

Roland Barthes's Photobiographies: Towards an “Exemption from Meaning”

Fabien Arribert-Narce

Introduction:

Barthes, Autobiography and Photography

Roland Barthes's interest in photography began at a very early stage in his career. Indeed, several texts in *Mythologies*, one of his first major works, and published in 1957, are dedicated to the role of photography in French society of the 1950s. At this time, Barthes was interested in the potential of the photograph as a powerful mass communication medium used, for example, to glorify Hollywood actors. In the following years, his work focused mainly on advertising and press photography, with articles such as “The Photographic Message” (1961) and “Rhetoric of the Image” (1964), in which he analyses the ways in which pictures convey meaning. At this stage, he conceived the photograph as a fundamentally ambivalent and paradoxical object, involving the “co-existence of two messages”, “the one without a code” (pure denotation), and “the other with a code” (that is to say a whole range of connotations).¹

Barthes thus highlights the photograph's capacity to fascinate us, working as an analogue of the real, giving a direct access to its referent on the one hand, and, on the other, to convey information and to be “read” like a text. He remained loyal to this double approach until the very end of his

career, and in particular in the last book he published (in 1980), *Camera Lucida*. In fact, his insistence on one or the other of these potentialities of the photograph depends on context. Overall, he talks about family and intimate snapshots as what he calls a “realist”, that is to say “primitively, without culture”, and examines all other pictures as a semiologist.²

In *Camera Lucida*, he focuses more on the photographic referent, this book being one of his most personal texts, in which he adopts a phenomenological approach to define photography, being finally spellbound by a snapshot representing his mother and allowing him to “find her again”, to “regain” her (his expression). In short, *Camera Lucida* is much more of an intimate essay dedicated to Barthes’s mother who died a couple of years before its publication than a theoretical work. The other important work by Barthes that clearly manifests an autobiographical character – even if none of Barthes’s texts could be said to be an autobiography in the traditional sense of the term – is *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. This book, published in 1975, can be described as a fragmentary self-portrait. It opens with an album of private snapshots, with captions provided by Barthes himself.

Thus, despite their obvious differences, Barthes’s main autobiographical works are both inhabited by photographs. How can this phenomenon be explained? Does this photographic presence explain to some extent Barthes’s refusal (or indeed, inability) to write a proper autobiography? My aim in this paper is to show that the photograph is the cornerstone of Barthes’s photobiographical project, conceived in the 1970s, that is to say in the last ten years of his life. His use of photography in this context greatly contributed to a redefinition of the autobiographical genre, raising in particular issues concerning the readability of autobiographical content – its ability to *signify* – and the temporality of memory. With the work of Barthes, autobiography may simply have entered (for good) the age of mechanical reproduction, and by so doing, escaped, to use his own term, the realm of the “*doxa*”. My reflection will encompass Barthes’s comparison of the photograph and what we might call the “biographeme” and his approach to the image, the face and to identity and referential signs – most notably proper names and handwriting.

Barthes’s Photobiographical Project: Studium-Biographemes, Punctum-Biographemes

As I noted earlier, none of Barthes’s texts could be said to be an autobiography in the traditional sense of the term, despite his desire to express what we might call an autobiographical content. This is mainly because

Barthes is very critical of this particular literary genre, which he refers to using the contemptuous expression “[auto]biochronography”.³ Like many other thinkers of his time (Blanchot, de Man, Derrida), he denounces the illusions involved in conventional autobiographical writing: this includes a referential illusion (that is to say, the illusion that the “I” speaking in the text *is* the autobiographer); the illusion that a human life can follow something like a destiny and can have a meaning. Another aspect of autobiographical narratives that Barthes does not like is their chronological linearity, conveying the illusion that the succession of events in the life of an autobiographer can correspond to a textual order. Finally, Barthes criticises the search for rational explanations of human behaviour, which are so common, he argues, in traditional autobiographies. This tendency is part of what is usually referred to as “retrospective illusion”, corresponding to the autobiographer’s temptation to rearrange the story of his or her life to give an impression of coherence, of logic, whereas the “real” is in fact something that resists meaning, as Jacques Lacan – among others – has argued.

To sum up, Barthes was against “*Curriculum Vitae*” autobiographies:

As we see, what passes into the work is certainly the author’s life, but a life *disoriented*. ... [Proust’s work is read as] the impassioned expression of an absolute personal subject who ceaselessly returns to his own life, not as to a curriculum vitae, but as to a constellation of circumstances and figures. More and more, we find ourselves loving not “Proust” (civil name of an author filed away in the histories of literature) but “Marcel”.⁴

Barthes clearly asserts here his taste for the fulguration of the personal through details, figures and fragments (versus conventional narratives). Besides, he demonstrates his aversion to the institutional persona of writers (writers as they *exist* in literary dictionaries, in schoolbooks). In fact, in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* for example, he criticises the very notion of “the private”:

Here “private life” is trivial actions, the traces of bourgeois ideology confessed by the subject: confronting this *Doxa*, I am less exposed in declaring a perversion than in uttering a taste: passion, friendship, tenderness, sentimentality, delight in writing then become, by simple structural displacement, *unspeakable* terms: contradicting what can be said, what it is expected that you would say, but which precisely – the very voice of the image-system – you would like to be able to say *immediately* (without mediation).⁵

In other words, autobiography means *doxa*, and according to Barthes,

it is impossible to talk about oneself without being influenced by prevailing ideologies, without being trapped in a series of prejudices and stereotypes. But if autobiography (at least as he defines it here) is Barthes's enemy, what does he want instead?

Barthes (and especially the "late" Barthes of the 1970s) expresses repeatedly his desire for a personal and intimate writing. For example, in 1978, in a lecture at the Collège de France, he states that "it is the *intimate* which seeks utterance in me, seeks to make its cry heard, confronting generality, confronting science."⁶ Having identified the dangers and traps inherent to language as a mode of expression, Barthes aspires in fact to an immediate form of communication, without sentences, outside language. This aspiration triggers his desire for "the neutral" to which he dedicated a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1978. Here is his definition of the "neutral":

I define the Neutral as that which outplays the paradigm, or rather I call Neutral everything that baffles paradigm. ... The paradigm is the wellspring of meaning; where there is meaning, there is paradigm, and where there is paradigm (opposition), there is meaning.⁷

Barthes clearly wants to escape what he views as a typically Western "tyranny" of meaning and logic. He looks for another kind of writing, immediate, unmediated, in direct contact with the real, and allowing an experience of pure presence. In this respect, Barthes's interest for Japanese *Haikai* grew significantly during the 1970s, due in part to their fragmentary nature and their capacity to grasp emotions in a concise manner. *Haikai* have for Barthes a referential dimension, and they share many properties with photography. These two kinds of "writing" share what Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, calls the "*noeme*" or essence of photography, the "That-has-been", giving the illusion that the referent is present and that it really existed, that "it was there", so to speak.⁸

In short, Barthes sought to express autobiographical content outside the realm of meaning, through simple designation. He found in the photograph a medium that, or so he thought, allowed him to achieve this. But how, precisely, is photography included in his autobiographical project?

The first thing to be said here is that Barthes uses photography as a theoretical model rather than anything else. In other words, his photobiographical project never takes shape in a concrete and complete work, despite his fascination for the characteristics of the photographic image on which he wrote so many texts at the end of his life. I shall come back later to the status of this project. For now, I would like to consider its content, which is founded on photographs, and also on "biographemes." Indeed, the

“biographeme” is the main biographical medium for Barthes. I will try to show here that there is a link in his thought between biographemes and photographs.

In the preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, a book published in 1971, the biographeme is defined as follows:

For if, through a twisted dialectic, the Text, destroyer of all subject, contains a subject to love, that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death. ... Were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences [tastes], a few inflections, let us say: to “biographemes” whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion; a marked life, in sum, as Proust succeeded in writing his in his work.⁹

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Barthes, probably referring to the biographeme, confesses a “curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the hallucinatory relish of ‘reality’ (the very materiality of ‘that once existed’)?”¹⁰ If we try to characterise biographemes, we can say that they are details, fragments, triggering the fantasy of direct contact with reality (a “hallucinatory relish of ‘reality’”). They are a minimum unit of life, and they can share the essence of photography that I referred to earlier, the “That-has-been.” The biographeme and the photograph, being both fragmentary pieces of “writing”, raise similar questions for Barthes. My claim is that, at least in the 1970s when he was writing on photography, he had the biographeme in mind – and *vice versa*.

Barthes himself suggests that they are part of the same project. The following quotation, taken from the preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, is important in this respect:

Or even a film, in the old style, in which there is no dialogue and the flow of images (that *flumen orationis* which perhaps is what makes up the “obscenities” of writing) is intercut, like the relief of hiccoughs, by the barely written darkness of the intertitles, the casual eruption of *another* signifier: Sade’s white muff, Fourier’s flowerpots, Ignatius’s Spanish eyes.¹¹

In the preface to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, this quotation comes just after the previous quotation reproduced here. Barthes is expressing a wish, involving biographemes, or to put it another way, the context of this quotation is an autobiographical fantasy. But does Barthes really have in mind a silent

movie here (“a film in the old style”)? Indeed, the way he deprives the filmic of its essential characteristics (that is to say continuity and simultaneity of image and sound) is striking. My claim is that Barthes is referring in this quotation to an album of photographs and not just a silent movie. The “barely written darkness of the intertitles” would correspond then to captions separating the pictures. All the characteristics of the photographic album are present here (the discontinuity, the fragmentary), and I think that if Barthes wanted to refer to films in this context, he would certainly have done so more explicitly (as he does in other texts). What does this hypothesis imply? In trying to describe his ideal autobiography, Barthes associates the biographeme with characteristics one would normally associate with photography. This comment provides a key to understanding Barthes’s photobiographical project.

I want to suggest that biographemes and photographs are thought by Barthes in the same theoretical framework, and what is said about one of them can be applied to the other. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes says that there are two kinds of photographs, *studium* photos and *punctum* photos. If what I have just said about the relation between photographs and biographemes is correct, there should be two kinds of biographemes, *studium* and *punctum*. Barthes defined these two categories in *Camera Lucida*: “the first ... has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; ... it always refers to a classical body of information” (25-6). It is “a kind of general, [human] interest”, “an average affect” (26). As for the “second element”, “it will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. ... It is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). It is a wild emotion. These characteristics remind us of some other famous distinctions made by Barthes between “pleasure” and “bliss” (*jouissance*) and between the “obvious” and the “obtuse” for example. Another important point is that a *punctum* photograph is in fact a “pierced” *studium* photo. In other words, in such photographs, the interest of the *studium* is not erased, but only short-circuited, put between brackets by the sudden emotion of the *punctum*. As Derrida claims in an article on Barthes, these two categories are not enemies: they “compose” together.¹² They can’t be thought of separately.

The *punctum*-biographeme plays a key role in Barthes’s autobiographical project, as it enables what he calls the “essential identity” of a person to be revealed (66). It is the ultimate detail. If the *punctum*-biographeme can be textual, Barthes suggests clearly that its best medium of expression is photographs. Like the Japanese *Haikai*, *punctum*-biographemes originate a “*satori*” (“loss of meaning”, “panic suspension of language”).¹³ They are beyond words. As for the *studium*-biographeme, it

supports everything that Barthes criticised under the name of the *Curriculum Vitae*. It only reveals the civil, cultural, superficial identity of a person. In fact, the best way to explain the difference between *studium* and *punctum*-biographemes is to refer to Barthes's distinction between "*reconnaître*" (recognise) and "*retrouver*" (find again or regain). Indeed, *studium* photographs and biographemes enable us to *recognise* somebody thanks to certain distinctive features. It corresponds to the voluntary memory, or to use Barthes's word, to "anamnesis". The *punctum* photograph and biographeme are, according to Barthes, the only mediums that allow somebody to be *resurrected*.

Let's look at some examples to illustrate this crucial distinction at work in Barthes's project. To begin with, here is an example (in *Camera Lucida*) of a photograph initiating an experience of voluntary memory:

No anamnesis could ever make me glimpse this time [the time when my mother was alive *before me*] 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 crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder (65).

Contemplating a picture representing his mother, Barthes recovers sensations he experienced in his childhood. These sensations are intact, and can be recalled at will. This corresponds exactly to the definition of *anamnesis* given by Barthes in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: "I call anamnesis the action – a mixture of pleasure and effort – performed by the subject in order to recover, *without magnifying or sentimentalizing it*, a tenuity of memory."¹⁴ However, it has to be said that the examples chosen here by Barthes – tactile and olfactory sensations – are reminiscent of the characteristics of involuntary memory described in the work of Marcel Proust, a crucial point of reference in *Camera Lucida*.

The picture in this example is undoubtedly a *studium* photo according to Barthes's definition. It enables Barthes to "*retrouver*" his mother in the weak sense of this term in French (to recover an object that was lost, for example). To recognise, to identify somebody involves a "*retrouvaille*" of this kind, and implies to retrieve (remember) features which have been sensibly experienced in the past. On the contrary, "*retrouver*", in the sense of resurrection, means to "regain" a person whose essential identity had never been experienced as such in the past. We recognise here characteristics of Proustian involuntary memory, and Barthes himself makes this connection:

For once, photography gave me a sentiment as certain as remem-

brance, just as Proust experienced it one day when, leaning over to take off his boots, there suddenly came to him his grandmother's true face, "whose living reality I was experiencing for the first time, in an involuntary and complete memory" (70).¹⁵

Looking at a snapshot representing his mother at the age of five in a Winter Garden in Paris, Barthes suddenly finds her essential identity, accessed through a sensory fulguration that is very similar to the Proustian narrator's experience of involuntary memory. This resurrection is described as a miracle. The Winter Garden photograph is the archetype of the *punctum*-photograph.

We can begin to understand here why photographs are the best autobiographical medium for Barthes: they allow their spectator to access an essence (of identity), and this in a Proustian manner. We can also begin to speculate as to what an ideal autobiography for Barthes might be or look like: an album gathering *punctum*-biographemes, verbal and visual. Of course, there are more *studium* than *punctum* photographs (we can think here of the pictures on the opening pages of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*). Nevertheless, the few pictures which really count for Barthes are enough to justify his autobiographical project. This project, aiming at a radical form of expression, "a pure designation" (the biographeme), directly inspired by the characteristics of photography, renews considerably the codes and the rules of autobiography as a genre.

Having said this, several problems are still to be solved. First of all, what exactly is an "essential identity" (or the essence of an identity)? In Proust's quotation, the narrator evokes the "*true face*" of his grandmother. But what is the role played by the face in Barthes's photobiographical project?

Barthes, Deleuze, Levinas and the Face

Barthes was very critical of the face, or rather of what he thought was an Occidental approach to the face. Already in *Mythologies*, he deplors the fact that people imitate the external appearances of famous actors, and that as a result, he suggests, all faces are alike. For Barthes, the face is a symbol of individualism. When people are attempting to distinguish themselves from other people, to be *original* – following fashion for example – they use codes and signs of originality in a very artificial manner. This is in fact the core of Barthes's critique of the face, considered by him as the realm of meaning: "A mask. It is this word which Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into the product of a society and of its history. ... The mask is the meaning insofar as it is absolutely pure" (34). What

Barthes does not like is the *studium* face, being nothing else than a mask with signs of identity that are to be read and interpreted.

His critique of the face reminds us of Deleuze and Guattari's text entitled "Year Zero: Faciality", in the seventh chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*,¹⁶ in which the authors describe the face as a "monstrous hood" produced by a "machine of faciality."¹⁷ For them, the face is nothing more – at least in the capitalist world – than a "map", a trap, an appearance, giving access to an illusive subjectivity.¹⁸ Furthermore, like Barthes, they associate such qualities in the face with the use in the Western civilisation of photographic and television images which serve to glorify the individual.

Against the face considered as a structure of signification, Deleuze and Guattari praise what they call the "head", that is to say "flesh" or even "meat". Like Barthes, they express a desire to destroy the face and to establish what is behind the mask. However, Barthes, through his piercing of the face with the *punctum*, does not gain access to the Deleuzo-Guattarian "head", but, as we have seen, to what is understood as a "true face", "an essential identity". In short, if Barthes was influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the face as a subjective and signifying whole, in his last work (*Camera Lucida*), his arguments differ from the conclusions drawn by the other two French philosophers.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes describes the "living resurrection of the beloved face" enabled by the Winter Garden photograph (64). This experience is characterised by an overwhelming emotion and by a disruption of language and meaning. But what exactly is this "true face" evoked by Barthes? It is also described as an "air" in *Camera Lucida*:

The air (I use this word, lacking anything better, for the expression of truth) is a kind of intractable supplement of identity, what is given as an act of grace, stripped of any "importance." ... All the photographs of my mother which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life (109-10).

Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Barthes finds another kind of face behind the face (the mask), described here as a soul, that is to say an essence gathering and condensing all of Barthes's experiences involving his mother in his life. To put it in Proustian terms, Barthes finds "a bit of time at the pure state." Barthes never experienced this "air" as such before the miraculous observation of the Winter Garden photograph which triggered the mechanism of involuntary memory.

Several remarks need to be formulated here. To begin with, if Barthes

is able to regain the essential identity of his mother while observing the Winter Garden photograph, it is because this picture is blurred and represents Barthes's mother at the age of five (as Barthes never saw her): "the only [photograph] which has given me the splendour of her truth is precisely a lost, remote photograph, one which does not look 'like' her, the photograph of a child I never knew" (103). Barthes adds: "lost in the depths of the Winter Garden, my mother's face is vague, faded" (99). Barthes seems to suggest here that in order to find somebody's essential identity, the face of the person observed in a photograph should not resemble them much – it should not be easily "readable". Its features should not be too definite. In this respect, Barthes shares several aspects of Emmanuel Levinas's approach to the face: "You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes!"¹⁹ In order to access somebody's "true face", it is not necessary to see or to touch the face of this person.²⁰ Indeed, this access transcends the sensible: "it is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible."²¹ In other words, the face should be considered as a signifier and not as a combination of signifieds. And as a signifier, it can be emotionally invested by the observer's *punctum*. We can think here of the opening picture of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: it represents Barthes's mother, is blurred, and is without caption. The face it represents cannot be easily identified or analysed, because as Barthes puts it, "the *air* of a face is unanalyzable [indécomposable]" (107). It is only possible to say that this face is blurred. It is not easy to use adjectives to describe it, and it is exactly why Barthes likes this picture: he does not want to reduce the face of his mother to a series of words. Observing this picture, he – and only he – is able to "regain" his mother. Despite its poor quality, it is a good picture *for him*.

In fact, scarcely one detail (a *punctum*) emerges in the photographs representing Barthes's mother's face, and it is, despite Levinas's claim, the colour of her eyes:

Yet in these photographs of my mother there was always a place set apart, reserved and preserved: the brightness of her eyes. For the moment it was a quite physical luminosity, the photographic trace of a colour, the blue-green of her pupils. But this light was already a kind of mediation which led me toward an essential identity, the genius of the beloved face (66).

We recognise here a *punctum*-biographeme, the key medium that permits

us, according to Barthes, to access somebody's essential identity. It has been argued that Barthes supplies his readers with an iconographic representation of this colour-*punctum* with Daniel Boudinet's photograph reproduced at the very beginning of *Camera Lucida*.²²

Whatever the case may be, Barthes seems to insist here on the importance of the physical mediation of the body in this miraculous and amorous experience in which the sensible prevails over the readable. And finally, what Barthes regains or finds again in *Camera Lucida* is the face of his mother as his body experienced it over his entire life. In other words, the "air" or "true face" is nothing other than a face *per se*, the face of Barthes's mother *for Barthes*, and that is why he does not show the Winter Garden picture in his book: he is the only one who can "access" this "intractable supplement of identity." Barthes adds that the *air* "accords with both my mother's being and my grief at her death" (70).²³ It is thus impossible to separate this essential identity from the emotion which allows Barthes to access it. It also explains why it is important that in the Winter Garden photograph the features of Barthes's mother's face are blurred: for Barthes, this face is much more an emotion than an *image* so to speak.

Photographs were for Barthes the best autobiographical vehicles because he could treat them as material signs, *signifiers* (what he calls "*champs de signifiante*"), triggering the *punctum*. But how does this approach to the photograph influence his use of other identity and referential signs that are so important in autobiographies?

Barthes's Use of Referential Signs (Proper Names, Handwriting)

In the margins of autobiographical works, photographs are often associated with other identity signs such as the proper name of the author. These signs are complementary and share a referential dimension. According to Philippe Lejeune, they allow a pact between the autobiographer and his or her reader to be formed.²⁴ In Barthes's case, however, photography is used to avoid traditional autobiographical writing. My claim here is that his approach to photography can help us to understand his use of other referential signs. His comments on the photograph can be brought to bear upon the proper name in particular.

Barthes, discussing his views on autobiography, makes a distinction between "Proust" and "Marcel" ("Marcel" being also the first name of the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, whose last name is unknown to the reader).²⁵ We recognise here the difference between the institution or writer *studium*, Proust, and the man who can be emotionally approached

through *punctum* biographemes, Marcel (which is also a fictional name). But what does this distinction involve in this context? How can it be applied to Barthes's proper name? How can we define the "Rolandism"?²⁶

To begin with, let's consider Louis Marin's remarks regarding the title of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*:

I insist on the repetition of the name, of the mark of social identity in the title of the book: ... the second "Roland Barthes" vacillates over a border, and by doing so, draws it. This border separates the name of the book (its title) from the name of who has written it; "Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes", part of a title? Pen name? Both of them, neither of them. In one case, the book has no author: paradoxically, because of the very repetition of the name, it is anonymous; in the other, and as paradoxically, the repetition becomes a fortuitous coincidence; the book is an homonym: it happens that the author of this biography has the same surname and first name as the person's whose life he narrates.²⁷

Following Marin's suggestion, the same name does not always have the same *signification*. Barthes's title could refer to the portrait of Barthes the writer by Roland, or the contrary. Several approaches are possible. But the repetition of the name – Barthes does not say anything here other than "Roland Barthes = Roland Barthes" – draws the reader's attention towards its very status: in this title, there is only a name, the name, that is to say, a *signifier*. Barthes's name is thus neutralised, like the "*khôra*", Derrida's definition of which reminds us of Barthes's description of the "neutral": "The *khôra* seems to be alien to the order of the 'paradigm', that intelligible and immutable model."²⁸

Finally, Barthes's name does not signify anything. It simply sends us the signal that it does not have a signification, that it is just a name. Barthes's repetition of the name is a means of escaping meaning. Nonetheless, it can be interpreted at the same time as an invitation to approach his name emotionally, to *pierce* or *punctuate* it. The name, like the photograph, is a signifier that allows the double reception of the *studium* and the *punctum*.

"Rolandism", the equivalent of "Marcellism" for Barthes, could be defined as an autobiographical practice aimed at approaching an author through a succession of *punctum*-biographemes, be they textual or photographic. With this definition of a "*science of the unique being*" evoked in *Camera Lucida* (71), Barthes theorises a practice probably shared by a majority of readers if we consider the fascination inherent to the photograph and the proper name, which are finally nothing other than graphic signs, re-

sistant to meaning. According to Barthes, the Roland Barthes *per se* that any reader can approach through *punctum*-biographemes represents the ultimate autobiographical content (*for him*). The Roland Barthes *studium* is not really of interest autobiographically speaking.

The importance of writing (*graphein*) in Barthes's photobiographical project leads me to consider finally another graphic sign that is obviously referential: handwriting. In particular, I would like to make a few remarks about the opening sentence of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, "it must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel."²⁹ Indeed, the fact that Barthes chose to use his own handwriting to write this sentence gives us a key for reading his photobiographical project. First of all, this sentence is provocative and clearly ironic, Barthes associating paradoxically a referential sign that can be easily identified as such with an explicit allusion through his use of the word "novel", to a fictional universe. There is an obvious contradiction between the form and the content of this message, which invites the reader to adjust his or her reception and to take into account the gap between language and image. Here is what the reader of this visual gag, of this nonsense, can think: I know very well that this sentence was written by Roland Barthes himself, and that Barthes is not a fictional character, so why should I read this work as if it were a novel? In fact, for Barthes, there is little difference between a character represented in a biography and a character in a novel. As a consequence, the presence of the word "novel" in this context should not trouble the reader too much. Besides, the reader is invited here to follow Barthes's suggestion and to read this work "as if [it was] spoken by a character in a novel", which does not imply to forget that the book was actually *written* by Barthes, who tries to draw our attention towards the very materiality of his handwriting. Finally, this sentence *refers* much more to writing itself than to the referent Roland Barthes who actually wrote the words. This interpretation is confirmed by the reproduction at the end of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* of two unreadable graphic signs: "Doodling ... or the signifier without the signified."³⁰ This attention given to the materiality of writing, greatly innovative in this context, is a direct consequence of Barthes's use of photography in his autobiographical work.

Conclusion

Barthes's photobiographical project can be considered as a polygraphy, involving texts, photographs, drawings and all sorts of graphic objects. The use of writing as the common denominator of his project allowed Barthes to deconstruct the difference between image and text, and to pro-

mote instead his distinction between two levels of reception, the *studium* and the *punctum*. For him, the best way to express and to access autobiographical content is emotionally. In other words, autobiography only concerns “amateurs” in the etymological sense of the term: “the Amateur renews his pleasure (*amator*: one who loves and loves again); he is anything but a hero (of creation, of performance); he establishes himself *graciously* (for nothing) in the signifier.”³¹

If Barthes's photobiographical project never took shape in a single volume, it constitutes nonetheless an invaluable reflexion on the potentialities of photography as an autobiographical support. As such, Barthes's project, whether unrealised or unrealisable, renews considerably the theory of autobiography, showing that, pace Philippe Lejeune and others, this literary genre is not necessarily the realm of signification, linearity and unity (narrative). Barthes's effort to base his attempt at self-expression on photography may only be one way to acknowledge the importance of photographs in personal writing, but it nonetheless constitutes an important intellectual and aesthetical move – a landmark as far as the autobiographical genre is concerned.

University of Kent / Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle
F.Arribert-Narce@kent.ac.uk

NOTES

- ¹ Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message”, in *Image-Music-Text*, trans and ed Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) 19.
- ² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000) 7 and 88. All in-text parenthetical references are to this book.
- ³ Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du Roman I et II* (Paris: Seuil, 2003) 278. My translation.
- ⁴ Roland Barthes, “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure...*”, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) 283. Unless otherwise indicated, the emphasis is Barthes's.
- ⁵ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans Richard Howard (London and Basingtoke: Papermac, 1995), 82-3.
- ⁶ Barthes, “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure ...*” 284.
- ⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, trans Rosalind Krauss (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 7.
- ⁸ “The name of Photography's *noème* will therefore be: ‘That-has-been’: what I

see has been there, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator or spectator*)" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 77).

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977) 8-9.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 53.

¹¹ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* 9.

¹² See Jacques Derrida, "Les morts de Roland Barthes", *Poétique* 47 (1981) 269-92.

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) xi and 75.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 109.

¹⁵ Barthes is quoting Proust here.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Year Zero: Faciality", in *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 1987) 185-211.

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, "Year Zero: Faciality" 211 and 187.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, "Year Zero: Faciality" 188.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985) 85. The verb "encounter" used here by Levinas corresponds to Barthes's expression "*retrouver essentiellement*."

²⁰ In this respect, Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: "The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*Totality and Infinity*, trans Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 194).

²¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 198.

²² Indeed, Diana Knight establishes a link between Barthes's comment on the colour of his mother's eyes in *Camera Lucida* and Daniel Boudinet's photograph (*Polaroid*, 1979), reproduced at the beginning of the book (in its original publication in French). This picture – the only one to be in colour in the book – materialises according to Knight the "blue-green" of Barthes's mother's eyes. See Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia. Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 266.

²³ See as well: "So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed *for me*" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 8).

²⁴ See Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

²⁵ See for example my endnote 4.

²⁶ In *La Préparation du Roman I et II*, Barthes describes "Marcellism" as "a special investment in Proust's civil person: his life, his friends, his eccentricities" (Barthes,

La Préparation du Roman 391). My translation. "Rolandism" would naturally be the equivalent of "Marcellism" for Barthes.

²⁷ Louis Marin, "Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes ou L'autobiographie au neutre," in *L'Écriture de soi* (Paris: PUF, 1999) 4-5. My translation.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Khôra", in *On the Name*, trans Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 90. Derrida adds that "in carrying beyond the polarity of sense (metaphorical or proper), it [the *khôra*] would no longer belong to the horizon of sense, nor to that of meaning as the meaning of being" (Derrida, "Khôra" 92-3).

²⁹ Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 1.

³⁰ Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 187.

³¹ Barthes, *Roland Barthes* 52.