

Writing Photography: The Grandmother in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the Mother in *Camera Lucida*,
and Especially, the Mother in *The Lover*¹

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In Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, and, especially, in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*, some photographs are imagined and described, but withheld from reproduction as images. Such an imagined photograph engenders the narrative of *The Lover*; the narrator describes a photograph of herself at fifteen and a half as she stands on a ferry crossing the Mekong, but it is a photograph "never taken" (13). The narrator of *The Lover* says that "the image doesn't exist. . . . It never was detached or removed from all the rest" (10). Such imagined, or taken but withheld, photos belong to what Madeleine Borgomano calls "virtual photography"; in this study I examine the effects and implications of virtual photography of maternal figures in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, and especially, Duras's *The Lover*.

As with actually reproduced photographs, such virtual photographs as we find in Proust, Barthes, and Duras imply a factual referent. As with actual photographs, virtual photographs transform human referents into mortified objects; both actual and virtual photography "freeze" human beings as static images. Photographs reify the human being as object of the gaze. At the same time as photography "kills" its object, it also resists death by mourning and immortalizing the object, by taking its subjects-as-objects out of history, time, and the processes of decay and death. Virtual photographs of mothers and grandmothers can

be “used” to figure a loss of and separation from the maternal; as with actual photographs, virtual photographs both express and induce recurring grief over the “death” of the maternal other. The process of photography itself interpolates a distance between the photographer and the photographed person/object. By textually ascribing use and meaning to photographs that are not reproduced, however, Proust, Barthes, and Duras contain the use of the photographs, and constrain the readers’ interpretations of them in ways that reproducing described photographs could not. This strategy protects the text from the uncontrollable excesses and hermeneutic possibilities of the image *qua* image; describing the image allows the narrator to position him or herself as a creator of absolutes, as God, while it simultaneously protects words themselves from the potentially ravaging, silencing, subverting power of images. Writing photography, then, privileges the voice and writing above the image, even as it acknowledges the frailty of words, the necessary failures of attempts to represent a human life.

Proust, Barthes, and especially Duras create virtual photographs of maternal figures. Proust’s narrator describes his photographer’s-eye-view of his ill and aging grandmother. Proust’s narrator “takes” a photo of her before she knows she is being looked at.² After returning from Doncières, Proust’s narrator, on first seeing his grandmother, reports that “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” (I: 815). Proust’s narrator describes his nightmarish view of his grandmother as a “photograph,” and positions himself as “only the witness, the observer . . . the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer” (I: 815). Mary Price calls this photograph of the grandmother a “metaphoric photograph” (155). In what Beryl Schlossman calls Barthes’s “articulations of the relations between language and desire,” in all his writings, Schlossman contends, “the voice of Proust can be heard” (144). Barthes indeed acknowledges Proust’s influence on his meditation on subject photography throughout *Camera Lucida* (45, 63, 75,

82, 105, 116); like Proust, Barthes also describes a photograph he does not reproduce. Barthes will not let the reader see a photo, taken in the Winter Garden, of his mother at five years old; he asserts: "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden photo. It exists only for me" (73). Like Proust and Barthes, Duras describes a photograph, but does not reproduce it as an image.

The narrator of *The Lover* reports that, one day, as the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* does his grandmother, she "photographs" her mother. She says:

I looked at my mother, I could hardly recognize her. And then, in a kind of sudden vanishing, a sudden fall, I all at once couldn't recognize her at all. There, suddenly, close to me, was someone sitting in my mother's place who wasn't my mother, who looked like her but had never been her. . . . There was a youthfulness about her features, her expression, a happiness which she was repressing out of what must have been habitual reticence. . . . My terror came from the fact that she was sitting just where my mother had been sitting when the substitution took place, from the fact that I knew no one else was there in her place, but that the identity irreplaceable by any other had disappeared and I was powerless to make it come back, make it start to come back. There was no longer anything there to inhabit her image. (85-86)

This passage echoes the passage from Proust; both narrators "take" photographs of strangers sitting in a maternal figure's place.

It is not surprising to find reminders of either Proust or Barthes in Duras's novel. *The Lover* has a hypo/hypertextual relationship with works both outside of and within Duras's *œuvre*. Although he admits that Duras reports disliking Barthes in *La Vie matérielle* (*Practicalities*) and Yann Andréa Steiner, Leslie Hill contends that Barthes's work, especially *Le Plaisir du texte*, influences Duras's struggle to represent bodies and desire (29), and, Borgomano discovers an implicit hypo/hypertextual relationship specifically between *Camera Lucida* and *The Lover* (74-77). Borgomano classifies the withheld or imagined photography of both *Camera Lucida* and *The Lover* as part of a "virtual photography" (74).

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” (6). Barthes abhors the nightmarish descent into thinghood that photography impels; he accuses the photographer, any photographer, of turning his or her subject into an object both during the process

of photography and in the product of photography; he laments that "photography transformed subject into object" (13), and that, "when I discover myself 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" (14) to be classified in files and opened to misinterpretation like any other object, like a body in a morgue.

Photography kills by objectifying the subject; Barthes discovers that "Death is the *eidos* of [the] photograph" (15). In his meditation on photography, Barthes employs Lacan's model of vision (Iversen, cited in Melville 113 n. 2), especially Lacan's theorization of the gaze. Like the process of taking photographs, and like the photograph itself, the gaze frames, immobilizes, and objectifies its "subject"; both the gaze and photography reify subjects as object. Barthes substitutes the still camera for the gaze by inverting a Lacanian metaphor. Lacan describes the mechanism of the gaze as photography when he writes: "the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which . . . I am photo-graphed" (106); Kaja Silverman persuasively argues that the still camera is "a central metaphor for conceptualizing the [Lacanian] gaze" (198). The referent becomes the reified object of the gaze as camera; the referent is stilled, "frozen," in the photograph.

In *The Lover*, Duras's narrator cries out in order "to crack the ice in which the whole scene [of the stranger in her mother's chair] was fatally freezing" (86). 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, or position. To become total-image is to become "death in person" (14), 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 image is immune to the effects of time and aging. While Duras's narrator speaks of her face as ravaged by drink and age, even before she drinks or reaches eighteen, in the virtual photograph of herself on the Mekong ferry, her face remains fifteen and a half, unravaged. The image suspends the 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 says that portrait photographs of force him to encounter "myself as other" (12); photographs of himself make him feel his doubleness and inauthenticity: his strangeness to himself. Barthes also reports that, sorting through photographs of his mother, he sees many in which "it is not she, and yet it was no one else" (66); Barthes borrows a quote from Proust to describe the painful inadequacy of these "photographs of a being before which one recalls less of that being than by merely thinking of him or her (Proust)" (63). 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 (63-65). 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 toward the essence of her identity, I was struggling among images partially true, and therefore totally false" (66). 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 virtual photograph of his grandmother, and in Duras's virtual portrait of Marie Legrand, a grandmother and a mother become unrecognizable strangers; these virtual photographs both announce and manifest the advent of the maternal as other, as object. For both the Proustian and the Durasien narrators, as for Barthes, to encounter the grandmother/mother as other is to lacerate the self. For the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* and the narrator of *The Lover*, the maternal is not yet fully other, but still a part of the self. At the moment he "takes" his photograph, Proust's narrator still feels as if my grandmother was still myself" (I: 815). Before "taking" the

virtual photograph of the stranger substituted for her mother, the narrator of *The Lover* suffers a deep ambivalence about “my mother, my love . . . [who] deserves to be locked up, beaten, killed” (23); yet, she says to her Chinese lover: “I couldn’t leave my mother yet without dying of grief” (40). Both Proust’s and Duras’s narrators consistently enact moments of abjection, a recurring moment when the child is neither fully object nor fully subject, and when the mother can be neither self nor other, as Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* describes it. While trying to separate from the maternal figure, Proust’s and Duras’s narrators find themselves incapable of, and ambivalent about, doing so. Valérie Baisnée, writing about Duras’s narrator, notes that the girl’s “separation from the mother . . . is not reconstituted as a historical finished moment but as a scenario dramatized and enacted various times as if never completely over” (44-45); Proust’s narrator also replays the terrible, necessary, and anxiety-producing separation from his grandmother. When he is away from her at Doncières, 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” (I: 811). Like the attempted phone call from Doncières, the virtual photograph of the Proustian narrator’s grandmother also figures the momentary, terrible and necessary separation from the maternal (Price 151) by representing, as does the virtual photograph of Marie Legrand, a familiar, intimate woman as a stranger. The virtual photograph kills Marie Legrand by supplanting her identity with another, almost unrecognizable, identity.

The virtual photograph of Marie Legrand figures the recurring moment of separation between mother and daughter as matricide. The narrator of *The Lover* wants to write, but she cannot fully become a writer, or a fully desiring woman, until she fully separates from her mother, who wants her to get a degree in mathematics. After she decides that she can avoid the math degree, the girl says to her mother that “what I wanted more than anything else was to write, nothing else but that, nothing” (22). Marie Legrand feels an imminent leave-taking in the daughter’s self-assertion; immediately after her announcement, the narrator discovers that her mother knows “I’ll be the first to leave.

There are still a few years to wait before she loses me, loses this one of her children . . . this one, she knows, one day she'll go, she'll manage to escape" (22). The mother envies the girl's independence, the daughter's discovery that she can make herself into a writer; becoming a writer, like wearing a man's hat, is "a choice of the mind . . . deliberate" (13). This protracted and wrenchingly painful escape from her mother enables the narrator to write; indeed, she writes best about her family and her mother when they are distant, unvisited for a long time, dead. The narrator, having grown into an adult woman and a writer, reports that:

They're dead now, my mother and my two brothers . . . I've left them. In my head I no longer have the scent of her skin, nor in my eyes the color of her eyes. I can't remember her voice . . . her laughter I can't hear any more—neither her laughter nor her cries. It's over, I don't remember. That's why I can write about her so easily now, so long, so fully. She's become just something you write without difficulty, cursive writing (28-29).

The mother's literal death, as well as her figurative death in a virtual photograph, enables the manipulation of symbols, the woman's transgressive entrance into the realm of the Lacanian Symbolic; the separation from and death(s) of the mother make writing easy.

Such intimate knowledge of the people, as people, who have been supplanted by strangers, causes both Proust's and Duras's narrators to experience vertiginous separation not only from the Maternal, but from a specific maternal relative. Barthes protests against reducing the person to a place-holder in a model of family relationships, writing that "in the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother . . . to the Mother-as-Good, she added that grace of being an individual soul" (75). Because the Proustian narrator knows his grandmother, as an individual, so intimately, he is shocked to find an other in her place; Duras's narrator is frightened and rendered speechless by the metamorphosis of her mother into an other. The girl's virtual photograph of her mother in *The Lover* occludes the qualities by which the girl usually recognizes her mother: "a despair . . . unalloyed" and "deep dependency about living" (14). In the virtual photograph,

the stranger who is still Marie Legrand looks “beautiful,” “youthful,” and, most startlingly, “happy” (85); she appears untouched by the despair that characterizes her, and thus like a stranger to her daughter. Proust writes of a “pious tenderness” which usually “hide[s] our eyes from what they ought never to behold” (1: 815) when we look 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 (26). The Proustian narrator’s virtual photograph 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, circumstances). Only love, Barthes says (12), can rescue the beloved person from the photographic image; only the Proustian narrator’s “pious tenderness” can reclothe an old woman in the *habillement* of his grandmother; only her daughter’s anguished cry of abject love/hate can call Marie Legrand back to her despair. Barthes’s mourning for his lost mother, his attempt to recall her from the dead by finding some photograph that “punctures” his heart with some detail, impels his entire meditation on photography. The mourner’s cry, the viewer’s love, liberates into subjecthood again the object of the dissecting, immobilizing, photographic gaze.

In *Remembrance of Things Past* and *The Lover*, however, this deathly gaze emanates from those who have to rescue a beloved/hated, and familiar woman from it. Both the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* and the narrator of *The Lover* position themselves as photographers, as possessors of the gaze. By standing apart as photographers, they create the very abyss their photographs figure; by making strange the familiar, by supplanting images for individuals, and by making objects out of subjects, and both the Proustian young man and the Durasien girl participate in matricide. The murder of a 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 grand-

mother, after which he reports feeling as if "it was already a beloved ghost that I had allowed to lose herself in a ghostly world" (I: 812), foreshadows his increasing inability to re-call 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" (I: 957). She becomes increasingly other to him even as he tries to repair the damage of his violent and inevitable "othering" of her. Unlike the Proustian narrator's grandmother, however, Marie Legrand can be called; the daughter can repair the photographed, objectified, falsified, suspended, murdered mother. After "taking" the virtual photograph of her mother, the girl is terrified that "the identity irreplaceable by any other had disappeared and I was powerless to make it come back" (85-86); she cries out. This cry is that of the child who is ripping herself from her mother even as she wants to reclaim the mother as her self. It is a calling out to the lost one that gets connected; the daughter's cry cracks and thaws the terrible photograph in which the daughter herself had frozen her mother; Duras writes: "I did cry out. A faint cry, a cry for help, to crack the ice in which my mother was fatally freezing. My mother turned her head" (86). Marie Legrand "comes back" from the death of the photograph; her daughter's cry resurrects the mother from her daughter's matricide. Marie Legrand's return to her mad, unhappy, usual self saves her daughter from a consequence of her crime: going mad.

In this scene, it is because she engages in photography that Duras's narrator flirts with madness. Barthes writes of "the profound madness of Photography"; photography both exhibits and induces "a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (as in certain nightmares)" (13). Duras's narrator articulates the madness inherent in photography when she remembers: "There was no longer anything there to inhabit her [the mother's] image. I went mad in full possession of my senses" (86). With her eyes open, the girl sees photographic evidence that her mother can become a stranger whose image the mother then vacates. The photo both tells the truth and lies: someone who is both her mother and a stranger inhabits the mother's place; that someone exits the image, disappears; the image of someone becomes an image of absence, of no one there. The hollowness of the image

of her mother as a stranger induces madness; her madness calls out to her lost mother even as it makes her again intimately akin to her mother who is normally, "clearly mad . . . from birth. [Mad] in the blood" (30). The narrator of *The Lover* "catches" the contagious madness of her mother; she goes mad herself when she "takes a picture," not of a mother who is not there, who cannot be photographed, but of the paradox and madness of photography itself.

The narrator's photograph, even as she "takes" it, represents Marie Legrand, as the narrator knows her, less and less adequately. The narrator here rediscovers 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. Duras'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 *œuvre* throughout which Duras attempts, fails, and attempts again to represent unrepresentable lives. The narrator of *The Lover* signals her continuing attempts, and failures, to tell the story of her family, her lovers, her desires, her life. She mentions actual photos of her son and her mother, and the text often "reads" as if the narrator is flipping through a photo album. Indeed, Borgomano reads *The Lover* as a companion work to *Les lieux de Marguerite Duras* (69), a composite work including two television documentaries featuring places important to and commented upon by Duras, which documentaries provided the text for a published collection of photographs (Hill 13-14). Unlike Duras's many films and the album of photographs, *The Lover* describes images rather than reproducing them; the novel prioritizes writing over the reproduction of actual images in the struggle to represent. Duras often sets writing or voices against images in her films and shows what Hill calls "the unrepresentable gap between image and word" (113), but she often positions writing as the category of representation that contains films and images; in *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, Duras says that "In the image, you already write. Film is written" (qtd. in Borgomano, 74, my translation). In *The Lover*, Duras subsumes images into writing; like Proust and Barthes before her, she withholds, refuses

to reproduce,³ describes photographic images: she writes photography.

Duras privileges words over actual images in *The Lover*; she believes in what Hill calls "the transgressive, magical function of writing" and that "writing is a radically transgressive activity beyond proscription, morality or theory" (22). The narrator of *The Lover* expresses the opinions of her creator about the transgressiveness of writing: she claims, "if writing isn't, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing . . . if it's not, each time, all contraries confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement" (8). Writing is an adventure into the unknowable; Duras's privileging of words does not guarantee that words represent a life better than images do. *The Lover* 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 Lover*, in moments of what Borgomano calls "l'autohypertextualité" (68), reminds us that she has, as a writer, repeatedly tried and failed to represent her life, and that this attempt is itself failing to represent that life. The narrator muses: "I've written a good deal about the members of my family . . . and I skirted around them, skirted around all those things without really tackling them" (7). She says that her present writing is "talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth [as she has written about before], of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried" (8). She summarizes these failed attempts to represent a human life, musing, "In the books I've written about my childhood . . . I've never written, though I thought I wrote" (25). For this narrator, writing is a continuing struggle, as Beckett puts it, to "fail better" at representing the unrepresentable. The narrator's life, pleasure, love affairs, and family remain impossible to represent; the narrator remarks that "the story of my life does not exist. Does not exist. There's no center to it. No line" (8); such a life is unrepresentable in conventional narrative terms or even in words. Writing about her family and about her life is writing about "the hidden stretches" and is writing "on the brink of silence" (25), attempts to speak "silence, the slow travail of my whole life" (25). No matter how

hard she tries, love and hatred remain "beyond my reach" (25), beyond representation.

To write photography, to make photographic images virtual, then, is not to choose more adequate over less adequate representation, but to contain and tame the excess of images. The narrator of *The Lover* not only enters the Symbolic by writing photography, but she puts herself in the position of the Father, of God, of the creator of absolutes, when she describes photographs that do not exist, such as the virtual photo of her mother and the virtual photograph of herself on a ferry, about which she says that it's to "its failure to have been created that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of being, of representing an absolute" (10). The writer who describes such a nonexistent photograph maintains control of its interpretation and its use. As Sontag reminds us, the meaning of a photograph is its use (106); Price argues that description directs the viewer's observation, and thus her or his use, of a photograph. This argument 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 virtual photography, such as Proust, Barthes, and Duras, assume that the image *qua* image 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; Duras's narrator likes it that two photos, one of herself, and one of her mother, do not exist. Writing photography thus not only protects the image from misinterpretation and misuse, but also shields frail writing itself from the force of the reproduced image. Proust, Barthes, and Duras save images of maternal relatives from direct exposure to the gaze of the viewer and from the *studium* into which photographs can fall even as they rescue writing from images that threaten to overwhelm it. Virtual photographs of a grandmother and two mothers, 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. In Proust, Barthes, and Duras, a grandmother and two mothers thus become images in

photographs even as they don't; it is this paradox that makes specific maternal figures, as Duras's narrator contends, into absolutes.

Notes

1. This paper is dedicated to Evie Newman.
2. Mary Price's discussion of photography reminded me of the Proustian narrator's virtual photograph of his grandmother.
3. By refusing to reproduce photographs, Duras echoes her other explicit statements about a larger "politics of refusal." In a series of interviews with Xavière Gauthier called *Woman to Woman (Les Parleuses)*, for instance, Duras often makes statements such as: "Usually a refusal of society is something revolutionary; it's political, . . . completely political, but not devised. A refusal of society is violent; it expresses itself through a departure, a refusal, a given action" (35). At other times during these interviews, however, Duras views refusal as akin to a kind of revolutionary passivity, alienation, and marginalization rather than as a decision or act. See Hill, pp.21-39, for a thorough and salient exposition of what he calls "the performative rather than analytical" (21) function of Duras's political statements.

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