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Photographs and Signatures: Absence, Presence, and Temporality in Barthes and Derrida

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"By nature, the photograph has something tautological about it: a pipe here is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself.... (I didn't yet know that this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for)."

"Every photograph is a certificate of presence."

--Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*^[1]

"To be what it is, all writing must, therefore be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the 'death' or the possibility of the 'death' of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark.... What holds for the receiver holds also, for the same reasons,

for the sender or producer."

--Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context"[2]

Roland Barthes, in his 1980 book *Camera Lucida*, and Jacques Derrida, in his 1977 essay "Signature, Event, Context," are, in at least one respect, engaged in similar projects: both endeavor to define the eidōs or constitutive nature of their respective objects of inquiry--photography for Barthes and writing for Derrida. However, as evidenced in the above-quoted passages, Barthes's phenomenological reflections on the presence and authenticity of the Referent in photography would seem to be somehow fundamentally in conflict with the arguments advanced by Derrida regarding the structural iterability of writing and the functional necessity of absence within any presence. The conflict appears in even greater relief if we take into account that "writing" for Derrida is an all-inclusive concept. As Derrida writes: "the traits that can be recognized in the classical, narrowly defined concept of writing, are generalizable. They are valid not only for all orders of 'signs' and for all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience, even the experience of being..." (SEC 181). For Derrida, therefore, photography-and the "totality of experience"--would clearly be governed by the "structure of the mark," the law from which he concludes that "there is no experience consisting of pure presence but only of chains of differential marks" (SEC 183).

Barthes, while writing in virtually the same historical and intellectual context (though not in any kind of direct response to Derrida), seems, quite explicitly, to deny the applicability of this logic of the mark to photography: "Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences; [why choose this object, this moment, rather than some other] it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be

a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't take, which turn, as milk does.... In short, the referent adheres" (CL 6). Nevertheless, I find the refusal of the logic of the mark (as Derrida defines it) in this passage to be unconvincing: in the imaginary dialogue I have set up between Barthes and Derrida this passage can perhaps be read as simply denying the status of communication to photography. Unlike the performative speech acts analyzed by Derrida, one could perhaps argue that there is not necessarily an intent to communicate something in the photograph, that there is not really an address to an other, at least in a strict or straightforward sense. Or, one might simply argue that this passage is indicative of the absence of attention to the issue of intentionality in Barthes's analysis (a subject which is greatly detailed in Derrida's essay). (For Barthes, we may remember, the photographer, that primary seat of intention, is literally and figuratively 'out of the picture'--his concerns are with the subjects and the readers of photographs). In other words, what I am provisionally suggesting is that, in fact, Barthes does not deny the applicability of the logic of the mark, the law of structural iterability, to photography in this passage, nor in *Camera Lucida* as a whole. While, at first glance, a comparative analysis of the arguments of *Camera Lucida* and "Signature, Event, Context" seems to present one with a substantial philosophical conflict, my project in this paper will be to question the validity of such a conclusion and to determine the ways in which Barthes and Derrida's arguments may be seen to intersect; furthermore, I will examine such questions which arise from consideration of these intersections as, for example: does the signature have a punctum, and in exactly what sense is the photograph governed by the structure of the mark? In the course of my analysis, I will also address issues concerning the specificity of Barthes's project in *Camera Lucida*: what constitutes the specificity of Barthes's object of analysis, and how can we understand his insistence upon the particularity of the photographic punctum? These questions, as I will

demonstrate, may be elucidated to a certain degree when viewed from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The last section of my analysis will then be devoted to a consideration of the object of Barthes's project as, in some sense, specificity "in itself," or "pure" particularity, and I will address the implications of such specificity or "unicity" in terms of the general structure of iterability theorized by Derrida.

Before delving into my suggestion that *Camera Lucida* as a whole does not deny that the photograph is governed by the logic of the mark, I want first to say a bit more about what I have up until now implicitly posited: the commonalities in subject-matter of these two very different analyses. There is, I think, an obvious similarity between the objects of analysis of both of these writers--the photographic portraiture which is the privileged focus of Barthes and the signature which Derrida discusses as a kind of privileged limit-example.^[3] It is significant to note that Derrida's discussion is focused upon the juridic signature, the signature which functions as an act with an intention, and that much of his argument here is centered around intentionality or, rather, the "irreducible absence of intention" which is the structural necessity that governs even "the most 'event-ridden' utterance" (SEC 192). While, as mentioned earlier, intentionality in this sense is not an issue that Barthes takes up, the presence of the referent is an important subject for both writers. In fact, one could easily substitute "photograph" for "signature" in the following passage from Derrida:

By definition, a written signature [photograph] implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But, it will be claimed, the signature also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now or present [maintenant] which will remain a future now or present [maintenant], thus in a general maintenant, in the transcendental form of presentness [maintenance].... In

order for the tethering to the source to occur, what must be retained is the absolute singularity of a signature-event [photographic-event] and a signature-form [photographic-form]: the pure reproducibility of a pure event (SEC 194).

Derrida's formulation here of the "pure reproducibility of a pure event," one should note, has an almost identical counterpart in the opening of *Camera Lucida*: "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (CL 4). Derrida goes on to ask:

Is there such a thing? Does the absolute singularity of signature as event ever occur? Are there signatures?

Yes, of course, every day. Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world (SEC 194).

The absolute singularity of the photograph as event, its having-been-present quality, is, of course, not even up for question in Barthes. However, what seems most significant about this passage in Derrida is that it seems to follow that Derrida's position would not really be in conflict with Barthes's assertion, quoted at the beginning of this paper, that the "photograph [or signature, I would add] is a certificate of presence," or of a having-been-present (CL 87). However, the important point for Derrida is that the very fact of our apprehension of the signature/photograph as certification of a past-presence is dependent upon a structure of iterability: "But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable form, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production" (SEC 194).

The question that arises here, of course, is whether or not the photograph's certification of presence--as it is theorized by Barthes--is similarly dependent upon a structure of iterability. To answer this question it is first necessary to take into account another commonality in subject-matter in these two works: the subject of death. For Derrida, death is part and parcel of iterability: "the 'death' of the receiver [and the sender or producer]" is "inscribed in the structure of the mark" (SEC 180). The possibility of the absence of the referent, he argues, "is not only an empirical eventuality" but is constitutive of the mark: "It constructs the mark; and the potential presence of the referent at the moment it is designated does not modify in the slightest the structure of the mark, which implies that the mark can do without the referent" (SEC 183).

For Barthes, of course, it can be said that *Camera Lucida* in its entirety is structured around the subject of death. At the beginning of the book Barthes writes about death as the eidos, not--at this point--of the Photograph, but specifically of the photograph of oneself: "Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me... is Death: Death is the eidos of that Photograph" (CL 15). Later on, death as eidos seems to apply to all photography as he notes that "however 'lifelike' we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (CL 31-32).

Death as eidos of the photograph then begins to take on a particularly interesting character as Barthes relates it to temporality, the temporal paradox of the photograph which he first describes as "a perverse confusion" of the Real and the Live: "by attesting that the object has been real [the certification of past-presence], the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive [a delusion of present-presence], because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality

an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead" (CL 79). Barthes later reformulates this temporal character of the photograph as the simultaneous experience/perception in reading of the "this will be" and the "this has been." This temporal paradox is the strange, almost hallucinatory, experience of the future anterior "of which death is the stake." In front of the photograph of his mother as a child, Barthes 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 96). And here, of course, is precisely where we can begin to see how the structure of iterability which Derrida describes in "Signature, Event, Context" figures in Barthes's thought in *Camera Lucida*: "the potential presence of the referent at the moment it is designated ["whether or not the subject is already dead"]," we recall, does not modify in the slightest the structure of the mark, which implies that the mark can do without the referent ["every photograph is this catastrophe"]" (SEC 183; CL 96). Indeed, it seems that it is this punctum of the photograph as the "vertigo of time defeated," this punctum of intensity (rather than, but also, perhaps, as well as the punctum of the lacerating "detail")^[4] the "mark" in photography, that "structural unconsciousness" as Derrida terms it, which "prohibits any saturation of context" (SEC 192).

Is not this punctum of time defeated a characteristic of the signature as well? What exactly can be said to constitute the specificity of Barthes's object, that specificity of Photography which he is constantly and continually trying to define in his project of a *mathesis singularis*--"the impossible science of the unique being" (CL 8; 71)--achieved, "utopically," for Barthes in the Winter Garden Photograph? One of Barthes's claims for photography's specificity seems, I think, to be rather medium-unspecific. He writes: "in Photography I can never deny that

the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography" (CL 76). On the contrary, I would argue that the inability to deny that "the thing has been there" is a characteristic shared by the apprehension of the signature^[5]; this characteristic, while not particularly emphasized in Derrida's analysis of the signature-as-juridical-act, could perhaps be brought to the forefront in an analysis that took into account the specifically material/graphical qualities of the signature, those qualities which one might perhaps call, after Barthes, the "grain of the pen."

Of course, Barthes himself attributes a "grain" to writing--in the narrower sense of handwriting--in "The Grain of the Voice": "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."^[6] He remarks further upon this "body in writing," in terms of "scription," in his 1974 interview "Roland Barthes versus Received Ideas":

Yes, I love writing, but as this word has taken on a metaphorical sense [as, for example, in Derrida's 'arche-writing']... I will take the aforementioned liberty of risking a new word: I love scription, the action by which we manually trace signs. Not only do I cherish the pleasure of writing my texts by hand, using a typewriter only in the final phase of preparation, but also and above all, I love the traces of graphic activity, wherever they are...^[7]

One should, however, emphasize that while handwriting, and even the "encounter between voice and language" in song, may bear a grain, this grain bears no necessary relation to the punctum; the two concepts are, in fact, described very differently in Barthes's texts, with the grain seemingly dissociated from the traumatic qualities of the photographic punctum.

Nevertheless, scription--whether in signatures or in handwriting more generally--and the recordings of vocal music discussed by Barthes would seem to share, at least to some extent, the temporal paradox evoked by the photograph.^[8] I would argue, therefore, that the key to understanding the specificity of photography that Barthes wants to maintain--as well as the specificity of photography's punctum--lies in the differing characters of that "saturation of context" which is prohibited by the "structural unconsciousness" of the mark. For Derrida, concerned as he is with the status of the performative and, of course, explicitly engaged in a response to J.L. Austin, the "saturation of context" refers to consciousness of intention: "In order for a context to be exhaustively determinable, in the sense required by Austin, conscious intention would at the very least have to be totally present and immediately transparent to itself and to others, since it is a determining center of context" (SEC 192).

For Barthes, on the other hand, the "saturation of context" in photography--that "unendurable plenitude" that he refers to--is perhaps most easily understood in terms of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The Photograph as analyzed by Barthes seems to derive its specificity, in part, from its situation--as image--in the Imaginary register (loosely equivalent to what Barthes terms the "Image-Repertoire"), as well as the Imaginary relation--always a dual relation, and with the effect of a nondifferentiation of Self and Other--that is set up between the image and the subject who apprehends that image. Keeping in mind that the ego is both situated and constituted in the Imaginary, that this recognition of the "self" is always a misrecognition, and that therefore the ego is constitutively and fundamentally alienated from itself ("Je est un autre," my "self" is always outside of "me," over there), the Imaginary specificity of photography is repeatedly emphasized in Barthes's text. For example, in a passage which seems particularly concerned with Imaginary alienation, Barthes writes: "For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a

cunning disassociation of consciousness from identity.... [T]oday it is as if we repressed the profound madness of Photography: it reminds us of its mythic heritage only by that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at "myself" on a piece of paper" (CL 12-13)[9] With regard to the lack of differentiation or confusion of Self and Other characteristic of the Imaginary, we can note Barthes's description of the slippage in the identity of the referent in the following passage: "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 84). Such slippage in the referent is also, in a sense, "performed" in *Camera Lucida*, particularly in Barthes's narrative of his experience of the Winter Garden Photograph:

Starting from her latest image, taken the summer before her death . . . I arrived, traversing three-quarters of a century, at the image of a child [an image of a--a not insignificantly ambiguous modifier--child, which deeply implicates Barthes-the-child-of-his-mother with his mother-as-child]: I stare intensely at the Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of the mother-as-child. Of course I was then losing her twice over, in her final fatigue and in her first photograph, for me the last; but it was also at this moment that everything turned around and I discovered her as into herself.... At the end of her life... my mother was weak, very weak. I lived in her weakness.... During her illness, I nursed her, held the bowl of tea she liked... 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.... Although growing up in a religion-without-images where the Mother is not worshipped (Protestantism) but doubtless formed culturally by Catholic art, when I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-Repertoire (CL 71-72; 75;

my italics).

Clearly the Imaginary is invoked in these passages of *Camera Lucida*, the dual relation with its confusion of self and other and its experience of an undifferentiated plenitude; but, to return to the comparison with Derrida, it is important to determine not only the specificity of the photograph's "saturation of context," but the specificity of that "structural unconsciousness" which prohibits (and "prohibition," I might add, is a very accurate term with regard to the Lacanian schema I am working with here) "saturation" or "plenitude." The structural unconsciousness, the logic of the mark, in Photography is, I think, deeply intertwined with what Barthes describes as the experience of the punctum, both as lacerating "detail" and as "the vertigo of time defeated"; this connection between the punctum and the structure of iterability can be elucidated, I think, through a consideration of the Lacanian theory of death drive--in particular, the death drive's alignment with the Symbolic order.

The Death Drive and the Will-Have-Been

Emphasizing the Borromean knot-like intersections of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, philosopher Richard Boothby's formulation of the Lacanian death drive seems, in part, to account for the role of the photographic punctum as trauma:

The death drive may be said to involve the emergence of the real in the disintegration of the imaginary--a disintegration that is effected by the agency of the symbolic.... The effects of unbinding, associated by Freud with the trauma, are to be attributed in the first place to the real.... However, although it is tied to the real, the unbinding of imaginary structures is brought about by the intervention of the symbolic.[10]

The emergence of the Real effected by the agency of the Symbolic seems to accurately describe the experience of the photographic punctum; and, in fact, Barthes himself invokes the Lacanian Real in relation to the contingency of the photograph--"the This, in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real"--at the very beginning of *Camera Lucida* (CL 4). The Symbolic is aligned with the death drive, and the signifier, as Lacan observes in the second period of his teaching, "materializes the agency of death."^[11]

But what about the experience of the punctum as the "vertigo of time defeated"? How does the "temporal hallucination" of the photograph relate to the death drive? The symbolically mediated subject, writes Boothby, "cannot be represented in any instant of time but is bound up essentially with the three extases of time, past, present, and future. In the defile of the signifier, the subject is determinable only in the future anterior, not as the one who is, but as the one who will have been" (DD 186; my emphasis). The "will-have-been" is the temporality of the signifier, of the subject lost in language--"subjected" by the logic of the mark. As Lacan writes in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis":

I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.^[12]

Clearly, the structure of the "will-have-been" as the temporality of the subject directly correlates to Barthes's formulation of the punctum as the experience of the future anterior: "Those two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village... how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then

already [always already?] dead (yesterday)" (CL 96). The logic of the mark in *Camera Lucida* thus seems situated not in the realm of intentionality--that structural necessity of an "irreducible absence of intention" that Derrida explores in "Signature, Event, Context"--but in temporality. The structural unconsciousness of the "mark" here seems to be located in the realm of the photograph's "bizarre temporal hallucination"--its temporality of the "will-have-been"--through which subjectivity is inscribed in the system of differential marks of the Symbolic order.

It is, however, also important to emphasize the prominence of the future anterior throughout the work of Derrida. The temporality of the "will-have-been" figures significantly in Derrida's critique of metaphysics, a critique which, as characterized by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, "liberates time from its subordination to the present, which no longer takes the past and the future as modes, modifications, or modulations of presence." [13] Commenting upon the importance of the future anterior in Derrida's work and the particular pervasiveness of its logic in Derrida's essay, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," Simon Critchley writes:

The importance of the future anterior is that it is a tense that escapes the time of the present; it simultaneously points to a future--aura--and a past--obligÈ--but never toward the present.... [I]t is a temporality irreducible to what Derrida would call "the metaphysics of presence"... and which envisages a language that would escape (or perhaps remain beneath) the dominant interpretation. [14]

The future anterior, so ubiquitous in "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," also figures significantly (particularly with regard to *Camera Lucida*) in another one of Derrida's texts: *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. The fragmented texts of "Envois" (Part I of The Post Card) deal explicitly with the hallucinatory temporality of the future

anterior, specifically as it relates to what one might fittingly call the "ex post facto" action of writing. Remarking upon his startling discovery of a post card which depicts Socrates writing at a table with Plato standing behind, Derrida writes:

I stopped dead, with a feeling of hallucination (is he crazy or what? he has the names mixed up!) and of revelation at the same time, an apocalyptic revelation: Socrates writing, writing in front of Plato, I always knew it, it had remained like the negative of a photograph to be developed for twenty-five centuries--in me of course.[15]

What is this apocalyptic scene, this logic of "Plato behind Socrates," if not a kind of "blind field"--"like the negative of a photograph"--that haunts "Socrates behind and before Plato" (the order of the linear progression of time)? The order, the "irreversible sequence," of generations is overturned in the "revelatory catastrophe" of Derrida's post card: "[M]y post card... naively overturns everything. In any event it allegorizes the catastrophic unknown of the order. Finally one begins no longer to understand what to come [venir], to come before, to come after, to foresee [prÉvenir], to come back [revenir] all mean. . ." (PC 21). Derrida's metaphor of the specter-like photographic negative--which had remained, waiting, to be developed in himself--is particularly appropriate: at least, from the perspective of my reading of *Camera Lucida*, it would almost seem to be no accident that Derrida describes "Plato behind Socrates" through the metaphor of photography. Such a conclusion (or the inevitable possibility of such a conclusion), it is important to note, is--in miniature-form--a central part of Derrida's argument in "Envois": "According to Plato it was first Socrates who will have written, having made or let him write.... Sophie and her followers, Ernst, Heinele, myself and company dictate to Freud who dictates to Plato, who dictates to Socrates who himself, reading the last one... again will have forwarded" (PC 111; 63)[16]

Perhaps another useful way to think about this particular characteristic of the logic of the future anterior is in relation to Lacan's observations on the way in which something "new" creates its own perspective within the past. In a segment of *Seminar II* devoted to a discussion of our relation to Plato and Socrates, Lacan asks:

What has happened since Socrates? A lot of things, and in particular, the concept of the ego has seen the light of day.

When something comes to light, something which we are forced to consider as new, when another structural order emerges, well then, it creates its own perspective within the past, and we say--This can never not have been there, this has existed from the beginning....

Think about the origins of language. We imagine that there must have been a time when people on this earth began to speak. So we admit of an emergence. But from the moment that the specific structure of this emergence is grasped, we find it absolutely impossible to speculate on what preceded it other than by symbols which were always applicable. What appears to be new thus always seems to extend itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself. We cannot, through thought, abolish a new order. This applies to anything whatsoever, including the origin of the world (S2 5).

A "defeat of time" is certainly evident in this particular aspect of the "will-have-been," in which "what appears to be new... always seems to extend itself indefinitely into perpetuity, prior to itself." Or, as Derrida states it somewhat differently in "Envois": "Socrates turns his back to Plato, who has made him write whatever he wanted while pretending to receive it from him" (PC 12)^[17] Thus, Plato is indeed "behind Socrates," and, similarly, the "blind field" of the photographic punctum "is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there"--the spectral negative that realizes itself "in me of

course," the individual spectator (CL 55).

However, these phenomena, while of the order of the future anterior, seem not to do justice to the temporal paradox evoked by Barthes as specific to the photographic punctum: "He is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake" (CL 96). What, for example, are we to make of some of the more enigmatic passages in *Camera Lucida*, such as Barthes's description of the "flat Death" of the Photograph?: "The horror is this: nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph.... The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting; I have no other resource than this irony: to speak of the 'nothing to say' " (CL 92-93).

As stated earlier, with regard to the Lacanian schema, the structure of the "will-have-been" is the temporality of the signifier, of the subject lost in language. It is in fact, argues Lacan in his seventh *Seminar*, "by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form" that "man, that is to say a living being, [can] have access to knowledge of the death instinct, to his own relationship to death": "it is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is."^[18] In this *Seminar*, it is important to note, Lacan shifts to a considerably different conceptualization of the death drive: instead of being identified with the Symbolic order, the death drive here, in what Slavoj Žižek characterizes as the third period of Lacan's teaching, entails the possibility of the radical "obliteration of the signifying network itself," in what Lacan terms the "second death" (SOI 132). The punctum described by Barthes is, I would suggest, analogous to what Lacan describes in this *Seminar* as the "blinding flash" of the beautiful which, functioning at the limit, reveals to us "the site of man's relationship to his own death"; this phenomenon of

the beautiful is, for Lacan, the limit of the "second death." (S7 260, 295, 298).

Unicity and Iterability: Antigone Between-Two-Deaths

For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable.

[I]f Photography seems to me closer to the Theater, it is by way of a singular intermediary (and perhaps I am the only one who sees it): by way of Death. We know the original relation of the theater and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead....

--Barthes, *Camera Lucida*[19]

Ah, wretched as I am . . . to dwell not among the living, not among the dead.

--Sophocles, *Antigone* [20]

As the place of the irreplaceable singularity and the unique referential, the punctum irradiates and, what is most surprising, lends itself to metonymy.... By taking a thousand differential precautions, one must be able to speak of a punctum in all signs (and the repetition and iterability structures it already), in any discourse, whether it be literary or not.

--Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes"[21]

Sophocles's oft-commented upon *Antigone* holds a unique place in Lacan's tragic ethics of psychoanalysis, discussed in his seventh *Seminar*. [22] In Lacan's commentary--which focuses on Antigone's act, defense, punishment and lamentation--the figure of Antigone functions as the one image

among and above others through which one is "purged" and "purified" of everything of the Imaginary order; she is the incarnation of "pure" desire: desire as death drive, which aims at the Thing, das Ding (S7 247-48). A classic Sophoclean hero, "marked by the stance of the-race-is-run," Antigone finds herself at a limit zone between life and death, in the "second death," encountered through the phenomenon of the beautiful.

Antigone's act--the burial of her brother Polynices, against the orders of Creon, for which she is condemned to be placed alive in a tomb--is, as Žižek points out in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, "an act of separation from the symbolic community."^[23] Hers is the "'mad' decision when, instead of I, the symbolic identity, the universal law, we choose a [objet petit a, the Thing], the exception, the particular object that sticks out from the symbolic order" (ES 78). I would argue that this choice of the a, and not the I, resonates clearly with Barthes's project of a mathesis singularis, his "impossible science of the unique being" (CL 70). What Antigone aims at, in her burial of Polynices, is his absolute irreducibility, his unicity, outside of any generality or universality: "In the Mother," writes Barthes, "there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother" (CL 75). With the death of Polynices, Antigone lost, "not a Figure"--the Brother--"but a being; and not a being, but a quality (a soul): not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable" (CL 75).

It is this unicity and irreplaceability of Polynices that Antigone invokes in her defense to Creon: as Lacan states it: "My brother is what he is, and it's because he is what he is and only he can be what he is, that I move forward toward the fatal limit" (S7 278-79). Antigone's position, argues Lacan, "represents the radical limit that affirms the unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polynices may have done, or to whatever he may have been subjected to" (S7 279). The unicity that Antigone insists upon is, I would suggest, very much akin to the the

"Intractable" essence of the Photograph--the "That-has-been"--insisted upon by Barthes (CL 77). For Antigone, as for Photography according to Barthes, "the event [Polynice's unique existence, his "that-has-been"] is never transcended for the sake of something else [his symbolic identity and actions]: the Photograph [like Antigone] always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *TuchÉ*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression" (CL 4).

In short, I would suggest that the Lacanian reading of Antigone's act as an insistence upon the unique value of Polynices's being helps to bring into focus the way in which the aim or trajectory of Barthes's analysis in *Camera Lucida* may be understood as revolving around the elusive "object" of unicity--specificity in itself, the impossible-Real of the "This" in its pure particularity. In this respect, Barthes's "impossible science of the unique being" would seem to be--contrary to my initial thesis--irreconcilable with the structure of iterability as theorized by Derrida: desire as death drive (incarnated, for Lacan, in the figure of Antigone) entails the possibility of the "radical annihilation" of the differentially organized Symbolic order through the "second death" (SOI 132).

In terms of the "second death," Lacan's reading of *Antigone* bears another point of relevance for *Camera Lucida*. Antigone's punishment and lamentation, I would argue, may be read as an allegory of the death invoked and inscribed in the Photograph: "The horror is this: nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph.... The only 'thought' I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting..." (CL 92-93). Antigone is condemned to being buried alive in a tomb; her fate, as Lacan observes, is that of "a life that is about to turn into a certain

death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves into the realm of death" (S7 248). Her punishment "will consist in her being shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death. Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living" (S7 280). Such a condition, remarks Lacan, "is not unique to Antigone" (S7 248), and one such analogy, I would suggest, can be found in Barthes's account of the future anteriority of the photographic punctum:

I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist) the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, 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 96).

Whether or not the subject in photography is already dead, we might add, she is "suspended in the zone between life and death," suspended between the catastrophic equivalence of the "this-will-be" and the "this-has-been."

This subject-in-suspension, however, must be understood as referring not only to the subject depicted in the photograph, but also to the subject--Barthes's Spectator--viewing the photograph; there is a certain "mobility" in Lacan's reading of *Antigone* that, I would argue, mirrors the movement of the "subject" of photography for Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. As Philippe Van Haute points out in "Death and Sublimation in Lacan's Reading of *Antigone*," Antigone's invocation of the unicity and irreplaceability of Polynices in her defense to Creon--"My brother is what he is"--will be heard by the analyst in its inverted form: "My brother is what he is" becomes "I am only his sister, I am only a sister"; this, Van Haute explains, is

why Lacan refers to Antigone as an "absolute individuality" (DS 113). One can, I would argue, detect a similar inversion in *Camera Lucida*, in a passage that I discussed earlier in terms of Barthes's description of the slippage in the identity of the referent: "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 84). In addition, we might also remember that the very point of departure of *Camera Lucida* involves Barthes taking himself as the "mediator for all Photography" and making himself the "measure of photographic 'knowledge'" (CL 8-9).

Can one not also detect in this slippage of the photographic "subject," this slippage between the observed subject and the subject-observing, that structural unconsciousness of the mark that, once again, prohibits any saturation of context, that, in this case, prevents one from ever speaking of any particular "This" in its absolute specificity? As Žižek remarks with regard to the sublime object of the impossible-Real, "never do we reach the point at which 'the circumstances themselves begin to speak', the point at which language starts to function immediately as 'language of the Real'" (SOI 97). In other words, the very movement of the photographic "subject" seems to point to the inevitable metonymic slippage involved in language, and seems, perhaps, to highlight the necessary failure of the utopian dimension of Barthes's project in *Camera Lucida*. Furthermore, does not Barthes himself remind us of the impossibility of his "impossible science of the unique being," when he writes (regarding the death inscribed in the photograph), "I have no other resource than this irony: to speak of the 'nothing to say'"? (CL 93).

At this point, one may turn, by way of clarification, to Derrida's assertion of the inevitable metonymy of the punctum in "The Deaths of Roland Barthes": "By taking a thousand differential precautions, one must be able to speak of a

punctum in all signs..." (DRB 289). This metonymy of the punctum, "scandalous though it may be," writes Derrida, nevertheless "allows us to speak, to speak of the unique" (DRB 286). In the same way that the structure of iterability theorized by Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context" initially seemed in conflict with Barthes's analysis of the "presence" of the referent in photography, Derrida's insistence upon the non-specificity of the photographic punctum seems at odds with Barthes's continuous insistence upon its specificity. I would argue that, in the final analysis, Derrida's claim of the non-specificity of the punctum--"it will not be a reduction of what he [Barthes] says about the photograph specifically to find it pertinent elsewhere: I would even say everywhere" (DRB 275)--both is and is not reconcilable with Barthes's project in *Camera Lucida*. "To speak of a punctum in all signs" is, perhaps, not a reduction of Barthes's project, but simply an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the *mathesis singularis*, a reminder of the fundamental impossibility involved in speaking of the "nothing to say" (CL 93). Finally, one might also remember Derrida's observation that, with the assertion of such metonymy, "singularity doesn't lose any of its force, on the contrary" (DRB 290):

[O]nly a metonymic force can still assure a certain generality to the discourse and offer it to analysis by submitting its concepts to a quasi-instrumental employment. How else could we, without knowing her, be so deeply moved by what he said about his mother, who was not only the Mother, or a mother, but the only one she was and of whom such a photo was taken 'that day ...'? How would this be poignant to us if a metonymic force... were not at work? (DRB 286).

With the insistence upon such an inevitable metonymic force, the singularity and specificity of and in Barthes's project--"the impossible science of the unique being"--"doesn't lose any of its force, on the contrary"; that is to say, it is not in spite of,

but perhaps because of the impossibility of its aim that *Camera Lucida* achieves its undeniable poignancy.

Notes

My thanks to Reni Celeste, David Rodowick, and Sharon Willis for their helpful suggestions.

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981), 5-6; 87. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "CL" followed by the page numbers. ↑

2. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in *Glyph 1*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 180. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "SEC" followed by the page numbers. ↑

3. For example, both the signature and the photograph possess a kind of documentary force and serve, in an official sense, as identificatory evidence. Of course, there is a definite distinction in terms of the way they function: for example, my signature can literally stand in for myself or my will, whereas my photograph, in some sense, attests that I am who I am. ↑

4. Here, of course, one can see the potential opening for another line of inquiry: the analysis of the punctum (as lacerating "detail") as a kind of part object, as an encounter with the Real as objet petit a in the Lacanian sense. Particularly suggestive for such an analysis, in relation to the idea of a "structural unconsciousness," is Barthes's assertion that the "detail" opens up "a kind of subtle beyond": "once there is a punctum, a blind field is created (is divined)..." (CL 57-58). ↑

5. Of course, one exception to this would be the signature that is forged; in the realm of photography, the "trick-photograph" would seem to be the analogous counterpart of the forged signature. ↑

6. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice" in *Image--Music--Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 188. ↑

7. Roland Barthes, "Roland Barthes versus Received Ideas" in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962--1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 193. ↑

8. With regard to recorded music, we might think, for example, of recordings of singers from the past; these recordings would seem to be analogous, on some level, to the historical photographs analyzed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*: "This punctum, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: that is dead and that is going to die" (CL 96). It is, however, important to remember that Barthes regards the punctum as a specific quality and possibility of photography, and not, for example, film. The issue here, between photography and film, or photography and recorded music, would seem to be one of still, static objects versus time-based media. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes himself speaks of films and recordings in terms of a melancholy, but not a punctum: "I can never see or see again in a film certain actors whom I know to be dead without a certain kind of melancholy: the melancholy of Photography itself (I experience this same emotion listening to the recorded voices of dead singers)" (CL 79). ↑

9. Of course, remembering Lacan's observation that "all sorts of things in the world behave like mirrors," it is certainly

possible to argue that we also have an Imaginary relation to script and the recorded voice. (Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book II*, trans. Sylvia Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 59. All further references to this text will be cited as "S2" followed by the page numbers. Certainly the "faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at "myself" on a piece of paper" occurs just as frequently with recordings of one's voice--even with something as banal as an answering machine message. ↑

10. Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 136. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "DD" followed by the page numbers. ↑

11. Jacques Lacan, "The Seminar on the 'Purloined Letter,'" trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Yale French Studies*, no. 48 (1972), 53. It is, however, important to note that this conceptualization of the death drive as aligned with the Symbolic falls primarily within the realm of what Slavoj Žižek has delineated as the second period of Lacan's teaching; in Lacan's later work, the signification of the death drive is in some ways "reversed," as the death drive then entails the possibility of the "radical annihilation of the symbolic texture." Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 132. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "SOI" followed by the page numbers. ↑

12. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977), 86. Lacan also speaks of this temporality of the future anterior in relation to the unconscious--"[the unconscious] is something which will be realised in the symbolic, or, more precisely, something which, thanks to the symbolic progress which takes place in analysis, will have been"--and to the return of the repressed--"what we see in the return of the repressed is the effaced signal of something which only takes on its value in the future, through

its symbolic realisation, its integration into the history of the subject. Literally, it will only ever be a thing which, at the given moment of its occurrence, will have been." *Seminar Book I*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 158-59. ↑

13. Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. Simon Critchley, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 6. ↑

14. Simon Critchley, "'Bois'--Derrida's Final Word on Levinas" in *Re-Reading Levinas*, 168. See also Derrida's essay, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," (*Re-Reading Levinas*, 11-48), which begins: "He will have obligated (il aura obligé)." ↑

15. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9. All further references to this text will be cited as "PC" followed by the page numbers. ↑

16. It is also interesting to note that the grammatical tense of the future anterior--the "will have been" or some variation thereof--permeates the fragmented texts of "Envois," just as in "At This Very Moment in This Text Here I Am." ↑

17. While outside the scope of the present paper, I would point out that these passages in Derrida and Lacan raise a number of questions with regard to the logic (or perhaps different logics) of the future anterior. In particular, what exactly is the relationship between the "will-have-been" and the temporal grammar of the "absolute already-there of the not-yet" and the "absolute already-no-more of the yet" which, as Derrida remarks, "no longer belong to time", but describe an "eternal or intemporal circle"? (Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 218-19. See also Derrida's "At This Very Moment in This

Work Here I Am," in which, within the same paragraph, he paradoxically states that the future anterior "could turn out to be--and this resemblance is irreducible--the time of Hegelian teleology," and yet "will have designated 'within' language that which remains most irreducible to the economy of Hegelian teleology and to the dominant interpretation of language," 36-37. ↑

18. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 295. All further references to this text will be cited as "S7" followed by the page numbers. ↑

19. *Camera Lucida*, 75; 31. ↑

20. Sophocles: *Antigone*, lines 850-52, ed. and trans. Andrew Brown (Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1987), 91. ↑

21. Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas in *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau Ponty*, ed. Hugh Silverman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 285; 289. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "DRB" followed by the page numbers. ↑

22. For an extended discussion of *Antigone* as it relates to the Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis, see Philippe Van Haute's "Death and Sublimation in Lacan's Reading of *Antigone*," in *Levinas and Lacan: The Missed Encounter*, ed. Sarah Harasym (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 102-120. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "DS" followed by the page numbers. ↑

23. Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 77. All further references to this work will be cited in the text as "ES"

followed by the page numbers. ↑



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