**View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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**Herbé, the Author of In Search of Lost Time**

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In 2015, Jean Narboni published *La nuit sera blanche: Barthes, »La Chambre claire«, le cinéma*, a book perfectly described by its subtitle.¹ It is about Roland Barthes and his final book, as well as his relationship with cinema. The author, Jean Narboni, is the nearly 80-year-old film critic formerly associated with *Cahiers du cinéma*, and editor of a series of books published jointly with the Gallimard publishing house. The first title in that particular series was Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, one of the most renowned, widely read and commented upon of Barthes’ books. Three things distinguish Narboni’s work. Firstly, previously unknown facts about the development of *Camera Lucida*, which Narboni had access to as editor of the series. Secondly, the structure of the book itself, which takes a selected photographic image and then provides commentary and context for it. Thirdly, cinema and film as its subject matter, a rarely analyzed part of the author of *Mythologies* oeuvre. Thanks to these three things, Narboni’s book allows us to reexamine the place photography occupied in Barthes’ work, especially in the context of his later works, even the unfinished ones—including his seminar, which he eventually failed to teach, on photographs of the prototypes of Proustian characters.

**Time, Film, Photogram**

And so, Narboni mentions that insofar as the preliminary version of Barthes’ text provided to him hadn’t undergone any extensive changes in the editing process, work on the illustrations was long and arduous. From the final version of the book, Barthes removed the majority of previously provided photographs, and then focused on their arrangement on the pages and their relationship with the text. This solicitous attitude towards the composition allowed him to devise—to quote Éric Marty—“a wholly innovative and unique subject, as innovative and unique as Breton’s *Nadja*.”² A number of elements contributed to this uniqueness, including its numerical features: it had two sections with twenty-four fragments each,
accompanied by twenty-four photographs plus the opening image: Daniel Boudinet’s Polaroid. The first fragment in the book is accompanied by Stieglitz’s Terminus. Narboni points out that the book, built around the number 24, is opened by the images of a veil-curtain and a terminus, signs pointing to the fact that the book is not about images but rather about time: “In a narrative where night follows day and we hear the heavy steps of a procession of hours, Time unquestionably becomes the main character.”

Therefore, in Camera Lucida, Barthes clashes with cinema time and time again, accusing it of superficiality, thoughtlessness, normalcy, and undue similarity to real life. These skirmishes started way back in the 1950s, with essays collected in Mythologies and pieces on semiotics published in “Revue internationale de filmologie.” These texts were the first and final attempts on Barthes’ part to introduce some sort of order to the theoretical discourse on photography, which was quickly—save for a couple of exceptions—abandoned. The author of S/Z unswervingly took the side—if we can speak of taking sides in this particular instance, it is after all how Camera Lucida is positioned—of the elder of the visual arts: “It is the advent of the Photograph—and not, as has been said, of the cinema—which divides the history of the world,” although his claim in the opening passages of the book seems slightly more nuanced: “I decided I liked Photography in opposition to the Cinema, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it.” The photographic noeme—“This has been”—is definitely different from the cinematic—“That appears to have been.” Barthes considered photography a short form and film a “rich” form, in the negative sense of the word: one that inspires the desire to introduce ellipses and litotes.

In spite of this theoretical aversion, Barthes flirted with cinema, as evidenced by his appearance in The Brontë Sisters directed by André Téchiné—who also planned to shoot a movie about Proust. However, the notes to his seminar on the auteur contain a fanciful passage that reveals him dreaming about a “camera in a buttonhole” that would make cinema something “total and permanent,” akin to a “journal of desires.”
Paradoxically enough, Barthes’ most important text on film is one that essentially says nothing about the form itself. I’m talking, of course, about The Third Meaning. Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills—an analysis which introduces terms that will prove seminal to Barthes’ work, such as signifiance, as well as sens obvie and sens obtus, both very important from the standpoint of interpreting photography, and which after some transformations will reemerge in Camera Lucida as studium and punctum. The open meaning, obtus, is to be found “not everywhere (…) but somewhere,” it is “a signifier without a signified,” it is “outside (articulated) language,” it can “only come and go, appearing–disappearing”; “If it could be described (a contradiction in terms), it would have exactly the nature of the Japanese haiku—anaphoric gesture without significant content, a sort of gash rased of meaning (of desire for meaning).”¹¹ The photogram is a privileged locus of that particular meaning in film, as it allows us to capture the elusive. It is not a filmic intermediate, nor an ancillary form, but rather a quote or a palimpsest that offers us insight into the process of creating signifiance. It argues for darkness and perversion, whereas cinema advocates light and hysteria.

Fascination

Between his early work on cinema and his essays on Eisenstein, Barthes published two semiotics treatises focused on photography. Pondering the place of denotation and connotation in The Photographic Message, he surprisingly puts forth—albeit in different terms—what would become the essence of Camera Lucida: “If such a denotation exists, it is perhaps not at the level of what ordinary language calls the insignificant, the neutral, the objective, but, on the contrary, at the level of absolutely traumatic images. The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning.”¹² Alongside trauma Barthes’ inquiry into the denotation of photography led him to formulate another key concept found in Camera Lucida, the noeme of “being-there,” which in The Rhetoric of the Image, the other of the aforementioned studies on photography, assumes a form very similar to the one from 1980: “The type of consciousness the photograph involves is indeed truly unprecedented, since it establishes not a consciousness of the being-there of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there.”¹³

The evolution of Barthes’ thoughts on photography isn’t as significant as Narboni claims. Narboni himself quotes a 1977 interview that Barthes gave to
“Photographe” magazine, in which the author of *The Pleasure of the Text* undermines one of *Camera Lucida*’s fundamental categories, that is “the power of authentication.” Narboni does so, however, to serve a hidden agenda—to emphasize the role played in Barthes’ evolution by André Bazin. According to Narboni, it was this pre-eminent critic and co-founder of “Cahiers du cinéma” that spurred Barthes—twenty years prior to the release of *Camera Lucida*—to explore the concept of the absence of man-creator and the “vestigial,” rather than the purely illustrative character of the subject in photography. However similar Bazin’s and Barthes’ concepts may seem on a purely theoretical level, it seems that the path towards the final book taken by the author of *Mythologies* leads to wholly different territories.

In a 1977 France–Culture Radio interview given to Bernard–Henri Lévy and Jean–Marie Benoist, Barthes talks about the “pleasure of the image” to transpose his deliberations on photography—just like the deliberations on literature before that—onto the area of the viewer’s personal experience and history, necessarily connected with the dictate of *being-there*: “What fascinates me about photography—and I am truly fascinated by photographs—is something that death surely plays a role in. This fascination may be somewhat necrophiliac—it’s fascination with something that was dead and what portrays itself as if it wanted to be alive.” The oft-repeated word *fascination* directs our attention towards the word itself, while the reference to necrophilia aims our thoughts at the Roman *fascinus* or *fascinum*: the embodiment of the divine phallus or simply a phallic amulet, a ritual and theatrical personification of pleasure/delight and craving/desire—all of which comprised fundamental Barthesian rhetorical figures in the 1970s. The photograph becomes—like the photogram, like the sadistic scenes in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, like Klossowski’s paintings—a fetish, a *tableau vivant*, concealing death behind theatrical and historical—or should we say theatricalized and historicized, seeing as everything here takes place on a meta-level)—staffage.

This is one trope. The other is the “preparation of a novel” class that Barthes taught between 1978 and 1980, that is while in mourning and just before the release of *Camera Lucida*. In the class he once again made the haiku comparison, originally...
featured in *The Third Meaning*—haiku being a fundamental form of writing which he spoke about during his seminar on the art of the novel. As such he considers photography the only form of art that can properly reflect the nature of haiku, with which it shares a noeme. And although a multitude of details makes photography very different from haiku, in both forms everything is “given at once”—in contrast of course to film, which needs to “develop” its narrative. It is clear that Barthes no longer sees photography in categories like connotation and denotation, message and causal instance, i.e. semiotic categories developed by Bazin and himself. “Looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture.” When he references that culture, that knowledge, he does so in the fashion of a 16th century alchemist or an ancient philosopher arguing the finer points of optics. “For the noeme »That-has-been« was possible only on the day when a scientific circumstance (the discovery that silver halogens were sensitive to light) made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object.” This scientific fact serves Barthes as a starting point for a mystical rather than a scientistic observation:

> 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, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze.

Obviously, we’re not talking about the photographed “thing,” but a person; and it is linked to Barthes’ gaze not by a “sort of umbilical cord,” but simply an umbilical cord. Barthes’ “here” is a deictic indication that invokes absence: the absent thing (person) and the absent photograph—the same one that the author ultimately decided not to show: the picture of his mother in the winter garden. By refusing to include it, Barthes turned towards others that “punctured” him, in order to ultimately discard them in favor of deliberations over the temporal nature of photography and memory. The picture of his mother was replaced by a photograph of Nadar’s mother, and ultimately by another picture from his childhood, one which features his mother but accompanied by the overbearing figure of his grandfather. If it’s true that—as claimed by Marie Gil—“His mother made Barthes’ life into a »picture«, that in the process of inversion she was the developer of the »photograph« that is life,” then the accidental discovery of the picture taken in
Chennevières-sur-Marne should be considered in the category of objective chance. It is an event, so to speak, in the anti-Derridian sense of the word: it was possible and necessary, it resulted in the puncture of a bloated balloon of ideas about photography, but it also provided us with a wholly new language to express them—the intimate language of the novel.

**Marcel Barthes**

Comparing the discovery of his mother’s picture to the Proustian madeleine is not necessarily just a brilliant rhetorical device. It’s also a logical association between *In Search of Lost Time*’s fundamental scene and numerous references to Proust scattered throughout *Camera Lucida*, including those mother-related. Therefore, when Barthes peruses the photographs of his mother, he persistently uses the verb retrouver (to find), which is a play on the Orphean (im)possibility of finding one’s loved ones after death as well as the title—and meaning—of the final chapter in Proust’s famous cycle.

In the introduction to the fifth volume of Barthes’ collected works, Éric Marty claims that the first part of *Camera Lucida* corresponds to *Time Lost*, while the other—to *Time Regained*. And again: there is an inkling of interpretational rhetoric to it, but simultaneously—and with all the differences that separate these two, basically incomparable, endeavors—it’s difficult not to notice that at the heart of both projects there lies a desire to regain lost time. This notion is also raised by Narboni, who included a passage from Proust’s *opus magnum* as his book’s motto, as well as by the most insightful scholar of the Proust–Barthes connection, Kathrin Yacavone, who considers *Camera Lucida* to be an attempt at adopting and assimilating Proustian ideas:

Barthes interprets, on a first level, the Proustian concept of memory in an allusive but clearly Proustian manner; in other words, even if he does not directly quote the author, the notions of Barthes are identical, even in their expression, to those of the novelist. On a second level, Barthes refers to Proust in a more direct and open manner; He compares his own ideas on memory (and photography) with those of Proust.
In his most intimate book, the same in which he wanted to remain “a primitive, without culture,” he incessantly—directly or by way of allusion—references the author of *In Search of Lost Time* and adopts a similar manner of narrating: he recounts events as he remembers them, without fact-checking, without poring over documents or archives. Archival work is cast aside in favor of Buddhist satori—moments of enlightenment and ecstasy—which, when juxtaposed with Proust, are infused with new meaning in the context of photography and allow us to isolate, from a multitude of others, a single, heretofore unshown image, just as a single figure—the “Mother/Grandmother”—emerged from a crowd of others in *In Search of Lost Time*.26

As is well known, Proust himself was also very passionate about photography and photographic metaphors are seemingly ubiquitous in his works.xxxvii In Barthes’ essays about him—which are strikingly rare if we consider the repeated readings and his fundamentally uncritical approach to Proust—Barthes does not explore photography-related subjects, as if leaving that particular field aside for a later essay, and deals with Proustian memory and time rather than images and pictures.28

Barthes discovered Proust’s work when he was sixteen, on vacation in Bayonne, and one of the last books he’ll ever read with unconcealed passion is George Painter’s classic two-volume biography of Proust himself. With regard to Proust, however, he stayed true throughout his entire life to the words he placed in the title of his essay on Stendhal: “We Always Fail to Talk of What We Love.”29 With the exception of his earlier study, *Proust and Names*, it is only in his final years that Barthes will decide to speak about the author of *In Search of Lost Time*—more extensively than the book itself—directly and openly. It’s as if the death of his mother was—to use a term from *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*—a biographeme which encouraged Barthes to treat it as Proust himself would: as an impulse to trigger the emergence of a new language, narrative instead of critical. No wonder, then, that in Barthes’ seminar on the preparation of novels Proust appears as an absolute, perfect reference point, above all a pioneer and a standard for how an author should burst onto the literary scene to be considered a “biographologist,” and simultaneously a subject of “Marcelism”—that is interest in Proust as a human being, as opposed to “Proustianism” as interest in the novel writer.30 As a supporter of both these
tendencies, Barthes was enchanted, fascinated, with intermediate forms of writing that existed between essays and novels. As Markowski has pointed out, it is from reading Proust that Barthes derived the

the pathology of reading. Not pathological reading, but the pathology of reading, a reading that reveals the pathos: the sorrow, the fear, the suffering, the love, the pity; in other words: feelings that have us crying over the dying Bolkoński, over the dying Grandmother of the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time.*

If we aren’t already in a world where reading and writing are things done “by a character in a novel” then we’re certainly heading towards that sort of reality.

Barthes himself does not in any way conceal his intent of weaving together Proust’s universe with his own. In his lecture, “For a long time I went to bed early,” (called “Proust and I” in the US) he says, bluntly (though somewhat perversely): “When placing Proust and myself in the same line, I did not wish to compare myself to a great writer—on the contrary—I wished to identify with him.” Barthes stresses, however, that the wish wasn’t to identify with an author of some great work, but a craftsman, someone like the scriptor from *The Death of the Author.* Proust becomes not the author, but a “scriptor”—a figure Barthes already desires to become. This is why he sought the similarities and connections, the metaphors and toposes which would reflect them both–Barthes and the author of *In Search of Lost Time.*

One such topos is the *puer senilis,* the senile child, found in “Marcel,” in Barthes, in the narrator of *Camera Lucida* who sees his own child in his mother, and infuses the image of Nadar’s mother—a stand-in for his own mother—with a certain measure of ambivalence by suggesting that it may be the photographer’s wife.

These fundamentally narrative efforts introduce a degree of chaos into the essayistic architextuality of Barthes’ book. They resemble—part and parcel—the conversations with his mother which upset the very critical foundations of *Contre Sainte-Beuve.* They are a sort of a harbinger of a novel, an autobiographical novel, or simply an autobiography.

**Photographic Radiance**

At this point in our inquiry into the autobiographical and novelistic nature of *Camera Lucida,* we stand before three options. Firstly, we can believe Barthes’ own
words, uttered in the course of his Proust-centered lecture:

I would love to develop this power of the Novel—the power of love or the power of loving (some mystics failed to distinguish between Agape and Eros)—either through means of the Essay (I was talking about the pompous History of Literature) or the Novel, using the name for any Form that differs from my previous practice, from my previous discourse.\(^3\)

In this particular case, he draws succor from the two-year-long seminar on novel writing which at times seems to stray away from writing—and let’s ignore the fact that talking about writing novels instead of simply writing them is in itself not that creative—but at other times he seems to treat the task seriously. This would be further evidenced by the accounts of Barthes’ friends, filled with stories of heaps of index cards and his hesitations over the character of his future work (whether it should be an epic Tolstoyan novel or something autothematic), as well as his idea to move to Urt, where—far away from Paris and his own obligations—Barthes could fully commit to creative work.\(^3\) In this interpretation, _Camera Lucida_ would definitely be a peculiar sort of _Contre Sainte-Beuve_, a preface to the “actual” work.

Secondly, we can follow the suggestions laid out by Philippe Roger who, in his essay on photography, sees _Camera Lucida_ as the counterpart to the final volume of Proust’s _opus magnum_, that is—naturally—a prelude to work, but a prelude that tapped off work that was already written.\(^3\) This other piece of work can, therefore, come into being, but its status is purely phantomatic, its most important element is the road already travelled. The third option is accurately summed up by Laurent Nunez:

It seems that Barthes, the myth hunter himself, fell victim to the final mythology, the most beautiful one, at least according to me. He mythologized the Novel. Or, to be more precise, he expected so much from narrative nature of the novel, the he did not dare touch it or gaze at it openly; this is why, in the end, he ultimately only brushed against it, not even grazing it.\(^3\)
From such a perspective, *Camera Lucida*—Barthes’ most intimate and deeply autobiographic text, but one that, frankly, confines its own narrative qualities to just a couple of devices, including light fictionalization and the use of passé simple—is the pinnacle of Barthes’ achievement in the field of writing novels. This is not even grazing, merely brushing against.

Here, I’d like to suggest a fourth possibility for reading the role of *Camera Lucida*, one that, to some degree, takes the other three into consideration, but adds two additional aspects to them. The first pertains to the very subject of Barthes’ final book, that is photography—an element that clearly carries no significance to the three earlier propositions, but whose involvement allows for a different understanding of the place the essay occupies in the author’s oeuvre. The other, more important one, is related to what Barthes did not write and did not do, therefore it can be considered an attempt at phantomatic or anticipatory criticism.

The “unwritten” here takes the form of a book collecting opinions and thoughts from his seminar on the photographs of the prototypes of Proustian characters—a seminar which ultimately failed to transpire due to Barthes’ death in March of 1980. We do, however, have access to his notes for the seminar, which gives us some insight into the way that the author of *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* planned to discuss these photographs.

The visual basis of the seminar consisted of the photographs taken in the workshop of Paul Nadar—son of the great Félix—on Rue d’Anjou, where a large number of friends of the Proust family, as well as Marcel’s own family, had their picture taken. The photographs where displayed publicly for the first time in 1978, at an exhibition called *Le monde de Proust: photographies de Paul Nadar*, and later published in the exhibition catalogue.

According to Barthes’ own notes, the seminar was supposed to consist primarily of contemplating a selection of photographs. Literally: contemplating them, with commentary reduced to providing appropriate biographic context. “I will be more or less absent from this presentation,” Barthes writes, “I simply prepared and arranged the materials in the laboratory.” Barthes indicates that he will not be looking for appropriate passages from the *Search* that would illustrate the prototypes of the characters. The seminar was to be free of interpretation; it was supposed to offer the “Marcelists” pure pleasure and entertainment, and inspire
“fascination.” The latter, however, was supposed to be inspired not by the photograph itself but by the person it portrayed, and most of all, by the fact that some of its qualities were eventually utilized in In Search of Lost Time. The extent to which Barthes ignores the “photographic” aspect of the pictures in his notes is striking, he consequently omits what in other circumstances—in Camera Lucida, perhaps?—would definitely draw his attention, maybe even “puncture” him. He does not even say a word about the photographic noise in the picture portraying Anna Gould: the person who accidentally came into the frame, the oblong object sticking out from her side, and the strange blackness from which both of these incongruous objects seem to emerge. In fact, we can say that not only would the seminar not allow interpretation, it would do the same with description—accordingly with a precept stated (and subverted!) in The Photographic Message: “In front of a photograph, the feeling of »denotation«, or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible.”

Remarks elaborating on how to see “photographs” as “keys” to the novel seem to be the most theoretically important element of the seminar notes. “Keys,” Barthes writes, “belong to the order of illusion, but the illusion functions as a Surplus of the Reading. Keys reinforce and develop the notional bond with the Work.” When writing about the bond with the work, Barthes means simply the role of the observer/reader who—somewhat contrary to earlier declarations—becomes the center of his attention as the tension between spectrum and spectator, discussed extensively in Camera Lucida, accumulates inside of him, and it is upon him that the success of the entire pure fascination-based endeavor depends. This transposition of emphasis from author onto reader creates—as pointed out by Kathrin Yacavone—an important, notional rather than empirical, relationship between the text and the photograph: a relationship in which the I of the spectator seems to transcend its own temporal borders in order to establish a separate world which it would inhabit along with the viewed photographs and—most importantly—with the photographed objects.

This is precisely why, when looking at the picture of Countess Greffulhe, Barthes writes the following: “How did she age? How did she die? 1952. That’s not long ago. I was writing Degree Zero!” The claim seems familiar. In his autobiographical dictionary, commenting on a childhood photo of himself, Barthes wrote: “Contemporaries? I was beginning to walk, Proust was still alive, finishing À la
Recherche du Temps perdu. Barthes lets us know that he belongs to the same world that Proust and his characters inhabit, that he lived and loved in the same time and space as the characters of the Search. The lines between the two either shift or dissolve completely. We may quote his book on photography: “From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here.” Barthes confesses he fell in love with three faces, those of Julia Bartet, the Duc de Guiche, and the 15-year-old Marcel. And that he has a special fondness for little girls from that period, “perhaps because it’s more or less that of my mother’s childhood.” Photography makes it possible to bring or even meld together two separate worlds—something that in literature would only be possible in science-fiction books. The visual medium allows for a sort of undifferentiation which is, on the one hand, a result of the technical qualities of the photograph itself (similar circumstances of capturing, specific chemical processes, quality that has suffered “the ravages of time”), and on the other—a product of the activity of the onlooker, an activity establishing a notional link to the past.

Only the photographs of Proust’s own family remain devoid of any sort of commentary.

The Transcription

Barthes does not stop on any name for long. It’s no longer the time of “names and proper names” which he explored in his 1967 essay. Let’s reiterate:

In terms of sign the proper name is open to exploration and decoding; it is both an environment, in the biological sense, in which to immerse oneself and indulge endlessly in all the daydreams it inspires, and a previous, tightly closed, fragrant object that must be opened like a flower.

It is exactly those sorts of names that Barthes can no longer create, a fact he laments both at the Cerisy-la-Salle conference and during his seminar on the preparation of novels. And without that there can be no talk of a narrative écriture. He attempted it in his dictionary, by invoking the names of Bayonne denizens he
remembered in order to inspire an “erotic relationship with proper names” and thus awaken the machine of significance. However, the effort remained fruitless, or so it seems. It would be worthwhile to reread the passage from *Proust and Names*—maybe even the entire essay—in light of Barthes’ final writings and seminars, focusing on photography and substituting it in place of the Name. Such a reading would yield not only a commentary on and a methodological summary of *Camera Lucida* and the seminar on Proust, but also an autointerpretation of the shift from contemplating *signifiant* and *signifiance* towards photography. As it is photography that will assume the Cratylean characteristics of the proper name, it is photography that will demonstrate “hypersemantics” in and of itself as it employs a language different from the natural language, it is therefore free of the metalinguistic multiplicity of levels. Thanks to the analogy principle, it is immediately congruent with its subject and simultaneously it is infinitely open to notional—rather than only empirical—relationships with an audience. Such a reading will make Barthes’ silence in his seminar on Proust more understandable, at least to a certain extent. We’re talking, obviously, about his symbolic silence and withdrawal, his attempt to hide behind the presented photographs, and not about him actually becoming silent by way of death. However, it is also a reference to his silence on the photographs of the Prousts and their children.

There is a picture taken on the balcony of the apartment at 45 Rue de Courcelles. The railing separates the picture into two halves: on the right we see the majestic figures of the male Proust lineage—Adrien, the father and Robert, the brother—the ornaments adorning the facade of the house behind their backs; on the left is the Rue de Courcelles, intersecting in the distance with the tree-lined Haussmann Boulevard. Looking at the photograph, Christian Péchenard correctly declares that the “drama of family photographs lies in the fact that there’s always someone missing—the person who surrendered their presence in the picture in order to serve as narrator.” In the case of the Rue de Courcelles photo—taken probably in 1903—that someone was, in all likelihood, Marcel himself, the future author of the *Search*, whose narrator will simultaneously be the photographer stating: “This has been.”

Maybe this is why Barthes left the photograph of the Proust family devoid of commentary. He wanted to become the one who surrenders their presence—the narrator of the family photograph. To use the lives of all the Proustian prototypes he gazed at in Nadar’s photographs to fashion his own past—his own and his
mother’s, to whom he bid farewell with Camera Lucida, a past which he eventually finds in these photographs and the seemingly insane project of writing, or rather transcribing, In Search of Lost Time. Because no other reasons seem to suffice.

The publisher of Barthes’ collected writings indicates that before his death, the writer “expressed regret for not having written In Search of Lost Time, or rather, commanded himself to write it, to transcribe it,” however, immediately afterwards he admits that he wrote Contre Sainte-Beuve, a book that Proust abandoned, instead. Indeed, the shadow—or maybe the specter—of the Search hangs over both the seminar on preparing the novel and Camera Lucida, as well as over the earlier volume, Roland Barthes. In 1978, during a recording session for France-Culture’s Un homme, un ville, Barthes strolled with Jean Montalbetti in Proust’s footsteps, through Paris and Illiers, through the novel’s Combray, and spoke clearly about his desire to transcribe Proust’s magnum opus. Naturally, these statements can be read metonymically—as an expression of the author’s desire to write a novel or any novel whatsoever. However, given that we’ve already committed to phantomatic and anticipatory readings, why shouldn’t we attempt a literal (and thus paranoid, to a certain extent) reading and see the seminar on Proust as a stage in Barthes’ process, a process leading up to transcribing—literally—in Search of Lost Time, or at least parts of it?

During the seminar on preparing novels, Barthes brings up the practice of imitation and identifies its two specific varieties—both present in the novel he often referenced in his work, Gustave Flaubert’s Bouvard et Pécuchet. Both types entail the “application of a book,” that is bringing the book’s ideas to life and—what’s more interesting to us—copying it. Surprisingly, Barthes does not develop the subject further, ostensibly because he finds it boring, and identifies the old practice of transcribing favorite poems as the only genuine form of copying. Barthes’ strategy here is quite puzzling. The author of S/Z clearly does not want to exploit the conceptual and creative potential of the copy, a potential he often encountered as a literary theorist and Flaubert reader. He had to know that Bouvard et Pécuchet was a part of a duology planned by Flaubert—its first volume, a novel. The second volume was to be called Copy and consist of a collection of excerpts and quotes from a variety of sources—from great authors to daily newspapers—a part of it was published as The Diary of Received Ideas. Barthes dismisses it all, conceals and symptomatically denies what’s most important, that is his plan to transcribe
the Proust novel—just like he does with his mother’s picture in *Camera Lucida*.

*Camera Lucida* constitutes the first volume of Barthes’ novel and is the equivalent of the first volume of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. *In Search of Lost Time* was to be the second volume—*Copy*. What, then, is the role of the photographs in the project? Well, it may be small but essential. Let’s bring up a fairly well-known story:

Pierre Menard did not want to compose another Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose the Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. [...] Initially, Menard’s method was to be relatively simple: Learn Spanish, return to Catholicism, fight against the Moor or Turk, forget the history of Europe from 1602 to 1919—be Miguel de Cervantes.54

Gazing silently, with fascinated eyes, at the photographs of the prototypes of Proustian characters, Barthes seems to withdraw but his withdrawal is only a facade. Fundamentally, like Borges’ Pierre Menard, he tries to forget European history from 1922 and 1980, wants to appropriate the Proust archive and become Marcel Proust himself. Is there anything more personal, more intimate than a family photo album? Barthes behaves somewhat like a psychopathic killer from crime fiction, who learns everything he can about his victim’s life, injecting himself into the victim’s relationships, gradually takes over their life, imitating them, to finally face them as their *alter ego*, kill and replace them, appropriate whatever the victim had: money, family, friends, and then escape to some exotic country to live out the rest of his life under an assumed name. We don’t really have to explain that in this criminal fantasy, *In Search of Lost Time* was that thing that the victim had that the killer desired. And as far as Barthes’ inability to come up with names? Well, he came up with one: during discussions at Cerisy, he admits that he could use the phonetic transcription of his initials, with the initial “H” silent, as a *nom de plume*: Herbé. IV The only thing we do not know is which exotic country would he end up choosing.
Footnotes


3 Narboni, La nuit, 58.


6 ibid., 1.

7 ibid., 75.


9 ibid., 73.


15 ibid., 133-143.


21 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 78.


29 Roland Barthes, *On échoue toujours à parler de ce qu’on aime*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, t. V.


34 ibid., 289.


39 ibid., 310.

40 ibid., 342.

42 Barthes, La Préparation du roman, 396.


44 Barthes, Preparation, 345.

45 Barthes, Roland Barthes, 23.

46 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 78.

47 Barthes, Preparation, 362.


49 Barthes, Roland Barthes, 51.

50 Christian Péchenard, Proust et les autres, (Paris: La Table ronde, 1999), 386.


52 The broadcast can be found at http://roland-barthes.org/audio_de_barthes1.html (accessed May 2, 2016).

53 Barthes, Preparation, 133.


55 Prétexte, 146. An entire chapter of Philippe Roger’s Roland Barthes, roman is called Herbé.