



AN EROTIC NOTE

*Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other.
It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of
my words. My language trembles with desire.*

— Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*¹

Although my fingertips have longed to touch the beaten hems of their skirts, the netting of their headdresses, the wires of their crinolines, the silkiness of their tights, the scented pages of their tattered and clutched books, the roundness of their pearls, the soft bits of their always new hair that cavorts about their lovely ears in joyful escape from their hairpins, their velvet cummerbunds, the lift of their closed but smiling lips, the warmth of their eyelids shut off in pretend sleep, their bodies and all that has touched them, I have only touched the precious edges of their pictures. To touch inside, to reach within the borders is forbidden; they are *just* photographs, to be preserved, protected from the oils, the dirt, the smirches of my fingertips. My fingers are bound . . . bound with words. It is not that I have no fingers; it is that I have “fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.”

Clementina Hawarden's photographs have always been erotic to me; they make my finger-words write desire. But they are not *just* that to everyone. But they are that to (not all but many of) my students. Bathed in my own (now seemingly old-fashioned) attachment to Barthes (as symptomatic as Barthes's own obsessional attachment to his own mother, but symptomatic of what?), my students have been carefully (but erratically?) schooled in expanding our cultural notion of the erotic. I show them the details: the skin flashing, the holes in the text, the “hand



Figure 6 “*Clementina’s captivating finger
in chin . . . a shoe kicked off.*”



Figure 7 “*Clementina tasting Isabella’s perfect fingers.*”

... at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment,” the *jouissance*, the punctum, the bliss, the pleasure, the part-word, the fragment, the rhythm, the absence, the edge, the tongue, the sentence, the nudge, the voice, the close reading, the intimate reading that touches.² I project a Hawarden photograph onto the wall (Clementina, Isabella, and Florence become almost lifesize, but not, as if they were inhabitants of Marie Antoinette’s three-quarter-scale village, “The Queen’s Hamlet,” hidden in the gardens of Versailles). Bathed in the light of the image, which at times becomes part of me (as when I point to Clementina’s captivating finger in chin, a foreshadowing of the delightful erotocomic queer ballet fingers of Mark Morris, her toes made available by a shoe kicked off, or to Clementina tasting Isabella’s perfect fingers, Isabella’s sheer veil cascading down her shoulder and wrapping around her other hand to both obscure and emphasize touch), I guide my students outside the frame (figs. 6 and 7). I take their hand and we go. Yet we remain within. Together with and through them (the photographs and the students) and now, I hope, through and with you, I/we desire to be outside of its frame, yet of the picture.

The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and it animates me.³

In the classroom, we let Barthes take our “hand . . . at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment.” We animate the image and we become animated: fired, stirred, kindled, cheered, heartened, quickened, vivified, brightened, buoyed. We do not touch the photographs. We do not touch each other. *It is as if I (we) had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my (our) words.*

That is *just* it. The erotic, as Barthes feels it and others who know the *jouissance* (the delicious ambiguity of a slowly rushing orgasmic pleasure and an ungenital pleasure at once) of reading, of looking, of teaching, yes and “of being.” Coming. Becoming. As Richard Howard put it in his introduction to the English translation of Barthes’s *Pleasure of the Text*: “The Bible . . . calls it ‘knowing’ while the Stuarts called it ‘dying,’ the Victorians called it ‘spending,’ and we call it ‘coming’; a hard look at the horizon of our literary culture suggests that it will not be long before we come to a new word for orgasm proper — we shall call it ‘being.’”⁴

My erotic finger-words pinch at the prudery of ideological analysis, the Protestantism of objective looking, the pride of the sexual organs in limiting our imagination of the erotic body. And sometimes, when outside of the frame, but of a Hawarden picture, a piece of something comes (a word, a tear, resentment, boredom, delight) and pinches back. For me, that is being/erotic.

*

*I seek what will touch me (as children we hunted in the
countryside for chocolate eggs that had been hidden there)
. . . I await the fragment that will concern me
and establish meaning for me.*

—Roland Barthes, *Sollers écrivain*⁵