

Notes on Love and Photography*

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When my gaze meets yours, I see both your gaze and your eyes, love in fascination—and your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are visible (things or objects in the world) as much as seeing (at the origin of the world), I could precisely touch them, with my finger, lips, or even eyes, lashes and lids, by approaching you—if I dared come near to you in this way, if I one day dared.

—Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*

I desire you. I desire only you. . . . Where are you? I am playing hide and seek with ghosts. But I know I will end up finding you, and the whole world will be newly lit because we love each other, because a chain of illuminations passes through us.

—André Breton, *Mad Love*

To be on an island inhabited by artificial phantasms was the most insupportable of nightmares; to be in love with one of these images was worse than being in love with a phantasm (perhaps we always have wanted the person we love to have a phantasmatic existence).

—Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*

*Is Roland Barthes dreaming when he writes *Camera Lucida*? Does he think of his mother every day, or of the mother of whom he dreams every day (he tells us at one point that he only dreams of his mother), or of the mother that he both knew and did not know, saw and did not see, or of the mother that was never herself? Is he haunted by the ruin of all the memories of her that he wished to capture, in the writing of this book, for every day and always? Or by what happens, one day, between photographic technology and the light that helps bring to life a photograph of his mother when she was five years old—a photograph in which he claims to find the truth of the face he loved, and from which he seeks to “derive” all photography? Or*

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else by what happens, all at once—within the movement of his thoughts and writing, and in relation to his body—among photography, the work of his unconscious, the ghostly experience of music, the traumatic experiences of death and mourning, and the pangs of love? Barthes dreams (and writes) his vision (offering us something like photography itself: what he calls “a new form of hallucination”), the fire of a declaration of love that, as he says, burns and consumes him, a “floating flash” that, blinding him, disorienting him, enables him to experience and touch his finitude; and if we listen to the muteness of his mournful song, to the cry of his writing, we can perhaps hear him say:

I approach myself as I wait for you, today, my love, and for all time, but I know that, with your death, but also in your life, the self I approach is lost and cannot be found. In the midst of this loss, I experience the madness of a single desire: to affect time with time, secretly, in the night, and with the hope that, like the click of a camera, I may yet live to archive the music of my love for you. I love you, I desire you, I want to see and touch your body, I cannot live without you, and, with your death, I am no longer myself, even though I know that, even before your death, and because of my love for you, I already was not myself. If I have been wounded by your death—if it has pierced me and struck me—it is because this wound already was “mine,” already was the signature of my love. Like the punctum about which I soon will tell you, your death has been added to my life, even if, from the very beginning, it already was there. No longer simply alive, but not yet dead, at the threshold of life and death, I offer you this book in the hope that it can suspend and derange time, and that, confessing my enduring love, my enduring wound, it can transform “the corpus I need” into “the body I see,” the body I touch.

I

Photography is mad, and, in the world of Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, its delirium and danger are related to the experience of love, and, more particularly, to what he calls the “pangs of love,” “extreme love.”¹ But what is love, and in what way does it pain us, pierce us, strike us, and offer us a glimpse of our mortality? What is its relation to death, mourning, music, and photography? What does love have to do with the ruin, loss, and dissolution of the self? What does it mean to love a photograph, and in what way does love mean nothing else than loving a photograph (is it even possible to love something other than a photograph)? What is the relation, within the space of photography, between the “observed subject” and the “subject observing” and how does this relation, at least according to

1. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1981), pp. 116, 12. All references to the English translation of this text are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *CL*. Since, on occasion, we have modified this translation, we also include references to the original French edition; in this instance, then, the second citation can be found in *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), pp. 179, 28. All references to the French edition are given following the English citation and will be cited as *CC*.

Barthes, require a reconceptualization of both photography and love? These are the questions raised by Barthes' strange, but moving meditation on photography and the death of his beloved mother. Barthes' text carries the signature of a vigil that is more than simply an experience of mourning, more than simply a surviving testimony or a meditation on photography, since, as is legible in nearly every one of its sentences, it remains amorously related to a mother who has died (perhaps even more than once), but is still living, and not only in his memory. Indeed, we could even say that, within the logic of the book, it is his mother's survival, her living on, even after her death, that indicates that things pass, that they change and transform, and, minimally, because this survival asks us to think not of the impossibility of a return to life but of the impossibility of dying, not life or death, but life and death, or perhaps, even more precisely, "life death." It is this ghostly survival—as a metonym for all such survivals—that defines the madness of the photograph, since it is there, within the medium of photography, that we simultaneously experience the absence of the "observed subject" and the fact of its "having-been-there," the relation between life and death, between testimony and its impossibility, between the self and an other, and among the past, the present, and the future. Within the delirious space of photography, all these apparent oppositions are suspended and ruined in order to be rethought in relation to the madness of love "itself," since the experience of love also breaks down and shatters these same oppositions, along with many others (including the relation between interiority and exteriority, presence and absence, singularity and repetition, lucidity and blindness, and necessity and chance). This means, among other things, that this little book on photography is also, and perhaps most essentially and significantly, a text on love and eroticism. It is Barthes' true "lover's discourse," and this because, as he suggests, to speak of photography is always to speak of love.

Barthes reinforces this point when, in the first few pages of his book, he confesses that when he looks at a photograph he sees "only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body" (*CL*, p. 7/*CC*, p. 19). It is precisely "love," he explains, "extreme love," that enables him to "erase the weight of the image" (*CL*, p. 12/*CC*, p. 27), to make the photograph "invisible" (*CL*, p. 6/*CC*, p. 18), and thereby to clear a path for him to see not the photograph, but the object of his desire, his beloved's body. If, at first glance, it would seem that the force of love, and particularly of "extreme love," enables him to pass through the photographic surface to reach the referent, to exceed the limits of the photographic medium in order to see his beloved, Barthes soon makes it clear that there can be no love without photography and no photography without love. But to state this chiasmic axiom is merely to articulate the beginning of a mystery, since what is really at stake in this context is the possibility of understanding what "love" and "photography" mean here, especially since, like all the other terms he mobilizes within his text—including "*studium*," "*punctum*," "music," "death," "mourning," "identity," and even "mother" (we would like to call these terms "Barthemes" to signal his effort to

singularize his use of them, to make them “his”)—these two words or concepts can never be understood outside of their relation to other words and concepts.

Like the lover who wishes to address the singularity of his beloved without recourse to the lover’s discourse he inherits, Barthes seeks to invent a language that would be more faithful to what he “perceives” to be the singular, paradoxical, and contradictory character of photography.² He suggests that, in order to submit to the photographic adventure, to surrender to the unprecedented experience of photography, we must invent a language with which we can approach it, even if we know we may never seize or capture it. Like all lovers, the Barthesian lover therefore seeks to name a world that has never yet existed before his eyes, as if his language might, in calling it forth, touch it for the first time. Indeed, as we know from his earlier analysis of the lover’s discourse, language desires nothing more and nothing else than to touch the beloved’s body—and the world in which it exists.

In the same way that the lover’s language wishes to approach and touch his beloved, Barthes desires to approach and touch photography: to touch its essence, to touch on what differentiates it from other modes of representation. In the opening paragraph of his text, he confesses, in a wonderfully ambiguous formulation that signals both photography’s singularity and its intimate relation with cinema: “I decided I liked Photography *in opposition* to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an ‘ontological’ desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was ‘in itself,’ by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images” (*CL*, p. 3/*CC*, pp. 13–14). Overwhelmed by desire, the writer seeks to discover the “ontology” of photography, but, rather than looking for concepts that might distinguish and define the fundamental elements with which we might determine photography’s singularity, he suggests that there can be no reflection on photography that does not begin with the revision of the words or concepts with which we speak and think about images, and through which we look at them. Barthes signals and reinforces the fact that his “Barthemes,” “his” words or concepts, designate something other than what we usually would expect them to mean through a series of typographical strategies, including the capitalization of terms, italicization, and the strategic use of quotation marks.³ Given the way in which each Bartheme condenses and encrypts a series of associations that prevent it from remaining self-identical to itself, we could even say that its condition of possibility can only be the impossibility of its ever having a fixed semantic content.

2. Barthes not only invents a set of Latinate neologisms but he also ceaselessly marks and remarks even familiar terms in such a way that, in each instance, they break away from what generally has been conceived or meant by them. He chooses Latin as the “mother tongue” of photography—an archaic language to describe a modern technology, a dead language to evoke a technology organized around death—because modernity can only be understood in relation to the past from which it emerges. For an excellent discussion of this point, see Elissa Marder, “Nothing to Say: Fragments on the Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *LEsprit Créateur* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2000), esp. pp. 28–30.

3. Barthes’ stylistic strategies—his use of capitalization, in particular—have been commented on extensively. Perhaps the most elaborate account is provided by Andrew Brown, *Roland Barthes: The Figures of Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

This is why Barthes frequently uses quotation marks (in this passage, around the word “ontological” and the phrase “in itself”); they signal that the word, name, or concept enclosed within them is never simply monosemic, but rather—like the subject whose entry into photographic space announces the “advent” of himself as an other—is always in the process of becoming something else. As is so often the case with Barthes, each element of his writing—its typographical eccentricities, its rhythm and movement, its echolalia and repetitions, its diction and distribution—works to enact what he wishes to convey.

If Barthes creates a text whose movement and circulation, whose words and names, embody and enact its semantic drift, in this instance it is because he wants to suggest that what makes love and photography love and photography is that neither they nor their amorous or photographic subjects ever remain the same. This means, among other things, that, before anything else, Barthes’ text is an assault on the constitution of a “safety zone” for any theory of photography in which it would be possible to delineate strict borders that would separate, define, and establish the elements that would be indispensable for thinking photography “in itself.” Among the words that have become the most essential to any reflection on photography there is perhaps no more important set of terms than “subject,” “image,” and “reference.” Barthes invents a heretical language that questions and redefines this “Holy Trinity” in order to destabilize the unity and integrity of each of its terms—to work in favor of processes and not positions, of multiple forms of becoming and not unities that would be identical to themselves—and therefore to reconceptualize photography altogether. Dissolving the distinction between one term and another, *Camera Lucida* proceeds in a way that could be said to belong to the experience of love; it proposes a theory of photographic becoming in which the photograph is a force of transformation: in which models become images, images become subjects, and subjects become photographs.

Within this logic of transformation and metamorphosis, it is impossible to sustain the abstraction we call “reference.” The relation between the represented object and its representation, between reference and image, does not presuppose an object whose being and existence precede, or remain outside, the process through which it becomes an image. On the contrary, Barthes suggests that photographic representation stages—makes absolutely “literal”—what is at the heart of modern representation, and this is precisely the putting into crisis of a temporal order in which first there is an object and then later its representation. What stands in front of the photographic apparatus—an object or subject that gives way to a portrait—does not “exist” before the camera’s click. As Barthes explains, “once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (*CL*, p. 10/*CC*, p. 25). This “active” transformation is not that of someone who offers himself to the camera, like some sacrificial victim, in order to be reproduced, but rather that of someone who knows that what makes him what he “is”—and therefore prevents him from ever being simply “himself”—is

the multiplicity that *inhabits* “him.” In the same way that the being of an object does not exist before its representation, there also is never a single, homogeneous object that—even before it is placed in front of the camera—coincides with itself. What Barthes engages here, in an extremely systematic and rigorous manner, is nothing less than what produces the difficulty of all contemporary reflections on photography: the absence of the subject. But, as he suggests—and here lies his strength and courage—this absence does not result from disappearance or effacement, but, on the contrary, from multiplication and proliferation. As he puts it,

in front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). (*CL*, p. 13/*CC*, pp. 29–30)

Photography—and the portrait as its genre *par excellence*—constitutes a radical and absolute destabilization of the Cartesian subject, “comparable to certain nightmares,” and not unlike the one advanced by psychoanalysis, in which “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.”⁴ Like psychoanalysis, photography shatters the subject of reason—a subject that would be complete and coincidental with itself—by introducing a plurality that is not produced by the metonymic force of unconscious desire, but by affects and the gaze: “I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (*CL*, p. 21/*CC*, p. 42). It tells me that I do not exist before my image—that I exist only as an image, or, more precisely, only as a series of images, none of which are ever one. It redeems me from the immobility of a “self” and tells me that the I that is reproduced in each new image, and in every copy of each of these images, is never even one at the moment in which it poses before the camera. “I only resemble,” Barthes notes, “other photographs of myself, and this to infinity: no one is ever anything but the copy of a copy, real or mental” (*CL*, p. 102/*CC*, p. 159). Undoing every contemplative act that would presume a distance between “itself” and the image on which it focuses, *Camera Lucida* puts the category of an observer—as the neutral subject of a process that presumably occurs outside him—into crisis.

The provocative statement that “a photograph is always invisible” (*CL*, p. 6/*CC*, p. 18)—because it is possible to pass through it in order to move directly to the referent—should be read not as a means of devalorizing or overcoming the materiality of the image, but as a way of contesting historical and sociological readings and understandings of the image. If Barthes claims, from the very beginning, that he is “‘scientifically’ alone and disarmed” (*CL*, p. 7/*CC*, p. 20), it is

4. Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977), p. 166.

because he refuses to imagine himself as someone who, sheltered and protected by a critical, sociological, historical, and even, in the end, an affective distance, rigorously and completely analyzes a photographic corpus. The I who speaks in *Camera Lucida* contemplates a series of photographs that he holds in his hands without imagining that he is a neutral witness of a relation or bond that has excluded him: on the contrary, the singular adherence that binds the image to its referent also includes him. This is why, far from reinforcing the assumption of an ontological difference between the subjectivity—the “humanity”—of the observer and the materiality of the chemical paper or metal plate that forms a photograph, *Camera Lucida* works to destabilize this frontier: the image becomes a subject and the subject becomes an image. They are bound together in a relation that, acquiring a certain privacy or intimacy, reveals itself to be an amorous one: the encounter between the subject and the photograph he holds in his hands produces the spark that subjectivizes the image (that “animates” it) and that simultaneously illuminates his own photographic being.⁵

Closer to pleasure than to science, the act of looking at a photograph therefore does not differentiate between a subject and an image, but rather brings together “two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing” (*CL*, p. 10/*CC*, p. 24). To look at a photograph also is to recognize the photographic dimension of my “self,” to identify a particularity that seizes my gaze, to register or acknowledge that I already am, and in advance, a kind of photograph.⁶ This is why, as Barthes suggests in the early pages of his text, he can take

5. Within this amorous relation, what evokes and attracts the gaze is called “adventure” (*CL*, p. 19/*CC*, p. 38). Like any adventure, the photographic adventure is linked to particularity—“contingency, singularity, adventure” (*CL*, p. 20/*CC*, p. 40) form a series in *Camera Lucida*—and to the adventurer’s confrontation with the other. Like all adventure, the photographic adventure implies the risk of an “internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor, too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken” (*CL*, p. 19/*CC*, p. 37). Like music, the photograph breaks into the subject and produces a kind of agitation and interruption that—and here is the effect of the risk (and of all risk)—transforms the subject and thereby prevents him from remaining “himself.” This is why, when Barthes suggests that, “In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it” (*CL*, p. 20/*CC*, p. 39), he implies that the adventurer’s risk is never that of losing his life, but of passing through an experience that, at the edge of death, “animates” him, gives him the life he did not have, an other life. But this risk is also, at the same time, and like the adventure of love, very trivial. This is why what makes a photographic experience an adventure is precisely the enactment of an incredible feat that works to transform this triviality into a field in which the power of adventure can unfold in unexpected and transformative ways. To say that there can be no photography without adventure means, among other things, that there can be no adventure without a force of animation and transformation. This is why, we might say, love (as another name for the photographic adventure) means: adventure, animation, a transformation that displaces the lover onto a new terrain, one in which neither he nor his beloved (neither the observed subject nor the subject observing) can remain who they were “before” their encounter.

6. This is why the very possibility of love depends on our being able to love a photograph. For Barthes, to love a photograph is to experience “an internal agitation, an excitement” (*CL*, p. 19/*CC*, p. 37), to experience the adventure of what cannot be spoken or known, and to take “into my arms what is dead, what is going to die” (*CL*, p. 117/*CC*, p. 179). To love a photograph is to embrace the mortality of the other, to experience a kind of madness, and to find and lose oneself in relation to the beloved, and inside the beloved, since, as we know, the beloved has, like the viewer of a photograph, internalized a trace of the lover, the lover’s “prick,” the lover’s *punctum*. To love an other, then, to love another living person, means to love a photograph—to love what, wounding us, piercing us, and entering us, can no longer be thought or experienced as entirely other than us.

“himself” as a “mediator for all Photography,” and why he can become “the measure of photographic ‘knowledge’” (*CL*, pp. 8–9/*CC*, p. 22). This also is why representation or testimony are never innocent: the camera is never here or there in order to register “reality,” and the image does not exist to confirm how different it is from us. Instead, Barthes suggests that the essence of photography lies in its affirmation of becoming. Photography names (without naming) the process whereby something stops being what it “is” in order to transform itself into “something else.” It “represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter” (*CL*, p. 14/*CC*, p. 30). Between life and death, subject and object, subject and image, in a kind of parenthesis, the specter I am becoming declares that the only image or subject that could really be an image or subject would be the one that shows its impossibility, its disappearance and destruction, its ruin.

To look at a photograph therefore means to contemplate the singular adherence that transforms me into an image and what the image demonstrates to me (without demonstrating anything at all) about what it means to be a photographic subject. The relation between the object and its image, among the image-object, the object-image, and my gaze, links me to the adventure of experiencing the photographic fragment as a mirror that returns me to my own image. As Barthes explains, “I am the reference of every photograph, and this is what generates my astonishment in addressing myself to the fundamental question: why is it that I am alive *here and now*?” (*CL*, p. 84/*CC*, p. 131). In other words, why am I not *there*—in the fragment of paper that I hold in my hand or in the place in which the photograph was taken? Why am I not *there then*, in the moment in which the click of the shutter was heard, in the precise instant in which what the image shows me was transformed into this image? If photography is “the cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (*CL*, p. 12/*CC*, p. 28), it is not only because photography signals a crisis in the identity of the subject but also because it introduces a mediation and break into the very interior of the concept of identity. Within the photographic space, I “discover” that I am never self-identical to myself, and that there is no object, no act, no instant that ever coincides with “itself.” Each time we hold an image in our hands, the magic of photography returns to repeat itself and the photographed and the photographic apparatus encounter themselves again as if for the very first time, in part because the observer, haunted and constituted by this earlier encounter, is himself a photographic apparatus. Photography prevents us from ever recognizing this or that identity—ours, but also that of someone or something else—because “photography” is the name of the destruction of any consciousness of identity.

This law of both love and photography—a law that interrupts identity by marking it with the sign of difference and transformation—belongs to what makes Barthes’ meditation on love and photography so radically provocative: against a

sense that photography's signature lies in its capacity to fix and preserve—to arrest—what is before the camera, he mobilizes a network of associations that, practically and textually, seek to disorganize and destabilize the opposition or difference between opposing terms, such as stasis and movement, preservation and destruction, survival and death, and memory and mourning. That this work of disorganization and destabilization is shown to be at the heart of the experience of love—as Barthes would have it, love is nothing else than a process of disorganization and destabilization—is what we are meant to trace, as if we were tracing and listening to a kind of secret, and as we follow the Ariadne's thread which, like the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother as a child, brings together photography, love, and death.

II

What would it mean to formulate an ontology for photography—for this medium that, according to Barthes, is characterized only by “contingency, singularity, adventure” (*CL*, p. 20/*CC*, p. 40)? *Camera Lucida* opens with this ontological desire and, as the text advances, ontology gives way to a space entirely devoted to desire: “I was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons,” Barthes writes, “I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound” (*CL*, p. 21/*CC*, p. 42). If photography is not to be thought as a theme (or as a question to which we might provide an answer), it is because it cannot be reduced to a theme; it is because, “unclassifiable” (*CL*, p. 4/*CC*, p. 15), it wounds the very possibility of theme and, in particular, of the theme or concept of photography. This is why the language and concepts mobilized throughout this text require a reading attentive to what he calls, at the end of the first part of the book, his “palinode,” his retraction of his desire to name or conceptualize photography in a determinate manner. We might even say that this palinode—as a mode of assertion that countersigns a kind of withdrawal from what is being asserted—is one of the text's signatures. It belongs to an effort of conceptualization that moves the text in one direction in order later to follow the reverse path in search of a language willing to risk a relation to “affect,” a language that, as he puts it, can only “speak of desire or of mourning” (*CL*, p. 21/*CC*, p. 41). The entirety of *Camera Lucida*, in other words, proceeds by seeking a language commensurate with the paradoxical character of the photograph—a language that is guided and interrupted by the desire for the very thing that, always lost, and never comprehended, remains to be mourned: photography itself.

The notorious distinction that Barthes makes between the photograph's *punctum* and *studium*—a distinction that, as we will see, is only the simulacrum of a distinction (even if, at the same time, these two terms always remain different from each other)—appears to be the exemplary instance of this paradoxical compromise with desire or mourning. As he would have it—at least initially—the *studium* is a field of predictability and repetition: “it always refers to a classical

body of information”; it is what “I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture” (*CL*, p. 25/*CC*, p. 47). It constitutes (or “figures”) a totality that always refers to something that precedes the image: the intention that might govern the photograph’s production, whether it is generated by the photographer, the technology, or the object captured in the image. This field is scanned by the detail that Barthes calls the *punctum*, which he claims is excluded from the field of intentions, in the strongest sense of the term “intentionality”—that is, in terms of a subject’s will of expression—but also in the sense of what this or that photographic technology or photographed subject can or wishes to say. “Certain details may ‘prick me,’” he writes, “If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally” (*CL*, p. 27/*CC*, p. 49). The *punctum* therefore escapes from what counts as the art of the photographer, but also from what we could call the art of the photographic technique or of the object—the capturing of the present moment, the precision of technical processes, the exhibition of rarities—precisely because *punctum* is the name with which Barthes seeks to designate what cannot be seen in advance, “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (*CL*, p. 47/*CC*, p. 79). Defined as a detail that fascinates, but also as a wound that interrupts the *studium*, that cuts or pricks the image and the corporeal gaze that would view it, the *punctum* points directly toward that affective field opened by images—a field that always evokes enjoyment as both pleasurable and wounding.

If the *studium* would seem to be on the side of legibility, the effect of a “certain training” (*CL*, p. 26/*CC*, p. 48) or “education” (*CL*, p. 28/*CC*, p. 51), if it evokes the range of cultural and historical contexts from which we may draw information that enables us to engage a photograph (even if only in a general way), the *punctum* is what disturbs this legibility, what punctures or strikes through the surface of reproduction: “it arises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”; it “disturbs” the *studium* (*CL*, pp. 26–27/*CC*, p. 49). Emerging with the ghostly force of the supplement, the *punctum* appears as a kind of transit or relay between the photograph and the viewer that, despite its violence, despite its singularity, nevertheless can be drawn into a network of associations. Like the language that moves in relation to affect, in relation to desire and mourning, the *punctum* works in relation to the *studium*. As Derrida explains in the elegy he wrote shortly after Barthes’ death,

as soon as the *punctum* ceases to oppose the *studium*, all the while remaining heterogeneous to it, as soon as we can no longer distinguish here between two places, contents, or things, it is not entirely subjugated to a concept, if by “concept” we mean a predicative determination that is distinct and opposable. This concept of a ghost is scarcely graspable in its self as the ghost of a concept. Neither life nor death, but the haunting of the one by the other.

“The ‘versus’ of the conceptual opposition,” he adds, “is as unsubstantial as a camera’s click.”⁷

If at first glance it would seem that the *punctum/studium* couple names the opposition between a cultural or historical canon and its interruption or between what is predictable and what is irreducibly singular—a claim that seems to be supported by Barthes’ assertion that “the *studium* is ultimately always coded, the *punctum* is not” (*CL*, p. 51/*CC*, p. 84)—the parenthesis that follows this assertion “(I trust I am not using these words abusively)” dissolves this pure antagonism in order to complicate and reformulate not only the opposition between singularity and predictability, contingency and repetition, detail and totality, but also between intentionality and nonintentionality. In *Camera Lucida*, the *punctum/studium* couple does not speak to us of antagonistic elements, of two forces opposed to one other, and identical to themselves; rather, it names the “co-presence” (*CL*, p. 42/*CC*, p. 72)—in the here and now of the space of every image—of two forces in transformation, two streams that tend toward each other, without ever coinciding with one another. This is why, if the *studium* names a kind of education, knowledge, and civility that produces a general interest, an *average* effect, it does so in the form of a simulacrum. “Photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask” (*CL*, p. 34/*CC*, pp. 60–61), Barthes notes in relation to a portrait taken by Richard Avedon. The *studium* designates an imposture, a fiction of generality that can only take the form of a myth. “This is why the great portrait photographers are great mythologists” (*CL*, p. 34/*CC*, p. 60–61), he adds, explaining that they are capable of capturing a face (the absolute mark of peculiarity) or a gesture (an act of pure contingency) and presenting it *as if it were* the face of a race, a nation, or a class. Indeed, in the same way that generality is nothing but a masquerade of generality, it is impossible to posit, within any image, a space of absolute transgression. Barthes’ amorous language seeks a radical difference, an object capable of interrupting the terrain of the always-the-same, and it finds it in the detail that captures its gaze and that he calls the *punctum*. But just as chance belongs to the amorous repetition, the *punctum* is far from being pure contingency or pure singularity: its regular appearance in each image adopts the form of a rule “plausible enough” (*CL*, p. 25/*CC*, p. 47) that it can be systematized as one of the two “themes in Photography” (*CL*, p. 27/*CC*, p. 49).

That Barthes both preserves and dissolves this opposition between difference and repetition, that he seeks to have it enact the paradoxical character of the photograph, is perhaps even more legible if we trace the way in which it is mobilized within his text a little more carefully. For example, it is legible when, in the moment in which he confronts the Winter Garden Photograph, he admits: “I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire. Thus I could understand my generality; but having understood it, invincibly I escaped from it. In the Mother,

7. See Jacques Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 41.

there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother” (*CL*, p. 75/*CC*, p. 117). Registering that his engagement with this photograph of his mother (before she was his mother) is informed and shaped by the Image-Repertoire (perhaps another name for the *studium*), he nonetheless suggests that what distinguishes his suffering from the suffering of another person in similar circumstances, what even increases it, is the fact that he has spent his whole life with her and that his suffering “proceeds from *who she was*” (*CL*, p. 75/*CC*, p. 117). Precisely in order to articulate and maintain the particularity of his mourning, Barthes confesses that, “like the Proustian Narrator at his grandmother’s death: ‘I did not insist only upon suffering, but upon respecting the originality of my suffering’; for this originality was the reflection of what was absolutely irreducible in her, and thereby lost forever” (*CL*, p. 75/*CC*, pp. 117–18). But how is it possible to believe in the originality of Barthes’ suffering if he himself tells us that it is “like” the suffering of Proust after the death of his grandmother? How can we believe in the originality of someone who is not an unprecedented figure in his life but a person who is repeated in the life of others, a figure almost as archetypal as the mother? In signaling originality through the words of another, Barthes stages the paradoxical character of mourning. Effectively, he suggests, the pain or grief that we experience before a loss is always contradictory: each time that we lose someone, we go through, at least structurally (even if not in every detail), exactly the same series of experiences as someone who has suffered a similar loss: we surrender to the same rituals, we reproduce the same set of sentences and formulas. At the same time, and like everyone else, we think that our suffering is entirely unique. And we are not wrong here, because, paradoxically, what is repeated each time that we fall in love or that we lose someone is precisely the radical originality of love or loss. Photography, like love or death, is the experience of the singularity that is repeated or of the repetition that appears as something singular.⁸

This structural relation between singularity and repetition reappears in another form within Barthes’ discussion of the *punctum/studium* couple. The *punctum* and *studium* do not belong entirely to the image or to the mode of perceiving it—they are neither only attributes of the image nor only a projection of the gaze—but rather are points of connection between the history of the image and the history of the gaze. This is why Barthes can say that the *punctum* is “what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*” (*CL*, p. 55/*CC*, p. 89). Between what “I add” and what “is already there,” or, more precisely, between what “I add” and what “*was* already there,” there is always a temporal dissymmetry: every image is like a clock that is always a little behind or a little ahead. This is why the true *punctum* sometimes comes a little later. There is “[n]othing surprising,”

8. As a means of visualizing this paradox, the front cover of the Spanish edition of *Camera Lucida* presents an image of an antique camera—a machine that reminds us of the daguerrotype or of a certain auratic moment—in the process of copying or taking a photograph. The camera is there, in the center of the cover, between two large quotation marks that, like citation, love, mourning, or photography, infinitely reproduce its originality.

Barthes admits, “if sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. It happens that I may know better a photograph I remembered than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*” (*CL*, p. 53/*CC*, p. 87). As he suggests, every photographic experience is always an experience of the past, of what is converted into an experience, not in the present of the living, not in the now of the camera’s click or of the gaze, but later, when—as happens in Barthes’ response to the family portrait taken by Van der Zee, which he analyzes in his discussion of the *punctum*—this or that photograph continues to haunt him, when it has, as he puts it, “worked within me” (*CL*, p. 53/*CC*, p. 87). Reading this portrait of a black family in 1926, and after first identifying its *punctum* as the belt and then as the “strapped pumps” of the standing black woman, he later claims that the “real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry (this sister of my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life)” (*CL*, p. 53/*CC*, pp. 87–88). That he identifies this *punctum* through a series of associations and displacements that evoke his history, his affections, and his inscription within a language, a culture, and a familial network that precede him, means that the *punctum* emerges in relation to elements of the *studium*. If this particular detail moves him, if he registers this particular wound, it is because this wound already is *in* him, somewhere in *his* history, even if in a displaced, encrypted, and illegible manner. It is because this wound appears, after a period of latency, like an “unexpected flash” (*CL*, p. 94/*CC*, p. 148), within his psychic and bodily memory. Moreover, this sequence of associations and displacements—from the belt to the pumps to the necklace, from the necklace of the black woman to the necklace of his aunt, from the photograph in front of him to an earlier photograph from his family’s history, and from the sadness or death sealed within one image to that inscribed within another—enacts the “power of expansion” that he already had associated with the *punctum* (*CL*, p. 45/*CC*, p. 74). In other words, the *punctum*, in all its singularity, in its absolute irreducibility, encrypts an entire network of substitutions that, composing and decomposing it at the same time, prevent it from ever being what it is, from ever being self-identical to itself. What makes this series of substitutions possible, however—and Barthes is entirely rigorous here—is time “itself,” and it is no accident that the term he associates most closely with accident and contingency—the *punctum*—is another word for time. Indeed, as he tells us, “there exists another *punctum* (another ‘stigmatum’) than the ‘detail.’ This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (‘that-has-been’), its pure representation” (*CL*, p. 96/*CC*, p. 148). If time lacerates the surface of the photograph, this wounded photograph also interrupts the

movement of time, in a manner that has, not the form of time, but rather the form of time's interruption, the form of an "*intense immobility*" (CL, p. 49/CC, p. 81), of an explosion. It wounds the form of time, intensely and irrecoverably. This disorder is introduced by the photograph from the very beginning, however, since every photograph is marked by the singular moment in which it was taken, a moment that, because it cannot be reproduced or repeated, because it is not redeemable in the present, inhabits the present like a kind of ghost. This is why every photograph signals "the return of the dead" (CL, p. 9/CC, p. 23), a return in which the photographed becomes a "Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person" (CL, p. 14/CC, p. 31).

The photograph therefore does not only look backward—it does not only evoke lost time and melancholy—but it also opens onto a future: it is in fact displaced toward the future. As Barthes notes, the metonymic force of the detail opens the photograph to "a kind of subtle beyond" (CL, p. 59/CC, p. 93). This beyond is not a spatial beyond or a crossing of the limits of codified knowledge or cultural sentiments; it is a "blind field" (CL, p. 57/CC, p. 91), a beyond that, composed of time, is like the future, something to which we always remain blind. It is the field of the possible, of what, within the photograph, cannot be said to be simply here and now, but rather evoked, like a promise, in relation to the past and to an unknown future which is still to come, but has, as its horizon, our future death. This is why, bound together like the copy and its negative, the *punctum* and the *studium* are the two fictional poles of photography: each image pretends to reach them but never entirely succeeds. *Punctum* and *studium* are the two threads that, together, constitute the materiality of photographic language: contingency, chance, gratuitousness, singularity, and difference, on the one hand, and necessity, predictability, composition, regularity, and repetition, on the other. In this way, every photograph not only shows what it exhibits—not only shows a relation between an observed subject and a subject observing captured on a piece of photographic paper—but also says, exhibits, or performs what photography *is*. Photography is an amorous experience, magical and paradoxical: an objective chance, a necessary gratuitousness, "the tireless repetition of contingency" (CL, p. 5/CC, p. 17).

III

There is something uncanny in every photograph—a force of destabilization, something that leaves us in suspense even as it fascinates us. This perhaps is because, when we look at an image, we encounter, directly in front of us, and no matter how elusive it may remain, the first sign of chance and contingency—again, what Barthes calls the *punctum*—and, like all encounters with contingency, this one also produces a certain terror and bedazzlement. But perhaps it is something else altogether: perhaps photography distances itself from all civilized and sympathetic contemplation and directly interrogates enjoyment because what we

notice when we look at an image is the peculiar relation that a photograph maintains with what was (but is no longer) before the camera. Within the photographic world of *Camera Lucida*, the photograph enables an experience of pleasure because it promises the possibility of our being able to conjure, and perhaps even to touch, the material remainder of the referent's lost body. Even if the referent is no longer present or living—and this absence or death is what wounds us, even if, as Barthes reminds us, this wounding is never experienced without a certain degree of pleasure—the trace of its “having-been-there” belongs to what makes a photograph a photograph. This is why the photograph always appears as a form of haunting which, evoking a material trace of the past, condenses, among so many other things, the relation between the past and the present, the dead and the living, and destruction and survival.

Unlike other modes of representation, photography effectively establishes an existential relation with the object because, within the photograph, “the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric” (*CL*, p. 78/*CC*, p. 123), even if we can only encounter its ghostly remains. This nonmetaphorical, real presence does not imply that the image bears “testimony” to anything or offers an “objective” or “faithful” representation of the object. The relation between indexicality and truth or testimony is not a characteristic of the index but a particular mode of reading or perceiving the photographic image that simultaneously brings together a conception of the subject, language, and representation. *Camera Lucida* distances itself from this relation between photography and truth precisely when it signals that the body that poses for the camera is a photographic body, a subjectivity that does not exist before its representation but that instead constitutes itself in the act of sitting in front of the camera. If, within classical semiotics, the process of representation begins and ends in the stability of the “referent,” Barthes undoes this certainty at the very moment he identifies this point of departure and arrival with a plural subjectivity, when he renames it a “little simulacrum,” the “Spectrum of the Photograph” (*CL*, p. 9/*CC*, pp. 22–23). Far from demonstrating the truth of reference, the indexical character of the photograph stages its phantasmatic being, its presence in the past and its absence in the present. The photograph is an index of the photographed, in the same way that his smell, his fingerprints, or the footprints he leaves in the sand are indices of him. They are traces or fragments left behind by a body that work as “a certificate of presence” (*CL*, p. 87/*CC*, p. 135), as a sign of something that was present then but now is not. The index is a sign linked to mourning and melancholy, and never to truth or testimony. Indeed, recalling the way in which photography was perceived in its beginnings in the nineteenth century, we may confirm that the idea that technology has the power to bring an occult “truth” to visibility is precisely the result of a historical perception. To put it differently: the confidence that what we call the referent or subject of an image is an entity that is stable and identical to itself, a full presence that exists before representation, that stands in front of the photographic apparatus and of which the camera (or language) gives

us a “faithful” or “true” representation, corresponds not to a characteristic proper to photography, but to a policing use of photographic technology. To naturalize a policial use of photographic technology and to convert this reading of the photograph into “the” reading of it is, like any ideological operation, the result of a dehistoricization of the multiple modes in which the photographic image is circulated and read. Nevertheless, it is precisely because there is no single way to read indexicality that an index—for example, a photographic portrait or a lock of hair—says something different to a detective in a police story than to the protagonist of a romance novel. This is why Alphonse Bertillon and Francis Galton sought a mode of ordering what to their eyes seemed evident: the correspondence between a subject and his image. In response, and to the contrary, Barthes confesses that “‘myself’ never coincides with my image” (*CL*, p. 12/*CC*, pp. 26–27).⁹

Indexicality is not linked to truth or testimony, but to the body. As an index, the photograph bears, according to Barthes, a material relation to the body of the photographed, which is why he can suggest that in photography the presence of that body within a unique moment in the past can never be metaphorical. As he notes, “I am delighted (or depressed) to know that the thing of the past, by its immediate radiations (its luminances), has really touched the surface, which in its turn my gaze will touch” (*CL*, p. 81/*CC*, p. 126). The photographic index is a corporeal trace, a luminous “emanation,” captured by a chemical process. From the perspective of its most absolute materiality—that is, as a chemical effect produced by light—photography acquires magical traits. The photographic index displays its magic, its alchemy, by joining—as if it were “a sort of umbilical cord” (*CL*, p. 81/*CC*, p. 126)—the body that earlier marked that photographic plate or film with its presence and the body that holds the image in its hands and looks it over with its eyes. What delights and, at the same time, depresses is the double character of the photographic trace. On the one hand, the image is a real (non-metaphorical) fragment of a body that belonged to the past. This means that from the very beginning the indexical character of photography offers the promise of immortality. This utopic hope of interrupting or stopping time, of immobilizing the present and freezing it on a two-dimensional surface, is legible in the first uses of photography—particularly in the nineteenth-century custom of taking portraits of the dead—and it remains inscribed within the desire of all photographic technology and, indeed, touches every image the camera takes. This is why a photograph can be considered an index, in the same way that a fossil or a ruin are indices: a fragment that comes to us from the past and permits us to dream that the totality that produced it is still here and, moreover, still belongs to us. On the other hand, as a trace, as an emanation of a body, an index—for example,

9. For early discussions of the concept of indexicality, see Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 196–219; and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'image précaire. Du dispositif photographique* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1987). While we have evoked many aspects of these discussions, we also have sought, following Barthes, to indicate our distance from them.

a photograph or a footprint on the beach—never gives us precise information about the body that posed for the camera or that sank its feet in the sand. Nevertheless, what cannot be neglected here is that we are left only with an absence—before the camera and on the sand. An index maintains an existential relation with the photographed body only because it signals, with an unforeseen “prick,” the wake of its disappearance.

If the index’s double character simultaneously delights and depresses, then, it is because it says that the body that was there was there in such a convincing manner that it was able to leave a small fragment of itself, a fragment that we touch with our gaze as if we were touching this body. But every index is also the sign of a fatality (*CL*, p. 6/*CC*, p. 18), because it simultaneously signals an irrecoverable time and a lost object. This perhaps is why photography evokes a greater sense of melancholy than other indexical objects: “in photography, something *has posed*” (*CL*, p. 78/*CC*, p. 123) in front of the camera, and this something has not slipped away but rather appears to have stayed there, arrested, if only for an instant. This promise of surrender that produces the immobile object before the tiny hole of the camera is perhaps what returns this absence most mournfully. It is also the sense of stability produced by photography when, embalming time, it moves us to imagine, as we contemplate a photographic portrait, that we are before an embalmed body.

This is why *there is something uncanny in every photograph—a force of destabilization, something that leaves us in suspense even as it fascinates us*. Like a “floating flash,” its “effect is certain but unlocatable, it does not find its sign, its name; it is sharp and yet lands in a vague zone of myself; it is acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence” (*CL*, pp. 51, 53/*CC*, p. 87). It is the force of a mark: the force of the index or of that past existence that has only an image as its trace, the force of the *punctum* or chance that wounds every image. The force of the photograph resides in its capacity to fascinate us and to leave us defenseless because photography—which often has been associated with the field of the Imaginary—does nothing else than point toward the very center of the Real, toward that place where we remain without words or without a gaze. This is why we so often remain mute in front of an image: it is as if, for a fleeting second, we are viewing what cannot be named. This also is why Kafka’s phrase—that we “photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds”—connects the compulsion to photograph not to the necessity of registering or possessing the world, but to the possibility of not seeing it, and this is because, ultimately—or at the limit—photography points toward the Real itself, toward what we do not wish to name, toward what we do not wish to see: the *punctum*, the index, contingency, death. Nevertheless, whether we seal our lips, close our eyes, or take photographs of everything, the “floating flash” will not fade away or disappear. Perhaps to see a photograph we do not need to open our eyes to its literal brutality, but neither do we need to close them. Ultimately—or at the limit—perhaps we can view a photograph best when we look at it with our eyes half-closed, as when we look at the sun.

IV

As an index, every image is an emanation of a body from the past that, disappearing and no longer here, nonetheless has left behind a fragment of itself. When we contemplate this remnant, that is, this photograph, we look at it quickly in order to arrest the gaze in a new fragment, in a detail that Barthes calls the *punctum*. In this way, index and *punctum* are two names for designating the experience of the fragment or the fragmentation of experience that we call “photography.” As a fragment, a photograph offers itself to be read as a kind of remnant or corpse; it is what remains of a totality that now is absent. But, as a new totality, it signals the violence enacted in every photographic act, and in photographic language itself. After all, a photograph is a cut that the eye or the camera realizes in the world, even if only in this fragmentary way. As Barthes suggests, while looking at a series of photographs of his mother and trying to discover her essence in them: “According to these photographs, sometimes I recognized a region of her face, a certain relation of nose and forehead, the moment of her arms, her hands. I never recognized her except in fragments, which is to say that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether” (*CL*, p. 66/*CC*, p. 103). These photographic fragments enable him to “dream about her,” but not to “dream her” (*CL*, p. 66/*CC*, p. 104). Or rather, if they “dream her,” they can only dream her as fragmented, as shattered, as only present in the absence that Barthes insistently and passionately wishes to overcome. The result of this fragmented dream is the object that, ungrateful and without memory, we call an image, a fragment that appears before our eyes only as a “counter-memory” (*CL*, p. 91/*CC*, p. 142), and as if it were a matter of an autonomous whole.

Camera Lucida perfectly identifies the ontological violence that characterizes photographic technology and translates it into a kind of grammar that names the effects of the image on the body of the observed subject and of the subject observing: it pierces, pricks, scans, and tears a hole. Nevertheless, Barthes reads this photographic violence—perhaps another name for the force of decontextualization that takes place in any photograph—in relation not only to melancholy or tragedy but also to enjoyment. The image is comparable, then, to the haiku. It shares with this poetic form the “essence (of a wound),” this feature of the fragment in which nothing is missing because “everything is given,” which neither asks for development nor provokes “even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion” (*CL*, p. 49/*CC*, p. 81). This identification between the photographic image and the haiku is pervasive within Barthes’ writings and can be traced in his essay “The Third Meaning,” in his book on Japan, *Empire of Signs*, and in his other quasi-autobiographical text, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*.¹⁰ In each instance, the

10. See Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 56; *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 83; and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 54–55.

haiku, like the image, is a kind of “anaphoric gesture,” where “meaning is only a flash, a slash of light,” in which what is developed is, as he puts it, “undevelopable” (CL, p. 49/CC, p. 81), and in which “the wake of the sign which seems to have been traced” within the photographic image “is erased.”¹¹ Somewhat different from melancholy and tragedy, and as a fragment that becomes a new totality and does not ask to be expanded, the image therefore acquires the brilliance and splendor of the haiku and, in this context, of the fetish.¹²

Indeed, the fetish is that fragment that initially receives special attention because it refers to an absent object in order to hide it and to occupy its place. The image becomes a fetish when the thin cord tying it to the object is cut and the gaze sinks into it in search of an increasingly minuscule detail whose “mere presence changes my reading” (CL, p. 42/CC, p. 71). Before the images of Mapplethorpe, Barthes is unmoved by the spectacle that photography offers, and instead focuses on the image of the underwear taken at very close range in order to register “the texture of the material” (CL, p. 42/CC, p. 71). Like the detective who concerns himself only with those details most pertinent to the resolution of the crime, the analyst who investigates the minute slip that will conduct him to the truth, and the lover who isolates a particular trait or feature in relation to which he surrenders himself to the beloved object, the close-up fragments the world and gathers details that make us forget the whole to which they at one time belonged.

The photographic gaze is fetishistic; it functions like an infinite blowup, and enlarges the image in order to search for “a ‘detail,’ *i.e.*, a partial object” (CL, p. 43/CC, p. 73). As Michelangelo Antonioni’s film or Julio Cortázar’s story confirms, however, to enlarge an image, to approach its details, is perhaps always to go in search of the mystery of our own image. “To give examples of *punctum*,” Barthes confesses, “is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*” (CL, p. 43/CC, p. 73). In *Camera Lucida* there is one detail that insists and captures Barthes’ gaze with great regularity, as if each portrait were a kind of magnet that attracts him to it. At first, it emerges as a “cultural or historical” question: “many of the men photographed by Nadar have long fingernails: an ethnographical question: how long were nails worn in a certain period?” (CL, p. 30/CC, pp. 52, 54). But later, this detail appears again, and with another tone, when Barthes contemplates a portrait of the young Tristan Tzara. What holds his attention is not the face of the photographed Tzara, nor even the fact that he is wearing a monocle; rather, Barthes suggests, “the grace of the *punctum* is Tzara’s hand resting on the door frame.” He then proceeds to a close-up that focuses on something even smaller, the true *punctum* of

11. In this sentence (and not including the citation from *Camera Lucida*), the first cited phrase is from “The Third Meaning,” p. 56; and the last two cited phrases are from *Empire of Signs*, pp. 83 and 84, respectively.

12. For a discussion of the fetishistic character of the photograph, see Christian Metz’s “Disavowal, Fetishism,” in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 69–80, and his “Photography and Fetish,” in *October* 34 (Fall 1985), pp. 81–91.

the photograph: here, “a large hand whose nails are anything but clean” (*CL*, p. 45/*CC*, pp. 74) would seem to be the most adequate analog to whatever it is that seduces us within an image. What dazzles us, what wounds us, when we look at a photograph is a marginal and unexpected detail—a kind of emanation of the unconscious within the body or in the image—which is excluded from the intentionality of the photographer or the photographed subject or object, and thereby opens the door for chance to enter. The *punctum* is a fetish, a fulgurating detail that, irradiating its light, does not occult, but nevertheless makes the rest of the image opaque. This is what seems to happen in Duane Michals’s portrait of Andy Warhol, in which Warhol covers his face with his hands but nevertheless manages to hide nothing. Warhol “offers his hands to read, quite openly; and the *punctum* is not the gesture,” but, as happens in the earlier image, “the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails, at once soft and hard-edged” (*CL*, p. 45/*CC*, p. 77). The *punctum* is this soft and spatulate detail that captures us; it is, at the same time, this “slightly repellent substance,” the remains left behind by a body, an object, or instant that we love as a fetish, as an index, or photograph. If this attention to nails is a kind of permanent interest for Barthes (it already appears in “The Third Meaning”), it is perhaps because fingernails seem to embody the fetish: the fact that they continue to grow even after the body to which they belong has died—we could even say that they represent that part of the living body that most closely resembles dead matter—means that, like the photograph, and like the fetish, they shatter the border between life and death, and presence and absence. Fragments of the body, they magnetize Barthes’ attention and desire because, among so many other things, they belong to his meditation on the contradictory character of photography. If a photograph is a fragment that steals the show from the totality that at one time had housed it, it is because what dazzles us within a photograph is, like Barthes’ nails, a marginal fragment, a detail that, fulgurating within the image, leaves everything else in shadows. This mobile and elusive detail is charged with a metonymic force. It condenses the image and displaces it like a ghost, it can be seen here and then there, it appears now and reappears later. The fragment we call a photograph and the fragment that illuminates it have the power to tear both time and our gaze: “it is phantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself” (*CL*, p. 40/*CC*, p. 68). Photography is the amorous fetish *par excellence*, a fragment of the present that, like the relation between two lovers, links and realizes both the past and the future and, in doing so, deranges time altogether.

V

In his discussion of the question of resemblance, Barthes claims that when he gets close to a photograph, when he feels he almost can touch his “desired object, his beloved’s body,” he finds himself “burning” (*CL*, p. 100/*CC*, p. 157), as

if consumed by a kind of fire. This experience of burning registers not only the extremity of his desire and love but also, at the very edge of this extremity, the conflagration of his identity. Indeed, the entire discussion of resemblance belongs to Barthes' polemic against identity in general. If a photograph implies a resemblance to an identity, he suggests, this identity is always "imprecise" and "even imaginary"; it is only an "absurd, purely legal, even penal affair" (*CL*, pp. 100–101/*CC*, pp. 157, 160). This is why a photographic portrait always "looks like anyone except the person it represents," and why he can find the "splendor" of his mother's truth in the Winter Garden Photograph (*CL*, pp. 102–03/*CC*, p. 160). In this "lost, remote photograph"—in which the little girl he never knew, the little girl who neither resembles nor looks "like" his mother, nevertheless evokes the "lineaments" of his mother's truth—Barthes encounters a photographic principle: "In front of the photograph of my mother as a child," he writes, "I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (*CL*, p. 96/*CC*, p. 150). If the photograph of his mother as a child already bears the trace of her future death, it is certainly because, at the moment in which Barthes finds it and views it, she *is* dead (the catastrophe "*has already occurred*," and he only can view the photograph through the lens of this death), but it is also because the photograph, at the very moment it was taken, already had mortified and immobilized its subject (the catastrophe "*had already occurred*," and not only before he views the photograph but also before his birth or his mother's death). Whether or not the mother "is already dead," then, *literally* dead, she already will have experienced (a kind of) death.

The photograph always brings death to the photographed, because death is the photograph's "*eidos*" (*CL*, p. 15/*CC*, p. 32).¹³ What survives in a photograph, what returns in it, is therefore always also the survival of the dead, the appearance of a ghost or phantom. This is why, within the space of the photograph, the dead always are alive, and the alive always are dead without being dead. This axiom enables Barthes to generalize his experience of the Winter Garden Photograph into a claim about the photograph in general, but it also leads him to read his own death not only in relation to that of his mother, but in relation to the death that is announced by every photograph: as he puts it, every photograph "always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (*CL*, p. 97/*CC*, p. 151). Observing a photograph, the viewer spectralizes himself in relation to a death that, through an uncertain and phantasmatic process of identification, now haunts him, now touches and inhabits his life, now comes to be seen as "his": a death that is the life

13. The mother's death is also legible, proleptically, and as a kind of analog, in the mortality of the Winter Garden Photograph's material support. "The photograph was very old," Barthes writes, "[t]he corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded" (*CL*, p. 67/*CC*, p. 106). Like all photographs, it shares the common "fate of paper (perishable)" and, "even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages. . . . Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes" (*CL*, p. 93/*CC*, pp. 145–46).

of his life, and in which he exists and lives, not as dead, but as dying. He exists, like the first actors who “separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead,” in “a body simultaneously living and dead” (*CL*, p. 31/*CC*, p. 56). That this experience of living at the threshold of death and life is another name for the experience of love—for what takes place in our relation to the one we love—is confirmed when, in *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes confesses: “I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.”¹⁴ While he suggests that this loss of self occurs especially in relation to the absent other, he also implies that it happens even when the other is presumably “present,” since the very relation between a self and an other means that, because each already inhabits the other, neither the self nor the other can return to himself (or, in the case of his mother, to “herself”): the self and the other deconstitute one another precisely in their relation.

If neither Barthes nor his mother can remain simply themselves, it is because, bearing the trace of the other, each can become identified with the other. The possibility of this transformation of the one into the other is confirmed in an extraordinary moment in which Barthes claims, in an extreme temporal reversal, to have given birth to his mother, and therefore to have become a mother himself. After recalling that the Greeks “entered into Death backward,” Barthes claims, on discovering the Winter Garden Photograph of his “mother as a child,” to have “worked back” in relation to this photograph “through a life, not my own, but the life of someone I love.” He goes on to suggest that, while taking care of his ailing mother “at the end of her life,” he is able to experience the backward “movement of the Photograph”—its capacity to take him back to the childhood of his mother—in “reality” (*CL*, p. 71/*CC*, pp. 111–12). “During her illness,” he explains, “I nursed her, held the bowl of tea she liked because it was easier to drink from than from a cup; she had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photograph. . . . Ultimately I experienced her, strong as she had been, my inner law, as my feminine child. Which was my way of resolving Death . . . if after having been reproduced as other than himself, the individual dies, having thereby denied and transcended himself, I who had not procreated, I had, in her very illness, engendered my mother” (*CL*, p. 72/*CC*, pp. 112–13). Acknowledging that his mother always had been his “inner law,” Barthes suggests that she was already in him before he was himself; she was already stronger or more forceful than he: from the very beginning, she had left an imprint on him and therefore given birth to him, reproduced him, “as other than himself.” As a mechanism for reproduction, the mother reproduces—like a camera—not the same thing, but something else: she therefore kills (Barthes says he “dies”) at the same time that she engenders, produces, gives birth, brings to the light of day, and gives something to be seen. He confirms this death—this

14. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), p. 49.

death that attends birth—when, as happens in this passage, he encounters himself in the figure of the mother. In experiencing the mother's alterity, in experiencing alterity in the mother, he experiences the alteration "in him" that infinitely displaces and delimits his singularity. This is why, from the moment of his birth, Barthes already experiences a kind of death in relation to the maternal body—a body whose material residue lives on in his body and therefore retrospectively confirms not only his body's passage through her body but also his capacity to retain a relation to the mother's body, even after her death. Embodying both the past and the present, death and life, Barthes' body bears the traces of the place where he once lived (and lived in order to begin dying): his mother's dark womb (or, as we might put it, his mother's "darkroom"). As he notes, "Freud says of the maternal body that 'there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there'" (*CL*, p. 40/*CC*, p. 68). The condition of possibility for a process of reproduction that gives something to be seen, the mother's body is at once camera, developer, and photographic darkroom. Giving birth to an image, the mother is another name for photography. This bond between photography and the mother is legible throughout Barthes' text, and it is not restricted to those moments in which he refers to the mother explicitly: he structures his entire text around a photograph of his dead mother that he does not reproduce, but from which he wishes to derive all photography, and he conceives of photography in maternal terms, as a process of reproduction that, like the mother, gives birth to a series of images—through chemical means—which create, preserve, and destroy their subjects, and which are joined to the observing subject by a kind of umbilical cord. Within the world of *Camera Lucida*, the mother is an incunabulum of images.

If Barthes' mother remains "in him," even after her death, even after she has disappeared and passed away, this is because, beyond the material traces, the material imprint her body has left on his, she remains in him in a series of memories and scenes that are nothing else than images: she leaves "in him" only images.¹⁵ Recalling his mother (but what else, other than the mother, can we remember?), Barthes associates her with a series of different, but related images—first the image of her during her illness, then the image she becomes when she is his "feminine child" or "little girl," and then the image of the one whom he "engenders." It is not an accident, however, that he identifies with the mother, with the maternal function, at the very moment when his "mother," not yet a mother, is the "essential child" in her "first photograph." Like the mother who reproduces the self as an other, Barthes reproduces his mother as an other (as a series of others). Incorporating his dead mother into his own spectral identity, he enables a kind of "resurrection" (*CL*, p. 82/*CC*, p. 129), another "birth," and thereby counters her death with an element of life (perhaps his "own"), but a life that already was there in the mother's living death. If the photograph bespeaks a

15. On this point, see Jacques Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in *The Work of Mourning*, p. 159.

certain horror, Barthes notes, it is because “it certifies that the corpse is alive, *as corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing” (*CL*, pp. 78–79/*CC*, p. 123); it is because, in other words, within the photograph, the dead and the living become undead.¹⁶

The general relay between photography and the mother suggests that the photograph—and, in this instance, the photograph we know as the son who becomes the mother—is endowed with a magical and uncanny power to procreate, and this is confirmed in one of the most remarkable passages in *Camera Lucida*, a passage that brings together light, the body, the gaze, the self, the referent, and the maternal body. Barthes writes: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being touches me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (*CL*, pp. 80–81/*CC*, pp. 126–27).¹⁷ Evoking

16. If Barthes desires to resurrect his mother, if he wishes to recover and revivify her body, we should not be surprised by his effort to reverse the trajectory of her life, to bring her back to life, and perhaps beginning from her death. This effort is legible, in its most secret and hidden form, in the very structure of *Camera Lucida*, at least insofar as we can claim—and we believe we can—that the structure and writing of the text embodies his desire. We can begin to read this effort by first noting that the text is composed of two parts, with each part consisting of twenty-four chapters, for a total of forty-eight chapters. It was written between April 15 and June 3, 1979, which means that it was written in forty-eight days. There are twenty-five photographs reproduced within the book, but, since the first one, Daniel Boudinet’s 1979 color photograph *Polaroid*, is, strictly speaking, outside of the text, there are twenty-four photographs within the text proper. The number twenty-four seems particularly significant within the context of the book, since it evokes the number of still frames—the number of photograms—that pass through a film projector every second as well as the number of hours in a day, that is, the number of hours that constitute the cycle between day and night and light and darkness. The number forty-eight perhaps becomes more significant, however, if we recall that Barthes’ mother died at the age of eighty-four, which, read backward, is forty-eight. This reversed identification would seem to be only coincidental, and perhaps only a game of numbers and chance, but it becomes less so when we remember that Barthes claims to have discovered the Winter Garden Photograph, the photograph he associates most closely with the “essence” of his mother, “by moving back through Time.” Moreover, he seems to reinforce this gesture of reversal by noting that “[t]he Greeks entered into Death backward: what they had before them was their past. In the same way I worked back through a life, not my own, but the life of someone I love” (*CL*, p. 71/*CC*, p. 111). While there would be much to say about these correspondences, the least we can say is that, in a very real sense, what Barthes seems to want—because of his love for his mother, because of his desire to have her alive and beside him—is to have his text embody the trajectory of his mother’s lifespan, but in reverse, as if, in doing so, it might, by reversing the movement of her life from life to death and thereby transforming it from death to life, magically restore her to him. In the same way that he claims to have started with his mother’s “latest image, taken the summer before her death” and then to have “arrived, traversing three-quarters of a century, at the image of a child” (*CL*, p. 71/*CC*, p. 111), he states that, in taking care of his mother when she was ill, in taking care of her as if she had become his child, he experienced this backward movement in reality. It is this experience of the displacement and reversal of time that encourages him to seek to conjure his mother through an act of writing that is as much an act of desire and love as it is an act of counting.

17. This play between light and skin, between the photograph and emanations, can be registered in the French word for “film”: *pellicule*. From *pellis*, the skin, *pellicule* and “film” originally have the same meaning: a small or thin skin, a kind of membrane. Although, in this passage, Barthes uses the word *peau* and not *pellicule*, he demonstrates his awareness of this etymological connection between film and skin—a connection that suggests the relation between this “carnal medium” and the photogram—in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. See *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 54.

Democritus and his theory of *eidolas*—in which bodies give off emanations, material vestiges of the subject, that travel through the medium of light to the eyes of a spectator¹⁸—Barthes suggests that the photograph brings together a distant past and a present moment in the same way that the “delayed rays of a star” join what is most distant to what is closest at hand, and that it is also bound to the spectator’s gaze by a kind of umbilical cord composed of light. As Elissa Marder suggests in her reading of this passage,

photography, whose etymology means “light writing,” alchemically transforms light into flesh. In this transformation, photography becomes a maternal medium that magically reconnects the body of the viewing subject to the body of the referent by an umbilical cord. This umbilical cord, in turn, creates a new corpus that envelops both the viewing subject and the photographed object under a common skin. In the act of transforming light into skin, photography transubstantiates the body of the referent and transports it through time and space.¹⁹

If the photograph transforms the living and the dead into the living dead—if it binds the living to the dead in a kind of “amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world”; if life and death are “glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures” (*CL*, p. 6/*CC*, p. 17)—it is also because, like the mother, the photograph kills at the same time that it gives birth. As Barthes puts it, “once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes. . . . I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice” (*CL*, pp. 10–11/*CC*, p. 25). Like the mother, the photograph exists between life and death, the past and the present, interiority and exteriority, body and image, and subject and image. It opens onto a future whose lineaments are not yet known, even if what can be known enables us to delineate the contours of the horizon and limit of death. This is why the mother—Barthes’ mother, but also all mothers—is nothing more nor less than a figure for the birth and death of photography.

VI

If the Winter Garden Photograph is indeed the “invisible *punctum*” of Barthes’ elegiac book²⁰—even though it does not belong to the series of photographs he exhibits and analyzes, it nevertheless haunts the entire book; we could even say that, as the wound that “signs” the book, there is no sentence in the book that is not touched by it—he soon suggests that, in thinking of the photograph, we

18. For a discussion of Democritus’s theory of *eidolas* in relation to photography in general, see Branka Arsic, “The Home of Shame,” in *Cities Without Citizens*, ed. Eduardo Cadava and Aaron Levy (Philadelphia: Slought Books; Rosenbach Museum and Library, 2003), p. 36.

19. Marder, “Nothing to Say: Fragments on the Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” p. 32.

20. The phrase is from Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” p. 43.

must think of something other than simply light or photography: we must think of what he calls the “last music,” the song of his mother and of his grief at her death, and, in general, a kind of accord or correspondence. As he notes: “The Winter Garden Photograph was for me like the last music Schumann wrote before collapsing, that first *Gesang der Frühe* that accords with both my mother’s being and my grief at her death: I could not express this accord except by an infinite series of adjectives” (*CL*, p. 70/*CC*, p. 110).²¹ While he already had stressed the relation between photography and music in his discussion of the *studium* and *punctum*—“Having thus distinguished two themes in Photography,” he writes, “(for in general the photographs I liked were constructed in the manner of a classical sonata), I could occupy myself with one after the other” (*CL*, p. 27/*CC*, p. 49)—his reference to Schumann’s last music is particularly resonant here, since, among other things, it evokes his 1979 essay “Loving Schumann” and an earlier essay from 1976 on Schumann and Schubert entitled “The Romantic Song.” In the latter text, he explains that, while listening to the Schumannian lied, he addresses himself to “an Image: the image of the beloved in which I lose myself and from which my own image, abandoned, comes back to me.” “I struggle with an image,” he goes on to say, anticipating his later understanding of his relation to the Winter Garden Photograph, “which is both the image of the desired, lost other, and my own image, desiring and abandoned.”²² After his mother’s death, however, the figure of the “desired, lost other” evoked by Schumann’s music becomes associated specifically with his mother and her death, and with the loss of self to which this relation and death give birth. He makes this point explicit in “Loving Schumann,” when he claims that Schumann is the musician of “solitary intimacy, of the amorous and imprisoned soul that *speaks to itself* . . . in short, of the child who has no other link than to the Mother,” and when he states that Schumann’s music is “at once dispersed and unary, continually taking refuge in the luminous shadow of the Mother (the lied, copious in Schumann’s work, is . . . the expression

21. That Barthes can only “express” this accord by “an infinite series of adjectives” is critical here, and especially in relation to what he understands as the photographic character of the adjective in general. He draws this “correspondence” between adjectives and photography in the series of lectures he delivered in 1978 at the Collège de France on “The Neutral,” not long after the death of his mother (a death that leaves its traces throughout the lectures) and just two years before his death. As a counter to the petrifying, death-bringing effects of the adjective, Barthes explains that, in the discourse of the lover, the lover’s tendency to cover his beloved with adjectives eventually leads the lover to experience the wounding lack “from which predication suffers” and he comes “to seek a linguistic way of addressing this: that the totality of imaginable predicates will never reach or exhaust the absolute specificity of the object of his desire.” When he claims that he cannot express the accord among Schumann’s “last music,” his mother’s being, and his grief at her death “except by an infinite series of adjectives,” he implies that all efforts to fix or arrest this accord inevitably will fail, which is why this effort has to begin again an infinite number of times. That his discussion of the adjective is particularly resonant with his concerns in *Camera Lucida* is reinforced when he claims, in a way that evokes his mother and her death, that “in linguistic culture” the “two objects” that are understood to be “beyond predication either in horror or in desire” are “the corpse and the desired body.” See Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 52, 58.

22. Roland Barthes, “The Romantic Song,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 290.

of this maternal unity).”²³ Suggesting that we have a relation to the Mother even when we are alone and speaking only to ourselves (and this because we internalize her trace just as we internalize the trace of the music we hear), Schumann’s music, like photography, joins love to a force of arrest, and the “Mother” to photography. Associated with the light and darkness within which photography emerges, the Mother also turns out to be linked to the rhythms and scansion of music “itself.”

What is perhaps most remarkable about this series of associations—among music, love, death, mourning, and the mother—is that it transcribes music onto a shadowy representation of mortality and finitude. This relation between music and death is evoked in André Malraux’s 1933 account of the early days of the Chinese Revolution, *The Human Condition*. Malraux notes that “music only can speak of death.”²⁴ If, on the one hand, he suggests that of all the arts only music can speak of death, on the other hand, he tells us that music can only speak of death, can speak of nothing but death. What makes music music, in other words, is that, in our experience of it, we encounter what is always about to vanish. This is why, for Barthes, music is linked to mourning, and, in particular, within *Camera Lucida*, to the relation between love and mourning. Indeed, it is precisely this latter relation that is evoked by the Winter Garden Photograph and that draws him toward Photography, since it is in relation to this particular photograph that he claims to understand that he must “interrogate the evidence of Photography . . . in relation to what we romantically call love and death” (*CL*, p. 73/*CC*, p. 115). Like love and death, music begins in its fugitive, transitory character, in the impossibility of our ever comprehending it. This is why music often has been understood as “an art beyond signification.”²⁵ In the experience of music, we always encounter an aleatory (but sonorous, audible, evocative) oversignification. We might even say that music is, as it were, the least incorporated matter. Like the other who always remains beyond our comprehension—as we know, this incomprehension is, for Barthes, a condition of love and its many enigmas—music remains, even after

23. Roland Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, pp. 293–94.

24. Malraux, *La condition humaine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1946), p. 334. Although Barthes rarely evokes China and its revolutionary history, he addresses both in a brief but rich text from 1975 entitled *Alors la Chine?* In a two-page coda—written in response to the negative reactions his text elicited—he suggests that, “hallucinating” China as an object, he would like to read it as the “feminine (maternal?) infinite of the object itself.” This hallucination is not “gratuitous,” he explains, and it is meant to go against the popular Western hallucination of China’s “directly political” and dogmatic discourse. At this moment, he makes a remarkable statement that, like Malraux, links the thought of China to music. Claiming that the intellectual or writer always moves by indirection, he notes that the aim of his little text was to offer a discourse that would be *just* (and “musically” so) in relation to the indirectness of Chinese politics. Claiming that only a certain musicality can be “just” to the indecipherability of Chinese politics, he concludes that “it is necessary to love music,” and “the Chinese also.” In this instance, then—and in keeping with what he suggests in *Camera Lucida*—music and love are on the side of indirection, on the side of what escapes our comprehension, and perhaps even on the side of what he dares to evoke, even if in the mode of a question, as the “maternal.” See Roland Barthes, *Alors la Chine?* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1975), pp. 8, 13–14.

25. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe makes this point in his reading of Adorno’s writings on music. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 144.

we hear it, even after we incorporate its trace, somewhere beyond us, resonating at a distance, in an exteriority that extends in every direction and that we experience as the opening of the world. Music has no hidden surface, even when it remains unseen; like Barthes' mother, it appears "without either showing or hiding" itself (*CL*, p. 69/*CC*, p. 107). It is fugitive and evanescent. Like love and death, it has the capacity to dispossess its subjects, and, since it determines us by displacing us, by disappropriating us, by making us inaccessible to ourselves, we could even say that it means *the vanishing of the subject*.

To say that music "only speaks of death," then, is to say that, like photography and love, music always signals our departure from ourselves, our imminent death. It is also to say that music has always been a means of experiencing traces, a form of inscription or writing. Like photography, it has the power to leave an imprint or trace—and it has this power because, among other things, it is rhythm itself. When Mallarmé says in *Music and Letters* that "every soul is a rhythmic knot,"²⁶ he recalls the archaic sense of the word "music": *rhythm*, which meant "type," "letter," "character," and even "scheme." This is why music always implies the violent imposition of a certain form; it is the impression that, in some malleable material (wax or vinyl, for example)—and, again, not unlike photography—produces an effigy. To designate an operation of this kind, the Greeks used the verb *tupein*, from *tupos*: the mark, the imprint, engraved characters. Emile Benveniste (for whom Barthes often confessed his admiration and love)²⁷ confirms this point in his 1966 essay "The Notion of 'Rhythm' in Its Linguistic Expression," noting that *rhuthmos* means originally *skhema* (form, figure, schema) and that it also characterizes (and belongs to) a generalized process of differentiation and distinction often exemplified by the letters of the alphabet.²⁸

This relation between rhythm and inscription, between rhythm and letters, evokes the question of writing in general, a question on the basis of which it seems possible, passing through the works of Barthes, to think about the subject's preinscription within writing. But, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes in his analysis of Benveniste's essay, we should not move too quickly through the steps of Benveniste's argument.²⁹ Benveniste in fact insists that *skhema* is only an

26. Stéphane Mallarmé, *La musique et les lettres*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 644.

27. See, for example, Barthes' 1974 essay, "Why I Love Benveniste" (in which he explicitly situates Benveniste within the context of a discussion of the relation between love and music), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 167.

28. See Benveniste, "La notion de 'rythme' dans son expression linguistique," in *Problèmes de linguistiques generale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 330.

29. See Lacoue-Labarthe's "The Echo of the Subject," trans. Barbara Harlow, in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 196–203. In many respects, our reading of Benveniste's essay—and of the notion of "rhythm" in general—is a miniaturized photograph of Lacoue-Labarthe's argument, an argument he repeats somewhat telegraphically in *Musica Ficta*, especially on pp. 77–83. We would suggest here that, although Barthes refers to Lacoue-Labarthe's essay, "Caesura of the Speculative," in *Camera Lucida* (see *CC*, p. 141), it is perhaps this essay, "The Echo of the Subject," that has the most resonance with his book. A reading of Theodor Reik's *The Haunting Melody*, the latter essay is, among other things, a meditation on the relations among music, mourning, and autobiography.

approximation of *rhuthmos*. If *skhema* designates “a fixed, realized form posited as an object,” *rhuthmos* is “the form at the moment it is taken by what is in movement, mobile, fluid, the form that has no organic consistency.” It is, he adds, “improvised, momentaneous, modifiable” form.³⁰ This means, among other things, that the form of rhythm is traversed by time, or, to put it differently, time is its condition of possibility. Following Lacoue-Labarthe, we can say that the word “rhythm” already implies—at the very edge of the subject’s capacity to figure or represent itself—the mark, the stamp, the imprint that, inscribing us within its movement, prevents us from ever returning to ourselves, sends us back to the night and chaos that, never ordered by us, enables us to appear as what we are, as what we are not—ourselves.³¹ This process of inscription and impression also characterizes the photographic space, a space in which, as Barthes suggests, we always experience the “advent” of ourselves as an other. In this sense, perhaps, “every soul is a rhythmic knot,” a bringing together of stasis and movement, of stability and instability, of singularity and repetition. We are *rhythmed*, therefore³²—which is to say that we become an impression, in particular, a photographic impression. Barthes confirms this transformation (and in the context of his relation to the beloved’s voice and body) in *The Lover’s Discourse* when he writes that, “in the fascinating image, *what impresses me (like a sensitized paper)* is not the accumulation of its details but this or that inflection. What suddenly manages to touch me (ravish me) in the other is the voice, the line of the shoulders, the slenderness of the silhouette, the warmth of the hand, the curve of a smile, and so forth.”³³ Like the detail or *punctum* that pierces him, that wounds him, the details of his beloved’s body enter him and transform him into the register, the imprint, of a series of impressions that, like the “sensitized paper” that records the other’s trace, confirm his photographic character, his inscription within a photographic process. The body he loves is not unlike the music he loves, since both enter his own body and, in entering it, prevent it from remaining just “his,” even if, as he suggests, “he” and his body become a kind of musical organ that “plays” this music from somewhere else as if it were emerging from “him” (like the *punctum*, the music is added to his body, even as it is already there). “Schumann’s music goes much farther than the ear,” Barthes explains, “it goes into the body, into the muscles by the beats of its rhythm, and somehow into the viscera by the voluptuous pleasure of its melos; as if on each occasion the piece was written only for one person, the one who plays it.” “The true Schumannian pianist,” he adds, is him: “*c’est moi*.”³⁴ Entering him and piercing him like the *punctum* of a photograph, music transforms and animates him and, in the rhythm of this process, he becomes the only one who can experience and interpret the music in a particular way, in a way that remains faithful to the

30. Benveniste, “La notion de ‘rythme’ dans son expression linguistique,” p. 333.

31. See Lacoue-Labarthe, “Echo of the Subject,” p. 202.

32. Lacoue-Labarthe makes this identical point in *ibid.*, p. 202.

33. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 191.

34. Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” p. 295.

madness of its movement. “Rhythmed” in this way, he is jostled back and forth until he appears to become a kind of light that, rebounding off the several surfaces it encounters, ensures that his “identity” remains nothing more than what he elsewhere calls a “fleeting index.”³⁵ As he puts it in his analysis of the lover’s discourse, displacing his interest from a musical interest to a photographic one, “in the amorous encounter, I keep rebounding—I am *light*.”³⁶

In an unpublished lecture from 1977 entitled “Music, Voice, and Language,” Barthes reinforces this relay between music and love by suggesting that music—in the composer’s imaginary, more often associated with night than with light—in fact “derives” from the discourse of love. “Every ‘successful’ relation,” he writes, “successful in that it manages to say the implicit without articulating it, to pass over articulation without falling into the censorship of desire or the sublimation of the unspeakable—such a relation can rightly be called musical.”³⁷ The music of love therefore belongs to a space of relation and silence—a space without articulation—but one whose silence is linked to the “affect of the lost, abandoned subject.” Barthes reinforces this claim in *Camera Lucida* in an exquisite passage on the relations among music, silence, blindness, the night, and, again, a certain accord. Immediately after noting that the *punctum* can “accommodate a certain latency,” that it can appear when he is not looking at a photograph, he writes: “Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. ‘The necessary condition for an image is sight,’ Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied: ‘We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.’ The photograph must be silent . . . this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute subjectivity is achieved in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: ‘Technique,’ ‘Reality,’ ‘Reportage,’ ‘Art,’ etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness” (*CL*, pp. 53, 55/*CC*, pp. 88–89). Encountering a photograph—like encountering music, Barthes suggests—requires a certain silence and blindness, and, together, this silence and blindness suggest a kind of withdrawal from more conventional (or less surprising) understandings of photography. If he likens the silence of the photograph to the experience of shutting his eyes to what we do not wish to see or wish to name, and to music itself (we should remember that silence, as he says, nonetheless still speaks), it is because music never gives anything to sight: it says nothing, it cannot be immobilized, it is, in Marie-Louise Mallet’s words, a “‘rebel’ object,” and this because, before everything else, it can never become an object.³⁸ Like love, death, and photography, it escapes the theoretical regard; it remains in the dark. This is why Nietzsche calls music the “art of the night,” and why he associates it

35. Barthes, “Listening,” in *Responsibility of Forms*, p. 248.

36. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 199.

37. Barthes, “Music, Voice, and Language,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 284.

38. Mallet, *La musique en respect* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2002), p. 11.

with the “night” of philosophy itself.³⁹ In Barthes’ terms, while music may be of the order of an “event,” like the photographic subject or object it appears only to disappear, and this is why it requires, at every moment, a work of mourning. This is simply to say that music names, if it names anything at all, a loss without return; it recalls death to us, and, since the night always suggests death, we could even say that, in Barthesian terms, there is no music without the night or death. As he states in relation to his love of Schumann, “Loving Schumann . . . is in a way . . . to adopt a Nietzschean word, Untimeliness, or again, to risk this time the most Schumannian word there is: Night.”⁴⁰ This means, among other things, that to focus on the relation between music and the night, between music and death, is already to suggest something “untimely,” since this focus menaces the projects of philosophy, knowledge, and truth. Like the Barthes who claims that he can respond to photographs only by dismissing “all knowledge, all culture,” and by refusing “to inherit anything from another eye than [his] own” (*CL*, p. 51/*CC*, p. 82), the Barthes who loves Schumann does so “*against* the age,” which, as he suggests, is the only responsible way of loving. Love means: *going against the age*, since “it inevitably leads the subject who does so and says so to posit himself in his time according to the injunctions of his desire and not according to those of his sociality,”⁴¹ and this is, he suggests, the only way to have even the slightest chance of addressing the beloved’s singularity, the beloved’s cherished body.

What happens, however, when, as Barthes asks, our eyes meet what they cannot see, or when they encounter what cannot be encountered—whether it be music, love, death, photography, or even the beloved’s singularity? What might this experience of blindness and shadows have to do with what makes photography photography? In what way is sight essentially linked to an experience of mourning, an experience of mourning that mourns not only experience but sight itself? Why is it that only the most profound mourning can become music? Why is it that music is most expressive only in the silence of the night? As Barthes would have it: as soon as a technology of the image exists, sight is already touched by the night. It is inscribed in a body whose secrets belong to the night. It radiates a light of the night. It tells us that the night falls on us. “But even if it were not to fall on us, we already are in the night,” Derrida explains,

as soon as we are captured by optical instruments that have no need for the light of day. We are already ghosts. . . . In the nocturnal space in which this image of us, this picture we are in the process of having “taken,” is described, it is already night. Moreover, because we know that, once taken, once captured, such an image can be reproduced in our absence, because we know this already, we already know that we are

39. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 143.

40. Barthes, “Loving Schumann,” p. 298.

41. *Ibid.*

haunted by a future that bears our death. Our disappearance is already there.⁴²

Camera Lucida begins in the shadowy night of this relation to death, in this rhythmic play between life and death, presence and absence, and light and darkness. As Barthes works to demonstrate—but in accordance with the madness of what he calls a “stupid” metaphysics (*CL*, p. 85/*CC*, p. 133)—the entire logic of our relation to the world can be read here, and it can be read as the logic of the photograph. Like the world, the photograph allows itself to be experienced only as a fragment, only as a remnant, of what withdraws from experience. This experience—and if it were different it would not be an experience at all—is an experience of the impossibility of experience. This is why, after the death of his mother, after the death of himself in relation to his mother (a death that, as he tells us, did not have to wait until his mother’s death, or even his), Barthes suggests that we remain entirely unprovided for in a world in which we must survive the impossibility of experience, in which the photograph—the photograph as we generally understand it, but also the photograph that we now can call “Barthes”—tells us, if it tells us anything at all, that it is with loss and death that we have to live, love, and experience what cannot be experienced. This music of love and death (and there can be no other) can be called, for lack of a better name, “photography.”

42. Jacques Derrida, *Échographies de la télévision. Entretiens filmés* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), p. 131.