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Toward a Phenomenology of "The Other World": This World as It Is for No One in Particular

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Abstract

In the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses *punctum caecum* (physiological blind spot) as a metaphor for the unconscious and the invisible of the visible. I read the *punctum caecum* alongside Merleau-Ponty's call in another working note to "[e]laborate a phenomenology of the other world." I take up a phenomenology of the other world as directed toward the *punctum caecum* of this world. I begin with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's unconscious and continue its unfinished thought by drawing in other iterations of the *punctum caecum* – the involuntary memories in Marcel Proust's, *In Search of Lost Time*, the *punctum* Roland Barthes finds in *Camera Lucida* and in words that refer to other worlds. Among Merleau-Ponty, Proust, and Barthes I sense something shared – a latent intentionality, and a question about mourning expressed across their disparate texts: the other who existed once, do they exist still? The other who looked at me once, do they look at me still?

Keywords

Merleau-Ponty – Proust – Barthes – unconscious – involuntary memory – *punctum*

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> To write the body. Neither the skin, nor the muscles, nor the bones,
> Nor the nerves, but the rest: an awkward, fibrous, Shaggy, raveled
> thing, a clown's coat.
>
> ROLAND BARTHES, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*

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In a January 1960 working note to *The Visible and the Invisible* titled, "problematic of the visible and the invisible," Maurice Merleau-Ponty composes a succinct account of the invisible's relation to the visible. The invisible is "connected" to the visible, but not "an *other visible*"; it "is *there* without being an *object*"; it is the "nucleus of absence" upon which each visible is centered. He continues:

> Raise the question: the invisible life, the invisible community, the invisible other, the invisible culture. Elaborate a phenomenology of "the other world," as the limit of a phenomenology of the imaginary and the "hidden" –.[1]

This note in particular has always drawn me in. Like every good fragment, every re-reading offers an illumination by another light: the "other world" as charged with the affectivity that ties me to this world. With apathy, I drape the other world in nostalgia; with melancholy, I read in it a kind of hopeful longing. I wrest it from its context and situate it near other notes with which something is shared, a kind of affective register, a tonality. I carry it with me outside the text, lightly preparing for a "chance" encounter in lived experience with that which will make it resonate. There is a thought here that I recognize as not belonging to me (I cannot take intellectual possession of it) that nevertheless concerns me.

The task at hand is to develop a phenomenology of the imaginary that approaches the invisible as the inner framework or structure of the visible and does so without turning it into an *other* visible, which would thereby destroy our relationship to it. This is not about bringing the invisible to light, nor about making it speak – as such an inquiry must also resist the urge to erect another subject hidden to oneself, the unconscious as a second consciousness.

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 229; emphasis in original.

A phenomenology of the other world: a phenomenology of what is at the limit of a philosophy of consciousness and unconsciousness.

In the working notes he adds that the unconscious is a *punctum caecum*, a metaphor for a physiological blind spot at the heart of seeing.[2] It is the point in the retina without photoreceptors – that part of the retina that does not see, but that makes it possible for the eye to see. As a metaphor for the unconscious, the *punctum caecum*, too, is invisible – wholly within the visible but not itself visible, the inner structure, the framework of the visible world, visibility itself. What, then, could a phenomenology of the other world be but a phenomenology of absence – our own and the world's? I read the call for a "phenomenology of 'the other world'" as a call for an impossible phenomenology of this world whereby that which appears does so for no one, at least for no constituting, "sovereign" consciousness.

Can phenomenology, then, do what it is not supposed to do, that is, offer an account of the constitutive absence – *punctum caecum* – at the heart of not only vision but of being; that primordial vision which precedes and exceeds every vision? Can it bring to presence (through the expressive act) visibility without seeing or being-seen, tangibility without touching or being-touched? Such a phenomenology would be directed toward what, arguably, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology had already been directed – albeit not at the same depth – toward the caesurae in the visible, its jointure, the absences and silences of which we are and in relation to which every expression is a modification and interpretation: the body's "natural symbolism."[3]

The seer sees the world and is a being-seen but does not see seeing. It is my one hand that touches the other and the other hand that is touched. I turn my attention back and forth; from one position to the other there is reversibility, but also encroachment and slippage between the two systems of the lived body. Because visibility itself, tangibility itself, is this movement of reversibility,

2 From a May 1960 working note titled, "Blindness (*punctum caecum*) of the 'consciousness,'" he writes, "*What* [consciousness] does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it). *What* it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the *ob*ject is born." Ibid., 248; emphasis in original.

In another May 1960 working note, when discussing the "negativity" of the touching-touched, he writes, "the untouchable of the touch, the invisible of vision, the unconscious of consciousness (its central *punctum caecum*, that blindness that makes it consciousness i.e., an indirect and *inverted* grasp of all things) is the *other side* or the *reverse* (or other dimensionality) of sensible Being. Ibid., 255; emphasis in original.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 226.

I cannot grasp it. As is well-known, I cannot touch touching. But there is also the vague sense that I do touch touching. I touch touching when I give up some of my distinctness, soften my gaze, and dispossess myself in the direction of a field of generality wherein touching and being touched are simultaneous, taking place in the same Now. When I imagine myself as no one in particular[4] and try to inhabit my own *punctum caecum*.

In what follows I explore a phenomenology of the other world as directed toward the *punctum caecum* of this world. I begin with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's unconscious and continue its unfinished thought by drawing in other iterations of the *punctum caecum* – the involuntary memories in Marcel Proust's, *In Search of Lost Time*, the *punctum* Roland Barthes finds in *Camera Lucida* and in words that refer to other worlds. Among Merleau-Ponty, Proust, and Barthes I sense something shared – a latent intentionality, and a question about mourning expressed across their disparate texts: *the other who existed once, do they exist still? The other who looked at me once, do they look at me still?* Guided by the question, I move across and between their texts, progressing through their common shapes and figures. This is a method called for by the desire to elaborate a phenomenology of the imaginary. To borrow Barthes' words, the task is to "dream the research aloud."[5]

1 Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Unconscious

In the phenomenological attention to lived experience – to that which appears to consciousness – there is a concomitant sensitivity to what withdraws, resists, and hides, which has been, since Sigmund Freud, associated with the unconscious.[6] Different iterations of the unconscious appear across Merleau-Ponty's texts,[7] each iteration indicating the step of a further theoretical development,

4 I use the phrase "no one in particular" to distinguish it from the discourse on anonymity because my interest in this paper is in the articulation of a being with others that dwells in the imaginary.

5 Roland Barthes, "Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977," trans. Richard Howard, *Oxford Literary Review* 4.1 (Autumn 1979): 32.

6 For Sigmund Freud, what he encountered working with his patients is that there is an inescapable paradox of consciousness: the subject knows and does not know at the same time. The unconscious emerges as a resolution: there is, beneath the subject, a second subjectivity, inaccessible to conscious that hides itself and its knowledge.

7 At first glance, the different iterations of the unconscious seem to mark radical departures in his thought, but as Emmanuel de Saint Aubert shows, there is evidence for a continuous development from *The Primacy of Perception* to *The Visible and the Invisible*. "Merleau-Ponty's Conception of the Unconscious in the Late Manuscripts." In *Unconsciousness Between*

a limit of reflective consciousness and of phenomenology. In Merleau-Ponty's early text on psychology, *Structure of Behavior* (1942), the unconscious is pathologized as a failure of consciousness to integrate its experience. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty depathologizes the unconscious while locating it wholly within the phenomenal realm by first situating consciousness in the body and its essential ambiguity as both subject and object. The body that sees is also one capable of being seen; the body that touches is at the same time the body touched. Although the body is at the same time the sensing and the sensible, knowledge of the unity of the body's two moments is delayed. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "I cannot touch touching," which means, I cannot simultaneously feel myself to be the subject and object of the touch; I feel in alternations. To reflect upon myself as body is to perceive the *encroachment* of the touching and the touched without coincidence. What is simultaneous is experienced as successive and reversible: "My left hand is always on the verge of touching the things, but … the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization."[8] The simultaneity is both here and not here, both a reality and something yet to be achieved.[9]

Unlike Freud, who Merleau-Ponty charges with introducing "an I think behind the I think," the unconscious here is located within experience as the nonreflective, anonymous dimension of existence that subtends every perception, action, and hope for the future.[10] Although it is beyond the reach of reflective consciousness, it is the movement by which reflection seeks what is sought, so we can say that the unconscious is both beyond and at the heart of reflective consciousness. To illustrate the dialectic between these two modalities of existence, Merleau-Ponty describes the realization of his love for another. It is neither the case that his love had, before his realization, been hidden from him (Freud) or transparent to him as something he did not want to know (Sartre). Like love, the unconscious is the way he orients himself toward the world through an absent other. As he writes, love "is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and of my behaviors … the love was lived – not known – from beginning to end."[11] Before it could be

Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis, ed. Dylan Trigg and Dorothee Legrand. (New York: Springer, 2017).

8 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 117; 251; 266.

10 Merleau-Ponty's reinterprets repression in light of the relationship between personal existence and the anonymous body. It is through the "organic repression" of the anonymous body that personal existence is expressed. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 103.

11 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 400.

an object of reflective thought it was already there: lived in the anticipation he felt for the other which inspired anew the rhythm of his daily activities, and who became for him a fulcrum around which his actions, behaviors, and words gravitated. In the context of a burgeoning love, the body is oriented toward a world of possibilities of which I am not yet aware. The unconscious is not inaccessible to consciousness but is "the movement through which we are directed toward someone,"[12] a latent intentionality that organizes and signifies the perceptual field around our anticipation for the absent other.

As a latent intentionality, the unconscious for Merleau-Ponty is not *without* consciousness, but is another register of consciousness. Opposed to the activity of personal existence through which my actions and behaviors come to be organized around my goals and projects, Merleau-Ponty conceptualizes the unconscious in *Institution and Passivity* as passive, an "oneiric" consciousness that subtends waking consciousness and also exceeds it, everywhere enveloping the real in the texture of the imaginary. As Merleau-Ponty writes in the *Passivity* lectures, this is not an "I think behind the I think." It is not the case that "I think" the other so much as "I dream" them, and this "I dream" haunts the "I think," classifying its events and objects with its "acquired intersubjective significations."[13] While the time of personal existence is linear and progressive, the oneiric register of consciousness touches all times at once; there is no cleavage, no means of discerning a past presence from a present absence. Merleau-Ponty writes, "I perceive myself in others, I perceive others in myself, I am in contact with my entire past, I have no temporal location, and my entire past is maintained only as the horizon of this present, sedimented."[14] Between the two registers of consciousness, there is communication and exchange.

In the year prior to his death, Merleau-Ponty publishes "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis" as a preface to Angelo Hesnard's *L'Oeuvre de Freud* (1960). It serves as his last, most complete account of the relationship between phenomenology and psychoanalysis and of his re-reading of the Freudian unconscious. Merleau-Ponty remarks that phenomenology has resolved into a positivism.

12 Ibid.

13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College of France (1954–55)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and H. Massey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 157.

James Phillips writes that the turn to oneiric consciousness indicates a reversal of priority" from that of the *Phenomenology*. It is no longer the case that intersubjectivity is modeled on perceptual consciousness, but perception is modeled on our undifferentiated intersubjective bonds. "From the Unseen to the Invisible," "From the Unseen to the Invisible." In *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, eds. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 79.

14 Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 160.

Due to superficial readings of phenomenology and Husserl's *Ideas I*, phenomenology has been reduced to a methodology, which calls for first-person descriptions of lived experience, and a philosophy of consciousness, which is tasked with the creation of concepts to be used by psychoanalysis.[15] As psychoanalysis similarly suffers from its own misunderstandings, it "confirms phenomenology in its understanding of consciousness as investment" and supplies it with the concrete examples that give phenomenology its weight.[16] This remarkable text, at times pithy and caustic, radiates a generosity toward the past – including that of phenomenology and psychoanalysis – which may have been the secret to the vitality of Merleau-Ponty's still-evolving thought.

Merleau-Ponty turns phenomenology back on itself as he embarks on reactivating its sedimentations by returning to Freud. The return to Freud is undertaken as a practice of re-reading. In re-reading Freud, he reads himself reading Freud as a young student, and recalls all that he rejected in Freud, which he continues to refuse. While commentators identify the articulation of the unconscious to be Freud's greatest insight, Merleau-Ponty writes of "a thought that is only expressed very indirectly by Freudian concepts," including that of the unconscious.[17] He is struck by what he finds in Freud: "his polymorphous perception of work, of acts, of dreams … this prodigious intuition of exchanges – exchange of roles, exchange of the soul and the body, of the imaginary and the real … this universal promiscuity."[18] In Freud's texts these unthought elements are an excess of psychoanalysis that escapes its mechanistic reduction. The "genius" of Freud is "in his contact with things, his polymorphous perception of work, of acts, of dreams, of their flux and their reflux, of counter-coups, of echoes, of substitutions, of metamorphoses … in his listening to the confused noises of a life."[19] The imaginary of Freud, the excess of his thought, radiates beyond the text in the relations of intertwining, substitutions, and polymorphisms that characterize an ontology of flesh – the very thought that Merleau-Ponty will spend the final years of his intellectual life

15 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Preface to Hesnard's *L'Oeuvre de Freud*." *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 18.1–3 (1982–3): 69.

16 Ibid., 67.

17 Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," 68.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

bringing to speech.[20] It is by its "*latent content* or its *unconscious* – that it is in consonance with psychoanalysis."[21]

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty is making a movement of return to Freud – but this is not a return to Freudian concepts, judgments, or frameworks. Rather, it is a turn toward the invisible, which we may refer to as the "unconscious," but only because this word, like every other, "retains, like the algae or the stone that one drags up, something of the sea from which it was taken."[22] The phenomenological unconscious is not the psychoanalytic unconscious; it is not a process carried out by subterranean forces that necessarily elude conscious awareness. For Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious's relation to consciousness is the analogue of the invisible to the visible. Like vision's *punctum caecum*, if the unconscious is not an object for perceptual consciousness, this is because what is sought by consciousness is consciousness itself. Merleau-Ponty writes, "[*w*]*hat* [consciousness] does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the *ob*ject is born."[23]

In the readings of Proust and Barthes that follow, I develop a phenomenology of the imaginary that is motivated by a thought expressed indirectly in the metaphorical description of the unconscious as a *punctum caecum*. Vision "sees more than is seen," and consciousness, too, is excessive. What is this excess implied by the *punctum caecum?* To whom does this excess belong? From where can I access the excess of vision, of thought? And at what time?

2 On the Aperspective of the Involuntary Memory

Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* figures prominently in Merleau-Ponty's later writings as the phenomenologist turns to literature and poetic language

20 "Freud never says any of this in these terms; but what is the good of allowing the misunderstanding to endure and willingly prolonging the 'scandal' of psychoanalysis?" In his terms, he is "reformulating certain Freudian concepts in the framework of a better philosophy" Ibid., 69.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes of a sufficient phenomenological reduction that would reveal the transcendental field as an *Ineinander*, which entails the entwinement or folding within being itself. Being is to be conceived of as promiscuous, polymorphous, sedimented and general (172).

21 Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," 71.

22 Ibid.

23 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 248; emphasis in original.

as expressive of the visible and the invisible.[24] Of Proust, he announces: "No one has gone further than Proust in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible."[25] It is Proust's involuntary memories that help Merleau-Ponty elucidate a nonlinear notion of bodily time as sedimented, simultaneous, overlapping, and unfinished.[26]

In this section, I read two scenes from Proust: a visit with his grandmother toward the end of her life, and the narrator's encounter with the petite madeleine. In the first, I am interested in the anxiety of love, which Proust illuminates as a desire to be a spectator of one's own absence: to see the other from the aperspective of one's nonexistence. In the second scene, I read the petite madeleine as an encounter with a nonvolitional, nonreflective *epoché*; that the forgotten past can be revealed is due to the work of creating what is found there, which requires "courage." I find in Proust an account of desire for absent others that imbues perceptual consciousness with the complexities of time noted above.

2.1 *To See Her Truthfully: as She Is, Herself*

In Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator expresses again and again his anxiety towards those whom he loves. The beloved never seems to give themselves entirely to him. The other withholds part of themselves, and this is felt by the narrator when they are in his presence and in the secret life they live when not in his presence. Without full presence, they are like phantoms, only "quasi-present." For our part, when we who view others do so with habitual glances, we become indifferent to their absences. No longer attuned to the strange distances they keep, others become in a sense too near to us, as if they were, like objects, immediately given. "Every habitual glance," writes Proust, "is a necromancy."[27]

24 On the the reciprocal envelopment of the visible and invisible that Merleau-Ponty finds in poetic language see: Emanuel de Saint Aubert, " 34–35; Dimitris Apostolopoulos, "The Systematic Import of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Literature," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 49.1 (2018): 1–17.

25 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 149. On Merleau-Ponty's engagements with Proust, see: Mauro Carbone, "'The Proustian Corporeity' and 'The True Hawthorns': Merleau-Ponty as a Reader of Proust between Husserl and Benjamin," in *Merleau-Ponty's Poetic of the World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

26 See: Mauro Carbone, "The Time of Half-Sleep: Merleau-Ponty between Husserl and Proust." In *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, eds. Ted Toadvine and L. Embree (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002).

27 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol III: The Guermantes Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 184.

Proust recounts his desire to overcome one of the many phantoms that make up his social reality, that of his grandmother, whose painful separation from him is prefigured in their encounters like a halo of nonexistence. What he longed for was to see his grandmother truthfully: as she is, herself. This total view he could never attain. We prefigure the absence of others with indifference, but also with our love. Through loving attention, the other is transformed into the object of our desire such that we can no longer access the way they exist disentangled from our affections for them. His love would rush ahead of every encounter and seize her, transforming her into an object of his love and prevent him from seeing anything in her that was not already entwined with his affections for her. She was always a projection of him and negative image of his desire. An aporia of love then: that by which the other appears is what limits the other's appearing.

At the heart of her withdrawal from him, he decides, is the other life that she leads without him. Although he has imagined her – by herself, alone in her little country town – he writes, "I had pictured her as she was when she was with me, but eliminating myself without taking into account the effects on her of such an elimination."[28] In order to fulfill the demands of love, his imagination makes present the grandmother in her absence; but, driven by love, it is his desire that gives his imaginings their force, and so his love provides the articulations that animate the imagined scene.

What he wants is an impossible sight for which he is not prepared – to see her presence in his absence – to see her from the perspective of his nonexistence. In this, his task is akin to that sketched out in the problematic of the visible and the invisible – a phenomenology of the imaginary and hidden that would be at the limit of a philosophy of consciousness. He too is directed to the "other world," which is not strictly a world *other* to this one, but this world from another perspective (aperspective).

In the narrator's visit with his grandmother toward the end of her life, he catches a glimpse of this other world. After hurling uncharacteristically cruel words to her, he walks into the room where she is sitting, and for just a moment as he stands in the threshold, before she recognizes him, he catches sight of her without him, allowing him to become a "spectator of one's own absence."[29] The narrator recounts, for a moment:

> I, for whom my grandmother was still myself, I who had never seen her save in my own soul … saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced,

28 Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 183.

29 Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 183.

> heavy and vulgar, sick, day-dreaming, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, an overburdened woman whom I did not know.[30]

What is it that he sees? He admits that this sight of her is one that eyes "ought never to behold."[31] He saw her as "the observer … the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer."[32]

It is not until years later, after the event of her death, that the memory returns, and that he is able to understand the significance of the earlier vision. In the interim, the narrator is still in search of his grandmother, as she is, truthfully. He looks for her in his recollections but finds nothing in them that "resembled my grandmother … I retained within me only in a potential state the memory of what she had been."[33] She remains for him in death the phantom that she was in life, and he is "astonished and remorseful" at how little he misses her.[34]

In truth, Proust's narrator didn't need to miss his grandmother because, as Merleau-Ponty remarks in *Phenomenology of Perception*, she was with him like a phantom limb.[35] After the loss, she remained quasi-present to him. Like a phantom limb, her loss was both behind him in the past and not yet here; it was on the horizon of his experience, and he was directed toward another encounter with her. After her death he still allowed for her and remained affectively bound to the world that might once again bear her presence. No longer visible but *in-visible* – she became the *punctum caecum* of his vision and grasp of the world. Although he could not conjure in his memory the intensity of his love for her, she was there, like the atmosphere of his experience, providing the articulations of his perceptions, animating his present reality.

In the future, he will see this earlier vision again, but for the first time, and in doing so, find a way to redeem this younger version of himself. He will do in the future what he should have done at the threshold of the room: fling himself into her arms and encounter her through his loving embrace.

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30 Ibid, 185.

31 Ibid., 184.

32 Ibid., 183–84.

33 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol I: Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin. (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 210.

34 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol V: Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C. K. Scott Montcrieff and Terence Kilmartin. (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 210.

35 "The amputee senses his leg, as I can sense vividly the existence of a friend who is, nevertheless, not here before my eyes. He has not lost his leg because he continues to allow for it, just as Proust can certainly recognize the death of his grandmother without yet losing her to the extent that he keeps her on the horizon of his life." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 83.

2.2 *Interrogating the "Petite Madeleine"*

In the midst of another cold, sorrowful day, Proust writes of an "exquisite pleasure" that runs through his body when he brings a petite madeleine dipped in warm tea to his lips.[36] Although this pleasure is catalyzed by the present sensation, he quickly notes that the pleasure is not caused by the sensation; the essence of this pleasure cannot be found by interrogating the tea or the madeleine but is to be found within him, "in the very depths of my being." As this pleasure is evoked by a present reality that it nevertheless does not correspond to, he assumes that it must be the repetition of a past event, and he looks in his memory for the "corresponding memory-image." The narrator then describes the measures he took in vain to recall the memory and understand the essence of the pleasure.[37]

After these failed attempts, Proust notes the courage that is required to inquire into the essence of the pleasure. "One must look into the abyss," he writes, "and have the courage not to return to present anxieties or future worries."[38] In the face of this pleasure, which has no logical proof but nonetheless provides "indisputable evidence of its reality," the anxieties and worries that we take to be real are revealed to be phantoms of real existence.

By turning toward the past – while refusing the tendency to preserve it in the present by making it intelligible or representing it as an image – it becomes possible to remember a forgotten past. The many intellectual routes taken by the narrator, which can recover a memory-image, are incapable of recovering the past that the narrator seeks, which is a past that has never been lived. Describing the futility of the intellect to recover a forgotten past, Proust writes "the intellect seeks but what is sought is the seeker itself, so one cannot seek, one must create what is sought."[39]

The forgotten past does not emerge because of the narrator's decision to turn toward it. After his efforts, it is the memory which suddenly "revealed itself."[40] Like the transfiguration that takes place between the person who wants to sleep and the sleeper, one can invite the event through the decision,

36 Proust, *Swann's Way*, 60.

37 He repeats the sensuous encounter, but the second taste is merely a bad copy of the first. He retraces his thoughts and finds the same state "illuminated by no new light." He clears his mind of any extraneous concerns and focuses intensely on the nature of the pleasure. He feels something starting to rise within him, not an image but something immaterial that he feels only as the echo of a great distance traversed. He "essays the task" "ten times over." Ibid., 61–63.

38 Ibid., 63.

39 Proust, *Swann's Way*, 63.

40 Ibid.

but the decision does not suffice to bring about the event. To sleep, writes Merleau-Ponty, "I lie in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes, breathe slowly … I call forth the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper."[41] I make a conscious decision to sleep, to welcome an event whose arrival depends on my ability to forget the decision just made. I do not choose to sleep so much as I entreaty myself to sleep and give myself over to the anonymous dimension of bodily existence that I will again forget at the second hint of morning light. Since it is not I who dream, but the one in me who dreams, it is not I who has access to and remembers the dream in the morning. The more that I search for the dream, the further I find myself from the possibility of recalling it. Like the memory that corresponds to the "exquisite pleasure," the dream reveals itself in a moment of relaxation, to the passivity that subtends the activity of consciousness. To bring this to waking consciousness, it is not a matter of seeking but of *creating* what is felt there. The memory that reveals itself to the narrator is not a single scene of his childhood in Combray, but the whole town – its streets, lights, colors and characters. No longer serving as the background of his recollections, he is again inspired by the very atmosphere of his childhood, a forgotten past that was not "in me, it *was me*."[42] The involuntary memory is produced through an interrogation that is not undertaken by the intellect, but the imagination.

We return to the question of the courage involuntary memories require. To stay with the feeling of a lost outside-inside, constituted by the traces of something absent, one must be willing to feel themselves absent, must invite this lost past by imitating what is absent. Typically, I find myself everywhere, located in the world of things that exist in relation to me and return me continually to myself through our interactions. Since the self that is sought is absent, I must work to suspend this reunion: I withdraw. By turning away from the world of my present concerns and suspending the weight of social obligations, I turn away from the world and others that served as the occasions for my self-presence. Dissolving into existence like a flickering of light, the one who stays with the interrogation of what is absent is like the one who gives themselves over to sleep, undoing the threads of their personal existence for something that is without assurances: there is no promise that what is absent will arrive; if it arrives, there is no promise that it will be recognized, or that one will be better off for its having arrived. This withdrawal from the world is not a rejection of the world, or a displacement of the present for the past. Merleau-Ponty writes of the circumlocutions of the melancholic: the one who seemingly

41 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 166.

42 Proust, *Swann's Way*, 60.

rejects the world but still holds onto the world that they depend on for their continued existence.[43] It is not that the melancholic is in "bad faith," lying to themselves about the present reality. In order to preserve what has been lost, which has no corresponding reality, the melancholic suspends the relations to the world that continually bring them back to themselves, thus safeguarding the past from the present reality. As Freud writes, the melancholic "swallows the loss."[44]

In the future, the lost time might be recovered in an involuntary memory: "a blatter of rain … the smell of an unaired room … the first crackling brushwood fire in a cold grate."[45] When sensible qualities from the past are forgotten they can later emerge in the present through the encounter with the same sensation. But I cannot say that *I* was the one who preserved the memory of these details, which seemed so trivial and insignificant. As attested to in recollections, these sensible qualities were never the focus, never the object of any intentions; they were just there in the background of lived experience. From what perspective, then, do we hear the blatter of rain? As Paul Claudel writes, and as quoted by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*, "*Where am I?* and, *What time is it*?"[46]

3 What Does the *Punctum* Make Seen?

In this section, I follow Barthes in his search for what is, for him, a *punctum*. As an anatamo-physiological metaphor for the unconscious, *punctum caecum* situates it in the body as the body's constitutive "blindness." Barthes's *punctum*, too, is bodily – it refers to any sharp point that we might find on another's body; it is so sharp, in fact, that to find it is to be cut and wounded by it. We see it without seeing – not because we are "blind" to it – but because it is in the background and we do not yet have the right kind of attention to see something so small, so insignificant.

43 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 306.

44 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia." In *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 245.

45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collége de France (1954–55)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Howard Masey. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 197.

46 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 103; 121.

3.1 *The Genius of Photography*

Camera Lucida, Barthes' final text, is a phenomenological essay on photography written in the wake of his mother's loss. I trace the contours of his analysis as a path that is directed toward the *punctum*. What sparks the inquiry, he tells us, is that "amazement" he has felt before an image of the emperor's brother when he realizes that these very eyes looked at the emperor. These eyes looked at the emperor in the past, but do they look at him still? It is a question directed at the continued existence of what photography makes seen. "I wasn't sure," he admits, "that Photography existed, that it had a 'genius' of its own."[47] Although he describes his desire as "ontological," his desire for the photograph "in itself" is inescapably personal and urgent. Some photos, he knows, exist. They have a genius – a posthumous production that transcends their frozen scenes – and this is certain in the way certain images feel, the way they grip him and take up residence in his imagination. To know with absolute certainty that the gaze of the emperor's brother continues to exist in the image, long after the referent's death, is not significant for the intellectual endeavor so much as it serves the needs of the bereaved son. He wants to know if the eyes of his mother, which gazed upon him while she was alive, gaze upon him still. Following his desire, he makes himself the measure of the photograph. He does not write to make himself understood by others or to be recognized except by one – the beloved body represented in the image.

Barthes is drawn to photography because he is drawn to his mother. No longer able to encounter her presence in the world, he nevertheless needs to see her, to encounter her being once and for all. Her body may no longer have a proper place, but in its nowhere place remain a collection of images – images that are common, shared, reproducible, and transmissible. These images do not reveal the beloved other so much as they withhold the other and mark the withdrawal of her presence. In her place, a representation of her life: fragmented, incomplete, tenuously preserved. It is in the midst of the fragmented images of her life that he needs to find her, recognize her as a whole being "as she is in herself." The impossibility of the endeavor does not only originate in the attempt to encounter her whole in precisely that which cannot be made whole. It is that the desire driving his inquiry is the same that forecloses his ability to see her. He wants to encounter her, not merely as a being in relation to him – this person he can encounter in his memories of her. As he writes, "contemplating a photograph in which she is hugging me, a child against her, I can waken in myself the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the

47 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 3.

perfume of her rice powder."[48] No, his love yearns to see what Proust yearned to see of his grandmother, and what Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the unconscious directed us toward – her really existing without him, as she is, fully "in herself."[49]

We know that it is in the "Winter Garden Photograph" that he sees her. It is in this image that he finds "the truth of the face I had loved."[50] Instead of showing the reader this image, he describes the encounter with the image that he had never seen before, that has captured his mother at a very young age (5 or 6) standing alongside her brother.

Barthes unpacks three relations that belong to the photograph: the spectator who views the image, the photographer who takes the image, and the referent as the image's object – three relations, three sets of practices, three different emotions. As a spectator, we are drawn to some images, which excite or intrigue us, and not drawn to others, which leave us indifferent. At first, he is in the position of the spectator who takes a general interest in the image and surveys the landscape that comprises the image's *studium*. The *studium* is the element of the image that piques the viewer's interest; it is everything average, cultural, that reveals itself to me because of my participation in a shared body of knowledge. In this case, what belongs to the *studium* is the appearance of "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."[51] What one recognizes through the *studium* has less to do with the referent of the image than with the intentions of the operator, the photographer who has staged the scene. The spectator "enters into harmony with [the operator], to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them."[52] In the image, the little girl stands slightly behind the boy and Barthes remarks, "you could tell that the photographer has said, 'Step forward a little so we can see you.'"[53] In this identification, the spectator repeats the gesture of the photographer who stages the scene and who can only see of the image what they have

48 Ibid., 65.

49 For Proust's narrator, love yearns to see the other as they are in themselves – without remainder. When the narrator catches a glimpse of this sight of his grandmother, he admits that he "saw what eyes ought never to behold," namely a world in which he no longer exists. Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 184.

On Barthes and Proust, see Erin Mitchell, "Writing Photography: The grandmother in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the mother in *Camera Lucida*, and especially, the mother in *The Lover*." *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 24.2: article 9.

50 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*., 67.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 26.

53 Ibid., 67.

willed themselves and others to see. Barthes refers to this as the "sovereign consciousness" of the spectator.

What Barthes desires to see – "the truth of the face I had loved" – has nothing to do with the intentions of the photographer, with the historical setting, or the tense parental relations that he reads in the bodily proximity of the siblings. The image may serve as the indexical counterpoint to an entire historical moment or historical life of the referent, but insofar as the encounter is mediated through culture, the viewer will never be able to recognize her, to encounter the referent's singularity.

3.2 *The Thought of the Punctum*

There is one image of my father as a young man captured by a well-known photographer that draws my interest. With my studied gaze, I become familiar with its composition, the various signs of the operator's celebrated technical skill. Hungrily, I take in its *studium*. Where is he? What time is it? I try to locate this one instant within the timeline of the life that I have pieced together, the one that is fractured, incomplete, and that I like to work-over from time to time. I do not know if the image carries in it for me – or in me for it? – a *punctum*.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes writes that the *punctum* is: "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)."[54] It is a small detail in the image that is beyond the intentions of the photographer. The detail does not provoke in the viewer a vague interest or disinterest; it surprises the viewer and disturbs their "sovereign consciousness." No longer is it the photographer's sight and art that one encounters, but the splendor and simplicity of "being there." Turned toward the referent as a partial object, the *punctum* says that the photographer nevertheless "could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object."[55] The total object reveals itself in the small details that draw the spectator's gaze away from the intended focus: in a family portrait, it has something to do with the straps of a woman's patent-leather shoes;[56] in a photo of soldiers, it is the group of nuns making their way across the background of the frame;[57] in a photo of Phillip Glass and Robert Wilson, the *punctum* is that there is something as of now ineffable about the way Wilson holds Barthes's attention.[58]

54 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.
55 Ibid., 47.
56 Ibid., 44.
57 Ibid., 22.
58 Ibid., 54.

I do not know if I will make my way through the *studium* to the *punctum*. I know that many of our distances dissolve in the image; I feel close to this body. The photograph offers those who view it a moment wrested from the flow of time, a fragile monument to "what has been." Although this body is suspended here in the photograph's present, it is also true that time has flowed on. This young man is going to one day die and he is already dead. In the image's present, we, who are concerned with the referent of the image, are gifted access to its temporal complexity: here, the event is both past and not yet here (Freud's ***Nachträglichkeit***). *He is alive, and he is dead.*

As a viewer, we do not always know what it is that has pricked us or why. That we do not immediately know what or why is a sign of the *punctum*, that what we have encountered is an element that does not belong to the *studium*. Bursting through a small detail, the *punctum* is not strictly an object but a feeling, an affective connection to the body of the referent. It is no longer the case that this image interests me on a merely intellectual level; it touches me by cutting and wounding me.

I implore the image to move me. I interrogate each detail and assemble the details into new configurations. I subtly soften my gaze. He is holding a guitar in a way that says to me that he is not also playing it. *Was it the photographer's intention that he look as if he were really playing it?* He is holding his guitar and his arm catches my attention. I am taken aback by how real it seems – this arm, which is pretending to pluck the strings of the guitar, feels so real. I narrow my attention – there is something about the crease of the elbow that seduces me into believing that I could touch it. As I marvel at the fleshiness of this detail, I am surprised that I am crying. I willed this encounter with the *punctum*; I sought it out and when it arrives, I am *surprised*.

I recall the child I once was, for whom the crease of the elbow in the picture must have been so familiar, common, routine; it was there, in the background of the life we shared. But it is not quite right to say that it is the memory-images that move me. It has to do with the texture of the body in the image, its reality, which has no equivalence in my memories. It is as if this person is real for the first time, and for an instant, I partake in this reality. The next instant will mark the catastrophe of their death: the absolutely certainty of the thought, "*he is going to die*,"[59] which Barthes writes, is, at the same time, the thought, "I am going to die."

59 Barthes illustrates this with an image of a young man who is about to be sent to the gallows. He writes, the *punctum* is "*he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *this will be and has been* … Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe." Ibid., 96; emphasis in original.

3.3 *The Word That Refers to the Other World*

In some words, one finds such an exquisite pleasure that it becomes a gift to forget them only to later encounter them by chance. Akin to what Proust's narrator discovers on that cold, sorrowful day when he tastes the madeleine, the pleasure that some words bring forth is not strictly in the word, but something that the word carries. The word that is intelligible gains its familiarity from what it refers to in this world. Sometimes the familiar word arrives in an entirely unfamiliar way – in between the word and this world a strange distance seems to open up inside of the listener, an echo of great distances traversed.

In a text posthumously published as *Mourning Diary*, Barthes attempts to track his grief in the wake of the loss of his mother. In an entry dated November 5, he writes of a *punctum*, a single word, a very sharp point, entirely unexpected, that arrived in him like an arrow shot through the heart. Barthes is in line, waiting to be helped, when the girl behind the counter says *Voilà* to the customer ahead of him. It is this single word, one of the many words he and his mother shared,[60] that comes from elsewhere and shatters him. Barthes recounts:

> That's how I can grasp my mourning. Not directly in solitude, empirically, etc.; I seem to have a kind of ease, of control that makes people think I'm suffering less than they would have imagined. But it comes over me when our love for each other is torn apart once again. The most painful point at the most abstract moment.[61]

In the word *Voilà!* the distance that separates the other world (the past, now unreachable world before her loss) and this world collapses, and his body remembers what it is like to hear the sound of the word that once referred to the world he shared with her, proof that the other world still exists in him. The sound of the world, its materiality, opens a wound, and it returns to him – not his mother as she was in life, but her negative image, the feeling of the weight of her loss from the world.

I have felt something of that catastrophic pleasure when I find and then later, as it were, find again, the words of one whom I have loved and lost. A note written alongside a grocery list, another scribbled on a bank statement used

60 "The expression I used when I brought *maman* something, when I was taking care of her. Once, toward the end, half-conscious, she repeated, faintly, *Voilà* (*I'm here*, a word we used to each other all our lives)." Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howell (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 37; emphasis in original.

61 Ibid.

as a bookmark in a bible that I have never read. So incidental, so negligible, so quotidian – that they have survived their moment must be due entirely to chance, not due to any intentions of the author's own or of my own. These words, in the time of their expression, Walter Benjamin would classify as "information": the kind of communication we come across in the news – practical, clear, entirely intelligible – words that belong so unquestionably to their own present moment that they are expressed without remainder, exhausted by the expression.[62] We can imagine the absurdity of one who re-reads old newspapers to hear about today's news events. To an indifferent reader, the thought of re-reading these words would produce a similar effect.

Every communication, even what we find in an old newspaper, points beyond the time of its expression. Communication carries a hopeful remainder, toward a future without guarantee that it will arrive; and if it arrives, without guarantee that it will be recognized. And sometimes the messages arrive and they are recognized; they animate the recipient with a breath from the past, and with such urgency and necessity that Proust's narrator remarks in the encounter with an involuntary memory, "the tears were flowing long before I knew I was crying." These are chance encounters with the past, but "chance" here means that it is an encounter with something that had been long prepared for, invited, and *willed without willing*: an in-voluntary memory – wholly within voluntary memory but not one of its images; a memory from the past not directed by me to the present; this is not the past as it is for me, but *for someone*.

These chance encounters are both invited and unsuspecting. In the aftermath, it is clear that I seek them out, but I cannot say that *I* find them. They arrive and when they do, I am overcome by the force of their affectivity. I am undone by the materiality of the words and could not have been said to have found them. In this undoing, I am mourning. It is not that I find the opportunity to mourn this or that particular loss. There is one in me who mourns and the one in me mourns *in general* – this is mourning as it is, not for *me*, but for *someone*. I am mourning in general – a *general* composed of so many particular losses without equivalents – none of which could be exchanged or confused with any other, none of them had every really gone away or been processed, completed; they had been nested there, held within the one that precipitated

62 "The prime requirement of information is that it appear 'understandable in itself' … The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time." Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 89–90.

the encounter. No longer just holding the memories of these losses, I could feel more clearly that they had been holding me. Each of them were there, whole and intact, charged with their own force enervating the activity. The words on the note that were not directed to me then are directed to me now, to this no one in particular who is simultaneously holding and being held.

4 Conclusion

In concluding, I want to return for a moment to Proust's narrator. In the earlier scene, Proust's narrator sees what eyes ought never see – in his grandmother's image he finds what he was looking for – his grandmother as she is without him. What he sees in her is the subtraction of his love from her presence: he sees her with cruel indifference. At the same time that he, through indifference, becomes a spectator of his grandmother, he becomes a "spectator of own's own absence."[63] As spectators we view others with the indifference that allows us to believe that other people are immediately given to us in this one moment, this is their truth, all that they are. Through indifference, we prefigure their absence and our own. It is not until the year after her death that the memory returns. The narrator recounts:

> I bent down slowly and cautiously, to take off my boots, trying to master my pain. But scarcely had I touched the topmost button than my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes.[64]

In this moment, the present sensation – touching his boots – is united to the past sensation of his grandmother unlacing his boots years ago in Balbec. Here, the hand now touching the boot coincides with the hand that once touched the boot; it is the same sensation cut across this world and the other world – his hand and her hand – his perspective and hers. The other "is in essence, me." He is touching touching. Through the encounter, an involuntary memory of his grandmother's face is evoked: not the face of the grandmother entangled with his affections, but the "tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother" that he earlier spied upon. It is the same face that he had glimpsed from the perspective of his nonexistence.

63 Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 183.
64 Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 210.

Proust's narrator is no longer the boy looking at her with the cruel indifference that he must have imagined they shared. What returns in the memory, what the body remembers, is who she was: the very someone that he had been looking for. If he could not find her after her death, it was because she was not truly missing, he was still anticipating her arrival. She was the one at the horizon of his life, the one towards whom his present life was directed. She was not that woman that he did not know, but the one through whom everything was known. She exists. She is not in the visible as one of its objects, but invisible, wholly within the visible, but not herself visible because she is visibility itself, sensibility itself. Through this sensation, he finds his grandmother present – not in the partial way in which he habitually encountered her in life or recollected her in death – but the "real grandmother," the "living reality," fully present in her absence from the world.[65] It was only in the "wild desire to fling myself into her arms … that I became conscious that she was dead."[66]

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes asks about the existence of what is shown in the photograph. Surely, the past of the image once existed, but does what is shown in the photograph still exist? The eyes of that soldier once looked at Napoleon. But do they look at the young emperor still? A question directed to the soldier's gaze because it is directed to his mother's gaze in the photo: these eyes looked at me once, do they look at me still? She was visible to me once, is she visible still? Barthes finds his answer in the thought occasioned by the *punctum* of her photograph: "she is going to die" and "I am going to die." The photograph reduces time to what has been. It reduces the vibrancy and motion of the life depicted to a frozen image of that life as shown from one perspective (the operator's). In the encounter with the *punctum*, the bereaved son is not reunited with the mother as she was in life, but in the thought of her death which is the thought of his own: a thought that was there, in the background of the life they shared. He sees her death from the perspective of his own. Because they share the same *telos*, he no longer has to fear it.

When Proust's narrator touches his bootstraps, he finds his own answer to that question posed by Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, and by so many others for whom mourning does not arrive along with the event of the other's death, or rather, for whom mourning is deferred. They look for mourning, but *they* do not find it. Mourning arrives like a cut, a fresh wound, and in finding their grief, they find themselves undone. It is not that *they* are mourning their personal losses, they are mourning in general, both mourning and being mourned. What a phenomenology of the imaginary searches out is the *punctum caecum* – that

65 Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, 211.
66 Ibid.

perspective of the world that doesn't belong to us but concerns us; it is our zero point of orientation around which everything that we perceive is in relation; our constitutive absence. A phenomenology of the other world – this world as it appears to no one in particular.

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