distinction between active and passive, subject and object. What remains is the touching of different surfaces (91). Barthes's obsession with ink and pens reveals the personal significance of these materials. The practice of writing by hand informed a large part of Barthes's identity as an academic and author. Following his own notion that the way we write impacts the way we think, we could speculate that the ideas he formed later in life—after having tried and failed to substitute writing his works by hand with writing them directly on a typewriter—were a spillover from his obsession with ink in a most literal sense. A few of these late insights include ideas about the intimate act of notation as the beginning of writing; the importance of the personal signature of the writer; the writer as a private person rather than a public textual figure; and the idea that reading and writing are part of an affective practice (*Preparation* xxvi). There, in his blue, slightly tilted handwriting, we discern something decidedly not "Neutral."

In Barthes's affectionate description of trying out pens and different types of ink, we as readers find *tangibilia*. As emblems of stuff that can be touched and stuff that touches us, they denote touch in a literal, haptic sense and a metaphorical sense, through pathos or affect. These *tangibilia* reveal a connection between the academic and the affective within the life and work of Roland Barthes. On a metalevel, they cause the same intermingling of the academic and affective for me, as his reader. I am touched by these concrete examples because they reveal an affective relation toward the act of writing itself. After all, the material practice of academic work has largely remained the same. It is there in the root of concrete materials, combined with the tone of affectionate reminiscence over these writing materials, that I find a "concision of affect and writing . . . the last degree of meaning"; the surplus value of writing (*Preparation* 107). By describing materials that can be touched through a medium that he feels an affective relation with, the medium of ink has the ability to leave an impression on its reader. Like the ink in which his text was written, it has made its mark on me.

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