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Image, affect, and autobiography

Roland Barthes' photographic theory in light of his posthumous publications

Kathrin Yacavone

As central to the theory of photography as Roland Barthes has become since his death in 1980, he was always reluctant to be considered an expert on the subject. In a late interview, he described *Camera Lucida*, his most important contribution to the field, as a "modest book" that would disappoint photographers, not least owing to his lack of in-depth knowledge of the medium (Barthes 1985: 357). In the same interview, Barthes professed unfamiliarity with canonical photographic works reproduced in important monographs and catalogs, stating that he selected the images for *Camera Lucida* from contemporary journalism. He adds that his choice of material was largely a matter of his own taste and the "pleasure" certain images held in store for him (Barthes 1985: 357–359). Similarly, shortly after the publication of the book, Barthes wrote on one of his filing cards (his equivalent of a writer's notebook), "[I am not an expert of Photography], I am only an expert of myself" (quoted in Nachtergael 2012: 121 [my translation]). These comments and notes, albeit partial and anecdotal, speak to several characteristics of Barthes' approach to photography, as well as his reception in the field of photography theory. First, his theoretical reflections on the medium are always specifically linked to personal life experiences and his tastes and, rather than pursued in isolation, are a significant part of his larger intellectual projects and methodologies, be they structuralist-semiotic or, later, an affective and phenomenological approach to reading, writing, and visual culture, conjoined with a pronounced self-reflexive interest in autobiography. Second, his approach to writing on the medium, from his early semiotic works to his later more personal and impressionistic engagements with photography, takes its cues from specific photographic images. An exception is one short but influential text, "The Photographic Message." In this essay, Barthes, at the time part of the Centre for the Study of Mass Communication at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, members of which sought to establish a systematic (i.e. semiotic) framework for the study of mass culture, analyzed photography in general as a system of communication, without reference to individual images, photographers, and specific styles or genres. The result was his famous definition of the photograph as a "message without a code" (Barthes 1977: 17). This notable exception aside, Barthes' writings on photography are centered on his perceptual and affective as well as intellectual engagement with particular and personally meaningful images.

This broadly speaking phenomenological orientation, inflected by a specifically Barthesian idea of pleasure, is equally prominent in several posthumous publications that deal with photography. These include the *Mourning Diary* (first published in French in 2009), his 1978–1980 lecture series at the Collège de France titled *The Preparation of the Novel* and his seminar "Proust and Photography" (published in the lecture series in 2003), and his final, never completed or published project, "Autobiography in Images." Barthes worked on these projects during the relatively short span of 1977–1980, a period framed by his mother's death on October 25, 1977 and his own on March 26, 1980. Recent developments have contributed to a reassessment of Barthes' oeuvre; these include the transferal of the Barthes estate from the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine) archives to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2011 and a relatively more open accessibility to unpublished material resulting from it; and a plethora of publications during the centenary year of Barthes' birth in 2015, seeking to make public hitherto unpublished material from his entire career, including correspondences, drafts, and notes from his famous (yet still largely unpublished) filing system. This reassessment should extend to his thoughts on photography, going as far back as to his second book, the 1954 biography of Jules Michelet, seldom mentioned in the context of his writing on photography, although clearly relevant.

Against this background, the present reconsideration of Barthes' contribution to the theory of photography has three main aims: (a) to introduce Barthes' posthumously published texts into the (English-language) discourse of photography theory; (b) to situate these texts within Barthes' overall engagement with the medium; and (c) to evaluate the extent to which they shed a new or different light on some of his well-known arguments and ideas. From a critical-conceptual perspective, I shall map these questions against the wider binary discourse in Barthes' oeuvre on photography and (or versus) language. In other words, Barthes' rejection of an authoritative position on photography is, on some level, entirely justified, of course, and not (only) a sign of (false) modesty. Primarily a literary critic and throughout his career first and foremost interested in language, Barthes' approach to photography remained indebted to this primary field of study, coupled with the question of the ideology and violence that language also always conveys, in his view. At first (in the 1950s) subsuming all images—photographic or other—under the paradigm of the linguistic sign, Barthes moved on (in the 1960s) to define the photograph as distinct from language, while still adhering to a linguistic and semiotic vocabulary. From the early 1970s onwards, he began to dissociate the photograph from language, clearly wishing to distinguish, for example, between the photographic album that opens his autobiographical *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and the main text. His late and posthumous publications, finally, indicate that Barthes not only attempts to wholly separate photography from language, but that he increasingly uses photographs *in the place* of it, given his increasing experiences and conceptualizations of language as violent, even "fascist," as he provocatively suggests in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977 (Barthes 2000: 461). This neat trajectory notwithstanding, throughout his career, Barthes always draws attention to the paradox that a photograph 'speaks' most powerfully precisely when it points beyond language or when it arrests language (as he argued, for example, in "The Photographic Message," with respect to the potentially traumatic impact of certain photographs); this stoppage of language, in turn, places (some) photographic images outside not only discourse, but the dominant ideology that is inescapably bound to it. And it is no coincidence that this insight is gained through viewing, responding to, and being powerfully affected by specific images, the leitmotif of Barthes' approach to photography, as I shall argue.

Michelet's gaze: the photographic portrait and biography

Barthes' first analysis of photography came in his well-known semiotic works on popular culture, including *Mythologies* (published in book form in 1957), where the medium is considered under the umbrella of an all-encompassing language paradigm. In other words, photography is seen to work in much the same way as language, at least with respect to cultural and ideological connotations, and he reads and analyzes photographs as texts whose ideological message must be demystified and critiqued. Transposing the semiological and, more specifically, Saussurean model of the linguistic sign (consisting of the arbitrarily linked signifier and signified) to the photographic image, Barthes' subsequent writings evidence a shift in his initial conception, culminating in his controversial proposal that the photographic image is "a message without a code" in 1961. This understanding of photography's specificity ran against the grain of prominent semiotic perspectives on visual culture, such as Umberto Eco's, which insisted on the coded nature of all cultural productions, including photography and film. The positing of photography as the 'other' of language is, however, one of the major themes of Barthes' writing on photography from this point on and represents one of the theoretical challenges he grappled with throughout his career and that resurfaces in a pronounced way in his late work.

This language-related strand in Barthes on photography runs in parallel with another, complementary one: the emphasis on the specific viewing experience and the impact and effect of a photograph on its viewer. This is a well-known and -discussed aspect of his relevant late works, and *Camera Lucida* specifically. However, recently published sections of his correspondence reveal that even the young Barthes was fascinated by the affective power of photography, one that he not only succumbed to, but actively orchestrated in his biographical work on the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet. Published in 1954 as Barthes' second book, *Michelet* appeared in Seuil's *Écrivains de toujours* series (the same one in which *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* appeared about two decades later), consisting of monographs dedicated to canonical French writers, philosophers, and intellectuals, in a format that typically juxtaposes biographical narrative with historical documents, such as facsimiles and autographs. Painted and photographic portraits of the authors in question provide further stock material characteristic of the series. Barthes intensely studied Michelet (for a planned, but never realized, PhD thesis), while confined to a hospital bed in the hope to cure his tuberculosis (first in the Saint-Hilaire-du-Touvent sanatorium and then in Leysin, Switzerland) from the mid-1940s onwards. In 1945 Barthes wrote to his close friend Robert David demanding, in no uncertain terms, to be sent a specific photographic portrait of Michelet, telling his friend in which little Parisian shops he might find the image (Samoyault 2017: 526). The photograph he had in mind, which he most likely saw in publications consulted for his biography of the historian, cannot be identified with certainty. It is likely, however, that it was either the photograph (by an unknown photographer) that Barthes chose for the cover of the original edition or Nadar's portrait of Michelet, from 1854/1855, taken against a plain background, letting the personality of the sitter fully emerge without the distracting decorum of the then typically stuffy bourgeois settings. The photograph by Nadar appeared in Barthes' biography as the only image reproduced over two pages in the middle of the book, making it the most prominent image in the monograph. (The English translation features the photograph of Michelet as a smaller, oval frontispiece illustration and thus also emphasizes its importance.)

Although it may seem that Barthes simply followed a convention of biographical discourse with the inclusion of photographic portraits of his subject, his foreword clearly speaks to a more reflexive and conscious principle at work. Referring to the illustrations in the

book, Barthes foregrounds the visual aspects of his biography as part of his "impassionate gaze" (Barthes 1987: 3), akin to Michelet's guiding use of visual material, including portraits, in his historical investigations. Barthes' selection of images goes hand in hand with his critical approach: in her majestic biography of Barthes, Tiphaine Samoyault has recently drawn attention to the sensory categories, invoking touch, smell, vision, and so on, borrowed from Michelet's own work and used by Barthes as chapter headers in his Michelet biography, labelling Barthes' approach an "affective" form of criticism (Samoyault 2015: 277–278 [my translation]). Although by no means as explicit as in his much later *Camera Lucida*, the use of photographs as first and foremost affective and emotional vehicles, for both Barthes and his readers, is thus already evident on the pages of *Michelet*. The prominent place of the Nadar portrait in his early work further resonates with his last book on photography, where Barthes states that Nadar is the "world's greatest photographer" (Barthes 1993: 68) and where he includes three images (of an original selection of ten) by this nineteenth-century photographer.

Moreover, after he was given the photograph of Michelet by Robert David, Barthes placed it on his desk while studying the historian's work (Samoyault 2017: 197); much in the same way, at the end of his life, he placed the much-discussed photograph of his mother as a child on his desk while writing *Camera Lucida*. In a further striking parallel between the two portraits, upon receipt of the portrait from Paris, Barthes again writes to his friend and describes its powerful, unsettling effect, indicating that he struggles to describe what he calls the "Kindness of a face" (Samoyault 2017: 526), a description that fits better with the photograph by an unkown photographer rather than the Nadar image, where Michelet's gaze is skeptical. Kindness is the very same characterization Barthes uses later to describe the photograph of his mother, in *Camera Lucida*: the word *bonté* occurs three times in the same paragraph that grapples with the description of the impact of this image on the author (Barthes 1993: 69). Although language apparently fails to accurately reflect Barthes' visceral experience of both portraits, there is one striking difference in his treatment of the portrait of Michelet and that of his mother as a child: he reproduces the former and withholds the latter. The different strategies employed by Barthes at the beginning and end of his career are most likely owing to his increasingly self-aware and reflexive use of photographic images in his work, as well as his evolving thought on photography more generally. In other words, even if the primary experiences of the two photographic portraits are similar in certain ways, the theoretical contexts of *Michelet* and *Camera Lucida* within which these viewing experiences are conveyed are not only separated by a proverbial and actual lifetime, but also marked by the death of the mother in 1977. This difference may be belied, however. Chantal Thomas has suggested that the affinity between the two books (or between Michelet, the historian, and *Camera Lucida*) lies precisely in the meditation on death, characteristic of Michelet's oeuvre (Thomas 2015: 92). Taken together with the new insights gained from the publication of hitherto unknown material, in both *Michelet* and *Camera Lucida* the contemplation of the photographic image and its emotional impact on the viewer are far from representing mere biographical anecdotes. Rather, as I have suggested above, the roots in biographical circumstances of Barthes' engagement with photography speak to what is one of his distinctive contributions to photography theory: namely the emphasis on the viewing experience and, concomitantly, the affective and potentially transformative power of the photographic image on the viewer.

Although Barthes wrote on landscape photography throughout his career (including, for example, on the rural scenes photographed by Daniel Boudinet in a 1977 article for the French fine art photography magazine *Créatis*), his overall preference apparently was for

photographic portraiture, an aspect that is confirmed and further emphasized by his posthumously published works, as well as being the grounds on which his theory of photography has often been critiqued, most comprehensively by James Elkins (2011). For Barthes, the human face in photography is the locus for the most effective conveyance of the affective power of photography, and his major interest in what may be classified as family snapshots rather than artistic portraiture, for example, further speaks to his intensified search (starting in the mid-1970s) for a 'neutral' form, one that escapes the binary structures of meaning and classification (a topic he explores explicitly in the 1977–1979 lecture series on *The Neutral*). In other words, a form not a priori shaped by ideological forces—for example, in the form of connotations or second-order meanings—and therefore possessing a certain "*innocence*," as he found, at least once, in his mother's childhood image (Barthes 1993: 69).

Camera Lucida through the lens of mourning

Considering the similar uses of photographic portraits in Barthes' early and late books, as well as the publication of his *Mourning Diary*, new insights can be gained from rereading *Camera Lucida* in this light, especially in relation to its writing process, the origin of a number of key ideas, and the deeper meaning of individual photographic images for Barthes. In addition to the extensive scholarly commentary *Camera Lucida* has received in the context of photography theory, scholarship focused on the evolution and production of Barthes' last book has mainly been concerned with the development of the text itself, with surprisingly little attention paid to the reproduced photographs, their provenance, and meaning for Barthes. For example, Jean-Louis Lebrave's 2002 essay has analyzed the intricate layering of notes and quotations fueling the writing of *Camera Lucida*, emphasizing the Proustian resonances in handwritten drafts and related filing cards that were even more pronounced than in the published version. The 330 dated notes (on the typical card format Barthes worked with of one-quarter of standard-sized paper) making up the *Mourning Diary*, written between October 26, 1977 (the day after the death of Barthes' mother) and September 15, 1979, further confirm the close connection to Proust, but also draw attention to new textual and visual connections and influences with respect to *Camera Lucida*.

Neil Badmington has recently argued that the notion of *punctum* developed in the first part of *Camera Lucida*, as pertaining to a particularly poignant detail of a photographic image that speaks more or less powerfully to the individual viewer, has a cinematic origin rather than the usually assumed photographic one (Badmington 2016: 44–54). In a similar fashion of displaced origins or recontextualization that have become apparent only by virtue of posthumous publications, Barthes' differently oriented definition of the *punctum* in the second half of *Camera Lucida* as photography's noema or essence, that is, the "that-has-been" (Barthes 1993: 96), is equally prefigured in his diary. Barthes repeatedly refers to Donald Woods Winnicott's text "Fear of Breakdown" (Barthes 2010: 122), in which the psychoanalyst considers the long-term impact of early trauma. This text provides Barthes with a formulation that both captures his own psychological state as well as applying to the paradoxical temporal structure of the photographic image (as showing something in the present that has already happened in the past). In his *Mourning Diary*, three references to Winnicott are directly linked to Barthes' experience of his mother's death: first, he writes about the "*fear of what has happened*," which he then reformulates as a "*catastrophe that has already occurred*" (Barthes 2010: 122, 158, 203; original emphasis). This latter phrasing anticipates the verbatim reference in *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes adds that "every photograph is this catastrophe" (Barthes 1993: 96). Both examples show the extent to which Barthes' primarily

psychological and individual reactions to cinematic images and to the event of the loss of his mother are later transcribed to fit the conceptual context of his discussion of photography in *Camera Lucida*.

With respect to photographic images, more specifically, I have already discussed the significance of a perceived kindness in Barthes' viewing of selected portrait photographs and the concomitant difficulty of description and, hence, a silencing of language in both his early *Michelet* and *Camera Lucida*. His *Mourning Diary* confirms this correlation between affective visual impact and silencing of language in Barthes' preoccupation with photography. On January 20, 1979, a few months before the writing of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes notes in his diary:

> *Maman*'s photo as a little girl, in the distance—in front of me on my desk. It was enough for me to look at it, to apprehend the *suchness* of her being (which I struggle to describe) in order to be reinvested by, immersed in, invaded, inundated by her kindness.
>
> (*Barthes 2010: 226 [translation modified]*)

Barthes here perceives the kindness of the face of the mother as a child as the essence or "suchness" of her being and, just as in his letter to Robert David from 1945 in relation to Michelet, laments the difficulty in describing this kindness. The four synonyms with which Barthes seeks to capture the effect of the image on him point towards the inner struggle to speak (about) the photograph's impact. This short diary entry prefigures a further key aspect of Barthes' engagement with photographic images, one that he embeds into the theoretical framework of *Camera Lucida* (which is necessarily lacking in his diary), that is, the self-consciously and, hence, meta-theoretically naïve reading of the photographic image as, at least hypothetically, devoid of connotations. Hence, his wish "to be a primitive, without culture" (Barthes 1993: 7). The evidential power of the photographic image and its affective force lead to an inevitable silence of language, or, inversely, language is reduced to a deictic function only: "Here it is" (Barthes 1993: 5), in Barthes' view. On his final account, language would either "tame" the image or subject it to ideology inherent in any meta-language (Barthes 1993: 117). In a meta-reflexive mode, not long after the above-quoted entry, the diary itself enters a period of silence (with only one brief entry between the end of March and mid-June 1979), a silencing that Éric Marty describes as a "process of extinction" (Marty 2010: 24 [my translation]), during which Barthes turns to writing his book on photography.

There are two further observations to be made on the entry from January 20, 1979. First, Barthes casually mentions that the photograph of his mother as a child lies in front of him on his desk, confirming his working methodology that he already explored in writing *Michelet*: the text emerges out of a close and presumably constant dialog with the central portrait; Barthes literally works under the leading (photographic) gaze of his mother/child that he describes, later, in an entry from December 29, 1978 as a "measure" and a "judge" that "guides" him (Barthes 2010: 220) and then, in *Camera Lucida*, as his "Ariadne" in the photographic labyrinth (Barthes 1993: 73). Curiously, he also draws attention to his simultaneous distance from and proximity to the photograph. This dynamic recalls Walter Benjamin's famous evocation of "aura" as a "unique appearance of distance, no matter how close it may be" (Benjamin 1999: 518 [translation modified]) with respect to nineteenth-century photographic portraits in his "Little History of Photography," which Barthes, as preparation for *Camera Lucida*, read in the French translation of the *Nouvel Observateur* special photography issue (Yacavone 2012: 19–26). Second, the above entry (and others) from Barthes' *Mourning*

Diary confirms what has previously been a matter of debate and contention (at least in an English-speaking context), namely the actual existence of the notoriously absent photograph of the mother in *Camera Lucida*.

As I have argued elsewhere with reference to photographic evidence showing Barthes at his desk with the portrait of his mother as a child in front of him (Yacavone 2012: 164–166), the posthumous *Mourning Diary* leaves no doubt about the fact that the so-called Winter Garden Photograph, the existence of which has been disputed, does exist. (It is in fact preserved in the Barthes archive, in a separate box from the other photographs and not open to public viewing.) Barthes' diary entry from June 13,1978 captures the discovery of the photograph: "This morning, painfully returning to the photographs, overwhelmed by one in which *maman*, a gentle, discreet little girl beside Philippe Binger (the Winter Garden of Chennevières, 1898)" (Barthes 2010: 143). In one of his last interviews for French television, a melancholic Barthes recalls the same episode in a disarmingly open account of the encounter with the image of his mother (Thomas and Thomas 2015), highlighting that the speculation on the missing photograph in *Camera Lucida* was perhaps due to a lack of accessibility of (at the time) widely circulating visual material and information, rather than a deliberate strategy, beyond the logic of the arguments in *Camera Lucida*, that is, on Barthes' part. In addition to the television clip, in 1979, Barthes was willing to be photographed at his desk together with the childhood portrait in front of him, as I noted. This color portrait of Barthes circulated on the cover of the first edition of the 1981 collection of interviews *Le Grain de la voix* (Yacavone 2012: 165).

The real existence of the Winter Garden Photograph has implications for Barthes' wider theses on the theory of photography to the extent to which his ontological quest in *Camera Lucida* is not imaginary, but rooted in an actual photographic image. The missing image is thus neither fiction nor literature nor writing, but a photograph—not more, but also, crucially, not less than this (Yacavone 2012: 170–171). By the same token, posthumous publications have brought to light the slowly evolving process whereby Barthes' book on photography represents a unification of two, initially separate preoccupations in his life: the death of the mother in 1977 and his subsequent desire to acknowledge her existence through a "monument" (Barthes 2010: 133), on the one hand, and the commissioning of a book, in the same year, by the Cahiers du cinéma label (under which Barthes had previously published during the 1960s), on the other. The synthesis of the two events is evident in the *Mourning Diary* where reference to *Camera Lucida* is first made as the "book about Photography," followed by the expression "book around *maman*," which finally becomes "*Photo-Maman* book" (Barthes 2010: 105, 133, 136). It is also interesting to note that the last entry *pre*dates the discovery of the Winter Garden Photograph, which suggests that the idea to combine autobiographical discourse and photography theory in his last book *ante*dates the finding of the object that became the (visually absent) nodal point of the book. Once the two strands were consciously combined, Barthes was impatient to get to work on the book, as is clear from his diary as well as from a recently published letter to his life-long friend Philippe Rebeyrol, dated March 25, 1979. Barthes describes his book as "profondément lié aux images de maman"—that is, "profoundly related to the images of his mother"—and tells his friend that its writing is "affectively essential" for him, which is why he no longer wishes to postpone his work on it (Barthes 2015: 253 [my translation]).

Although the dates Barthes provides at the end of *Camera Lucida* suggest a swift writing period of only about six weeks, between April 15 and June 3, 1979, Badmington has rightly pointed out that the *Mourning Diary*, by contrast, reveals that the preparation of the book took much longer, and that Barthes struggled to begin writing for more than

a year (Badmington 2016: 44). In part also owing to his lecturing commitments at the Collège de France, most notably his *Preparation of the Novel* series, as Barthes laments in the same letter to Rebeyrol, the groundwork for *Camera Lucida* also included intense exploration of photographic material. Apart from the search for his mother's essence in old family photographs—only one of which is actually reproduced in his book, that is, the "La Souche" or "The Stock" picture, a portrait of the mother as a child, depicted together with her brother Philippe Binger and their grandfather (Barthes 1993: 104)—Jean Narboni's recent testimony of the publication process of *Camera Lucida* sheds novel light on Barthes' selection of images.

Then the production editor of the Cahiers du cinéma imprint, Narboni received the original manuscript of *Camera Lucida* and collaborated with Barthes on its final layout during the summer and autumn of 1979. Together with the manuscript, Barthes submitted a list of illustrations containing 56 images, but quickly afterwards recalled his original propositions, indicating in a letter to the editor dated June 18, 1979 that he wishes to "greatly reduce" the number of illustrations (quoted in Narboni 2015: 44–46 [my translation]). Just as in the case of his first illustrated book, *Michelet*, Narboni's account confirms that Barthes paid close attention to the text-and-image dynamic in *Camera Lucida*, not only by selecting the images himself, but also by closely considering the place of images in his text and their captions. But, if the published text contains only 25 images, less than half of the initially proposed amount, omitting images that Barthes was initially keen on including, such as photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, portraits of Rossini and Offenbach by Nadar, and a Duane Michals portrait of Andy Warhol (Narboni 2015: 79), it is reasonable to assume that aspects of the final selection were also due to circumstances beyond Barthes' control. Indeed, Narboni writes about the circuitous process whereby planned illustrations were discarded, replaced, and substituted by others, and that Barthes once, albeit halfheartedly, expressed the wish to renounce any kind of illustration with the aim of "facilitating" the publication process (quoted in Narboni 2015: 78 [my translation]). And yet, his suggestion that this process lacked a "plan" (Narboni 2015: 78) on Barthes' part is not fully convincing, not least given that the illustrations together represent both "another little history of photography," with images representing almost every decade of photographic history from 1820 to 1970, as Geoffrey Batchen has argued (Batchen 2009: 262), and a "history of the faceless," that is, the forgotten faces of history, as Magali Nachtergael has recently proposed (Nachtergael 2015: 66 [my translation]). Barthes insisted on including other images from the original list. As Narboni testifies, Barthes asserted his plan to reprint Daniel Boudinet's blue-green Polaroid photograph of a curtain in color and on special paper (Narboni 2015: 58), which affirms Diana Knight's argument that the frontispiece image is linked to Barthes' description of his mother's eyes as "blue-green" (Barthes 1993: 66), hence establishing an intermedial link between the only color image in *Camera Lucida* and the missing photograph of the mother (Knight 1997: 266).

As these new findings and details on the production process of *Camera Lucida* indicate, although idiosyncratic in many ways, Barthes' approach to photography theory may be described as generally inductive—that is, moving from contemplation of specific images to a formulation of the wider theoretical implications and conceptual insights gained from this close viewing. His original text, intended as a blurb and published for the first time in full as a facsimile in Narboni's book, is telling in this respect: much less enigmatic than the published (French) version of the Tibetan contemplation on death as a "super-illusion" (Barthes 1980; omitted in the English translation), Barthes' original draft is a glossing of his loosely phenomenological approach and an explanation of the intended word-and-image interplay. He writes for example:

> This search takes the form of a wandering: its author looks at some photographs that have a personal interest for him and seeks to define step by step where that which holds him, fascinates and moves him resides in these photographs.
>
> *(quoted in Narboni 2015: 72 [my translation])*

There is no straightforward and linear connection between images and text or ekphrasis here, but a back-and-forth meandering that is guided by emotion and affect as much as intellectual inquiry. Barthes thus goes on to define his discourse as both "intellectual and affective" (quoted in Narboni 2015: 72 [my translation]), of which the Nadar portrait of his wife Ernestine, reproduced as the first image of the second part of *Camera Lucida*, is a telling example.

Narboni quotes from the first manuscript version of Barthes' book, where he explicitly drew attention to the substitution of his own mother with the old woman depicted in Nadar's portrait: "It was as if [...] I had substituted my own mother with the mother of Nadar" (quoted in Narboni 2015: 94 [my translation]). Even before the publication of this explicit comment by Barthes, I have shown the level of confusion and/or substitution at work here: Nadar's portrait shows his wife Ernestine rather than his mother (already long dead when the photograph was taken in 1890), a mix-up aided by Beaumont Newhall's misleading dating of the image in his classic *History of Photography*, which Barthes consulted in preparation of *Camera Lucida* (Yacavone 2012: 170). Barthes' subsequent deletion of his commentary on the image emphasizes the extent to which he sought to protect his mother and her image from the theoretical discourse at the center of which he nonetheless places her—absent—photograph. "In the Mother," Barthes writes, "there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother" (Barthes 1993: 75). However, as Narboni's account makes clear, Barthes at the time was informed that the Nadar photograph depicts the photographer's wife rather than his mother, which led Barthes to add to the image caption "mother" an ambiguous "or of his wife, one does not know" (quoted in Narboni 2015: 98 [my translation]). This suggestive practice of text-and-image relation that deliberately favors personal reading over historical accuracy is deployed throughout *Camera Lucida*. However, it is used to the most powerful effect in relation to the Winter Garden Photograph of the mother as a child, where the image disappears entirely 'behind' language. In other words, the ekphrastic account of the image evokes it in much detail, but replaces it and denies the reader the opportunity to scrutinize the image for him- or herself, owing to Barthes' fear, as he suggests, that the photograph may be seen as banal (Barthes 1993: 73). If language, in Barthes' last book, replaces the central and most important photograph, the posthumously published seminar on "Proust and Photography," as well as his highly fragmentary project "Autobiography in Images," move in the opposite direction: both texts evidence an attempt on Barthes' part to replace language by the photographic image.

A seminar on Proust and an "Autobiography in Images"

As I indicated in the introduction to this chapter, Barthes' posthumous publications that address photography date from the short period of 1977–1980. In parallel to working on *Camera Lucida*, he wrote the *Mourning Diary*, for example, but much of his time and energy in these years was taken up by the preparation of lectures and seminars at the Collège de France, as letters and diary entries from this period frequently emphasize. Mainly concerning the question of creative writing—more specifically, how one actually writes a novel—Barthes' *Preparation of the Novel* series, delivered in two installments in 1978–1979 and

1979–1980, also addresses photography. In one session, from February 17, 1979, Barthes discusses the reality aspect of the short poetic form of the haiku, harkening back to his 1968 discussion of the 'effect of the real' in Flaubert's fiction. If he analyzed detailed descriptions of a room's décor in Flaubert's short story "A Simple Heart" as an example of realist literature's production of a rhetorical effect of the real, here the emphasis is on the visual and its dominance over language in producing the reality effect. In the lecture, Barthes makes a strong analogy between a figurative disappearance of language in haiku ("language fading into the background, to be supplanted by a certainty of reality" [Barthes 2011: 70]) and photography's particularly powerful reality effect. With his future *Camera Lucida*, which he started writing a few months after the February session, likely in mind, he remarks that the specificity of the photographic image and this effect have not yet fully been explored and he continues by formulating the hypothesis that photography is defined by a "that has been" (Barthes 2011: 71), which represents the first occurrence of this expression in Barthes' work. Before the lecture moves on to discussion of individual haiku poems, Barthes proposes that a "*Theory* of photography"—here, as in *Camera Lucida*, contrasted with cinema, of which there is no theory but only a "culture"—"might be possible" (Barthes 2011: 71; original emphasis). If *Camera Lucida* can be seen to pursue such a theory or its possibility, his two unfinished projects, the seminar on "Proust and Photography" and his notes on an "Autobiography in Images," both explicitly turn away from any systematic theory of photography. Still closely related to the use of photographic images, they instead epitomize an even more creative and experimental probing of the affective, (auto)biographical, and imaginary effects and impacts of the photographic image that Barthes pursued during the final months of his life.

"Proust and Photography" was posthumously published in 2003 (and translated into English in 2011), as an appendix to *The Preparation of the Novel* lecture series. Planned as an "Examination of a Little-Known Photographic Archive," as the subtitle specifies, Barthes selects around 50 photographic portraits of Marcel Proust, his family, friends, and acquaintances, taken by Paul Nadar, son of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon Nadar, whose portraits were important to *Camera Lucida*. Yet Barthes never delivered the seminar. The evening before he had arranged to begin the projection of the images in a darkened seminar room at the Collège de France, he crossed the Rue des Écoles with the intention to check the image projector. He was hit by a van, later dying from the consequences of this accident in the context of long-term health problems (Samoyault 2017: 6). Even more elliptical than the rest of his lecture notes (where existing voice recordings complement the written notes, which has led to a re-edition of *The Preparation of the Novel* in French in 2015, taking account of the spoken comments), the posthumous publication of "Proust and Photography" consists only of some introductory notes, followed by the Paul Nadar photographs, which are arranged alphabetically as per the sitter's name and accompanied, in turn, by brief biographical comments on the sitter and his or her relation to Proust and his novel (information Barthes chiefly takes form George Painter's two-volume biography of Proust from 1959–1965).

"Proust and Photography" not only relates to Proust's importance for, and wide-ranging influence on, Barthes, but also shows the extent to which Barthes' use of Paul Nadar's photographs is based on the specific realist ontology of photography developed in *Camera Lucida* (Yacavone 2009: 105–109). However, recent research carried out in Barthes' archive (by myself and, most importantly for our context, by Magali Nachtergael) has brought to light the fragmentary notes for an autobiographical project "in Images," intended to consist exclusively of photographs, which leads to a different, forward-looking interpretation of the

seminar. "Proust and Photography" and "Autobiography in Images" represent Barthes' turning away from the more theoretical considerations of *Camera Lucida*, and both exemplify an expression of the same autobiographically and affectively oriented intention vis-à-vis photography. But "Proust and Photography" takes a negative approach in the sense that it draws attention to everything that it does *not* attempt to do. Barthes begins his seminar by anticipating several likely "disappointments" on the part of his audience, with the first one consisting in "keeping [his] interventions to a minimum" (Barthes 2011: 308). Having become a cultural celebrity in the late 1970s (owing to the far-reaching success of his *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*), Barthes' name alone drew large audiences to his lectures and seminars at the Collège de France, and his intention to disappear in the semi-dark projection room may well have disappointed potential members of his audience. Barthes imagines the audience as comprising what he calls "Marcelians," that is, only those interested in Marcel as a "social being" rather than in Proust, the established French literary author (Barthes 2011: 309). With this focus on Marcel's life, social habits, and peculiarities comes the next wave of disappointments, according to Barthes. Introducing the topic of his seminar, he again defines his aims negatively: neither an analysis of the links between Proust and photography nor even a seminar on 'Proust,' as he clarifies (Barthes 2011: 309). He will not analyze the photographs: "no ideas, no literary or photographic remarks, no attempt" to find correspondences between them and Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, nor is the aim of the seminar "intellectual," and "there'll be no 'theory'" (at least, not beyond the few introductory remarks; Barthes 2011: 310). What then, one may wonder, is the purpose of Barthes' endeavor?

From our perspective, Barthes aims to fully exploit the affective power of the photographic image, against the background of reading Proust's novel. In his characteristically expressive language on the subject, he wishes to "produce an intoxication, a fascination," which he goes on to define as "particular to the Image" (Barthes 2011: 310). Put differently, Barthes' presentation places images before discourse to replicate the photographs' effect on the viewer that he himself experienced; intoxication is therefore not to be read in a pathological sense, but as a form of excitement and exhilaration. In a similar manner, he defines the identification of biographical "keys" or clues in relation to Proust's novel, that is, the supposed real model for the fictional character, as an "excitement" and a "cryptological energy" (Barthes 2011: 314). Further twisting the traditional understanding of the identification of keys (for which Proust's work has been a particularly rich field of exploration), Barthes states that the deciphering of clues does not refer to Proust's life, but to the reader and his or her imagination (Yacavone 2009: 104–105). Keys therefore "strengthen and develop the *imaginary* link with the Work" (Barthes 2011: 314; original emphasis). The specific role and function of photography in this context is to excite and ignite the 'cryptological energy,' on the one hand, and to affect a "confrontation," as Barthes notes, "between the Dream, the Imaginary of reading and *Reality*," on the other (Barthes 2011: 314; original emphasis). In other words, the photographic portraits by Paul Nadar as shown by Barthes are aimed at confronting the reader with his or her imaginary image of the characters in Proust's novel, a clash that can lead to (further) "disappointment" or, indeed, the intended "intoxication" (Barthes 2011: 315).

Barthes' selection of photographs for the purpose of intoxicating his audience and his sparse comments on them reflect his rejection of establishing the keys to Proust's novel in the traditional sense, while simultaneously playing on loose biographical links between the photographed person and Proust's life and literary work. But, he also goes further and connects the images to his own biography, for instance, when he comments on the portrait of

Professor Édouard Brissaud that he is the father of the "Dr. B. who treated [Barthes]" for his pulmonary ailment, the sons of whom he attended school with (Barthes 2011: 328). Or, pondering the death in 1952 of the Comtesse Greffulhe in light of her iconic portrait showcasing the back of her lily-covered dress and her facial reflection in a mirror, he exclaims "I was writing *Degree Zero*!" (Barthes 2011: 345). This kind of sudden short-circuiting of his own biography with that of Proust is reminiscent of Barthes' captioning of one of his childhood photographs included in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, which reads: "*Contemporaries? I was beginning to walk, Proust was still alive, and finishing* À la Recherche du temps perdu" (Barthes 1995: 23; original emphasis). Two other portraits included in his seminar are childhood portraits of girls: Jeanne Pouquet and Gabrielle Schwartz. Barthes remarks in the same personal tone: "I like the little girls from this period. [...] Perhaps because it's more or less that of my mothers' childhood" (Barthes 2011: 362). It is in the photographic section of "Proust and Photography" that his use of photographs is more positively affirmed: unlike the preliminary comments that indicate everything the seminar is *not*, Barthes' fusion of the Nadar portraits with his own biography experiments with a new form of biographical writing (Nachtergael 2012: 125), one that finds its positive expression in the notes for a planned autobiographical project "New Look" (Fonds Roland Barthes n.d., card no. 37 [Barthes uses the English expression]).

His intended, although of course not complete and literal, silence in front of the photographs by Paul Nadar in his seminar is congruent not only with Barthes' understanding of "fascination" as having "nothing to say" (Barthes 2011: 310), but also with the wider trajectory of his probing of photography's affective power as a silencing of language. This would have been fully achieved, however, in "Autobiography in Images," given Barthes' plan to tell the story of his life through an arrangement of photographic images without, or with only very minimal, accompanying text. Preserved in Barthes' archive in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, an envelope belonging to his photography-related projects contains 54 handwritten index cards, as well as a number of images: postcards from Japan and the negative of the aforementioned "The Stock" family photograph (included in *Camera Lucida*), as well as a postcard showing an aerial view of Urt (Barthes' usual summer residence and where he wrote *Camera Lucida*).

These images are part of what Barthes, on the note cards from the same envelope, refers to as "My life in images/New attempt at autobiography/An autobiography New Look" (Fonds Roland Barthes n.d., card no. 37 [my translation]; underlining in the original). Penciled on the side of this card is a further comment that speaks to Barthes' intent to assemble 50 photographs of his life to extract and choreograph (in a Brechtian fashion, as he hints) a new form of visual autobiography (Nachtergael speaks of Barthes' "scénographie," 2012: 123). Although Barthes explicitly refers to the seminar on Proust and photography as a parallel project (Fonds Roland Barthes n.d., card no. 8), his emphasis on affect establishes a further connection between the two planned projects, based on the use of photographs as powerfully affective vehicles: "an autobiog [*sic*] with real images, centered on affect," Barthes notes (Fonds Roland Barthes n.d., card no. 39 [my translation]). Although Barthes wonders whether his 1975 autobiography represents a precursor to his current project, "Proust and Photography" and "Autobiography in Images" together represent a more radical approach to photography than the one explored in the photographic preface of his *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. In the Proust seminar, Barthes planned to abandon general theoretical considerations and minimize discursive commentary in order to provide a platform for the full affective power of the photographic image to emerge; in the "New Look" project, he proposed to abandon language (almost) entirely. Any kind of meta-language in the form of

ekphrasis or explanation, for example, is thus rejected and implicitly seen to hinder rather than help the viewing of photographs. Barthes here, in practice, reaches the logical conclusion of his own theoretical considerations, namely that the photograph is experienced as most affectively powerful in the absence of language.

In sum, Barthes' posthumously published correspondence, notes, lectures, and draft projects shed significant new light on his relationship with photography, from his use of photographic portraits in his early biography of Michelet, and his seeking to establish a theory of photography closely tied to the contemplation of individual images (both private and public) and their affective impact on viewers (*Camera Lucida*), to his subsequent turn away from theory and language more generally. This now expanded picture of Barthes' thinking on and through photography demonstrates, for instance, that his famous semiotic-structuralist analysis of the medium and its uses was a kind of intellectual detour —albeit a highly insightful and influential one—from the existential and affect-based account of photography initiated (in practice) in *Michelet* and later renewed and elaborated, but with clear continuity, not only in *Camera Lucida*, but also later, never fully realized work. Here, Barthes no longer attempts to describe his personal experience of photographs, but instead tries to provoke such experience for his readers and listeners. And it is clear that, even in such a paradigmatically personal work as "Autobiography in Images" would have been, this silencing of (meta-)language in the face of the image itself would have come to full fruition had Barthes lived long enough to realize it.[1]

Note

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