

**PHOTOGRAPHY, TEXT, AND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION IN
MARCEL PROUST'S *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME* AND ROLAND
BARTHES'S *CAMERA LUCIDA***

by

Annie Counter

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art
History

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates representations of individuals produced via text and photography in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, with special emphasis on representations of maternal figures. Writers of photography, such as Barthes and Proust, assume that the image qua image both disappoints and exceeds words; that the reproduced image will generate readings dissonant or even oppositional to the writer's own. Barthes cannot submit the picture of his mother to the scrutiny of strangers who will not see the essence of his mother he sees there; Proust offers his readers either non-existent photographs or photographs that are divorced from their referents. Writing the photographic not only protects the image from misinterpretation and misuse, but also shields writing itself from the force of the reproduced image. Fictional photographs of a grandmother and mother allow the writer to figure loss and mourning while rescuing the images of maternal figures from the reifying and loveless gaze of the public.

Marcel Proust (1871 – 1922), in *Time Regained*, the final volume of his 3000-page novel *In Search of Lost Time*, urges his reader to consider the text from different angles and proposes a multiplicity of readings: “The reader needs to read in a certain way in order to read properly; the author must not take offense at this, but on the contrary must permit the reader the greatest of freedom, suggesting: ‘Perhaps you will see better with this lens, or perhaps with this one.’”¹ On the same page he compares his work to “a sort of optical instrument.”² In fact, *In Search of Lost Time* abounds with optical instruments and optical metaphors; Proust’s narrator views his world both literally and figuratively through magnifying lenses, magic lanterns, and stereoscopes. Images called up by the text are multiplied, enlarged, and distorted by a variety of optical toys as well as the imagination and memory of Marcel.³ Many of the novel’s most important sequences are viewed or captured by the narrator specifically via the photographic. In some instances, Marcel directly engages with a photograph or camera, while in others Proust writes the photographic process metaphorically or metonymically. If, as Roland Barthes

¹ Marcel Proust. *In Search of Lost Time*. Trans. C.K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmarin, revised by D.J. Enright, 7 volumes (New York: Modern Library, 1992) v. VI p 344-45. Proust’s text was originally published in seven volumes, the first in 1912 and the last (posthumously) in 1927.

² Ibid. v. VI p. 345.

³ Following the example of Roger Shattuck, I refer to the author as “Proust” and the narrator as “Marcel.” See Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Binoculars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

once claimed in *Camera Lucida*, there is “nothing Proustian in a photograph” and photography does not call up the past, then what is it doing so insistently in Proust’s search for lost time?⁴ What recollective powers might a cookie possess that a photograph does not?⁵ Furthermore, what role does Marcel Proust play in *Camera Lucida*? Barthes mentions Proust by name six times within his one hundred and nineteen page essay on photography. In order to answer these questions, it will be necessary to examine what photography could have meant for both Proust and Barthes, with a particular focus on the relationship between representations produced with written texts versus those produced via photography in both the *Search* and *Camera Lucida*.

The photographic functions in the *Search* on several levels, together with a range of other visual phenomena. Roger Shattuck contends that it is primarily through the art of optics that Proust beholds and depicts the world.⁶ Throughout the *Search* he reveals single and multiple images, distortions, and misapprehensions. Emphasizing the binocular nature of human vision, Shattuck explores what he terms the “stereo-optics of time”: the simultaneous views of people, places, and events that Proust consistently introduces

⁴ Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) p. 82.

⁵ Proust’s 3000 pages of memories are initially provoked by an encounter with a petit madeleine dipped in linden tea.

⁶ Roger Shattuck. *Proust’s Binoculars*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

through the medium of metaphor and involuntary memory.⁷ Throughout the novel, the reader is presented with a double perspective: the perspective of the boy Marcel as his life is lived and the perspective of the narrator, the adult Marcel who looks back and remembers. In the end, according to Shattuck, the narrator attains both the wholeness of vision to reorganize himself and his world, and the final certainty of his vocation.⁸ While Shattuck's analysis of the *Search's* stereo-optic temporality is illuminating, I would argue that the narrator never attains a wholeness of vision. Instead, the moment of the text's completion is simultaneously the moment of its inception. Therefore, the reader is made aware of a third perspective, that of the writer who has already undertaken the production of a 3000-page text that is begun at the end of the *Search*. The vision of the narrator is consistently layered and never presented from a single moment in time. In this sense, the text of the *Search* can be compared to the photographs it describes: they all represent persons in states that no longer exist.

Marcel Proust was, as evidenced by his letters and biography, an avid collector of photographs.⁹ Throughout his life he attached an extraordinary importance to the possession of photographs. Not only did he make it a point

⁷ Ibid. ch. 2.

⁸ Roger Shattuck. *Proust's Way*. (New York: Norton, 2000) p. 172-77.

⁹ André Maurois. *Proust: Portrait of a Genius*. Trans. Gerard Hopkins. (New York: Harper Collins, 1950) p. 62-75.

to keep photographs of his family, friends, and acquaintances at his bedside, but by the account of his friend Jean Cocteau, the author also amassed an enormous and varied collection of photographs of people whom he did not know, both celebrities and anonymous persons.¹⁰ According to Proust's biographer André Maurois, everyone who knew Proust was painfully aware of his passion for photographs – all who visited the author were invited to inspect his collection.¹¹ Lucien Daudet remembers his first visit:

My new friend received me in his bedroom . . . Aware of my timidity, after a first attempt at an extremely vague conversation, he said: 'Here, I've collected a few photographs of famous people, actresses, writers, artists – they may entertain you, and also this book.' I glanced at the portraits . . . and I leafed through the book, which contained a quantity of photographs of Madame Laure Hayman and was bound in a piece of silk from one of her dresses. I had the temerity to tell Marcel Proust that I wasn't much interested in all this – which rather disappointed him.¹²

Proust's offer to Daudet had nothing to do with the young man's timidity; a number of visitors recall this ordeal-by-album. One young woman who declined to admire the author's photographs was never invited back.¹³

Several of Proust's visitors took pains to record the fetishistic storage of these prized possessions. The legendary collection of photographs was housed

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 62.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 62.

¹² Marcel Proust. *Correspondences*. Ed. Philip Kolb (Paris: Gallimard) v. IV p. 240.

¹³ Maurois, p. 70.

entirely in the author's bedroom, in a special "oriental" cabinet that was kept under lock and key.¹⁴ The closely-guarded images were stored along with a range of small personal effects collected (knowingly or otherwise) from persons who interested the author, including notes, pressed flowers, locks of hair, and the aforementioned piece of silk.

Proust may have acquired the habit of exchanging and keeping portrait photographs from his mother, who had a profound influence on him throughout his life and ravenously accumulated images and souvenirs of her two sons. One biographer explains "If the family iconography was so rich, it was because Madame Proust took care to register her children's features at every stage of their lives."¹⁵ Between their tenth and twelfth years Marcel and his brother Robert were photographed at least four times. Proust's mother took the family's trips to the photographer seriously. Appropriate costume and coiffure were often discussed and arranged weeks in advance. Not content with merely dolling her boys up in their best clothes before posing them for

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 70. Maurois describes this piece of furniture as particularly exotic. While he does not offer a specific physical description of the cabinet, he applies the adjectives "unique" and "mysterious" to it, and explains that it was always kept locked, even though Proust showed the photographs to nearly every visitor he had. Proust would unlock the cabinet in front of visitors, then lock the photographs back up before they left. While it is possible that he was concerned about theft, it is more probable that this careful storage was the result of psychological factors.

¹⁵ Georges Brassai. *Proust in the Power of Photography*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) p. 13. Brassai offers a chapter on the photographic habits of the Proust family.

posterity, Madame Proust dressed Marcel and Robert in a range of veritable disguises including hats and other garments never worn before and never to be worn again. Once the boys were outfitted to the satisfaction of Madame Proust, they were posed for several minutes sitting on odd chairs or standing alongside strange columns in a setting that belonged exclusively to the universe of portrait photographers.

Photography preserves a dearly loved one's likeness in perpetuity, and it also supplies a means of defining, visually, one's identity and status; it is a method of fixing the characteristics of both individuals and classes of people. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth-century and continuing into the late nineteenth-century, when the Proust family made their visits to the photographer's studio, middle-class people in particular wanted to affirm their respectability and their material success, and saw in photography a means of displaying these assets.¹⁶ Via visual cues such as fine new clothing and props like books or musical instruments, the middle classes could at once link themselves to the upper classes whose material wealth they envied and distinguish themselves from the lower classes that they considered socially inferior. Recollections of these portrait sessions can be found within the text of the *Search*: "That year, when, a little earlier than usual, my parents had

¹⁶ See Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth-Century Photography*. (London: Lund Humphries, 2001) for a description of the identity-generating function photography served during this time period.

decided on the day to return to Paris, the morning of the departure, my hair had been curled to be photographed, carefully set off by a hat I had never worn before.”¹⁷ A photographic portrait offered the opportunity to have one’s likeness captured, reproduced, and distributed amongst friends, family members, and the public in general. Once out of one’s possession, one’s image spoke for itself, and having a photograph taken in one’s finest apparel was a means to ensure that the image would have something favorable to say. Madame Proust was fully aware of photography’s identity-producing capacities, and seems to have passed this knowledge on to her son.

Most portraits of Proust as an adult were taken by the fashionable establishments of the period: Pierre Petit, Photo Salomon, Photo Hermann, Studio Nadar; but it was Otto who was the author’s preferred portraitist and of whom he was, along with Robert de Montesquiou, a preferred customer.¹⁸ In July of 1896, when Charles Maurras informed Proust that he would be publishing an article on *Pleasures and Days* and requested a portrait, Proust eagerly complied: “When do you need my photograph? If immediately, I’ll send you one that is not good. If I have ten days or so, I’ll go

¹⁷ Proust, *Search*, v. I p. 64.

¹⁸ Proust, *Correspondences*. V. II p. 349-378. The author discusses his favorite studio in several letters addressed to his mother in December 1904. Because even the most fashionable photography studios were still affordable (albeit sometimes a financial stretch) to most middle-class people, the middle classes could further associate themselves with the upper classes by patronizing the same photographers.

to Otto and have one made that I won't call worthy of me but of you."¹⁹

Maurras granted the author the interval and Proust hurried off to Otto. After the article was published, Proust thanked Maurras by way of a long telegram, to which he added in a postscript "If *La Revue encyclopédique* could return my photographs, I would be very grateful."²⁰ He had submitted to Maurras not one new photograph, but an entire series.²¹ Amongst the dozens of photographs Proust already possessed of himself, he was not able to find a single one he deemed appropriate to illustrate this article. He was compelled to have an entirely new series made which captured what he considered his most authorial qualities.

Because this publication requested that the subjects of the articles supply their own images, as opposed to creating portraits via a staff photographer or artist, the authors featured were at liberty to choose images of themselves that they felt were most flattering. Some authors supplied engravings, while others, like Proust, sent photographs. Since the authors themselves chose the images, they did not necessarily all look alike or even

¹⁹ Ibid. v.I p. 296-98. *Pleasures and Days* is a collection of short stories. It is Proust's first published work.

²⁰ Ibid. v. I p. 409. Proust also had new photographs made every time one was requested for publication.

²¹ These images are reproduced in William C. Carter, *Marcel Proust*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) ch. 1.

similar. Many provided images that were difficult to distinguish from the mass of middle-class photographic portraits that individuals took to distribute to their friends and families. Several images feature bust-length representations (photographic or otherwise) of men and women with no discernable background or setting at all. Other authors and artists, like Proust, seized this opportunity to generate public interest about themselves and produced images they hoped would distinguish them, at least visually, from ordinary people or even from other authors. Some images are composed to catch the readers' eyes with dramatic lighting. Others might be described as action shots; they feature men and women hard at work in offices or libraries, reading or writing.

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Proust's collection does not show him reading or writing.²³ The space the author occupies in these photographs is ambiguous. Two of the three images are bust-length shots, one is in profile and the other is frontal. His head, shoulders, and chest fill the frames. These two shots are close-ups; they resemble the identity photographs taken by police more than they

²² There is a lot of variety to be found in late nineteenth century portraits of authors. In addition to the many different forms these portraits took, one should also be aware of the many contexts in which they were found. One author might find a photograph suitable for one publication, but not another. In addition, portraits intended for private use may look unlike those intended for the public. This matter is further complicated when one considers the influence and interests of the artists who produced the portraits.

²³ In this sense, the photographs bear resemblance to well-known portraits of Emile Zola and Baudelaire. Perhaps Proust hoped that viewers would associate his image (and his work) with these writers.

resemble the other author portraits published by *La Revue encyclopédique*. In the third image, Proust sits casually upon a chaise lounge. The viewer can make out the pale seat and the floor of the room, but the background space is enveloped in darkness. It is impossible to make out the boundaries of the room, what type of room this might be, or even, for that matter, whether Proust is in a room at all. This dark space, along with the dark, conservative suit the author wears, draws the viewer's eye exclusively to Proust's extremely pale face, which appears so white in contrast to the rest of the image that it seems to glow. The viewer's gaze is also encouraged to rest upon the author's face by his hand, which he rests upon his chin as though he is lost in thought. These photographs, with their high value contrasts and unidentifiable spaces, function specifically to highlight the physical features that the author was famous for: his pale, sickly complexion; his large, dark eyes; and his shiny black hair. These features, specifically the pale skin and the dark eyes, were associated by Proust's friends and family with his nervous condition, the very same condition that was credited with being either the cause or the effect of his writing.²⁴ On the one hand, Proust's novel can be read as a creative aesthetic triumph over medical determinism. It tells the story of a nervous narrator who struggles with negative hereditary factors and who suffers from a chronic lack of drive, but who overcomes his illness in order to produce a work

²⁴ Michael Finn. *Proust, the Body, and Literary Form*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 1-9.

of literature. On the other hand, Bergotte, the writer-friend of Marcel in the *Search*, explains that creative and aesthetic sensitivity is actually the cause of unpleasant medical conditions:

...The proper course of treatment cannot possibly be the same for you as for any Tom, Dick, or Harry. Nine-tenths of the ills which intelligent people suffer spring from their intellect... (the doctor) has made allowances for the difficulty of digesting sauces, for gastric trouble, but he has made no allowance for the effect of reading Shakespeare.²⁵

In either case, the creative work of the author is closely linked to the nervous condition highlighted in this collection of photographs.

As an adolescent, Proust exchanged his carefully constructed photographic portraits with those of his friends. By this process, he obtained photographs of Jacques Bizet (the composer's son), Jacques-Emile Blanche, and Lucien Daudet.²⁶ He also exchanged photographs in his collection with photographs from his friends' collections, and obtained portraits of Robert Dreyfus (a former classmate), Daniel Halévy, Reynaldo Hahn, Gaston de Caillavet, Robert de Billy, the Romanian princes Antoine and Emmanuel Bibesco, Georges de Lauris, Prince Léon Radziwill, and the Duke of Albufera.²⁷ Two exchanges that were particularly special to Proust took place with an English youth, Willie Heath, and a Swiss boy, Edgar Aubert.

²⁵ Proust, *Search*, v. II p. 198.

²⁶ Jean-Francois Chevrier. *Proust et la photographie*. (France: Editions de l'Etoile, 1982) p. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 15.

Biographers believe these two were among the first young men whom Proust, at twenty-two years of age, romantically pursued.²⁸ The back of the photograph from Aubert was inscribed with a dedication: “Look in my face: my name is Might Have Been; I am also called No More, Too Late, Farewell.” This quotation comes from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sonnet *Stillborn Love* and unfortunately was not only indicative of the results of Proust’s romantic pursuit of these young men, it was also morbidly prophetic: both Heath and Aubert met with tragic early deaths shortly after meeting Proust.²⁹ The unsettling thanatotic quality of this quote was not lost on Proust: in the twenty years following the receipt of this photograph, the author used the line as a dedication on at least five gifts he presented to others, including copies of his book and photographs of himself.³⁰

The very personal nature of Proust’s relationships with these young men may also, in part, account for present-day absence of the author’s rumored collection of photographs. Although no one can say for certain what happened to the photographs, it is believed that the author had them burned shortly before his death.³¹ Proust’s obligatory move from the Boulevard

²⁸ Tadié. p. 118.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 118. According to Tadié, at the time Proust seems to have been unaware of the source of this quote.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 118.

³¹ Roger Shattuck. *Proust’s Way*. (New York: Norton, 2000) p. 141.

Hausmann in 1919 and the uncertainty of his eventual lodging compelled him to do without many of his possessions. He asked his maid Céleste Albaret to proceed with an *auto-da-fé* of his papers, letters, manuscripts, notebooks, and photographs. While Albaret confirmed the destruction of thirty-two black leather notebooks, she denied having burned anything else.³² Yet in a letter of April 1919 to Doctor Abel Desjardins, a former fellow student at the Lycée Condorcet, Proust negated Albaret's claims in advance: "Lately, compelled to leave my Boulevard Hausmann residence, I have burned precious autographs, manuscripts of which copies no longer exist, and ever so many rare photographs."³³ Thus, it would seem that the author was aware of his collection's potential to reveal aspects of his own identity that he may not have wanted to make public once it left his possession.

In a 1910 letter to Simone de Caillavet, Proust explained his desire for photographs:

It would make me very happy if you would give me your photograph. I think of you, all the same, without a photograph, but my memory is tired by stupid things and this makes photographs precious to me. I keep them as reinforcements and do not regard them often in order not to

³² Proust. *Correspondences*. V. X p. 18. "Someone, I don't know who, has written that before leaving the Boulevard Hausmann apartment, Monsieur Proust had made me destroy a great many papers, photographs, and other things. This is untrue."

³² *Ibid.* p. 9.

³¹ Quoted in Irene Albers. "Proust's Photographisches Gedachnis," in *Zeitschrift fur Franzosische Sprache and Literatur*. V. III, no. 1, 2001. P. 20.

exhaust their virtue. When I was in love with your mother, I did phenomenal things to get a hold of her photograph.³⁴

The woman he refers to is Jeanne Pouquet. Proust did go to extraordinary lengths to obtain her photograph. He befriended, in his words, a number of tiresome people, including photographers he knew Pouquet's family had visited, and he even tried to steal a picture from a family album during a dinner party at her parents' home.³⁵ A maid caught him, and at the time he penned the aforementioned letter to her daughter, almost twenty years later, he still did not have Pouquet's photograph in his collection. Upon receipt of this letter, Caillavet sent to Proust the long sought after object – a photograph of her mother. Regarding the gift, Proust wrote back to Caillavet: "I must always be thanking you, since you're always so kind. I have received the photograph, which is a splendid resemblance, all the more precious for perpetuating the memories of a forgetful man."³⁶ But the photograph was not a representation of the woman Proust knew. Instead, the author received an image of a little girl in a gypsy costume, a shot of Jeanne Pouquet taken ten years before Proust met her.³⁷ What did this image remind the author of? Proust did not

³⁵ Brassai, p. 27.

³⁶ Proust, *Correspondences*, v. VII p. 160. It is interesting to note that in this letter Proust makes no mention of receiving a photograph of Simone de Caillavet, which is what he originally requested in his letter to her.

know Pouquet when she looked like this – he met her when she was already a young adult. And what kind of memories could the gypsy costume have perpetuated for the author?

This incident with the photograph of Jeanne Pouquet is echoed throughout the text of the *Search* and within Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. First, Marcel witnesses the weeklong agony and death of his beloved grandmother, the kindest and truest person in the novel.³⁸ Marcel's grandmother metamorphoses during her suffering into a series of unrecognizable human and bestial figures before death permanently lays her to sleep – restored to herself as a little girl: "Life in withdrawing from her had taken with it the disillusionments of life... On that funeral couch, death, like a sculptor of the Middle Ages, had laid her down in the form of a young girl."³⁹ Of course, Marcel could not have known his own grandmother when she was a little girl, but he is only able to recognize her as a little girl after her death. This type of recognition occurs again in the last pages of *Time Regained*, when Marcel recognized Mlle. Saint-Loup.⁴⁰ This final scene occurs at a reception given by the Guermantes, the aristocratic family Marcel idolized as a

³⁷ This photograph is reproduced in William Howard Adams, *A Proust Souvenir* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1984) p. 45.

³⁸ Proust, *Search*, v. III p. 470-71.

³⁹ *Ibid.* v. III p. 471.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* v. VI p. 506-7.

boy. Marcel has decided to come out of seclusion and rejoin society and his friends with the aim of writing a novel. His plan runs aground when he arrives at the reception, only to fail to recognize any of his former friends and acquaintances that he was to write about. After he fails to recognize his former childhood sweetheart, Gilberte, she leaves him to find her daughter to introduce to him. When Gilberte returns with her daughter, Mlle. Saint-Loup, Marcel is better able to recognize this young woman whom he has never met than any of his old friends. The narrator laments,

Indeed nothing is more painful than this contrast between the mutability of people and the fixity of memory... that we cannot now, outside ourselves, approach and behold again what inside our mind seems so beautiful... except by seeking it in a person of the same age, by seeking it, that is to say, in a different person.”⁴¹

What he recognizes in this girl is his own youth. Mlle. Saint-Loup, who is the daughter of Gilberte Swann and Robert Saint-Loup, represents to the author the joining of the two “ways” he spent his life following: Swann’s way and the Guermantes way.

It is interesting to note that in a work commonly read as an autobiographical novel, and particularly in a text so attentive to visuality, there are so few passages that depict the narrator’s external appearance. Although there are many photographs of lovers, celebrities, and relatives, Marcel describes a photographic portrait of himself only once. This passage is set in

⁴¹ Ibid. v. VI p. 438.

the narrator's hotel room at Balbec. Marcel is eating breakfast in the company of his maid Céleste and her sister Marie as Céleste remarks: "Didn't you see in his dresser drawer the photograph of when he was a little boy? ... The one with his little cane, all dressed up in fur and lace – no prince ever had the like."⁴² Céleste Albaret, in her biography on Proust, recalls a moment late in the author's life when he presented her with a photograph of himself as a little boy.⁴³ This photograph matches Céleste's description in the *Search* perfectly: an elegantly dressed little boy is posed with his cane in front of a splendid tapestry.⁴⁴ This photograph seems to provide a link between Proust's text and his person, but, like the photograph of Pouquet, this photograph of the young Proust would be unrecognizable to anyone who was not familiar with Proust as a young boy. This particular image is remarkable because it looks almost nothing like the images produced of Proust as an adult. It does not have any of the adult Proust's most recognizable features, such as the large dark eyes and black hair contrasted with delicate white skin – the little boy in this photograph is blonde. Furthermore, the text of the *Search* increases rather than clarifies confusion in regards to the photograph. At first, Marcel

⁴² Proust, *Search*, v. IV p. 334. Proust gave the fictional maid in this scene the same name as his actual maid: Céleste Albaret, providing another link between novel and biography.

⁴³ Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust*, trans. Barbara Bray. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003) p. 114.

⁴⁴ This photograph is on display at the Proust Museum in Illiers-Combray.

denies that the photograph even exists. Then, after acknowledging that there is a portrait of himself as a boy in the drawer, Marcel describes his own sad appearance in the photograph as due to the suffering he underwent as a child because his ill health or what he perceived as neglect on the part of his parents, whilst Céleste describes the boy's appearance in the photograph to her sister as plump, haughty, and perhaps even coddled. Céleste's descriptions of the photograph are contradicted by the narrator's, and throughout the whole scene the photograph never emerges from the drawer. The subject of the photograph is buried beneath layers of textual and visual representation in an elaborate game of display and disguise.

Such photographic images – imagined, concealed, or without recognizable visual connections to an individual – abound in the *Search*. Nevertheless, like reproduced photographs, the textual photographs in Proust imply contingency and reference. Roland Barthes explains that the photograph is “pure contingency and nothing else (it is always *something* that is represented),” and contrasts the photographic image to the text, which “by the sudden action of a single word, can shift a sentence from description to reflection.”⁴⁵ What happens, though, when the photographic image *is* text, when a photograph is reproduced not via a print developed from a negative, but instead via language?

⁴⁵ Barthes, p. 30.

On the one hand, these fictional photographs might assume the qualities of both photographic and textual representations. Because fictional photographs are described specifically as photographs, as opposed to memories or paintings for example, they carry with them the associations of reference and contingency that are particular to photographic images. Photographs are often regarded as more evidentiary than other forms of visual representation because the photograph is a trace from a person (or object). At the same time, because these photographs are fictional and are reproduced via text, they may assume some of the representational qualities that are specific to language. Because they are not reproduced as images, the authors can retain some control over their interpretations. For example, in the passage from the *Search* described above in which Marcel and his maids discuss his childhood portrait, Marcel describes his childhood visage as “sickly” while his maids describe it as “cherubic.”⁴⁶ If the photograph was reproduced for readers as an image, readers would be free to interpret visual elements such as the boy’s pale skin according to their own frames of reference. Marcel might interpret the pale skin as a signifier of illness, Céleste as coddling on the part of the boy’s parents. In this passage, Proust describes a conflict of interpretation provoked by a photograph between two characters

⁴⁶ Proust, *Search*, v. IV p. 334.

in his novel. With a textual photograph, a writer is able to do the interpreting work for the reader, or at least to curb the reader's own interpretations.

On the other hand, this very same passage indicates that instead of assuming the representational powers of both photographs and texts, the fictional photographs of Proust and Barthes may question the possibility of representation via either image or language. The two readings of the photograph presented by Proust are, if not mutually exclusive, so dissimilar that one begins to wonder at photography's status as evidence. While presenting a photograph via language rather than as an image may serve to protect the image from misinterpretation, presenting a photograph via two disparate interpretations saps the photograph of its referential and contingent aspects.

Photographs are valued for their referential qualities, but a photographic image of an individual, no matter how well-staged, can never entirely represent the complexities of that person's identity. Although photographic portraits seem to be reproductions of actual individuals, photographs deprive their subjects of speech and motion, and thus reduce them, like the props they are photographed with, to singular static images, subject to the interpretation of any viewer. Barthes calls this stubborn adherence of referent to photograph the "fatality (no photography without something or someone) [which] involves Photography in the vast disorder of

objects."⁴⁷ He abhors the nightmarish descent into thinghood that photography impels; Barthes accuses the photographer, any photographer, of turning him into an object both during the process of photography and in the product of photography; he laments that "photography transformed subject into object," and that "when I discover my self in the product of this operation (of being photographed, of being excruciatingly operated upon), what I see is that I have become Total-Image... others... turn me, ferociously, into an object."⁴⁸

Barthes goes on to explain, "Death is the eidos of the photograph;" photography kills by objectifying subjects.⁴⁹ Barthes's model of vision ascribes this fatal power to the gaze of the viewer. Like the process of taking photographs and like photographs themselves, the gaze frames, immobilizes, and objectifies. Both the gaze and photography have the capacity to reify subjects into objects; for Barthes, to become total-image is to become "death in person."⁵⁰ On the other hand, the photographed image simultaneously defies death. It is immune to the effects of time and aging and suspends countenances and gestures in a permanent present. Thus, photography has

⁴⁷ Op Cit. p. 5

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 14

⁴⁹ Barthes, p.15.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 14.

the power to immortalize a moment while at the same time murdering a subject. Barthes explains that this process forces him to encounter “myself as other.”⁵¹ He goes on to report that while sorting through photographs of his mother, he finds many in which “it is not she, and yet it was no one else;” he echoes Proust to describe the inadequacy of these “photographs of a being before which one recalls less of that being than by merely thinking of him or her.”⁵²

Like Proust, Barthes also describes a photograph that he does not reproduce as an image. Barthes refuses to reveal to his reader the Winter Garden photograph, a photograph taken of his mother at five years of age in the glass-roofed winter garden of the home in Chennevieres-sur-Marnes in which she was born. Barthes describes this photograph as the “true image” of his mother which he seeks; the discovery of this photograph leads Barthes to believe for a moment that this image is his mother: “Lost in the depth of the winter garden, my mother’s face is blurred, pale. My first reaction was to cry out: ‘At last, there she is!’”⁵³ Not only does Barthes refuse to reproduce this image for the gaze of his reader, he can barely view it himself; the photograph

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 13.

⁵² Ibid. p. 66.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 66.

that best captures his mother's true essence does not capture her visage, she is blurred and pale.

The photograph served Proust not only as an object of erotic desire, which could be displaced from a beloved person to a picture, but also as a reminder: without photography his tired memory threatened to fade. A photograph that is gazed upon too frequently runs a double risk of losing its value: the image on the paper can physically fade, and the memories provoked by the image can fade as well. The author's relationship with the photographic image is thus ambivalent; Proust both seeks out the photograph and avoids it. He uses the photograph like a drug; it is taken in small doses to counteract the failure of memory that accompanies the passing of time. Taken too often, however, or in too high a dose, the photo-drug threatens the viewer with dependency or addiction. This applies also to the role of the photograph in the *Search*: it supports the memory by serving not so much as a model, but rather as a medium for the imaginary realization of the absent. The photograph is not a substitute for an individual or even for a memory of an individual, and Proust does not desire a recollection of the moment captured by the photograph; instead, he uses the photograph to animate his memories of the subject captured.

Photography fascinated Proust. Images are captured from life, duplicated and fixed permanently onto a flat surface that can be transported from place to place, and enlarged, reduced, and reproduced. Photographs

can call forth people and places, fleeting expressions, and nuances of atmosphere, mood, and time. Derived from the Greek *photos* (light) and *grapho* (to describe), the photograph could be considered an appropriate Proustian metaphor for his art, since light and its absence in photographs describe objects and events just as Proust does in his almost dialectic oppositions and oscillation of fragments of daylight and darkness, present and past, or remembrance and forgetting from which images suddenly emerge.

There is always an image system with Proust, an attempt to arrest action, to capture and preserve a moment in time. These attempts, however, are seldom successful. Like the boyhood portrait in the drawer, the images are multivalent and indeterminate. Susan Sontag catches the essence of Proust's struggle when she writes of photography in the most general sense: "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote."⁵⁴ Imprisoning reality, then, is one desire inherent in the act of photography. However, this process of instant access is another way of creating distance, of removing the real. "To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to re-experience the unreality and the remoteness of the real," writes Sontag.⁵⁵ In Proust captivity and the urge

⁵⁴ Susan Sontag. *On Photography*. (New York: Picador, 1973) p. 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 15.

to capture contain this ultimate paradox. In the episodes involving captivity it is largely a question of sequestering a desired woman. Possession in various forms is the aim of the lover (as in the case with Albertine), the admirer (as in the case of Mme. Guermantes), and the spectator (as in the case of La Berma). It is finally photography that negotiates between flight and captivity, in that it allows the fixation of an image in the form of a print.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the photographic in Proust is that the photographic process is often halted mid-way or interrupted. It is a matter of a reversed image, the negative itself, which throws the emphasis from the final product back onto the process itself. Love plays a significant role in this negative structure. The male protagonist is portrayed over and over again as seeking in the women he loves those traits that will complement as well as torment his own nature – the very ingredients designed to make him suffer. “Those women are a product of our temperament, an image, a reversed projection, a ‘negative’ of our sensibility.”⁵⁶ It is almost as if all the women to whom one man is attracted in the course of his lifetime have come from the same negative. And so it is with jealousy as well, if the sense of the *cliché negatif* can be extended. The narrator speaks at one point of seeking, in Albertine’s smile and in her ways, as in an album of photographs, the mysterious passion he still feels.

⁵⁶ Proust, *Search*, v. II p. 647.

And before she pulled herself together and spoke to me, there was an instant during which Albertine did not move, smiled into the empty air, with the same feigned spontaneity and secret pleasure as if she were posing for someone else to take her photograph, or even seeking to assume before the camera a more dashing pose.⁵⁷

Like Proust's own desire to produce for *La Revue encyclopédique* a specific view of himself with a series of photographs incorporating carefully chosen poses and costumes, Albertine wishes to present to her lover a pleasing, if somewhat contrived, image of herself, fabricated to appeal to a specific audience. Proust does this by yet another inversion of symbols, "in the realm of horror" as he imagines her acting and reacting with other women.⁵⁸ With a similar twist in logic, he seeks in the very source of his suffering the "antidote" which will bring him peace.⁵⁹

The narrator composes an album of Albertines in the vain hope of fixing an inaccessible being. The flatness of the photograph, however, has an additional quality that frustrates this attempt: it invites pretense, masks, and playacting. It only fixes the external aspect. Both Proust and the narrator of his novel accumulated considerable collections of photographs of actresses. Many images of these women are advertisements for specific theatrical productions. Like La Berma in the *Search*, Sarah Bernhardt frequently

⁵⁷ Ibid. v. V p. 774.

⁵⁸ Ibid. v. V p. 338.

⁵⁹ Ibid. v. V p. 338.

appears in photographs dressed as Phèdre, a role for which she was famous. Proust admired her and collected her photograph but was not a friend of hers.⁶⁰ Gabrielle Réju (known as Rejane), one of Proust's models for the character Rachel, appears in photographs intended as public advertisements for her role as Germinie Lacerteux as well as images intended for private use, such as one in which she holds her daughter in her lap. This woman was a close friend of Proust's and he even lived as a guest in her home for some time.⁶¹ This examination of the performative aspect of photographs can obviously be extended to include images such as photographs of the actress Cora Laparcerie which are an advertisements for the actress, but not for specific roles, and, further, to images of people who are not professional actors. In one shot, viewers see Madame de Bernardaky, a socialite and friend of Proust's, dressed in an elaborate costume and posed upon an ornate staircase.⁶² This woman is surrounded by signifiers of wealth and status, but in another shot, viewers see another socialite and friend of Proust's, Madame Greffulhe, posed upon the same staircase, which turns out not to be someone's luxurious natural setting, a home or theater, but only an elaborate

⁶⁰ Tadie, p. 98.

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 110.

⁶² This image is reproduced in Adams, *A Proust Souvenir*, p. 59.

backdrop in the studio of the photographer Nadar.⁶³ An even closer inspection of these photographs would reveal that not only are the settings and costumes of many of these shots carefully composed for some certain effect, but that the actual bodies of the sitters have been reworked and altered.⁶⁴ A retouching pencil reduced the waistlines of both women by nearly one-third, thus producing in both women the same idealized female form.

To what extent, then, is the cliché a cliché in the other sense of trite expression or stereotype as well? Is not Proust in the process of exploding the clichés of love itself, since the charms of the desired woman are revealed to be negatives, for example: Albertine's refusal to see him; Odette's peculiar pallor, her mediocrity, her very lack of charm; and in the case of all the major female protagonists, their penchant for other women? The cliché-like character of the desired is actually a necessary ingredient in Swann's growing love for Odette, in Charlus's taste for young men, and in the narrator's love for Albertine. Each one seeks out shallow yet elusive creatures that resist possession. It is the protagonist in each case who develops the cliché, fabricates an aura around it, and touches up the original image. In other words, he fills in what is missing.

⁶³ This image is reproduced in Anne-Marie Bernard, ed., *The World of Proust, as seen by Paul Nadar*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) p. 55.

⁶⁴ Details of the retouched images are reproduced side-by-side in Bernard, *The World of Proust*, p. 29.

The narrator reflects in *The Captive* that he possesses in his memory only a “series of Albertines,” separate from one another, incomplete outlines or snapshots, and he perceives that his jealousy is restricted to an intermittent expression, fluctuating in form and intensity.⁶⁵ Portraits, images and photographs of the desired object are thus a part of the flux of fixation and flight throughout the novel. Although Albertine is a captive, she “moves about” in her captivity in the mind of the beholder.⁶⁶ Even Albertine’s physiognomic traits are dynamic: “when trying to recapture that little beauty spot on her cheek, just under the eye, I remembered that, looking from Elstir’s window when Albertine had gone by, I had seen it on her chin.”⁶⁷ The narrator, for his part, is intent on be/holding his captive, since his being, his existence, is defined by what he holds. Often this is only in the visual sense, as when he holds her within his gaze. Yet it is more a question of point of view here than it is of movement of the subject herself. That is to say, the image of Albertine fades or solidifies depending upon the ingredients of memory and jealousy on the part of the narrator. Much later, as he reflects upon the pleasure he experienced during his love affair with Albertine, he decides that it was realized only inversely by the distress he felt when she was not there by his

⁶⁵ Proust, *Search*, v. V p. 108-22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* v. V p. 620.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* v. II p. 622.

side.⁶⁸ Conversely, whenever he was sure she was coming, he only felt a vague ennui. Indeed, all the dynamics of his relationship with Albertine are worked out in terms of the negative.

Thus, the paradox in the case of sexual love is that the arrestation of the image in the form of a photograph negates its attraction. As Proust demonstrates over and over, desire is destroyed once an object is captured. Movement, even intermittent movement, seems to allow a proliferation of forms, and it is this very lack of fixity, this moving picture, that perpetuates desire. In contrast to Albertine, Odette becomes visually static, like a living photograph. “Odette had at length discovered, or invented, a physiognomy of her own, an unalterable ‘character,’ a ‘style of beauty,’ and on her uncoordinated features... had now set this fixed type, as it were an immortal youthfulness.”⁶⁹ Once Odette finally achieves this immortal youth, her husband Swann completely loses interest in her and pines over an old daguerreotype taken before she discovered youthfulness and beauty, in which she looks like an aging milkmaid:

...the “touched up” photographs which Odette had taken at Otto’s, in which she queened it in a “princess” gown, her hair waived by Lenthéric, appealed less to Swann than a little daguerreotype taken at Nice, in which, in a plain cloth cape, her loosely dressed hair protruding beneath a straw hat trimmed with pansies and a black velvet bow, though a woman of fashion twenty years younger, she looked (for the

⁶⁸ Ibid. v. VI p. 311-19.

⁶⁹ Ibid. v. II p. 164.

earlier a photograph the older a woman looks in it) like a little maidservant twenty years older.⁷⁰

Once again, the arrestation of an image, this time in an actual living body, kills desire, and the only photograph that suffices is nearly impossible to trace, visually, to its referent.

A pertinent question comes out of this refusal to be fixed on the part of Proust's subjects: what happens when a picture is taken, when movement slows to a point where an image is actually caught? In one poignant scene Proust suggests that distortion or false perception is especially common in the case of people who are most dear to us. We see them exclusively in an animated system, and this series of moving frames does not allow us to see the still which might permit an alternative appraisal of that person's condition. When the narrator suddenly comes upon his grandmother after having been away, he catches her unawares and is struck by the fact that she has aged, that she is approaching death. "For the first time, and for a moment only, since she vanished very quickly, I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, a dejected old woman whom I did not know."⁷¹ The narrator describes his nightmarish vision of his grandmother as a photograph, and positions himself as the photographer, who has called to take a

⁷⁰ Ibid. v. V p. 267.

⁷¹ Ibid. v. III p. 180.

photograph of a place alien to him in which he has no emotional investment and to which he will never return: "Of myself... there was present only... the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that automatically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph."⁷² Marcel is accustomed to perceiving his grandmother in an animated system, the perpetual motion of which is fueled in part by his previous conception of her. What surprises and grieves Marcel in his photographer's view of his grandmother is his vision of his own absence. He sees for the first time and only for an instant an old woman whom he does not know; thus, it would seem that the fixation of visions, whether in the context of sexual attraction or that of family bonds, involves disillusionment in the real sense of the term: an image of reality minus the ingredient of desire.

What is perhaps even stranger about this particular scene is the narrator's identification with the figure of the grandmother. In a comparison that calls forth the play of reflection both within and outside the mirror, the narrator sees himself reacting like a sick person, who, not having looked at himself for a long time recoils upon catching sight of himself in a mirror.⁷³ The confusion of the self is further heightened by the words "whom I did not

⁷² Ibid. v. III p. 184.

⁷³ Ibid. v. III p. 186.

recognize” which echo like a refrain all the way from the early Combray days of Aunt Leonie’s agitation over seeing people whom she did not recognize. One of the meanings of the verb to recognize (*connaitre*) is to be capable of forming an image; here again Proust remains in the realm of the visual. The narrator himself calls attention to the merging of his grandmother’s with his own image and is overwhelmed with the recognition of a lost self. The worst of it seems to be the degree of self-annihilation that her death has brought him, so that all of their life together, their mutual tenderness, the very selves that they were in the past, are forever obliterated.

Later, months after the death of his grandmother, the narrator is struck by the finality of his loss at the very moment he finds her again, in a photograph. This photograph, taken by Marcel's friend Robert Saint-Loup only a few months before the death of his grandmother, presents to Marcel an image of his grandmother in which she disguises herself with cosmetics and costume. At the time the photograph is taken, Marcel is disgusted by his own grandmother's playacting; he is surprised by what he perceives as her childishness and vanity. He is particularly annoyed by the delight she takes in the prospect of the photographic session, and out of spite he encourages her to primp for the photograph, then humiliates her with some mean and sarcastic remark at the moment the photograph is to be taken. As a result, her feelings are hurt and her usual joyful expression is exchanged for an unfamiliar tightened countenance. Consequently, in the combination of the

flattering lighting, the dress and make-up, and the foreign expression, Marcel's grandmother is physically unrecognizable in the actual photograph. Yet, after her death, this photograph serves as the catalyst to the narrator's mourning; it is the medium through which Marcel is able to recollect his relationship with his grandmother and realize his loss. Marcel, alone in his bedroom one morning, finds the photograph in a drawer and is overwhelmed with grief: "Upheaval of my entire being... my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes... True, I suffered all day long as I sat gazing at my grandmother's photograph. It tortured me."⁷⁴ He recognizes the expression on his grandmother's face as the product of his own vicious behavior and mourns both the grandmother he lost and the version of himself that she took with her.

Like photographic prints, the negative images of Barthes and Proust transform human subjects into mortified objects; photographs freeze people into static images. At the same time photography kills its subject, it also resists death by immortalizing the object and removing it from history, time, and the processes of decay and death. Suppressed photographs of loved ones can be used to figure loss and separation. The process of photography itself interpolates a distance between the photographer and the photographed. By creating textual photographs of loved ones instead of reproducing actual

⁷⁴ Ibid. v. IV p. 210-245.

prints, however, Barthes and Proust contain the use of the photographs, and constrain interpretation of them in ways that revealing them could not. This strategy protects the texts from the uncontrollable interpretive possibilities of the image. The textual photographs of Proust and Barthes can be read only through the lenses of the authors' memories. There is no chance that the readers of these texts, when they encounter these textual photographs will not recognize the authors' beloved maternal figures.

Because Proust and Barthes describe photographs, or acts of vision that resemble the process of taking photographs, one might expect that each photograph that appears in the text has a specific empirical referent, an object that could interrupt light and leave an impression on film. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes sadly notes that "a specific photograph... is never distinguished from its referent... It is as if the photograph carried its referent with it."⁷⁵ Susan Sontag adds "photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it," and that "a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened... there is always a presumption that something exists or did exist that is like what's in the picture."⁷⁶ Sontag reminds us that the debate over photography's "truth" and "objectivity" becomes possible, indeed ceaseless, because of this impossibility

⁷⁵ Barthes, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Sontag, p. 16.

of ridding the photograph of its referent. Both Barthes and Proust, by taking photographs of strangers in the place of maternal figures, imply that those uncannily familiar strangers existed; photography insists, "that has been." Even a textual photograph insists on a referent and asserts that the otherness of one's self and one's closest relatives can be documented as photographic fact.

The process of photography and the photograph itself enframe, capture, and immobilize a human subject in a moment of time, and in a particular gesture, expression, and position. To become total-image is to become "death in person," to be suspended in time and exiled from history. Such a death-as-object is simultaneously, however, a fending-off of death in that the photographed body is immune to the effects of time and aging. The image suspends a person's face and gesture in an eternal present; thus, photography arrests death at the same time that it embalms the subject as object. Photography immortalizes a moment even as it murders the subject of that moment. It is in this stillness, in this frozen moment of the photograph, that the human subject becomes an object. The scene frozen in the photograph shows the photographed being as an other, as an eerie double of the photographed person. Barthes writes that portrait photographers force him to encounter "myself as other;" photographs of himself make him feel his

doubleness and inauthenticity, his strangeness to himself.⁷⁷ He reports that he does not truly find his mother in the many photographs of her he looks at; she remains a historical stranger in the clothes and accessories of a past that is not his. In these photographs, Barthes's mother is portrayed as not yet a part of his past, a part of himself. Barthes writes of his distress at recognizing only fragments of that being in the photographs through which he sorts; he writes that "photography... compelled me to perform a difficult labor; straining towards the essence of her identity, I was struggling towards images that were partially true, and therefore totally false."⁷⁸ Barthes feels the pain of almost recognizing his mother in the images before his eyes; the photographs express the simultaneous presence and absence of his mother; photographs both compel and express his mourning.

In the Proustian narrator's photographic view of his grandmother, in the scene in which he catches her alone and describes himself as an anonymous photographer visiting the home, she becomes an unrecognizable stranger. This photograph both announces and manifests the advent of the maternal as other, as object. For both Marcel and Barthes, to encounter the grandmother/mother as other is to lacerate the self. For the narrator of the *Search*, the maternal is not yet fully other, but still a part of the self. At the

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 5.

moment he "takes" his photograph, Marcel still feels as if "my grandmother was still myself."⁷⁹ He enacts moments of abjection, a reoccurring moment in which the child is neither fully object nor fully subject, and when the mother is neither self nor other.⁸⁰ Proust's narrator finds himself incapable of, and ambivalent about, separating from a maternal figure; he replays over and over the anxiety-producing separation from his grandmother. While he is away from her, a failed phone call to his grandmother becomes "a symbol, a presentation... of an isolation, that of my grandmother, separated, for the first time in my life, from myself."⁸¹ Like the aborted phone call, the fictional photograph of the narrator's grandmother also figures a momentary, terrible but necessary separation from the maternal by representing a familiar woman as a stranger. Such intimate knowledge of this woman, as an individual, who has been supplanted by a stranger causes the narrator to experience separation not only from the Maternal, but also from a specific maternal relative. Barthes protests against reducing the person to a place-holder in a model of family relationships, writing "in the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother... to the Mother-as-Good, she added that grace of

⁷⁹ Proust v. III p. 184.

⁸⁰ Julia Kristeva. *Proust and the Sense of Time* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 10-13.

⁸¹ Op. Cit. v. III p. 173.

being an individual soul."⁸² Because Marcel knows his grandmother so intimately as an individual he is shocked to find another in her place. Proust writes of a "pious tenderness" which usually "hide[s] our eyes from what they ought never to behold" when one looks at a beloved person; stripped of our love for the person photographed, the photograph reveals signs of aging, mere facts of costume and historical period, family resemblances, and sociopolitical data belonging to what Barthes calls the studium of photographs.⁸³ The Proustian narrator's photographic view exposes his grandmother's corporeal being in all its transience and decay, but the old woman he sees is still his grandmother. The photograph is thus mendacious about the person, even as it tells the truth about the person's body, clothing, and circumstances. Only love, Barthes says, can rescue the beloved person from the photographic image; only Marcel's "pious tenderness" can reclothe an old woman in the *habillement* of his grandmother. Barthes's mourning for his lost mother, his attempt to rescue her from the dead by finding some photograph that "punctures" his heart with some detail, impels his entire meditation on photography. The viewer's love liberates into subjecthood again the object of the dissecting, immobilizing, photographic gaze.

⁸² Barthes, p. 75.

⁸³ Proust, v. III p. 184 Barthes, p. 11.

In the *Search*, however, this deathly gaze emanates from one who has to rescue a beloved and familiar woman from it. The narrator positions himself as photographer, as possessor of the gaze. By standing apart as a photographer, he creates the very abyss his photograph figures; by making strange the familiar, by supplanting an image for an individual, and by making an object out of a subject, the young man participates in matricide. The murder of a (grand)mother both expresses and induces guilt, and impels the work of mourning, a mourning that then manifests itself as a calling out to the lost one. The Proustian narrator's disconnected long-distance phone call to his grandmother, after which he reports feeling as if "it were already a beloved ghost that I had allowed to lose herself in a ghostly world," foreshadows his increasing inability to recall her to him; after she dies, he sees "a creature other than my grandmother, a sort of wild beast which was coated in her hair and couched in her bedclothes."⁸⁴ She becomes increasingly other to him even as he tries to repair the damage of his violent and inevitable "othering" of her.

In the scene in which Marcel fails to visually recognize his sickly grandmother, it is because the narrator engages in photography that he flirts with madness. Barthes writes of "the profound madness of Photography;" photography both exhibits and induces "a sensation of inauthenticity,

⁸⁴ Ibid v. III, p. 180, 474.

sometimes of imposture (as in certain nightmares)."⁸⁵ With his eyes open, Marcel sees photographic evidence that his grandmother can become a stranger whose image the grandmother then vacates. The photograph both tells the truth and lies: someone who is both his grandmother and a stranger inhabits his grandmother's place. The narrator's photograph, even as he "takes" it, represents his grandmother, as he knows her, less and less adequately. The narrator here discovers not only the madness inherent in photography, but also the insanity of the impossible but necessary struggle to represent a human life through any medium. Proust's novel explicitly thematizes the compulsive urge to represent and the hopeless inadequacy of all representation. A human life both impels and exceeds representation; such excess informs an oeuvre through which Proust attempts, fails, and attempts again to represent unrepresentable lives. The narrator signals his continuing attempts, and failures, to tell his story. He mentions actual photographs of several characters, and the text is often compared to a gallery of portraits.⁸⁶ The novel prioritizes writing over the reproduction of actual images in the struggle to represent. Proust often sets dialogue against imagery in his novel and highlights the gap between image and word. The *Search* subsumes

⁸⁵ Barthes, p. 47.

⁸⁶ Mieke Bal, *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

images into writing. Like Barthes, Proust withholds, refuses to reproduce, describes photographic images; he produces textual photography.

Proust actually announces that he privileges words over images in the *Search*; his narrator claims "The reality that he [the writer] has to express resides... not in the superficial appearance of his subject but at a depth at which appearances matter little."⁸⁷ Writing is an adventure into the unknowable; Proust's privileging of words does not guarantee that words represent a life better than images do. The *Search* explicitly thematizes the writer's obligation to represent, the writer's compulsive attempts to represent, and simultaneously, the inevitable failure of words to represent. The narrator of the *Search* reminds readers that he has, as a writer, repeatedly tried and failed to represent life. For this narrator, writing is a continuous struggle, as Beckett puts it, to "fail better" at representing the unrepresentable.⁸⁸

To produce textual photography is not to choose more adequate over less adequate representation, but to circumvent the excess of images. The narrator of the *Search* not only enters the Symbolic by writing photography, but puts himself in the position of the Father, of God, of the creator of absolutes, when he describes photographs that do not exist and visually referentless photographs like the photographic view and the actual photograph

⁸⁷ Proust, v. VI p. 289.

⁸⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Proust*. London: John Calder, 1987. p. 93.

of his grandmother. The writer who describes such nonexistent or subversive photographs, a writer who writes textual photographs that undermine photography's tendency to adhere to a referent, maintains control over their interpretations and uses. As Sontag reminds readers, the meaning of a photograph is its use; description directs the viewer's observation, and thus his or her use, of a photograph.⁸⁹ This claim is especially valid when the photograph does not exist except as it is written; the viewer gets directives on how to view the image only from the description.

Writers of photography, such as Barthes and Proust, assume that the image qua image both disappoints and exceeds words; that the reproduced image will generate readings dissonant or even oppositional to the writer's own. Barthes cannot submit the picture of his mother to the scrutiny of strangers who will not see the essence of his mother he sees there; Proust offers his readers either non-existent photographs or photographs that are divorced from their referents. Writing the photographic thus not only protects the image from misinterpretation and misuse, but also shields writing itself from the force of the reproduced image. Proust and Barthes save images of maternal relatives from direct exposure to the gaze of the viewer and from the studium, or "the wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste," into which photographs can fall even as they rescue

⁸⁹ Sontag, p. 106.

writing from images that threaten to overwhelm it.⁹⁰ Fictional photographs of a grandmother and mother, then, allow the writer to figure loss and mourning while rescuing the images of maternal figures from the reifying and loveless gaze of the public.

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⁹⁰ Barthes, p. 27.

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