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 **Impressions: Proust, Photography, Trauma**

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Impressions:  
Proust, Photography, Trauma**

*Rebecca Comay (bio)*

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A good enough place to begin is with the famous passage in "Inter-

mittencies of the Heart"—alternatively titled in the manuscripts "La mort après-coup de ma grand-mère"—in which the narrator, arriving for the second time at Balbec, comes to touch himself and thereby presses the button that will reveal his own touch as the traumatic touch of the Other. Having arrived exhausted at a hotel whose unexpected familiarity evokes a feeling not of reassuring domesticity but of profound uneasiness, he collapses in his room and begins to undress. Despite its possible overexposure, this passage deserves to be read at length, beginning with its ungrammatical opening sentence—somewhat exceptional, I believe, in Proust—and ending with its oxymoronic appeal to a "complete and involuntary recollection":<sup>1</sup>

Upheaval of my entire being [*Bouleversement de toute ma personne*]. On the first night, as I was suffering from cardiac fatigue, I bent down slowly and cautiously to take off my boots, trying to master my pain. But scarcely had I touched the topmost button [*le premier bouton*] than my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. The being who had come to my rescue, saving me from barrenness of spirit, was the same who years before, in a moment of identical distress and loneliness, in a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had come in and had restored me to myself, for that being **[End Page 86]** was myself and something more than me (the container that is greater than the contained and was bringing it to me). I had just perceived in my memory, stooping over my fatigue, the tender, preoccupied, disappointed face of my grandmother, as she had been on that first evening of our arrival, the face not of that grandmother whom I had been astonished and remorseful at having so little missed, and who had little in common with her save her name, but of my real grandmother, of whom for the first time since the afternoon of her stroke in the Champs-Élysées, I now captured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection.

If the refinding of the lost object will prove here to be the occasion of the latter's most irrevocable withdrawal—for it is "on finding her at last" that the narrator learns the unbearable truth that he has lost his grandmother "forever" (2:785)—such a paradox rigorously specifies just what is at stake in the temporal logic of *Nachträglichkeit*. The "anachronism" (2:783) that defines the most intimate encounter with the Other as essentially a missed encounter involves a moment of identification that fissures the self-identity of both parties concerned. At the most intimate moment of self-proximity, the narrator finds himself cast in the impossible role of substitute for his own substitute. As he assumes his dead grandmother's role—her role, precisely, of assuming for him his own role of undressing himself—the most familiar domestic ritual turns into a vertiginous spiral of self-divestment in which the heterological kernel of autoaffectation is traumatically revealed.

Inside and outside thus form a chiasmus: the lost object forms a "container that is greater than the contained" (2:783) in which it simultaneously finds itself, such that the self is cast as an "empty apparatus" (3:1116) that is structurally equivalent to the container of its own container. Such a chiasmus inevitably disrupts every notion of consciousness as interiority or inwardness, and thus every model of memory as *Er-innerung*. Floating in the internal crypt that marks a kind of outside on the inside, the contents of consciousness find themselves suspended in an "unknown region" in which, Proust remarks, "it is perhaps equally inexact to suppose that they escape or return" (2:784) such that what is retained is secreted in an interior *extimité* described elsewhere as the "prolonged oblivion" of the archive (1:692).

What is striking is the way in which this scene of traumatic loss unmistakably evokes a certain trauma of seduction. The grandmother's spectral touch...

# Impressions: Proust, Photography, Trauma

Rebecca Comay

## I

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