

On Superficiality: Truman Capote and the Ceremony of Style

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This article explores the quality of lightness in Truman Capote's Breakfast at Tiffany's. Precisely what kind of lightness do we find in the novel, what are some of its defining characteristics and what are the key strategies by which this effect is achieved? I begin by discussing the narrative's readability, its linguistic transparency and its deliberate attenuation of supplementary meaning. This transparency, I would like to suggest, ultimately impedes our standard interpretative procedures, frustrating any attempt to reinstate (plausible) symbolic meaning. I then address in greater detail the "depthlessness" of the novel, its emphasis on surfaces and immediate legibility. Finally, I offer an analysis of Holly Golightly herself, making the argument that as a character she shares (and indeed determines) many of the novel's lighter qualities — attaching supreme value to "the surface of things," privileging the signifier over the signified and actively pursuing the freedom and mobility of non-meaning.

Keywords: Truman Capote / lightness / readability / superficiality / Roland Barthes

"And when all these weighty matters are off my hands," said Genji at last, "I hope I shall have a little time left for things which I really enjoy — flowers, autumn leaves, the sky."

—MURASAKI SHIKIBU,
THE TALE OF GENJI,
11TH CENTURY

How admirable he is
who does not think "Life is ephemeral"
when he sees a flash of lightning.

—MATSUO BASHO,
17TH CENTURY

I

In September 1916, an interview with a visiting Chinese scholar named Hain Jou-Kia appeared in the *New York Times*. Before coming to the United States, the newspaper's readers were told, Hain had spent several years studying "social conditions" in Japan. As his interests were "chiefly literary," however, he had also "made a careful study of Japanese literature, and [had] arrived at some interesting conclusions on the subject." These conclusions were as follows:

Japanese literature differs from Chinese literature chiefly in that it is not concerned, as Chinese literature is, with morals and philosophy. Japanese literature is light. One thousand years ago there were published in Japan two famous books, *Genji-Monogatari* and *Ise-Monogatari*. These are the origins of Japanese literature as we know it today. They are very famous. They deal merely with the times of their authors, with the surface of things, manners, customs, gossip. They do not deal with the great basic things of life, with morals and philosophy. These books are studied in the Japanese schools and universities, and their influence is responsible for the lightness of modern Japanese literature. . . . You see the same thing in Japanese paintings. The thing which interests the Japanese painter, however skilful he may be, is the thing that he sees—the superficial and momentary thing. . . . Japanese poetry, especially the Japanese songs, is [also] very light—so light that it is sometimes almost impossible to discover its meaning. (qtd. in Kilmer)

Forty years later, writing in the same newspaper, William Goyen would criticize Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) for demonstrating these very qualities. It too focused on "the surface of things," offering implausibilities and trivialities rather than engaging with more serious (or "weighty") themes. In place of morality and meaning, it too promoted an aesthetic of lightness and insubstantiality. Goyen was particularly critical of the novel's whimsicality, its "quality of doll-like glee" and liberal use of "vaudevillian devices." He also found the characterization less than convincing and accused the author of "creating and dwelling in a doily story-world entirely of [his] own tatting." Although Capote would later describe this review as an act of treachery (*Too Brief* 445), in many ways Goyen is quite right. The novel does feature a large cast of implausible caricatures—Salvatore "Sally" Tomato, for instance, the elderly Sicilian gangster, or Rutherford "Rusty" Trawler, the Nazi-sympathizing millionaire playboy—and in numerous places the narrative itself challenges our credulity. However, as I shall argue in the following pages, these qualities need not be regarded as literary-aesthetic failings. On the contrary, they are all strategies that contribute, in one way or another, to the success of the novel's underlying aesthetic project: the pursuit of weightlessness.

The correspondences between the above critiques, despite the intervening decades, are striking. In fact, what we see emerging, in each case, is essentially the same conflict of literary values. On the one hand we have the belief that literature ought to be composed of a certain density, that it ought to engage with "the great

basic things of life” and that it ought to use “substantial” language in order to produce tangible meaning. On the other hand we have an aesthetic I would describe as one of lightness: an aesthetic founded on the principles of superficiality, insubstantiality and the attenuation of meaning. Needless to say, this disagreement has a long and distinguished genealogy. “[T]hroughout the centuries,” Italo Calvino writes, “two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make literature into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses. The other tries to give language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations” (*Six Memos* 15). My point here, essentially, is that we should understand the lightness of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* neither as an aesthetic failing nor as mere “cuteness” or “whimsy” (Goyen), but as the articulation of a particular aesthetic sensibility—one that deliberately privileges style over substance, the “superficial and momentary thing” over the dead weight of profundity and permanence.

Although Capote himself rarely discussed such matters, a short essay written three years before the publication of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* does give us some idea of his aesthetic affinities. In this essay he celebrates the “Japanese sense of style,” reserving particular praise for the “luminous” purity of classical Japanese literature and the ornate gestural vocabulary of Kabuki theatre:

[W]hen the curtain rises on a performance of the Kabuki dancers, a premonition of the entertainment, the *frisson* it will ultimately achieve, is already there in the severely rich patterns of color, [the] exotically solemn postures of the dancers kneeling in their robes like porcelain figurines. . . . It is all a ceremony of Style, a phenomenon that seems to rotate, in a manner quite separate from emotional content, on absolute style alone. (“Style” 355–56)

This is as good a description as any of the lightness that so often characterizes Capote’s own writing and as such is probably the best place to begin our discussion of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. But precisely what kind of lightness do we find in the novel, what are some of its defining characteristics and what are the key strategies by which this effect is produced? In what follows, I shall argue that the lightness of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is primarily achieved through a comprehensive diminution of its symbolic and hermeneutic codes. With regard to the first of these codes, I shall be discussing the narrative’s readability, its linguistic transparency and its deliberate attenuation of supplementary meaning. This transparency, I would like to suggest, ultimately impedes our standard interpretative procedures, frustrating any attempt to reinstate (plausible) symbolic meaning. Turning to the hermeneutic code, I address in greater detail the “depthlessness” of the novel, its emphasis on surfaces and immediate legibility. I then discuss the way in which Capote eliminates, or at least reduces, many of the strategic delays ordinarily imposed by the hermeneutic code, thus diminishing the gap between the formulation of an enigma and its eventual disclosure. Finally, I offer an analysis of Holly Golightly herself, arguing that as a character she shares (and indeed determines) many of the novel’s lighter qualities—attaching supreme value to “the surface of things,”

privileging the signifier over the signified and actively pursuing the freedom and mobility of non-meaning. As will become obvious, I have found the work of Roland Barthes especially useful in exploring many of these issues, and over the course of the article I shall be referring to *S/Z* and *Empire of Signs* (both published in 1970) with particular frequency. The former study frames my structural analysis of the novel's semiotic codes, while the latter, through its engagement with Japanese culture, provides a clearer understanding of the transparency and superficiality that are such salient features of Capote's narrative.

II

I would like to begin by discussing the diminution of the symbolic code in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the sense of lightness this retreat from meaning generates.¹ Rather than pursuing non-meaning through an assault on language and narrative, however, Capote manages to achieve this objective within the confines of a "perfectly readerly discourse" (Barthes, *Empire* 81). Indeed, it is the novel's very readability, the dominance of its primary or literal meaning (what Holly calls "the story part" [*Breakfast* 24]), that enables it to shed its potential supplementary meanings with such ease.² Any attempt to restore these discarded meanings, I shall argue, would be to exceed the level of interpretation that the novel itself clearly encourages. On this level—that of the purely denotative—*Breakfast at Tiffany's* tells a simple story. After moving into a new apartment in Manhattan's East Seventies, the unnamed narrator, an aspiring writer, becomes acquainted with one of his neighbors, a young socialite known as Holly Golightly. Over the next year or so, he passes "many hither and yonning days" (54) with Holly, bears witness to her various romantic misadventures and does his best to unravel the mystery of her "true" identity. Finally, having been unjustly implicated in a drug scandal, Holly flees to Rio de Janeiro, and that, we are led to believe, is the last the narrator will ever see of her. In due course a postcard arrives, and several years later there is an unconfirmed sighting of Holly in a remote African village, but otherwise "she's gone . . . [j]ust gone" (15).

It is one of the central ironies of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that the narrator's struggle to "read" Holly Golightly should itself be so eminently readable. None of the hermeneutical difficulties he encounters are transmitted to the reader, and nothing is allowed to disrupt the effortless eloquence (and clarity) of the sentences he produces. Susan Sontag has argued that transparency of this kind is the "highest, most liberating value in art," for it "means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are" ("Against" 13). And this, I would like to suggest, is precisely what the novel's transparency achieves. It assures us, as readers, that there is no deeper, supplementary meaning to be found "behind" its language or discourse. What we see is what we get—and what we get takes place right there, on the narrative's elegantly filigreed surface.

Before discussing this transparency in greater detail, though, I should probably take a moment to clarify my description of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as

“meaningless.” I am not suggesting, of course, that Capote’s novel achieves a complete suspension of meaning. That would be impossible, for as Barthes quite rightly observes, “there is no literature without a sign, and no sign without a signified” (“Last Word” 200). In other words, “everything in [a text] signifies. . . . Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness” (Barthes, “Introduction” 89). What I am suggesting, however, is that *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* works toward an attenuation of meaning, a “thinning out” of the symbolic code, so that the narrative might be relieved of as much supplementary weight as possible. And it is this drive to limit the production of connotative meaning that serves to distinguish the “non-meaning” of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* from that of other, more “weighty” literary narratives. In Camus’s *The Stranger*, for instance, the absence of meaning carries a quite profound meaning: it signifies absurdity.³ Beckett’s plays too are “more than simply meaningless because they gain their content . . . through the negation of meaning” (Adorno 154)—through ellipses and non sequiturs that are themselves pregnant with meaning. The difference here, then, is twofold. First, the absence of meaning in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* has no meaning: it tells us nothing about the “benign indifference” (Camus 154) of the universe or the arbitrary and absurd nature of our lives. Second, in Capote’s novel, this absence of meaning never becomes a source of distress or terror: it is not intended to provoke the “*horror vacui* of existentialist nothingness” (Calvino, “Hemingway” 225) or the dread Pascal felt when confronting the “eternal silence of these infinite spaces” (Pascal 66). Instead, it promotes a sense of weightlessness and autonomy—the “buoyancy of a bird” (Capote, *Breakfast* 52), one might say, or the blissful inconsequentiality of a girl “spin-dancing . . . over the cobbles under the El” (20). In this respect, it perhaps comes closer to the kind of meaninglessness we find in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, who writes that “[t]he man of today . . . feels no sense of deprivation or affliction at [the] absence of meaning” (“Nature” 71). Like Capote, Robbe-Grillet discourages the “induction of poetic meaning” (Barthes, “Last Word” 198) by focusing our attention on surfaces, on outsides rather than insides; and like Capote he forgoes “transcendent” signification for the “immediate signification of things” (Robbe-Grillet, “Realism” 166). But here too there are some crucial differences. There is an objective, analytical quality to Robbe-Grillet’s writing that we don’t find in Capote. Robbe-Grillet’s emphasis on the materiality of the physical world also gives his writing a density that distinguishes it from the refined ethereality of Capote’s prose style. And whereas Robbe-Grillet attempts to suspend meaning by “break[ing] the fascination of narrative” (Barthes, “Last Word” 198), by disrupting its intelligibility, Capote does precisely the opposite—despite the underlying similarity of his objectives.

So just what kind of meaninglessness are we talking about here? For Capote, as we have seen, intelligibility is everything, an intelligibility so complete that it purges the narrative of all traces of the esoteric or the obscure. In *S/Z*, Barthes argues that “the classic text is pensive . . . it still seems to be keeping in reserve

some ultimate meaning, one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying.” According to Barthes, if a story such as Balzac’s *Sarrasine* “has nothing more to say than what it says, at least it attempts to ‘let it be understood’ that it does not say everything.” This allusion to meaning, he suggests, is “coded by pensiveness, which is a sign of nothing but itself: as though having filled the text but obsessively fearing that it is not *incontestably* filled, the discourse insist[s] on supplementing it with an *et cetera* of plenitudes” (216–17). Not so *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. In Capote’s novel there is no implied supplementary meaning, no “*et cetera* of plenitudes,” in fact no latency of any kind. There is only one meaning, the most obvious, and it offers itself up to the reader with alacrity. For Barthes, the final line of Balzac’s story (“And the Marquise remained pensive”) functions as a sign of its plenitude, gesturing toward these hidden reserves of meaning; and one could argue that at a certain point in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* Holly assumes a similarly emblematic status. In this case, however, she becomes a sign of the text’s guilelessness, a sign whose purpose, here at least, it is to reassure the reader that there are no hidden reserves of meaning. “The morning light seemed refracted through her,” the narrator remembers. “[A]s she pulled the bed covers up to my chin she gleamed like a transparent child: then she lay down beside me” (29).

It is this commitment to legibility that ultimately brings about the diminution of the novel’s symbolic code, for if there is never anything behind or surrounding the thing described, if it produces neither latent nor “transcendent” meaning, then the potential for symbolic substitution is reduced to a minimum. And whatever symbolism does survive this reduction of meaning itself becomes severely attenuated in the process. Take Holly’s cat for instance, the one she refuses to name “until he *belongs* to somebody.” “We just sort of took up by the river one day,” she says, “we don’t belong to each other: he’s an independent and so am I. I don’t want to own anything until I know I’ve found the place where me and things belong together” (40). The equivalence here between Holly and her cat is so direct, so obvious, indeed so literal, that it loses all symbolic resonance. “He’s an independent and so am I”—what more is there to say? Consider too the birdcage Holly gives the narrator as a gift: “a palace of a birdcage, a mosque of minarets and bamboo rooms yearning to be filled with talkative parrots” (19). Holly, we are told, doesn’t like cages, and when she offers this one to the narrator, she makes him promise that he will “never put a living thing in it” (57). Again the symbolism is unambiguous: the cage’s function here is to represent the captivity, the immobility, to which Holly is so averse. But symbolism of this kind is hardly symbolism at all; in fact, symbolism thus proclaimed barely rises above the level of the metaphorical. And this depletion of symbolic meaning in turn serves to complicate any sustained critical engagement with *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, all but foreclosing the possibility of commentary or “close reading.” For how is one supposed to “decipher” a text that so readily decodes itself, offering no resistance whatsoever to our understanding? If the pensive qualities of a narrative like *Sarrasine* appear to invite critical analysis, then the candor of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*

does just the opposite: encouraging a literal (or semantic) interpretation, while actively repelling the attention of the critical reader.⁴

In “Against Interpretation,” an essay first published in 1966, Susan Sontag argues that “a great deal of [modern] art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation,” by a desire to proclaim its own non-meaning. One way of achieving this objective, she says, is to produce “works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is.” She offers as one of several examples the “liberating anti-symbolic quality” of old Hollywood movies—adding that “[i]n good films, there is always a directness that entirely frees us from the itch to interpret” (11). In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes makes a similar argument regarding the traditional Japanese haiku. According to Barthes, the haiku “enters into that suspension of meaning which to us is the strangest thing of all, since it makes impossible the most ordinary exercise of our language, which is commentary” (81). This resistance to interpretation, he observes, tends to provoke two quite different critical responses within the Western academy. The first could be described as a kind of underreading, where “to speak of the haiku [is] purely and simply to repeat it” (72). The second, a form of overreading, discovers signification where there is none. “The West moistens everything with meaning,” Barthes writes, “like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples”—and so, in order to spare discourse the “infamy of non-meaning,” the (Western) critic is forced to deny “any nullity which might reveal the emptiness of [its] language” (70).

Like an old Hollywood movie, then, or a Japanese haiku, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* resists interpretation not because of its opacity, its hidden profundities, but because of its transparency—offering us a narrative so superficial, so patently “just what it is,” that it immediately invalidates any attempt to burden it with deeper and more substantial meaning.⁵ In a playfully metafictional manner, these interpretative difficulties even find their way into the narrative itself, where they are modeled for us by Holly. At one point, for example, the narrator reads her a story he has written about “two women who share a house, schoolteachers, one of whom, when the other becomes engaged, spreads with anonymous notes a scandal that prevents the marriage.” Once he has finished reading the story, Holly “floUNDER[s] for something . . . to say,” before eventually offering the following response: “Of course I like dykes themselves. They don’t scare me a bit. But stories about dykes bore the bejesus out of me. I just can’t put myself in their shoes.” Then, sensing that she may have said the wrong thing, she adds: “Well really, darling . . . if it’s not about a couple of old bulldykes, what the hell *is* it about?” (25). This is a good question, and one Holly herself will answer later in the novel when she encounters similar difficulties reading a story the narrator has recently published in a magazine. “I read that story twice,” she says. “Brats and niggers. Trembling leaves. *Description*. It doesn’t *mean* anything” (59). Quite so (racist language notwithstanding): it doesn’t mean anything. Here we have a cue, if one were needed, for how best

to interpret the novel we are reading—a gentle reminder of the narrative’s most appropriate “level of perception, the level on which it is perfectly and immediately intelligible” (Barthes, “Last Word” 200).

III

As I have suggested, Capote’s commitment to the superficial in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* also brings about the diminution of the novel’s hermeneutic code, further contributing to its sense of lightness and insubstantiality. According to Barthes, the hermeneutic code is responsible for the formulation and ultimate resolution of enigmas or mysteries within literary narratives. Under this category, he argues, we may “list the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed” (*S/Z* 19). The particular significance of the hermeneutic code lies in its control over the pace of the narrative, something it achieves through the insertion of various “dilatary morphemes” (*S/Z* 75) whose purpose it is to defer, for as long as possible, the moment of full disclosure. Or as Barthes himself writes,

[T]he hermeneutic code has a function, the one we . . . attribute to the poetic code: just as rhyme (notably) structures the poem according to the expectation and desire for recurrence, so the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution. The dynamics of the text . . . is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story’s “unfolding” and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs an opposite action: it must set up *delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatary area whose emblem might be named “reticence,” the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside. (*S/Z* 75)

But once again, this isn’t quite what *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* does. Just as the novel’s “pensiveness” is deliberately undermined by its attenuation of supplementary meaning, so too is its “reticence” overcome by a desire to tell all—to confess everything it knows, like one of the gossip columns Holly keeps between the pages of her *Baseball Guide*. The narrative certainly has its enigmas, its mysteries, but these never last long, and they are never allowed to disrupt its dominant tone of candor and lucidity. Whenever full meaning does retreat from view, giving the narrative the illusion of depth, a process of self-correction takes place, and meaning is quickly returned to the surface where it belongs. Rather than privileging the mystificatory and the opaque, in other words, the novel offers us an aesthetic of immediate (or at least accelerated) legibility. And it does so, I would like to suggest, by minimizing the number of “dilatary morphemes” imposed by the hermeneutic code and thus greatly reducing the interval between the formulation of an enigma and its ultimate disclosure.

Not surprisingly, most of the enigmas in the novel tend to cluster around Holly Golightly, and one of the earliest of these is particularly revealing. It's fourthirty in the morning, and the narrator has just told her what day it is. "*Thursday*," she replies. "My God. . . . It's too gruesome" (26). The narrator responds to this enigmatic utterance with a "request for an answer" (Barthes, *S/Z* 210). "I was tired enough not to be curious," he tells us. "I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes. Still it was irresistible: 'What's gruesome about Thursday?'" (26). Rather than solving the mystery at this stage, however, Capote chooses to deploy several dilatory morphemes—a partial answer, followed by a suspended answer or "aphasic stoppage" (Barthes, *S/Z* 75). The partial answer, essentially, is that "a girl can't go to Sing Sing with a green face" (26), but this doesn't tell us why Holly should be going to Sing Sing in the first place or who she will be visiting there. The suspended answer comes when she suddenly tells the narrator to go to sleep. "Please," he says, "I'm interested." To which she replies: "I know you are. That's why I want you to go to sleep. Because if I keep on, I'll tell you about Sally" (27). Yet despite these strategies, and within a page or two of its initial formulation, the enigma is swiftly resolved. Holly, like the text itself, would like to keep quiet, and for a moment or two she prevaricates, but the narrative's will to disclosure is far too strong for her to resist: "They never *told* me not to tell anyone. In so many words. And it *is* funny . . ." (27). Some mystery, as the girl herself might say.⁶

Embedded within Holly's narrative there is, of course, another enigma that will not be explicitly resolved until the end of the novel. Holly, it transpires, is paid one hundred dollars a week to communicate a "weather report" from the incarcerated gangster Sally Tomato to his lawyer, Mr. O'Shaughnessy. Asked by the narrator what the purpose of these reports might be, she replies, "[I]t's nothing. Just messages I leave with the answering service so Mr. O'Shaughnessy will know for sure that I've been up there. Sally tells me what to say, things like, oh, 'there's a hurricane in Cuba' and 'it's snowing in Palermo'" (29). On the face of it, we would seem to have a genuine mystery here, one that will not be explained for another fifty pages or so (when we finally learn, courtesy of the *Daily News*, that these reports are "coded messages" by which Sally Tomato has been able to control "a world-wide narcotics syndicate" [84]). But in fact this enigma offers little more than the simulacrum of a mystery, for at the very moment of its formulation it is rendered transparent and thus destroyed. Like the novel's symbolism, its mysteries are simply too obvious, too immediately intelligible, to survive. In *S/Z*, as we have seen, Barthes argues that the hermeneutic code establishes an elaborate system of "obstacles, stoppages [and] deviations" by which the solution to an enigma may be deferred. Yet what kind of enigma is it that demonstrates no "reticence" whatsoever, that surrenders itself so easily, that offers simultaneous formulation and disclosure? The underlying significance of these weather reports is, from the outset, so obvious to the reader (if not to Holly herself) that they constitute what Robbe-Grillet calls "an opacity without mystery" ("Enigmas" 81). And it is this anti-esoteric quality that once more concentrates our focus on the privileged "surface of things," where the narrative's meaning can be located without difficulty or delay.

The diminution of the hermeneutic code also influences the construction of character in Capote's novel. Traditionally, of course, there has been a tendency to favor "round" characters over "flat," the intricacies of the three-dimensional over the reductive implausibility of the two-dimensional. But not in this case. Consider Rusty Trawler for instance, a character whose flatness and artificiality are foregrounded from the moment he is first introduced to the reader:

He was a middle-aged child that had never shed its baby fat, though some gifted tailor had almost succeeded in camouflaging his plump and spankable bottom. There wasn't a suspicion of bone in his body; his face, a zero filled with pretty miniature features, had an unused, a virginal quality: it was as if he'd been born, then expanded, his skin remaining unlined as a blown-up balloon, and his mouth, though ready for squalls and tantrums, a spoiled sweet puckering. (36–37)

Here we have a character who never even comes close to plausibility, a character who has been denied interiority and substance ("there wasn't a suspicion of bone in his body"), and whose very face, "a zero filled with pretty miniature features," serves to proclaim his emptiness.⁷ Elsewhere Rusty is described as an "absurd foetus" (70), an image that captures him perfectly, for he is, like something seen by ultrasound, little more than an undeveloped caricature of a human being. And he's not the only one in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who appears to have entered the world prematurely. Joe Bell, the lugubrious bartender; Mr. Yunosshi, the Japanese photographer; Mag Wildwood, the "cover girl" (71) from Arkansas; O.J. Berman, the Hollywood agent; José Ybarra-Jaegar, the Brazilian diplomat with the "bull-fighter's figure" (46)—at no point do any of these characters lose their cardboard qualities and assume the full weight of ontological plausibility. In Goyen's review of the novel, this is regarded as an artistic failing on Capote's part. His characters are criticized for being too thin and "less [than] feasible." We are told that their improbable names "often supplant depth of characterization," and that by resorting to "vaudevillian devices" he "weakens his originally serious conception of . . . character" (Goyen). But this seems to me to be a misreading of the novel—or at least a misreading of the aesthetic logic behind its implausibility. By stripping his characters of their "fullness" as human beings, by reducing them to the status of caricatures, Capote manages to free them from the burden of genuine referentiality. Here, too, the signifier is attached to the signified as loosely and as lightly as possible. Like the "Oriental transvestite" Barthes discusses in *Empire of Signs*, these characters do not "copy" human beings, but "signify" them: character in this case being "the gesture of [humanity], not its plagiarism" (89).

This sense of insubstantiality is further heightened by Capote's use of a technique we might describe as "strategic transparency."⁸ Despite the novel's emphasis on appearance and spectacle, its unqualified candor also enables the reader to see, quite clearly, what lies behind the characters' flat surfaces and empty gestures: nothing, a void, the degree zero of personality. To cite Barthes once more: "what is carefully, preciously given to be read is that there is nothing there to read" (*Empire* 62). The characters are what they are; and they are obviously (and eternally) so.

There are no hidden depths to Joe Bell or O.J. Berman or José Ybarra-Jaegar, no mysteries and no surprises either. Everything we need to know about them can be summarized in a sentence or two. One loves Holly from afar; another considers her a “phony” (32), yet “sincerely like[s] the kid” (35); the third is interested only in finding an appropriate wife for “a man of [his] faith and career” (91). And of course the narrator himself is the most transparent of all the novel’s characters, the one through whom we see everything else, the one whose “emptiness” makes possible the very story we are reading.

Only Holly is allowed to complicate things, for at first sight she does seem to offer both meaning and mystery. But as I shall argue, these are qualities she ultimately abjures by insisting on her own indeterminacy and superficiality. Indeed, Holly is the one character in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* who actively pursues non-meaning—and in so doing manages to determine the tone, structure and density of the narrative she occupies.

IV

“I’d been living in the house about a week,” the narrator remembers, “when I noticed that the mailbox belonging to Apt. 2 had a name-slot fitted with a curious card. Printed, rather Cartier-formal, it read: *Miss Holiday Golightly*, and, underneath, in the corner, *Travelling*. It nagged me like a tune: *Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling*” (16). This card is what initiates the hermeneutical project around which *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is structured—the narrative that follows being an account, essentially, of the narrator’s struggle to fill this sign with meaning. Just who is Holiday Golightly, and how should one interpret her “curious” use of the present participle? But what makes the novel particularly interesting is the tension that arises out of this project—a tension between two opposing forces within the narrative, each constituting two quite different aesthetic and epistemological perspectives. The first of these, represented by the narrator, values “solidity” and stability of meaning. According to this understanding of the world (and of literature), every sign carries recuperable supplementary meaning and every chain of signifiers, however elusive or enigmatic it may be, eventually discloses an ultimate signified. The second position, represented by Holly, promotes what Barthes calls “the ethic of the empty sign” (“On *S/Z*” 83)—privileging superficiality and non-meaning over their opposites. And as we have seen, this latter perspective is the one the novel itself finally endorses. In other words, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is “light” and superficial, committed to the freedom and mobility of non-meaning, not because of its narrator, but in spite of him. Although everything that occurs is focalized through his eyes, the narrative’s dominant sensibility clearly belongs to Holly. Furthermore, by striving to empty herself of meaning in this manner, it is Holly who is ultimately responsible for the attenuation of the novel’s symbolic and hermeneutic codes. “I *hate* snoops” (30), she tells the narrator when he attempts to pry into her past life. And she feels this way not because she would like to maintain her enigmatic status within the narrative, but because she would prefer to destroy

the hermeneutical process altogether; not because there is a hidden meaning she would like to protect, but because she would rather “contain” no meaning at all. In this respect, Holly could be compared to the elaborate packaging Barthes found so appealing during his visit to Japan in 1966. “[I]t is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package,” he writes,

that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the envelope: a sweet, a bit of sugared bean paste, a vulgar “souvenir” . . . are wrapped with as much sumptuousness as a jewel. It is as if, then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains. . . . [T]he package is not empty, but emptied: to find the object which is in the package or the signified which is in the sign is to discard it: what the Japanese carry, with a formicant energy, are actually empty signs. (*Empire* 45–46)

In a similar way, Holly attempts to reduce as far as possible her inward reserves of meaning so that the “package” is of greater currency than the object it encloses. After peeling away the layers of signification surrounding Holly, the narrator finally discovers her “secret”: that her name is actually Lulamae Barnes and that she had been married, at the age of fourteen, to a simple rustic type called Doc Golightly. But this discovery has practically no impact on the trajectory of the narrative and does almost nothing to stabilize or determine Holly’s identity. It is, in short, a secret without value, one that we as readers uncover only to discard.

Throughout the novel, then, Holly refuses to allow her meaning to be fixed, or arrested, by a transcendental signified of any kind—what she herself would probably call the “absolute finito” (76). Instead, she strives to remain “elusive, nameless, placeless” (52). At one point, the narrator remembers asking her why she had left home at such a young age: “She looked at me blankly, and rubbed her nose, as though it tickled: a gesture, seeing often repeated, I came to recognize as a signal that one was trespassing. Like many people with a bold fondness for volunteering intimate information, anything that suggested a direct question, a pinning-down, put her on guard” (24). It is significant that what troubles Holly here is not the threat of disclosure, but the threat of being “pinn[ed]-down,” of having her identity rendered stable and finite by the enforced ascription of meaning. She is happy to volunteer “intimate information,” but only so long as it retains a loose, polysemic quality; anything too specific scares the “bejesus” out of her. And this fear is what makes it possible for us to read Holly herself as a kind of floating signifier. It was Claude Lévi-Strauss, of course, who first used this term to describe signifiers with vague, variable or unspecified symbolic value. Such signifiers, he argued, have a “fluid, spontaneous character,” and because they “represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning,” they are “susceptible [to] receiving any meaning at all” (55). This serves as a good description of Holly too, for by resisting all attempts to secure her meaning, by striving to achieve a state of “zero symbolic value” (Lévi-Strauss 64), she exposes herself instead to an excess of meaning and a proliferation of readings. I would like to suggest, however, that these meanings are never quite definitive, and a degree of provisionality is imposed on any interpretation of Holly’s character precisely

because of her semiotic emptiness. Simply put, if she is no one particular thing, then that makes her (potentially) everything—and meaning this profligate, this generous with its own resources, very quickly becomes no meaning at all.

I have, in the preceding pages, used the term “mobility” more than once while describing Holly, and it would be useful at this stage to clarify the dual meaning I intend this word to carry. The first of these meanings is entirely literal. Like a floating signifier, Holly’s emptiness enables her to detach herself quite easily from her surroundings, to remain “travelling” at all times. “You can’t give your heart to a wild thing,” she says, “the more you do, the stronger they get. Until they’re strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky” (69).⁹ In addition to its literal meaning, however, I am also using the term mobility in its Byronic sense, to describe the “vivacious versatility” (Byron 515)¹⁰ of Holly’s character, its radical instability. Byron once described himself as “hav[ing] no character at all,” and claimed that this allowed him to be “every thing by turns and nothing [for] long” (qtd. in Gardiner 389–90). As we have seen, this is also true of Holly, whose emptiness enables her to become everything (and at the same time, ideally, nothing). Her curious indeterminacy is made clear in the very first description we are given of her face: “A pair of dark glasses blotted out her eyes. It was a face beyond childhood, yet this side of belonging to a woman. I thought her anywhere between sixteen and thirty” (17). Then several days later, the narrator is introduced to the Hollywood agent O.J. Berman, who further reinforces this sense of indeterminacy and instability. “She’s okay,” he says, recalling his own first encounter with Holly, “she comes across. Even when she’s wearing glasses *this* thick; even when she opens her mouth and you don’t know if she’s a hillbilly or an Okie or what. I still don’t. My guess, nobody’ll ever know where she came from. She’s such a goddamn liar, maybe she don’t know herself any more” (33–34). She is, Berman concludes, a phony; but at the same time “[s]he isn’t a phony because she’s a *real* phony. She believes all this crap she believes” (32). This assessment of Holly’s character seems to me entirely accurate. To be a phony presupposes the existence of some genuine essence that has been deliberately concealed. In Holly’s case, however, what you see is what you get: like the narrative itself, she has managed to remove her inner core of meaning, or more precisely, to bring it to the surface, so that she is what she appears to be—if, indeed, she is anything at all. Elsewhere in the novel, she is variously described as “a Hollywood degenerate” (45), “a crude exhibitionist” (60), “an utter fake” (60), “a child-wife from Tulip, Texas” (64), a “hausfrau” (75), a “glittery voyager” (78), a “PLAYGIRL” (82), a “GLAMOUR GIRL” (82), a “*beautiful movie starlet and café society celebrity*” (83), “*a fragile eyeful*” (84), “*a tomboy*” (84), “a whore” (85), a “beautiful child” (91) and a “bawling baby” (91). And one could argue that she is, at one time or another, all of these things—but not for long, not essentially, and not with any meaningful degree of stability or finality.

I have thus far been suggesting that Holly’s determination to pursue non-meaning leads to the attenuation of the novel’s symbolic and hermeneutic codes, transforming her, along the way, into a floating signifier capable of representing

(almost) anything. And it is this free-floating quality, this enthusiasm for what lies on the surface of things, that provides her character with such mobility, both literally and in the Byronic sense of the word. But why should she aspire to the condition of meaninglessness in the first place, why should she strive to become pure surface, all signifier and no signified? Once more, Barthes's engagement with Japanese culture offers us some useful answers.

What fascinates Barthes about Japan is that its "sign systems, with their extraordinary virtuosity, their subtlety, their strength and elegance, are, in the end, empty." They are empty, he says, because they do not lead to an ultimate signified: "[I]n Japan, as I read things, there is no supreme signified to anchor the chain of signs, there is no keystone, which permits signs to flourish with great subtlety and freedom" (*L'Express* 98–99). The crucial word here is the last one. For Barthes, Japan offers liberation from the tyranny of meaning he associates with Western semiotic structures—and it does so through its emphasis on depthless surfaces, empty gestures and the free-floating play of signifiers. "All civilizations," he argues,

in which monotheism plays a role are necessarily under the constraint of monism; they stop the play of signs at some definite point. And that is the structural constraint of our civilization. So you understand why I give such importance to everything that tends to break away from Western monocentrism, everything that opens onto a possible image of the plural. (*L'Express* 99)

This kind of semiotic autonomy is something Barthes particularly associates with the signifying practices of traditional Japanese theatre. In his 1968 essay on Bunraku puppetry, for example, he celebrates the "tranquillity, lightness, and grace of beings free of thinking, of meaning—free of the 'disorders of consciousness'" (Sontag, "Writing" 78).¹¹ Here, as is so often the case in his writing, the theatrical becomes "the domain of liberty, the place where identities are only roles and one can *change* roles, a zone where meaning itself may be refused" (82). All of which gives us some idea of why Barthes should feel such a strong affinity for Japanese culture. In Japan he found an epistemology, a way of looking at the world, that confirmed many of his own aesthetic principles—particularly the notion that, in Sontag's words once more, "depths are obfuscating [and] demagogic, that no human essence stirs at the bottom of things, and that freedom lies in staying on the surface" ("Writing" 80–81). But how does all this relate to Holly? Well, she too demonstrates the "tranquillity, lightness, and grace of [a being] free of . . . meaning." She too occupies a "domain of liberty," a place where "identities are only roles," and one can change roles as frequently and as effortlessly as one pleases. She too offers us a "possible image of the plural"; and of course she too believes that "freedom lies in staying on the surface," where one can be whatever one appears to be.

As suggested above, the narrative of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* hinges on an opposition between two quite different sensibilities: that of the narrator and that of his subject, Holly Golightly. If Holly can be associated with those cultures that

allow signs “to flourish with great subtlety and freedom,” then the narrator represents the monocentrism of the West, its determination to “moisten” everything with finite meaning—like “an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples” (Barthes, *Empire* 70). And this, as we shall see, is precisely what he attempts to do with regard to Holly, whose declaration of mobility (“*Miss Holiday Golithly, Travelling*”) he finds so “provocative” (42). At once intrigued and threatened by Holly’s indeterminacy, he strives to produce a definitive reading of her character—one that will terminate forever her carefree days of “hither and yonning” (54).

The narrator’s sedentary nature is revealed in the very first sentence of the novel. “I am always drawn back to places where I have lived,” he confesses, “[to] the houses and their neighbourhoods” (9). And he makes his proprietorial tendencies, his attachment to things, clear from the outset too: “[M]y spirits heightened whenever I felt in my pocket the key to [my] apartment; with all its gloom, it still was a place of my own” (9). Of course it was always going to be difficult for a perspective of this kind to accommodate a difference as great as Holly’s, and as the novel progresses the narrator’s unease at her “flighty” ways becomes increasingly pronounced. On hearing that she will soon be leaving for Brazil with José, he imagines Holly as “a glittery voyager of secure destination, steam[ing] down the harbour with whistles whistling and confetti in the air” (78), and he begs her to reconsider: “[Y]ou can’t. After all, what about. Well, what about. Well, you can’t *really* run off and leave everybody” (79). But she refuses to listen, anticipating instead the glamorous wedding she will have in Rio. Then later in the novel, when it becomes clear that she is still intending to leave despite the end of her affair with José, the narrator tries again: “Holly. Holly. You can’t do that” (92). Her reply is typical: “*Et pourquoi pas?*” (92).

And why not? Because, I would like to suggest, the narrator is attempting to reinstate the symbolic and hermeneutic codes within the narrative, and this is something he can do only by ascribing to Holly a stable and finite meaning, by reducing her to a state of rigid singularity. There is nothing he fears quite so much as Holly’s mobility, her status as a floating signifier, for it risks evacuating the narrative itself (his narrative) of meaning. At one point, for instance, he sees Holly entering the 42nd Street public library and decides to follow her inside. As he watches her read and take “laborious” notes, he muses that “the average personality reshapes frequently, every few years even our bodies undergo a complete overhaul—desirable or not, it is a natural thing that we should change.” But not Holly, he decides; she would “never change” (55). Needless to say, this is wishful thinking—and more than once in the novel we encounter evidence that suggests otherwise. For a start, the narrator has already acknowledged that “Holly and libraries [are] not an easy association to make” (55), so her very presence there represents change (or at least atypicality) of some kind. And then immediately after making this claim, he

[comes] to, startled to find myself in the gloom of the library, and surprised all over again to see Holly there. It was after seven, she was freshening her lipstick and perking up her appearance from what she deemed correct for a library to what, by adding a bit of scarf, some ear-rings, she considered suitable for the Colony. When she'd left, I wandered over to the table where her books remained; they were what I had wanted to see. *South by Thunderbird. Byways of Brazil. The Political Mind of Latin America.* And so forth. (56)

There is, in this passage, an obvious determination on the part of the narrator to ignore all evidence that would contradict his belief in Holly's immutability. Although she is changing before his very eyes, transforming herself from one Holly into another, he refuses to acknowledge the reality of this metamorphosis. After wandering over to the table where her books are lying, he discovers still more evidence of her mobility, her plurality. Yet here too a kind of self-censorship occurs, a refusal to register the actuality of her shape-shifting. Instead we are given a list of titles, followed by a somewhat dismissive "and so forth." As the narrator of a story that has already established the transparency of its discourse, its legibility, he is obliged to tell us what he finds on the table; and yet at the same time he does everything he can to not tell us, as this would negate his earlier statement regarding Holly's immobility. Hence the deliberately vague *et cetera* with which he concludes this anecdote is a rhetorical ploy that enables him to perform a simultaneous act of disclosure and erasure. For as Barthes writes of a similar passage in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, "[T]his last attribute, like any *et cetera*, censors what is not named, that is, what must be both concealed and pointed out" (*S/Z* 70).

As I have argued, the narrator demonstrates a genuine fear of Holly's plurality and will do whatever it takes to reduce her to a state of singularity. This is suggested, obliquely, when he begins to see more than one Holly after falling from a bolting horse: "The trouble was, I couldn't see her; rather, I saw several Hollies, a trio of sweaty faces. . . . Then there were four of her, and I fainted dead away" (82). Again the termination of the scene represents a retreat from an uncomfortable reality, one the narrator is being forced to confront, against his will, by the very substance of his narration, by the story he is telling. At other junctures, however, he is left with no choice but to acknowledge Holly's mutability. When he encounters Doc Golightly, for example, he feels compelled to warn him that he will "find Holly, or Lulamae, somewhat changed" (66). Later in the novel, when she undergoes yet another transformation in anticipation of her marriage to José, he is obliged (in his capacity as narrator) to describe the process: "Her hair darkened, she put on weight. She became rather careless about her clothes. . . . A keen sudden un-Holly-like enthusiasm for homemaking resulted in several un-Holly-like purchases. . . . She spent whole hausfrau afternoons slopping about in the sweatbox of her midget kitchen" (74–75).

But despite these scattered acknowledgements, the narrator remains determined to secure Holly's identity, to ground her in an ultimate signified—and one could regard the narrative itself as his final attempt to do so. On the last

page of the novel, he receives a postcard from her explaining that she is “*looking for somewhere to live . . . and will let you know the address when I know it myself.*” Significantly, however, a second postcard never arrives. “The address,” he says, “if it ever existed never was sent, which made me sad.” He then describes seeing Holly’s lost cat in the window of an apartment building, and concludes on a rather wistful note: “I wondered what his name was, for I was certain he had one now, certain he’d arrived somewhere he belonged. African hut or whatever, I hope Holly has, too” (100). That “whatever” is revealing, as is the sudden shift in tense. Such strategic vagueness allows for the possibility that he is referring not to an unspecified place but to the narrative itself. And the transition into the present tense reinforces this possibility. Now, having come to the end of his story, the story we have just finished reading, he hopes to have achieved one thing at least: he hopes to have accommodated Holly within the structure of the narrative, to have given her somewhere to live, somewhere she “belongs.” Yet here too she proves elusive. All that remains of her are several photos taken by Mr. Yunioshi in an African village in “the tangles of nowhere” (12). These photos, we are told, depict

a tall delicate Negro man . . . displaying in his hands an odd wood sculpture, an elongated carving of a head, a girl’s, her hair sleek and short as a young man’s, her smooth wood eyes too large and tilted in the tapering face, her mouth wide, over-drawn, not unlike clown-lips. On a glance it resembled most primitive carving; and then it didn’t, for here was the spit-image of Holly Golightly, at least as much of a likeness as a dark still thing could be. (12)

As much of a likeness as a dark still thing could be—which is to say, barely a likeness at all. This sculpture represents something of a triumph for Holly, for she has finally attained the kind of freedom she has been pursuing all along. She has disappeared into pure “signification,” becoming all signifier and no signified; or more precisely, she has disappeared into a series of proliferating signifiers, a “duplicative chain of bodies and copies” (Barthes, *S/Z* 71), whose ultimate signified, her “true” identity, appears to be almost infinitely recessive. Here, as Barthes writes of Bunraku theatre, “*citation* rules, the sliver of writing, the fragment of code” (*Empire* 55). We have before us a written description of a photo of a sculpture that may or (crucially) may not depict Holly Golightly. But how can one possibly hope to locate the “real” Holly among all these citations and copies? The simple answer, of course, is that we can’t—for “she’s gone . . . [j]ust gone” (15).

V

Four years before the publication of *Madame Bovary* in 1856, Flaubert famously wrote of his desire to produce a novel that was all style and no substance:

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style, just as the earth, suspended in the void, depends on nothing

external for its support; a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. The finest works are those that contain the least matter. . . . I believe the future of Art lies in this direction. I see it, as it has developed from its beginnings, growing progressively more ethereal. (154)

In many ways, this passage also serves as an apt description of Holly Golightly's project in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Like Flaubert, Holly attaches supreme value to style, to surface and gesture. She too strives to immerse herself in the signifier, and she too pursues a kind of semiotic autonomy—the right to refer to “nothing,” to be “suspended in the void.” And of course the same could be said of the novel itself, for at a certain point it becomes clear that Holly's objectives and those of the narrative she occupies are in almost perfect alignment. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* offers us literal meaning (as it must if it is to avoid the symbolic resonance of the unintelligible), but it refuses to generate or support any other kind of meaning. Hence the novel's lightness, which, as I have suggested, is grounded in the comprehensive diminution of its symbolic and hermeneutic codes. In the former case, this is achieved through the narrative's deliberate attenuation of supplementary meaning, which in turn frustrates many of our standard interpretative procedures. In the latter case, it is achieved by reducing the strategic delays ordinarily imposed by the hermeneutic code and thus producing an aesthetic of immediate or accelerated legibility. In both cases, as Barthes writes of Robbe-Grillet, Capote manages to “disappoint” meaning and mystery “precisely when he makes it possible.” And any attempt by the reader to reinstate these qualities would involve a considerable degree of resistance to the novel's most plausible level of interpretation—the level on which it is perfectly and immediately intelligible” (Barthes, “Last Word” 200).

There is, as we have also seen, a tension in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* between two opposing forces: the first, represented by the narrator, privileges stability and density of meaning (good “literary” values); the second, represented by Holly, promotes what Barthes calls “the ethic of the empty sign” (“On *S/Z*” 83). And it is the second of these perspectives, I have argued, that eventually achieves aesthetic and epistemological dominance within the narrative. By emptying herself of meaning, by becoming an entirely superficial “thing,” Holly also manages to evacuate the narrative of much of its meaning and mystery. Of course a complete absence of meaning is impossible to achieve, for every signifier signifies something. But in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, I would like to suggest, we come very close indeed to this elusive ideal—approaching it, one might say, asymptotically. On the surface we have a finely wrought level of literal meaning and at times, perhaps, a secondary level of signification representing the principle of “lightness” itself, but otherwise all latent and transcendent meaning has been effectively eradicated. Like the Japanese haiku, Capote's novel is “just what it is,” and nothing more. It demonstrates all the “attributes of the ‘good’ (literary) message: clarity, simplicity, elegance, finesse” (Barthes, “Digressions” 119)—yet repeatedly deprives us of the deeper symbolic meanings that are supposed to accompany this message.

In so doing, it manages to defy all but the most “superficial” of commentaries, for without meaning, without substance, there is really nothing more to add and nothing left to say.

Notes

1. In this article, I shall be using the term “symbolic code” more loosely than Barthes does in *S/Z* to designate the entire system of symbolic and connotative meaning generated by literary narratives.
2. By “literal” here I mean that “zero-degree” of meaning which is “authorized by the . . . simplest of the existing dictionaries, the one authorized by the state of a given language in a given historical moment, the one that every member of a community of healthy native speakers cannot deny” (Eco 36).
3. For more on meaninglessness as a “theme” in Camus, see Barthes, “Literature” 272.
4. Umberto Eco has usefully distinguished between semantic and critical interpretation, observing that “many artistic devices, for instance, stylistic violation of the norm, or defamiliarization, seem to work . . . as self-focusing appeals” (55), thus encouraging the latter.
5. This is not to suggest, of course, that Capote’s novel renders all criticism redundant. Rather, the function of criticism in this particular case should be, as Sontag puts it, “to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*” (“Against” 14).
6. Similarly, there is the question of José Ybarra-Jaegar’s identity, a “mystery” (46) resolved over the course of a single weekend—and two pages.
7. One might be reminded here of Tintin, whose round, featureless face was aptly described by his creator as “the degree zero of typeage” (Hergé qtd. in McCarthy 33).
8. I am, with this phrase, deliberately inverting Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “strategic opacity”—a term he uses to describe the “technique of radical excision” employed by Shakespeare in his late tragedies. According to Greenblatt, “Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a strategic opacity” (323–24).
9. Of course it is also important to acknowledge Holly’s occasional ambivalence toward this kind of mobility: “[I]t’s better to look at the sky than live there,” she later declares. “Such an empty place; so vague. Just a country where the thunder goes and things disappear” (69–70).
10. This apt phrase comes from Byron’s description of Lady Adeline in Canto XVI of *Don Juan*: “So well she acted all and every part / By turns with that vivacious versatility, / Which many people take for want of heart. / They err; ’tis merely what is called mobility, / A thing of temperament and not of art, / Though seeming so, from its supposed facility, / And false though true, for surely they’re sincerest, / Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest” (XVI.97). (The other key phrase Byron uses in this passage, “false through true,” might also bring to mind O.J. Berman’s description of Holly as a “real phony”—someone who “believes all this crap she believes” [32].)
11. See Barthes, “Lesson in Writing.”

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