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This personal, wide-ranging, and contemplative volume--and the last book Barthes published--finds the author applying his influential perceptiveness and associative insight to the subject of photography. To this end, several black-and-white photos (by the likes of Avedon, Clifford, Hine, Mapplethorpe, Nadar, Van Der Zee, and so forth) are reprinted throughout the text. APA Citation (style guide)Barthes, R. (1982). *Camera lucida: reflections on photography*. 1st American pbk. ed. New York: Hill and Wang. Chicago / Turabian - Author Date Citation (style guide)Barthes, Roland. 1982. *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang. Chicago / Turabian - Humanities Citation (style guide)Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982. MLA Citation (style guide)Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections On Photography*. 1st American pbk. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982. Print. Note! Citation formats are based on standards as of July 2010. Citations contain only title, author, edition, publisher, and year published. Citations should be used as a guideline and should be double checked for accuracy. Book by Roland Barthes This article does not cite any sources. Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed. Find sources: "Camera Lucida" book - news · newspapers · books · scholar · JSTOR (October 2011) (Learn how and when to remove this template message) Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography Cover of the first editionAuthor Roland BarthesOriginal title La Chambre claireTranslator Richard HowardCountry FranceLanguage FrenchSubject Photography, PhilosophyPublisher Hill and WangPublication date 1980Media type Print (Softcover)ISBN 0-8090-3340-2OCLC 7307145 Dewey Decimal 770/1.19LC Class TR642 .B3713 1981 Camera Lucida (French: *La chambre claire*) is a short book published in 1980 by the French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes. It is simultaneously an inquiry into the nature and essence of photography and a eulogy to Barthes' late mother. The book investigates the effects of photography on the spectator (as distinct from the photographer, and also from the object photographed, which Barthes calls the "spectrum"). In a deeply personal discussion of the lasting emotional effect of certain photographs, Barthes considers photography as asymptotic, irreducible to the codes of language or culture, acting on the body as much as on the mind. The book develops the twin concepts of *stadium* and *punctum*: *stadium* denoting the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it. Camera Lucida consists of 48 chapters divided into two parts. The novel is composed in free form and does not follow a particularly rigid structure. Barthes does not present a fixed thesis, but instead, highlights the evolution of his thought process as the novel unfolds. As such, he consistently returns to ideas expressed in previous chapters to complete them, or even deny them. The story becomes increasingly personal in the second half, as scientific terminology, precise vocabulary, and numerous scholarly and cultural references give way to increasingly subjective and intimate language. The book is illustrated by 25 photographs, old and contemporary, chosen by the author. Among them are the works of famous photographers such as William Klein, Robert Mapplethorpe and Nadar, in addition to a photograph from Barthes's private collection. Context Camera Lucida, along with Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, was one of the most important early academic books of criticism and theorization on photography. Neither writer was a photographer, however, and both works have been much criticized since the 1990s. Nevertheless, it was by no means Barthes's earliest approach to the subject. Barthes mentions photography in one of his 'little mythologies'—articles published in the journal *Les Lettres Nouvelles* starting in 1954 and gathered in *Mythologies*, published in 1957 (and in English translation in 1972). The article "Photography and Electoral Appeal" is more obviously political than Camera Lucida. In the 1960s and entering the next decade, Barthes's analysis of photography develops more detail and insight through a structuralist approach; the treatment of photography in *Mythologies* is by comparison tangential and simple. There is still in this structural phase a strong political impulse and background to his theorizing of photography: Barthes connects photography's ability to represent without style (a 'perfect analagon': "The Photographic Message", 1961) to its tendency to naturalise what are in fact invented and highly structured meanings. His examples deal with press photographs and advertising, which make good use of this property (or bad use of it, as the case may be). Published two months prior to his death in 1980, Camera Lucida is Barthes's first and only book devoted to photography. By now his tactics in writing, always shifting and complex, favouring the dialectical to the morally or politically 'committed' (Sartre), had once again changed. If sentimentality can be seen as a tactic in the late career of Roland Barthes, then Camera Lucida belongs to such an approach. It is novelistic, in line with the developments towards this new type of writing which Barthes had shown with *A Lover's Discourse* and Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes. However, the ideas about photography in Camera Lucida are certainly prepared in essays like "The Photographic Message", "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), and "The Third Meaning" (1971). There is a movement through these three pieces of which Camera Lucida can be seen as the culmination. With "The Third Meaning" there is the suggestion that the photograph's reality, aside from all the messages it can be loaded with, might constitute an avant-garde value: not a message as such, aimed at the viewer/reader, but another kind of meaning that arises almost accidentally yet without being simply 'the material' or 'the accidental'; this is the eponymous third meaning. This essay of 1970, ostensibly about some Eisenstein stills, anticipates many of Camera Lucida's ideas and connects them back to still earlier ones. One could almost swap the term third meaning for the punctum of Camera Lucida. Yet the personal note of pain in Camera Lucida is not present in these earlier writings and is unmistakable. Written after his mother's death, Camera Lucida is as much a reflection on death as it is on photography. Barthes died in an automobile accident soon after the publication of Camera Lucida, and many have read the book as Barthes's eulogy for himself. Further reading Library resources about Camera Lucida Resources in your library Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida* New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Elkins, James. "Camera Dolorosa" in *History of Photography*, vol. 31, no. 1, (Spring 2007) pp. 22–30. Halley, Michael. "Argo Sum: Camera Lucida Review" in *Diacritics*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Winter, 1982), pp. 69–79. Nickel, Douglas R. *History of Photography*, vol. 24, no. 3, (Fall 2000), pp. 232–235. Olin, Margaret. "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification." *Representations* 80.1 (2002): 99–118. Retrieved from " > Skip to content *Reflections on Photography* Formats & editions An inquiry into a very modern art form - photography. Barthes personal investigation into the meaning of photographs is a seminal work of critical theory. This is a special *Vintage Design* Edition, with fold-out cover and stunning photography throughout. Examining themes of presence and absence, these reflections on photography begin as an investigation into the nature of photographs - their content, their pull on the viewer, their intimacy. Then, as Barthes contemplates a photograph of his mother as a child, the book becomes an exposition of his own mind. He was grieving for his mother at the time of writing. Strikingly personal, yet one of the most important early academic works on photography, Camera Lucida remains essential reading for anyone interested in the power of images. 'Effortlessly, as if in passing, his reflections on photography raise questions and doubts which will permanently affect the vision of the reader' *Guardian* Of all his works it is the most accessible in language and the most revealing about the author. And effortlessly, as if in passing, his reflections on photography raise questions and doubts which will permanently affect the vision of the reader *Guardian* Roland Barthes' final book - less a critical essay than a suite of valedictory meditations - is his most beautiful, and most painful *Observer* Profoundly shaped the way the medium is regarded Geoff Dyer, *Guardian* I am moved by the sense of discovery in Camera Lucida, by the glimpse of a return to a lost world New Society 2Who could help me? From the first step, that of classification [...], Photography evades us. The various distributions we impose upon it are in fact either empirical (Professionals/Amateurs), or rhetorical (Landscapes/Objects/Portraits/Nudes), or else aesthetic (Realism/Pictorialism), in any case external to the object, without relation to its essence, which can only be (if it exists at all) the New of which it has been the advent; for these classifications might very well be applied to other, older forms of representation. We might say that Photography is unclassifiable. Then I wondered what the source of this disorder might be. The first thing I found was this. What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else [...] a photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope. Show your photographs to someone - he will immediately show you his: 'Look, this is my mother; this is me as a child.' etc.; the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See' 'Here it is'; [...] A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished (as is the case for every other image, encumbered - from the start, and because of its status - by the way in which the object is simulated): it is not impossible to perceive the photographic signifier (certain professionals do so), but it requires a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection. By nature, the Photograph (for convenience's sake, let us accept this universal, which for the moment refers only to the tireless repetition of contingency) has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe. It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish (sharks, I think, according to Michelet) which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive (I didn't yet know that this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for). This fatality (no photograph without something or someone) involves Photography in the vast disorder of objects - of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other? Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences; it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't take, which turn, as milk does. Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see. In short, the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on Photography. The books which deal with it, much less numerous moreover than for any other art, are victims of this difficulty. Some are technical; in order to 'see' the photographic signifier, they are obliged to focus at very close range: Others are historical or sociological; in order to observe the total phenomenon of the Photograph, these are obliged to focus at a great distance. I realised with irritation that none discussed precisely the photographs which interest me, which give me pleasure or emotion. What did I care about the rules of composition of the photographic landscape, or, at the other end, about the Photograph as family rite? Each time I would read something about Photography, I would think of some photograph loved, and this made me furious. Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body; but an impudent voice (the voice of knowledge, of science) then adjured me, in a severe tone: 'Get back to Photography. 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.' Yet I persisted; another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture. So I went on, not daring to reduce the world's countless photographs, any more than to extend several of mine to Photography: in short, I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, 'scientifically' alone and disarmed. [...] 4So I make myself the measure of photographic 'knowledge.' What does my body know of Photography? I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs - in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives ... And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I should like to call the Spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. One of these practices was barred to me and I was not to investigate it: I am not a photographer, not even an amateur photographer: too impatient for that: I must see right away what I have produced (Polaroid)? Fun, but disappointing, except when a great photographer is involved). [...] Technically, Photography is at the intersection of two quite distinct procedures; one of a chemical order: the action of light on certain substances; the other of a physical order: the formation of the image through an optical device. It seemed to me that the Spectator's Photograph descended essentially, so to speak, from the chemical revelation of the object (from which I receive, by deferred action, the rays), and that the Operator's Photograph, on the contrary, was linked to the vision framed by the keyhole of the camera obscura. But of that emotion (or of that essence) I could not speak, never having experienced it; I could not join the troupe of those (the majority) who deal with Photography-according-to-the-Photographer. I possessed only two experiences: that of the observed subject and that of the subject observing ... It can happen that I am observed without knowing it, and again I cannot speak of this experience, since I have determined to be guided by the consciousness of my feelings. But very often (too often, to my taste) I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice. [...]Posing in front of the lens (I mean: knowing I am posing, even fleetingly), I do not risk so much as that (at least, not for the moment). No doubt it is metaphorically that I derive my existence from the photographer. But though this dependence is an imaginary one (and from the purest image-repertoire), I experience it with the anguish of an uncertain filiation: an image - my image - will be generated: will I be born from an antipathetic individual or from a 'good sort'? If only I could 'come out' on paper as on a classical canvas, endowed with a noble expression - thoughtful, intelligent, etc. [...] I decide to 'let drift' over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be 'indefinable,' in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and 'myself' which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, 'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar: if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing! Alas, I am doomed by (well-meaning) Photography always to have an expression: my body never finds its zero degree, no one can give it to me (perhaps only my mother? For it is not indifference which erases the weight of the image - the Photomat always turns you into a criminal type, wanted by the police - but love, extreme love). To see oneself (differently from in a mirror): on the scale of History, this action is recent, the painted, drawn, or miniaturised portrait having been, until the spread of Photography, a limited possession, intended moreover to advertise a social and financial status - and in any case, a painted portrait, however close the resemblance (this is what I am trying to prove) is not a photograph. Odd that no one has thought of the disturbance (to civilisation) which this new action causes. I want a History of Looking. For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. [...] Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object: in order to take the first portraits (around 1840) the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight; to become an object made one suffer as much as a surgical operation; then a device was invented, a kind of prosthesis invisible to the lens, which supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility: this headrest was the pedestal of the statue I would become, the corset of my imaginary essence. The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). In terms of image repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell-the-truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre. [...] (The 'private life' is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect.) Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me (the 'intention' according to which I look at it) is Death: Death is the eidos of that Photograph. Hence, strangely, the only thing that I tolerate, that I like, that is familiar to me, when I am photographed, is the sound of the camera. For me, the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing - and the only thing - to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches - and I recall that at first photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood.91 was glancing through an illustrated magazine. A photograph made me pause. Nothing very extraordinary: the (photographic) banality of a rebellion in Nicaragua: a ruined street, two helmeted soldiers on patrol; behind them, two nuns. Did this photograph please me? Interest me? Not even. Simply, it existed (for me). I understood at once that its existence (its 'adventure') derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world (no need to proceed to the point of contrast): the soldiers and the nuns. I foresaw a structural rule (conforming to my own observation), and I immediately tried to verify it by inspecting other photographs by the same reporter (the Dutchman Koen Wessing): many of them attracted me because they included this kind of duality which I had just become aware of. Here a mother and daughter sob over the father's arrest (Baudelaire: 'the emphatic truth of gesture in the great circumstances of life') and this happens out in the countryside (where could they have learned the news? for whom are these gestures?). Here, on a torn-up pavement, a child's corpse under a white sheet; parents and friends stand around it, desolate: a banal enough scene, unfortunately, but I noted certain interferences: the corpse's one bare foot, the sheet carried by the weeping mother (why this sheet?), a woman in the background, probably a friend, holding a handkerchief to her nose. Here again, in a bombed-out apartment, the huge eyes of two little boys, one's shirt raised over his little belly (the excess of those eyes disturb the scene). And here, finally, leaning against the wall of a house, three Sandinistas, the lower part of their faces covered by a rag (stench? secrecy? I have no idea, knowing nothing of the realities of guerrilla warfare); one of them holds a gun that rests on his thigh (I can see his nails); but his other hand is stretched out, open, as if he were explaining and demonstrating something. My rule applied all the more closely in that other pictures from the same reportage were less interesting to me; they were fine shots, they expressed the dignity and horror of rebellion, but in my eyes they bore no mark or sign: their homogeneity remained cultural: they were 'scenes,' rather a la Greuze, had it not been for the harshness of the subject. 10My rule was plausible enough for me to try to name (as I would need to do) these two elements whose co-presence established, it seemed, the particular interest I took in these photographs. The first, obviously, is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylized, more or less successful, depending on the photographer's skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information: rebellion, Nicaragua, and all the signs of both: wretched un-uniformed soldiers, ruined streets, corpses, grief, the sun, and the heavy-lidded Indian eyes. Thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training. I did not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe this word exists in Latin: it is *stadium* which doesn't mean at least not immediately, 'study,' but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by stadium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *stadium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions. The second element will break (or punctuate) the stadium. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the stadium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points: precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many points. This second element which will disturb the stadium I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). Having thus distinguished two themes in Photography (for in general the photographs I liked were constructed in the manner of a classical sonata), I could occupy with one after the other.11Many photographs are, alas, inert under my gaze. But even among those which have some existence in my eyes, most provoke only a general and, so to speak, polite interest: they have no *punctum* in them: they please or displease me without pricking me: they are invested with no more than *stadium*. The *stadium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste: I like / I don't like. The *stadium* is of the order of liking, not of loving; it mobilises a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds 'all right.' To recognize the *stadium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *stadium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. The *stadium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, 'politeness') which allows me to discover the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them 'in reverse,' according to my will as a Spectator. It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer's myths in the Photograph, fraternising with them but not quite believing in them. These myths obviously aim (this is what myth is for) at reconciling the Photograph with society (is this necessary? Yes, indeed: the Photograph is dangerous) by endowing it with Junctions, which are, for the Photographer, so many alibis. These functions are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. And I, the Spectator, I recognise them with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *stadium* (which is never my delight or my pain).12Since the Photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always some thing that is represented) - contrary to the text which, by the sudden action of a single word, can shift a sentence from description to reflection - it immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge. When William Klein photographs 'Mayday, 1959' in Moscow, he teaches me how Russians dress (which after all I don't know): I note a boy's big cloth cap, another's necktie, an old woman's scarf around her head, a youth's haircut, etc. I can enter- still further into such details, observing that many of the men photographed by Nadar have long fingernails: an ethnographical question: how long were nails worn in a certain period? Photography can tell me this much better than painted portraits. It allows me to accede to an infra-knowledge; it supplies me with a collection of partial objects and can flatter a certain fetishism of mine: for this 'me' which likes knowledge, which nourishes a kind of amorous preference for it. In the same way, I like certain biographical features which, in a writer's life, delight me as much as certain photographs; I have called these features 'biographemes'. Photography has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography.[...]25Now, 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 agonising 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). Further, 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': neither as a photographic performance nor as a living resurrection of the beloved face. If I were ever to show them to friends I could doubt that these photographs would speak.26With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born? I could read my nonexistence in the clothes my mother had worn before I can remember her. There is a kind of stupefaction in seeing a familiar being dressed differently. Here, around 1913, is my mother dressed up -hat with a feather, gloves, delicate linen at wrists and throat, her 'chic' belied by the sweetness and simplicity of her expression. This is the only time I have seen her like this, caught in a History (of tastes, fashions, fabrics): my attention is distracted from her by accessories which have perished; for clothing is perishable, it makes a second grave for the loved being. In order to 'find' my mother, fugitively alas, and without ever being able to hold on to this resurrection for long, I must, much later, discover in several photographs the objects she kept on her dressing table, an ivory powder box (I loved the sound of its lid), a cut-crystal flagon, or else a low chair, which is now near my own bed, or again, the raffia panels she arranged above the divan, the large bags she loved (whose comfortable shapes belied the bourgeois notion of the 'handbag'). Thus the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it - and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history (impossible for me to believe in 'witnesses'; impossible, at least, to be one; Michelet was able to write virtually nothing about his own time). That is what the time when my mother was alive before me is - History (moreover, it is the period which interests me most, historically). No anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time starting from myself (this is the definition of anamnesis) -whereas, contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child, against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crepe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder.27And here the essential question first appeared: did I recognise her? [...]28There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it. The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing, along which he had extended one arm; she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera; you could tell that the photographer had said, 'Step forward a little so we can see you'; she was holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do, in an awkward gesture. The brother and sister, united, as I knew, by the discord of their parents, who were soon to divorce, had posed side by side, alone, under the palms of the Winter Garden (it was the house where my mother was born, in Chennevières-sur-Marne). I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother. The distinctness of her face, the naive attitude of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself, and finally her expression, which distinguished her, like Good from Evil, from the hysterical little girl, from the simpering

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