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To Philosophize Is to Learn to Die

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In the course of my life I have often had the same dream, appearing in different forms at different times, but always saying the same thing, “Socrates, practice and cultivate the arts.” In the past I used to think that it was impelling me and exhorting me to do what I was actually doing: I mean that the dream, like a spectator encouraging a runner in a race, was urging me on to do what I was doing already, that is, practicing the arts, because philosophy is the greatest of the arts, and I was practicing it. But ever since my trial, while the festival of the god has been delaying my execution, I have felt that it might be this popular form of art that the dream intended me to practice, in which case I ought to practice it and not disobey. —Socrates, in Plato’s Phaedo, 61

As the quintessential man of letters, Roland Barthes had the genial gift of being able to sympathize with an endless variety of discourses, texts, myths, and semiotic systems. The profusion of apparent subjects—Japan, Brecht, Balzac, photography, “mythologies,” classical writing, the theater—is perhaps calculated to provoke the purist who insists on the values of thoroughness and well-grounded inquiry. At the same time, one would have to be obtuse to fail to recognize the critical projects that animate the many books, essays, and studies; these are explorations that put into question the often closed and crabbed commitment of the scholar or critic to the confines of what he or she knows in “proper” serious fashion.

Barthes’s Empire of Signs may stand as the emblem of his polemic with scholarship; it is an imaginary voyage, undertaken by a traveler who deliberately eschews a knowledge of the language of the country where he travels and dispenses with the apparatus—extensive studies of history, literature, and culture—that the trav-
eling scholar typically employs to attain some simulacrum of the mastery that is comfortably taken for granted when one is “at home” with one’s own specialty or Fach. Barthes’s desire to slide over the surface of Japanese life is, however, tied to his attempt to suspend or, as the phenomenologists (to whom we shall return) would say, “bracket” the Western metaphysical commitment to the values of the center and interiority. Barthes proposes to contest these values and the binary categories of center/periphery and interior/exterior that they exemplify and reinforce. In attributing the Western taste for concentric cities with a full center to “the very movement of Western metaphysics, for which every center is the site of truth,” his language comes surprisingly close to the philosophical theematics of Derrida and Deleuze. We might be tempted to say that Barthes is an imaginary traveler in philosophy as well as in Japan. In fact, there are resonances of philosophy and its language(s) throughout Barthes’s work, sometimes oblique, sometimes polemical, sometimes simply as part of a body of reference texts (as in A Lover’s Discourse). The first book, Writing Degree Zero, is a sustained answer to Sartre’s What Is Literature? while the last book, Camera Lucida, is dedicated to Sartre’s L’Imaginaire; the names of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and a bevy of more recent French philosophers play across Barthes’s pages.

The questions that I wish to pose revolve around the elusive relation between Barthes’s writing and philosophy. They could be elaborated in a series, beginning perhaps with the most simple-minded: does Barthes have a philosophy? Surely, such a question in a Barthesian text would be rewritten: does “Barthes”—who? and by what principle of identity?—“have”—what is the notion of ownership here?—“a philosophy”?—is philosophy to be construed as oriented toward a single more or less centered and coherent system? At the end of such a series of questions we might be asking for a nuanced account of the ways in which Barthes is tempted by philosophy, fears it, desires it, tentatively tries on its robes, analyzes its signs and myths, or inscribes it by citation, parody, or temporary adoption of this or that “position” in his own texts. The project of assembling the questions and interrogating the texts is a large one; but I have suggested already that Barthes is not to be thought of simply as either inside or outside of philosophy.
The philosophical tradition, imbricated as it is in our languages, in the protocols of rhetoric and semiology, in the very texture of our cities (as Barthes insists), is not to be easily overcome or rejected, although it may be displaced, deconstructed, or read differently. Barthes's most "personal" texts—*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* and *Camera Lucida*, for example—maintain a relationship with philosophy even while aiming at the qualities of the unique, the bodily, the fragmentary, and the aphoristic that are meant to challenge the hegemony of "the movement of Western metaphysics, for which every center is the site of truth." One might say that philosophy, no matter how de-idealized, is still part of the writer's body; it helps to constitute that writerly body traversed by so many learned and inherited codes. It is itself a code of sorts (an economy of philosophemes, Derrida would say), subject to the same law of repression and the return of the repressed as any other bodily tendency that might be the subject of attempts at exclusion or extirpation.

I propose to interrogate Barthes's oblique relation to philosophy in a text that both deliberately and adventitiously operates as a conclusion and précis of his work—*Camera Lucida*. Adventitiously, because the appearance of the book was followed so rapidly by his death. Deliberately, because Barthes concludes on the basis of his meditations and his reading of the photograph of his mother that "once she was dead I no longer had any reason to attune myself to the progress of the superior Life Force (the race, the species). My particularity could never again universalize itself (unless, utopically, by writing, whose project henceforth would become the unique goal of my life). From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death" (*CL*, p. 29).

The exception of writing from the waiting for death must strike us as peculiar, for to be sustained it would require a thorough separation between the public body and the private body. Not only would the reconciliation of particularity and universality through writing be a utopian enterprise; it would also seem that—without some support in what is here parodically called the "Life Force"—the wish to write would itself be fantastic and utopian. But this is to anticipate the result of a reading yet to be done. For the time being, we may remark several features of this passage and its context. The language is highly philosophical (although sometimes set off by parodic majuscule type): "particu-
larity,” “universalize,” “undialectical,” “Life Force.” The thematics of death announced here can hardly be extricated from their articulation in Hegel, Heidegger, or Derrida. Significantly, Barthes’s thoughts take this turn in relation to a subject which had appealed to him at various times as precisely that medium in which it might be possible to avoid the theoretical and the philosophical: photography.

Camera Lucida has been described as a fragmentary or aphoristic book. Certainly it is so in some respects, and the impression of a discrete writing is strengthened by the formal separation of the text into forty-eight numbered sections. The reader will also know, perhaps, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, which is not only aphoristic in form but reflectively comments on that form and its meaning. Like Camera Lucida, the earlier text is interspersed with photographs. Yet Camera Lucida is a narrative, even if its components can sometimes be read differentially as aphorisms. More specifically, it is the narrative of an ontological quest inviting comparison with a number of other narratives (those of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, and others). I shall read Camera Lucida then, at least initially, as a variation on the genre of ontological quest; such a reading will perhaps help to situate the specific strategies and concepts of the inquiry in relation to the discourses of philosophy. This is the kind of reading that will be necessary, for example, if we want to understand what Barthes is doing in employing the language of universals and particulars and in seeing what he might mean when he writes of awaiting his very own “undialectical death.”

As in the case of Descartes’s Meditations and Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind, Barthes’s narrative is marked by a distinction between a naïve “I” who does not yet know where the journey will lead and a more knowledgeable, sophisticated “I” who has completed it. The difference in these personae is clear from the beginning; the Barthes who narrates begins by citing an experience with a photograph (of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome) which had already been forgotten by the remembered naïve Barthes. Only sometime later was he “overcome by an ontological’ desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what photography was ‘in itself’” (CL, p. 1). Photography, we eventually learn, must be understood in terms of forgetting/remembering; here already in the stage setting of the ontological quest we encounter an expe-
perience that will be remembered only later. The quest, then, seems to have two beginnings: the personal and forgotten beginning in which Barthes wonders at seeing eyes (Jerome’s) that saw Napoleon, and a more conventional philosophical beginning which aims at formulating a definition or essence. This explicit double origin of the quest gives it a context which the standard Cartesian or Hegelian narrative tends to obscure: Descartes does not incorporate his own visionary dreams into the Meditations, but mentions only the general possibility that we might be dreaming; Hegel does not recount his tangled relations with Hölderlin and Schelling, but speaks of the dialectic of lordship and bondage. What is at stake here is the role of context and exemplar in the philosophical narrative.

The photograph is a concrete tie to the past; it tells us “that-has-been.” To imagine the philosophical quest as marked by photographs, then, is to see it as situated and contextualized. Barthes’s (later) memory of the photograph of Jerome itself plays the role of the photograph; it tells us that, despite the theoretical prejudice that the ontological desire is a universal human possibility, each quest which takes place under the sign of that desire has its origin in an event. Barthes explains the mutual implication of photograph and event:

In the photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the photographer always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute particular, the sovereign contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the This (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the Tuché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression. (CL, p. 2)

The photograph, and so the quest associated with it, resists any reduction to being a mere example of something more general; it has an insistent haecceity (as Duns Scotus and Charles Peirce would say) that will give any narrative not only what Barthes once called “the effect of the real” but what he now, more majestically, terms “the Real.” Since Barthes’s narrative, like so much of philosophy, will take the form of a mnemonic search, we could say that the text begins by dislocating and complicating the usual assumptions of such memory excursions. That is, a
memory which is unremembered at the time when one begins an inquiry is later seen to have played a significant role in the acquisition and interpretation of other memories (one might think here of the role of the primal scene in psychoanalysis).

It is the stubborn particularity of the photograph that leads Barthes into his first philosophical impasse. Conventional aesthetic categories seem totally external to photographs in a way that they are not to the products of traditional arts. And searching for a theoretical analysis in the writings of others is frustrating: “Each time I would read something about photography, I would think of some photograph I loved, and this made me furious” (CL, p. 2). Like the systematic doubt practiced by Descartes or the Hegelian “highway of despair,” the initial attempts at understanding lead to confusion and aporia. But, as in those philosophical narratives, the way out of the impasse lies in radicalizing and heightening its tensions. Barthes now sees himself as torn between two voices: that of impersonal science which would ask him to bracket his personal taste/distaste and that of the naïve primitive who would indulge his own fascination with his “referent, the desired object, the beloved body.” The voice of science is one that Barthes’s reader has heard before. It declares: “What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer belongs to the category ‘Amateur Photographs,’ dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc.” (CL, p. 2). The voice is that of Barthes in Mythologies, analyzing the cultural imperialism of “The Family of Man.”

This experience of self-division is itself a classical philosopheme associated with the theoretical quest; it typically deepens the search by displacing it from an external arena to an internal one. Such a change of direction from ostensibly impersonal scientific understanding to that of the self which sees itself inextricably involved in the undertaking might be called Oedipal or tragic; of course, Barthes will contest the traditional associations of these terms with their implications of the normalcy of the succession of generations and gender identity. (To understand his “undialectical death” we shall have to interrogate the philosophical use of the “example” of death.) But the alteration of standpoint can be used to good effect without assuming such baggage, as in Nietzsche’s narrative The Genealogy of Morals, which at first pur-
ports to be a scientific inquiry into the origin of morality but eventually becomes an arena in which “we” inquirers must recognize our own involvement in the economics of good and evil, guilt and redemption. This Nietzschean model for Barthes’s enterprise may be obscured by the fact that Barthes’s praise for Nietzsche (in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) is for his mastery of the aphoristic form. But it is worth recalling because Nietzsche’s way of dealing with the classical “Descartes to Hegel” type of philosophical narrative is not only the fragmentation of aphoristic praxis but the parodic story which displaces evolutionary tales of moral progress (as in *The Genealogy of Morals*), the presentation of a new type of moral-philosophical hero (*Zarathustra*), or the autobiographical account of the ascent to wisdom (*Ecce Homo*).

In his own key, and with his own tone, Barthes’s engagement with philosophy is something like that; in recalling his rejection of the scientific voice, he marks the transition with Nietzsche’s name, where Nietzsche is understood as one who philosophically empowers a certain kind of fiction: “I began to speak differently. It was better, once and for all, to make my protestation of singularity into a virtue—to try making what Nietzsche calls the ‘ego’s ancient sovereignty’ into an heuristic principle” (*CL*, p. 3).

The narrating Barthes now sees that the “dilemma . . . corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language between several discourses . . .” (*CL*, p. 3). The fiction of *Camera Lucida* will be that “I [Barthes] make myself the measure of photographic ‘knowledge’” (*CL*, p. 4), but that “I” maintains a constant dialogue with the voices of philosophy and science. Each gesture of the inquiring “I,” now engaged in what he describes as a personal phenomenological quest, corresponds to or parodies a stage in the reflection or meditation characteristic of the more classical philosophical narrative. As for “the measure” Barthes asks himself, “What does my body know of photography?” and replies with a division into the operation of photography, being the subject of a photograph, and looking at photographs.

Since Barthes is not even an amateur photographer, he excludes the praxis of photography from his inquiry. This exclusion of action is a form of *askesis* which helps Barthes to focus on his perspective as observer. Yet focusing is an act, and an act that
we identify with the operation of the camera; in his own way, Barthes is producing a series of snapshots. For Barthes, the "emotion" or "essence" of the photographer's experience is unspeakable and unknowable, just as for us, his readers, the Winter Garden photograph must be invisible and unintelligible; everything connected with the reading and writing of Camera Lucida must then take place as the other side of an absence which can never be filled in. Already in the early stages of Barthes's narrative, then, we can set the story over against the traditional comprehensive claims made by the Cartesian/Hegelian Bildungsroman or voyage of discovery which moves from confusion to clarity, absence to presence; already the unspeakable and the unreadable accompany what at one level purports to be a continuous recollection, "Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print" (CL, p. 38).

That is precisely the experience Barthes reports having as a subject of photography—that is, the sense that he has been transformed into another, an object, that he has "become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person" (CL, p. 5). Camera Lucida, of course, contains no photos of Barthes, unlike its predecessor, which was filled with them. The entire text, in a sense, is his snapshot as a writer. In acknowledging his liking for the sound, the click of the camera when being photographed, Barthes is perhaps expressing his artistic fraternity with the photographer. Writing, too, is a mechanism, involving distinctive operations and sounds, at the point of both composition and printing (does Barthes speak of the sound of the pen or the typewriter?). Barthes has completed the askesis necessary for his quest-narrative first by eliminating himself as actor (he is no photographer), and then by noting that photography effectively eliminates him as subject (to be photographed is to be killed). It is just at this point that the text opens up in a new way. The residue of Barthes's photographic body is now the spectator with his "I like/I don't like" (another ominous binary of the fort/da type containing a moment of sentencing or exclusion). Simultaneously, graphically, there begins to appear the series of photographs which are the subject of Barthes's likes and of his commentaries. No photos, then, without "I like/I don't like." But the photos double the text in a new way: if (as we shall see) the message of the photo is "that-has-been" or death, then the living narrative of the quest, already
doubled by its philosophical models, is now juxtaposed with a non-narrative series of photos. As the objects of Barthes’s likes, they form, for us, an array of times, places, and subjects; they act as a dispersion or diffusion of the trajectory that leads the writer on at the same time that again, for us, they are necessary so that we can follow that trajectory. The punctum/studium binary that is said to characterize the photograph now comes to characterize the text in which the photographs are embedded. The discursive part of the text, the words, constitutes its studium, making contact with cultural codes and traditions; the continuity of the studium is disrupted at twenty-four points by the photographs, which demand a different sort of attention. Arresting the continuous reading of Barthes’s narrative, they call for a lingering attention and form a series to be contrasted with the words of the text.

Barthes’s narrative, then, is qualified and interrupted by the very photographs on which he comments, yet the narrative is never obliterated by the photographs. The counterpoint of image and text is also a counterpoint of tenses. According to Barthes, the tense of the photograph is “that-has-been”; each one conveys a simple past, something over and done with or, at the extreme, something dead. The discursive narrative, however, always suggests a process of thought that is in the making, one that invites a sympathetic participation or identification by the reader. The typical tenses of Barthes’s narrative are the present (“So I make myself the measure of photographic ‘knowledge’”) or the imperfect (“I was glancing through an illustrated magazine”). Verbal language, it seems, will not coincide with the images; the presence of the narrator guarantees the continuity that is excluded by photography.

After the appearance of the photographer in the text, Barthes continues to describe his inquiry as phenomenological:

But it was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology, so readily did it agree to distort or to evade its principles according to the whim of my analysis. First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: on the one hand the desire to give a name to photography’s essence and then to sketch an eidetic science of the photographer; and on the other the intractable feeling that photography is essentially (a contradiction in terms) only contingency,
singularity, risk: my photographs would always participate, as Lyotard says, in “something or other” . . . (CL, p. 8)

At first, phenomenology was the alternative to a semiology with scientific aspirations; where semiology would have legislated an inquiry into cultural codes and their underlying institutions, phenomenology promised a way of focusing on the nuances and texture of experience insofar as it is one’s own. The move from semiology to phenomenology would be a step back in terms of Barthes’s own career and in relation to the standard narrative of twentieth-century French intellectual life, in which phenomenology is what is transcended by structuralism, which is transcended by deconstruction and genealogy, which are transcended by . . . Later, Barthes will tell us that he lacks a future. One way of enacting that lack is to abandon at the beginning of the intellectual story his own beginnings (in semiology) and to regress to an earlier stage (phenomenology, whose paradigm is apparently Sartre’s L’Imaginaire) which had previously been the object of his critique. But phenomenology is still too scientific. Barthes would like to say that the eidos of the photograph is its singularity, but this is no eidos at all. How might one “do phenomenology” while retaining the singular and contingent? And Barthes adds in effect a second question: how might one practice a phenomenology that does not reduce the affective, emotional side of the experience of photographs? “Classical phenomenology, the kind I had known in my adolescence (and there has not been any other since), had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or mourning” (CL, p. 8). Of course, a number of Husserl’s disciples (Scheler, Plessner) had attempted phenomenologies of the emotions, although one might regard their studies, like Sartre’s The Emotions: Outline of a Theory, as nonclassical. In any case, what is important for Barthes is not really the question of whether one might have a phenomenology of “desire or grief,” but whether having such will require the surrender of the emotions themselves; Barthes protests at the very logic of the “question” or “theme”: “As Spectator I was interested in photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think” (CL, p. 8).
Beginning with Barthes’s heuristic adoption of the fiction of the ego (on Nietzsche’s advice), he has been searching for the proper arché for his inquiry. We might now describe that still somewhat tentative arché by paraphrasing Descartes: I am wounded, therefore I think. This might appear to be a reversal of the Cartesian cogito ergo sum, but it is more of a gloss that could also be expressed with a Sartrean accent. Descartes, after all, had used the fact of his doubting in order to establish his existence (and, if we follow the course of the Meditations, even that arché remains provisional until it is validated, in Meditation III, by the demonstration of God’s existence). Doubt was also a kind of wound or insufficiency that could throw one into a state of radical uncertainty and self-conflict, such that one might wonder, for example, whether one’s everyday perceptions are nothing but images without referents. (Barthes will short-circuit Descartes’s doubt about the referent by defining the photograph in terms of an ineluctable referentiality.) Sartre provides a link of sorts between Cartesian doubt and the Barthesian “I am wounded”; for Sartre, the cogito has the form “I am a lack” or “I am an absence.” In Barthes, the wound will take the form of death, both one’s own and others’. Each punctum in the photographs that he values will be “an accident that pricks me” and so reminds him of his own mortality.

It is upon the establishment of this (tentative) Cartesian/Sartrean arché that Barthes articulates the distinction studium/punctum that he calls his “rule.” Descartes had done something similar in assuming, provisionally, that the success of the cogito allowed him to employ the rule that all of his ideas which were both clear and distinct were true. One might even see a formal analogy between clarity/studium (that which is clearly understood) and distinctness/punctum (that which has been articulated into specific points and details). Barthes does not explicitly formulate his rule, which might be stated this way: attend to those photographs which exhibit a studium that is transversed or transgressed by a punctum. The rule seems to embody that very duality between a search for the eidos and an examination of affective consciousness that Barthes had described as the difficulty of his “cynical phenomenology.” In good Cartesian or Hegelian fashion, Barthes has transformed an apparent opposition in the subject matter into a reflective procedure of apprehension. Uni-
versatility and singularity have been retained and reconciled by making them correlative aspects of a rule. Barthes puts the rule to good use, productively piling up a series of observations reminiscent of his earlier critical and semiological work. The rule itself resembles in a formal way the distinction of figure/ground employed by Gestalt psychology.

Barthes's application of the rule (recounted to us narratively and reflectively) shows him as capable of following the scientific discipline of phenomenology, as the various forms or contents that may be assumed by studium and punctum are surveyed, classified, and distinguished. The “unary” photograph without a punctum is isolated as a degenerate case. The consequences of the studium being coded and the punctum being uncoded are drawn out; for example, “the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” or “in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes” (CL, p. 22). All of this is reported in the imperfect or the novelistic present because Barthes the narrator knows that it eventually became impossible to settle into the regularized critical routine of a phenomenology or semiology of photography. So the narrator knows that the scientific Barthes was really gathering his forces and collecting his experiences for a deeper inquiry into himself. The later, narrating Barthes can provide a psychoanalytic account of the (relatively) impersonal concerns of the earlier investigator who directed his phenomenological rule upon the photographs selected by his “I like/I don’t like.”

Barthes finally comes to criticize his own activity in using the rule precisely because it leads only to a series of observations, a “bad infinite” (as Hegel would say), and not to the definition which philosophy seeks for its object:

Proceeding this way from photograph to photograph (to tell the truth, all of them public ones, up to now), I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the eidos) of photography. I had to grant that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal. I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of photography, that thing which is seen by anyone looking at a photo-
graph and which distinguishes it in his eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode. (CL, p. 24)

Would it be overly tendentious to suggest that his crucial turning point in Barthes’s narrative of himself as philosopher, here a philosopher recalled by his conscience to the search for universality, is a transformation of an analogous turn of Socrates in the Phaedrus? There Socrates gives a speech about love that he later recants on both moral and metaphysical grounds: on moral grounds because the speech shamefully advocates that the beloved yield himself to the nonlover, for crassly utilitarian reasons; on metaphysical grounds, because the speech does not determine the essence or eidos of love. Stricken with shame, Socrates hides his head and declares that he must now make up for his sins by reciting a palinode which will be a true speech about love.

Now while love and desire are also the themes (so far) of Camera Lucida, Barthes’s self-reproach seems to involve a charge of delay and temporization rather than one of outright moral transgression. But Barthes’s “first speech” (as recounted in CL, pp. 1–23), like the one regretted and retracted by Socrates, is the expression, as he says, of a “hedonist project” which must lead to bad morals and bad metaphysics. The second part of Barthes’s text, then, will constitute the true voice of love and of the metaphysical quest. But Socrates’ second speech will be rewritten, for love’s focus will be not on an ever-expanding totality (the love of Beauty and the Forms), but will come to be defined in relation to an absolutely determinate past; and truth will turn out to be “undialectical.”

Nevertheless, recollection will be the path common to Barthes and the Platonic Socrates; yet the philosopheme of recollection will mean something completely different when both its subject and object are mortal bodies rather than the separable soul and the pure objects of knowledge. Barthes then will be reinscribing the love story of the philosophical tradition; not attempting the impossible feat of rejecting it altogether, but of modifying its vocabulary, its mood, and its tone in accordance with the materiality of the body, the body’s image, and the mechanism (photography) which functions as an artificial memory. Of course, it is
just this mechanism of artificial memory that is the other focus of attention in the Phaedrus itself. There writing is the pharmakon (undecidably gift, poison, drug, remedy) which immobilizes, kills, and preserves living speech and thought. We live in the graphic age of artificial memory (hypomnemesis), including the omnipresence of the visual image, whether moving (film, television) or still (photo-graphy). To embrace the still photograph in preference to the film, a taste which Barthes confessed at the start of his journey (CL, p. 1), is to favor the graphic in its typical and minimal form, in which it makes no pretension to motion and life. Barthes did not know the grounds of this preference at the beginning, but he comes to learn them; for the same reason he excludes color from true photography later on (although La chambre claire is prefaced by a monochromatic, greenish Polaroid photo that is not reproduced in the English translation).

These considerations point to the particular register in which Barthes rewrites Socrates' palinode (it may be worth recalling that both the Phaedrus and the Symposium are among Barthes's reference texts in A Lover's Discourse). Socrates' ideal love story begins with a primal vision of eternal truth and beauty; but that vision is forgotten and (we would say) repressed with varying intensities in different individuals. But a form of mnemonic recapture of that metaphorical vision is available which begins with an apparently mundane visual event:

But when a man recently initiated, who has looked upon many of the great realities, sees a god-like countenance or physical form the beauty of which is a faithful imitation of true beauty, a shudder runs through him and something of the old awe steals over him. . . . Once he has received the emanation of beauty through his eyes, he grows warm, and through the perspiration that ensues he irrigates the sprouting of his wing. (Phaedrus, 251)

Barthes's love story, in contrast, begins (that is, from the time that he initiates the search for his mother through her photographs) as a voluntary search for what is known in advance to be the specific and determinate; Socrates' begins with a particular vision of a beautiful person and leads, if successful, to a "dialectical" or totalizing love for beauty. What Barthes had origi-
nally sought in the story related in his palinode was not the visual image of his mother but the right stimulus to write about her:

Now, one November evening shortly after my mother's death, I was going through some photographs. I had no hope of "finding" her, I expected nothing from these "photographs of a being before which one recalls less of that being than by merely thinking of him or her" (Proust). I had acknowledged that fatality, one of the most agonizing features of mourning, which decreed that however often I might consult such images, I could never recall her features (summon them up as a totality). No, what I wanted—as Valéry wanted, after his mother's death—was "to write a little compilation about her, just for myself" (perhaps I shall write it one day, so that, printed, her memory will last at least the time of my own notoriety). (CL, p. 25)

Barthes set out to produce one of those reminders to oneself which provoked the denunciation of the written word in the *Phaedrus* (and in the logocentric tradition of Western philosophy). Such artificial memory is said to be simply a recipe for forgetting. To the extent that the planned memoir might be read by others, it would be separated from its author, "the father of the logos"; it would be an orphan with no one to come to its aid in the event that it is questioned, misinterpreted, or abused. Barthes does not in fact write this memoir of his mother (unless we construe *Camera Lucida* as in fact being that text). Like her picture, it is for us what Derrida calls a "spectral referent." Instead, the act of poring over the family photographs leads, eventually, to a visionary encounter. But the way to the vision is not easy, for Barthes first notices how "History" separates him from his mother by dressing her in an unfamiliar costume and placing her in a different setting: "There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed differently" (CL, p. 26). Or we might describe the path to the vision as the easiest of all, because the end was not deliberately sought. For Barthes, the family photographs were initially technical objects, part of the project of artificial memory, and his attitude toward them repeats, in a different key, the fruitless classificatory activities with which his ontological quest for
the *eidos* of the photograph had begun: "I could not even say that I loved them: I was not sitting down to contemplate them, I was not engulfing myself in them. I was sorting them, but none seemed to me really 'right'" (*CL*, p. 25).

Unlike the lover in Socrates' palinode, Barthes knows from the beginning that he is seeking to reactivate a memory, but this hypomnemonic search, based on the cataloguing of old photos, presents him with the question "did I recognize her? . . . I recognized her differentially, not essentially" (*CL*, p. 27). Barthes's account of the laborious "Sisyphean" process of "straining toward the essence" seems to invoke the difficulties of Platonic or Hegelian dialectic—that is, "the labor of the negative" (as Hegel called it), which is involved in the criticism of the various possible concepts or definitions of that which we seek to know.

It is while caught up in these labors that Barthes discovered the Winter Garden photograph that revealed to him then "the truth of the face I had loved" and, on reflection, the very *eidos* of photography. Of the "truth" that Barthes finds, there is not much to be said, since it is, as he repeatedly emphasizes, a truth peculiar and particular to him; it is, he tells us, her innocence and kindness. The isolation and uniqueness of this quality is suggested by the claim that it stands in no relation to circumstances or context: "In this little girl's image I saw the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever, without her having inherited it from anyone; how could this kindness have proceeded from the imperfect parents who had loved her so badly—in short: from a family? Her kindness was specifically *out-of-play*, it belonged to no system . . ." (*CL*, p. 28).

This description of the truth of the photograph, and its position at the end of a search (a search whose end was not and could not have been clearly envisioned from the beginning) bears a certain resemblance to Socrates' account of what lies at the end of the lovers' quest. Having recognized the intimations of true beauty in and through each other, they continue their ascent when death releases them from the body. Borne aloft by their recently liq- uified wings, nourished by earthly beauty, they are able, finally, to attain a vision of that self-sufficient beauty: "Whole and unblemished also, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles we gazed at in the pure light of final revelation, pure initiates as we were . . ." (*Phaedrus*, 250). Plato and Socrates cannot *present* us
with this beauty which depends on nothing else, which is only radiant and never receptive. There is no way an embodied soul can partake of a vision that earthly ocular experiences can anticipate only by metaphor. So we have an analogical series of approximations to both journey and goal, as in the Platonic dialogues and the myths embedded in them. Now, although the Winter Garden photograph of his mother is available and could be reproduced (a number of family photographs were printed earlier in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes), Barthes does not reproduce it because "it exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture..." (CL, p. 30). It is unpresentable (to any but Barthes) for reasons just the opposite of those that make Platonic beauty unpresentable. Such a photograph demonstrates the possibility "utopically, [of] the impossible science of the unique being" (CL, p. 28).

Yet, while the Winter Garden photograph does not appear, another photograph occupies the place where we might expect to find it. In the midst of Barthes's discussion of his mother's photo the text exhibits Nadar's portrait of "his mother (or of his wife—no one knows for certain)" (CL, p. 28). The photograph by Nadar is a determinate displacement of the Winter Garden photograph. The latter is of a very young girl; the subject is identified (Barthes's book documents it as his mother), but the photographer is unknown. Nadar's subject is somewhat indeterminate (mother or wife?—and, if plausibly either of these, why not some other woman?), but the photographer is famous (Barthes reproduces three of his photographs and forthrightly declares that he judges him to be the world's greatest photographer). In all these respects the present(ed) photograph is the alternative to the absent one and so reinforces the sense of its absence. Barthes is about to announce that the essence of photography, which he discovered in this absent photograph, is just its inevitable pastness; its noema cannot be present but is always a form of absence: "that-has-been" (CL, p. 32).

Barthes's text here reverses Plato's, in the way that the Nadar photograph reverses the Winter Garden one. Plato, whose fictional Socrates criticizes writing, knows that he writes; his own text must escape the critique by showing how it is distinguished from and superior to the written speech of Socrates recited by Phaedrus. In that respect, the entire Phaedrus is a palinode that
answers the criticism of writing it contains. But in order to construct such a pallinode, Plato must make a gesture in the direction of effacing the characteristics of writing from the work. It must seem to be free-flowing, living speech; as it turns out, it is a dialogue that might easily be performed without showing the script to the audience, although the script of Lysias from which Phaedrus reads would indeed be in evidence as an object of ridicule and parody.

The machinery of Barthes's writing is out in the open. His text is divided into numbered sections, which force upon the reader the sense of spacing; like Nietzsche's aphoristic writing, these spaced, fragmented pages inhibit an idealizing tendency that would make the text a transparent presentation of a continuous, integrated body of thought. More pointedly (this is its punctum), the text is marked by the photographs of quite material (human) bodies. The contrast is not one that could be found in just any book of photographs. Color photographs, unlike these starkly black-and-white ones, might be used to create the impression of a continuous, well-integrated presentation. Like the orphan logos whose fate is lamented by Socrates, these pictures appear in the text without benefit of paternal protection. The sense of the photograph is beyond the photographer's supervision; Barthes defines the punctum as a dimension of meaning that arises only because of the unnameable disturbance it provokes in a viewer. Whether the photographer intended this punctum seems irrelevant; the punctum must be mine (Barthes's studium/punctum distinction might be illuminated by thinking of it in terms of Heidegger's contrast of the existential modes of das Man and Jemeinigkeit). When Barthes characterizes the punctum as "what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there" (CL, p. 23), this "already there" is not a function of an authorial intention but a feature of the constituted photographic text.

Barthes's book, then, is a kind of rewriting of the Platonic narrative in a space where the metaphysics of presence has been put into question. Love, desire, and discourse are rethought in terms of mechanism, an irreversible pastness, and a hesitation before all dialectical resolutions that would produce higher unities out of differences. We have just seen that the generation of meaning that occurs when Barthes reads photographs cannot be construed on the model of that infinitely open-ended dialogue that
aims at the whole, the totality which would include all valid discourse. More poignant, perhaps, is the exclusion of eye-contact, which is for Plato the bodily analogue of the contact of souls through language. As Socrates tells it in his palinode, love begins with a vision of a beautiful other; in order for love to grow wings it is necessary that the other return my gaze and that a reciprocal communication of the eyes be initiated: “Just as wind or echo rebounds from smooth, hard surfaces and returns whence it came, so the stream of beauty flows back again into the beautiful beloved through his eyes, the natural inlet to the soul. There it comes and excites the soul, watering the outlets of the wings and quickening them to sprout; so in his turn the soul of the loved one is filled with love” (Phaedrus, 255).

But the photographed subject is not looking at anyone who is looking at the photograph. Because he is seen without seeing, he feels the gap between “himself” and his image: “Photography transformed subject into object . . .” (CL, p. 5). What makes photography distinctive is just this power of generating a look that meets no other look:

That is the paradox: how can one have an intelligent air without thinking about anything intelligent, just by looking into this piece of black plastic? It is because the look, eliding the vision, seems held back by something interior. The lower-class boy who holds a newborn puppy against his cheek (Kertesz, 1928), looks into the lens with his sad, jealous, fearful eyes: what pitiable, lacerating pensiveness? In fact, he is looking at nothing; he retains within himself his love and his fear: that is the Look.

Now the Look, if it insists (all the more, if it lasts, if it traverses, with the photograph, Time)—the Look is always potentially crazy: it is at once the effect of truth and the effect of madness. (CL, p. 46)

This observation, it might be noted, is accompanied on the facing page by a photograph of Mondrian staring frontally (crazily?) into the camera.

Barthes’s most radical inversion of the Platonic story has to do with a transformation of the meaning of madness. For Plato and Barthes alike, the gifts of madness are to be contrasted with the banality of convention, yet in all other respects they part com-
pany. Platonic madness, the madness of love as philosophy, involves an opening up and exchange of looks that eventually leads to the common apprehension of that which is impersonal and independent of your look, my look, or our exchange of looks. The madness of photography, Barthes suggests, has to do with its absolute attachment to the particular. Photography can be tamed by making it into an art (arts are respectable and intelligible), or by its banalization in a gregarious sea of images (as in the United States, Barthes says), or it will be "mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time" (CL, p. 48).

What is the "very letter of Time"? It is the noema of photography, "that-has-been," a past that is fixed and separated from us. But because of this ineluctable pastness, the "very letter" is also death, if we are able to understand death in a rigorously undialectical way. This at least is what Barthes first claims to read in the Winter Garden photograph and then, on a larger scale, comes to understand in reading the place of photography within our culture. The first realization coincides with the attitude of the Greeks (the tragic and not the Platonic Greeks, we should add): they "entered into Death backward: what they had before them was their past" (CL, p. 29). And so Barthes, the observer of (his mother’s) death, began looking at her more recent photographs and arrived finally at a vision of her as changed into herself. Here Barthes alludes to a poem of Mallarmé’s that is simultaneously reminiscent of Hegel’s principle that Wesen ist was gewesen ist. Essence is what has been or, in Barthes’s phrase, "that-has-been." This reminiscence of one of the great thinkers of life and death should not appear arbitrary here, for it is just in connection with the discovery of the mother, and of photography’s essential connection with death, that Barthes confronts the philosophical tradition with his experience of photography:

If, as so many philosophers have said, Death is the harsh victory of the race, if the particular dies for the satisfaction of the universal, if after having been reproduced as other than himself, the individual dies, having thereby denied and transcended himself, I who had not procreated, I had, in her very illness, engendered my mother. Once she
was dead I no longer had any reason to attune myself to
the progress of the superior Life Force (the race, the spe-
cies). My particularity could never again universalize it-
self (unless utopically, by writing, whose project hence-
forth would become the unique goal of my life). From now
on I could do no more than await my total undialectical
death. (CL, p. 29)

The philosophical thought that Barthes summarizes here is
indeed classical. For both Plato and Aristotle, the reproduction
of the species is the normal way of achieving a kind of immortality
(more difficult ways involve the production of immortal works or
attaining a philosophical contemplation of the eternal). Tragedy
turns on the fact that these forms of immortality are highly frag-
ile and that the different forms may interfere with one another.
So on Aristotle’s analysis it is Oedipus, the man of knowledge,
who, ignorant of his own parentage, begets children who must
also be the end of his line of generation. But normally death
is dialectical in the sense that the individual is negated and
transcended by the species. It is Hegel (from whom, ultimately,
Barthes borrows this language of universality, particularity, nega-
tion, and transcendence) who formulated the principle that the
child is the death of its parents. But if there is no transcendence
through the begetting of another generation, then death is un-
dialectical. In the metaphysical tradition that links Plato to
Hegel, the possibility of a particular failure to participate in the
dialectical process is always recognized. Hence tragedy, which
plays in the gap between the ideal and the actual. Yet tragedy re-
forces the ideal because its failures are unintelligible without it.

Despite Barthes’s having opened the philosophical passage
above with a reference to the Greeks, we might understand him
as substituting the very modern cultural fact of photography for
the traditional art of tragedy. The substitution supposes that
there is indeed a place to be filled. On the one hand, Barthes has
explicitly undertaken the philosophical quest for the *eidos* of
what we may call an art (despite his reservations about the nor-
malizing tendency of that designation). On the other, it could be
noted that the philosophical quest, because of the way in which it
requires narrative, must exist in uneasy relationship with those
arts or forms of storytelling whose claims to truthfulness it would like to dismiss. Photography is what tragedy becomes when life and death are thought nondialectically.

Here Barthes joins forces with the anti-Hegelian movement of recent French thought. Hegel takes tragedy (and to some extent comedy) to be the most philosophical of arts, by which death and conflict are given a meaning. Antigone, Hegel’s choice as the greatest tragedy and greatest work of art, can be given a detailed structural and dialectical analysis, as in the Phenomenology of Spirit, in which it is shown that death is intelligible as the only possible intersection of the worlds of men and women (at least in a society like early Greece that thinks of natural distinctions as equivalent to cultural categories). But for Barthes the photograph is an unvarnished intrusion of death: “... if dialectic is that thought which masters the corruptible and converts the negation of death into the power to work, then the photograph is undialectical: it is a denatured theater where death cannot ‘be contemplated,’ reflected and interiorized; or again: the dead theater of Death, the foreclosure of the Tragic, excludes all purification, all catharsis” (CL, p. 37).

The life of spirit, Hegel had said, grandly and ambitiously, “is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.” But where, in our culture, can we find an art or activity that acknowledges and surmounts death in this way? Have we, perhaps, already witnessed the death of tragedy? Isn’t that death part of the same movement that has called into question both the pantragic, dialectical conception of history and the dialectical interpretation of artistic and cultural forms? Yet Barthes still will insist, despite such changes, that “death must be somewhere in a society.” Our form of death is a “flat” one, purged of teleological narrative, of religion, and of ritual: “Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print” (CL, p. 38). The earliest works of art in Hegel’s grand narrative, the Lectures on Aesthetics, are the monuments, designed to immortalize, which were erected by the Egyptians and Indians. Now, Barthes observes, we have renounced the monument and have replaced it with the “flat death” of photography.
But photography is not simply about death. The Cartesian turn taken by Barthes’s inquiry when he decided (provisionally) to adopt the standpoint of the ego has now become a Heideggerian insistence on the ineluctability of his own death. Thinking of the Winter Garden photograph from which he derives the essence of photography, Barthes finds that it “says” very little and so he cannot penetrate to its heart or transform it into philosophical or critical discourse (his criticism and his philosophy will be concerned with this very lack). But, he adds, “The only ‘thought’ I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting” (CL, p. 38). It is as if both the cultural studium of Barthes’s text and the punctum of the photographs that accentuate and interrupt it tend toward the impossible speech act “I am dead” that Barthes had explored in Poe and Derrida had found implicit in Husserlian phenomenology. As the latter suggests in his meditation on the insistent indexical character of the sign: “The appearing of the I to itself in the I am is thus originally a relation with its own possible disappearance. Therefore I am originally means I am mortal.” That is what Barthes discovers in photography, and it is a discovery that both deepens and renders irreversible the experiment of undertaking a subjective approach that he had embarked upon under the sign of Nietzsche.

It is, then, perhaps more than a coincidence that Barthes’s concluding rhapsody in his palinode in praise of photographic madness again appeals to Nietzsche’s example. This time, however, it is not the cool Nietzsche who inventively suggests new procedures and methods of inquiry, but the mad Nietzsche who is the (Dionysian) victim of a scandalous love. The love awakened by the photograph, Barthes confesses, resounds with the music of pity (the temptation against which Nietzsche argued and thought). In the photographs that he loved, Barthes now sees, “I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity’s sake” (CL, p. 47).

In this text so replete with philosophical citations and allusions (I have only been able to indicate a portion of its philosophical economy), why is the final philosophical snapshot devoted to
the madness of Nietzsche? No doubt the reference is overdetermined. Nietzsche appeared first to authorize a kind of experimental phenomenology; he reappeared in the palinode to confirm the significance that Barthes accords to the Winter Garden photograph: "All the world's photographs formed a Labyrinth. I knew that at the center of this Labyrinth I would find nothing but this sole picture, fulfilling Nietzsche's prophecy 'A labyrinthine man never seeks the truth, but only his Ariadne'" (CL, p. 73).

We recall that Ariadne herself was not at the center of the labyrinth but supplied the thread which allowed the explorer to map its penetralia and return to the point of entrance. Barthes confirms this by explaining that the prized photograph was not the key to a "secret thing (monster or treasure)" but invaluable for its power to "tell me what constituted that thread which drew me toward photography" (CL, p. 30). Beyond truth, then, there is the madness of love; but that love must be understood in relation to a pre-Platonic myth that valorizes the specific person who is its object and that, rather than opening out into the cosmic spaces of the eternal forms, is set in a very complex interior, in a cave lacking the illumination of the sun. We remember that Barthes's discovery occurs at night, at home, in the dark time of the year, by the artificial illumination of a lamp. If Barthes wishes to construct an anti-Platonic palinode, then Nietzschean madness will substitute for the mania praised by Socrates. The madness of love for the absolute particular replaces that of the lovers who transcend the visually beautiful. Perhaps we shall think, too, of the contrast between the despised, beaten work horse of Turin and the team of horses (one noble, one base) driven by the soul in the Platonic myth. The possibility is reinforced by the Kertesz photograph of a young boy with a small puppy that appears on the page opposite the prose section where Barthes cites Nietzsche's episode with the horse.

Socrates concludes his palinode by enumerating the benefits of that philosophical pursuit which is the gift of a certain kind of madness. If Barthes brings his to an end by remembering Nietzsche's collapse, it is both to suggest a different form of madness and perhaps to situate the madness of photography within our age. If Barthes is not only constructing a palinode but also narrating the story of his philosophical quest, then we should not be surprised to find that that narrative, like all of its classical
philosophical predecessors, must include a history of philosophy itself. In the largest and most ambitious metanarrative of philosophy's history, that is, Heidegger's story, the Western obsession with presence (a kind of madness or *hybris*) is bounded by the figures of Plato and Nietzsche. What begins with the Platonic attempt to discern the possibility of total presence in the ideality of the forms ends with Nietzsche's celebration of the will to power, conceived as a generalization of what is taken to be most pressingly present to us subjectively or personally.

In this Heideggerian story, Nietzsche's final madness is emblematic of the madness (a grand, tragic, heroic madness no doubt) which has animated philosophy since Plato. Much depends on the question of whether such a metanarrative of philosophy's history can be established and maintained. To the extent that it can be, the individual philosophical quest can be anchored in a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Plato, Descartes, Nietzsche—for example). But suppose that Nietzsche is to be recast, to follow the letter and image of Barthes's text, as the philosopher of the photographic epoch and its madness. Would the story then be skewed, interrupted, and deprived of its closure? If death is present in our culture by means of photography, then perhaps Nietzsche is the thinker of that kind of death, the thinker of the century that, as Barthes tells us, paradoxically invented both photography and history (*CL*, p. 38). This madness, the philosophical madness that would replace Platonic-dialectical madness, would join death and historicity with the specificity of "that-has-been." Perhaps we can hear some of that madness in Zarathustra's fragments of a lover's discourse that appear under the title "The Tomb Song":

O you visions and apparitions! O all you glances [*Blicke*] of love, you divine moments [*Augenblicke*]! How quickly you died. Today I recall you as my dead ones. From you, my dearest friends among the dead, a sweet scent comes to me, loosening heart and tears . . . I must now call you after your disloyalty, you divine glances and moments: I have not yet learned any other name. Verily, you have died too soon for me, you fugitives. Yet you did not flee from me, nor did I flee from you: we are equally innocent in our disloyalty.⁶
Zarathustra grieves for the divine moment, for the Augenblick—literally the blink of an eye, the time that it takes to capture a snapshot of experience and to transform it into a memory. In the blinking of the eye, can we hear this sound of the camera? “Life/Death: the paradigm is reduced to a simple click, the one separating the initial pose from the final print” (CL, p. 92). The other, equally mad side of this love of the dead and entombed moment is called the thought of eternal recurrence. But in “The Tomb Song,” which is not yet able to speak (or sing) that thought, we see death generalized, deprived of any ritual and religion other than that which consists in reviewing the snapshots or blinkings of the eye that are the traces of the dead.

“To philosophize is to learn to die.” Barthes had supposed that he was engaged in a philosophical quest for the eidos of photography. He had read philosophy (and everything else) and had become a writer, a critic, a teacher, a moraliste; but never before had he set out to “do philosophy,” that is, to construct a method and to articulate a set of categories from the ground up. He began by noting, like Descartes, the paucity of the literary and critical resources—that is, the various rhetorical and empirical classifications of photography; but the idea of continuing along the lines of a “pure” phenomenology (that is, one independent of the inquirer’s personal situation and a textual tradition) collapses almost as soon as it is formulated. Doing philosophy becomes not the hedonistic project assumed in the ode but the meditation on love and death of the palinode. But in the photographic age the classical formula of Socrates and Montaigne must be rethought and reinscribed. It is not simply traditional wisdom that Barthes acquires and displays through his confessional narrative and the photographs in the text. As Derrida suggested in the case of Husserl, death is no longer to be conceived as an isolated narrative event, but as the ineluctable accompaniment of every “I am.” It is as if we were to rewrite Kant’s thesis “the ‘I think’ must be able to accompany every act of consciousness” by substituting an “I am mortal” for the cogito. This new form of the “I think” must be both unique and absolutely general. It is as available as the family book of photographs.

It is this pluralizing power of Barthes’s deaths and of his dead (ones) that is articulated in Derrida’s essay “Les morts de
Roland Barthes.” One might describe this reading of death as a
death announcement by postcard: Barthes supplies pictures and
text, while we are, if not the addressees, at least its recipients. The
letter that bears the news of death is no longer delivered in a
black-bordered envelope by special messenger; it may turn up in
the magazine or newspaper. But who reads, who receives, these
letters? Are the readers the “proper” recipients or does a certain
chance come into play in both receipt and reading? Surely in con-
struing Camera Lucida as a being engaged with the question of
how one “does philosophy” I have assimilated it all too easily to
the cultural studium of my professional activity, even if I have ac-
cented it by the punctum of a more specific and personal interest
in certain texts of Plato, Hegel, or Nietzsche. Not having known
Barthes outside of his texts, having never met him or heard him
lecture, I am freed in a certain way to take up his postcards as I
choose. In any case, I continue to read Barthes, especially the
texts that I have not read before, and so he remains on my hori-
zon; in a certain sense he is still alive, for me.

While writing this essay, word came to me of the death of my
Uncle Byron. I don’t have the right picture of Bye and there would
be no point in showing it if I had. I hadn’t seen him for over
dozens years, since my father’s funeral. The death of the uncle,
the last and youngest of three brothers, ought, on the basis of
Barthes’s meditations on genealogy and dialectics, to force me fi-
nally to think of myself as part of the older generation with a re-
sponsibility for family tradition (news, gossip) and ritual. Unlike
Barthes, I’ve married and fathered children, so my death could be
tempered by dialectics, aufgehoben in the continuity of family or
race, and I could, in good conscience, make common cause with a
Hegelian philosophy of historical teleology (with suitable modi-
fications by Kojève or Sartre). But Barthes’s deaths are also deaths
of and for that studium, philosophy, which, as he reminds us, has
never really been far from death.

What I recall most about Uncle Bye was his introducing me,
along with a small army of cousins, to the ritual and mystery of
the movies. His occupation allowed him to produce private show-
ings on the birthdays of some of us children (and once he even
saw to it that I met one of my favorite stars). In that projection-
studio one saw the praxis of showing the movie; Bye could choose
what was to be shown, decide when the lights were to go off or on,
set the stage. The movies in this form gave us a feeling of participating in a festive ritual, presided over by the kindly uncle who could arrange the entire scene with his wizardly powers. At that time I didn’t ask what the movies were—that is, I didn’t wonder about their eidos. When I came to think of myself as a philosopher, it was literature in its print and its solitude that I thought one might try to understand someday. Barthes distinguished photography from the cinema, perhaps because the latter nourishes a certain image of continuous narrative; certainly it can be a form of normalizing and domesticating the mad possibilities of photography. Of course, there are other possibilities, including, most obviously, the introduction of the punctum of the still photograph into the moving studium of the film. In Blow-Up or Under Fire the device is used in connection with deaths that are either captured or foreshadowed by the click and whirl of the camera.

So now I have suffered a kind of interruption with the death of that uncle who initiated me into the culture of the movies. My memories will be punctuated, my faith in Aristotelian or Hegelian stories subject to new forms of interrogation. Perhaps philosophical stories—and there are so many of them, so many more than one could admit when I first undertook to submit myself to that discipline—will appear both more unavoidable and less coherent to me than they had previously. They will be fragmented, it seems, into philosophemes and juxtaposed with nonphilosophy. They will be closed off by the horizon of the aphorism (the horismos), while opened up to language and history. In any case, this is what I read in Barthes’s text, never intended for me, but appearing all the same in the mail.

Notes

