"...I who am dead." Thus the narrator of Julio Cortázar's "Blow-Up," but adds, immediately, "and I'm alive, I'm not trying to fool anybody." How we understand the bizarre contradictions of modern fiction is, I argue, a rhetorical question. Since the world invoked by a fiction is not real, what are we (per)suaded to do? We can do nothing in that world, but we can do something with it, namely, accept or reject it. The suasion urged by a fictional text is an imaginative accommodation of the premises, the (fictional) assertions, the representations, in short, the autonomy of its world. In Madame Bovary, the implied author invites the implied reader to accept the plausibility that a given bourgeoise living in a French provincial town in the nineteenth century would feel the feelings and do the doings ascribed to Emma. To the extent that we readers are suaded of that plausibility through our entrance into and willingness to stay bound by the fictional contract, the novel is a rhetorical success.

A text may be suasive in two main ways, according to the direction of its reference: whether to the world or to itself, whether extra- or intratextually. A text urging an audience to take action in the real world (an advertisement, a legal brief, a speech in Congress, a public encomium), insofar as its appeal is current, is extratextually suasive, though, if well done, it has intratextual values. It reaches out of itself, to get people to take a stand, to change (or to reaffirm) their views about real issues, to act or at least to feel differently about them. Of course it will utilize a textual form to do so, whether a minister's solemn enunciation of a carefully prepared sermon or the excited "improvised" speech of a political candidate whose rhetoric is precisely his claim to have "thrown away rhetoric" by throwing away his prepared text. But here the textual form is secondary, transparent or invisible, not itself the focus. Indeed, it should not call attention to itself. A jury so full of wonder at the beauty of a lawyer's display of logic might well forget or suspect the object of his plea. He wants to sound logical only to the extent that that will help his case. He may do so, for example, if by a kind of metonymic contagion he can make his client's behavior sound more logical. On
the other hand, if evidence is slender and his witness pitiable, he will utilize a more purely emotional appeal.

A fictional text can only be intratextually or form-suasive. "Form" I mean in a broad sense: not only surface properties like diction, meter, rhyme, but also broader discursive ones — narrative voice, point of view, even the selection and arrangement of contentual elements. The essential form-suasiveness of any text depends on a certain integrity, a recognizable consistency of intent throughout. Fictional texts make claims to autonomy, that is, to acceptability as single, homogeneous (however complex) things in themselves. For all its bizarreness, Emma Bovary's gruesome death is appropriate and plausible. Suicide by other means would somewhat weaken the novel's autonomy. Accidental death would considerably weaken it. Living happily ever after would destroy it.

Any modern view of the rhetoric of fiction must resemble an astute reviewer's characterization of Wayne Booth's use of the word:

'Rhetoric' is Professor Booth's term for the means by which the writer makes known his vision to the reader and persuades him of its validity.1

By "vision" is meant not "that which might be" but "that which holds for the particular world invoked by this text," and by "validity," not scientific or other truth-value but simply esthetic coherence or self-consistency. (I would also argue that rhetoric — Plato and Booth to the contrary notwithstanding — need only entail self-consistency, not consistency with the tradition of moral norms. But that is subject for another essay.)

So rhetoric is both in the text (put there by the author) and in the reader. We operate on the assumption that any reader has the potential ability or competence to recognize what is needed to interpret a fictional text, to grasp the conditions of its plausibility and autonomy. And an important part of that competence derives from knowledge he has acquired and stored over years of reading and living, stored (if we follow the ancients) in topoi, or to use a more modern concept, "codes." The topoi, as Eco says, are nothing other than "overcoded, ready-made paths for inferential walks" that the reader is invited to take. Where a text is highly innovative, or otherwise troublesome, the reader must experiment, try to make new patterns, new codes to accommodate it. How to characterize this ability is a subject of some interest.

The topoi or "places," so the metaphor goes, occupy the mind's space, a space where information, common and technical, is stored. (The metaphor continues in the circuitry of artificial intelligence, with its "memory banks," "storage," etc.) If we accept the metaphor, we can look at these stockpiles the way structural linguists have looked at their counterparts in language. Each language presents reservoirs of forms, or paradigms, visualized traditionally as vertical bins intersecting the horizontal string of an actually constructed sentence, the syntagma. From the paradigm of possibilities, the speaker selects one or a few to actualize a syntactic and semantic element. Syntax and semantics assume that

1 David Lodge: the back cover of the paperback version of Booth, 1961.
these elements occur in well-formed complexes. At the vocabulary level, for example, there are myriad sets of nouns whose interrelation rests on opposition and mutual exclusion: if we introduce the word “object” into our sentence, we have consciously or unconsciously ruled out alternatives like “thing,” “item,” “entity,” “do-hickey” and so on.

Semiotics finds the same kind of meaning-patterning beyond language, in other forms of culture, and so borrows the notion of paradigmatic stores. But what happens if one finds no code in his mind to accommodate a given textual demand, or, though a familiar code seems invoked, he cannot find terms in it that make any sense? As when, in Cortázar’s story, we read one moment that the narrator is dead and the next that he is alive? Barthes touches upon the problem when he discusses modernist (scriptible) texts, but he tells us little or nothing about how the reader actually achieves a degree of comprehension. His method would seem to be to work from and through codes we do have and feel secure about. We have acquired, through our experience with narrative structure, the code of “narrator.” We know, for instance, that narrators may (though need not) be fully established human beings in their own right — characters or authorial surrogates. Another code, that of common-sense physiology, tells us that human beings are either dead or alive but not both. Still another code, the code of figures, tells us that “dead” can be used metaphorically. Another, the code of the fantastic, tells us that the “living-dead” is conceivable, if we suspend certain rules of nature. And so on. In short, we have potential means for negotiating the text by picking and choosing among codes that we decide might be relevant. Enough has been said in recent years to lay to rest the notion that reading is a passive activity. The view of the reader actively ransacking his codes of verisimilitude to make sense of a text strongly reaffirms the argument, though in a different terminology.

But why call them “codes”? For one thing, to insist that (for all their familiarity) these stores of interpretants are conventional — learned, not “natural” or intuitive. We get better at interpretation as we acquire new codes, and increase the supply of interpretants in the old codes. For a second, to emphasize their covert character. The text need not, generally does not, cite the code in terms of which we may identify the voice of the narrator. It simply presupposes an acquaintance with it. And if the reader draws a blank, he must, by hook or crook (as a good handyman or bricoleur) gather, imagine, project “facts” or even invent codes to meet the case. Whether consciously or not, he must ask himself such questions as “Under what set of circumstances can I accept a narrator who is both alive and dead?”

The third reason to call them codes is that they are structured, that is, they follow non-random distributions.

The important point about treating one’s choices as coded rather than merely as selections from an agglomerate list is that the notion of code insists on interdependence. Any story then is seen as a message whose complexity requires decision-making — that is, decoding — according to a whole variety of intersecting codes, many of which are not linguistic but more broadly cultural.
This decoding, this decision-making, is facilitated by a maneuvering among the codes, and especially the use of one code to help determine another. In the case of the Cortázar story, it is within the area of linguistic semantics that I can decode the expression "blow-up," that is, decide that the sense intended by the text is "photographic enlargement" and not, say, "explosion." But the deeper sense of "code" allows me to go beyond this mere lexical selection to choices in semiotic areas. For example, the speaker sometimes refers to himself as "I" and sometimes as "he." The language code alone cannot clarify this oscillation. But another code, that of narrative structure, and especially its subcode of narrative voice, allows me to think of certain possibilities among which to choose. For example, one is to consider the oscillation as a challenge to the normal rule, and thus to signal a metacodic questioning of the whole artifice of story-telling, of highlighting story-telling as an artifice, as a tacit assertion that its conventions are in fact conventions and must be consciously registered as such.

At any rate, by raising to a conscious level the process of decoding, that is of code negotiation, I think we can demystify some important aspects of the reading and interpretive process. Roland Barthes has analyzed certain codes in conventional, or as he calls them, "readably" (lisible) narratives by Balzac and Poe as opposed to more problematic modernist or "writerly" texts—"writerly" in the sense that the texts are open-ended, admit of wider-ranging interpretations. Compared to "parsimoniously plural" lisible texts, scriptible texts are supposed to be infinitely plural, to consist of a virtual "galaxy of signifiers." One purpose of this study is to raise the question of the utility and viability of such notions.

The codes informing narratives are of two basic sorts, corresponding to a widely-held contemporary theory of narrative structure. The theory is dualist, presuming that narratives divide into two major planes, the formal, or "discourse" plane (after French discours), and the contentual, or "story" plane (after French histoire). That a narrative is recounted by a first-person narrator, or in interior monologue, is a question of discourse; that it is about a seaman, or that everybody lives happily ever after is one of story. Generally, one need not explicate a story's discourse to interpret it. But one does not get beyond the first sentence or two of "Blow-Up" to realize that it raises (in so many words) questions about how its discourse shall go, that is, how its story shall be told. Narrative discourse is as highly coded as is story, and in problematic texts the determination of its codes can be crucial to the achievement of even modest interpretations.²

What follows is not an explication of "Blow-Up" but rather some moments from the history of my encounter with it, explained or rationalized by the theory of topic codes. It is not an exact record of my thinking; I have forgotten or never became conscious of my actual mental activity. So this is only the trace of my own reading, following my own associational paths. It makes no claims to the "truth" (whatever that means) about "Blow-Up." The real world of

² For my theory of narrative discourse in its most complete form, see Chatman, 1978.
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interpretation is "partitioned off," as Gilles Deleuze puts it: each of us sees things under different signs, in terms of different categories. But interesting as those differences are, the process by which one reaches an interpretation is no less interesting. That is the subject of this essay: not the interpretation but the struggle to interpret experienced by one mind. A description of that process seems to me worth the risk of revealing my own interpretive inadequacies. Here is a reconstruction of what occurred, or, to be perfectly accurate, must have occurred, given the limits of my own literary competence. The focus is not on the interpretation but on the code-selection and -implementaton process that I think I used. Barthes' study of the reading process in S/Z presumes that no reading is ever the first: "We must . . . accept one last freedom: that of reading the text as if it had already been read" (1974: 15). However true or useful that may be for Barthes' theoretical purposes, it gives small consolation to the reader struggling to make a modicum of sense of a difficult text. How can he write about such a text with Barthes' grand pluralist flair knowing that in fact he has not yet understood it in any satisfying way, that though he can repeat what it says, he cannot say what it meant, that is, meant in any satisfying sense? Barthes' freedom of déjà-lu, surely, comes only to the reader in control of at least one plain-sense interpretation. But what is one to do if one has not acquired that control? What does he do until he acquires it? I found that when I started my notes for this essay I had read "Blow-Up" several times, yet could not in good conscience say that I understood it — under any reasonable definition of "understand." To feel Barthes' freedom at my stage of incomprehension would be idle and self-deluding. Therefore my account in no way compares to Barthes' elegant analysis of "Sarrasine." His is triumphantly after the fact; it is an account of the text. Mine is humbly during the fact, afloat, often barely afloat, amid heavy seas of deciphering. Mine is precisely the record of mistakes, of false leads, of a sometimes furious hunt for the quarry of plain sense. Plain sense: there, I confess it. A notoriously Anglo-Saxon, not a Gallic notion. But, somehow, one essential to me at some level too deep to plumb or to question. I must simply respect my need for a coherence, however sketchy, and follow its promptings. Afterwards, perhaps, I can enjoy the space-ship ride among Barthes' galaxy of signifiers. For the moment simple coherence is my imperative.

Does this mean that I reject the notion of the "open" or plurisignificational text, one open to several or even a multitude of interpretations? Not at all. What I am saying is that I cannot accept a text as plurisignificational until I make at least one satisfying sense of it. I must start with at least one before I can entertain pluralisms. Plurisignification, further, would seem to mean that the different interpretations are of comparable value, are equally rich or fruitful, that I present one precisely because it comprehends aspects not comprehended by another. If I refuse to give up an interpretation of Don Quixote which also highlights its mockery of the medieval romance, it is because the single interpretation of Don Quixote as picaresque adventure neglects precious features of satire. Conversely, to be dominated by the satiric interpretation alone neglects precious features of the picaresque. But somehow the plain-sense
picaresque view of *Don Quixote* comes first and provides a secure base upon
which the ironic reading may float.

One more observation: the concept of "openness," I think, needs theoretical
exploration. One consideration is domain. Some texts, surely, are open in a local
sense but not in a global sense. In *Lord Jim*, at the local level, the constitution of
Jim's character is open. We cannot be easy about any absolute or ultimate
view of Jim's precise mixture of cowardice and heroism because Marlow
himself cannot finally decide, and he is our necessary vademecum into the
mental as into the geographical hinterlands of Conrad's novel. But no one would
seriously argue, I think, that the text is open in a global sense that permits us, for
instance, to interpret Jim as a figment of Marlow's imagination. Whatever we say
about "openness," it is clear that certain interpretations are simply
incompatible. To anticipate, one cannot, I think, entertain at the same time a
supernaturalist interpretation of "Blow-Up" in which the hero literally enters an
enlarged photograph and a naturalist one in which he hallucinates that he is
doing so. I do not think that the cause of hermeneutics is well served by such a
view of textual "openness."

As I struggled with the story, I tried to do so consciously in terms of the notion
of codes, to name the code that I had drawn upon as soon as I was satisfied by an
interpretation. In the heat of reading, however, I could not inquire closely into
the logic of naming them or limiting them to a certain number. Barthes has
proclaimed five codes in *S/Z* (and a slightly larger number in his later study of
Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valen"), but he does not tell us how he
hit upon those five, whether we are to assume that they apply only to his text or to
any narrative text whatsoever, and, if the latter, what the basis is for his belief
that they exhaust the universe of possible codes. My own approach is empirical,
using the codes as a way into the text, not as a way of accounting for it.

1. "BLOW-UP"3 THE DISCOURSE

It is not always necessary to consider a story's discourse to interpret it. But the
first five paragraphs of "Blow-Up" explicitly raise questions about how its
discourse shall go, that is, how the story is to be told. Further, the recurring flights
of clouds and birds (mostly in parentheses) are couched in the present tense,
unlike other story events. Since their time reference is the same as that of the
discourse, I must decide whether they occur prior to or contemporary with the
moment of narrative telling. ("Blow-up" is printed in the Appendix.)

What does "Blow-Up" mean? Is the code military? Engineering? Photographic? The answer seems to clarify in the reference in paragraph two to a
"Contax 1.1.2," which I recognize as a very expensive professional camera,
whose small format requires the "blowing-up" or enlarging of prints. I am set for
further photographic allusions, including metaphorical ones. (For the meaning of
the Spanish title, see below, III.)

At the very outset, two questions arise about the discourse: 1) Why does the

1 Julio Cortázar (1967). Paul Blackburn, the translator, was a close friend and apparently a
collaborator of Cortázar's but there are some problems in the translation.
narrator consciously refer to the process of story-telling (code of discourse: the beginning; choice of pronoun for the narrator)? Why does he have so much difficulty getting going? 2) Who is he (code of discourse: narrator-identity)? What is his situation in the discourse — location, physical and mental condition, and so on — and how does he relate to the story’s protagonist? Is he the protagonist (the “Roberto Michel” of paragraph six), or is he someone else? Who is the narrator, that is, to whom is the narrator speaking?

The second question, I feel, can only be answered by the whole narrative. I must await the end before hazard ing a guess. The first question, however, seems more immediately negotiable. Why is he engaged in the grammatical struggles (which pronoun to use, and which tense)? Why should he introduce solecisms? The code that first suggests itself to me is that of sophisticated modernist, “self-conscious” fiction. One such code (I think of Robbe-Grillet) would deny the possibility of any coherent reading: contradictions and paradoxes, that code tells me, are introduced precisely to make impossible the kind of piecing out of meanings that the search through the codes and confirmations by context enables. (But that code seems itself delusory: pure incoherence is impossible, because it is the nature of texts, in the act of presenting themselves as such, to utilize codes, even if these are self-contradictory. The reader simply accepts an overriding code of self-contradiction.) Not all self-conscious texts are self-negating: for example, in John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” the narrator advances clichéd prescriptions about narrative voice, point of view, plot, and so on, apparently to question whether the whole apparatus does not prevent an author from getting to the truth he wishes to express. But Cortázar’s narrator seems genuinely confused and torn, or so subsequent statements, I think, suggest. And here we have a first principle of interpretation, namely, to seek out redundancy. For instance, it seems as if he wishes the typewriter to tell the story (paragraph two), to form with him some kind of mechanical collaboration, along with that other machine, the camera (code of technology: the machine; code of psychology: human autonomy). Perhaps he feels inept as a storyteller. Perhaps he is self-effacing. Perhaps indolent (the “bock” he wants to drink). Perhaps perfectionist (“... that would be perfection”). Any answer is premature. The entire narrative, both discourse and story, may be needed to explain his discomfort. Perhaps, ultimately, I shall have to recognize some overriding code, either psychological (should I conclude that the narrator’s situation is unique) or philosophical (should I conclude that it is universal).

Other questions immediately arise. Who is the blond? Is she a character (code of story: character)? Why all the fuss about the clouds (code of story: setting)? Why does the narrator feel obliged to tell the story (paragraph two)? Some ostensible answers seem to be offered: “It’s of such burning importance to the world” since “One of us all has to write”; then, contradictorily, “I don’t know”; finally, “To relieve myself of the tickling in my stomach.” Which is it? Or is the real reason none of these? Who are the “we” of paragraph two, and why are they compromised? Who are the “they” of paragraph five that will “replace” him? In what sense is the narrator dead and yet alive? Why does this “death,” whatever it
is, make him less compromised? Why does he so frequently contradict himself? He is both dead and alive. He claims to be undistracted but the clouds keep distracting him. He begins with this period, but it turns into the last one back, and ends by being the one at the beginning. In paragraph two he must tell the story, but in paragraph three he wonders why he must tell it. He says that nobody knows what he’s seeing (including, presumably, himself), yet adds immediately in parentheses that it’s the clouds that he is seeing. These are infractions of the code of ordinary narrative logic and consistency. Why do they occur? When shall we find out that he’s not trying to fool anybody about claiming to be dead? How can it be that he, the narrator, is of a group who don’t know 1) who is telling the story, 2) what actually occurred, 3) what he is seeing now (paragraph four)? What is the something other than clouds that will start coming (paragraph five)? How could telling the story be an answer to the questions raised in paragraphs three through five? I do not argue that these questions are “logical” in some scientific sense. It is just that I have been instructed by the literary tradition to ask them. Culture, not nature, demands that they be answered.

The sentences of paragraph one, I feel, are more than verbal spaghetti. “You” for instance is juxtaposed to “the blond.” That might make her the narratee, but evidence is not conclusive. A narrative code of plot-discovery (Barthes’ hermeneutic code) suggests that I keep my eyes open for her identification. (It comes in paragraph ten.) If “you,” the narratee, is not the blond, who is he/she? Is it possible that “you” is not the narratee? (How would that work?) Is he the “reader” or another person in the narrative? “... you the blond woman was the clouds” is narratively opaque as well as grammatically ill-formed, but I keep it in mind (it turns out in retrospect to be a key statement in the story).

If the various violations of the language code are not citations of a modernist ironic code, which code do they elicit? I guess at some code of psychology, of the emotions, perhaps frustration, uncertainty, anxiety, the need to relieve oneself of tensions. This choice seems confirmed by “What the hell.” In context, the vacillating among nouns and pronouns in particular suggests uncertainties about identity that the narrator might feel (code of psychology or psychopathology). That would work together with the self-effacement implicit in the fantasy of the typewriter writing the story by itself: perhaps it is an attempt to escape from the responsibility of selfhood or autonomy. Engaging the code of psychology, I speculate that he uses his camera as a means of putting himself at one remove from reality. And if so, why? Because it’s too painful?

About the “dead” narrator I feel on really unfamiliar ground. I dredge up from memory the film Sunset Boulevard, in which the voice-over of the hero (William Holden), a young man kept by an aging movie star (Gloria Swanson), narrates and comments on events. Yet in the final scene he is dead, floating face-down in the swimming pool. (The film Rashomon plays with a similar notion.) But the parallel is useless, because “Blow-Up” announces the narrator’s peculiar condition at the very outset, and then goes on to dispute the assertion by saying that he is in fact alive. If I relate the dead/alive narrator to his problems with pronoun-establishment and the like, my sense is reinforced that he is
reluctant to tell the story for psychological reasons. (Redundancy is clearly a crucial principle in interpretation.) I attribute “distraction” to him by the psychological code. I note too that being dead and seeing clouds are syntactically equated by the code of grammar (apposition): “me who am dead… I who see only the clouds.” Even though I cannot yet figure out why, I feel emboldened to try a hypothesis: except in supernatural narratives (and intuitively, for the moment, this does not feel like one), you cannot be literally dead and gone and still tell a story. Even in the Sunset Boulevard situation, the narrator is dead but remains some kind of ghostly narrative voice: he has simply gotten us the message from beyond. But in “Blow-Up” everything else suggests that the narrator is alive. So I am most attracted to a code of figurative speech, of poetic figures: he feels as if he were dead. But that in turn gives rise to a number of possibilities. Dead how? Emotionally exhausted? Numb by experience? Will-less? Grief-stricken? And how does that fit together with the remark that he has the “dumb luck” to know that machines like typewriters (for all their precision and perfection) can only be operated by human hands? Does that imply some kind of wish that he could give up the burden of being alive? I must await more clues. The clouds must wait, especially since I have opted for a figurative interpretation of “dead” (“clouds” thus cannot be a reference to “heaven” as a citation of a religious code). Nor do death or clouds seem to be easily interpretable as some ecstatic invocation of the Romantic code (a subcode of the ideology or world-view code). The narrator’s tension undercuts any nubilous felicity, whether by accident or design.

In the third paragraph, his ambivalence seems to continue, despite his decision “to put aside all decorum and tell it” (as if “telling” were innocent of narrative art). I get the distinct feeling in this paragraph that he is trying to delay or even avoid telling the story, but is forcing himself to do so, that the function of the “tickle” is to make light of the task (code of figures, code of psychology: defense mechanism). In paragraph six, there is a citation of the narrative code of conventional story-telling, where the protagonist is straightforwardly named and identified, exposition is offered in the past perfect (in Spanish, the imperfect), and so on — all that seems to be a response to this desire to simply tell it. But I do learn, explicitly, that the story must be told because something “weird” (rado) has happened, and the code of narrative pretexts (as in the Turn of the Screw and a thousand ghost stories) hints that weird happenings will form the climax of the story. The imperative “Always tell it . . . ” in this context seems to be enjoining himself rather than the narratee (hence belongs to the code of narrator’s psychology more than to that of “philosophizing and generalizing”).

But the first actual attempt at telling does not begin until paragraph four. The sentence needs a better translation than the one published: “Let’s walk down the staircase of this house until Sunday, November 7” “bajemos por la escalera de esta casa hasta el domingo siete de noviembre . . . ”. The hortatory subjunctive (bajemos) seems strange (code of the substance of the discourse, i.e., the Spanish language). Does it again signal the narrator’s nervousness about his task? He seems almost to ask the narratee to accompany him. Why? Does he doubt his
ability to tell a story properly (code of narrative discourse and code of emotions: self-doubt)? But might there also be some apprehension about going down that staircase again. that is, going back over those events (code of psychology: manifest signs of latent conflicts)? “... until Sunday, November 7” continues the hortatory invitation, the narrator trying to lead the narratee back with him to that particular date (odd because hasta as a temporal preposition usually means “up to an event in the future”). Perhaps a narrative-enlivening code is cited whose function is to contemporize the past. (See the discussion of “now...” in paragraph seven, below.) But that does not explain why the narrative needs contemporization. Nor my vague sense that the liveliness of the expression seems hollow, unconvincing, like a man trying to be gayer than he really feels. The parenthetical “(because we were photographers, I’m a photographer)” may simply be a lingering on of the pronominal indecision of paragraph one. It may also (or alternatively) recall the desire for company inferable from the hortatory subjunctive of paragraph two. More information seems necessary “... nobody really knows who it is telling it, if I am I or what actually occurred or what I’m seeing (clouds. and once in a while a pigeon)...” Here I clearly need a code of textual coherence. For “I,” the grammatical discourse subject, must know who is telling it — by the definition of “first-person narrator.” Who indeed is telling it? Is “I” really “I”? What actually occurred? What is “I” seeing? Is the truth only “I’s” truth? — these questions tie up with that of the “dead narrator.” A psychological code suggests itself: a person so confused by an experience, so wrought up by it could well question the evidence of his senses, then his identity and perceptual powers. The psychological code could undermine the discourse code. But at this point, I’m only conjecturing; another code entirely may be involved. Equally interesting is the immediate juxtaposition of “... nobody really knows... what I’m seeing” and “(clouds, and once in a while a pigeon ...).” The code of punctuation tells us that parentheses may be used in narrative discourse to give the narrator’s answer to a rhetorical question: perhaps, “nobody else knows what I’m seeing, dear reader, but I’ll clue you in: it was clouds and birds.” But if that’s true, why the confidentiality? And if it’s not true, what is the function of the parentheses and the piece of text they contain? The question proves important because, as we shall see in the final paragraph, the clouds seem to replace everything else in the narrator’s perceptual field. In any case, however I construe the parenthetical clouds, they must signify something of overriding importance, not only because of the frequency of their occurrence but also because of the crucialness of the sites in the text where they intervene. They are like a sore tooth that the narrator’s tongue can’t help touching. In view of the psychological problems that have already arisen, I am a little skeptical about taking the reference to “my truth, the truth only for my stomach” as an invocation of some code of relativist philosophizing. It seems more like an additional concession or apology on the narrator’s part for the right to get started on his story. But why again, does he need to apologize?

In paragraph five, the strange logic proceeds apace. Though he hasn’t begun the story at all, the narrator tells us we are already in the middle of it. Then a
series of odd if-clauses starts a sentence destined to remain incomplete, which of
course adds to my sense of his agitation. “If they replace me…” (Si me
sustituyen...). Who are “they”? I can only speculate. The narrator is
apprehensive about his task; given the hypothesis of his inexperience in writing
stories, are “they” some kind of cultural authorities (code of Latin culture, code
of Catholicism), those who know how a story has to be written, as they know
everything else? Or are the “they” more sinister still, and if so, sinister in what
way? “If, so soon [perhaps already so soon into my task] I don’t know what to
say” and “If the clouds stop coming and something else starts”: I sense a hint
about the clouds. They seem to be keeping the narrator “going” in some way, for
by the code of grammar, apposition suggests that “replace me” and “something
else (presumably something undesirable, even dangerous) starts coming” are
allied. Thus, the flow of clouds may symbolize the preservation of whatever
stability the narrator now possesses. Yet what could be less intrinsically stable
than clouds (code of science, code of Romance)? But now it occurs to me to delay
consideration of the clouds until the very end, when I can tally all their
appearances and review them systematically, the better to reach a conclusion
about their meaning. I feel at this point that the question of how to complete the
sentences re-echoes, through the metaphor of the grammatical code, the
narrator’s uncertainty about how to tell the story. No wonder he needs to warn
himself that he never will get started if he doesn’t stop all the hemming and
hawing. Something really is holding him back, and the code of psychology
suggests it is some deep apprehension. About all this difficulty in getting started,
this discursive obsessing, I draw certain tentative conclusions, or at least
become alerted to certain possibilities: that the narrator’s problem is no mere
modernist pose, that it either says something personally about him (code of
psychology) or something about the nature of the world, at least as he sees it
(code of philosophy). In any case, the code of textual coherence persuades me
that the difficulty in getting started is related to the experiences in the story which
he is about to recount.

II. “BLOW-UP”: THE STORY: EXPOSITION
The story proper seems to begin in paragraph six, in an “objective” way.
According to a traditional narrative code, which I have no trouble negotiating
(the narrator now really seems to want the narratee to join him), the hero is
formally named and identified; the exact moment in story-time is fixed (narrative
discourse code: time, dates), including what he had done before the story began
(code of grammar: past perfect for exposition). And so is the exact story-space
(code of geography: Paris: Île de la Cité). I recognize another citation of the
discursive code of contemporization, one of whose key devices is the “epic
preterite,” that is, the preterite with present adverbs (“Right now... I was able
to sit”), along with near rather than far deixis (“a wind like this” instead of
“That”). Still another traditional narrative code citation is that of the narrator as
generalizing observer (“it’s rare that there’s wind in Paris”). And another is the
narrator’s being privy to the mind of characters (“I figured that,” “Michel knew

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that”). These traditional citations plus the stabilization of tenses reassures me for a moment, lulls me into assuming that this may turn out to be a “regular” story after all. My complacency, of course, is to be rudely shaken.

For suddenly “him” becomes “me”: I already suspected (from the reference to “amateur photographer,” “Sunday, November 7,” etc.) that “Michel” and “I,” the narrator, might be the same person. The pronounal shifts between “I” and “he” (and “Roberto Michel”) make some critics feel that there are two narrators, Michel and another standing ironically behind him. Of course there is available such a code of multiple or embedded narration. But certain hints seem to mitigate against it here. For one thing, the first paragraph’s explicit expression by the narrator of his difficulty in choosing a pronoun for the narrator. We are confronted from the very outset by an expression of ambivalence. And ambivalence seems to me a better explanation for the shifting than double narratorhood. The code of first person narration is highly normative in signalling self-reference by a narrator, and it is generally potent enough to override other forms. Only in the context of “I” do we normally accept “he” as a mere stylistic variant, not the other way around. (Norman Mailer’s consistent reference to himself as “Mailer” and “he” in *Armies of the Night* does relatively little to distance the character from the narrator.) The opposite holds only where other contextual implications of multiple narratorship are offered, as in fictions by Conrad in which shifts from “he” to “I” signal that we shall hear Marlow’s version of the narrative happenings; but that is effected because Marlow’s audience is named, and perforce includes the first, anonymous narrator, the “real” *I*.

### III. STORY: FIRST STAGE: THE ÎLE DE LA CITÉ
Paragraph seven seems to follow, comfortably, traditional narrative paths. The narrator philosophizes about the art of photography (code of discourse: narrator’s generalization), and enters the protagonist’s mind to show self-assurance about such matters. But I have a problem with the sentence about Michel’s philosophy of photography (“Michel knew... 1/250 sec.”). Though I recognize it, too, as a generalizing comment, I’m not sure I understand the point, and it seems a point of some relevance. The sentence after it (“Right now... (time)” perhaps only means that a good photographer does not confine his eye to the small frame of a viewfinder. But how — in terms of his *art* — can any photographer seriously call that limitation “insidious”? Though it may confine him in his extra-artistic personal viewing, it must always remain a necessary constraint upon the practice of the art (along with lighting, distance, and so on). I cannot find a code to resolve the issue besides the earlier psychological one of ambivalence. Since I do not know what is causing *that*, I remain in the dark. The expression “distracted tone” (for *el tono distraído*, not “keynote of distraction”) is a bit odd too: presumably it means (by the code of physiology) that the eyes in ordinary relaxed perception are constantly shifting about. But “distracted” then has suddenly taken on a positive connotation, since it is more “natural” than the fixed quality of the photographer’s eye, glued as it is
to the viewfinder. I remember the remarks about distraction in paragraph two: perhaps the answer is that then (in storytime) Michel was relaxed and confident in his normal, “distracted” way of looking, whereas now (in discourse-time) “death” has cleared up his visual distraction, giving him a fixed (obsessive?) viewpoint. Calling the word “now” “a dumb lie” (estúpida mentira) is also strange. I catch another whiff of the narrator’s ambivalence. What could it mean? Does it question the viability of the epic preterite convention and perhaps even the possibility of distinguishing a contemporary narrative moment (and hence the whole Western way of conceiving stories — and even time itself — as a series of grains of sand, each one marked “Now,” tumbling silently through the sphincter of an hour-glass)? If it is a purely philosophical challenge, why does it seem to have so much emotional pressure behind it?

In the story “Right now” is 10 a.m., Sunday, November 7, 19 — (epic preterite). Michel’s actions at first seem to follow the traditional code of causality. Out on a photographing jaunt, he finds the light too weak, so he dawdles along the Seine. He’s looking for photographic subjects, so he is unusually alert to appearances. And so on. The causality code evokes an easily grasped code of avocation: “photographer-on-the-prowl.” So I’m not surprised to be asked to follow the order of Michel’s perceptions: “Nothing there but a couple . . .” The couple is first visually slighted by a refusal to dip into the narrative code of descriptive detail. Like Michel, I pass them over on first reading. They’re presented as a minor picturesque feature of the landscape. For an instant or two the narrator is absorbed in his own private pleasures. But his double leisure (photographer on the loose, photographer waiting for the light to improve) leaves him open to idle curiosity (code of normal psychology: “As I had nothing else to do . . .”). Paragraph nine tracks his surmise: no, not just a couple, because of age differences, perhaps a boy and his mother, no, not that, but an erotic couple after all. In a familiar way, the code of curiosity opens out into two related codes, that of description (one of the codes of conventional narration, as a “task” of the narrator) and that of extended speculation — first a conjectured biography of the boy’s life so far (paragraph twelve), and then a prediction of what is about to happen to him (last part of paragraph thirteen). The narrator’s interpretation of the boy’s fear, I note, explicitly avoids the privileged inside view: he does not say “The boy was scared,” but rather “You could guess that.” The external observer divines not only the fear but its peculiar mixture with shyness and the conflicting need to be decorously manly. That it is “telegraphed” to keen eyes can still be explained in the esthetic and photographic codes, but something else seems to be surfacing.

Paragraph ten gets more problematic. “The boy’s fright didn’t let me see the blond very well”: perhaps a citation of a code of sympathy: later (paragraph twelve) he will speak of male adolescence in Paris with a kind of knowing, good-natured tolerance. But the seeds of a more personal, even a vicarious identification may be being sown, and I feel prompted to watch for the flower. (I began to feel this about the verb “telegraphed” in the previous paragraph.) “Now, thinking back on it, I see her much better at that first second when I read
her face...” A code of memory, agreed, and it seems at first that the present tense “see” (veo) could be read, out of the narrative code, as a “historical” present-tense enlivening the usual preterite. But then I realize that the demand of the sentence is odder, for “read” (leí) is in the preterite, not the historical present. This violation of the code of grammatical consistency recalls that of the earlier grammatical switches. After first asserting that he didn’t see her very well, the narrator tells me that he did in fact “read” (study, make an interpretation of) her face, including, presumably, her character and intentions, not now, at the moment of the discourse, but back then, at the story moment, November 7, 19–. How can I reconcile the terms of this apparent paradox (which cannot be unrelated to the paradox of the alive/dead narrator)? One possible solution is a kind of time-negating code: maybe the experience is not relived at the present moment but actually lived, in the assumption that time is an illusion (Proust helps me swallow this one). Thus discourse-time and story-time are identified. Of course, I must check this extreme reading against later information. I also don’t understand her sudden swinging around “like a weathercock.” Of course it’s a simile (code of figures), but what does it mean? Weathercocks are controlled by the wind, and I am prompted to discover what “wind” is controlling her. The figure argues that not her own desire motivates her. The force must be external. (I note again how my discoveries follow the order of the narrator’s own surprise, yet I also remember that he is a retrospective narrator.) Though her swinging around is connected only by “and” with the clause “the eyes, the eyes were there,” there seems something causal about the relation. Further, the repetition of “eyes” makes me wonder. Is it emphasis, and if so what is being emphasized and why? And “the eyes” raise an interesting grammatico-lexical question. Spanish prefers the definite article to possessive adjectives with body parts: los ojos can be Englished either as “the eyes” or “her eyes.” The translator’s choice of “the eyes” strikes me as significantly correct. (In the next paragraph, however, Cortázár writes sus ojos negros.) In short, I’m not at all clear that “the” eyes are hers. Certainly calling them “the eyes” detaches them from the body, estranges them, makes them potentially sinister. Are the eyes those of some external person, the “wind” that drives the weathercock?

That every gaze “oozes with mendacity” seems on the surface a citation of a narrator’s cultural generalizing code. But what exactly does it mean? “Oozes” activates the metaphoric code, and I have trouble with its tenor. Does it mean that looking is itself intrinsically mendacious, causes or generates lies? Or that the objects of looking potentially entail mendacity, i.e., appearances may or may not be what they seem? The difference between “The pond oozes slime” and “The pond oozes with slime” is subtle but important; in the first case, the implication is that the pond generates the slime, in the second that the pond is a more or less indifferent host of the slime. Other translations of rezumar that I find in the Spanish-English dictionary are “exudes” and “seeps.” Perhaps the stress is on the involuntariness of the gazer’s predicament — perhaps “one cannot help risking a false interpretation through contemplating an appearance.” Expelling “us furthest outside ourselves,” in this context, seems to mean
that of all the senses, seeing is the most far-ranging, therefore the most likely to be alienated from the rest of the body.

It is interesting to note that the narrator again refers to his visual sensitivity, not to validate (or even mention) a photographic ability but rather an investigative or even detective ability. Like Sherlock Holmes, he sees because he can make proper allowances for the omnipresence of false appearance (code of character: avocation). This elaborate philosophizing on the difference between appearance and reality is peculiarly undercut in two ways. For one thing, the paragraph ends lamely and inconclusively: “... all that is difficult besides.” For another, the parentheses make fun of the observer. The narrator, Michel, is accused of “rambling.” Does the accusing voice belong to another speaker, say an “effaced” narrator, or simply to another aspect of Michel’s personality? My previous reasons for assuming that Michel is the narrator, that another narrator does not stand behind him, are no more threatened by this oddity than by the switching around among the pronoun persons. I cannot find a new reason for believing that the narrator is someone other than Michel. Yet I wonder why he should take such a detached view of himself. If it is Michel, the self-mockery is sharp and devastating: it says, in effect, “Don’t pay much attention to me, folks, I just ramble on.”

More confusion greets me in paragraph eleven. Michel remembers the “boy’s image before [or “rather than”]: Spanish antes que his actual body,” but “remembers the woman’s body much better than [mejor que] her image.” Now one can remember an actual object either in terms of a mental image or in terms of an abstract, say a verbal, notion. But this distinction is not at all between the object seen and the mental representation of that object. It’s possible, I suppose, that “image” (imagen) here means “immediate, therefore general or hazy impression,” although that would be strange, in English at least. Another possibility is that “image” is the fixed photographic image (as opposed to the memory of the actual body-as-remembered). But the moment of the snapping of the picture does not take place until paragraph sixteen, so either this is an anticipation to be held in mind, on the strength of previous citations of the photographic code, or some kind of metaphorical distinction (code of figures) between appearance (province of the camera, of art) and reality (province of the mind, of nature). Or the “image” may be Michel’s first fixed visual impression or “shot,” the snapshot in his mind, whereas “the actual body” would be the body in movement, from all its visual perspective (“that will clear itself up later”: notice the future tense, ambiguously “later in story-time” and/or “later in discourse-time”). If my assumption is correct, if he is in fact acting like a camera, I can either account for it in a metaphorical code (the same used by Christopher Isherwood in his Berlin Stories) or in more literal codes. Given Michel’s second-paragraph longings to be like (or to be, tout court) a typewriter/camera, I am disposed to the latter view. Whichever interpretation I pick, it seems clear that confusion continues in the narrator’s mind and expression, corroborating my earlier sense of his ambivalence (code of psychology). A similar point about the “unfair words” (palabras injustas): “willowy” (delgada) and “svelte”
(esbeta) are not “unfair” to the blond in any sense that I can make out, since they are complimentary. And even if they weren’t, it hardly seems reasonable for Michel to apologize for saying derogatory things about this apparently objectionable woman. More ambivalence. The best that I can make of it for now is in terms of the psychopathology code — the narrator’s perception is/was affected by his emotional state, although possibly a code of philosophy is saying “Perception is never correct, by definition. it is always ‘unjust’ (in the sense of ‘inexact’).” Both could work: the philosophy code, of course, can be a mere facade or pretext for the deeper code of psychopathology.

The code of figures (metaphor) obviously has to be consulted to understand the wind “cutting out,” “framing” (not “paring away”) her face (recortaba su cara). “Framing” makes sense in the photography code: “including in an area, usually a small rectangle, of vision, and thus ‘cutting off’ from the rest of the world.” As for the world “left standing (dejaba al mundo de pie) horribly alone in front of her black eyes,” the idea that the whole world should stand before a single person (even the most powerful), that she could make its billions of people and animals feel “alone” hardly makes sense even as hyperbole. But the context suggests figurative codes — symbolism and hyperbole — deriving perhaps Michel’s sympathy with the boy from his consideration of the full ramifications of the woman’s act (to be spelled out later). In her potency as a general instrument of evil, she acquires this sort of power. Given that symbolization, her eyes can be both sinewy as eagles and puffy as green slime. All of which persuades me that the degree of animosity against the woman and the narrator’s sympathy-identification with the boy is greater than I had thought in paragraph ten: the seeds mentioned in my discussion there are beginning to sprout, and I eagerly await the blooms.

Paragraph twelve is fairly easily identified again as a speculation about the boy’s life from his appearance (code of traditional narrative description, code of surprise). I conclude (through a code of value) that the narrator thinks that adolescence is a pretty great time of life (“total love . . . availability analogous to the wind and the streets”), and when I read in paragraph thirteen “This biography was of the boy and of any boy whatsoever,” my intimation of a narrator-boy nexus is strengthened. The boy is innocence on the verge of corruption, and the woman is corrupting Eve (code of symbols). There are, after all, other ways of thinking of adolescent boys — as pains in the neck, for example. That innocence is what the narrator sees and identifies with in the boy is underlined by the images: he is “a terrified bird,” a “Fra Fillipo angel, rice pudding with milk.” Identification is also hinted by his observation that both he and the boy have their gloves in their pocket (paragraphs 8 and 12). But I sense overtones that I cannot fit into the chord. Especially the angel seems a bit excessive, and I seek future clarification.

In paragraph thirteen, the narrator says that he could not see the sky because he “could do nothing but look at [the blond and the boy] and wait, look at them and . . .” Why could Michel do nothing but look and wait? He could easily have intervened, if he thought the boy was being taken advantage of. Something
inhibited him. It wasn’t politeness — he didn’t think twice about taking the photograph in paragraph sixteen. It looks like the same ambivalence and passivity he has suffered from since the first paragraph. The code of psychology suggests more than ever that his behavior is odd. I sense definite recourse to a code of psychopathology. That would certainly help to explain “look at them and…”, not only a repetition but a fragment ending in dots of ellipsis. This citation from the code of punctuation suggests endless repetition, that is, psychological obsession. (Repetition and ellipsis could mean something else, e.g., emphasis, but this context seems to obviate it.) The obsessive pours over and over things, like a cow chewing its cud. “To cut it short” I see as an embarrassed recognition of that habit. (Cf. other examples of berating himself for lingering — “Michel rambles on to himself,” and so on.) The narrator continues speculating, but it is now about what happened immediately before and what will happen immediately after. I note the elaborateness of his postulated alternatives. Was the boy there first or the blond? Would he bolt or stay? The concern is more elaborate than an ordinary Sunday photographer looking for a picturesque shot would need to exhibit. The obsession hypothesis is getting confirmed. “Any of this could happen, though it wasn’t happening yet” (Todo esto podía ocurrir pero aún no ocurría). “Michel perversely waited”: why “perversely”? On the surface because he violates the code of etiquette (cf. paragraph seventeen: the blond says no one has the right to photograph without permission). But I now know enough about Michel’s mind to guess at a deeper reason. It is perverse to sit and do nothing, at best to take a photograph. Perhaps he is mentally paralyzed in some way (code of psychology). In this context, “picturesque” invokes the code of irony: given his mountingly obsessive preoccupation, Michel’s picture will hardly be taken for Sunday-hobby reasons.

“Strange how the scene was taking on a disquieting aura” argues that this feeling was unusual to him. “Almost nothing” is the appearance, the way others would see it. “Strange” is the way he sees it. To prove to himself that the plot (in both senses of the word) is no figment of his imagination, he decides to photograph it, thereby “reconstituting things in their true stupidity”: a citation of a code of big cynicism. Here I discover some potential answers to questions that began back in paragraph seven. There he said that the good photographer preserves the distracted note, that is, refuses to be trapped into seeing things as if they were always framed by his viewfinder. Now he seems to be saying the opposite: the scene is becoming disquieting (is he the one making it so?). He is going to use the camera to quiet it (himself?) down. I picture a man who uses his camera, a machine, to distance himself from the world, especially from its more painful aspects. That might explain, too, why he seems passive, reluctant to intervene, in a way helpless. The code of psychopathology tells me that there are people who will go to considerable lengths to stabilize the world, to “fix” it in some image that they find comfortable. Though he speaks of the normal banal life of Paris as “stupid,” he seems to need that stupidity. Why? What fear is it warding off?

A man in grey hat sitting in a car catches the corner of his eye. Michel
philosophizes. That is, Michel-as-character philosophizes, back at the story-moment (by the narrative-discourse code of mental entry) that cars are “private cages.” At first I take it as a random description (codes of narrator’s description). He contrasts it with the freedom of wind and sunlight, and might just as well have included clouds. The code of text-cohesion whispers to me that the contrast between cages and sky and clouds is somehow important and that I must extract a meaning from it. Later I shall discover a sinister connection with Michel’s own plight. I note, too, that the narrator acts as if he knows nothing about this man. Though the man is to play a crucial role, this ignorance feels familiar; it is the conventional narrative code (used, say, in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*) in which the “I”-narrator, though living after the events of the story, pretends to see them as if contemporaneously, exhibiting the unwitting character’s ignorance. As narrator, later in the discourse, after the fact, Michel will argue that the man in the car is a principal in the unfolding tragicomedy. But as a character, in story-time, he may be permitted not to know (code of discourse: allowable disclaimers of knowledge by a narrator who was formerly a character in the story he narrates).

Michel prepares to shoot the picture: “Aperture at sixteen” (code of technology, photography: the “f-stop”). He “studies a focus,” i.e., focusses his camera on another object in the immediate visual field, which is, he guesses, at the same distance as his real target (code of art of candid photography). At this point, as character engaged in his hobby, Michel seems relatively active and healthy, recognizing even the esthetic need for a “rhythmmed” photograph, to avoid the sense of stiffness. (It is the character-Michel of the “distracted eye,” paragraph seven, not the narrator-Michel who earlier in the discourse needed the mechanical quietus of the camera.) Now a photograph cannot have rhythm in the literal sense of the word, since it is fixed once and for all by its chemical and physical nature. But the metaphor is meaningful and “healthy”: I know perfectly well what he means; I have seen both good and bad photographs, and have noted that good ones contain or suggest incipient movement, i.e., the subject is caught at a moment and in a posture which I find dynamic, that is, about to move, whereas in bad photographs the subjects seem painfully posed, stuck there by the photographer in a rigid, uncomfortable and essentially artificial stance. The stiff image destroys artistic rhythm by breaking time into pieces instead of preserving the illusion of duration. The facial and bodily expression of the figure and its disposition in the frame of the picture give the sense that its very movement have been caught. Only in that figurative sense can we say that a fixed image has “rhythm” and “movement.” Photographers catch things at the one exact instant which communicates the whole time-period of which it is a fraction (code of figures, visual synecdoche; code of photographic art).

The woman strips the boy of what is left of his freedom, hair by hair: I cannot help associating this graphically described process with Michel’s own struggles with freedom (wanting to give it up, being helpless, seeing the car as a private cage, and so on). The “possible endings” again reiterate the elaborateness of his fantasizing about what will happen, and the fact that he intentionally closed his
eyes suggests that he is fantasizing under some strong inner compulsion. Once more I note repetition, suggestive of a nervous man’s need to persuade himself: “It might go like that, it might very well go like that.” A preoccupied tone of voice must accompany that repeated phrase.

I note too that the assertion that follows is given added weight by the indirect free discourse form. Logically, of course, the sentence must be something like “[Michel, the character (not, I, the narrator) realized that] that woman was not looking for the boy as a lover . . .” Casting the phrase in its free rather than tied form gives it added authority since it leaves open the possibility that the narrator may also (or independently) be certifying it (code of discourse: free indirect style). But again I note how much is inferential, how as narratee I’m being asked to go along with a whole set of suppositions about the meanings of other characters’ behavior with no independent evidence for it. That would be fine if I had reason to trust the narrator-character’s reliability, but by this time, I no longer have. (I think we do tend to give narrators the benefit of the doubt until we are persuaded otherwise.) I note too that the direction of surmise seems to be closing toward some goal: 1) she wanted to seduce him, 2) no, her intentions were other, even more vile, a) perhaps, sadistically, to torment him, b) to dominate him to some unknown end for a game’s sake, c) indeed, for someone else. He is preparing me for “someone else” but on little more than an intuition (or so it seems now; later I shall think otherwise).

The conclusion is presented as a mere hunch — no evidence is offered to verify it. Indeed, the “other” voice of the narrator, which we’ve heard before (the mocker of Michel’s “rambling”) pooh-poohs the idea: “Michel is guilty of making literature.” This “other,” I assume again, is only the post-story, discourse voice of the narrator. And it knows very well (as I discover after finishing the story) that the character-Michel’s hunch is all too accurate. Again we have the kind of anomaly which has faced us since the beginning of the story: two voices warring with each other, yet no reason to believe that they belong to different people. How to explain it? The first two sentences of paragraph sixteen are self-deprecating. Michel (this alter ego complains) imagines “exceptions to the rule,” “individuals outside the species,” “monsters.” What rule? Presumably the rule of normal predictability, according to the code of the social order: an older woman approaching a young boy is interested either in money (code of prostitution) or in some “special pleasure” (code of sexual behavior: perhaps as in the film Madame Rosa, where a prostitute gets attracted to the pubescent hero, an angelic-looking Arab boy). The rest of the paragraph is defensive, self-justificatory. The warring in the psyche continues (if my hypothesis is correct). He takes the picture not to change anything out there, that is, to help the boy (though later he pats himself on the back for doing so), but rather because he knows that he will not be able to resist fantasizing about the woman (“I’m given to ruminating”), and he wants somehow a fixed, mechanical record of her. The code of psychopathology seems richly invoked. He prepares for a whole spate (“several days”) of obsessing. He doesn’t trust himself, his own memory: he wants a picture record... for what purpose? To “hang onto” (as the
painter Bill says in the film version)? To “help” him in his ruminations? Again, and even more strongly, we get the sense of a man whose hobby represents far more for him, psychically, than a way to pass leisure hours pleasantly. He takes the picture, with predictable reactions: the boy is surprised, the woman irritated. I note that Michel not only infers, from her appearance, the woman’s feelings (a look of surprise, a look of “flat-footed hostility”), but goes on to divine a cause of those feelings (“robbed.” “ignominiously recorded”). This could, in another story, involve a peering into a character’s mind licensed by the omniscient narrator’s code. In this text, however, I now have good reason to recognize an instance of the very “imaginings” or obsessions that he has just spoken about.

So the note beginning in paragraph seventeen sounds hollow: it’s not worth the trouble to go into great detail, he protests. After the veritable flood of minute particulars of what probably happened, what might happen, and so on! The code here is not ironic, since the narrator seems unaware of the discrepancy: it is the macho tone of earlier paragraphs, the bravado that says “I don’t care; nothing can hurt me because I’m so tough.” Indeed, he speaks the way the boy might speak if we could hear him, strengthening my sense of their identification. Perhaps the boy’s imagined emotions are Michel’s emotions (code of psychology: identification, in the technical sense). The same bravado seems to inform his reaction to the blond’s request for the film: “For my part, it hardly mattered whether she got the roll of film or not, but anyone who knows me will tell you, if you want anything from me, ask nicely” (code of sociology: the macho; code of psychopathology: compensation for emotional insecurity). I note that he just doesn’t say he demands to be treated nicely: he must drag in “anyone who knows me,” as if he needed to justify himself by citing his reputation. I remember the uneasiness he expressed in going downstairs, how he needed to invite the reader to join him (paragraph four). His report of what he actually said to the blond, however, is curiously formal and distant, even stilted: “I restricted myself to formulating the opinion that not only was photography in public places not prohibited, but it was looked upon with decided favor, both private and official.” Such elegant diction sorts queerly with a tough guy speaking to a tart Parisienne (let alone a Parisian tart). I see evidence of a gap between Michel’s view of himself and how he actually comes off in public, another sign that all is not well with him psychologically, especially in the area of aggression and hostility (code of psychopathology: discrepancy between feelings and external behavior). I note too how the oddly stilted and distanced grammar of the next sentence corroborates this interpretation: instead of “While I said that,” we read “While that was getting said” (the English passive translating the Spanish reflexive). It’s as if Michel were some inert conduit through which his words were “getting said,” or maybe a phonograph cartridge picking up and echoing pre-ordained vibrations (I remember his previous longing to have other machines — the typewriter and the camera — tell the story for him). Michel’s passivity is taking on alarming proportions, for all his disclaimers to the contrary. Or perhaps because of those disclaimers. The boy disappears “like a gossamer filament of angel-spit.” I discover from Spanish speakers that the flowery
English translates a banal expression for the transparent spider-web-like threads sometimes seen floating in the air. The literal translation is “like the hair of the Virgin.” I assume that the translator changed it to make an antithesis with the “devil-spit” of the next paragraph. On either reading the boy is seen as lily-white compared to the coal-black evil woman. I note the histrionic and hyperbolic expression and wonder if it has anything to do with my theory of an emerging pattern of psychopathology. In the code of Roman Catholicism the Virgin is traditionally associated with protection, safety; she is a favorite guardian saint. Thus the innocent boy loses himself in her hair, joins the thousands and millions of other “hairs” that safely waft about her head. And he himself is “heavenly.”

“But virgin-hair is also called devil-drool.” The meaning of the Spanish title “Las Babas del diablo” now becomes clear: the expression “devil-spit” (or “-drool”) means about the same as English “close shave”: a tight situation in which danger is so near that one can almost feel drops of the devil’s saliva (code of Spanish idiom, based on the code of figurative language: metonymy). But the literal sense also has a kind of punning import, since there is the comparison of the blond’s curses (“spit out”) and the devil’s saliva. I also realize, from what little I know of the codes of Latin culture, that these are not really religious references. Catholic dogma would not equate luck with the Virgin, however much that may be done by the masses. Michel’s taking “great pains to smile” seems to be another instance of the shy-boy macho stance: the show of self-assurance which is purchased at some cost. The man in the gray hat now arrives to take up his part in the “comedy.” This characterization of the episode, like previous ones, ostensibly slights it, in the code of the tough urbanite, but I now know better. In retrospect, too, I see again that Michel-as-narrator is withholding information. A traditional narrative code, of course, permits him to do so: though he must know, since he is telling us after the fact and could tell us straight off what part the man was playing, he elects not to, either to heighten suspense (code of the first person narrator-protagonist, code of plot suspense) or to preserve the order of his own perception (he knew that the “clown” was involved, but not exactly how). Or both, since his suspense and curiosity must perforce be ours.

When Michel tells us that the man had been pretending to read the paper we are again in the code of surprise (for all the assuredness of Michel’s diction). It seems more and more important to get clear about what actually happened on the Ile de la Cité. But it is difficult to do so, since our only source of information is Michel himself, and we have begun to suspect his reliability. He describes the man, the “flour-powdered clown,” in a peculiar mechanical metaphor (his grimace went from one side of his mouth to another as though on wheels). And he confesses that he does not know why he got down off the railing or why he did not give them the photo. But I can guess why, if my psychological hypothesis is correct. He felt threatened, and could not decide whether to fight or to flee. His macho stance prevented him from accepting his own fear and also what caused it, his identification with the boy. The part about their fear and cowardice may be an accurate assessment. But I feel, from previous surmises about Michel, that
something else may be going on. Perhaps he is projecting, putting on the others what he feels himself (code of psychopathology). A possible balance-sheet stands thus: he identifies with the boy — who thereby is made a paragon of virtue, a hair of the Virgin — and projects his negative feelings onto the man and the blond — whom he endows with all the vices of the devil. Given the form of the discourse, I do not have any outside independent proof of their guilt, since, by the code of the first person narrator, any evidence acquired about anything in the story has been strained through Michel’s consciousness. For all I really know they may be as innocent as lambs. I remember fictions, like Henry James’ “The Lie,” where the code of the “unreliable narrator” permitted lies, distorting, manipulations of the facts to suit the narrator’s own ends. Michel’s contempt for their “cowardice and fear” could easily be an unconscious reaction to the cowardice and fear which he refuses to recognize in himself. That would certainly explain the discrepancy between his stance of bravado and what he actually permits himself to do. His tension is high and rising (“we made a perfect and unbearable triangle”). The laugh he flings in their faces seems designed more to break that tension than to mock them. He walks off “a little more slowly, I imagine, than the boy.” “I imagine” could perhaps be taken in the codes of sarcasm or understatement. But the fact that he compares his walking off to that of the boy lends support to my previous hunches about Michel’s sense of identification with the boy. Michel too feels that he is escaping something dreadful, even though, as a street-wise adult (if we are to believe his own picture of himself), it is hard to see why he is in any particular danger, at the level of “reality.” at least.

IV. STORY: SECOND STAGE: MICHEL’S ROOM
A space occurs between paragraph nineteen and twenty, and this citation of the typographical code seems explained by the first sentence: “What follows occurred here, almost just now.” The story-moment has been brought virtually (though not quite) up to the present discourse-moment, the “now” when “one wonders and wonders.” The space is the sign of a textual juncture. The first stage of the story ended with Michel walking off in apparent triumph, leaving the pair stymied. The narrative now concerns what happened later, immediately before Michel started to type. I look forward to learning why he wanted to tell the story (as well as why he is so conflicted about it). The account starts calmly enough. He lists the shots he developed, mentioning that of the blond and the kid last, almost as an afterthought (“then he found two or three proof-shots”). Of that shot, he makes a poster-size enlargement, ostensibly because both negative and first enlargement were so “good.” “Good” in what sense I ask, for he admits that only the shots of the Conservatoire were worth all that work? “Good” seems not to be a term in the esthetic code. It could be “good” simply in the technical code, I suppose, “well-exposed” or the like, but somehow I don’t believe it. There’s already too much to suggest that Michel has strong psychological investment in what happened on the Ile de la Cité that morning, and his ambivalence (“one wonders and wonders”) remains evident. He tacks it up on the wall and is
constantly drawn away from his work to look at it. Knowing something about him, I seek obsessive, identificatory, projective reasons, and I am not disappointed. At first the blow-up inspires him to “remember”... what? Presumably all the details of what had occurred. He speaks of “comparing the memory with the lost reality.” Though elsewhere he has shown excitement and curiosity, he describes the operation as “gloomy.” Why “gloomy”? Is there a hint (in the psychopathological code) about the price he’s paying for his obsession, that the inquiry itself is morbid, fraught with personal conflict? There is confusion in the expression: how can one compare a memory with a past reality except through the function of the faculty of memory? And if this “frozen memory” is so complete and accurate, why should the comparison be gloomy? Because the reality is “lost”? But the experience was unpleasant: why should he “miss” it? I am impressed that the memory of the scene is frozen or petrified — like a photo. I focus not only on the fixedness of the memory (a play, too, on “fixative” in the code of photography, and by figurative implication, obsessiveness in the psychopathological code), but also its eerie completeness — “nothing is missing, not even, and especially nothingness, the true solidifier of the scene.” “Solidifier” translates fijador, a technical term in photography, the acid bath for fixing the image after development (code of photography, code of figures). But the equation of memory and photograph is no mere metaphor: he does not say “a frozen memory, like a photo...” but “a frozen memory, like any photo...” (the Spanish has todo photo, “every photo”). Seeing memories as fixed and complete photos ties in with Michel’s earlier yearnings that typewriter and camera take over for him, disburden him from personal responsibility. The snapshot-in-the-head should be “snapped” by eyes-become-cameras. But the nothingness that is not missing, what could that be? One obvious meaning would be the empty space, the background against which all objects and their actions must stand out (code of visual perception, code of design). But perhaps something more profound is being said: could the “nothing” be precisely the absence of meaning of the situation, an absence which can only be filled by the kind of speculation that he now seems to be indulging in? That meaning, like beauty, lies always and inherently in the eye of the beholder, no matter how he tries to squirm out of his responsibility? “There was the boy, there was the woman” sounds like a kind of obsessive stock-taking (code of psychopathology): Michel examines the photo intently for a clue of some sort. “The first two days I accepted what I had done...” suggests to me: a) that “afterwards” he no longer accepted it, but no exact mention of a later period occurs (code of chronology falsely invoked); and b) that what he had done makes him feel guilty in some way. But why? Superficially, for wasting his time? More deeply, for intruding on “life”? For peeping? He sounds like a small or adolescent boy. Looking up now and then from his work, he examines the blow-up: “the first surprise was stupid” (badly translated as “I’m such a jerk”). I naturally awaited a second surprise, but again am disappointed. The code of the potential series is regularly evaded in “Blow-Up.” He is sitting directly facing the photo, but notes that if he sat at the diagonal, say 45 degrees or more either to the
left or the right of the central axis of the picture, he might be able to make fresh discoveries. This seems a citation of a code of detection. Michel no longer looks at the photo with even a pretense of esthetic interest: he clearly wants to discover something in it. (The search becomes the whole point of Antonioni’s movie *Blow-Up.*) But I find the notion very odd. If we think about photography as a preeminently flat, surface art, I wonder how anybody can claim to see more if he looks at the images from an oblique angle. A photo is not a piece of sculpture: it has no third dimension. Nor is it a *trompe l’œil* painting, in which a shape is undecipherable if seen frontally but clear if seen from an angle. The code of detection is not developed, as traditionally in detective fiction. There is no mention of *what* he saw at that oblique angle that he could otherwise not see. What we get is a reference to a “dry leaf... admirably situated to valorize a lateral section.” The “lateral section” seems to be some kind of perspective marker (code of visual design). Here it establishes, validates the perception of a third dimension. So I infer that the “surprise” was to discover not a new element in the picture, but a new frame, a new “deep” space for it, a third dimension. Underplayed as it is, this discovery marks a dramatic change in the story, for the three-dimensional proves to be no mere figure or artistic license, but a space actually to be inhabited. Subtle hints begin to drop that the narrator shall (passively) participate in events in that space. For instance, he does not say that he looked at the woman but rather that she “caught his eye.” His vision is the object of a predicate governed by the woman.

The code of grammar tells me that an event in the discourse-time, like taking a rest from his translation, is by convention less convenient than the remembering of an event in the story-time (“I enclosed myself happily... in that morning”). In narratives, the discourse exists for the sake of the story, not the other way around. I note the inconsistency of “happily” with previous negative feelings about the events, with the “gloomy operation” of memory, and chalk it up to Michel’s continuing emotional vacillation and ambivalence (code of psychopathology). His ironic detachment is undercut by what turns out to be self-reassuring rationalization or even apology — I note the concessions in “Basically, I was satisfied with myself” (implication: though peripherally dissatisfied), in “my part had not been too brilliant,” in his regret that he hadn’t thought “to leave without a complete demonstration of the rights, privileges and prerogatives of [naturalized] citizens.” Even his satisfaction in helping the boy is self-eroded in no less than four different ways: “if my theorizing was correct, which was not sufficiently proven,” “out of plain meddling,” “now he would be regretting it,” “Michel is something of a Puritan.” Again the psychopathological implications seem clear. There is a moment when a realistic view prevails, where he speaks of his “theory,” rather than taking the unexamined fantasies as the reality. But this proves to be only a lull before the outbreak of the storm.

The twenty-first paragraph begins by further undercutting the previous paragraph’s satisfaction at a job well-done. *Before*, Michel says, while still working on his translation, he did not know why he had hung the enlargement on the wall; a code of logical consequence implies that *afterwards* he did. But we
never really learn if that is true, for he never tells us. One more attempt to make things sound logical and consequential fails, one more sense that Michel is being drawn into something irrational, unexplainable. For reasons beyond his understanding, he felt compelled to hang the photo. His anxiety echoes in the repetition of “the [unknown] reason, the reason,” as if grasping at the word might help him understand the reason. The act of hanging the photo was not only inexplicable but “fatal.” Passivity in some sense presupposes fatalism. Passive people don’t do things; things simply happen to them. And “fatal” how? The sentence that follows gives an extraordinary answer: “I don’t think the almost-furtive trembling of the leaves on the tree alarmed me. I was working on a sentence and rounded it out successfully.” It seems clear that this is no figurative or remembered movement or sound but literally and uncannily the rustle of leaves which issues forth from the photo. Unless the story now turns supernatural, this is a delusion, the second and confirming piece of evidence of a full-scale hallucination, intermingling with the sense that the flat space of the photo has extended into a third dimension.

“Habits,” Michel says, “are like immense herbariums.” Which habits? Perhaps “habit” refers backwards, to the process of translation: “the movement of the leaves did not alarm me because I was deep in the habitual process of translating, doing my usual work.” But the code of punctuation prompts me to ask: why then is the “habit” sentence connected in such an offhand way, by a casual, even unwitting, comma-splice, to the “movie-screen” sentence? Is he referring to another habit entirely, that of imaginatively projecting himself into the space of a self-created visual artifact? The large size (movie-screen) of hallucination replaces the small size (32 x 28 cms.) of reality. Further, an herbarium houses a collection of dried plants systematically arranged. Again the systematized, unfree, catalogued note. So when he tells me that the enlargement “in the end” (i.e., finally, after all this inspection, reverie, reminiscing) “looks like” a movie-screen, I begin to wonder whether he does not simply mean that it is a movie-screen. The twenty-second paragraph seems to justify my suspicion.

V. STORY: THIRD STAGE: INSIDE THE BLOW-UP

“Her hands were just too much.” The code of grammar demands “...too much for whom?” Again I suspect the identification that has begun to haunt me — “too much” both for the boy and for Michel, whose curiosity, dread, excitement are also aroused. In the midst of a sentence, Michel sees the woman’s hand begin to close on the boy. I feel that her movement is not happening in memory, but right now, literally before Michel’s eyes. He literally sees this movement. All the possible illusions of reality have now transformed the photograph into a full-blown hallucination: it has depth, it emits sounds, it displays internal movements. It is not only a movie screen but a holographic movie screen, an illusionary space which the hallucinator may enter, indeed will soon be forced to enter. And when he says “there was nothing left of me,” I take him literally; he has exited this ordinary world and entered that of the photograph-become-hallucination. Suddenly, the statement that he was dead, in the first paragraph,
falls into place. He follows the action in the "photo": with abnormal close attention: the kid ducking like a boxer, the woman murmuring and kissing him, then the boy nervously looking for the man once he begins to understand the woman’s message, the "master” coming on the scene. Only at this moment, the moment of Michel’s compulsive inspection of the blow-up, does he infer, to his horror, that the seduction was for homo- rather than heterosexual purposes. I see now that the moment of discovery has been elaborately timed in two ways, through the chronology of story and through that of discourse: 1) Michel only "discovers" the "real" nature of the "plot" (quotation marks of "as if") when the boy “discovers” it, that is, at the appropriate moment in Michel’s own hallucinations. If the situation were normal, I might infer that the events as Michel actually experienced them back on the Île de la Cité went by too fast. Only by powerful imagining — a "slow-up" in time, corresponding to the spatial blow-up — can he make a more careful examination of the boy’s face, thereby permitting him to learn the "truth." But the real reason seems to be converse: events slow up precisely because he cannot help it; he is doomed to be obsessed by them, in excruciating detail. 2) By exercising the first-person narrator’s conventional right to withhold information, Michel insured that our own discovery of the "facts" should exactly coincide with his and the boy’s (answering the question about the reason for the teasing delay of the last sentence of paragraph eighteen, “It was only at the point that I realized [the man] was playing a part in the comedy”). But it occurs to me, here again, that Michel-as-narrator cannot help this kind of timing: he does not do it to heighten our frisson, but to re-enact the events for himself. The re-enactment entails a compulsive re-ordering, one that does not jibe with the sequence reported in the paragraphs fourteen through nineteen, but precisely with his own inner needs.

I wonder why the difference between a heterosexual and a homosexual pickup should be so horrifying (remembering that the horrible “reality” is the reality of a hallucination). The code of psychopathology suggest that I look in the direction of what I have learned in previous paragraphs about Michel’s own psyche — the identification with the boy, the fantasy about his purity (“to lead the angel with his tousled hair”), this observation that he is not the first man to send a woman to entrap a young boy. Ostensibly, it seems like a big-city platitude (code of narrator’s generalization). But I have already seen such platitudes conceal psychological blocks in this man. So I take the question seriously: Was there also "a first man" in Michel’s own experience? Was Michel seduced as a young boy in this way? Or did he simply fear such a seduction, his tough stance developing to cover apprehension about his own latent homosexual impulses? The story refuses to tell me; it’s not that kind of story. But in a way it doesn’t matter, since (as the code of psychopathology again suggests) the fear of an incident may be more disturbing than the incident itself. Though “Michel follows the action,” I must always remember that this action is not what he actually told us he saw on the Île de la Cité; in paragraph seventeen our last glimpse of the boy was as he ran past the car; only afterwards did the man come out, and then Michel simply left. So what I am reading now cannot be a mere filling out of Michel’s memory
through forgotten details; it must be an alternative version. Yet unlike previous alternative versions (e.g., in paragraph fifteen: “closing my eyes, I set the scene”), there is no acknowledgement or recognition by Michel that he is in fact fantasizing. This is a hallucination, not mere fantasy (code of psychopathology). I note, too, a histrionic note in the mounting chord of hysteria. Forgetting the tough city code, Michel says that the “reality,” as he now sees it, i.e., hallucinatorily, is more horrible than what he had imagined earlier, a heterosexual pick-up of unclear motive. But there was no mention earlier of “horror”; at worst Michel perhaps felt a kind of cynical distaste. Further, the imagined seduction itself is painted in virtually operatic terms — “an awakening in hell.” Any lingering doubts about the personal reference, about Michel’s identification with the angelic boy, now seem dispelled, and that identification provides reasons why he takes it upon himself to be guarantor of public morality. There is a grandiose religious note; in this heated context, Michel may well be feeling the need to be a savior, indeed the Savior (he gets “nailed to the air” a few sentences later). And it is easy to see how a crisis — a “break,” in psychiatric jargon — might occur when this guarantor should discover his “failure” to save all the boys of Paris. The shell of his neurosis or psychosis is about to crack open. And like all neurosis or psychosis it is, in Karen Horney’s words, “a search for glory.” There is rue and perhaps anger in his recognition that this boy, or some boy somewhere in Paris, might say “yes,” — whatever saviors might hope to do for them. Michel cannot stop the world (in Carlos Castenada’s sense). He is the victim of all-or-nothing logic (code of psychopathology). His inability to accept the limits of his powers leaves him broken, reduced to impotence, helpless and inert as a machine without an operator.

There is in fact “nothing left of him.” “There was nothing I could do.” All that exists is what is literally happening there in the photograph-become-hallucination. The transformation is complete: his mind is now a machine or combination of machines — a movie camera, a holographic movie camera that turns thoughts into solid images, feeds them to a projector which in turn flashes them into the three-dimensional space on his wall. His total mechanization is explicit: “I turned a bit, I mean that the camera turned a little.” Imagined events have visually materialized by the intensity of his absorption with them. Even their order is dictated by Michel’s obsession. For now the man comes up to the couple while the boy is still there. “All at once,” Michel cries, “the order was inverted.” “Order” signals the code of chronology: the sequence is changed. It also signals the code of power: they, the others, were going to win. And the result is a helplessness, a state of trapped despair on his part: “[... they [man, blond, boy] were going toward their future; and I on this side, prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, prisoner of not knowing who they were, that woman, that man, and that boy, of being only the lens of my camera, something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention.” In short, what was an early wish has become a

“... All the drives for glory... aim at the absolute, the unlimited, the infinite. Nothing short of absolute fearlessness, mastery, or sainthood has any appeal for the neurotic obsessed with the drive for glory” (Horney, 1950; 34–35).
fatal reality: Michel, now turned machine, holographic recorder, can perform only one function, mainly to rehearse its obsessions. Therefore, he is incapable of helping the boy "this time" because "this time" happens not in the real world but only in Michel's mind: that is, three-dimensional, projected space. He is only the lens of his camera, "something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention." Henceforth he can only feel victimized, trapped, numb, powerless. Clearly, a common constellation of features, or "syndrome," to use the professional jargon.

Since Michel becomes a surrogate for his Contax, a machine which can only capture frozen moments of reality, time becomes frozen for him, too. I note the elaborate helpless struggle with verb tenses: "what had to happen, what had to have happened, what must have had to happen," "which was now going to happen, now was going to be fulfilled" (verbal repetition as sign of the code of obsession). The others "go to their future; he remains the prisoner of another time"; "The abusive act had certainly already taken place": he can only so surmise, since he is not in time. But a few sentences later: "[ ... ] he was going to say yes [ ... ] Everything was going to resolve itself right there, at that moment." The code of story-time has shifted into the frozen present, or more exactly, the frozen iterated present. These sentences seem to present an objective correlative of the obsessive mind at work. As the trauma is enacted (re-enacted?) it creates its own temporal frame. So ordinary chronology goes out the window.

The order is inverted: when Michel says "they were alive, moving, they were deciding and had decided, they were going to their future," the code of inference tells me that for him everything is the reverse. He is not alive, he does not move: I can read, without undue strain, "catatonic." He no longer can decide his fate, he shall be controlled by his visions and obsessions. He had no future. This "other," a frozen time, of which he is prisoner, is the eternal empty present (the time of the clouds, I suspect). His obsessions shall incarcerate him more efficiently than any jailer. It is not strange that his jail should be a terribly silent place: it is the special silence of catatonia. "stretching itself out, setting itself up." At this moment, Michel can bear it no longer and screams terribly.

At this point, with behavior so obviously clinical, I felt the need to fill out my knowledge of the code of psychopathology. What came to hand were two popularizations of psychoanalytic theory: Eric Berne (1962) and Charles Brenner (1957). After the fact, I see the eminent rhetorical suitability of dipping into such texts. They are storehouses of modern-day psychological topoi, compendia of accepted opinion about mental illness. Berne describes in detail often astonishingly similar to that of "Blow-Up" the experiences of a paranoid schizophrenic pseudonymed "Cary Fayton" (1962: 164–7). A loner most of his life, unable to make human contacts, he suffered an acute breakdown:

He saw his own feelings reflected from others, and just as a light reflected from a mirror might appear to a confused mind to come from the mirror itself, so he thought that he was loved and hated by people who hardly knew him or knew him not at all. He heard voices and saw visions which confirmed his projected feelings. [...] he put his own wishes into the minds of others and felt as if they were directed
toward himself. It was like projecting his feelings on a screen so he could sit back and watch them as though they were someone else’s [...] Thus he avoided the guilt which would have arisen if he were the aggressive one [...] In [a later] stage he lay for a long time almost as though dead. In such a state patients often show sudden, unpredictable outbursts of great violence[...]

Hence Michel’s scream, which moves him into another stage. It enables him to change the fantasy, but he only goes from the frying pan into the fire, and no less passively: he realizes that he “was beginning to move toward them,” not of his own volition but like a programmed robot. The effect uncannily resembles that of a movie camera on a dolly tracking in to closer views of its subject (code of cinematography). In his words: “... in the foreground, a place where the railing was tarnished emerged from the frame. The woman’s face turned toward me as though surprised, was enlarging, and then I turned a bit. I mean that the camera turned a little, and without losing sight of the woman I began to close in on the man ...” Finally the woman is cut out of the frame by the “camera” dollying forward. (The effect is precisely a dolly-shot, not a “zoom,” which would keep all objects in the frame.) The man in the grey hat stays center but ultimately goes out of focus as the camera approaches (this is what would happen with a real lens if it got too close to its subject). As Michel approaches, the man looks angrily out of eyes which have become mere black holes. In the code of photography the “black holes” might be taken as a product of overcontrasty lighting, but the context now overrules so simplistic a view. The man is devilish (code of symbols); his eyes are holes, like a skeleton’s. (Berne might say that his eyes project Michel’s mortido, his death-instinct.) Again, we get the grandiose note: the man wanted “to nail [Michel] onto the air” (code of Christian iconology). And at that very moment, by sacrificing himself, as Christ did for mankind, Michel saves the angelic boy again. Or rather the camera saves him, as the boy flies between it and the man. In the code of psychopathology, the boy’s salvation is a projection of Michel’s own desire to be saved — from whatever it is that makes him a helpless victim of his obsessive fantasies. He says, in so many words, that he is happy to see that the boy has “learn[ed] finally to fly across the island, to arrive at the foot-bridge.” But, since he himself remains in the clutches of his grandiose self-image, it is always the others, never himself that he “saves.” And even the others, the young boys, live only in a “precarious paradise.” I interpret this as a topos of worldly wisdom, however much entangled in the psychosis: innocence is all too easily lost in this world, the child’s naked feet cannot forever avoid the muddy streets of adulthood. The precarious paradise has its dismal counterpart in the room in which Michel is now locked away, and we begin, perhaps, to understand one meaning of the clouds (code of symbols).

Michel finds himself confronting the couple alone, “out of breath.” Surely his breathlessness reflects the fatigue of resistance to Effort rather than effort itself. He has not moved of his own volition but has been propelled malgré lui. “No need to advance closer” (a better translation than Paul Blackburn’s of no había necesidad de avanzar más) turns out to be merely wistful self-reassurance. I sense the full physical force of the verb pro-jectare, to throw forward,
reverberating against its cinematic and psychoanalytic overtones. But the relentless camera-dolly with poor Michel astride continues moving toward the man, passing the blond out of its frame. As it approaches, the man gets blurred. One understands first, at the purely technical level, that lenses are incapable of extremely close focus (code of photography). But the image of the half-open mouth, the shaking black tongue, and the man’s final transformation into a lump blotting out everything else is obviously more profoundly psychoanalytic. Michel’s worst fear is realized: he is drawn willy-nilly into the black palpat ing mouth of the putative homosexual. All his resistance, his picture-taking, his bravado, his messianism — all for naught, he breaks down into tears like an idiot. This man who would reveal corruption with his camera, hoisted on his own petard, is dragged photographically into a hellish cavern in Sodom.

VI. DISCOURSE: CLOUDS AD INFINITUM

“Now there’s a big white cloud, as on all these days, all this untellable time (este tiempo incontabile). . . what remains to be said is always a cloud.” “Blow-Up” ends with the clouds, all that is left is the clouds, and their meaning seems to fall into place in the emergent picture of Michel’s plight as we summarize their mentions:

1. “You the blond woman was the clouds” (paragraph one).
2. “I . . . see only clouds” (paragraph two).
3. He describes clouds, in a variety of shapes and colors, and their association with other fleeting things, like birds (paragraph two).
4. “Nobody knows . . . what I am seeing”; but parenthetically what he is seeing is only clouds (paragraph four).
5. The clouds must keep coming or something else will, something associated with his being “replaced” (paragraph five);
6. The pigeons seen back on the Île de la Cité in story-time “are maybe even some of those which are flying past now,” i.e., in discourse-time amid the clouds.
7. He apologizes for harping on the clouds, and notes that it is only now, in discourse-time, that he observes them; on the fatal morning, in the story-time, he didn’t look at the sky once (paragraph thirteen).
8. He develops the photo and among its other images — the woman, the boy, the tree — he sees “the sky as sharp as the stone of the parapet, clouds and stones molded into a single substance...” Michel seems to go out of his way to assert the fixity of the clouds back then, in that moment in story-time when the photo was still only a photo. However, a parenthesis immediately reiterates the sense of their constant movement now, in discourse-time: “now one with sharp edges is going by, like a thunderhead.”

The final paragraph conveys the exact moment when Michel opens his eyes after his tearful breakdown. Not a second has elapsed between paragraphs. There is no evidence that he has shifted his gaze; indeed, it is clear that he is still looking at the photo. or what was the photo. for now all there is is “a very clean, clear
rectangle tacked up with pins on the wall." Every troubling image has vanished — man, woman, boy, tree, Île de la Cité, Seine. All that is left are clouds and occasionally a pigeon or a sparrow. It is not his window that he gazes out, but the photo that he gazes into —" for a long spell you can see it raining over the picture [imagen], like a spell of weeping reversed." What better metaphor for psychotic projection could one imagine: “a spell of weeping reversed”? The photo remains a three-dimensional hallucination, but (the code of psychopathology insists) it has been swept clean of any but monotonous, benign images created by Michel’s urgent need to efface every memory of an event so endowed with traumatic import. The photograph, the projection of his psychotic needs, has virtually put him into a trance. Now that the story has caught up with the discourse, I must re-focus my image of Michel in his room. The discourse-space has become the contemporary story-space. Instead of a man at his typewriter writing his narrative, stretching his legs occasionally, getting up to drink a beer, looking out of the window, I see a man planted in a chair gazing helplessly at, and as if hypnotized by, a photograph. And why is it only clouds and other fleeting images that fill the frame? Because I infer they are soothing, graceful, silent, and, especially, they move. That is, they give off a simulacrum of life without any of its messiness, and to Michel, its horror. They can be counted on to remain always and only clouds. They come in infinite varieties of shapes, textures and colors, but they cannot harm him, they have no import, they provide a means for total and constant distraction at a safe and empty distance. They are the perfect delusional substitute for life. They serve the same function as television sets, the only active principle, one remembers with a chill, in the lives of millions of bored, trapped, lonely people, whose passivity is so great that they need to be controlled by distracting perceptual imagery. What is staggering about “Blow-Up” is our realization that Michel has been in this posture right from the beginning, but has cleverly manipulated the discourse to dissemble that fact (code of narrative structure). Instead of an O. Henry “trick-ending” in the story, the trick is in the discourse. As discourse and story join up, I feel the rug being pulled from under me. And I am led to believe that Michel will go on forever gazing at those clouds passing through his blow-up.

Fiction rarely demands ready technical expertise; and in this case its rhetoric seems satisfied by a verisimilar or folk psychiatry (albeit a modern one). But the reading of a fiction would seem unfinished without some profile of the characters one has lived with, even very briefly, as in this short story. On my reading, Michel is a paranoid schizophrenic suffering from at least the following symptoms which I summarize by comparing them with definitions in Berne’s book, my psychiatric codebook:

1) “Projection,” my manual tells me, is “a defense mechanism which results in the individual attributing a (conscious or unconscious) wish or impulse of his own to some other person or for that matter to some nonpersonal object of the outside world. A grossly pathological example of this would be a mentally ill patient who projected his impulses and as a result incorrectly believed himself in danger of physical harm from the F.B.I., the Communists, or the man next
door..." (Berne, 1962: 101). The psychosis marked most prominently by projection is paranoid schizophrenia. Now what impulses, I ask myself, could Michel be projecting? And upon whom? For one thing, the fear of being homosexually seduced, which he projects onto the boy; secondly, the more deeply repressed fear of recognizing his own homosexual impulses to seduce an "angelic" boy, which he projects onto the man in the grey hat; and, finally, the conscious longing to be at peace with the universe, to turn his obsessions off, which he projects onto real or imagined passing clouds and birds.

2) The latter projection leads to withdrawal and ultimately to catatonia. He is trapped in his top floor room, doomed to watch the clouds pass, for all intents and purposes dead (his own word) to the world. Michel's total isolation is manifest from the outset: he mentions no one else — no friend, associate, relative — no one but the three chance individuals who have come to haunt him. This early isolation corresponds to what Berne describes as a "simple withdrawal, an inability to make human contacts through either libido or mortido..." Sometimes it seems to resemble "an insufficiency of physical energy." Catatonia is only a later and exaggerated stage of this repression and rigidifying of muscles as well as emotions. I cannot, of course, know the state of Michel's musculature, and it may well be that "catatonia" is too hyperbolic to describe his final trance-like state as he stares at the photograph. It is clear, however, that at least his eye-muscles have stopped moving; they can no longer even scan the photo but are helplessly fixed upon it and by it, registering the passage of clouds from left to right. But the sudden violence characteristic of catatonia is there. Michel experiences a bizarre outburst, perhaps an attempt to alleviate his sense of oppression (first the scream and then the crying "like an idiot" of paragraph twenty-three). Michel's catatonia, symbolized by the eternally passing clouds, condemns him to his ultimate fate. Despite his feeling (paragraph five) that "it's impossible that this keep coming, clouds passing continually and occasionally a pigeon," there doesn't seem to be much he can do about it. Passive all along, he finally creates a marvellous obsessional-holographic-movie-hallucination which can occupy him — render him totally passive — for the rest of his life.

3) One of the standard symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia is grandiosity, or in Berne's phrase "heightened [self-] significance." In this stage a patient will think that he is "now the greatest man in the world, the procreator of all children, and the source of all sexual energy...a benevolent king and a great lover from whom all gifts come to men and women" (1962: 168). Michel's grandiosity is amply attested by his feeling that he alone of all men is uncompromised and fated to tell this tremendous story (paragraph two) and by the implication that in saving the angelic boy, he is saving "any boy whatsoever" (this, of course, is his way of saving himself, his own innocence, as projected onto this boy).

4) Michel is clearly paranoid: "they" will replace him, "if the clouds stop coming and something else starts." Ultimately he feels he is moving into the putative homosexual's mouth. Evidence is strong of a deep irrational terror and sense of persecution. Paranoid schizophrenics often hear voices: "the voices, of
course, [are] only another kind of projection and reflection: they [are their] own thoughts being spoken back to [them]” (Berne, 1962: 167). Michel, being a visual type, a photographer, sees images instead, but clearly the basic mechanism is the same.

5) Finally, there is Michel’s split personality, the symptom for which the disease is named. Berne prefers the term “hebephrenia,” “a frenzy of youth,” which also has interesting implications for this story since so much of Michel’s behavior is protective (and projective) of his own lost innocence. (Or is it “lost”? Maybe he is a hysterical virgin, in the grand old Freudian tradition.) The hebephrenic behaves “as though his personality was split into separate pieces, each acting independently of the others ... [his behavior is] disconnected ... with a somewhat sexy tinge” (1962: 168). Whatever its best name, a schism in his mind would explain Michel’s enormous difficulty with identity, his shifting among personal pronouns, his vacillation between vocation (dealing in words) and avocation (dealing in visual images), his job itself (translator as mediator between two languages and two worlds).

Given this profile, “unreliable” seems absurdly mild as a characterization of Michel’s narrative report (code of the discourse). If Michel is projecting his own homosexual impulses and his great fear about those impulses, the villains, the blond, and the man, may actually be quite innocent. Unlike Antonioni’s film, where we can see the corpse for ourselves, Cortázar’s story is always compromised. Bound as it is to the first person narrator-protagonist (code of the discourse), it can offer no independent evidence that the man in the grey hat is in fact a homosexual. Its limitations are also the beauty of its form. The “discovery” occurs only to Michel, in the solitude of his room. Nothing that happened out there on the Île de la Cité as first reported proves that the blond was working as a pederast’s decoy. At the one moment when something might have been said by the man and directly quoted by the narrator as evidence, I find only “The clown and the woman consulted one another in silence...” “In silence”: is it not conceivable that the man was a total stranger simply coming over to find out what was going on, perhaps to help the woman deal with this agitated fellow? I shall never know, but this inference seems as legitimate as Michel’s version. Michel, whose obsessive search through photography to fix a confusing world has failed, retreats into a catatonic obsession with the very symbols of instability, clouds, in their aimless, senseless, natural drift (code of symbolism, code of folk physics). Inanimate though they are, they show more life than he. His reality must forever remain confounded with a self-created appearance, indeed an artificial chemical copy of appearance.

The final projection is beautifully captured in the image of weeping. Michel’s response to the emotional onslaught was to burst into tears. “Normally” the lachrymal flow would go from inside outward — from tear-ducts out over the surface of the eyes and down the cheeks. But after the catatonic episode, the weeping is “reversed”: Michel turns his own tears, the liquid signs of his own violent emotion, into raindrops. The raindrops are safe because distanced: they fall from outside the cleansed frame of the photo. Two metaphors are involved:
the tears become rain, conveniently, because they stop at the transparent surface of the eye, the cornea, instead of welling past them. But the sense of the word "reverse" is also metaphorical: he has stopped his flow of tears by externalizing them, by changing them into another form of liquid, rain, issuing from another source, the clouds.

I now understand what he meant when he said that every looking oozes with mendacity. I also understand what he meant back in the first paragraph when he said "you the blond woman was the clouds..." He acknowledged at the very outset that the consequence of inquiry, from snapshot to blow-up, is that the incident and the three characters will vanish despite, indeed perhaps because of, the very minuteness of his inspection: the boy flies like a bird, the woman is brutally excluded as the camera "tracks in..." and finally the "pederast" (if such he is) loses his contour, becomes a mere blob because the camera has approached too close, beyond its own optical tolerance. Only clouds are left. The camera has exceeded its limits, its power to fix visual reality. That the blond woman, standing for the whole incident, is the clouds, has become the clouds, makes sense if we consider the attributes of clouds: fleeting, ephemeral, unstable, natural — as opposed to the fixed stability of the art of photography (and by extension any art or any human record, including the record of the memory).

I now feel the need to look for something in the story beyond the rantings of one madman struggling with apprehensions about homosexuality. My need for a thematic code demands more general implications. I can now (and only now) step back and survey the story in broader terms, as the posing of a problem I know very well, a problem seemingly inherent in the human condition. We all comb the world's appearances for its realities, but we are always and ultimately blocked not only because eyes are imperfect organs, but because our minds raise compelling reasons not to see, or to see only the reflections of distorted mirrors. As Eric Berne puts it, "Schizophrenia is just an exaggerated example of the principle that people feel and act in accordance with their inner images rather than in accordance with reality" (1962: 169). At this level, "Blow-Up" urges me to generalize the experience of the hero to my own situation as a human being in a trying world (code of philosophy, code of generalization). But this invitation comes to me late and with difficulty. It is not some glancing spark off a galactic whirligig of signifiers. The story takes on personal relevance: candor (it too is a code) urges me to recall moments when I felt victimized and projected the feeling onto others. And I recognize broader cultural overtones: projection is a mechanism — as Rollo May shows in Power and Innocence — well understood and handled by mythology. The Sphinx represented the projection of the evil feelings of Hellenic culture. Oedipus gloriously transcended his society and age, refusing to join his countrymen in that projection. He understood that "...the only way to deal with the Sphinx is to take her back to her true home within our own psyche" (May, 1972: 212). To cite the oedipal myth is not farfetched in the context of "Blow-Up." As one of my students (Eric White) pointed out, we can see the photograph and the hallucination as an enactment of the primal oedipal drama: the lust for the
mother and the consequent fear of being destroyed, in this case, literally swallowed up by, the father. Michel's drama occurs in a photographic (cinematographic, holographic) context as simple testimony to his bias of interests. But the power of the story is the resonance it has for the rest of us — projectors all — even if we don't know a Contax from an Arriflex.

My first effort depended on my own resources, my own searching among the codes of my reading experiences, so I did not seek out other interpretations of this story. Afterwards, however, I was eager to know if others agreed with me. I was delighted to discover the partial concurrence of a Cortázar specialist, Lanín A. Gyrko (1972). Gyrko concludes (1972: 217): "The maximum irony of the narrative may lie in the distinct possibility that the horrible truth that Michel believes he has discovered... may be but another fabrication of his volatile consciousness. He thus may have destroyed his own self, becoming ironically, the victim of a mere self-delusion... Truth within 'Las babas del diablo' is like the clouds that float across the blow-up that is Michel's imagination, the clouds that constantly change in size and shape. Truth is protean, evanescent, and perhaps only imaginary — or nonexistent. The only truth for Michel, and one which, ironically, he is unaware of, is the horrible reality of his own broken, obsessed, and deluded consciousness."

The value of an interpretation is its explanatory power. Otherwise we are doomed to the relativism of parti-pris and hobby-horses. Other interpretations I have read do not account for important aspects of the text. One, for instance, by Henry Fernández (1968–9) argues that the tension is an esthetic one, that a man who uses both print and photography must come to understand their limits of expressiveness; otherwise he commits the hubris deplied by Lessing. Michel, in this view, "tormented by the images in his blow-up... [ends by seeing] only a sky with moving clouds in the photograph, a constantly fluid reality existing simultaneously in time and space, which he is content to merely sit and watch... The fact that he can no longer freeze reality, as symbolized by the constantly moving blow-up, does not disturb him." The incapacity of such an interpretation to answer the veritable deluge of questions that have come up seems fairly obvious.

In June 1978 I was able to discuss the story briefly with Mr. Cortázar himself. He graciously acknowledged my interpretation but found it different from his intention as he remembered it. For him the story was essentially a fantasy. The narrator is, in his view, actually killed by the man at the end of paragraph twenty-two. The final paragraph (if I understood Mr. Cortázar correctly) was from the point of view of the camera, which he sees lying flat on the ground pointing upwards to the sky, registering the passing clouds, doomed to a perpetual recording of the empty sky.

Since our discussion was so brief, I am not sure that I grasped Mr. Cortázar's view correctly nor that he would wish me to report it. I do so on my own responsibility. Nor do I wish to engage the difficult question of the relation of the real author to his work. I shall only indicate my own difficulty in accommodating such an interpretation. For one thing, it leaves me at a loss about how to interpret the "I," not simply of the first twenty-two paragraphs but especially of the last paragraph. The "I" says that he opened his eyes and dried them with his fingers. If "I" has become a camera, what metaphor would explain the "fingers" of a camera drying its eyes? My own code of figurative language simply doesn't stretch so far — and that may be my own loss.
APPENDIX

BLOW-UP*

[1] It'll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing. If one might say: I will see the moon rose, or: we hurt me at the back of my eyes, and especially: you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my your his our yours their faces. What the hell.

[2] Seated ready to tell it, if one might go to drink a bocock over there, and the typewriter continue itself (because I use the machine), that would be perfection. And that's not just a manner of speaking. Perfection, yes, because here is the aperture which must be counted also as a machine (of another sort, a Contax 1.1.2) and it is possible that one machine may know more about another machine than I, you, she — the blond — and the clouds. But I have the dumb luck to know that if I go this Remington will sit turned to stone on top of the table with the air of being twice as quiet that mobile things have when they are not moving. So, I have to write. One of us all has to write, if this is going to get told. Better that it be me who am dead, for I'm less compromised than the rest: I who see only the clouds and can think without being distracted, write without being distracted (there goes another, with a grey edge) and remember without being distracted. I who am dead (and I'm alive, I'm not trying to fool anybody, you'll see when we get to the moment, because I have to begin some way and I've begun with this period, the last one back, the one at the beginning, which in the end is the best of the periods when you want to tell something).

[3] All of a sudden I wonder why I have to tell this, but if one begins to wonder why he does all he does do, if one wonders why he accepts an invitation to lunch (now a pigeon's flying by and it seems to me a sparrow), or why when someone has told us a good joke immediately there starts up something like a tickling in the stomach and we are not at peace until we've gone into the office across the hall and told the joke over again; then it feels good immediately, one is fine, happy, and can get back to work. For I imagine that no one has explained this, that really the best thing is to put aside all decorum and tell it, because, after all's done, nobody is ashamed of breathing or of putting on his shoes; they're things that you do, and when something weird happens, when you find a spider in your shoe or if you take a breath and feel like a broken window, then you have to tell what's happening, tell it to the guys at the office or to the doctor. Oh, doctor, every time I take a breath... Always tell it, always get rid of that tickle in the stomach that bothers you.

[4] And now that we're finally going to tell it, let's put things a little bit in order, we'd be walking down the staircase in this house as far as Sunday, November 7, just a month back. One goes down five floors and stands then in the Sunday in the sun one would not have suspected of Paris in November, with a large appetite to walk around, to see things, to take photos (because we were photographers, I'm a photographer). I know that the most difficult thing is going to be finding a way to tell it, and I'm not afraid of repeating myself. It's going to be difficult because nobody really knows who it is telling it, if I am I or what actually occurred or what I'm seeing (clouds, and once in a while a pigeon) or if, simply,

I'm telling a truth which is only my truth, and then is the truth only for my stomach, for this impulse to go running out and to finish up in some manner with, this, whatever it is.

[5] We're going to tell it slowly, what happens in the middle of what I'm writing is coming already. If they replace me, if, so soon, I don't know what to say, if the clouds stop coming and something else starts (because it's impossible that this keep coming, clouds passing continually and occasionally a pigeon), if something out of all this. And after the "if" what am I going to put if I'm going to close the sentence structure correctly? But if I begin to ask questions, I'll never tell anything, maybe to tell would be like an answer, at least for someone who's reading it.

[6] Roberto Michel, French-Chilean, translator and in his spare time an amateur photographer, left number 11, rue Monsieur-le-Prince Sunday November 7 of the current year (now there're two small ones passing, with silver linings). He had spent three weeks working on the French version of a treatise on challenges and appeals by José Norberto Allende, professor at the University of Santiago. It's rare that there's wind in Paris, and even less seldom a wind like this that swirled around corners and rose up to whip at old wooden venetian blinds behind which astonished ladies commented variously on how unreliable the weather had been these last few years. But the sun was out also, riding the wind and friend of the cats, so there was nothing that would keep me from taking a walk along the docks of the Seine and taking photos of the Conservatoire and Sainte-Chapelle. It was hardly ten o'clock, and I figured that by eleven the light would be good, the best you can get in the fall; to kill some time I detoured around by the Isle Saint-Louis and started to walk along the quai d'Anjou. I stared for a bit at the hôtel de Lauzun, I recited bits from Apollinaire which always get into my head whenever I pass in front of the hôtel de Lauzun (and at that I ought to be remembering the other poet, but Michel is an obstinate beggar), and when the wind stopped all at once and the sun came out at least twice as hard (I mean warmer, but really it's the same thing), I sat down on the parapet and felt terribly happy in the Sunday morning.

[7] One of the many ways of contesting level-zero, and one of the best, is to take photographs, an activity in which one should start becoming an adept very early in life, teach it to children since it requires discipline, aesthetic education, a good eye and steady fingers. I'm not talking about waylaying the lie like any old reporter, snapping the stupid silhouette of the VIP leaving number 10 Downing Street, but in all ways when one is walking about with a camera, one has almost a duty to be attentive, to not lose that abrupt and happy rebound of sun's rays off an old stone, or the pigtails-flying run of a small girl going home with a loaf of bread or a bottle of milk. Michel knew that the photographer always worked as a permutation of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed upon it (now a large cloud is going by, almost black), but he lacked no confidence in himself, knowing that he had only to go out without the Contax to recover the keynote of distraction, the sight without a frame around it, light without the diaphragm aperture or 1/250 sec. Right now (what a word, now, what a dumb lie) I was able to sit quietly on the railing overlooking the river watching the red and black motorboats passing below without it occurring to me to think photographically of the scenes, nothing more than letting myself go in the letting go of objects, running immobile in the stream of time. And then the wind was not blowing.

[8] After, I wandered down the quai de Bourbon until getting to the end of the isle where the intimate square was (intimate because it was small, not that it was hidden, it offered its whole breast to the river and the sky), I enjoyed it, a lot. Nothing there but a couple and, of course, pigeons; maybe even some of those which are flying past now so that I'm seeing them. A leap up and I settled on the wall, and let myself turn about and be caught and
fixed by the sun, giving it my face and ears and hands (I kept my gloves in my pocket). I had no desire to shoot pictures, and lit a cigarette to be doing something; I think it was that moment when the match was about to touch the tobacco that I saw the young boy for the first time.

[9] What I'd thought was a couple seemed much more now a boy with his mother, although at the same time I realized that it was not a kid and his mother, and that it was a couple in the sense that we always allege to couples when we see them leaning up against the parapets or embracing on the benches in the squares. As I had nothing else to do, I had more than enough time to wonder why the boy was so nervous, like a young colt or a hare, sticking his hands into his pockets, taking them out immediately, one after the other, running his fingers through his hair, changing his stance, and especially why was he afraid, well, you could guess that from every gesture, a fear suffocated by his shyness, an impulse to step backwards which he telegraphed, his body standing as if it were on the edge of flight, holding itself back in a final, pitiful decorum.

[10] All this was so clear, ten feet away — and we were alone against the parapet at the tip of the island — that at the beginning the boy's fright didn't let me see the blond very well. Now, thinking back on it, I see her much better at that first second when I read her face (she'd turned around suddenly, swinging like a metal weathercock, and the eyes, the eyes were there), when I vaguely understood what might have been occurring to the boy and figured it would be worth the trouble to stay and watch (the wind was blowing their words away and they were speaking in a low murmur). I think that I know how to look, if it's something I know, and also that every looking oozes with mendacity, because it's that which expels us furthest outside ourselves, without the least guarantee, whereas to smell, or (but Michel rambles on to himself easily enough, there's no need to let him harangue on this way). In any case, if the likely inaccuracy can be seen beforehand, it becomes possible again to look; perhaps it suffices to choose between looking and the reality looked at, to strip things of all their unnecessary clothing. And surely all that is difficult besides.

[11] As for the boy I remember the image before his actual body (that will clear itself up later), while now I am sure that I remember the woman's body much better than the image. She was thin and willowy, two unfair words to describe what she was, and was wearing an almost-black fur coat, almost long, almost handsome. All the morning's wind (now it was hardly a breeze and it wasn't cold) had blown through her blond hair which pared away her white, bleak face — two unfair words — and put the world at her feet and horribly alone in front of her dark eyes, her eyes fell on things like two eagles, two leaps into nothingness, two puffs of green slime. I'm not describing anything, it's more a matter of trying to understand it. And I said two puffs of green slime.

[12] Let's be fair, the boy was well enough dressed and was sporting yellow gloves which I would have sworn belonged to his older brother, a student of law or sociology; it was pleasant to see the fingers of the gloves sticking out of his jacket pocket. For a long time I didn't see his face, barely a profile, not stupid — a terrified bird, a Fra Filippo angel, rice pudding with milk — and the back of an adolescent who wants to take up judo and has had a scuffle or two in defense of an idea or his sister. Turning fourteen, perhaps fifteen, one would guess that he was dressed and fed by his parents but without a nickel in his pocket, having to debate with his buddies before making up his mind to buy a coffee, a cognac, a pack of cigarettes. He'd walk through the streets thinking of the girls in his class, about how good it would be to go to the movies and see the latest film, or to buy novels or neckties or bottles of liquor with green and white labels on them. At home (it would be a respectable home, lunch at noon and romantic landscapes on the walls, with a dark entryway and a mahogany umbrella stand inside the door) there'd be the slow rain of time,
for studying, for being mama's hope, for looking like dad, for writing to his aunt in Avignon. So that there was a lot of walking the streets, the whole of the river for him (but without a nickel) and the mysterious city of fifteen-year-olds with its signs in doorways, its terrifying cats, a paper of fried potatoes for thirty francs, the pornographic magazine folded four ways. a solitude like the emptiness of his pockets, the eagerness for so much that was incomprehensible but illumined by a total love, by the availability analogous to the wind and the streets.

[13] This biography was of the boy and of any boy whatsoever, but this particular one now, you could see he was insular, surrounded solely by the blond's presence as she continued talking with him. (I'm tired of insisting, but two long ragged ones just went by. That morning I don't think I looked at the sky once, because what was happening with the boy and the woman appeared so soon I could do nothing but look at them and wait, look at them and . . . ) To cut it short, the boy was agitated and one could guess without too much trouble what had just occurred a few minutes before, at most half-an-hour. The boy had come onto the tip of the island, seen the woman and thought her marvelous. The woman was waiting for that because she was there waiting for that, or maybe the boy arrived before her and she saw him from one of the balconies or from a car and got out to meet him, starting the conversation with whatever, from the beginning she was sure that he was going to be afraid and want to run off, and that, naturally, he'd stay, stiff and sullen, pretending experience and the pleasure of the adventure. The rest was easy because it was happening ten feet away from me, and anyone could have gauged the stages of the game, the derisive, competitive fencing; its major attraction was not that it was happening but in foreseeing its denouement. The boy would try to end it by pretending a date, an obligation, whatever, and would go stumbling off disconcerted, wishing he were walking with some assurance, but naked under the mocking glance which would follow him until he was out of sight. Or rather, he would stay there, fascinated or simply incapable of taking the initiative, and the woman would begin to touch his face gently, muss his hair, still talking to him voicelessly, and soon would take him by the arm to lead him off, unless he, with an uneasiness beginning to tinge the edge of desire, even his stake in the adventure, would rouse himself to put his arm around her waist and to kiss her. Any of this could have happened, though it did not, and perversely Michel waited, sitting on the railing, making the settings almost without looking at the camera, ready to take a picturesque shot of a corner of the island with an uncommon couple talking and looking at one another.

[14] Strange how the scene (almost nothing: two figures there mismatched in their youth) was taking on a disquieting aura. I thought it was imposing it, and that my photo, if I shot it, would reconstitute things in their true stupidity. I would have liked to know what he was thinking, a man in a grey hat sitting at the wheel of a car parked on the dock which led up to the footbridge, and whether he was reading the paper or asleep. I had just discovered him because people inside a parked car have a tendency to disappear, they get lost in that wretched, private cage stripped of the beauty that motion and danger give it. And nevertheless, the car had been there the whole time, forming part (or deforming that part) of the isle. A car: like saying a lighted streetlamp, a park bench. Never like saying wind, sunlight, those elements always new to the skin and the eyes, and also the boy and the woman, unique, put there to change the island, to show it to me in another way. Finally, it may have been that the man with the newspaper also became aware of what was happening and would, like me, feel that malicious sensation of waiting for everything to happen. Now the woman had swung around smoothly, putting the young boy between herself and the wall, I saw them almost in profile, and he was taller, though not much
taller, and yet she dominated him. It seemed like she was hovering over him (her laugh, all at once, a whip of feathers), crushing him just by being there, smiling, one hand taking a stroll through the air. Why wait any longer? Aperture at sixteen, a sighting which would not include the horrible black car. But yes, that tree, necessary to break up too much grey space...

[15] I raised the camera, pretended to study a focus which did not include them, and waited and watched closely, sure that I would finally catch the revealing expression, one that would sum it all up, life that is rhythmed by movement but which a stiff image destroys, taking time in cross section, if we do not choose the essential imperceptible fraction of it. I did not have to wait long. The woman was getting on with the job of handcuffing the boy smoothly, stripping from him what was left of his freedom a hair at a time, in an incredibly slow and delicious torture. I imagined the possible endings (now a small fluffy cloud appears, almost alone in the sky), I saw their arrival at the house (a basement apartment probably, which she would have filled with large cushions and cats) and conjectured the boy's terror and his desperate decision to play it cool and to be led off pretending there was nothing new in it for him. Closing my eyes, if I did in fact close my eyes, I set the scene: the teasing kisses, the woman mildly repelling the hands which were trying to undress her, like in novels, on a bed that would have a lilac-colored comforter, on the other hand she taking off his clothes, plainly mother and son under a milky yellow light, and everything would end up as usual, perhaps, but maybe everything would go otherwise, and the initiation of the adolescent would not happen, she would not let it happen, after a long prologue wherein the awkwardnesses, the exasperating caresses, the running of hands over bodies would be resolved in who knows what, in a separate and solitary pleasure, in a petulant denial mixed with the art of tiring and disconcerting so much poor innocence. It might go like that, it might very well go like that; that woman was not looking for the boy as a lover, and at the same time she was dominating him toward some end impossible to understand if you do not imagine it as a cruel game, the desire to desire without satisfaction, to excite herself for someone else, someone who in no way could be that kid.

[16] Michel is guilty of making literature, of indulging in fabricated unreality. Nothing pleases him more than to imagine exceptions to the rule, individuals outside the species, not-always-repugnant monsters. But that woman invited speculation, perhaps giving clues enough for the fantasy to hit the bullseye. Before she left, and now that she would fill my imaginings for several days, for I'm given to ruminating, I decided not to lose a moment more. I got it all into the view-finder (with the tree, the railing, the eleven-o'clock sun) and took the shot. In time to realize that they both had noticed and stood there looking at me, the boy surprised and as though questioning, but she was irritated, her face and body flat-footedly hostile, feeling robbed, ignominiously recorded on a small chemical image.

[17] I might be able to tell it in much greater detail but it's not worth the trouble. The woman said that no one had the right to take a picture without permission, and demanded that I hand her over the film. All this in a dry, clear voice with a good Parisian accent, which rose in color and tone with every phrase. For my part, it hardly mattered whether she got the roll of film or not, but anyone who knows me will tell you, if you want anything from me, ask nicely. With the result that I restricted myself to formulating the opinion that not only was photography in public places not prohibited, but it was looked upon with decided favor, both private and official. And while that was getting said, I noticed on the sly how the boy was falling back, sort of actively backing up though without moving, and all at once (it seemed almost incredible) he turned and broke into a run, the poor kid,

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thinking that he was walking off and in fact in full flight, running past the side of the car, disappearing like a gossamer filaments of angel-spit in the morning air.

[18] But filaments of angel-spit are also called devil-spit, and Michel had to endure rather particular curses, to hear himself called meddler and imbecile, taking great pains meanwhile to smile and to abate with simple movements of his head such a hard sell. As I was beginning to get tired, I heard the car door slam. The man in the grey hat was there, looking at us. It was only at that point that I realized he was playing a part in the comedy.

[19] He began to walk toward us, carrying in his hand the paper he had been pretending to read. What I remember best is the grimace that twisted his mouth askew, it covered his face with wrinkles, changed somewhat both in location and shape because his lips trembled and the grimace went from one side of his mouth to the other as though it were on wheels, independent and involuntary. But the rest stayed fixed, a flour-powdered clown or bloodless man, dull dry skin, eyes deepset, the nostrils black and prominently visible, blacker than the eyebrows or hair or the black necktie. Walking cautiously as though the pavement hurt his feet; I saw patent-leather shoes with such thin soles that he must have felt every roughness in the pavement. I don’t know why I got down off the railing, nor very well why I decided to not give them the photo, to refuse that demand in which I guessed at their fear and cowardice. The clown and the woman consulted one another in silence: we made a perfect and unbearable triangle, something I felt compelled to break with a crack of a whip. I laughed in their faces and began to walk off, a little more slowly, I imagine, than the boy. At the level of the first houses, beside the iron footbridge, I turned around to look at them. They were not moving, but the man had dropped his newspaper; it seemed to me that the woman, her back to the parapet, ran her hands over the stone with the classical and absurd gesture of someone pursued looking for a way out.

[20] What happened after that happened here, almost just now, in a room on the fifth floor. Several days went by before Michel developed the photos he’d taken on Sunday; his shots of the Conservatoire and of Sainte-Chapelle were all they should be. Then he found two or three proof-shots he’d forgotten, a poor attempt to catch a cat perched astonishingly on the roof of a rambling public urinal, and also the shot of the blond and the kid. The negative was so good that he made an enlargement; the enlargement was so good that he made one very much larger, almost the size of a poster. It did not occur to him (now one wonders and wonders) that only the shots of the Conservatoire were worth so much work. Of the whole series, the snap-shot of the tip of the island was the only one which interested him; he tacked up the enlargement on one wall of the room, and the first day he spent some time looking at it and remembering, that gloomy operation of comparing the memory with the gone reality; a frozen memory, like any photo, where nothing is missing, not even, and especially, nothingness, the true solidifier of the scene. There was the woman, there was the boy, the tree rigid above their heads, the sky as sharp as the stone of the parapet, clouds and stones molded into a single substance and inseparable (now one with sharp edges is going by, like a thunderhead). The first two days I accepted what I had done, from the photo itself to the enlargement on the wall, and didn’t even question that every once in a while I would interrupt my translation of José Norberto Allende’s treatise to encounter once more the woman’s face, the dark splotches on the railing. I’m such a jerk; it had never occurred to me that when we look at a photo from the front, the eyes reproduce exactly the position and the vision of the lens; it’s these things that are taken for granted and it never occurs to anyone to think about them. From my chair, with the typewriter directly in front of me, I looked at the photo ten feet away, and then it occurred to me that I had hung it exactly at the point of view of the lens. It looked very good that way; no doubt, it was the best way to appreciate a photo, though the angle from the
diagonal doubtless has its pleasures and might even divulge different aspects. Every few minutes, for example when I was unable to find the way to say in good French what José Norberto Allende was saying in very good Spanish, I raised my eyes and looked at the photo; sometimes the woman would catch my eye, sometimes the boy, sometimes the pavement where a dry leaf had fallen admirably situated to heighten a lateral section. Then I rested a bit from my labors, and I enclosed myself again happily in that morning in which the photo was drenched. I recalled ironically the angry picture of the woman demanding I give her the photograph. The boy’s pathetic and ridiculous flight, the entrance on the scene of the man with the white face. Basically, I was satisfied with myself; my part had not been too brilliant, and since the French have been given the gift of the sharp response. I did not see very well why I’d chosen to leave without a complete demonstration of the rights, privileges and prerogatives of citizens. The important thing, the really important thing was having helped the kid to escape in time (this in case my theorizing was correct, which was not sufficiently proven, but the running away itself seemed to show it so). Out of plain meddling, I had given him the opportunity finally to take advantage of his fright to do something useful; now he would be regretting it, feeling his honor injured, his manhood diminished. That was better than the attentions of a woman capable of looking as she had looked at him on that island. Michel is something of a puritan at times, he believes that one should not seduce someone from a position of strength. In the last analysis, taking that photo had been a good act.

[21] Well, it wasn’t because of the good act that I looked at it between paragraphs while I was working. At that moment I didn’t know the reason, the reason I had tackled the enlargement onto the wall; maybe all fatal acts happen that way, and that is the condition of their fulfillment. I don’t think the almost-furtive trembling of the leaves on the tree alarmed me, I was working on a sentence and rounded it out successfully. Habits are like immense herbariums, in the end an enlargement of 32×28 looks like a movie screen, where, on the tip of the island, a woman is speaking with a boy and a tree is shaking its dry leaves over their heads.

[22] But her hands were just too much. I had just translated: “In that case, the second key resides in the intrinsic nature of difficulties which societies . . .”—when I saw the woman’s hand beginning to stir slowly, finger by finger. There was nothing left of me, a phrase in French which I would never have to finish, a typewriter on the floor, a chair that squeaked and shook, fog. The kid had ducked his head like boxers do when they’ve done all they can and are waiting for the final blow to fall; he had turned up the collar of his overcoat and seemed more a prisoner than ever, the perfect victim helping promote the catastrophe. Now the woman was talking into his ear, and her hand opened again to lay itself against his cheekbone, to caress and caress it, burning it, taking her time. The kid was less startled than he was suspicious, once or twice he poked his head over the woman’s shoulder and she continued talking, saying something that made him look back every few minutes toward that area where Michel knew the car was parked and the man in the gray hat, carefully eliminated from the photo but present in the boy’s eyes (how doubt that now) in the words of the woman, in the woman’s hands, in the vicarious presence of the woman. When I saw the man come up, stop near them and look at them, his hands in his pockets and a stance somewhere between disgusted and demanding, the master who is about to whistle in his dog after a frolic in the square, I understood, if that was to understand, what had to happen now, what had to have happened then, what would have to happen at that moment, among these people, just where I had poked my nose in to upset an established order, interfering innocently in that which had not happened, but which was now going to happen, now was going to be fulfilled. And what I had imagined earlier was much less
horrible than the reality, that woman, who was not there by herself, she was not caressing or propositioning or encouraging for her own pleasure, to lead the angel away with his tousled hair and play the tease with his terror and his eager grace. The real boss was waiting there, smiling petulantly, already certain of the business; he was not the first to send a woman in the vanguard, to bring him the prisoners manacled with flowers. The rest of it would be so simple, the car, some house or another, drinks, stimulating engravings, tardy tears, the awakening in hell. And there was nothing I could do, this time I could do absolutely nothing. My strength had been a photograph, that, there, where they were taking their revenge on me, demonstrating clearly what was going to happen. The photo had been taken, the time had run out, gone; we were so far from one another, the abusive act had certainly already taken place, the tears already shed, and the rest conjecture and sorrow. All at once the order was inverted, they were alive, moving they were deciding and had decided, they were going to their future; and I on this side, prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, to not know who they were, that woman, that man, and that boy, to be only the lens of my camera, something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention. It was horrible, their mocking me, deciding it before my impotent eye, mocking me, for the boy again was looking at the flour-faced clown and I had to accept the fact that he was going to say yes, that the proposition carried money with it or a gimmick, and I couldn’t yell for him to run, or even open the road to him again with a new photo, a small and almost meek intervention which would ruin the framework of drool and perfume. Everything was going to resolve itself right there, at that moment; there was like an immense silence which had nothing to do with physical silence. It was stretching it out, setting itself up. I think I screamed, I screamed terribly, and that at that exact second I realized that I was beginning to move toward them, four inches, a step, another step, the tree swung its branches rhythmically in the foreground, a place where the railing was tarnished emerged from the frame, the woman’s face turned toward me as though surprised, was enlarging, and then I turned a bit. I mean that the camera turned a little, and without losing sight of the woman, I began to close in on the man who was looking at me with the black holes he had in place of eyes, surprised and angered both, he looked, wanting to nail me onto the air, and at that instant I happened to see something like a large bird outside the focus that was flying in a single swoop in front of the picture, and I leaned up against the wall of my room and was happy because the boy had just managed to escape, I saw him running off, in focus again, sprinting with his hair flying in the wind, learning finally to fly across the island, to arrive at the footbridge, return to the city. For the second time he’d escaped them, for the second time I was helping him to escape, returning him to his precarious paradise. Out of breath, I stood in front of them; no need to step closer, the game was played out. Of the woman you could see just maybe a shoulder and a bit of the hair, brutally cut off by the frame of the picture; but the man was directly center, his mouth half open, you could see a shaking black tongue, and he lifted his hands slowly, bringing them into the foreground, an instant still in perfect focus, and then all of him a lump that blotted out the island, the tree, and I shut my eyes, I didn’t want to see any more, and I covered my face and broke into tears like an idiot.

[23] Now there’s a big white cloud, as on all these days, all this untellable time. What remains to be said is always a cloud, two clouds, or long hours of a sky perfectly clear, a very clean, clear rectangle tacked up with pins on the wall of my room. That was what I saw when I opened my eyes and dried them with my fingers: the clear sky, and then a cloud that drifted in from the left, passed gracefully and slowly across and disappeared on the right. And then another, and for a change sometimes, everything gets grey, all one enormous cloud, and suddenly the splotches of rain cracking down, for a long spell you
can see it raining over the picture, like a spell of weeping reversed, and little by little, the frame becomes clear. Perhaps the sun comes out, and again the clouds begin to come, two at a time, three at a time. And the pigeons once in a while, and a sparrow or two.

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