



Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents
------	--------	----------	--------------	----------

Access provided by University of Oregon

Personal Effects: Rilke, Barthes, and the Matter of Photography

[Kenneth S. Calhoon](#)

"Give light to the metal."

--Ezra Pound, "The Alchemist"

I

One of Rilke's *New Poems* describes a blind man testing his way through the streets of Paris, his path, from which the city itself is effectively absent, likened to a dark crack running through a bright cup:

Sieh, er geht und unterbricht die Stadt,
die nicht ist auf seiner dunkeln Stelle,
wie ein dunkler Sprung durch eine helle
Tasse geht. ¹

The simile is proper to a lyrical corpus in which, for example, a flamenco dancer's sudden first flourishes are compared to the combustion of a sulphur match, or the perceived iridescence of a marble torso to the shimmering coat of a predatory animal. Such comparisons may well be the business of poetry generally, but Rilke's "thing-poems" are striking in their emphasis on the material and on the resistance that matter poses to meaning. It is as if each poem faced anew the task of transubstantiation--of converting the signifying object into a medium for what it otherwise only dissimulates. The cup, its density giving way to luster, registers in turn a trace of the **[End Page 612]** supersensible, though as negativity, as shadow. The crack is a function of physical properties of which it does not partake; it articulates the cup's delicacy without itself being delicate. This transparency is the achievement of the alchemy (taken more or less literally) that produced both porcelain, the cup's apparent substance, and photography, in particular the process by which a light image is recorded on the silverized plate of the daguerreotype. The cup, with its bright/dark dyad, emulates a photographic surface, and points to the role of photography proper in reviving the classical semiotic ambition of "arresting the flight of the signified."

Something else that aligns Rilke's portrait of the blind pedestrian with photography is the opening enjoinder to behold ("Sieh"). "Behold" has a more haptical connotation than "Sieh" but is consistent with a biblical order of proof in which to touch is to know. As if blind, Thomas desired to touch the wounds of the resurrected Christ. Roland Barthes, for whom the photograph is "never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is,'" ² invokes the story of Thomas (79-80) and with it implicates the myriad aspects of photography that converge on the finger. The finger and not the eye, he insists, is the photographer's true organ (15), and the *punctum*, by which he names the poignant detail that

results from the sheer contingency that weighs on the operator's finger, connects the finger that points to the wound it indicates. He describes the "almost voluptuous" pleasure he takes at the metallic sound of the camera's shutter being tripped (15), which echoes later when he recognizes, in an old photograph of his mother, an ivory powder box familiar from his childhood ("I loved the sound of its lid" [64]). The box rings with a materiality that links it both to the true beloved object, the mother, and to the camera itself, whose one-time proximity to her the photograph authenticates. It is by virtue of this proximity that "one can never deny that *the thing has been there*," i.e., that the photograph is "somehow co-natural with its referent" (76).³

This state of being "co-natural" has its analogue in the myth of [End Page 613] contiguity from which the ancient synonymy of *mater* and *materia* is derived. On this count, Barthes cites a familiar source: "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'" (40). The recent death of Barthes's mother is the occasion for writing *Camera Lucida*, part of which is concerned with the difficulty in finding a photograph adequate to his memory--his knowledge--of her. Provisionally, he rediscovers her not in a photographic likeness, but in certain images containing objects that belonged to her--the powder box, a cut-crystal bottle, or pieces of furniture and fabric. These items, some of them still in Barthes's possession, exemplify the metonymic rapport that anchors maternal identity. Contiguous with the camera as well as the mother, they help establish a parallel between the inexorable materiality of maternal origins and the persistent referentiality of photography. Artifacts from a milieu both filled and protected, they correspond to an interior of sensation that envelops the world within the self and makes the recovery of the mother a matter of restoring an embodied sentence: "contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder" (65).

The photograph's ability to stir tactile and even olfactory sensations is evidence of what Barthes deems "a [metonymic] power of expansion" (49), which enables "the image [to launch] desire beyond what it permits us to see" (59). The primacy he ascribes to the *finger vis-à-vis* the eye is roughly consistent with the post-Enlightenment program of restoring to sight its connection to touch. In an important essay on the plastic arts (*Plastik*, 1770/78), Herder described the eye as an organ that extends the knowledge of the hand to objects beyond one's reach. Herder developed Diderot's example of the man born blind who, gaining the use of his eyes, could not immediately decipher the visible world around him: only gradually did he learn to invest the shapes and surfaces he saw with the corporeal fullness of objects he already knew through touch. The insights of the blind thus produce an awareness of a lost unity of sight and touch--a unity still apparent when the connoisseur (*Liebhaber*) regards a piece of sculpture, his eye projecting the hand across its contours, "als ob er im Dunkeln taste."⁴ [End Page 614]

The sensual implications of Herder's example are explicit in *Camera Lucida*, which periodically turns to the difference between erotic photography and pornography. Whereas the pornographic image caricatures the "violent" potential of the photograph as such, which "*fills the sight by force*" (91), the erotic photograph veers off center, endowed by its *punctum* with a "blind field," a "subtle *beyond*" (59). Barthes's analysis parallels Lessing's famous distinction between a Laokoon figure caught moments before screaming and another shown in the full contortions of pain. The former, which describes the actual statue, epitomized for Lessing the art of choosing "the most pregnant moment," one which, in this case, anticipates the scream without causing it to obtrude upon the spectator's vision.⁵ In photography, writes Barthes, capturing this moment is a matter of fortuity, which, however, is the benefit of the contingency that defines the medium. He presents an "erotic" composition by Robert Mapplethorpe, which shows the young Mapplethorpe himself, his arm outstretched on a bed, his hand partially uncurled:

the photographer has caught the boy's hand . . . at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment: a few millimeters more or less and the divined body would no longer have been offered with benevolence: . . . the photographer has found the *right moment*, the *kairos* of desire. (59)

This body "offered with benevolence" looks backward to the maternal body, which Barthes found incarnated in the inviting landscape ["*heimlich*, awakening in me the Mother (and never the disturbing

Mother)" 40], and forward to the photograph in which he will come to perceive the "sovereign *innocence*" of his mother-as-child ("if you will take this word [*innocence*] according to its etymology, which is: 'I do no harm'" [69]).

Two references to the good mother frame a passage that associates a well-meaning, generous body with an essentially classical beauty, ⁶ which precludes the kind of unsettling, decomposing spectacle that **[End Page 615]** the gaping mouth of a screaming Laokoon would constitute. ⁷ At stake is a beauty that tempers arousal (whether of fear or desire) in favor of an embodied cognition. Barthes likewise distinguishes between images that frighten or repulse and others that are *pensive*, the latter having the capacity for subversion (38). Certain of Mapplethorpe's works subvert the pornographic interest of the image by shifting from genitalia to underwear shot at close range, its fabric magnified ("I am interested in the texture of the material" [42]). If this (tactile) diversion typifies the photograph's essential ability to project "beyond what it permits us to see," then the photograph itself shares with the aforesaid fabric properties of the fetish. This bears on the whole range of material objects that recall Barthes's mother to him, including the one particular photograph (faded and slightly creased) deemed "co-natural" with the mother who "does no harm." The repeated characterization of the photograph as "wound" makes all too clear the discovery that lies opposite the photograph's inescapably deictic language, which "suggests the gesture of a child pointing to something and saying: *that, there it is, lo!*" (5). ⁸ Again, the marble Laokoon is commensurate with the paradox of the fetish, arresting the sequence in a state of "just before," that is, immediately prior to the perception of a terrifying lack, which the fetish at once disavows and affirms. ⁹ This simultaneity of belief and denial accords with the layering of tenses discerned by Barthes in the photograph: "By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. . . . I shudder . . . over a catastrophe which has already occurred" (96).

The contradictory structure of the fetish inheres in the photograph, which opposes the assurance that "*the thing has been there*" to the knowledge that it is there no longer. The former is keyed to the materiality of the referent, the latter to that of the photograph. Subject to decay whatever its material, the photograph, if not **[End Page 616]** discarded, suffers the fate of other precious objects, linked now to the person photographed by a perishability it also shares with the spectator. Any solace the photograph affords will depend on its transparency, which Barthes posits at the outset: "it is not [the photograph] that we see" (6). There is something ultimately miraculous in the photograph's capacity to recede behind the thing it represents, as Barthes acknowledges (82), and the "resurrection" this connotes has a darker underside. The matrix that couples the familiar (*heimlich*) landscape with the mother also associates knowledge about the mother's body with the disconcerting prospect that, according to Barthes, is contained in every photograph: "the return of the dead" (9).

This ambivalence dictates the dual structure of the fetish, suggesting that the photograph works both to summon the dead and keep them at bay. Amplifying Kafka's assertion that "we photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds" (53), Barthes ventures that one can best understand a photograph by shutting one's eyes, "to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness" (55). The "blind field" with which the detail invests the photograph is thus the ironic crux of photography, which erodes itself as visual medium. The photograph that "touches" the spectator activates a mode of perception that is simultaneously self-perception, recalling a state in which the body, not yet divided from itself, subsumes both terms of the signifying relation (in the way that "feeling" subsumes an external as well as internal sense). Shutting one's eyes to the photograph is a question of music (55); in an essay dated one year earlier than *Camera Lucida*, Barthes observes that Schumann's music, because it "goes into the body," can be "fully heard only by someone who plays it" (to which one might add that in German, the keys of the piano are called *Tasten*). ¹⁰ Appropriately, the figure of a blind musician accompanies Barthes's reflection on the photograph's power to *insignify* itself and thus to restore an intimacy that lies beyond and before sight:

There is a photograph by Kertész (1921) which shows a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy; now what I see, by means of this "thinking eye" which makes me add something to the photograph, is the dirt road; its texture gives me the certainty of being in Central Europe; I perceive the **[End Page 617]** referent (here, the photograph really

transcends itself: is this not the sole proof of its art? To annihilate itself as *medium*, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself?), I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania. (49)

Barthes perceives the *texture* of the road, an attribute available to touch, which in turn supplies the *certainty*, named by Freud, "that one has already been there." Like the mother one can feel, the materiality of the photographic signified is realized in a dark interior of feeling akin to what Herder, taking his cue from the blind, described as an awareness of and by the body ("Innesein des leibhaften Körpers"). ¹¹ By means of a corporeal knowledge ("I recognize, with my whole body") Barthes insinuates himself into the scene in place of the blind man, oblivious now to the obstacle that matter poses to pure representation.

II

Like the violinist in the photograph by Kertész, the blind figure described by Rilke personifies an ability that Barthes, not to mention Benjamin, ascribes to the photographic device--the ability to look without seeing. ¹² Here now is the full text of "Der Blinde":

Sieh, er geht und unterbricht die Stadt,
die nicht ist auf seiner dunkeln Stelle,
wie ein dunkler Sprung durch eine helle
Tasse geht. Und wie auf einem Blatt

ist auf ihm der Widerschein der Dinge
aufgemalt; er nimmt ihn nicht hinein.
Nur sein Fühlen rührt sich, so als finge
es die Welt in kleinen Wellen ein: **[End Page 618]**

eine Stille, einen Widerstand--,
und dann scheint er wartend wen zu wählen:
hingegen hebt er seine Hand,
festlich fast, wie um sich zu vermählen.

Rilke's lyrical portraits of the sightless ("Die Erblindende" is another example) isolate what is graceful--even beatific--in the movements of those who are seen but do not see themselves being seen. One may note a similarity to the theater, in particular the post-Enlightenment tradition, in which the spectacle feigns ignorance of spectators, who are consigned to a darkened area invisible from the stage. The following statement by Barthes underscores the connection between this darkened space and the *camera obscura*, as well as that between the photographer and an audience determined to see without being seen:

I imagine . . . that the essential gesture of the *Operator* is to surprise something or someone (through the little hole of the camera), and that this gesture is therefore perfect when it is performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed. (32)

The pretense of being unobserved conformed to the wishes of an ascendant social class bent on becoming wholly untheatrical; this meant forgetting the essential theatricality of its conventions, which drama since Diderot and Lessing had worked to naturalize (and which Brecht sought to expose). ¹³ Barthes emphasizes what he regards as photography's kinship to more ancient or popular modes of theater--its way of imposing a mask on its subject, making the person photographed aware of becoming the object of an alien gaze. Significantly, the mother whom Barthes finds in a variety of photographs is discreet, untainted by "theatricalism": "She did not struggle with her image, as I do with mine: she did not *suppose* herself" (67).

The mother's self-containment--her lack of conspicuous affect--fits the decorum of her milieu, which the naturalistic codes of theater reinforce. Barthes notes that narrative cinema, which perpetuates those codes, forbids the visual reciprocity endemic to photography **[End Page 619]** and especially

older portraits, in which the frontal pose was most common. His contention that these photographs have the power of looking one "*straight in the eye*" (111) confirms the relay of gazes that, by force of the chemical conveyance of light ("From a real body . . . proceed radiations which ultimately touch me" [80]), brings Barthes face to face with Napoleon:

One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked on the Emperor." (3)

These lines, the first of *Camera Lucida*, attest to an astonishment whose persistence, Barthes later concludes, "reaches down into the religious substance out of which I am molded" (82). However obliquely, Barthes associates the representation of the sovereign with the Eucharist ("to be no longer a sign but the thing itself" [49]), channelling into his text an echo of a seventeenth-century discussion that held these moments in tandem. Louis Marin has devoted two books to the Eucharist and the importance of its foundational equation ("This is my body") for classical French logic generally, and specifically for the corresponding formulae central to the logic of absolutism: "*L'état, c'est moi*" and "The portrait of Caesar is Caesar." ¹⁴

The Port-Royal grammarians looked to the Eucharist as a model for solving two related aporias: that objects cannot represent ideas, because the presence of matter interferes with the presence of sense; and that language cannot represent purely, because words are always inflected by the passions of a subject tainted by original sin. A transparent representation, in which words and syntax efface themselves in mediation between object and idea, is clouded by the density of the object; furthermore, such representation is eroded by the ebb and flow of desire, which imprints itself on discourse through the movement of the sentence, through syntactical aberrations, and through figure. The problem, therefore, is how to liberate language from a subject mired in a corrupt nature, i.e., how to institute a system of clear and distinct ideas free of the murky concupiscence that reigns within us. This entails the capacity to keep affects, which are of the self, distinct from objects, to which we are naturally **[End Page 620]** inclined to impute them (in the way that "I'm cold" and "It's cold" are used interchangeably). This is the realm of *confused* ideas, in which sensations are projected outward, acquiring the semblance of objectivity. That such confusion was viewed as *aveuglement* gives an inkling of the direction Herder strove to reverse in marshalling the lessons of blindness to undo the disjunction, which Port Royal valorized, between sensations and things.

The inability to distinguish between affects and objects sets limits to the representation of the self in its sovereignty--and ultimately of the sovereign proper. Flattery, to which kings are acutely susceptible, feeds--literally--on the paradox of self-love: the self, which is always lacking, cannot love itself except as something other (better) than itself. The flatterer gives us the image we want of ourselves, while hiding the fact that this image originates in our own desire. This passage of affects into apparent objectivity results in self-negation, as we identify with images that others paint of us. The king, Marin observes, identifies with his portrait, which "offers him the icon of the absolute monarch he desires to be"; but even as he recognizes himself in that image, he knows himself eclipsed by it, "because *his signs are the royal reality*, the being and substance of the prince" (*Portrait* 7-8). The icons representing the king straddle the same contradiction inherent in the fetish; and it can be suggested that photography, as Barthes understands it, generalizes the very singularity that defines the king, for the king alone has the power to be present in the signs that indicate his absence. Napoleon's brother and the photograph itself are delegates, twin conductors of the persistent light emanating from the absent emperor--light that makes him the true referent of a photo taken years after his death. Along with the privileged photograph of his mother, this image furnishes Barthes with the basis for maintaining that photography "has something to do with resurrection" (82). Transparent, it exhibits the "dematerialized materiality" conferred on the sacramental host by the Eucharist (Marin, *Critique* 93). The photograph is thus an angelic body, its weightlessness duplicating the incorporeality into which the photographic subject ("already dead") is passing. "[T]he figure of the deceased on the mantelpiece," Marin writes, proclaims silently what the angel at Christ's tomb declares: "He is not here, he is elsewhere" (*Portrait* 5).

Resigned as unto death, Barthes submitted to photographers who posed him with his paintbrushes or against the backdrop of children at play ("But I--already an object, I do not struggle" [13]). The self-dispossession he experiences recalls that of the absolute monarch, **[End Page 621]** subordinate

to his image and thus a slave to the valets who manipulate his appearance (the daily dressing ritual or *lever*). Like flattery, photography enables its human subject to aspire to an imaginary existence in the minds of others, yet the embellished image underscores the lack for which it is meant to compensate. The king depends upon the ability of his representations to sustain an image that transcends the materiality of the royal body. The king's absence is the test of his power, which is manifest in the objects and persons minted and dispatched to represent him. Flattery accomplishes a similar transubstantiation by in effect converting language into food. ¹⁵ The flatterer's art of self-effacement conforms to the larger semiotic ideal of a sign that recedes behind the signified. Yet the subject of flattery, as of photography, *like the king* forgets himself in his image, the introjected product of an alien self-interest. Barthes's distaste for the imposition of photographic portraiture reflects a nostalgia for a body that, in contrast to that of the king, is the creation not of discourse, but of birth:

. . . if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing! Alas, I am doomed by (well-meaning) Photography always to have an expression: my body never finds its zero degree, no one can give it to me (perhaps only my mother? . . .). (12)

Barthes's lamentation iterates the passage into the mirror stage, the theory of which, here sketched by Julia Kristeva, accounts also for the paradox of sovereignty: "Before recognizing itself as identical in a mirror and, consequently, as signifying, this body is dependent vis-à-vis the mother." ¹⁶ The child who identifies with his reflection attains mastery over his body, thanks to the apparent completeness of the image. At the same time, he is captive to that image which comes from without and is augmented by pronouncements that situate him within a regimen of expectations. The king, too, is fixed by the regard of others; the mastery he enjoys is at once an enslavement to the machinery of monarchy (Marin, *Critique* 224). Biographies of kings are not untypically chronicles of "prematurity," allegorizing the trials of a subject whose innate baseness, to paraphrase Port Royal, leads him to seek an improved likeness in the world of objects. [End Page 622] (Shakespeare's Henry V, whose rise to majesty is described as a triumph over fallen nature, pledges, indeed threatens, to "Be like a king.") ¹⁷ In proclaiming himself identical with the state, the monarch--because he is exceptional--"normalizes" what elsewhere counts as a confusion of sentiments for things. His power is the absolute power of predication ("*L'état, c'est moi*"), his body, the signifying body *par excellence*. That body's affinity to the bread of the Christian sacrament, a sensible object that represents symbolically, agrees with the ideal of objects freed from the materiality of resemblance.

In accordance with this ideal, Port Royal proposed to substitute an artificial, paternal language for the irrevocably material and drive-ridden language learned from the mother. Nurtured by this language of childhood was an inflation of affect similar to what Freud would identify as the hallmark of narcissism. To confuse the self for the world is also to mistake the signifier for its referent, which in the realm of sexuality can produce a debilitating fetishism, in literature "an insipid formalism" stemming from the "objectification of the pure signifier, more and more emptied of meaning" (Kristeva 139). The degradation of a maternally connoted language proceeded on the authority of the dictum, which Port Royal raised to a moral standard, that words follow from things. Modernism, beginning with Mallarmé, may be said to have violated this dictum once and for all, along with its attendant prohibition regarding the maternal-instinctual. However, Barthes argues that realism, though it might be thought to adhere to that dictum, in fact shares in modernity's disintegration of the sign, albeit in a "somewhat regressive manner," as it operates "in the name of a referential plenitude." ¹⁸

An index of this regression is found in *Malte's Notebooks* when Malte recalls the death of his grandfather, a Danish chamberlain, whose very sickness restores a terrible majesty in the form of a sonorous body (cows miscarry at the sound of him bellowing in the night). Bloated beyond recognition, Kammerherr Brigge demands to be borne into the room in which his mother died twenty three years earlier and which has been sealed off ever since. A veritable mausoleum, it is also a photographic space in which objects, grown so fragile with time that they crumble at the slightest touch, are gradually exposed: [End Page 623]

Die Vorhänge wurden zurückgezogen, und das robuste Licht eines Sommernachmittags

untersuchte alle die scheuen, erschrockenen Gegenstände und drehte sich ungeschickt um in den aufgerissenen Spiegeln. [19](#)

Nothing is said of the mother, but a plethora of material things comes to light--delicate, gilded, secreted away--objects whose musty redolence endears them more to the dogs than to the human members of the household. This emblematic death signals the juncture at which things proliferate in inverse relation to their significance. Like curiosity shops, novels brim with objects whose purpose is less to denote reality than to intimate the familiar, that is, to provide the assurance of "having been there" (Barthes, "The Reality Effect" 147). This is also the purpose of those personal effects that Barthes's mother kept on her dressing table; in her absence, they redouble the referential claim of the photographs in which they appear. The claim is tenuous: verging on the intangible, the objects themselves indicate the disconcerting lack that lurks at the heart of the familiar. The possessions filling the room that Malte describes commemorate not the mother but the moment of her passing (for they have been left exactly as they were when she died, i.e., arrested in the state of "just before"). Her dying son, motionless on the floor of this *camera obscura*, replaces her as the "living corpse" that haunts every photograph. [20](#)

III

The foregoing episode, in which the old Brigg's entourage breaches the stale darkness of the long-sealed bedchamber, suggests the opening of a tomb, recalling those notable archaeological discoveries that, in the nineteenth century, produced new contents for novels as well as museums. In 1870 Heinrich Schliemann surveyed a slope along the Aegean, about which the *Iliad*, which he had loved since childhood, gave him that "certainty that one has already been there" and set him digging for Troy: **[End Page 624]**

There had been such a city. It had been destroyed, and by fire. Stones, as well as fables, persisted. And "golden Mycenae": it had indeed worked gold, and its tombs . . . yielded golden cups and a mask of gold which Schliemann thought Agamemnon's, as Troy yielded jewelry he called Helen's when he hung it on his wife Sophie for a photograph. (A photograph! It is like a photograph of the True Cross.) [21](#)

This passage, from Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, musters an astonishment similar to that expressed by Barthes with respect to the photograph of Napoleon's brother ("I am looking at eyes that looked on the Emperor"). Schliemann's discovery had the effect of assimilating Homer's poem to the sensibility of the nineteenth-century novel, informed as it was by the expectation of a concordance between objects described in narrative and actual things in the world. Museums soon burgeoned with articles that Homer might plausibly have touched, if not seen, making his world suddenly palpable, photographable. (Kenner [48] reports that one commentator produced a photo of the Cyclops' cave.) No longer mere fables, the *Iliad* and then the *Odyssey* acquired the same specificity of reference that defines the relation between historicism and the kind of proof the photograph affords: "There had been such a city." Bethlehem as well. Vastly disparate ages occur as archaeological strata in an early photograph of the Holy Land, evoked by Barthes to illustrate the "vertigo of time defeated":

In 1850, August Salzmann photographed, near Jerusalem, the road to Beith-Lehem (as it was spelled at the time): nothing but stony ground, olive trees; but three tenses dizzy my consciousness: my present, the time of Jesus, and that of the photographer, all this under the instance of "reality." (97)

Much as psychoanalysis found archaeology useful as a metaphor for representing the simultaneity (in the unconscious) of different and distant epochs, so too the photograph, like the cubist surface, works to collapse these epochs onto a single plane. This is consistent with the literary modernism that was apt to revive archaic spellings (Beith-Lehem) **[End Page 625]** not as romantic shading, but as phonetic or graphic intervention. Regarding Pound's first Canto, Kenner describes the co-presence of ancient and modern voices: "In transparent overlay, two times have become as one, and we are meant to be equally aware of both dictions (and yet they seem the same diction)"

(Kenner 29). Pound's use in the same poem of the Saxon "swart" builds on the efforts of Jacob Grimm and his contemporaries, who shifted the emphasis in philology onto the materiality of language, charting the phonetic energies that could migrate, for example, between *t* and *z* (*swart* / *schwarz*). Grimm's discoveries complemented a Romanticism that was already focused on the internal economy of sounding words, tending more and more towards music. Even the better Romantics never tired of rhyming "lauschen" with "rauschen," and at century's end certain poets were still delirious with the alliterative luxury of a tongue whose history had placed the preponderance of accents on the first syllable. "Dies flüssig grüne Gold heißt Gift und tötet," runs the first line of a poem by Hofmannsthal, typifying the decadence that in France had been rechristened *Symbolisme* ("[The word 'symbol'] gave an air of system to the otherwise baffling fact that poems were producing things that had not preceded them" [Kenner 189]).

Barthes insists that the photograph cannot counterfeit the existence of the object recorded, and while this situates photography firmly within the Realist universe (for which Barthes professes an affinity), it also points to an impulse that was working to dissolve the correspondence that defined Realism. The "inherent indexicality" ²² of the photograph is the test of Barthes's claim that photography is a child of chemistry and not painting: "For the *noème* '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" (80). The photograph requires a material object to give *body* to *light*; matter constitutes the resistance that makes energy detectable, just as resistance translates hydraulic force into electricity or electricity into heat. The manner of this translation was crucial to Pound, who began to understand the image (in poetry or the visual arts) as a relation between matter and energy.

For an ideographic model of this relation, Pound looked to the vortex, a "patterned integrity" (Kenner 145) made available to the [End Page 626] senses or intellect by whatever material it happened to be organizing at a given moment. The material changes; the pattern is stable. It is the principle by which a poem can survive translation into a different language, or by which a seed, carried half way around the world, can organize the soil, water and air of one continent into a tree indigenous to another. The Oedipus complex, drawing hundreds of generations through its vortex, seems a similar, massive indifference to context. As Russian Formalists endeavored to reduce the world's folk tales to a fixed set of generative patterns, so James Joyce, who believed *Hamlet* and *Don Giovanni* to be homeomorphic of *Oedipus*, mined industrial Dublin for the raw material with which to regenerate Ulysses. Where Barthes claims disinterest in those split-second photographs that capture the explosion of a drop of milk (33), he draws attention to one more patterned integrity--the perfect crown of flaring energy made visible by the milk but indifferent to it: "For the vortex is not the water but a patterned energy made visible by the water" (Kenner 146). The exploding drop of milk demonstrates the physical-chemical moment that is photography itself, which requires a material object but at the same time makes the material itself interchangeable: "Whatever it grants to vision," Barthes affirms, "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (6).

A much anthologized poem by C. F. Meyer exemplifies the formalism of the vortex ("a patterned energy made visible by the water"). The poem presents a Roman fountain, though without describing it directly; instead, its structure is progressively sketched by the vigorous flow of water as it fills three concentric basins, cascading veil-like from the first two, each basin filling and emptying simultaneously in an economy of perfect exchange ("Und jede nimmt und gibt zugleich / Und strömt und ruht"). ²³ A poem by Rilke has an almost identical object but describes it outright: "Zwei Becken, eins das andre übersteigend / aus einem alten runden Marmorrand." ²⁴ The slow trickle of water, inadequate to outline the fountain's shape, seeps over beards of moss, the residue of lethargy. A quiet pool mirrors the heavens while drip-induced ripples circle outward, reflecting the entropy of a vortex reversed ("sich . . . / verbreitend, ohne Heimweh, Kreis aus Kreis").

These fountain poems fall within a tradition of "ekphrastic" poems-- [End Page 627] poems that describe sculptural objects and in so doing aspire themselves to the condition of sculpture. ²⁵ Keats's "Ode On a Grecian Urn" and Mörike's "Auf eine Lampe" are familiar examples; ²⁶ both conjure objects whose roundness is replicated once by the images that encircle them, twice by the brocade of words with which the poem strives to achieve a roundness of its own. ²⁷ Meyer's poem thematizes

this circularity as circulation (the lines cited above could well describe the chambers of the heart), Rilke's the dissipation that ensues when circulation falters. The image of circle upon circle rippling outward retraces form to intimate the movement towards formlessness, i.e., the final degradation of matter that defines entropy. Even a casual glance at Rilke's poem reveals it to be a sonnet, itself a "patterned integrity" as structured as the thing described (no more baroque an object than a Roman fountain!), but this form seems at odds with the poem's languid syntax, a sequence of seven present-participle constructions ("übersteigend," "sich neigend," "wartend," etc.), the only finite verb occurring in the subordinate clause with which the poem closes. (Meyer's poem ends with a finite verb ["ruht"] and stretches usage a bit to begin with one as well ["Aufsteigt der Strahl . . ."].) This accumulation of verbs tending towards the intransitiveness of adjectives is true to the fountain, a heavy monument to spent energy.

Rilke's fountain is more explicitly the allegory that the Grecian Urn becomes, as Keats's ode gradually stirs an awareness of the vessel's funerary nature. The point to be made here is that these various objects--urn, lamp, fountain--share with photography the intrinsic juxtaposition of tenses that, ultimately for Barthes, makes *time* the searing *punctum* of every photograph. He evokes a very old photo of **[End Page 628]** two small girls ("they are playing with hoops"), and what he says of them can well be said of the children frolicking on Mörike's marble lamp: "They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday)." Likewise, the "bride of quietness" frozen for eternity on Keats's urn is "still unravish'd," and the beholder is left to "shudder," with Barthes, "*over a catastrophe which has already occurred*" (96).

IV

Barthes's elegiac reflections on photography vindicate a Romanticism that neutralized the monument by finding decay in what seemed intractably durable. Between such abiding supports as the Elgin Marbles and, at the other physical extreme, the photographic print, the daguerreotype--a light image recorded on silverized copper--is a symbolic as well as technical intermediary. As Barthes observes: "the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of . . . silver [which], like all the metals of Alchemy, is alive" (81). The science of exposing the spirit hidden in matter, alchemy aims at the same "dematerialized materiality" by means of which gold coins purportedly conveyed the unique translocality of the royal body. The *actio in distans* of absolutism is close at hand when Barthes, citing Susan Sontag, compares the light emitted by the "missing being" in the photograph to the "delayed rays of a star" (80-81). [28](#)

Rilke's own recourse to alchemy compensates for the disintegration of *meaning* and *form* (as the referent fades over time from the more durable photographic plate), which in the history of the arts produces a frivolity of the latter. Barthes remarks on an Alexandrine tradition of detachable set pieces (ekphrases) in which the "beautiful" reigned, leaving form unconstrained by realism or even verisimilitude ("The Reality Effect" 143-44); and Nietzsche, commenting on the baroque disarticulation of soul and mask, noted a corresponding emergence of beauty as empty façade--an allegory of a soul whose ascent had left behind an unheard-of density: "Der Stein ist mehr Stein als früher." [29](#)

The conceit of coaxing stone into voice is familiar from such precursors to Rilke's "thing-poems" as Keats's "Grecian Urn," whose **[End Page 629]** aphoristic equation of truth and beauty, as if to confirm Nietzsche's assessment, makes beauty a truth unto itself. Now, the philosopher who accused Wagner of being a miniaturist with no other final aim than the interesting effect [30](#) impugned an entire century, in which collectors and detectives alike consorted with mute objects and made them interesting. In a poem from *The Book of Pictures*, a collection whose title anchors pictorialism within a culture of the memento, Rilke likens "things" to the bodies of violins, "full of grumbling darkness" ("von murrendem Dunkel voll"), asserting a manichaeian duality of light and dark that makes enlightenment an errant journey past material obstacles: "und was in den Dingen irrt, / wird nach dem Lichte streben." [31](#) Such miracle was the purported achievement of the poet's voice, which in the guise of a taut violin string should "quiver like silver" ("silbern erzittern"). Known to alchemy and photography as a carrier of light, silver is here insinuated between substance and wave-length (of light and sound). Alive, it is caught in a process of decay that releases energy from matter and

composes the *aura* of aging photographs. A later poem of Rilke's ("Jugend-Bildnis meines Vaters") describes a daguerreotype of the poet's father as a young officer, in which the decay of the material holding the image figures a transitoriness that extends beyond the photographic subject to the hands holding the object. Implicit in this poem, almost as silent pun, is the *Silberblick*, which refers to the state of being slightly cross-eyed, but which also connotes the shimmer in the eyes of one whose *thoughts* are trained on some distant, perhaps beloved object:

Im Auge Traum. Die Stirn wie in Berührung
mit etwas Fernem. Um den Mund enorm
viel Jugend, ungelächelte Verführung,
und vor der vollen schmückenden Verschnürung
der schlanken adeligen Uniform
der Säbelkorb und beide Hände--, die
abwarten, ruhig, zu nichts hingedrängt.
Und nun fast nicht mehr sichtbar: als ob sie
zuerst, die Fernes greifenden, verschwänden.
Und alles andre mit sich selbst verhängt
und ausgelöscht als ob wirs nicht verständen
und tief aus seiner eignen Tiefe trüb--. **[End Page 630]**
Du schnell vergehendes Daguerreotyp
in meinen langsamer vergehenden Händen.

(*Werke* 1:278)

As photographic technology advanced it replaced silver with tin and eventually paper, repeating in a sense the introduction of paper money in place of precious metals, and meeting with a similar resistance, given that this too represented a diminished corporeality. The same would be said of electrical light, heralded by its early champions as odorless and "bodiless" (*körperlos*).³² An age that began more and more to shun the light (filling darkened interiors with unusual remnants) found solace in the *patina*, an aura in the making, and the early practice of hand-coloring photographs typifies the aesthetic interference with the mechanically and mathematically reproducible imparticular.³³ With reference to a kindred intervention, Kenner addresses a generation of poets for whom the ruins of the past yielded the raw material for poetry but no meaning:

The instinct that applied brown varnish [to paintings] was setting the object at a distance to make it interesting. The instinct that as the 19th century progressed drew writing and painting closer together was enacting a massive bafflement at the question, how to go about *meaning* anything. For objects are even more enigmatic than stories. What are they doing here? Why do broken rims crumble here in the desert? What is the wind doing? I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (Kenner 25)

Kenner's citation of Eliot's *Waste Land* furnishes an epigram for those modernists who, to quote Henry Sussman, "ushered in an era dominated by the tactile qualities of aesthetic material comprising modern and postmodern culture."³⁴ In Rilke's daguerreotype it is the hands themselves that fade; the ensuing attribution of parallel rates of decay to the image and the subject (be)holding it announces an acceleration of decomposition that, to Barthes, inscribes the photograph with a redundancy of the transitory: **[End Page 631]**

[B]y making the Photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of "what has been," modern society has renounced the Monument. . . . [E]verything, today, prepares us for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive *duration*. (93)

Duration is the essence of the vortex, a pattern that, in the vein of Goethe's *Dauer im Wechsel*, remains stable in the face of material variations. It is the phylogenic principle that urges consolation in the idea that life goes on not despite one's death but because of it. The fact that Barthes has never had children excludes him from the teleology that renders death intelligible as the "harsh victory of the race" (72). Yet by virtue of a mythic, ahistorical time, to which the photograph is a "fugitive testimony" (93), the past stretches out in front of him. He experiences his mother as his "feminine

child," both in the photograph taken of her at the age of five, and in the helpless infirmity of her final days, when he nursed her, "engendered" her (72). ³⁵ The particular photograph of Barthes's mother as the five-year-old he never knew confirms the child she became on the eve of her death. His "paternity" is by reason of this mythical metalepsis. The future repeats the past in a genetic vortex that reproduces patterns of physical resemblance across generations. Barthes remarks on the power of a single photograph among hundreds to suddenly isolate an otherwise unnoticed affinity, "the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor" (103). Like old age, the photograph "disincarnates the face, manifests its genetic essence" (105).

A patterned integrity revealed by the process of formal disintegration: this describes Rilke's Roman fountain, whose decay leaves behind a skeleton of clearly defined parts. It also describes his "Selbstbildnis aus dem Jahre 1906," which in the *New Poems* immediately follows "Jugend-Bildnis meines Vaters." Of that poem it can be said that the father's uniform, still visible in the cloudy mirror of the daguerreotype, is the explicit formal moment; its decorative braid replaces what in more classical exemplars would likely have been **[End Page 632]** tendrils of ivy. In the subsequent poem, the uniform's nobility is displaced onto the arch of the eyebrows, i.e., from the paternal signifier onto material features in which the subject perceives himself, so to speak, as his mother's "feminine child":

Des alten lange adligen Geschlechtes
Feststehendes im Augenbogenbau.
Im Blicke noch der Kindheit Angst und Blau
und Demut da und dort, nicht eines Knechtes
doch eines Dienenden und einer Frau.
Der Mund als Mund gemacht, groß und genau,
nicht überredend, aber ein Gerechtes
Aussagendes. Die Stirne ohne Schlechtes
und gern im Schatten stiller Niederschau.
Das, als Zusammenhang, erst nur geahnt;
noch nie im Leiden oder im Gelingen
zusammengefaßt zu dauerndem Durchdringen,
doch so, als wäre aus zerstreuten Dingen
von fern ein Ernstes, Wirkliches geplant.

(*Werke* 1:278-79)

The poem thematizes "a certain persistence of the species" (105), which, according to Barthes, the photograph, being uniquely sensitive to "flashes" of continuity and resemblance, is prone to reveal (103). As with photography generally, it gives evidence of a genetic patterning that collects scattered elements from afar ("aus zerstreuten Dingen / von fern"). The dual connotation of nobility as birthright and supremely cultivated appearance is distributed across the two poems, the one dissimulating the other. Their sequence substitutes the father with the self and finds in the self a lineage that extends back to the materiality of maternal origins. A noble countenance flashes forth in individual fragments, grown visible in a moment of decline. The aforementioned *Dauer im Wechsel*, while consistent with Meyer's evocation of a fountain that simultaneously "flows and rests," is subject to deterioration.

Pretenses to the contrary notwithstanding, photography is allied with impermanence. Its advent, as Barthes notes, coincides with an age of revolutions and assassinations (93-94). Napoleon's absence from the photograph of his brother--and from any photograph--emblemizes the era that photography helped to inaugurate. The astonishment that Barthes experienced at Bonaparte's luminous residue shares in the ephemerality of the photographic plate or print **[End Page 633]** ("the astonishment of '*that-has-been*' will also disappear" [94]). Aristocracy, already for Port Royal an example of the sign absorbing the referent, is phantasmatic, passing into the exteriority of pure semblance, and beyond that into nothingness (Marin, *Critique* 236). The increasingly ethereal image on the daguerreotype simulates the effect of fading eyesight, the metal object it leaves behind tangible evidence of a vanished signified. What remains of the photograph is the isolated subject lost in self-reflection, which in Rilke runs from the dream-swept eyes of the young officer to the sheer phonetic density of "Augenbogenbau," in Barthes from "eyes that looked on the Emperor" to the "imperious sign of my own death" (7).

[Kenneth S. Calhoun](#) is Associate Professor of German at the University of Oregon. He is author of *Fatherland: Novalis, Freud and the Discipline of Romance* (1992) as well as essays on Lessing, Kleist, German and English Romanticism, detective fiction, and early German cinema. He is also editor of a forthcoming anthology entitled *Between Monument and Milieu: Common Places of Weimar Cinema*.

Notes

1. "Der Blinde." Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke*, vol. 1, *Gedichtzyklen* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1984), 346.

2. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5. All subsequent references to *Camera Lucida* are cited parenthetically by page number.

3. In a truly excellent and unique discussion, Ann Banfield draws on Russell and Whitehead to "gloss" Barthes's philosophical vocabulary with respect to "deixis as reference restricted to sensation." "L'Imparfait de l'Objectif: The Imperfect of the Object Glass," *Camera Obscura*, 24 (1990): 68. See also Anselm Haverkamp, "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes and Augustine on Photography," *Comparative Literature*, 45 (1993): 263.

4. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Pross, vol. 2, *Herder und die Anthropologie der Aufklärung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), 474.

5. G. E. Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Jost Perfahl and Otto Mann, vol. 2, *Kritische und philosophische Schriften* (Munich: Winkler, 1974), 92. Barthes refers specifically to Lessing's "pregnant moment" in an essay entitled "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 93.

6. Barthes makes the point that the youth's beauty is "in no way classical or academic," but there is more than a hint of Winckelmann both in his evocation of the boy's "blissful eroticism" and in his contention that such a photograph "[launches desire] toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together" (59).

7. David E. Wellbery, "Das Gesetz der Schönheit: Lessings Ästhetik der Repräsentation," in Christian L. Hart-Nibbrig, ed., *Was heißt 'Darstellen'?* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 192-94.

8. Corinna A. Tsakiridou, "Barthes explores photography 'as a wound,'" *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory*, 18 (1995): 280-82; Margaret Iversen, "What is a photograph?," *Art History*, 17 (1994): 454-55.

9. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 70; Susan E. Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers: Narcissism and Abjection in Lessing's Aesthetic and Dramatic Production* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 111-12.

10. "Loving Schumann," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 295. See Johnnie Gratton, "Text, Image, Reference in Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire*," *Modern Language Review*, 91 (1996): 362-63.

11. See Helmut J. Schneider, "The Cold Eye: Herder's Critique of Enlightenment Visualism," in Wulf Koepke, ed., *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1996), 58.

12. Barthes: "The photographic look has something paradoxical about it which is sometimes to be met with in life: the other day, in a café, a young boy came in alone, glanced around the room, and

occasionally his eyes rested on me; I then had the certainty that he was *looking at* me without however being sure that he was *seeing* me: an inconceivable distortion: how can we look without seeing?" (111); Benjamin: "Was an der Daguerreotypie als das Unmenschliche, man könnte sagen das Tödliche mußte empfunden werden, war das (übrigens anhaltende) Hereinblicken in den Apparat, da doch der Apparat das Bild des Menschen aufnimmt, ohne ihm dessen Blick zurückzugeben. Dem Blick wohnt aber die Erwartung inne, von dem erwidert zu werden, dem er sich schenkt." "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 223. See Nancy A. Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 47.

[13.](#) Long before writing *Camera Lucida*, Barthes published a brief essay analyzing some photos of a production of *Mutter Courage*, observing that Niobe and Clytemenestra, suffering mothers in contrast to whom Mother Courage has often been judged "unnatural," "had already been made theatrical before the theatre took possession of them." "Seven Photo Models of Mother Courage," trans. Hella Freud Bernays, *Drama Review*, 12 (1967): 52.

[14.](#) *La Critique du discours: Etudes sur la Logique de Port-Royal et les Pensées de Pascal* (Paris: Minuet, 1975); *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[15.](#) Marin, *Portrait*, 94-104; Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or, The Morality of Evil*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 36-59.

[16.](#) Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 136.

[17.](#) *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, l.ii.274.

[18.](#) "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 148.

[19.](#) Rilke, *Werke*, vol. 3, *Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1984), 115-16.

[20.](#) Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 10-11. See also Jean-Michel Rabaté: "It is tempting to read Barthes's book as less a Proustian novel than a Mallarméan *tombeau*, since it is not only a tomb for his mother but . . . a tomb for his mother and himself united in a single entity." *The Ghosts of Modernity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 79.

[21.](#) Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 42. Compare Barthes: "it is logical that literary realism should have been . . . contemporary with the regnum of 'objective' history, to which must be added the contemporary development of techniques, of works, and institutions based on the 'real': the photograph (immediate witness of 'what was there'), reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects (the success of the Tutankhamen show makes this quite clear), the tourism of monuments and historical sites." "The Reality Effect," 146.

[22.](#) George Baker, "Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait," *October*, 76 (1996): 75.

[23.](#) "Der römische Brunnen." Theodor Echtermeyer (ed.), *Deutsche Gedichte: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, revised by Benno von Wiese (Düsseldorf: Bagel, 1982), 491.

[24.](#) "Römische Fontäne," *Werke*, 1:285.

[25.](#) Beda Allemann, *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), 48-49.

[26.](#) See Kenneth S. Calhoun, "The Urn and the Lamp: Disinterest and the Aesthetic Object in Mörike and Keats," *Studies in Romanticism*, 26 (1987): 3-25.

[27](#). Murray Krieger both analyzes and supremely exemplifies a critical idiom that takes recourse to the spatiality of the visual arts, sculpture in particular, to account for the means by which a poem achieves a formal and linguistic self-sufficiency: "That is, through all sorts of repetitions, echoes, complexes of internal relations, it converts its chronological progression into simultaneity, its temporally unrepeatable flow into eternal recurrence; through a metaphorical bending under the pressure of aesthetic tension, it converts its linear movement into circle." "*Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited*," in *The Poet as Critic*, ed. Frederick P. W. McDowell (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 3-26. Reprinted as an appendix to Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), 263-88.

[28](#). Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Banfield, 71-74.

[29](#). Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta, vol. 1, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1976), 576.

[30](#). *Werke*, vol. 3, *Der Fall Wagner*, 917-18.

[31](#). "Am Rande der Nacht." *Werke*, 1:156-57. See Christoph Asendorf, *Batterien der Lebenskraft: Zur Geschichte der Dinge und ihrer Wahrnehmung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Giessen: Anabas, 1984), 135.

[32](#). Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Lichtblicke: Zur Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1986), 74.

[33](#). Walter Benjamin, "Eine kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Ansichten* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1992), 88. Hedvig, the heroine of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, has ruined her eyes retouching photographs in her father's portrait studio (the epitome of the cluttered interior).

[34](#). Henry S. Sussman, *High Resolution: Critical Theory and the Problem of Literacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 131.

[35](#). Vladimir Nabokov writes in his memoirs that "first and last things often tend to have an adolescent note"; he refers to a "chronophobic" who saw his own death figured in a home movie, made only weeks before his birth, showing a new baby carriage intended for him. This melancholy object exhibits the same air of "just before" that pervades the childhood photographs of Barthes's mother, which also represent the period that most interests him historically, "a time in which she was alive *before me*" (65). Nabokov, *Novels and Memoirs 1941-51*, ed. Bryan Boyd (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 369.

[Muse](#) [Search](#) [Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#) [Top](#)