FRAGMENTARY IMAGES, FRAGMENTARY SELVES:

REFRAMING THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT AS A FRÜHROMANTIK FRAGMENT

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates claims – made by scholars such as Elizabeth Eastlake, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes – that photographic portraits are somehow superior to their painted or drawn counterparts. The analysis of works by these scholars will lead to the suggestion that this superiority lies in the photographic portrait’s ability to communicate ipseity, and the remainder of the dissertation will consist of an enquiry as to the nature and legitimacy of that ability. With the help of Jacques Derrida’s Demeure, Athènes, I will argue that this ability to communicate ipseity can be best explained if the portrait is understood as a romantic fragment, in the sense proposed by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis: a work of art whose wit suggests multiple interpretations and whose irony prevents the audience from declaring any one interpretation as superior and final. This solution depends on an understanding of ipseity as inherently and irreducibly heterogeneous, and it will be shown that this is precisely how Barthes and Schlegel understood it.

However, by arguing that ipseity can be best communicated through a fragmentary work, we will have simply shown that any fragmentary portrait (photographic or otherwise) is capable of communicating ipseity. If the claims of Barthes, Benjamin, and Eastlake are to have any merit, then there must be a property peculiar to photographic portraits which facilitates that communication. The last chapter of this dissertation will argue that photographic portraits can indeed effect such a communication more easily as long as the viewers accept a particular version of photographic realism: the realism of transparency.

With the help of Kendall Walton’s counterfactual defense of photographic realism, as well as Barbara Savedoff’s investigations of the effect of the belief in such realism in the interpretation of photographic works of art, I will argue that the superiority of fragmentary
photographic portraits lies in their ability to demand that viewers identify what (or who) was photographed regardless of how witty or ambiguous the image is. We will conclude with an investigation of the effects of digital manipulation on the widespread belief in photographic realism, and its consequences for the power of photographic portraits.
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1. Introduction

 shouldn’t photography – which began as a hyperdetailed record of our shared visible world – provide a close, critical examination of that world, the kind of jarring irritant able to rouse viewers out of a complacent, forgetful slumber, and into a wakeful regard of what is?

Jerry Thompson

The photographic portrait has perplexed its viewers and scholars since its first appearance, and has led to repeated investigations of its peculiar powers and limitations. One recurring claim is that certain (but not all) photographic portraits are able to communicate the ipseity – the very identity – of the photographed person in a manner that exceeds the capabilities of other artistic media. This dissertation will examine some of the most famous arguments to this effect in order to ask whether and how such a feat may be accomplished by photography. The following chapters will argue that photography is indeed able to communicate a person's ipseity, and that it can do so by spawning one or more narratives about the person in question while preventing the viewer from ever declaring any one narrative to be final. Furthermore, we will argue that photography can accomplish this task by being a fragment in the sense proposed by Friedrich Schlegel: a self-contained work suggesting a potentially infinite number of competing interpretations while preventing the interpreter from committing to any one option. In order to make this argument, we will show that the question of identity in photographic portraits is an old one – nearly as old as the photographic medium itself – and we will investigate the evolution of that question through three seminal works in the philosophy of photography. As a result of that investigation two possible reasons for the photographic portrait’s peculiar ability will arise: the fragmentary nature of some portraits, and the self-evidential power of photography (which is

1 Thompson, Why Photography Matters, 4.
typically studied under the heading of “photographic realism”).

Chapter 2 will consist of the statement of the problematic which drives the present study, and of a brief anticipation of the arguments which will follow in subsequent chapters. It will largely consist of an examination of three seminal works in the philosophy of photography: Lady Elizabeth Eastlake’s 1857 article titled “Photography,” Walter Benjamin’s 1931 Kleine Geschichte der Photographie, and Roland Barthes 1980 La Chambre Claire. These examinations will show that the question of identity has surrounded photographic portraits from the start, and that the insights gained by photography’s early scholars were revived and furthered in the studies of their successors. By examining increasingly nuanced explanations for the photographic portrait’s ability to communicate the very identity of the portrayed person, it will become clear that the peculiar power of such portraits is tied to their penchant for capturing unintended and seemingly trivial details, but that such details alone cannot account for the successful communication of ipseity. With the help of Jacques Derrida’s Demeure, Athènes, we will propose that only by functioning as fragments, in the early Romantic sense, can portraits adequately convey who a person is or was.

Chapter 3 will examine the fragmentary works of Friedrich Schlegel in order to better understand the peculiar hermeneutic of the Romantic fragment. There we will show that a fragmentary work is distinguished by the presence of two characteristics: wit and irony. We will argue for an understanding of romantic wit as a work’s ability to suggest multiple (often incompatible) interpretations and of irony as the work’s resistance to being reduced to any one such interpretation. Having defended such an understanding of the romantic fragment, we argue that Schlegel, Derrida, and Barthes all conceived of ipseity as irreducibly heterogeneous, and that as such ipseity falls among the subject matters which are well-suited for fragmentary treatment.
We will end this chapter by arguing that not only did Barthes see the \textit{Winter Garden} photograph (which he claims captured his mother’s identity completely) as a fragment, his first draft of \textit{La Chambre Claire} amounted to an effort to translate a fragmentary photograph into an equally fragmentary text. However, as we come closer to explaining the photographic portrait’s ability to communicate \textit{ipseity}, it will become clear that such communication is in principle achievable by fragmentary works in any medium. As such, photography’s ability to function as a romantic fragment cannot explain the alleged superiority perceived by Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes, and we will ask whether there is anything peculiar to photographic portraits which could facilitate such communication.

Chapter 4 will attempt to answer that question by examining the question of photographic realism. This dissertation will not be able to do full justice to the richness of this area of study, but thankfully such a thorough investigation will not be needed. By examining the works of contemporary scholars of photography such as Kendal Walton, Patrick Maynard, and Barbara Savedoff, we will show that the superiority of photographic portraits in the communication of identity relies on the acceptance of a particular version of photographic realism: the realism of transparency. This theory of realism points to photography’s dependence on the photographed subject in order to argue that the existence of the photograph serves as proof for the (prior) existence of the photographed subject. Following Savedoff’s argument that such an acceptance plays a crucial hermeneutic role in the reception of any photograph (including abstract and other artistic photographs), we will argue that the viewer’s faith in the documentary authority of photographic portraits can explain both the presence and the force of the portrait’s claim to identity. Once we have established the nature of such a belief in transparency and its impact on the hermeneutics of the photographic image, we will turn to Lee Friedlander’s \textit{Aloha},
Washington for an example of a deeply fragmentary photographic portrait.

We will end our investigations with a consideration of the belief in photographic transparency in the age of widespread digital manipulation. There we will see that although the rise of Photoshop may have largely eroded the public’s faith in transparency, this faith remains unaffected in one specific domain of photography: the photographs which are made by the viewer herself. This will lead us to a brief examination of photography as a hermeneutic practice, and will help us understand how a photographer can come to create a suitably fragmentary photographic portrait.
2. Statement of the Question: Photography & Ipseity

*Welche Vorstellungen müssen die Theoristen gehabt haben, die das Porträt vom Gebiet der eigentlich schönen, freien und schaffenden Kunst ausschließen. Es ist grade, als wollte man es nicht für Poesie gelten lassen, wenn ein Dichter seine wirkliche Geliebte besingt.*

[“What kind of ideas must those theorists have had who excluded portraiture from the province of the properly fine, liberal, and creative arts. It’s just as if one were to refuse to consider something poetical in which a poet praises his actual mistress.”]

August Wilhelm Schlegel

Our investigation will begin by locating the question of the peculiarity of photographic portraits in three key texts: Lady Elizabeth Eastlake’s 1857 article “Photography,” Walter Benjamin’s *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, and Roland Barthes’ *La Chambre Claire*. In section 2.1 we will examine Eastlake’s attempt to identify the unique properties of photographic portraits by comparing them to Rembrandt’s paintings. Though Eastlake will demonstrate a certain ambivalence towards the new medium, she will arrive at an important insight: due to its chemical and optical processes, which she believes preclude any meaningful interventions on the part of the photographer, photography opens up entirely new avenues for communication. Relevantly for our purposes, Eastlake notes that photographic portraits can depict their subjects with a peculiar strength of identity, though she does not elaborate this point.

Then, in section 2.2, we will examine Walter Benjamin’s engagements with photographic portraits in his *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*. There we will see that, despite his ignorance

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of Eastlake’s scholarship, Benjamin argues along very similar lines and arrives at very similar conclusions. Comparing photographic portraits to their painted counterparts, Benjamin notes that the former can place a peculiar and persistent demand on its viewers. Some, but not all, photographic portraits demand that its viewers acknowledge the personhood of the portrayed subjects, and inquire into their identities. Benjamin’s investigation yields a bit more clarity and precision than Eastlake’s, and shares her insight that this ability follows, at least in part, from the scientific processes which comprise the photographic arts. However, like Eastlake, Benjamin does not give us a satisfactory explanation for the photograph’s claim of identity. Furthermore, Benjamin commits a gross misidentification in his analysis of a particular portrait, and his mistake is enlightening.

Section 2.3 turns to Roland Barthes’s analysis of one particular portrait, of his mother as a child, in *La Chambre Claire*. Barthes claims that this portrait, and no other, manages to properly convey the identity of his mother. In his attempt to explain how that portrait manages such a feat, Barthes joins Eastlake and Benjamin in locating that power in the chemical and optical processes of photography. Barthes goes further than his predecessors in his examination of the consequences of these processes, and offers a brief defense of photographic realism. However, as will become evident in our analysis of Barthes’s work, although photographic realism may provide proof that the portrayed person existed, realism alone cannot account for some portraits’ ability to communicate the identity of its subjects. And although Barthes does offer an additional explanation for this photographic feat, turning to his concept of a *punctum*, it too proves unsatisfactory. Fortunately, various passages in his books and personal diary suggest an alternate explanation.

That explanation becomes clearer with the help of Jacques Derrida’s investigations of our
debt towards the dead in *Demeure, Athènes*. Section 2.4 turns to that work, which proposes an analogy between photographs and fragmentary sentences. Through his efforts to bear witness to the uniqueness of a fragment, Derrida implicitly suggests that in order to communicate a person’s identity one must do justice to all possibilities and understandings of that person. This would be an endless task, and as we will see in section 2.5 it mirrors the proper way to engage a Romantic fragment, according to Friedrich Schlegel.

As a result of our brief analyses of Derrida’s and Schlegel’s insights, in section 2.5 we will propose a slight correction to Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of *ipseity* as a narrative identity. We will maintain that narration is the preferred medium for understanding *ipseity*, but will follow Schlegel’s suggestion that, since even the simplest person is inherently heterogeneous, no single narrative can properly describe who one is. Consequently, I will propose that if certain photographic portraits are able to communicate the identity of the portrayed person, they do so by functioning as Romantic fragments, which promote countless interpretations and preclude any one of them from gaining priority. Finally, I will argue that even if he did not argue this explicitly, Barthes too understood such portraits as fragments, understood in this way.

### 2.1. Elizabeth Eastlake and the Photograph’s Strength of Identity

It has been remarked that scholarship on photography, like the photographic medium itself, reached maturity shortly after its inception. As Patrick Maynard notes, “one often finds nineteenth century figures dependably clear, farsighted, interesting, and articulate in their observations on photo phenomena.”³ It is thus not surprising to find that nineteenth century scholars often grappled with the same puzzles which vexed their twentieth century counterparts. One such puzzle concerns the peculiar powers of photographic portraits, and early scholars of

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photography were quick to point out that such portraits differ significantly from their drawn or painted counterparts, even if the nature of this difference defied straightforward conceptualization.

Lady Elizabeth Eastlake begins her renowned 1857 article with a brief discussion of a few photographic portraits, the very first “specimens of a new and mysterious art” that she encountered.⁴ Although the context makes it clear that it was photography as a whole that was “new and mysterious,” the ambivalence and hesitation with which Eastlake describes photographic portraits in particular betray an awareness that this genre of photography bears its own mysteries. Despite the fact that later in the same article she argues that its mechanical processes preclude photography from earning the label of “art,”⁵ and despite the fact that she finds the small and imperfectly rendered portraits of Free Church Ministers to be harshly frank, Eastlake cannot help but remark that in those early portraits “the spirit of Rembrandt had revived.”⁶ But if she believed that photographic portraits are incapable of becoming works of art, we must ask ourselves what precisely Eastlake could have meant by this remark.

Here the most obvious course of action is to turn to Rembrandt's portraits, and inquire whether any of her remarks about the photographs can help us identify the nature of this revived spirit. It might be tempting to look for an answer in the Flemish style of realism, a style which often bordered on trompe-l'œil,⁷ with which Rembrandt painted his portraits. His 1659 Self-

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⁴ Eastlake, “Photography,” 40
⁵ “[F]or all that requires mere manual correctness, and mere manual slavery, without any employment of the artistic feeling, she [i.e. photography] is the proper and therefore the perfect medium.” Eastlake, “Photography,” 64.
⁶ Eastlake, “Photography,” 40, 58, 60.
Portrait, for instance, confronts us with a frankness that seems to match Eastlake's description of the mysterious photographic portraits. Rembrandt's rendering of his own skin as greasy, blotched, and wrinkled; his unapologetic depiction of his bulbous nose; the fatigued and weary countenance – in all of these we see “no attempt to idealise [sic] or soften the harshnesses and accidents of a rather rugged style of physiognomy,” as Eastlake wrote of photographic portraits. Yet this lack of idealization – regardless of whether that term is understood as the attempt to represent the portrayed person in a flattering way, or as the use of the sitter as a model for a work of fiction – is hardly defining of Rembrandt's work. Examples of the latter form of idealization are easy to come by: his Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul, as the title indicates, functions both as a self-portrait and as a depiction of the apostle, and the group portrait of the Night Watch clearly depicts a carefully staged scene. Moreover, while it is undoubtedly true that many of his portraits include (and sometimes emphasize) the physical imperfections of the sitter, one can easily find numerous other portraits in which the attempts to render the sitter as more beautiful than she or he really was. His portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert, for instance, might include a few wrinkles on the sitter's face (necessary imperfections if the portrait of a 76-year-old was to have any credibility) but nevertheless the cheeks and forehead are depicted as incongruously smooth.

8 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Self Portrait. 1659. Oil on canvas, 84.5 x 66 cm. National Gallery of Art (Andrew W. Mellon Collection). http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.79.html.

9 Eastlake, “Photography,” 40.


The difference in the degree of frankness of Rembrandt's commissioned portraits, in comparison to his self-portraits, already implies that which the difference in the depiction of Johannes Wtenbogaert's “crow's feet” and forehead make clear: the inclusion of such imperfections in a painting is a matter of choice. As Eastlake reminds us, painters such as Rembrandt tend to concentrate detail and clarity in the most important parts of the image.13 Straight (or unadulterated) photographs, on the other hand, reproduce detail in a comparatively indiscriminate way: everything that lies in the same plane of focus, and that is sufficiently still (relative to the camera) is reproduced with the same amount of detail. As a result, photographic portraits tend to depict extraneous and unintended details, such as clothing and surrounding furniture, with the same amount of care as the facial features which should retain priority in the image. Moreover, with sufficient depth of field, all facial features are depicted with the same amount of care, and included despite the wishes of the photographer. As photographic methods and equipment progressed, the amount of extraneous detail reproduced in prints increased, giving Eastlake the impression that facial features in portraits became “more unfinished in proportion to the rest.”14

Eastlake's reflections on the excessive extraneous details present in technically superior photographic portraits culminate in a surprising declaration: “the likeness to Rembrandt and Reynolds is gone!”15 But it seems that we are not warranted in equating this “likeness” with the “spirit of Rembrandt” which we are investigating – after all, what destroyed this likeness, for Eastlake, was the presence of extraneous detail in later photographic portraits. And while it may

13 “The first principle in art is that the most important part of a picture should be best done.” Eastlake, “Photography,” 60.
14 Eastlake, “Photography,” 60
15 Eastlake, “Photography,” 60
be true that the early photographic portraits to which Eastlake refers lacked such extraneous details, they also lacked relevant detail in the faces of the subjects, for in them “the heads were not above an inch long, they were little more of patches of broad light and shade.”\textsuperscript{16} As such, even if the later portraits lacked any likeness to Rembrandt due to excessive detail, it is hard to see how the early portraits would bear such a likeness with insufficient detail. Rembrandt, after all, is known precisely for the meticulous attention to detail with which he painted. One might contend that the early photographic portraits to which Eastlake referred concentrated detail in the center of the image, since some early photographic lenses suffered from excessive astigmatism, but this hypothesis would fall flat as soon as one returned to Rembrandt’s paintings. Rembrandt concentrated the detail in the portrait’s faces, after all, and not in the center of his image. It seems that the strongest hypothesis is that the early portraits to which Eastlake referred distributed detail equally across the image, but the overall resolution was low enough to keep the extraneous details from becoming distracting.

Rather than discredit our suggestion that Eastlake recognized something unique and mysterious in photographic portraits, her ambivalence regarding the comparative status of these portraits in relation to those painted by Rembrandt is evidence of her struggle to conceptualize the novel characteristics of photographic portraiture. That this is so becomes clear in Eastlake's argument that while photography ought not to be considered an art-form, it nevertheless constitutes a “new form of communication between man and man.”\textsuperscript{17} What makes photographic communication new, in her view, is precisely that which prevents it from being considered an art-form: the chemical and mechanical processes which underpin the photographic medium,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{16} Eastlake, “Photography,” 40
\textsuperscript{17} Eastlake, “Photography,” 65
\end{flushright}
processes which she claims replace human intervention in the creation of images. But as we will see in the following chapters, this is precisely where Eastlake's reflections run amok, for photographic processes and the peculiar accuracy that results from them are not incompatible with artistic decision-making.

For the moment, however, we should note that Eastlake considered photographic portraits to be both superior and inferior to painted portraits. They are inferior, for the features of the subject could not be idealized as they are in (at least some of) Rembrandt's portraits, and as such the resulting image lacks artistic worth. Yet that same flaw, which reduces photographic portraits to “accurate landmarks and measurements for loving eyes and memories to deck with beauty and animate with expression,” together with photography's penchant for the inclusion of unintended and otherwise extraneous details, give a peculiar advantage over painting.

Anticipating arguments by Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, Eastlake claims that the presence of otherwise minor details in the photograph may result in a portrait with a unique connection to the depicted person. “Minor things – the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other – are given with a strength of identity which art does not even seek.” This peculiar strength, which Eastlake attributes to photographic portraits alone, deserves close examination. Unfortunately, her article remains vague as to the nature of this identity in which photographic portraits seem to excel. Our efforts in understanding this peculiarity, however, are aided by the fact the peculiarities of photographic portraits continued to puzzle subsequent scholars.

2.2. Walter Benjamin and the Portrait’s Unruly Claim of Identity

In his 1931 Kleine Geschichte der Photographie, Walter Benjamin examines the impact

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18 Eastlake, “Photography,” 65
19 Eastlake, “Photography,” 65
20 Eastlake, “Photography” 65.
of photographs on their viewers, and his investigations lead to comparisons between paintings and photographs which parallel those made by Elizabeth Eastlake. The similarities between the findings of the two scholars grow more striking as it becomes clear that Benjamin was unfamiliar with Eastlake’s text. Benjamin turns to several photographs from the mid-nineteenth century in his article, claiming that “die Blüte der Photographie [...] in ihr erstes Jahrzehnt fällt” [“the flowering of photography [...] occurs in its first decade”].

Yet he fails to give early scholars of photography their due, stating that “die historischen oder, wenn man will, philosophischen Fragen, die Aufstieg und Verfall der Photographie nahelegen, jahrzehntelang unbeachtet geblieben sind” [“the historical or, if you will, philosophical questions which accompany the rise and fall of photography went unnoticed for decades”].

Benjamin’s oversight of Eastlake’s essay is all the more puzzling given her close association with David Octavius Hill, a photographer whom Benjamin admired and whose works are carefully examined in Kleine Geschichte der Photographie. Yet while we may regret Benjamin’s lack of engagement with Eastlake’s scholarship, his ignorance of her work only adds weight to the many insights that the two shared – after all, these are insights arrived at independently by the two scholars.

Comparing the ways in which painted and photographic portraits affect their viewers, Benjamin notes that the type of interest elicited by painted portraits changes once the audience no longer knows the person depicted. Shortly after a portrait was painted, viewers were likely to wonder and ask who, in fact, is represented on the canvas, particularly if the painting is a portrait of a relative. “Nach zwei, drei Generationen aber ist dies Interesse verstummt: die Bilder, soweit sie dauern, tun es nur als Zeugnis für die Kunst dessen, der sie gemalt hat” [But after two or

three generations this interests fades; the pictures, if they last, do so only as testimony to the art of the painter”). That is to say, paintings can indeed elicit interest in the identity of its subjects, particularly when the viewer is related to the painted subject. But as time passes and the viewers become more distant from the portrayed person, this interest wanes.

Echoing Eastlake's remarks, however, Benjamin detects “etwas Neuem und Sonderbarem” [something new and peculiar] at work in the photographs of Newhaven fishwives by David Octavius Hill: in one such photograph “bleibt etwas, was im Zeugnis für die Kunst des Photographen Hill nicht aufgeht, etwas, was nicht zum Schweigen zu bringen ist, ungebärdig nach dem Namen derer verlangend, die da gelebt hat, die auch hier noch wirklich ist und niemals gänzlich in die »Kunst« wird eingehen wollen” [“something persists that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer Hill, something that cannot be silenced, that makes the unruly claim to the name of the person who had lived then, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed into art”]. Unlike painted portraits, which with time become interesting only for their artistic and aesthetic qualities and as examples of a particular artist's work, photographic portraits retain a powerful claim: a demand that the portrayed subject be acknowledged as an actual person.

Here we must note that not only do Benjamin and Eastlake identify similar (if not identical) phenomena at work in photographic portraits – peculiar claims of identity on behalf of the portrayed person – they both arrive at similar explanations for these phenomena. Both attribute this peculiarity of photographic portraits to photography's chemical and mechanical processes, and in particular to photography's penchant to imbue images with extraneous details.

Paralleling Eastlake’s remarks on the impact of a child’s shoes or toy in a portrait, Benjamin attributes the unruly claim of certain photographic portraits to unintended details which escape the photographer’s control.

Examining a photograph of Karl Dauthendey and his second wife, notably a portrait taken the year that Eastlake published her article on photography, Benjamin argues that so long as “hat man sich lange genug in so ein Bild vertieft” [“one has immersed oneself long enough in such a picture”] one will, despite the best efforts of the photographer to control the contents of the image through staging and composition, feel an “unwiderstehlich den Zwang, in solchem Bild das winzige Fünkchen Zufall, Hier und Jetzt, zu suchen” [“irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now”]. In the case of this particular portrait, Benjamin locates this spark in the woman’s gaze, which at first seems to be directed at Dauthendey but upon close inspection can be seen to focus somewhere outside the image, in the distance. This uncontrolled detail, according to Benjamin, “mit dem Wirklichkeit den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat” [“has seared the character of the image with reality”] and foreshadows Miss Friedrich’s future suicide “so beredt [...] das wir, rückblickend, es entdecken können” [“so eloquently that we, looking back, can discover it”]. Yet if this unintentional detail is the ground of the photograph’s unruly claim of identity, we must find a way to account for the fact that Benjamin grossly misidentifies the woman in question.

As Kathryn Yacavone points out, Benjamin wrongfully refers to the portrayed woman as Dauthendey’s first wife, who committed suicide in 1855, when in fact the woman portrayed is his second wife. Benjamin’s mistake is all the more puzzling given that the photobook which he

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referenced, Bossert and Guttmann’s *Aus der Frühzeit der Photographie*, adds the following caption to the photograph: “*Der Photograph Karl Dauthendey und seine Braut, Frl. Friedrich (1837-1873) nach dem ersten gemeinsamen Kirchgang am 1 September 1857*” [“The photographer Karl Dauthendey and his bride, Miss Friedrich (1837-1973) after their first church attendance together on September 1st 1857”].

Humorously, Yacavone notes that “by 1857, the wife who had taken her life in 1855 could of course no longer be photographed.” Thus we must ask how Benjamin could have made such a grave mistake, and whether this mistake speaks against his claim that certain photographic portraits make an unruly claim of identity on behalf of their subjects.

We can point to two things which strongly contributed to Benjamin’s misinterpretation of the photograph’s claim of identity. The first is Benjamin’s distrust of captions in portraits such as Dauthendey’s, which he makes apparent in his examination of David Octavius Hill’s photographs. At the height of Hill’s photographic career, Benjamin argues, newspapers were still so rare that the photograph had not yet been linked so forcefully to captions. “*Diese ersten reproduzierten Menschen traten in den Blickraum der Photographie unbescholten oder besser gesagt unbeschriftet*” [“These first people to be reproduced enter the viewing space of Photography innocently, or better, unlabeled”]. Thanks to their uncaptioned innocence, the gaze of the viewer could rest on the portrayed faces and be open to all of their possibilities; undisturbed by prior (limiting) interpretations. “*Kurz, alle Möglichkeiten dieser Porträtkunst beruhen darauf, daß noch die Berührung zwischen Aktualität und Photo nicht eingetreten ist*” [“In short, all possibilities of this art of portraits rested upon the fact that the connection between

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actuality and photograph had not yet been infringed upon”].\(^{30}\) The implication here is that, by inserting themselves between reality and the photograph, captions simultaneously limit the possible interpretations of a portrait and compromise its privileged claim to identity. This hermeneutically limiting aspect of captions deserves a more careful treatment than it can be given at present, but for now it suffices to note that Benjamin’s disregard for Bossert’s caption may have been due to Benjamin’s attempt to fully and directly engage with the Dauthendey portrait.

The second reason for the misidentification of the photographed woman was Benjamin’s recent reading of Max Dauthendey’s biography of his father Karl. As André Gunthert notes, “l’formation biographique déployée dans l’ekphrasis provient en fait du livre de souvenirs consacré par le poète Max Dauthendey à la mémoire de son père défunt” [“the biographical formation deployed in the ekphrasis comes, in fact, from the memoir dedicated by the poet Max Dauthendey to the memory of his deceased father”].\(^{31}\) Gunthert argues that Benjamin confuses Max Dauthendey’s description of another portrait (one of Karl’s first wife) with the image reproduced in Bossert and Guttmann’s photobook, and we may add that this confusion was all the more likely to occur given Benjamin’s distrust of captions in the context of *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*.\(^{32}\) Moreover, if we turn to Max Dauthendey’s brief description of the photograph of Karl’s first wife, we can see why Benjamin would be tempted to look for any indications of a future suicide. “Auf diesem Bilde,” he writes, “ist noch kein Zeichen des späteren Unglücks vorauszusehen, nur daß meines Vaters etwas finsterer, starker männlicher Blick eine jugendliche Härte verrät, die der ihn horchend prüfenden Frau weh tun konnte” [“One cannot

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yet foresee any signs of the future misfortune in this image, only that the male gaze of my father, sinister and strong, betrays a juvenile ruthlessness capable of wounding the woman who is listening to him”]. Whereas Dauthendey finds nothing to foreshadow the future suicide, save for the cruelty apparent in the gaze of his father, Benjamin finds (in the wrong image) an ample and eloquent foreshadowing in Miss Friedrich’s gaze. It is as if, upon encountering the double portrait in Bosser and Guttmann’s book, the forlorn gaze of Miss Friedrich had called so much attention to itself as to dominate the page, drawing attention away from the caption and leading Benjamin to think of Max Dauthendey’s description of the photo of his father’s first wife. If this is what happened (and Roland Barthes will give us reason to think it may have been), Benjamin’s mistake becomes easier to understand, if not to forgive.

Yet regardless of Benjamin’s misidentification of Miss Friedrich, we should note that his mistake results from his attempt to answer the photograph’s demand that the woman be recognized as the person she had been. And even if Benjamin’s attempt ultimately falls short, he may nevertheless have been correct in locating the ground of the photograph’s claim of identity in the uncontrolled and unintended (from the point of view of the photographer) facial expression. Thus we see in Benjamin a repetition of the same insights we noted in Elizabeth Eastlake’s article: namely, that the photographic portrait makes a strong claim on its viewers regarding the identity of its subject – a claim that surpasses any which may be made by painted portraits – and that this claim is dependent on photography’s penchant for reproducing extraneous details. These two insights are again repeated by Roland Barthes, whose investigations add depth to those of Eastlake and Benjamin.

33 Dauthendey, Der Geist meiner Vaters, 180. Translation my own.
2.3. Roland Barthes and the Impossible Science of a Unique Being

In 1980, less than two years after his mother's death, Roland Barthes wrote *La Chambre Claire* in order to inquire into the nature of photography. Thoroughly personal in nature, that work is an attempt to understand photography from the point of view of the spectator, and indeed from the point of view of one particular spectator: Barthes himself. The primary goal of that text is to discover why certain photographs affect him in a manner that most other photographs do not. The first part of his investigation looks for this exemplary characteristic in his favorite photographs, and culminates with his famous distinction between a *studium* and a *punctum* in photography. Though this distinction will be briefly addressed below, it deserves more attention than I can hope to give in this dissertation. The second part of the investigation, however, lies much closer to our immediate interests. Here Barthes' attention shifts to a much more personal matter: he begins to look for a photograph that truly captures his mother and, having found such a photograph, he wonders how the image manages such a feat. As is the case with Eastlake and Benjamin, Barthes locates the source of this photographic power, at least in part, in the chemical and optical processes which constitute the medium. But since, as Yacavone has established, Barthes engaged with Benjamin’s *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie* when he wrote *La Chambre Claire*, we should not be surprised if many of their insights coincide.34 Rather, we should look to Barthes for his further development of those insights.

Barthes begins by proposing that the photograph is a particular form of sign, one that does away with the arbitrariness of language and the uncertainty of most representative images. René Magritte's point in *La trahison des images*, for example, fails to apply to photographs. Magritte's painting of a pipe is accompanied by the caption “*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*” [“this is not

a pipe”], a warning that regardless of how realistic a painting may be, it should never be
cnfused with that which it represents. “La Photographie,” on the other hand, “a quelque chose
de tautologique: une pipe y est toujours une pipe, intraitablement” [“the Photograph […] has
something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe”].35 This is because
the photograph as sign cannot be distinguished from its referent with the ease and immediacy
that painting and drawing allow. A viewer can only distinguish the photographic signifier through
“un acte second de savoir ou de réflexion” [“a secondary action of knowledge or of reflection”],
and Barthes warns that following such an action the photograph, qua photograph, is destroyed.36
Understood phenomenologically, Barthes' claim is that normally one does not look at a
photograph, but rather looks at the photographed thing (or person) through the photograph. We
can, of course, shift our focus to the photograph as a sign and question its verisimilitude, but this
is always a secondary intentional act which assumes the occurrence of the first. Moreover, to
question the photograph's verisimilitude is to cease properly encountering it as a photograph,
reducing it to the status of a mere illustration. This is because, for Barthes, the photograph as
sign and the photographed as referent “appartient à cette classe d'objets feuillettés dont on ne
peut séparer les deux feuillets sans les détruire” [“belong to that class of laminated objects
whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both”].37

Now, clearly a difference exists between the photograph of a pipe and the pipe itself, but
according to Barthes this difference is not identical to the one which holds between Magritte's
painting and its model. Magritte’s painting functions as a standard instance of imagistic
representation: the image resembles a pipe, and the viewer is able to imagine that what she is

35 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 17, Camera Lucida 5.
36 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 16-17, Camera Lucida 5-6.
37 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 17, Camera Lucida 6. Translation modified.
seeing is a pipe. In the former case, however, the act of representation seems to be fundamentally modified, for here the pipe itself appears through the photograph. “La photo est littéralement une émanation du référent” [“the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent”], according to Barthes. This is so because of photography’s optical and chemical processes, which “a permis de capter et d’imprimer directement les rayons lumineux émis par une objet diversement éclairé” [“made it possible to recover and print directly the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object”].

Proposing what amounts to a defense of photographic realism, Barthes points out that, if photographs are in fact emanations from the photographed objects, a crucial difference exists between the referents found in photographs and those found in other images. “J’appelle «référent photographique», non pas la chose facultativement réelle à quoi renvoie une image ou un signe, mais la chose nécessairement réelle qui a été placée devant l’objectif, faute de quoi il n’y aurait pas de photographie” [‘I call “photographic referent,” not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers, but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph’]. Here Barthes anticipates Kendall Walton’s own defense of photographic realism (to be examined more carefully in the following chapters), which notes that “photographs are counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene even if the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the photographer are held fixed.” In other words, Barthes and Walton argue that a photograph of a pipe could not have been made were it not for

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38 Following Kendal Walton’s conception of mimesis, we can say that the marks which Magritte makes on the canvas serve as props for the viewer’s game of make-believe, and it is only from inside that game that the viewer is able to see a pipe. See Walton, “Pictures and Hobby Horses.”
39 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 126, Camera Lucida 80. Translation modified.
40 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 126, Camera Lucida 80.
41 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 120, Camera Lucida 76. Emphasis in the original. Translation modified.
42 Walton, “Transparent Pictures” 100.
the fact that the pipe truly existed and was located before the camera at the moment the shutter was released. Regardless of whether the photographer understood the object to be a pipe, and even regardless of his awareness that the pipe lay before the lens, the resulting photograph would inevitably be a photograph of that pipe. In the case of drawing of painting, however, the depiction of the pipe depends precisely on the painter’s awareness and understanding of the pipe as a pipe. Had the painter mistaken the pipe for a mouse, the resulting painting would likely depict a mouse, rather than a pipe.

Photographs are thus dependent on the existence of the photographed object because, in photography, light reflecting or emanating from that object strikes a silver halide medium and chemically alters it (mutatis mutandis, the same holds for straight digital photography). The object appears through the photograph roughly in the same way that it would appear to our eyes, were we to stand in the camera's place at that the time the photograph was taken. Painting can only approximate this level of immediacy, even when it is made with the aid of a camera obscura. This is why Barthes suggests that photography is above all a chemical process, and its similarities and inheritances from painting are merely accidental. But even if the object appears through the photograph just as it would were one to observe it in person, Barthes must still be able to account for the difference between looking at a pipe through a photograph and an unmediated act of looking at the same pipe.

Barthes’ explanation of that difference points to the dimension of time. The intentionality of looking at a photograph indeed points to the object photographed, but points to it in the past. Through a photograph of a pipe we do see the pipe itself, but we see it as it was when the photograph was made (be that years or mere moments ago). Commenting on Barthes' text,

43 Barthes. La Chambre Claire 126, Camera Lucida 80.
Derrida explains that though the photographed object may be absent to the observer, having disappeared with the passing of the photographed moment, the intentional structure of looking at the photograph leads to that object in the past and “la référence à ce référent, disons le mouvement intentionnel de la référence (puisque Barthes recourt justement à la phénoménologie dans ce livre) implique aussi irréductiblement l’avoir-été d’un unique et invariable référent” [“the reference to this referent, call it the intentional movement of reference (since Barthes does in fact appeal to phenomenology in this book), implies just as irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent”].44 This then, is the double evidential power of photography: it grants us access to the thing itself, and simultaneously grants proof that the thing existed, at least at the time photograph was taken. The photograph may have been staged, composed, or lit in such a way as to manipulate the response of the viewer, but nevertheless “dans la Photographie, je ne puis jamais nier que la chose a été là” [“in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there”], before the lens, as Barthes puts it.45 The photographer has the ability to alter the way in which the thing appears in the photograph, but so long as it does appear there, a space is opened in which the thing can assert its own existence.

We who live in the age of Photoshop may be less willing to grant this self-evidential property of photography (a question that will be addressed in subsequent chapters), but Barthes would probably insist on the following distinction: once manipulated so as to add or remove a thing or person, an image is no longer a photograph. Rather, the manipulated image becomes an illustration or a collage which poses as a photograph. The dangers of image manipulation lie in the difficulty we now have of distinguishing photography from illustration, and in our

45 Barthes. La Chambre Claire 120, Camera Lucida 76.
subsequent refusal to recognize the space which photography opens for things to manifest themselves and the mistaking of the mimetic function of images for the self-assertion of the represented objects or persons.

Returning now to the question of the alleged privilege of photographic portraits, we can already see one potential (even if partial) explanation of the “unruly claim” of identity noted by Benjamin: Photography certifies that the person whom we contemplate indeed existed, and Barthes notes that “cette certitude, aucun écrit ne peut me la donner” [“no writing can give me this certainty”]. And as we will see below, by forcing me to acknowledge the past reality of the portrayed person, and by giving me access to that person (who emanates through the photograph), the photograph also demands that I inquire into who that person was. Moreover, since this demand is created by properties intrinsic to the photograph, it is likely to persist for as long as the photograph itself persists (unlike the interest in the identity of painted relatives, which dies out as the portrait’s viewers grow more distant to its subject).

Yet even if one grants photography its self-evidential properties, one must still wonder if it can capture the very identity of the person portrayed. It may be tempting to attempt an explanation based on Barthes’ defense of photographic realism, but it must be remembered that his arguments can only establish that photographs provide evidence that a person existed. But from these arguments alone, the photograph does not seem capable of telling us who that person was. Looking at photographs of his mother, Barthes notes that in the majority of these photos “je ne la reconnaissais jamais que par morceaux, c’est-à-dire que je manquais son être, et que, donc, je la manquais toute” [“I never recognized her except in bits and pieces, which is to say

46 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 134, Camera Lucida 85.
47 In fact, further below we will argue that this is precisely what happens (see section 4.3).
that I missed her being, and that therefore I missed her altogether”].\(^{48}\) The mere photographic depiction of a person is not enough for the image to make a “strong” or “unruly” claim of identity (to borrow Eastlake’s and Benjamin’s vocabulary). The only guarantee is that we will be presented with an aspect of the person, not their essence, their ipseity.

Yet Barthes’ search for a photograph which truly captured his mother came to an end when he discovered a childhood photograph of her which accomplished what no other portrait (photographic or otherwise) had: it revealed “la vérité du visage que j’avais aimé” [“the truth of the face I had loved”], which is to say, the very essence of who she was, her very identity.\(^{49}\) As he writes in his *Journal de deuil*, “Il me suffisait de la regarder, de saisir le tel de son être (que je me débats a décrire) pour être réinvesti par, immergé dans, envahi, inondé par sa bonté” [“It was enough for me to look at her, to grasp the suchness of her being (which I struggle to describe) in order to be reinvested by, immersed in, invaded, inundated by her goodness”].\(^{50}\) In other words, Barthes had found a photograph which did more than demand that its viewers inquire into who the portrayed person had been. He found an image which supplied an adequate answer to that inquiry. “La Photographie du Jardin d’Hiver,” as Barthes came to call that image, “était bien essentielle, elle accomplissait pour moi, utopiquement, la science impossible de l’être unique” [“The Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being”].\(^{51}\) Here was a photograph that succeeded in capturing the uniqueness of a loved one, but Barthes struggled to understand how this took place. He notes that the unknown photographer who had made that image “avait produit une photo

surérogatoire, qui tenait plus que ce que l’être technique de la photographie peut raisonnablement promettre” [“had produced a supererogatory photograph, which contained more than what the technical being of photography can reasonably promise”].

In adequately communicating the identity of his mother, in other words, the photograph had done more than can be explained through photographic realism alone. But, and this is the driving question of this dissertation, how can such a feat be possible?

Given Eastlake’s and Benjamin’s insights regarding the importance of unintended details in photographic portraits, it is perhaps unsurprising that Barthes would turn to similar details in his examination of the Winter Garden photograph. Barthes’s explanation makes recourse to the concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, the two structural elements he identifies as present in noteworthy photographs. By *studium* he refers to the general connotative meanings that can be derived from the political, historical, and above all cultural elements of the photograph:

*C’est par le studium que je m’intéresse à beaucoup de photographies, soit que je les reçoive comme des témoignages politiques, soit que je les goûte comme de bons tableaux historiques : car c’est culturellement […] que je participe aux figures, aux mines, aux gestes, aux décors, aux actions.*

[It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally […] that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the setting, the actions.]

“*Studium*” thus refers to all elements in a photograph which arouse interest as a result of the viewer’s general cultural knowledge, be it because the photograph allows the viewer to make use of her knowledge, or because it augments that knowledge. Crucially, the *studium* can be sought out by analyzing the image – it can be detected though a study, however brief and superficial.

The *punctum*, on the other hand, cannot be deliberately found, regardless of the care with

52 Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* 110, *Camera Lucida* 70. Translation modified

which the image is analyzed. “Cette fois, ce n’est pas moi que vais le chercher [...] c’est lui qui part de la scène, comme une flèche, et vient me percer” [“This time it is not I who seek it out [...] it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me”].

The punctum disrupts the studium, imposes itself on the viewer, and “sa seule présence change ma lecture [de sorte que] c’est une nouvelle photo que je regarde” [“its mere presence changes my reading [so that] I am looking at a new photograph”]. Its impact on the viewer is violent, piercing the viewer like arrows, opening “blessures” [“wounds”] which afflict the viewer with their poignancy. Barthes’ forceful use of language, which describes an experience which may not resonate with our usual encounter with photographs, is not mere hyperbole. Rather, it reinforces his point that the punctum is a rare occurrence, even in societies as saturated by photographic images as our own. Moreover, Barthes states that the punctum is a small and unintentional detail, not unlike the details described by Eastlake and Benjamin. That is to say, the punctum is a profoundly meaningful, yet accidental, aspect of a photograph.

Given the profoundly personal impact of the punctum, it is perhaps unsurprising that Barthes turns to it as an explanation for the Winter Garden photograph. Explaining his decision not to reproduce the photograph in La Chambre Claire, Barthes argues that the photograph would not have the same impact on his readers as it does with him. “Tout au plus intéressait-elle votre studium: époque, vêtements, photogénie; mais en elle, pour vous, aucune blessure” [“at most it would interest your studium: period, clothes, photogeny [sic]; but in it, for you, no wound”]. Yet despite his claims regarding the personal impact of the portrait, his attribution of

54 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 48, Camera Lucida 26. Emphasis in the original.
55 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 71, Camera Lucida 42.
56 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 49, Camera Lucida 27.
57 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 115, Camera Lucida 73.
a punctum to the image seems out of place.

Describing his first encounter with the image, Barthes writes that “j’observai la petit fille et je retrouvai enfin ma mère” [“I observed the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother”]. Richard Howard translates “j’observai” as “I studied,” and though that translation is a bit forced, it does call attention to an alarming fact: the recognition of Barthes’ mother in the photograph was not immediate. Even if we do not equate “observation” with “study,” we ought to recall that Barthes describes an attentive act of observing is appropriate to the studium, rather than the punctum. After all, Barthes initially defines studium as “l’application à une chose, le goût pour quelqu’un, une sorte d’investissement général, pressé, certes, mais sans acuité particulière” [“the application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, attentive commitment, to be sure, but without special acuity”]. Hence, the mere fact that Barthes only recognized his mother after some attentive observation is enough to show that Winter Garden’s ability to capture the very essence of his mother cannot be attributed to the presence of a punctum alone.

Similarly, we should note that Walter Benjamin’s engagement with the Dauthendey double portrait was only possible after he immersed himself in the image (see note 25 above). That is to say, even if the crucial element for Benjamin is Miss Friedrich’s gaze, an unintended element which dominates and transforms the image and thus would seem to qualify as a punctum, the fact that immersion or attentive observation is needed to identify that gaze prevents us from applying the label of punctum straightforwardly. Given these complications, we would do well do examine how Barthes describes the photograph after he has recognized his mother in it.

58 Barthes, La Chambre Claire 107, Camera Lucida 69. Translation modified.
In his first description of the young girl depicted in *Winter Garden*, Barthes notes a series of attributes such as “*la clarté de son visage, la pose naïve de ses mains, la place qu’elle avait occupée docilement sans se montrer ni se cacher*” [“the clarity of her face, the naïve posture of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself”] which, when combined, gave the portrait the quality of “*ce paradoxe intenable et que toute sa vie elle avait tenu: l’affirmation d’une douceur*” [“that untenable paradox which she had nonetheless maintained all her life: the assertion of a meekness”].60 It is possible that Barthes thought of the paradoxical “assertion of a meekness” as a rare quality among human beings, and if so it is understandable that Barthes would connect the success of the portrait to its ability to communicate that trait. But if this is all that the *Winter Garden* portrait accomplishes, Barthes would be hardly justified in claiming that it captured the very essence of his mother. After all, a person who can be defined by a single trait (even if that trait is a perplexing one) ought to strike us as implausibly one-dimensional.

Ultimately, in fact, Barthes admits that he is unable to adequately account for the photograph’s ability to convey precisely who his mother had been. Rather than reducing the portrait’s congruence with his mother to a single (albeit paradoxical) attribute, Barthes states that “*je ne pourrais dire cet accord que par une suite infinie d’adjectives; j’en fais l’économie, persuadé cependant que cette photographie rassemblait tous les prédicats possibles dont se constituait l’être de ma mère*” [“I could not express this accord except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit, convinced however that this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother’s being was constituted”].61 In other words, Barthes claims

61 Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* 110, *Camera Lucida* 70.
that the portrait is able to communicate who his mother had been, in her entirety. Rather than proposing a reductive reading, one which emphasizes a single attribute and claims that this attribute defines the portrayed person, the *Winter Garden* photograph seems to suggest an infinitely long, and by extension infinitely accurate, description of that person. It is no wonder that Barthes referred to the *Winter Garden* photograph as “la science impossible de l’être unique.”

Yet if *Winter Garden* succeeds in communicating the identity of his mother, Barthes’ decision to label that accomplishment as impossible ought to puzzle us. At this point we must ask what is meant by the impossibility of this feat, and how *Winter Garden* manages to accomplish this supposedly impossible task. Our answers will begin to emerge as we turn to Jacques Derrida’s *Demeure, Athènes*.

2.4. “Nous nous devons à la mort ;” Jacques Derrida’s Testament to Uniqueness

Originally published in 1996, ostensibly as an introduction to and commentary of Jean-François Bonhomme’s photographs of Athens, *Demeure, Athènes* consists of an investigation of our inherently indebted relationship towards the dead and a proposal of how to begin repaying that debt. The book consists of a brief narrative followed by a series of twenty aphorisms exploring the relationship of photography to our debt towards the dead. Derrida calls each aphorism a *cliché*, or snapshot, and a reader could very easily, but mistakenly, assume that Derrida is merely playing with words in an attempt to playfully echo the photobook which he is introducing. In fact, however, with each aphorism Derrida attempts to capture the uniqueness the phrase with which he opens the book: each *cliché* is the textual photograph of a unique sentence. If we pay close attention to the performative element of Derrida’s text, we see that it suggests a

62 Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* 110.
parallel between itself and photographic portraits such as Barthes’ *Winter Garden*. Moreover, as we will see, that text suggests that our debt towards the dead consists of adequately remembering the uniqueness of the deceased person. As such, Derrida’s proposal for repaying that debt may prove illuminating in our quest to understand the peculiar power of some photographic portraits to adequately capture *who* a person was.

The book begins with a single sentence, alone in its paragraph: “*Nous nous devons à la mort.*” Derrida follows this sentence with a brief commentary, a neutral caption like those which often accompany photographs: “*Ce fut le 3 juillet dernier, vers midi, près d’Athènes*” [“It was this past July 3 [1996], right around noon, close to Athens”]. This sentence took him by surprise, Derrida writes, and he immediately felt the urge to safe-keep it: “*le désir me vint de la graver dans la pierre*” [“the desire immediately overcame me to engrave it in stone”] or to capture it in a snapshot (“*un instantané*”). The necessity for erecting a monument for this sentence follows from the uniqueness that Derrida recognized in it, and from the fear that once forgotten, the sentence would be lost. As a linguistic sign it can of course be reproduced indefinitely, but the singularity of “*Nous nous devons à la mort*” begins to show itself as we note that it cannot be adequately translated into any single sentence in English (or Greek, the language to which Derrida knew his text would be translated).

Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas translate the sentence as “we owe ourselves to death,” but note that *devoir* may also carry the connotation of “devotion” – opening the possibility of a translation as “we must devote ourselves to death” – and that the reciprocal relation of the two “*nous*” in the sentence also open up the possible translations as “we owe each

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64 Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes, 9, Athens, Still Remains*, 1.
other or we owe one another to death (or up until death).” As each translation functions as a disambiguation, something of the original is each time lost. Indeed, the ambiguity of the sentence is largely what makes it unique, and Derrida comments that a comprehensive analysis of “Nous nous devons à la mort” would be an endless endeavor:

“We had the impression that, by focusing on these words like a photograph, one could—and the analysis would be endless—discover within them so many ‘things’ that their letters showed by concealing themselves, remaining immobile, impassive, exposed, too obvious, although suspended in broad daylight in some obscure camera of the French language.”  

Here the parallel to Barthes’ analysis of Winter Garden begins to emerge, as the seemingly inexhaustible nuances of the sentence lead to a uniqueness that is unfathomable.

Aware of the uniqueness and fragility of the sentence, but unable to pinpoint exactly where that uniqueness lays, Derrida states that his duty to safeguard the sentence was not freely taken up. Rather, much like a debt, the obligation towards the sentence seems to emanate from the outside, perhaps from the sentence itself. Derrida admits to having become “son otage, plutôt que son hôte” [“its hostage rather than its host”], and that “Il me fallait en tout cas m’acquitter envers ladite phrase. A tout prix.” [“I had in any case to pay my debt toward this sentence. No matter the cost”]. One way in which Derrida attempts to repay this debt is by attempting to elucidate the sentence, and here we see how the performative and philosophical aspects of Derrida's text intertwine. The philosophical exegesis of “Nous nous devons à la mort” belongs to the performative repaying of Derrida's debt to the sentence, and at the same time the

66 Derrida, Athens, Still Remains, 73. n.1.  
68 Derrida, Demeure, Athènes, 14, 17, Athens, Still Remains, 5, 7.
performative aspect of the essay sheds light on its more explicitly philosophical sections.

In the seventeenth cliché Derrida begins to list the various meanings of “Nous nous devons à la mort,” but he begins with the disclaimer that in order to properly to account for all its facets he would have to dedicate “des siècles de livres [...] a ce souvenir” [“centuries of books to its memory”]. Since a complete elucidation of the sentence lies out of Derrida's reach, he conducts his exegesis with an eye for that which is unique in it. He begins with the most obvious meaning of the sentence, which is the one that least interests him. This is “[le] sens de la grande tradition post-socratique et sacrificielle de l'être-pour-la-mort” [“the sense of the great post-Socratic and sacrificial tradition of being-for-death”], where one's dread of death leads to taking great care of the dead and to devoting all that one does to a preparation for death. While a valid and plausible interpretation of the sentence, this “ethico-Socratic” (éthico-socratique) version of the debt for the dead is in fact a disguise for one's attachment to life: we respect the dead in order to “tenir la mort en respect, par respect pour la vie” [“keep death at a respectful distance, out of a respect for life”]. This sense of Nous nous devons à la mort “se traduit facilement [...] dans toutes les langues et sans doute dans toutes « visions-du-monde »” [‘can easily be translated into every language and no doubt every 'world view'],” says Derrida, and so it cannot be that which is most sacred and unique in the sentence, that which must be preserved at any cost.

Derrida then turns to what is specifically French in the sentence: the reciprocal relation of the two instances of nous, and their unique relationship to the verb devons. While the first nous is

69 Derrida, Demeure, Athènes, 50, Athens, Still Remains, 57.
70 Derrida, Demeure, Athènes, 52, Athens, Still Remains, 59.
the subject, and the second the object, of the sentence, it is only after the first has been reflected in the second, through the action of the verb, that it can truly establish its place as subject. This peculiar relationship of the parts of the sentence could be interpreted as stating that each of us is “pris dans une dette ou un devoir qui nous précède et nous institue, une dette qui nous contracte avant même que nous ne l’ayons contractée” [“taken by a debt or duty that precedes us and institutes us, a debt that contracts us before we have contracted it”]. This interpretation would hold that we are who we are solely because of a debt which exists before we do, and those to whom we are indebted thus would come to define us. Such a formulation is very similar to Dennis Schmidt’s understanding of our debt towards the dead as constitutive of our ethical selves, and Derrida acknowledges that this uniqueness of the French language can nevertheless “se traduire dans un idiome [philosophique] commun” [“be translated into a common [philosophical] idiom.”]. The possibility of translating “Nous nous devons à la mort” into a common idiom such as Schmidt’s, while illuminating, shows that the uniqueness of the sentence cannot be captured by this interpretation. Moreover, it is certain that other sentences of the French language contain a similar grammatical structure to “Nous nous devons à la mort.” In fact, if the uniqueness of “Nous nous devons à la mort” were reducible to its linguistic structure, it would quickly be shown not to be unique at all.

What is unique to the sentence, Derrida tells us, is the “modalité pragmatique de son événement” [“pragmatic modality of its event”], or the peculiar combination of possible

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77 For instance, *Nous nous devons à la vie*, or, to add a degree of complexity, *Nous nous devons à nous-même.*
meanings that manifest themselves in the sentence.\footnote{Derrida. Demeure, Athènes, 55, Athens, Still Remains, 63. Emphasis in the original.} The sentence struck Derrida without context and with a multitude of meanings, leaving each interpretation equally plausible, and no other sentence carries just those possibilities. That it happened to be a sentence regarding the uniqueness of a person is a fortuitous event, but it need not have been so. Another sentence could have arisen as an aphorism (or, to anticipate the next chapter, as a fragment) and presented its own set of unique possibilities. And just as a sentence devoid of context holds a unique set of possibilities, so does any given person. Our debt requires bearing witness to that individuality, but the witnessing of a single attribute or a collection of attributes is inadequate to the task. What is required is a way to attest for the uniqueness of that person while also accounting for the particular way in which she was unique. Language, at least by itself, seems inadequate. Merely to label someone as “unique” is to apply a general label and fail to account for their uniqueness, and an exhaustive list of any given person's characteristics and possibilities would require “centuries of books,” to use Derrida's expression. It is clear that another means of witnessing is required. The success of the Winter Garden photograph, together with Derrida’s explicit focus on photography in Demeure, Athènes suggests photography as one means of adequately witnessing the uniqueness of a person. Conversely, and more importantly for our present purposes, Derrida’s attempts to do justice to “Nous nous devons à la mort” suggests an explanation for Winter Garden’s success.

2.5. Fragmentary and Endless: Paul Ricoeur and Friedrich Schlegel on Ipseity

Derrida’s engagement with “Nous nous devons à la mort” is wholly dependent on the fragmentary nature of that sentence, and highlights the hermeneutic open-endedness of such fragments. Indeed, his project consists of bearing witness precisely to that open-endedness, and
suggests that bearing witness to the ipseity of a person is analogous to bearing witness to the uniqueness of a fragmentary sentence. Following this insight, we would do well to ask if the photographic portrait’s unruly claim of identity, its capacity to enact the impossible science of the unique being, is also connected to the photograph’s inherently fragmentary nature. In what follows I will argue that this is precisely the case and, moreover, that Roland Barthes shared that insight even if he did not state it explicitly.

In order to understand Derrida’s insight regarding the analogy between interpreting a fragment and witnessing the uniqueness of a person, we should begin by turning to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of a narrative identity. In “L’identité narrative,” Paul Ricoeur distinguishes two forms of identity: “l’identité comme mêmeté (latin idem, anglais same, allemande gleich), et l’identité comme soi (latin ipse, anglais self, allemande selbst)” [“identity as sameness (Latin idem; English same; German gleich) and identity as self (Latin ipse; English self; German selbst)”]. Identity as sameness covers such things as numerical identity (where two or more things are identified as recurrences of the same thing), extreme resemblance (“X et Y portent le même costume, c’est-à-dire des costumes tellement semblables qu’ils sont substituables l’un par l’autre” [“X and Y wear the same dress, that is, dresses of such similarity that they can be substituted for one another”]), and permanence over time (where an object is recognized as the same thing it was in the past). In other words, whenever one asks what a thing is one asks for an account of identity as sameness.

On the other hand, ipseity, or the identity of a self, is the kind of identity which answers the question of who someone is. This kind of identity, according to Ricoeur, amounts to

knowledge of a self (be it self-knowledge or knowledge of another self), and he adds that knowledge of this kind is inherently interpretive.\textsuperscript{81} This interpretive knowledge most often takes the form of narratives: stories people tell themselves or others about who they are and how they came to be that person. The equation of ipseity and narrative in Ricoeur is so extreme that he is able to claim that “nous égalons la vie à l’histoire ou aux histoires que nous racontons à son propos” [“we equate life to the story or stories we tell about it”].\textsuperscript{82} Ultimately, Ricoeur understands ipseity as a “narrative identity.” As such, it is not surprising to read that Ricoeur finds the narrative to be “une médiation privilégiée” [“a privileged mediation”] in the interpretation of the self.\textsuperscript{83} That is to say, according to Ricoeur, the ideal portrait would be neither a painting nor a photograph, but a completely accurate novel about the person in question.

Yet doubts arise regarding the possibility of such a complete novel. Despite the apparent privilege of the narrative, any narrative account of someone's ipseity is necessarily incomplete. After all, a complete narrative must account for every thought, action, and meaningful possibility in the person's life. Such an account would be at least as lengthy as the life in question, even if it is the case that one's ipseity is translatable into a single coherent narrative. Here we can begin to see how Derrida’s claim that “centuries of books” would be required to do justice to “Nous nous devons à la mort” would also be applicable to the narrative identity of a person.

But Derrida’s efforts to do justice to the fragmentary sentence also serve as a word of caution regarding Ricoeur’s concept of a narrative identity. An adequate account of “Nous nous devons à la mort,” as we have seen, would require acknowledging its various possibilities, many

\textsuperscript{81} Ricoeur, “L’identité narrative” 295, “Narrative Identity,” 73.
\textsuperscript{82} Ricoeur, “L’identité narrative” 300, “Narrative Identity,” 77.
\textsuperscript{83} Ricoeur, “L’identité narrative” 295, “Narrative Identity,” 73.
of which are mutually exclusive. A complete account of that sentence would ultimately be incoherent. Derrida insinuates an analogy between the sentence and the *ipseity* of a person, and the implication seems to be that one’s identity should not be assumed to be translatable into a coherent narrative.

Here we should note that “Nous nous devons à la mort” is a perfect example of a Romantic fragment, as understood by Friedrich Schlegel: a short text (similar to an aphorism) whose wit suggests myriad (often mutually exclusive) interpretations and whose irony prevents the reader from committing to any one interpretation lest the wit be abolished and the fragment destroyed *qua* fragment. And whereas Derrida merely implied the analogy between his fragment and the *ipseity* of a person, Schlegel makes that point much more explicitly.

The nature of the Romantic fragment and its relationship to *ipseity* will be explored in detail in the next chapter; for now, it suffices to show that, like Derrida, Schlegel resisted any reduction of the self to a coherent narrative. Just as fragments are complexes of potentially incompatible meanings joined by wit and irony, individuals according to Schlegel are inherently and irreducibly heterogeneous. In fragment 121 of the *Athenaeum* we read that the mind of a properly cultivated person “*der gleichsam eine Mehrheit von Geistern, und ein ganzes System von Personen in sich enthält*” [“contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons”], and in fragment 63 we read that even uncultivated persons are inherently heterogeneous, and in understanding themselves as coherent they make caricatures of themselves.\(^84\)

Given the incoherence of *ipseity* according to Derrida and Schlegel, the fragment suggests itself as the ideal medium for its communication. Yet the fragment, with its subtle

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\(^{84}\) Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente,” KFSA II, 185 §121, 174 §63, “Athenaeum Fragments” §121, §63
nuances and endless reversals of meaning, requires a particularly resilient and savvy reader. Most readers will fail to perceive a fragment's plurality of meanings, and will take the text at face value. A small minority of cultivated readers will detect some ambiguity and will appreciate its corresponding wit, but may become frustrated after some time. In the end, it is unlikely that any reader will perceive the full gamut of a fragment's wit and irony, especially since there is a potentially infinite variety of meaning in any given fragment. Schlegel was so deeply aware of this hermeneutic difficulty that he was led to invent an ideally cultivated reader, for whom he wrote all his fragments.85

This is where a photograph such as Winter Garden proves useful. Unlike most photographs, which convey limited aspects of a person's identity, and thus suggest limited narratives, Winter Garden conveys a seemingly infinite collection of aspects. As such, I here propose that a photograph such as Winter Garden functions as a Romantic fragment, suggesting myriad incompatible narratives which reflect the portrayed person's fundamentally incoherent self. The remainder of this dissertation will be devoted to defending this proposal, but before we do so it is worthwhile to note that Barthes has left indications that he too understood Winter Garden as a fragment.

Kohei Kuwada argues that Barthes turned to photography as a catalyst in the transition from fragments to novels. “La photographie,” writes Kuwada, “équivaut pour Barthes au «potin» ou au «roman»” [“Photography is, for Barthes, equivalent to ‘bits of gossip’ or to the ‘novel’”].86 Kuwada’s hesitation between gossip (i.e. fragmentary accounts of a person) and novel is complex, and indicative of the transitory role of the photograph. This becomes clear as

Kuwada explains that Barthes’s “engagement dans le potin est un avancement du fragment au roman” [“engagement with gossip is an advancement from the fragment to the novel”]. The importance of the novel for Barthes, in this case, was that it allowed him to speak those whom you love (as opposed to speaking of them, or telling them you love them). Thus, in La Chambre Claire (and, according to Kuwada, particularly in the first, unpublished manuscript), “Barthes vise déjà non seulement à rechercher l’essence de la photographie mais aussi à dire finalement quelqu’un qu’il aime, à savoir sa mère, par l’intermédiaire de la photographie” [“Barthes intends not only to research the essence of photography but also to speak someone he loved, namely his mother, through the intermediary of photography”]. The right photograph, in other words, would prompt Barthes to do properly speak the narrative identity of his mother (i.e. to begin repaying his debt towards her, as Derrida would say), inconsistent though that narrative may be.

The importance of the fragmentary photograph for Barthes’ project of speaking the narrative of his mother can be seen in an early entry of his Mourning Diary. Roughly a week after the death of his mother, and before his discovery of Winter Garden, Barthes wrote the following: “Je ne veux pas en parler par peur de faire de la littérature [...] bien qu’en fait la littérature s’origine dans ces vérités” [“I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature […] though in fact literature originates within these truths”]. The risk of literature is that by writing we frequently gain the false impression that we have fully accounted for the subject matter of our investigation, and subsequently fall into what Schlegel names the “Unverstand der

90 Barthes. Journal de deuil, 31 octobre, Mourning Diary, 23.
Verständigen” [incomprehension of the comprehending] – a notion we will explore in the next chapter.\footnote{Schlegel, \textit{Über die Unverständlichkeit}, KFSA II, 363, “On Incomprehensibility,” 260.} If the subject matter of our investigation is a person, this false impression leads to a reductive account of their ipseity. In \textit{Les morts de Roland Barthes} Derrida admits to the fear of committing that very injustice in his eulogy of Barthes. “\textit{Faire hommage d’un essai}” \footnote{Derrida. \textit{Les morts de Roland Barthes}, 281, “Deaths of Roland Barthes”, 51.} [“to pay homage with an essay”] or to give a speech “\textit{sur un thème dont on croit avec confiance qu’il eût à coup sûr intéressé l’auteur disparu}” \footnote{Derrida, \textit{Les morts de Roland Barthes}, 281, “Deaths of Roland Barthes”, 51.} [“on a theme that we confidently believe would have interested the author who has passed away”] seem to him risky strategies.\footnote{Barthes. \textit{Journal de deuil}, 24 juillet 1978. \textit{Mourning Diary}, 168. Translation modified.} The risk is that “\textit{un quel traitement marquerait encore la dette, il en acquitterait aussi bien}” \footnote{Barthes. \textit{Journal de deuil}, 24 juillet 1978. \textit{Mourning Diary}, 168. Translation modified.} [“such a treatment would indeed point out the debt, but it would also pay it back.”] That is to say, it would seem to pay it back, and give the eulogist the illusion that his or her work is concluded. Barthes’s initial hesitation to “\textit{faire de la littérature}” by writing about his mother can thus be seen as the fear of doing an injustice to her memory in his account of her ipseity.

The value of the fragmentary photograph, in turn, becomes clear in a latter diary entry:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“Photo du Jardin d’Hiver: je cherche éperdument à dire le sens évident. (Photo: impuissance à dire ce qui est évident. Naissance de la littérature)\textsuperscript{\textdagger}}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
[“Photo of the Winter Garden: I try desperately to say the obvious meaning. (Photo: impotence to say that which is obvious. The birth of literature)\textsuperscript{\textdagger}”]
\end{quote}

The photograph presents its meaning, the very being of his mother, in an obvious yet language-defying way. That is to say, the photograph shows his mother’s \textit{ipseity} to Barthes, but it does not explain of what that ipseity consists. In the process of unpacking that meaning, countless
narratives arise, and literature is born. But the fragmentary photograph remains as a reminder of
the inadequacy of each narrative, and prevents each narrative from being declared final. Hence,
in order to understand how a photograph such as Winter Garden is able to communicate the
ipseity of the portrayed person, we need to better understand the Romantic fragment.
3. Fragmentary Hermeneutics

"Verstehen sollt ihr mich eben nicht, aber daß ihr mich vernehmen möget wünsch ich gar sehr."
["You’re not really supposed to understand me, but I want very much for you to listen to me."]
Friedrich Schlegel

In a four-year period, spanning from 1797 through 1800, Friedrich Schlegel conducted intense investigations of and in a new literary genre he named the “fragment.” Schlegel’s engagement with the fragmentary genre as such started with the publication of his *Kritische Fragmente* in the journal *Lyceum der schönen Künste* in 1797, continued with the publication of Novalis’ *Blüthenstaub* (which Schlegel edited and to which he added four fragments of his own) and the collectively written *Fragmente* in the first volume of the journal *Athenäum* in 1798, and culminated with the publication of *Ideen* and the essay *Über die Unverständlichkeit* in the final volume of the *Athenäum* in 1800. While he would go on to write thousands of short aphoristic notes during the rest of his life (for this seems to be the manner in which he took notes and conducted his private musings), he only published fragments during this short four-year period. And although commentators have often turned to Schlegel’s unpublished notes for confirmation of their interpretations, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe criticize such practices heavily. Such references, they say, brush over the distinction between “le morceau frappé d’inachèvement et celui qui vise à la fragmentation pour elle-même” [“a piece that is

95 Schlegel, “Ideen,” KFSA II, 261 fn.1; “Ideas” 129a.
96 Following convention, in what follows Friedrich Schlegel will be referred to simply as “Schlegel.” When referring to his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, the full name will be used.
97 Ernst Behler and Roman Struc suggest that the main motivation for the publications of the first fragments was Friedrich Schlegel’s anxiety regarding his ability to communicate his ideas, which led to the decision to “publish his thoughts in the original state of their inception.” See Behler and Struc, “Friedrich Schlegel’s Literary Aphorisms”, 35.
struck by incompletion and another that aims at fragmentation for its own sake”]. Moreover, we can see in the *Athenäum* fragments themselves a warning against references to unpublished works. “*Das Druckenlassen verhält sich zum Denken*” we read, “*wie eine Wochenstube zum ersten Kuß*” [“Publishing is to thinking as the maternity ward is to the first kiss”]. It is a mistake, then, to treat the notes Schlegel would write throughout his life as if they were of the same caliber as the fragments published between 1798 and 1800, which engaged with the notion of the fragment as a genre in its own right and led to significant advances in hermeneutics. In what follows, then, we will focus our attention on the published fragments, turning to an unpublished collection only when there is sufficient evidence that the Jena romantics considered it to be of sufficiently high quality.

Our present aim consists of elucidating the concept of the fragment in order to argue that the peculiar ability of photographs such as *Winter Garden*, viz. their success in communicating the very *ipseity* of the person portrayed, becomes plausible if such photographs are understood to be fragmentary in the sense proposed by Schlegel. Before arguing that the photograph can function as a romantic fragment, however, we must show that the fragment as such is capable of communicating what we have termed *ipseity*: the identity of a person, in the sense appealed to by Benjamin, Barthes, and Derrida in the previous chapter.

However, our goal is immediately complicated by the fact that the nature and purpose of the romantic fragment is a subject of much dispute. As Pol Vandevelde notes, the writings of the romantics “are not ready-made objects for philosophical interpretation. Rather, they challenge those who try to interpret them.” As such, before we can turn to the questions of how

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100 Vandevelde. *Heidegger and the Romantics*, 16.
photographs can be considered to be fragments in the relevant sense, and how fragments can communicate the *ipseity* of a person, we must take the time to carefully examine the nature of the romantic fragment itself so as to propose and defend an understanding of it.

This task will begin in section 3.2 below, where we examine the role of wit in the romantic fragment. We will then turn to the complementary concept of irony in section 3.3, and as we do, the peculiar hermeneutics of the fragment will begin to take shape. That hermeneutic will require, as we will see, the positing of an ideal reader by the author of the fragments – a notion we will explore in section 3.4. Then, in section 3.5, we will examine the proper subject matters of fragmentary works, in order to argue that *ipseity* lends itself to such a form of communication. Before we can proceed, however, we should emphasize that our focus lies in the hermeneutic dimensions of the fragment, but that these dimensions by no means exhaust the meaning and importance of these short works. Indeed, some of the most influential commentaries on Schlegel’s fragments emphasize not their hermeneutic aspects, but rather their relationship to the philosophical developments in German Idealism. Section 3.1 below will briefly address some of these commentaries in order to highlight a risk of reductionism which threatens any interpretation of the fragments. Once properly aware of this danger, we will be better able to avoid falling into the same traps.

### 3.1. The Dangers of Philosophical Reductionism

In his doctoral dissertation, Walter Benjamin interprets the concept of criticism presented in Schlegel’s and Novalis’ fragments as instantiations of Fichte’s notions of reflection and auto-reflection, stating that “Das im Selbstdbewuβtsein über sich selbst reflektierende Denken ist die Grundtatsache, von der Friedrich Schlegels und größtenteils auch Novalis erkenntnistheoretische Überlegungen ausgehen” [“thinking that reflects on itself in self-consciousness is the basic fact from which Friedrich Schlegel’s and, in large part, Novalis’
epistemological considerations take their start”]. This interest in the relationship between the early romantics and idealism leads Benjamin to focus on the hermeneutic aspects of the fragments only inasmuch as they relate to the projects of German Idealism. That is to say, rather than investigating the curious multiplication of meanings which follows from, and is fostered by, the fragments, Benjamin merely notes that when Schlegel’s fragments put Fichte’s concepts into practice, they produce an endless stream of meanings:


“The thinking of thinking of thinking can be conceived and performed in two ways. If one starts from the expression “thinking of thinking,” then on the third level this is either the object thought of, thinking (of the thinking of thinking), or else the thinking subject (thinking of thinking) of thinking. The rigorous original form of second-level reflection is assailed and shaken by the ambiguity in third-level meaning. But this ambiguity would have to unfold into an ever more complex plurality of meanings at each successive level.”

In short, Benjamin notes that the fragments yield a potentially uncontrollable multiplication of meanings, but he attributes that fact to the structure of auto-reflection, rather than to a feature of the fragmentary genre. If the multiplicity of meanings results from the structure of “thinking of thinking of thinking,” then it would take place regardless of the genre in which such reflection took place.

Benjamin is, of course, correct in identifying auto-reflection as a primary concern of Schlegel’s fragments, especially given that the very first fragment of the Athenäum consists of a critique of the lack of reflection in philosophy: “Über keinen Gegenstand philosophieren sie

101 Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik, 18, The Concept of Criticism, 120.
102 Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik, 30-1, The Concept of Criticism, 129.
seltner als über die Philosophie” [“Nothing is more rarely the subject of philosophy than philosophy itself”].\textsuperscript{103} This critique is repeated on fragments 43 and 44, which state that “die Philosophie geht noch zu sehr grade aus, ist noch nicht zyklisch genug” and “jede philosophische Rezension sollte zugleich Philosophie der Rezensionen sein” [“philosophy is still moving too much in a straight line; it’s not yet cyclical enough,” and “every philosophical review should simultaneously be a philosophy of reviews”].\textsuperscript{104} But by not understanding the multiplication of meanings as a hermeneutic peculiarity of the fragmentary genre, Benjamin is ultimately unable to account for meanings which do not explicitly deal with auto-reflection. And given that the various collections of romantic fragments cover topics as diverse as religion, politics, art, love, gender, suicide, and philosophy (to name but a few), the claim that the multiplication of meanings of each fragment is restricted only to the increasing layers of auto-reflection is not only implausible, but readily disproven.

As I will show in the next section, the plurality of meanings of the romantic fragments results from the co-presence of two hermeneutic forces: wit and irony. To be sure, Benjamin does examine these crucial concepts, but his examinations fall short of clarifying how precisely each of them functions in the fragments. Benjamin’s engagement with wit amounts to reducing it to the romantic’s way of employing “mystische Terminologie” [“mystical terminology”], or to the peculiar nature of Schlegel’s thought. “Es war,” Benjamin states, “die eines Menschen, dem jeder einzelne Einfall die ganze ungeheure Ideenmasse in Bewegung setze” [“It was the style […] of a man for whom every sudden inspiration would set in motion the whole enormous mass of his ideas”].\textsuperscript{105} It is true that wit was also used by Schlegel in order to express or address mysticism –

\textsuperscript{103} Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente,” KFSA II, 165 §1, “Athenaeum Fragments” §1.
\textsuperscript{104} Schlegel, “Athenäums-Fragmente” §43, 44, “Athenaeum Fragments” §43, 44.
\textsuperscript{105} Schlegel, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik, 50, The Concept of Criticism, 141.
in *Ideen* §59 we read that “*Nichts ist witziger und grotesker als die alte Mythologie und das Christentum; das macht, weil sie so mystisch sind*” [“nothing is wittier and more grotesque than classical mythology and Christianity – because they are so mystical”]\(^\text{106}\) – but we have reason to be cautious of the outright equation of wit and mysticism, especially since Benjamin’s reasoning partly results from Benjamin’s heavy-handed juxtaposition of Schlegel’s and Novalis’ epistemological presuppositions.\(^\text{107}\) Moreover, while Schlegel’s personal notes indeed suggest that his thinking was witty in nature, Benjamin’s observations do little to help us understand how precisely wit is to be understood in the context of the fragments.

Benjamin’s treatment of the fragment’s irony suffers from similar problems. We should note that this treatment is more careful than that of wit, leading to the distinction between material and formal ironies. Observing with disapproval that commentators on Schlegel had thus far only discussed irony in regard to the artist’s subjective decisions, Benjamin notes that this focus overlooks significant instances of irony.\(^\text{108}\) If the form of the work is bound by objective laws, Benjamin argues, then the artist’s subjective ironies can only influence the work’s material.\(^\text{109}\) Irony is not confined to the artwork’s material, however, and Benjamin calls our attention to the irony of the artwork’s form.\(^\text{110}\) “Die formale Ironie,” he explains, “*ist nicht, wie Fleiß oder Aufrichtigkeit, ein intentionales Verhalten des Autors. Sie kann nicht, wie es üblich ist, als Index einer subjektiven Schrankenlosigkeit verstanden, sondern muß als objektives Moment

\(^\text{106}\) Schlegel, “*Ideen*” KFSA II, 262 §59, “Ideas” §59.
\(^\text{107}\) See. Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik*, 15, *The Concept of Criticism*, 119: “Die Heranziehung der Schriften des Novalis zu denen Schlegels rechtfertigt sich durch die **vollige Einhelligkeit** beider hinsichtlich der Prämissen und der Folgerungen aus der Theorie der Kunstkritik.” [“The justification for bringing in Novalis’ writings along with those of Schlegel is the **complete unanimity** of both as regards the premises and conclusions of the theory of criticism”]. Emphasis mine.
im Werke selbst gewürdigt werden” [“Formal irony is not, like diligence or candor, an intentional demeanor of the author. It cannot be understood in the usual manner as an index of a subjective boundlessness, but must be appreciated as an objective moment in the work itself”].

During our analysis of irony below, Benjamin’s insight that certain kinds of irony pervade the very form of the artwork will be shown to be correct, but for the moment it suffices to note that despite this careful distinction, Benjamin fails to properly explain how, and to what purpose, irony takes place. The clearest consequence of irony for Benjamin is, ultimately, another confirmation of Fichte’s influence on Schlegel: “Es versteht sich von selbst, daß sie [i.e. die Ironie], wie die Kritik, sich nur in der Reflexion darstellen kann” [“It is obvious that irony, like criticism, can demonstrate itself only in reflection”].

Walter Benjamin is by no means the only commentator of Schlegel to emphasize a connection to German Idealism. In their renowned book, L’Absolu littéraire, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy make the bold claim that “le romantisme, en effet, s’il n’est pas lui-même entièrement ni simplement philosophique, n’est en toute rigueur compréhensible (voire accessible) qu’à partir du philosophique, dans son articulation propre et du reste unique (c’est-à-dire inédite) au philosophique” [“although it is not entirely or simply philosophical, romanticism is rigorously comprehensible (or even accessible) only on a philosophical basis, in its proper and in fact unique (in other words, entirely new) articulation with the philosophical”].

While Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy frame the movement of Romanticism against the backdrop of German Idealism as a whole (their work opens with an examination of

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111 Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik, 87, The Concept of Criticism, 165.
112 Benjamin, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik, 85, The Concept of Criticism, 164.
113 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, L’Absolu Littéraire, 42, The Literary Absolute, 29.
the “Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism”\textsuperscript{114}, they argue more specifically that Kant, and not Fichte, “\textit{ouvre la possibilité du romantisme}” [“opens up the possibility of romanticism”].\textsuperscript{115} Just as the vacuity of the Kantian subject prompted the rise of speculative idealism – the search for a subject “\textit{absolument libre et par là même conscient de soi}” [“absolutely free and thereby conscious of itself”] – so did Kantian philosophy prompt the rise of Romanticism.\textsuperscript{116} Yet, they argue, Romanticism would search for the Absolute via a different path, one that led not to a subject reflecting back on itself, but to “\textit{la littérature se produisant en produisant sa propre théorie}” [“literature producing itself as it produces its own theory”] – the eponymous Literary Absolute as opposed to the Absolute Subject.\textsuperscript{117}

In their examination of the romantic fragments as prospective instantiations of such a literary Absolute, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe provide a much more thorough and helpful analysis of the concepts of wit and of the fragment than we find in Benjamin. That analysis will be referenced below, but for the moment it is important to emphasize a serious shortcoming of their work: their insistence that the fragments become comprehensible, or even merely accessible, only when viewed in light of their philosophical presuppositions and concerns. The passage cited above (see note 113) is not mere hyperbole, for they later state that “\textit{la philosophie, donc, commande le romantisme}” [“philosophy, then, controls romanticism”].\textsuperscript{118} By claiming that the fragments can only be properly understood against the backdrop of Kantian philosophy, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy effectively dismiss all non-philosophical interpretations of the

\textsuperscript{114} A complicated text, which has been attributed, at different times, to Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin (all of whom were roommates while at the Tübinger Stift), and was written sometime between 1795 and 1796.

\textsuperscript{115} Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, \textit{L'Absolu littéraire}, 42, \textit{The Literary Absolute}, 29.

\textsuperscript{116} Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, \textit{L'Absolu littéraire}, 48, \textit{The Literary Absolute}, 33.

\textsuperscript{117} Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, \textit{L'Absolu littéraire}, 22, \textit{The Literary Absolute}, 12.

\textsuperscript{118} Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, \textit{L'Absolu littéraire}, 42, \textit{The Literary Absolute}, 29.
fragments, much as Benjamin had done.

Moreover, the authors of *L’Absolu littéraire* are not alone in claiming that the romantic fragments can only be understood against the backdrop of Kantian philosophy. Rodolphe Gasché, in an article that further develops and modifies the positions defended in *L’Absolu littéraire*, announces that his intention is to argue that “the Romantic position, and in particular the theory of fragmentation, is understandable (that is, distinguishable in what it philosophically puts forward) only if it is seen to derive, elaborate on, and enact a series of implications that follow from Kant’s reflections on the presentability of ideas.” That these claims regarding the dependence of romanticism on the philosophy of idealism are excessive and reductive can most easily be shown with the help of Michel Chaouli, who provides an elucidating interpretation of the fragments by turning not to 18th century philosophy, but rather to 18th century chemistry.

In *The Laboratory of Poetry*, Chaouli helps us see that a frequently recurring analogy in the romantic fragments has received nearly no attention: that of chemistry. In the well-known fragment 366 of the *Athenäum*, for example, we read that “Verstand ist mechanischer, Witz ist chemischer, Genie ist organischer Geist” [“understanding is mechanical, wit is chemical, genius is organic spirit”]. And in fragment 83 we read that “der Satz der Widerspruchs ist auch nicht einmal das Prinzip der Analyse, nemlich der absoluten, die allein den Namen verdient, der chemischen Dekomposition eines Individuums in seine schlechthin einfachen Elemente” [“The principle of contradiction is by no means to be equated with the principle of analysis: namely, of the absolute kind of analysis which alone deserves the name, the chemical decomposition of an individual into his simplest and most basic components”].

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119 Gasché, “Ideality in Fragmentation,” xi.
121 Schlegel, “Fragmente” §83, “Athenaeum Fragments” §83
formulations, it is surprising that neither Benjamin, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy, or Gasché has devoted any significant time to deciphering how precisely we should understand Schlegel’s use of “chemical.” And as Chaouli’s work makes evident, it is a mistake to assume that Schlegel’s understanding of chemistry is similar to our own, for that science found itself in a very peculiar place at the end of the 18th Century.

Following the establishment of Lavoisier’s theory of oxidation in the 1780s, and the subsequent displacement the phlogiston theory of combustion, the discipline of chemistry underwent a paradigm shift that would not begin to stabilize until Dalton proposed his atomic theory in 1810. As a result, even as chemists in the intervening years labored to develop a chemical model which could describe the various combinations and recombinations of substances in a purely mechanical fashion, they would find themselves unable to explain why certain substances seem to combine more readily with some substances than with others, or why substance X only combines with Y when in the presence of Z. In order to cope with this puzzling state of affairs, chemists found themselves forced to complement their theory of combination with a theory of attraction: “on the one hand, a force that marches with the implacable predictability of an algorithm; on the other, an anthropologically imagined counterforce that introduces unevenness and contingency.”

Late 18th Century chemistry, then, was by no means the precise mathematical science it is often taken to be nowadays.

To complicate matters further, unlike Novalis, who had received rigorous scientific training at the mining academy at Freiberg, Schlegel’s grasp of contemporary chemistry was

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122 Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry*, 7-10.
123 Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry*, 7, 121.
124 Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry*, 7.
dilettantish at best.\textsuperscript{125} As a result, we can expect Schlegel to have had a comparatively hyperbolic view of the way in which chemistry was ruled by uncertainty and contingency at the time, which in turn helps us understand how he employed chemistry as an analogy for analysis, wit, the fragment, and even language itself. As Chaouli notes, “just as eighteenth-century chemists are puzzled by what it is that makes the combination of sulfur, hydrogen, and oxygen yield very different substances, depending on circumstances, so Schlegel has no theory about why it is that some combinations of phonemes, morphemes, or words are permissible while others are not.”\textsuperscript{126} But even as he cannot provide a precise theoretical account of such linguistic phenomena, he nevertheless seeks to exploit and emphasize its uncertainty in his fragments. By understanding that this unpredictable combinatory process is what is at stake in Schlegel’s view of chemistry, we can better come to grips with some formulations – such as “wit is chemical spirit” – that would remain nonsensical otherwise, even if the hermeneutics of the fragment will ultimately caution us against prioritizing authorial intention.

The upshot of this preliminary overview of some of the preeminent commentaries on Schlegel’s fragments is that we must remain vigilant of the risk of reductionism in our own interpretation of the fragments. For just as Gasché claims that the fragments are incomprehensible unless they are viewed against the backdrop of Kantian philosophy, so might Chaouli have claimed that they are incomprehensible unless viewed against a backdrop of 18\textsuperscript{th} century chemistry. To his credit, Chaouli makes no such claim, and as we will see no such claim can be defended once the uncontrollable multiplication of meanings of the fragments is taken seriously. For while Gasché’s interpretation may indeed be impossible unless one reads the

\textsuperscript{125} Stoljar, “Introduction,” 3; Chaouli, \textit{The Laboratory of Poetry}, 2.

\textsuperscript{126} Chaouli, \textit{The Laboratory of Poetry}, 28.
fragments with Kant in mind, one may nevertheless achieve an equally legitimate, but very different, interpretation without that hermeneutic lens.\textsuperscript{127} Just as Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert argues that “to consider early German Romanticism as a literary movement is \textit{one} valid way to interpret it, but it is by no means \textit{the only} one, and it is certainly an erroneous way, if this interpretation entails that literature was \textit{all} the early German romantics were about,” the same might be said of the movement as a reaction to Kantian philosophy.\textsuperscript{128}

As will be shown below, the fragments demand multiple, often mutually exclusive, interpretations. We should thus acknowledge that Gasché’s reading of the fragments as attempts to provide a presentation (\textit{Darstellung}) of the Kantian Idea has great insight and explanatory power, as does Benjamin’s reading of the fragments as attempts to put the Fichtean notions of reflection and auto-reflection into practice. However, neither should be taken as the only proper way to understand the romantic fragment. Indeed, even if Schlegel meant for the fragment to provide a presentation of the Kantian idea, or to embody the Fichtean notion of auto-reflection, any attempt to interpret the fragments solely in light of their relation to German Idealism would amount to an unacceptable reductionism. After all, such interpretations justify their dominance over competing understandings by referring to the intentions of the fragment’s authors, as well as their understanding of contemporary philosophy. But as will be shown below, that is an interpretive strategy precluded by the fragments themselves.

As such, the romantic fragments will here be considered not primarily in light of their relationship to German Idealism, but rather in light of the peculiar hermeneutics they propose

\textsuperscript{127} Here we should note that Michel Chaouli does, in fact, acknowledge the Kantian influence in his own reading of Schlegel’s fragments. My claim is that he could have not done so and still have arrived at a legitimate interpretation. This claim will find its justification below.

\textsuperscript{128} Millán-Zaibert, “What is Early German Romanticism?” 5.
and embody, but doing so in no way discounts the contributions these fragments make to post-Kantian philosophy. In what follows, the romantic concepts of wit, irony, and the ideal reader will be explored in order to shed light on the hermeneutic process demanded by the fragments. And while our analysis will in fact propose an interpretation of the fragments, we must remain vigilant that it does not achieve coherence at the cost of unacceptable reductionism.

3.2. Of Hedgehogs and Witty Hermeneutics

While the inadvisability of reductionist readings can be deduced from the very plurality of meanings of each of the fragments, it is also explicitly prescribed against in the essay Über die Unverständlichkeit, which begins by distinguishing between subject matters which lend themselves to reasoning from first principles from subject matters which require a fragmentary approach. Of the former, we read that “einige Gegenstände des menschlichen Nachdenkens reizen [...] zu immer tieferem Nachdenken und je mehr wir diesem Reize folgen und uns in sie verlieren, je mehr werden sie alle zu Einem Gegenstände” [“some subjects of human thought stimulate us to ever deeper thought, and the more we are stimulated and lose ourselves in these subjects, the more do they become a Single Subject”].

That is to say, some subjects of thought lend themselves to being subsumed under a single concept, or a first principle from which they can be derived. They point, in other words, towards a coherent and over-arching theory, and invite solitary contemplation (or losing oneself in thought). Such subject-matters are the proper domain of the analytic writer (which will be distinguished from the synthetic writer below), for as Manfred Frank notes, such “reflective ascending movement from one proposition [...] to its ground” is precisely what Schlegel means by the term “analytic.”

Other subject-matters, however, would completely escape our attention if we secluded ourselves from the world and “einseitig unser Betrachtung widmeten” [“unilaterally devoted our contemplation”] to them, thriving instead “wenn wir [...] mit Menschen im Verkehr ständen” [“when we associate with other people”].\textsuperscript{131} Instead of subsuming themselves under a first principle, these subject-matters “die sich als Gegenstände des Nachdenkens bei genauerer Reflexion immer mehr vervielfältigen und verwickeln” [“upon closer inspection multiply and entangle themselves more and more as objects of thought”], leading us away from the Subject of Subjects.\textsuperscript{132} Such subject matters, in other words, become ever more complex as they are investigated, and can only be thought properly in the course of intellectual relationships where each interlocutor pushes the other to see the matter at hand in a new and ultimately richer manner.\textsuperscript{133} The results of these relationships are symphilosophy and sympoetry: philosophical theories and works of literature whose authorship becomes confused as each interlocutor contributes to the understanding of the text or issue at hand. As we will see below, such subject-matters constitute the domain of the synthetic writer, who employs wit and irony in order to convey a plurality of meanings.

The progress of such symphilosophy and sympoetry is not necessarily cumulative: an interlocutor may suggest a new understanding which is as valid as, but exclusive of, previous proposals. Schlegel's fragments are attempts to emphasize this very characteristic of interpretation by bringing the reader's focus to the multiplicity of meanings inherent in words themselves. Writing of his published fragments, Schlegel claims that he “wollte beweisen, daß alle Unverständlichkeit relativ [...] sei; [...] daß die Worte sich selbst oft besser verstehen, als

diejenigen von denen sie gebraucht werden” [“wanted to prove that all incomprehension is relative, […] that words often understand themselves better than do those who use them”].

That is to say, the hermeneutic of the fragment focuses not on the discovery of authorial intention (the understanding of the author qua word-user), nor on the reader's response to the text (for the reader is but another word-user), but on the unpacking of the various meanings inherent in the text itself. According to this hermeneutic, when a text is understood differently by its author and each of its readers it is not strictly correct to state that the readers have not comprehended the text's meaning. The incomprehension on the part of each reader (or author) is not absolute: they may have each gotten a valid meaning out of the text, but to the extent that their interpretation obscures other valid interpretations they have fallen into a relative state of incomprehension. In Über die Unverständlichkeit it becomes clear that it is precisely this “Unverstand der Verständigen” [“incomprehension of the comprehending”] – the inability to grasp alternative meanings as a consequence of the adoption of one interpretation – that Schlegel has tried to call attention to in his fragmentary writings. Complete lack of understanding, or the “Unverstand der Unverständigen” [“incomprehension of the uncomprehending”], is seen as a lesser problem. Here we can see why we should remain attentive to the risk of reductionist readings such as Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Nancy’s, for such reductionism amounts precisely to the incomprehension of the comprehending which Schlegel so detests. Moreover, as Christopher Strathman points out, for Schlegel “the basic tendency of words, left to themselves, is always towards chaos rather than order, or toward an order that is not quite recognizable as such.”

137 Strathman, Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative, 50.
bring the focus of interpretation to the word itself is to recognize and legitimate an indefinite plurality of meanings.

This proliferation of meanings in the fragment takes place primarily through the employment of wit and irony. Strathman suggests that the fragment's “wit opens the possibility of a world of understanding while its ironic judgment withdraws this possibility before it can be cognitively grasped and subsumed within the order of knowledge.” In other words, Strathman understands wit and irony as opposing forces in the hermeneutic process: one suggests meanings while the other shows those meanings to be mutually contradictory and therefore impossible. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc suggest a similar interpretation, identifying these two forces as a “creative enthusiasm counter-balanced by a sceptical irony.” Yet Schlegel's fragments often resist a clear demarcation between wit and irony, problematizing these definitions.

If we turn to the fragments themselves, we find reflections on wit as early as in the Kritische Fragmente, where it is claimed that “Witz ist unbedingt geselliger Geist, oder fragmentarische Genialität” [“wit is absolute social feeling, or fragmentary genius”] and that “Witz ist logische Geselligkeit” [“wit is logical sociability”]. These early definitions of wit seem compatible with Strathman's understanding, for here sociability implies symphilosophy, the dialogue between various ways of understanding the subject-matter at hand. The logical sociability of wit can here be understood as the simultaneous appeal to various interpretive logics, or various ways of understanding one and the same text. Indeed, in Athenäum §37 we read that “manche witzige Einfälle sind wie das überraschende Wiedersehen zwei befreundeter Gedanken nach einer langen Trennung” [“many witty ideas are like the sudden meeting of two

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138 Strathman, Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative, 6.
friendly thoughts after a long separation”]. Yet our understanding of the fragmentary hermeneutic depends on how we interpret the friendliness and separation alluded to in this fragment.

If one interprets the friendliness of the thoughts expressed in Athenäum §37 as logical coherence, perhaps with an eye to the logical sociability expressed in Kritische Fragmente §56, then that fragment states that wit allows the reader to see how two distinct thoughts which were not previously seen in relation to one another are logically compatible after all. On the other hand, one can also understand Athenäum §37 as stating that logically incompatible thoughts (thoughts affected by a “long separation”) are united through wit and are thus seen to have an affinity of sorts: the affinity of disparate thoughts which find expression in the same sequence of words. Because of the logical incompatibility of the thoughts, their union would take place in a way analogous to a Gestalt-switch, as in the “duck-rabbit” image (which can be seen as a duck or as a rabbit, but never as both at the same time). In just the same way, the witty fragmentary text would prompt the reader to see various incompatible meanings in one and the same text while giving the reader no criteria with which to determine which reading is preferable. E.T.A. Hoffmann's Der Sandmann would thus stand out as an exemplary fragmentary text not because it is presented as combination of letters and narration (each of which would be a fragment in the sense of a fractured text), but rather because it proposes two (if not more) logically incompatible ways of understanding the events it recounts without giving the reader any means to rank these possibilities. As Sigmund Freud points out, the conclusion that Hoffmann's Nathaniel is insane is no more likely than the conclusion that the Sandman was Coppelius all along. 

142 See http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit_illusion.jpg
143 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 51. As will be argued below, Freud's subsequent decision to side with the second
But here we may have reached an impasse: for we have identified two mutually exclusive interpretations of *Athenäum* §37 – as the revelation of logical compatibility between two otherwise unrelated thoughts, or as the juxtaposition of two logically incompatible thoughts – and so far we are left with no way of choosing between them. Indeed, according to the second interpretation proposed above, in order for that fragment to be witty it simply cannot provide us with any way to choose between the interpretations. Yet not all is lost, for we may turn to other fragments for help in our interpretation.

At this point we should note that the move I am proposing, viz. referring to other fragments for help in interpreting *Athenäum* §37, is controversial, and that this controversy arises from the very fragment to which I will turn in order to settle the controversy. In *Athenäum* §206, we read that “ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel” [“a fragment, like a miniature artwork, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog”]. At first glance, this fragment seems to state that fragments ought to be interpreted in isolation from each other. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, for instance, read the fragment as an allusion to “l’intégrité et l’intégralité de l’individualité organique” [“the integrity and wholeness of organic individuality”], and Gasché agrees, interpreting it as a claim that fragments are “singular organic totalities.” Michel Chaouli, in turn, suggest that in this fragment Schlegel “claims to conceive of each fragment as an independent unit.” By interpreting the hedgehog analogy as a claim for the independence and self-reliance of each

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146 Gasché, “Ideality in Fragmentation”, xii  
147 Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry*, 33.
fragment, one may be inclined to see *Athenäum* §206 as a prohibition against the use of other fragments as context for the interpretation of any one fragment.\footnote{148}

However, as Chaouli later points out, Schlegel vehemently resisted his brother’s suggestion that the *Athenäum Fragmente* be split up and published over the span of two issues of the *Athenäum* journal, a move which speaks against such complete independence of each fragment.\footnote{149} Moreover, Schlegel’s insistence that the *Athenäum Fragmente* collection be published as a whole conflicts with the hedgehog analogy only if one profoundly misunderstands the nature of the prickly mammals. The mistakes here seem to be either an under-emphasizing or an overemphasizing of the peculiarities of a hedgehog when interpreting the fragment in question. Gasché, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy are guilty of the former, for if organic integrity and wholeness are all that is meant, the curious choice of a hedgehog in the fragment becomes unexplainable. After all, Schlegel could have used any other animal for such an analogy, or perhaps could have simply stated that “fragments are complete in themselves like animals.” This is not to say that Gasché and the authors of *L’Absolu littéraire* are altogether wrong, for the allusion to organic integrity can indeed be detected in the fragment, but their interpretation seems to miss something vital.

Chaouli, on the other hand, sees the hedgehog fragment as a deliberate allusion to that animal’s defense mechanisms, sharp needles which turn any close encounter into a painful affair for the encroaching predator. But by interpreting the fragment as if hedgehogs were completely asocial beings, Chaouli over-estimates the consequences of such a prickly nature. Even if the needles which cover their bodies make physical contact a delicate affair, they do not render such

\footnote{148} Such a prohibition which would, of course, contradict itself as soon as it influenced the interpretation of any other fragment.  
\footnote{149} Chaouli, *The Laboratory of Poetry*, 112.
contact impossible. Were that the case, hedgehogs would become extinct in short order, for they would be unable to mate or rear their young. What’s more, if one understood the fragment’s prescription of complete isolation literally, one would be hard pressed to account for a hedgehog’s ability to eat, for instance. It seems, then, that a closer look at hedgehogs is in order.

The controversy over the hedgehog fragment is surprising given that Arthur Schopenhauer, a thinker whom Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy mention immediately after discussing the fragment in question, had already provided a sensible path for the interpretation of this analogy.\(^{150}\) In his *Parerga und Paralipomena*, Schopenhauer describes the peculiar sociability of porcupines as he constructs a parable about human society:

“Eine Gesellschaft Stachelschweine drängte sich, an einem kalten Wintertage, recht nahe zusammen, um, durch die gegenseitige Wärme, sich vor dem Erfrieren zu schützen. Jedoch bald empfanden sie die gegenseitigen Stacheln; welches sie dann wieder von einander entfernte. Wann nun das Bedürfniß der Erwärmung sie wieder näher zusammen brachte, wiederholte sich jenes zweite Uebel; so daß sie zwischen beiden Leiden hin und hergeworfen wurden, bis sie eine mäßige Entfernung von einander heraus gefunden hatten, in der sie es am besten aushalten konnten”

“One cold winter’s day, a group of porcupines huddled together quite closely in order through their mutual warmth to prevent themselves from being frozen. But they soon felt the effect of their quills on one another, which made them again move apart. Now when the need for warmth once more brought them together, the drawback of the quills was repeated so that they were tossed between two evils, until they had discovered the proper distance from which they could best tolerate one another.”\(^{151}\)

Here we find porcupines described as capable of an uneasy society: if they become too close to one another, they will destroy themselves; but death also awaits the porcupine who foregoes the warmth of its peers and seeks complete independence.

If we understand the hedgehog analogy in *Athenäum* §206 with the help of Schopenhauer’s porcupine parable, we arrive at an understanding of the fragments as members

\(^{150}\) Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *L’Absolu Littéraire 63, The Literary Absolute* 43

of an uneasy society, who can turn to each other for help (e.g. for interpretive context) but who cannot be brought so close together as to be seen as a single coherent text (for doing so lead to the incomprehension of other, mutually exclusive meanings). The hermeneutic permissibility of such inter-fragment referencing is supported by Schlegel’s surprise at his readers’ misunderstandings of Athenäum §216, which opens with the claim that “die Französische Revolution, Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre, und Goethes Meister sind die größten Tendenzen des Zeitalters” [“The French Revolution, Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, and Goethe’s Meister are the greatest tendencies of the age”]. Schlegel admits that his view of the French Revolution as an allegory for transcendental idealism is quite peculiar, but adds that “ich habe es ja aber schon so oft und in so verschiednen Manieren zu erkennen gegeben, daß ich wohl hätte hoffen dürfen, der Leser würde sich endlich daran gewöhnt haben” [“I have let this opinion be known so often and in so many different ways that I really might have hoped the reader would have gotten used to it by now”]. That is to say, Schlegel relied on his reader’s knowledge of his other fragments and works for the intelligibility of this fragment. Indeed, such inter-fragment references are ultimately what distinguishes fragments from aphorisms, as Chaouli ultimately argues. “Unlike aphorisms,” he writes, “Schlegel’s fragments depend far too strongly on an idiosyncratic network of meanings to be effectively quotable.”154 As we’ll see below, the unquotability of the fragments will ultimately result from the fact that although fragments reference one another for context and meaning, such references never succeed in permanently stabilizing such meaning.

Returning now to the task of interpreting Athenäum §37, which states that “many witty ideas are like the sudden meeting of two friendly thoughts after a long separation,” we find

154 Chaouli, The Laboratory of Poetry, 57.
ourselves able turn to other fragments for help with our interpretation of the concept of wit, though with the caveat that excessive reliance on other fragments might ultimately be destructive. Indeed, *Kritische Fragmente* §22 states that “ein einziges analytisches Wort, auch zum Lobe, kann den vortrefflichsten witzigen Einfall, dessen Flamme nun erst wärmen sollte, nachdem sie geglänzt hat, unmittelbar löschen” [“a single analytic word, even in praise, can extinguish the most brilliantly witty idea, whose flame should only radiate warmth now, after it has given off light”].¹⁵⁵ That is to say, just as we seek help in order to decide which of two possible meanings to attribute to a fragment, we are warned of the danger of premature analyses of any witty expression. The danger is that, in the process of investigating the relationship between the thoughts we see as wittily joined, we may end their relationship (i.e. extinguish the wit) completely. In other words, the analysis may come down on the side of one of the interpretations, thus giving the reader grounds to dismiss the others as inferior, or even implausible. Thus, for instance, the premature decision that the duck-rabbit is really an image of a duck precludes one from seeing the rabbit, and Freud's conclusion that Hoffmann's Sandman was real (and therefore that Nathaniel was not insane) precludes the experience of the very wit of “*Der Sandmann.*”

Here, then, we see confirmation for the second proposed interpretation of *Athenäum* §37: wit joins two logically incompatible thoughts. Paradoxically (or rather, wittily), we here also see a prohibition against giving preference to that interpretation, lest we quench the flame of wit and do away with the fragmentary character altogether. Wit thus refers to the fragment's ambiguity; and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy write that “le Witz a reçu la qualification fondamentale d'être la réunion des hétérogènes” [“Witz is basically qualified as a unification of heterogeneous

elements”). But in order to understand the precise nature of this witty union of heterogeneous meanings in a single expression, we must come to grips with wit’s ever-present counter-weight: the concept of irony.

3.3. Fragmentary Irony and Hermeneutic Frustration

In Über die Unverständlichkeit, we read that “ein großer Teil von der Unverständlichkeit des Athenäums liegt in der Ironie, die sich mehr oder minder überall darin äußert” [“a great part of the incomprehensibility of the Athenaeum is unquestionably due to the irony that to a greater or lesser extent is to be found everywhere in it”], and we should keep in mind that Schlegel’s use of the term “irony” is unorthodox at best. As Ernst Behler notes, until the publication of Schlegel’s fragments the concept of irony more or less unequivocally referred to a rhetorical move whereby one meant the opposite of what one said. However, Schlegel’s appropriation of the term “gave irony a completely new scope and effected a fundamental change in the concept in Western literary theory.” As such, in order to understand Schlegel’s claim that his fragments were incomprehensible because they were ironic, and in order to understand irony’s relationship with wit, we must take the time to decipher his novel understanding of “irony.”

Behler claims that the historical change in the meaning of “irony” can be located, rather precisely, in the opening sentence of Kritische Fragmente §42: “die Philosophie ist die eigentliche Heimat der Ironie, welche man logische Schönheit definieren möchte: denn überall wo in mündlichen oder geschriebenen Gesprächen, und nur nicht ganz systematisch

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156 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, L'Absolu littéraire, 74, The Literary Absolute, 52.
158 Behler, German Romantic Literary Theory, 142.
159 Behler, German Romantic Literary Theory, 146.
philosophiert wird, soll man Ironie leisten und fordern” [‘philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty: for wherever philosophy appears in oral or written dialogues – and is not simply confined into rigid systems – there irony should be asked for and provided’]. This fragment begins Schlegel’s discussion of Socratic Irony, one of many different subspecies he will later catalogue, which refers in part to the impossibility of identifying Socrates’ true beliefs and positions in the platonic dialogues. The elucidation of this kind of irony is continued in Kritische Fragmente §108, where it is described as simultaneously involuntary and deliberate and, crucially, we read that “sie enthält und erregt ein Gefühl von dem unauflöslichen Widerstreit des Unbedingten und des Bedingten, der Unmöglichkeit und Notwendigkeit einer vollständigen Mitteilung” [‘it contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication’]. Socratic irony, in other words, manages to cultivate a desire for (or an awareness of the necessity of) a completely successful communication while simultaneously raising the awareness that such success is beyond our reach.

Moreover, this fragment allows us to begin to grasp what Schlegel meant when he stated that certain subjects of thought evade reasoning from first principles (see note 133 above). After all, according to this fragment, Socratic irony brings our attention to the irreconcilability of the unconditioned (or the Absolute: Unbedingten) and the conditioned (Bedingten) and to the impossibility of complete communication. It is reasonable to deduce, therefore, that it is precisely the communication of the unconditioned that is shown by Socratic irony to be both

necessary and impossible.\textsuperscript{162}

Indeed, as we read in one of Schlegel’s contributions to Novalis’ \textit{Blüthenstaub}, “\textit{Hat man nun einmal die Liebhaberei fürs Absolute und kann nicht davon lassen: so bleibt einem Ausweg, als sich selbst immer zu widersprechen, und entgegengesetzte Extreme zu verbinden}” [“if one becomes infatuated with the absolute and simply can’t escape it, then the only way out is to contradict oneself continually and join opposite extremes together”].\textsuperscript{163} That is to say, only through witty fragments, which bring distant thoughts together, can the absolute be thought. The “way out” suggested above does not consist of a way to overcome the struggles of a finite being attempting to come to grips with an infinite concept, but rather of a way to continue that struggle in a productive way. Millán-Zaibert agrees, stating that the fragments are a response to “the absolute unpresentability of the Absolute,” and as Behler and Struc note, the essence of the fragments “lies in their relationship to the infinite and in the despair of not being able to grasp it in a more conventional way.”\textsuperscript{164}

Here we should note that this property of Socratic irony, \textit{viz.} its penchant for calling attention to the impossibility and necessity of complete communication, is shared with the broader conception of irony found in the Schlegel’s writings. That this is so can be seen in \textit{Athenäum} §121, where we read that “\textit{eine Idee ist ein bis zur Ironie vollendeter Begriff, eine absolute Synthesis absoluter Antithesen, der stete sich selbst erzeugende Wechsel zwei streitender Gedanken}” [“an idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the continual self-creating interchange of two conflicting

\textsuperscript{162} Indeed, Behler and Struc reach just this conclusion. See “Friedrich Schlegel’s Literary Aphorisms,” 36.
\textsuperscript{163} Schlegel, “\textit{Blüthenstaub},” KFSA II, 164 §26, “From Blüthenstaub” §3.
\textsuperscript{164} Millán-Zaibert, “What is Early German Romanticism?” 20; and Behler and Struc, “Friedrich Schlegel’s Literary Aphorisms”, 36.
thoughts”]. Irony, then, seems remarkably similar to wit, for it consists in the bringing together of potentially incompatible thoughts.

Yet the difference between wit and irony becomes clearer as Schlegel provides us with a partial taxonomy of irony, describing dramatic irony as “wenn der Dichter drei Akte geschrieben hat, dann wider Vermuten ein andrer Mensch wird, und nun die beiden letzten Akte schreiben muß” [“when an author has written three acts, then unexpectedly turns into another man and now has to write the last two acts”]. Although this could also serve as a description of a certain kind of wit, what we see here is an emphasis not of the multiple ways in which a text can be interpreted, but rather of the gap which separates these interpretations. That is to say, whereas wit highlights the cohabitation of distinct thoughts, irony highlights their very distinctness.

By interpreting the difference between wit and irony in this way, we can appreciate Millán-Zaibert’s insight that “allegory and wit are ways of presenting the infinite to the finite mind,” without mistakenly assuming that such a presentation is wholly successful. For whereas romantic wit allows the fragments to navigate the tension between an infinite concept and a finite mind, “romantic irony is a device that enables Schlegel to capture the tensions, without freezing the eternal movement between that which is without limits and that which is defined in terms of limits.” We can find support for this interpretation in Ideen §69, where we read that “Ironie ist klares Bewußstein der ewigen Agilität, des unendlich vollen Chaos” [“irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos”]. Irony denotes not the plurality of wit, but rather the irreducibility of that plurality. The “eternal agility” spoken of

in the above fragment refers to the fact that the reader cannot help but endlessly jump from one way of interpreting the text to the other as she is prevented from declaring any interpretation as final.

Wit and irony are thus two sides of the same coin, and any attempt to cleanly separate the two is doomed to go awry.\textsuperscript{170} As such, Strathman’s definition of wit and irony as inherently opposed, one suggesting possibilities for interpretation and the other taking those possibilities away, must be qualified: wit and irony are names for two aspects of the same movement, and cannot be understood without reference to each other. If Kritische Fragmente §48 states that “Ironie ist die Form des Paradoxen” [“Irony is the form of paradox”], we must add that the paradox can only arise from the interplay of the various meanings provided by wit.\textsuperscript{171} At the same time, without irony’s endless indecision, wit’s multiplicity of meanings would soon be reduced to a single dominant meaning during the process of interpretation, and wit itself would perish.

It is important to note that while wit and irony constitute the basic hermeneutic movement of the romantic fragment, they should not lead to obscurity for obscurity’s sake. “\textit{Man soll Witz haben},” we read in Athenäum §32, “aber nicht haben wollen; sonst entsteht Witzelei” [“One should have wit, but not desire to have it. Otherwise, you get persiflage”].\textsuperscript{172} Intentional wit, in other words, leads to superfluous ambiguity. And as we read in Athenäum §173, “\textit{im Styl des echten Dichters ist nichts Schmuck, alles notwendige Hieroglyphe}” [“there’s nothing

\textsuperscript{170} Behler and Stuc make a similar observation, claiming that “wit and irony are most intimately linked together and cannot be viewed separately.” See “Friedrich Schlegel’s Literary Aphorisms,” 40.


\textsuperscript{172} Schlegel, \textit{Athenäums-Fragmente},” KFSA II, 170 §32, “Athenaum Fragments,” §32.
ornamental about the style of the real poet: everything is a necessary hieroglyph”]. As we have noted above, the importance of the fragment lies in its ability to assist us in thinking about subject matters (such as infinity, or the Absolute) which we cannot fully grasp; but that is not to say that conventional reasoning is to be abolished. In fact, adding ambiguity to thinking willy-nilly would only obscure those subject matters which lend themselves to straightforward conceptualization. Such needless obfuscation is condemned in the fragments themselves: “Nichts ist verächtlicher als trauriger Witz” [“Nothing is more contemptible than pathetic wit”]. Irrespective of such pathetic instances of wit, however, the important point for our purposes is that there are some subject matters, such as the Absolute, which can only be properly addressed through witty and ironic works such as the fragments.

In fact, when dealing with the subject matters appropriate to the fragment no single explanation can truly do justice to what is explained. In Athenäum §82 we read that there are only three kinds of explanations possible in scholarship (Wissenschaft): “Erklärungen, die uns ein Licht oder einen Wink geben; Erklärungen, die nichts erklären; und Erklärungen, die alles verdunkeln” [explanations that shed some light or give a glimpse; explanations that explain nothing; and explanations that obscure everything”]. The play on the word “Erklärung” (explanation, but also enlightenment) is obvious here, and an interpretation of the fragment as a jab against rationalism clearly suggests itself – especially given that the fragment opens with a dismissal of philosophical demonstrations as nothing more than extravagant shows of intellectual

might ("Demonstrationen im Sinne der militärischen Kunstsprache").\textsuperscript{176} That is certainly a valid reading, but not the only one possible. We need not read this fragment as a negation of the claim, in Über die Unverständlichkeit, that certain subject matters are indeed most appropriate to reasoning from first principles. If instead we read this fragment as referring only to those subject matters appropriate to fragmentary thinking, we find in it a warning of the limits of such enquiries. In fragmentary scholarship, that is, the most an explanation can do is begin to shed light on the matter at hand, and start the process of gaining an understanding. "Die rechten Definitionen lassen sich gar nicht aus dem Stegreife machen," the fragment continues, "sondern müssen einem von selbst kommen" {["True definitions can't be made off the cuff, rather they must come of themselves"]).\textsuperscript{177}

The challenge lies in the fact that in order to do justice to those subjects of thought, one must attempt to grasp all of the different aspects of the subject-matter, knowing that no amount of reasoning will be able to combine them all under one concept. And as one cannot communicate all of these aspects in a coherent manner (otherwise the fragment would be unnecessary, and the subject matter would lend itself to a more commonplace reasoning), one must find a way to combine the various incompatible meanings in a single explanation. Simply listing out the various explanations in succession would not suffice, for in the reader's eyes the text would simply devolve into self-contradiction as each claim invalidates, or is precluded by, its predecessors. The solution is thus to find sentences which express multiple meanings at one time, and to enlist the ambiguity of language in this communicative task. If done successfully, the resulting explanation would be inherently and irreducibly ambiguous, which is to say, it

\textsuperscript{176} ["demonstrations in the sense of military jargon"]. Schlegel, "Athenäums-Fragmente," KFSA II, 177 §82, "Athenaeum Fragments" §82.

\textsuperscript{177} Schlegel, "Athenäums-Fragmente," KFSA II, 177 §82, "Athenaeum Fragments" §82. Translation my own.
would be witty and ironic.

Yet here we arrive at a serious hermeneutic problem: the fragmentary work must be understood in all its possible meanings, but a reader cannot derive all of these understandings simultaneously. The gravity of this problem, and Schlegel’s attempts to solve it, lead to further developments in the hermeneutic of the fragment, and culminates with the notion of an ideal reader.

3.4. The Ideal Reader as a Critic, Symphilosopher, and Sympoet

The necessity of positing an ideal reader was already apparent in Schlegel’s early discussions of Socratic irony, which he claims passes undetected by the “harmonisch Platten” [“harmonious bores”] who cannot grasp it: “Wer sie nicht hat, dem bleibt sie auch nach dem offensten Geständnis ein Rätsel” [“to a person who hasn't got it, it will remain a riddle even after it is openly confessed”].178 As we have seen, if a fragment is read with no regard for its irony – that is, if its multiple meanings are reduced to one harmonious meaning – then the very fragmentary nature of the text will be destroyed.

Avoiding such a destructive reading requires a particular attitude on the part of the reader, an openness to the multiplicity of the text. Schlegel calls such a reader a critic. “Ein Kritiker ist ein Leser, der wiederkäut,” he writes. “Er sollte also mehr als einen Magen haben” [“A critic is a reader who ruminates. Therefore, he ought to have more than one stomach”].179 To be a critic means to digest one and the same work in multiple ways, to receive it in its plurality. It is not enough to be familiar with one or two of the possible meanings of a text, since for as long as the reader neglects other possible meanings she will fall into the incomprehension of the

comprehending (Unverstand der Verständigen). Instead, the ideal reader should be aware of all possible meanings of a text, so as to be able to alternate between them and truly appreciate their unlikely union.

Such a difficult task becomes more arduous still, as not only must the fragment's reader be aware of all of the meanings intended by the author who produced a fragment in the attempt to grasp or communicate something which defies logical reasoning, she must also be aware of the unintended meanings which nevertheless belong to the text. Indeed, as Pol Vandeveld points out, meaning can be seen to reside in at least three distinct levels in any written work: “the author’s intention, the meaning of words and sentences, and the significance of those meanings to a particular audience.”180 Aside from being able to interpret the text as the author intended, one must be able to interpret it as every other reader has done and, more crucially, in every possible way allowed for by the words themselves. The ironies of the fragments are not merely subjective, as Walter Benjamin has already noted (see note 111 above), but are also found in the very material with which the fragments are composed: words. The scale of this problem becomes clear as Schlegel voices the suspicion that even if one thinks he has gotten all of a text's ironies under control, “es würde bald eine neue Generation von kleinen Ironien entstehn” [“soon there will arise a new generation of little ironies”], with the result that even the texts of the most careful authors of past times continue to produce new meanings, and therefore new ironies, which become evident when they are read by each new generation of readers.181 Hence the problem presents itself: if the meanings of a text tend towards indefinite proliferation, how can any reader be expected to do justice to the text?

The answer to this question begins with the requirement that the reader be sufficiently cultivated, and in the *Kritische Fragmente* we find quite a strict definition of cultivation (Bildung):

> „Ein recht freier und gebildeter Mensch müßte sich selbst nach Belieben philosophisch oder philologisch, kritisch oder poetisch, historisch oder rhetorisch, antik oder modern stimmen können, ganz willkürlich, wie man ein Instrument stimmt, zu jeder Zeit, und in jedem Grade“

“A really free and cultivated person ought to be able to attune himself at will to being philosophical or philological, critical or poetical, historical or rhetorical, ancient or modern; quite arbitrarily, just as one tunes an instrument, at any time and to any degree.”

In other words, if the cultivated reader ruminates over the text, she must not only have an adequate number of stomachs – as required by *Kritische Fragmente* §27 – but must also be able to intentionally shift the cud from one stomach to the next. This digestive metaphor soon becomes inadequate, however, as the reader must also be able to take any given perspective to greater or lesser degrees. She must not only be able to read the text from an ancient or modern perspective, but also be able to read it from any of the transitional points in between. A cultivated person, in other words, must be capable of adopting and modifying different perspectives at will.

In *Athenäum* §121 we see just how much is at stake in this understanding of cultivation, for there the cultivated person is described as inherently heterogeneous, and able to manipulate that heterogeneity at will:

> „Aber sich willkürlich bald in diese bald in jene Sphäre, wie in eine andre Welt, nicht bloß mit dem Verstande und der Einbildung, sondern mit ganzer Seele versetzen, bald auf diesen bald auf jenen Teil seines Wesens frei Verzicht tun, und sich auf einen andern ganz beschränken; jetzt in diesem, jetzt in jenem Individuum sein Eins und Alles suchen und finden, und alle übrigen absichtlich vergessen: das Kann nur ein Geist, der gleichsam eine Mehrheit von Geistern, und ein ganzes System von Personen in sich enthält, und in dessen Innerm das Universum, welches, wie man

sagt, in jeder Monade keimen soll, ausgewachsen, und reif geworden ist.”

“But to transport oneself arbitrarily now into this, now into that sphere, as if into another world, not merely with one’s reason and imagination, but with one’s whole soul; to freely relinquish first one and then another part of one’s being, and confine oneself entirely to a third; to seek and find now in this, now in that individual the be-all and end-all of existence, and intentionally forget everyone else: of this only a mind is capable that contains within itself simultaneously a plurality of minds and a whole system of persons, and in whose inner being the universe which, as they say, should germinate in every monad, has grown to fullness and maturity.”

As we will discuss below, heterogeneity as such cannot be the distinguishing mark of the cultivated person, since for Schlegel all people are at bottom irreducibly heterogeneous. But the capacity to don whichever aspect of oneself one wishes to, and to commit oneself fully to all such choices one makes, even as doing so would run counter to one’s present understanding or worldview – that is the mark of cultivation, and the mark of the best reader of fragments.

Clearly, such levels of cultivation must be exceedingly rare, and an author of fragments will likely soon find that there are no readers who measure up to the standards of the text. But as the Kritische Fragmente point out, the solution cannot be writing the fragment as a Bildungsroman:

“Leute die Bücher schreiben, und sich dann einbilden, ihre Leser wären das Publikum, und sie müßten das Publikum bilden: diese kommen sehr bald dahin, ihr sogenanntes Publikum nichts bloß zu verachten, sondern zu hassen; welches zu gar nichts führen kann.”

“People who write books and imagine that their readers are the public and that they must educate it soon arrive at the point not only of despising their so-called public but of hating it. Which leads absolutely nowhere.”

Rather than lower the standards of one’s text in order to find an audience for it, and instead of engaging in the Sisyphean endeavor of trying to educate the public (and ultimately resenting it for falling short and misunderstanding the text), Schlegel suggests simply envisioning an ideal

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reader, and writing the fragment with her in mind.

In order to properly understand the notion of the ideal reader, we must first come to grips with the distinction that is drawn between analytic and synthetic writers. In the *Kritische Fragmente*, we see that writers are divided into either of these two categories depending on whether they are more likely “entweder manches nichts zu sagen, was durchaus gesagt werden müßte, oder vieles zu sagen, was durchaus nicht gesagt zu werden brauchte” [“not to say a number of things that absolutely need saying, or else to say a great many things that absolutely ought to be left unsaid”]. The synthetic writer bears the first characteristic for, instead of explicitly stating all she wants to say, she combines various meanings into as few words as possible. The analytic writer, on the other hand, attempts to make his text crystal clear by carefully dissecting it and drawing out each of its messages. As we have seen, when dealing with a fragmentary text this tendency towards analysis is fatal, for it precludes the reader from perceiving the witty juxtaposition of heterogeneous meanings.

Analytic and synthetic writers approach their intended audience in very different ways. In *Kritische Fragmente* §112 we read that the analytic writer will adapt his text to best convey his message to the reader, and we can add that this indeed would be the best way to proceed in normal communication, for this kind of writing prioritizes authorial intention by raising the chances that the reader will extract the intended meaning from the text. But this approach is precluded for the writer who deals with subject matters which cannot be exhausted by a straightforward analysis. The fragmentary writer has to synthesize as many meanings as possible in the text, and cannot cater the text to her audience without risking an inadmissible loss of meaning. The synthetic writer, then, must invent her own reader:

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185 Schlegel, “*Kritische Fragmente,*” KFSA II, 150 §33, “Critical Fragments,” §33.
“Der synthetische Schriftsteller konstruiert und schafft sich einen Leser, wie er sein soll; er denkt sich denselben nicht ruhend und tot, sondern lebendig und entgegenwirkend. Er läßt das, was er erfunden hat, vor seinen Augen stufenweise werden, oder er lockt ihn es selbst zu erfinden. Er will keine bestimmte Wirkung auf ihn machen, sondern er tritt mit ihm in das heilige Verhältnis der innigsten Symphilosophie oder Sympoesie.”

“The synthetic writer constructs and creates a reader as he should be; he doesn't imagine him calm and dead, but alive and critical. He allows whatever he has created to take shape gradually before the reader's eyes, or else he tempts him to discover it himself. He doesn't try to make any particular impressions on him, but enters with him into the sacred relationship of deepest symphilosophy or sympoetry.”

That is to say, unable to cater her work to her readers, and unable to educate her readers so as to be able to properly read her works, the author of fragments must instead imagine a perfect reader for whom to write.

This ideal reader, as we have suggested above, is the perfectly cultivated person, a reader able to willingly commit to different perspectives at a whim, and with one's whole being. In order to properly read a fragment, it is not enough to imagine different perspectives, or to be able to reason from a variety of points of view: each perspective visited must be seen as the true one, and any contradictory explanation must be declared as false; but one must be able to shift commitments at whim, and to do so smoothly and immediately. The ideally cultivated reader is thus not just one reader, but many readers at a time, since this reader must do justice to the plurality of meanings of the fragment.

If such a reader seems godlike, one need only look at Athenäum §262 for confirmation, for there cultivation is defined as a rise into divinity: “Gott werden, Mensch sein, sich bilden, sind Ausdrücke, die einerlei bedeuten” [“To become God, to be human, to cultivate oneself are all expressions that mean the same thing”].

Two consequences of this fragment quickly

suggest themselves: first, to write for a perfectly cultivated person is to write for God, that is, for someone who includes countless other people within herself. But that is not to say that ordinary readers should not be able to approach the fragmentary text, for – and this is the second conclusion to be drawn – all human beings are god-like (or cultivated) to some extent. Indeed, as an earlier fragment points out, people are not as simple as they often take themselves to be:

“jeder ungebildete Mensch ist die Karikatur von sich selbst” [“every uncultivated person is a caricature of himself”].\(^{188}\) That is to say, the uncultivated person exaggerates her inner harmony, she presents herself as simple when she in fact is complex and heterogeneous to some extent.

Cultivation is thus not simply a matter of increasing one's knowledge, it is simultaneously a matter of becoming aware of one's complexity and of increasing that complexity by acquiring new perspectives from which to choose. As the person becomes more cultivated, she becomes more heterogeneous and more aware of that heterogeneity, thus making her able to comprehend the fragmentary text to a greater extent. The fragment’s author thus writes for the reader who can appreciate the fragment in all of its complexity, knowing that the fragment remains somewhat accessible to ordinary readers; and that it becomes more accessible the more cultivated the reader.

This interpretation is strengthened when we read that “jeder rechtliche Autor schreibt für niemand, oder für alle. Wer schreibt, damit ihn diese und jene lesen mögen, verdient, daß er nicht gelesen werde” [“every honest author writes for nobody or everybody. Whoever writes for some particular group does not deserve to be read”].\(^ {189}\) But this means not only that one does not write for a specific audience, since no actual reader can do justice to the text, but also that one


writes for every possible interpreter of the text: to write for the ideal reader is to write for no one and for everyone. That is to say, the notion of the ideal reader includes every actual reader and every possible future reader. Furthermore, we must recall the optimism expressed in Kritische Fragmente §112 and Athenäum §262 (see notes 186 and 187 above): for if to be human is to become ever more cultivated, and if the synthetic author enters into symphilosophy with her readers, then the author has reason to hope that the various meanings of a text will gradually become apparent to her readers. As such, even though the fragmentary text is written for an ideal reader, there remains the possibility that actual readers may come to deeper and deeper engagements with the text. Rather than be educated by the author (as is the intention of a Bildungsroman), the reader of fragments takes on an active role analogous to that of the writer, and discovers, or perhaps invents, each of the meanings as if for the first time.

In his discussion of the fragments, Pol Vandevelde distinguishes three ways in which a reader might see meaning in a work: discovery, fabrication, and invention. A meaning that can be discovered is “an autonomous entity in the form of a content of thought lying somewhere for us to stumble upon it,” which is to say, it is a pre-existing meaning (such as what the author intended for the work to mean) which the reader uncovers in and receives from the text. A meaning that is fabricated, by contrast, is one that cannot be found not in the work, but rather in the reader, who projects it on the text.

A meaning that is invented, finally, is one which belongs both to the reader and the text, and which results from the fact that both the text and its interpretation are “at the same time

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190 Vandevelde, Heidegger and the Romantics, 22.
191 Vandevelde, Heidegger and the Romantics, 22.
192 Vandevelde, Heidegger and the Romantics, 22.
inchoate and progressive” processes. Invention differs from mere fabrication in that it is grounded on the text: the invented meaning was one of the potential interpretations of the work before the time of invention. At the same time, invention differs from discovery in that the meaning had not actually been derived from the text before the moment of invention.

Vandevelde points to the practice of *diaskeuasis* as crucial for the formation of Schlegel’s understanding of interpretation, and we may add that it also serves as a perfect example of inventions of meaning. Diaskeuasts were tasked with editing Homer’s texts, connecting its parts together by providing transitions but also by extrapolating and increasing the meaning of the works being edited. Such an interpretive process “is a form of criticism that disassembles and reassembles the work and aims at bringing the potentiality of the work to its actuality,” which is to say, it is the invention of meaning. By encouraging its readers to invent new meanings – which is to say, to bring potential meanings to actuality – the fragment gives its readers the opportunity to further cultivate themselves.

The fact that the reader becomes the co-creator, rather than the receiver, of meanings has great consequence for the hermeneutic of the fragment. As we read in the last fragment of Novalis’ *Blüthenstaub*, “Der wahre Leser muß der erweiterte Autor seyn” [“the true reader must be an extension of the author”], for the reader is charged with the task of turning the rough work into a polished one by extracting the ideas from the text. And just as the reader can enter into a relationship of symphilosophy or sympoetry with the author, he may also engage other readers in the same manner:

“*wenn der Leser das Buch nach seiner Idee bearbeiten würde, so würde ein 2ter Leser*”

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196 Novalis, “*Blüthenstaub,*” §125, “Miscellaneous Observations” §125.
noch mehr läutern, und so wird dadurch daß die bearbeitete Masse immer wieder in frischhätige Gefässe kömmt die Masse endlich wesentlicher Bestandtheil – Glied der wirksamen Geistes.”

[“if the reader were to work through the book according to his own idea, a second reader would refine it still more, with the result that, since the mass that had been worked through would constantly be poured into fresh vessels, the mass would finally become an essential component – a part of the active spirit”].

As each reader extracts one meaning from the text, and as the text is understood from different perspectives, the collective understanding of the fragment progresses. And again we see the demotion of authorial intention, for while the fragment acknowledges that an author often is able to add clarity to a text, this can only take place “durch unpartheyisches Wiederlesen seines Buch” [“through impartial rereading of his book”]: when the author is able to forget her original intentions and see the text for what it really is. For while the fragment notes that “bey Fremdem geht gewöhnlich das Eigenthümliche [des Buches] mit verloren, weil die Gaben selten ist völlig in eine fremde Idee hineinzugehn” [“the uniqueness {of the book} is lost with strangers, since the gift for entering another’s idea is so rare”], it also warns: “oft selbst beym Autor” [“often even for the author”]. The uniqueness of a fragmentary work is the specific multiplicity of meanings it contains, and given the proliferation of meanings which occurs in the fragment, the last clause in the previous quote is decisive: for here we see that the author is a stranger to her own text, that the ideas contained therein may be novel even for her.

A further consequence of the reader’s status as co-creator can be seen in Athenäum §264, where we read that “man soll nicht mit allen symphilosophieren wollen, sondern nur mit denen die à la hauteur sind” [“you shouldn’t try to symphilosophize with everyone, but only with those

who are à la hauteur”). The danger seems to be that if the actual reader is not sufficiently
cultivated, the intellectual back-and-forth of symphilosophy will stall. If the author (or reader) is
genuinely interested in further understanding the text, she may not be content with the feedback
he receives from insufficiently cultivated readers, or at least from those readers alone. The
posited ideal reader may thus serve as a devil’s advocate for the writer, as a prompt to seek
ironies even in texts that seem stable. This is Strathman’s view, and he points out that “Schlegel
repeatedly insists on the presence of another person, a reader or a clandestine self; someone to
think with him as he writes, presumably to keep his writing loose and unstable, open to
contingency, alteration, or change.” But insofar as the ideal reader is here only posited by the
author, his influence on the text is limited. After all, any positive contribution (i.e. any novel
interpretation) of the text on the part of the imagined ideal reader would in fact be the result of
the author’s (at best impartial) re-reading of the text. But an ideal reader, even an imagined one,
can aid an author by means of negative feedback: by inserting doubt into every interpretation that
announces itself as final, and by prompting the author to look for new ironies in every word.

Symphilosophy thus serves as the mechanism in the further cultivation of the reader of
the text, even when the reader is the writer herself, and when the symphilosopher is but an
imagined interlocutor. Justus Fetscher points out that “inherent in the fragment is a provocative
stimulus to respond, to continue what has already been said,” whether it be through discussion,
letters, or further fragments. If symphilosophy is the process through which readers are further
cultivated, then it is clear that it functions better as a truly social event. The ideal reader must
thus be seen a stand in for actual symphilosophizing; an ideal of perfection which paradoxically

201 Strathman, Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative, 48.
fails to live up to the actual accomplishments of real and imperfect readers. After all, although actual readers are incapable of perceiving every possible irony of the fragment, they are capable of making positive contributions to the process of symphilosophy. An actual reader may suggest an interpretation stemming from a perspective which another reader is unaware of, and of which he would probably not become aware if he were simply to simulate the process of symphilosophy with an imagined ideal reader. The fragment as the instrument of symphilosophy thus prompts the reader to further cultivate herself as she gains a deeper understanding of the subject matter of the fragmentary text.

3.5. Fragmentary Images, Fragmentary Selves

As we have seen in our discussion of fragmentary irony above, witty and ironic works such as the fragments ought to facilitate the thinking of subject matters which otherwise defy conceptual reasoning. The most obvious of such subject matters is the Absolute, or the absolutely unconditioned and infinite. However, as we have seen in section 3.1 above, the Absolute is not the only appropriate subject matter for fragmentary works. Rodolphe Gasché, for instance, sees in the romantic fragments an attempt to present the Kantian concept of the idea, a concept of reason for which no corresponding sensation can be given, and which therefore cannot become an object for knowledge.\textsuperscript{203} By wittily combining antithetical thoughts, the fragments would amount to “a self-presentation of the idea as such,” and would offer a solution to the question of how something achieves presentation for the first time (as opposed to being merely represented).\textsuperscript{204} However, as we have seen, Gasché’s analysis runs amok as he argues that only by understanding the fragments as presentations of the Kantian Idea can one understand them at

\textsuperscript{203} Gasché, “Ideality in Fragmentation,” xv.

\textsuperscript{204} Gasché, “Ideality in Fragmentation,” xiv, xx.
all. As we will now demonstrate, in addition to the Absolute and the Kantian Idea, there is at least one more subject matter that is appropriate to fragmentary treatment: the ipseity of a person.

In order to understand how the fragments manage to communicate the very ipseity of a person, we must keep in mind the manner in which the fragmentary genre collapses the distinction of form and content. For in the same way that the fragments contain a theory of the fragmentary genre while simultaneously performing that theory – this, we may recall, is precisely the reason why they are considered l’absolu littéraire by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy205 – so do the fragments contain an account of individuality in the sense of ipseity while at the same time performing that account. After all, as the Athenäum-Fragmente make explicitly clear, fragmentary works ought to be understood as individuals in the same way as persons. “Sinn für Poesie oder Philosophie hat der,” we read, “für den sie ein Individuum ist” [“Whoever conceives of poetry or philosophy as individuals has a feeling for them”].206 Taken in isolation, this fragment might imply no more than that works of poetry or philosophy ought to be understood as numerically singular. On the other hand, if we turn to other fragments in the same collection for context, a fuller picture emerges.

In Athenäum §242, we see the claim that “die alte Poesie sei ein Individuum im strengsten und buchstäblichsten Sinne des Wortes” [“classical poetry is an individual in the strictest and most literal sense of the word”], for it meets and exceeds all requirements according to which we judge “solcher Phänomene, welche wir in rechtlichen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen für Personen, ja sogar für Individuen gelten müssen und gelten lassen sollen” [“such phenomena whom we consider and should consider, in our legal and social relations, to be

205 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, L’Absolu littéraire, 22, The Literary Absolute, 12.
people and yes, even individuals”]. In other words, fragmentary works of are worthy of the designations of “person” and “individual” in precisely the same way as human beings are. As such, we can begin to understand Gasché’s concise equation “fragment = system = work = individual.” After all, not only does each fragment function as an unorthodox system of juxtaposed meanings, each such system constitutes a work in and of itself, and every fragmentary work is endowed with the qualities by which we declare human beings to be individuals and persons.

A reader might here object, pointing out that the quoted fragment refers to classical poetry rather than the modern, fragmentary, genre that the Jena romantics sought to establish and with which we are concerned. The distinction, the objection may continue, can be found in Athenäum §24, which states that “Viele Werke der Alten sind Fragmente geworden. Viele Werke der Neuern sind es gleich bei der Entstehung” [“many of the works of the ancients have become fragments. Many works of the moderns are fragments as soon as they are written”]. Yet in Athenäum §22 we see that, from the point of view of hermeneutics, romantic fragments differ from fragments or ruins of ancient poems only in in the temporal direction of the reader’s reconstructive interpretation, which is progressive in modern fragments and regressive in ancient ones. Justus Fetscher is correct in pointing out that at bottom this difference means that whereas ancient ruins are the result of disintegration, romantic fragments are tendencies, or “incipient indication[s] of the future that has not yet become manifest.” But as the example of the diaskeuasts shows, from the point of view of the reader a fragment demands an inventive

211 Fetscher, “Tendency, Disintegration, Decay,” 58.
interpretation (to use Vandevenle’s terminology) regardless of whether it is a ruin or an intentionally fragmentary work. In other words, a fragment should be “ein unteilbares und lebendiges Individuum” [“an indivisible and living individual”] irrespective of the cause of its fragmentation.212

Moreover, as we have seen above, just as every person is inherently and irreducibly heterogeneous, so is every fragment inherently and irreducibly ambiguous. And if the proper cultivation of a person increases the ease with which that person can shift her intellectual commitments to and from various perspectives, so does the proper cultivation of a fragmentary work increase the variety of ways in which it can be interpreted. For “gebildet ist ein Werk, wenn es überall scharf begrenzt, innerhalb der Grenzen aber grenzenlos und unerschöpflich ist” [“a work is cultivated when it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits limitless and inexhaustible”], so that it gains versatility (Vielseitigkeit) and vision.213 We can thus understand a particular romantic fragment as performing the ipseity of a particular person (be that person real or not), so that the process of interpreting the former can serve as a tool for better understanding the latter.

We find further confirmation of this interpretation in a series of unpublished fragments written by Schlegel in 1796. While recourse to Schlegel’s private writings risks inappropriately treating hastily formulated notes as if they were carefully crafted fragments, we have good reason to believe that we can avert such a risk here. According to Manfred Frank, in late 1796 Schlegel sent two collections of fragments to Novalis as a follow up to philosophical conversations they had had in the summer of that year.214 It is reasonable to assume that

214 Frank, The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism, 194.
Schlegel considered these fragments ripe for symphilosophy – if not with the general public, then at least with Novalis, a philosopher he knew to be à la hauteur. We may thus assume that these fragments are of a high enough caliber for rigorous treatment, especially given that when Novalis returned those fragments to Schlegel, he included a note of praise.\textsuperscript{215}

In the first of these collections, we read that “Der Mensch ist allmächtig und allwissend und allgütig; nur ist der Mensch in dem Einzelnen nicht ganz sondern nur Stückweise da. Der Mensch kann nie da seyn” [“The human being is omnipotent and omniscient and all-good; only that being is not entirely in the particular, but is rather only there piecemeal. The human being can never be there”].\textsuperscript{216} That is to say, given a person’s inherent and irreducible heterogeneity, which is so expanded by cultivation that it approaches divinity, it is impossible for the person to manifest herself in her entirety at any one time. After all, the proper cultivation of a person consists of being able to adopt any aspect of her heterogeneity at will, and not of uniting her plurality into a coherent homogeneity. Therefore, just as “das Absolute selbst ist indemonstrabel [sic]” [the Absolute itself is indemonstrable”] and ultimately characterized by undiscoverability (Nichterkennbarkeit), so in the final analysis is the person.\textsuperscript{217} Given these similar epistemic challenges, it is not surprising to see the fragments themselves recommending a fragmentary genre in order to convey who a person is or was.

The fragmentary genre in question is the novel, and it is important to realize that, according to the romantic fragments themselves, the novel was to be the fragmentary work \textit{par excellence}. As Peter Firchow notes, Schlegel’s creation of the adjective “romantisch” was a clear and intentional reference to the French word “roman,” for Schlegel held the novel to be “the

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\textsuperscript{215} Frank, \textit{The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism}, 194.
\textsuperscript{217} Schlegel, “Beilage I,” KFSA XVIII, 511, §64; 512 §71. Translations my own.
\end{flushleft}
most perfect expression of romantic art.” And indeed, in the *Athenäum* fragments we read that “die chemische Natur des Romans, der Kritik, des Witzes [...] leuchtet von selbst ein” [“the chemical nature of the novel, criticism, wit [...] is self-evident”]. If we recall Chaouli’s insight that chemistry serves as an analogy for the fragment’s unpredictable combinatory nature, we here see a recognition that novels combine an uncontrollable multiplicity of meanings in the same way that fragments do. Furthermore *Athenäum* §111 tells us that “die Lehren welche ein Roman geben will, müssen solche sein, die sich nur im Ganzen mitteilen, nicht einzeln beweisen, und durch Zergliederung erschöpfen lassen” [“the teachings that a novel hopes to instill must be of the sort that can be communicated only as wholes, not demonstrated singly, and not exhaustible by analysis”]. After all, the fragment explains, if the subject matter lent itself to analysis and piecemeal demonstration, a non-fragmentary rhetorical form would be preferable. As we have seen in the essay *Über die Unverständlichkeit*, a synthetic and fragmentary genre is only suitable to those subject matters that are not derivable from first principles. As such, we here see a recommendation of the novel as a vehicle for the communication of complex subject matters such as the Absolute and ipseity.

We find confirmation that novels can communicate the *ipseity* of a person in *Kritische Fragmente* §78, where we read that “mancher der vortrefflichsten Romane ist ein Kompendium, eine Enzyklopädie [sic] des ganzen geistigen Lebens eines genialischen Individuums” [“many of the very best novels are compendia, encyclopedias of the whole spiritual life of a brilliant individual”]. In addition, as the fragment goes on to explain, every person who is cultivated or

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in the process of being cultivated (a category which in the final analysis includes all people – see note 187 above), “enthält [...] in seinem innern einen Roman” [“contains a novel within himself”]. This is not to say that every person is capable of writing a novel, but rather that a novel could be written about each person. Each person, in other words, is an appropriate subject matter for fragmentary treatment.

Interestingly, however, since the fragments state that the best novels are written about genialischen Individuums, we are left with the clear implication that novels about relatively uncultivated people would be markedly inferior as works of art. This implication is unsurprising, for if a novel’s ability to account for the heterogeneity of a person consists of a performance of that heterogeneity (through the novel’s plurality of meanings), it then follows that the complexity and fragmentary worth of the novel must precisely correspond to the complexity of the person being portrayed.

For the moment, however, it is important to note that if novels are able to convey the entire spiritual or mental (geistigen) life of a person, and if that life cannot be described in a logically coherent fashion, then we have good reason to believe that the fragment’s understanding of a geistigen Leben closely matches Roland Barthes’ and Jacques Derrida’s understandings of ipseity to which we alluded in the previous chapter. After all, if Barthes claims that the Winter Garden photograph contained “tous les prédicats possibles” which could be attributed to his mother, if expressing them would require “une suite infinie d'adjectives,” and if Derrida argues by analogy to the fragmentary sentence “nous nous devons à la mort” that paying one’s debt towards a deceased person would require “des siècles de livres,” then it is clear that both consider ipseity to be irreducibly heterogeneous and inadequate to reasoning from first

Indeed, Barthes’ understanding of ipseity becomes clear in *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*, and it does so in two ways. The first is performative, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* is a fragmentary work, a book composed of fragments arranged in “un ordre absolument insignifiant” [“an absolutely insignificant order”]: the arbitrary alphabetical order of each fragment’s title. The meaninglessness of the fragment’s ordering results from the overt aim of the book to function as a structural portrait of the amorous subject, and is dictated by the guiding principle: “qu’il ne fallait pas réduire l’amoureux à un simple sujet symptomal, mais plutôt faire entendre ce qu’il y a dans sa voix d’inactuel, c’est-à-dire d’intraitable” [“that the lover is not to be reduced to a simple symptomal subject, but rather that we hear in his voice what is ‘unreal,’ i.e. intractable”]. In other words, Barthes’ book aims, in true Romantic fashion, to perform the ipseity of a (unnamed) subject in love. Whether that work succeeds in achieving its goal, given that it aims to be a purely structural portrait, is a question we cannot explore at present. For us, it suffices to note that Barthes sought to perform the ipseity of a person, and deliberately chose a fragmentary genre for the task.

The second way in which *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* confirms that Barthes’ understanding of ipseity closely matches Schlegel’s understanding of the individuality of a person lies in the explicit discussions of ipseity found in that work. Two fragments are particularly interesting here: “adorable” and “atopos.” In the first we find a discussion of the desire that the lover feels for the object of his or her affections, and we see that this desire is so

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224 Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* 110; and Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 50.
unique as to resist naming. The French word “adorable” names the desire in a brutally generic way, for “plus j’éprouve la spécialité de mon désir, moins je peux la nommer ; à la précision de la cible correspond un tremblement du nom ; le propre du désir ne peut produire qu’un impropre de l’énoncé” [“the more I experience the specialty of my desire, the less I can give it a name; to the precision of the target corresponds a wavering of the name; what is characteristic of desire, proper to desire, can produce only an impropriety of the utterance”].

The only proper way to understand adorable, in the end, is translating it into “l’ipse latin : c’est lui, c’est bien lui en personne” [“the Latin ipse: it is him, it is him alright, in person”]. The specificity of the desire is identical to the specificity of the desired person, and can only be defined to the extent that we can define the person desired.

Yet, as we read in the “atopos” fragment, the object of my desire is ἄτοπος – unclassifiable, utterly resistant to any stereotype – for “atopique, l’autre fait trembler le langage : on ne peut parler de lui, sur lui ; tout attribut est faux, douloureux, gaffeur, gênant : l’autre est inqualifiable” [“the other makes language indecisive: one cannot speak of the other, about the other; every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: the other is unqualifiable”]. That is to say that a person, according to Barthes, cannot be simply named or described; she cannot be understood merely with reference to first principles. To properly speak the other – not to speak of or about her, but to speak her very ipseity – one requires more than conventional language-use can provide. One must subvert language, force it to resist a reduction to single meanings or principles. That is to say, one must speak in fragments.

230 Barthes, Fragments d’un discours amoureux, 44. A Lover’s Discourse, 34-5. Emphasis in the original.
Given the similarities between Barthes’, Derrida’s, and Schlegel’s understandings of ipseity, the possibility of the photographic portrait succeeding in communicating ipseity because it functions as a romantic fragment quickly suggests itself. As Kritische Fragmente §78 states, all works which manage to convey the intellectual life of a person “bekommen dadurch einen Anstrich vom Roman” [“thereby take on a novelistic hue”].\(^\text{231}\) Therefore, if photographic portraits are able to perform (rather than merely describe) such a mental life, we have good reason to think of them as novelistic, and therefore as fragmentary.

We find partial support for this conclusion in Kohei Kuwada’s argument, referred to in note 86 above, that “La photographie équivaut pour Barthes au «potin» ou au «roman».”\(^\text{232}\) For Barthes, Kuwada argues, both the gossip (potin) and the novel are ultimately ways of speaking the very being of a person (i.e. performing their being with speech), but gossip risks reducing the person in question to a series of generalizations.\(^\text{233}\) As we have just seen, in Fragments d’un discours amoureux, Barthes came to distrust any language that could risk such reduction, and adopts a fragmentary style characterized by precisely the most important characteristics of the romantic fragment as proposed by Schlegel. In fact, as Kuwada notes, Barthes does so precisely in order to speak of a person portrayed in a photograph: “l’auteur de La Chambre claire décide, comme montre le manuscrit, de s’engager [...] de parler de quelqu’un qui est photographié en recourant au pouvoir généralisant du langage” [“the author of Camera Lucida decides, as the manuscript shows, to begin speaking of someone who was photographed by resorting to the generalizing power of language”] which is to say the power of fragmentary language.\(^\text{234}\) Kuwada

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\(^\text{233}\) Kuwada, “Du Fragment au roman: la photographie” 132.

speaks of this as Barthes’ “avancement du fragment au roman” [“advance from the fragment to the novel”], but as we understand the novel itself as a type of fragment we may instead understand this as a translation from one type of fragment to another.235

In other words, if Barthes is able to detect the entirety of his mother’s being in the Winter Garden photograph, this already indicates that the photograph is a fragmentary work. If, in addition, Barthes sees in that photograph the material from which to write a novel that speaks (or performs) his mother’s ipseity, then we may understand the writing of that novel as the fragmentary interpretation of another fragment. As we have seen in the previous chapter, at first Barthes hesitated to simply write about his mother, “par peur de faire de la littérature.”236 Yet as Kuwada shows us, the first manuscript of La Chambre Claire consisted precisely of such a biographical attempt, but an attempt notable due to its reliance on the Winter Garden photograph for inspiration. That first version of La Chambre Claire “raconte en effet, à travers une photographie du Jardin d’hiver, une histoire de sa mère, de son amour pour elle et de ses souffrances liées à sa disparition” [“in fact tells us, through a photograph of the Winter Garden, a story of his mother, of his love for her, and of his suffering due to her disappearance”].237

It is remarkable that Barthes’ intention in the first draft of La Chambre Claire is to do precisely what Derrida prescribes in Demeure, Athènes as the proper repayment of one’s debt towards the dead. That prescription, we may recall, consists of bearing witness to the unique individuality of the deceased. In the case of the fragment “Nous nous devons à la mort,” which Derrida used as an analogue for a person, this individuality consisted of the particular

236 Barthes. Journal de deuil, 31 octobre, Mourning Diary, 23.
heterogeneity, the “modalité pragmatique,” of the sentence.\textsuperscript{238} As we have seen in our reading of the last fragment of Novalis’ \textit{Blüthenstaub}, the precise combination of meanings derivable from a fragment – its particular heterogeneity – constitutes the very uniqueness of that work (see note 199 above). The implication of Derrida’s analogy is that in order to bear witness to the uniqueness of a person, one must account for that person in her entirety, which in turn requires accounting for her in her complex heterogeneity. More so than his claims that \textit{Winter Garden} accomplished the impossible task of communicating his mother’s essence as a whole, the fact that Barthes believed he could undertake the task of repaying his debt of remembrance towards his mother solely with the assistance of that photograph suggests that it indeed performed his mother’s ipseity.

Furthermore, Barthes’ failed attempt to write a novel that bore witness to his mother illustrates the very value of photographs such as \textit{Winter Garden}. Kuwada calls attention to Barthes’ admission, in the notes of his seminar entitled \textit{La Préparation du roman}, of his nagging desire to write a novel and his ultimate failure to do so: \textit{“je puis avoir le désir tenace de faire un roman […] et puis constater que je n’y arrive pas”} [“I can have the tenacious desire to write a novel […] only to realize that I’m incapable of doing so”].\textsuperscript{239} Barthes attributes such a failure to his lack of storytelling ability, but if we understand his novel as itself an attempt to interpret a fragmentary work (the photograph) it then becomes clear that Barthes’ failure was due to the nature of the fragment itself.\textsuperscript{240} After all, as we have seen above, the uncontrollable multiplications of meanings of fragments preclude its readers (or viewers) from ever being able to declare they completely understand the work. As Vandevelde puts it, “there is no final stage

\textsuperscript{238} Derrida. \textit{Demeure, Athènes}, 55.
\textsuperscript{239} Barthes, \textit{La Préparation du Roman}, 264, \textit{The Preparation of the Novel}, 197.
\textsuperscript{240} Barthes, \textit{La Préparation du Roman}, 264, \textit{The Preparation of the Novel}, 197.
that can be reached, in which we could think that now we have understood the work or that we do not understand.”

When discussing subject matters such as *ipseity*, the impossibility of reaching a final interpretation should be understood as a strength rather than a weakness of a work. In his attempt to interpret *Winter Garden* as a novel, Barthes failed not because of any weaknesses as a storyteller, but because he was unable to navigate the complex jumble of meanings of the photograph and produce an equally complex novel. After all, unless he succeeded in creating a work that was itself a fragment that precisely matched the juxtaposition of meanings contained by the portrait, any story or description he offered would fail to account for the uniqueness of his mother or of her portrait.

Paradoxically, however, Barthes’ failures highlights an advantage of a successful fragmentary portrait such as *Winter Garden*. By reminding the author of a biography that his work fails to communicate and/or perform the identity of the person portrayed, a fragmentary portrait keeps the memory of the person alive. After all, a principal characteristic of a fragmentary work is its ability to deny interpretive closure while simultaneously promoting the continuation of the interpretive process. A portrait such as *Winter Garden* reminds its viewers that there is always more to the portrayed person than one can see at any one moment, and prompts the viewers to contemplate the image and look for more. It is worth recalling that only after intense contemplation Barthes was able to detect his mother in her portrait, and only after immersing himself in the portrait of Karl Dauthendey and Miss Friedrich did Benjamin feel the full effects of the image.

That is to say, the power of a fragmentary portrait does not consist in reproducing a

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person’s physical appearance (something every passport photo can do), but rather in revealing, through a belabored and unending interpretive process, the ipseity of the person.

Yet here our argument runs into a problem: in attempting to argue that the photographic portraits which puzzled and enthralled Barthes and Benjamin managed to perform the ipseity of the portrayed persons, we have in fact argued that fragmentary works are capable of such a feat, and that some such works are images. We have not, however, demonstrated any superiority of photographic portraits over their drawn or painted counterparts, as we have set out to do in this dissertation. Indeed, an argument could be made that the “spirit of Rembrandt” which Eastlake detected in those early photographs of Free Church ministers consisted in their ability to convey something of the ipseity of those ministers in much the same way that Rembrandt’s paintings convey something about their subjects. In order to decide whether photographic portraits hold any superiority in the performance and communication of ipseity, we need to examine that which sets photography apart from other visual works of art: the question of photographic realism. The following chapter will thus focus on whether photography holds any privileged relationship to the visible world it depicts, and whether such a relationship would affect the photographs performance of ipseity.
4. The Hermeneutics of Realism

“[La photographie] agit sur nous en tant que phénomène « naturel », comme une fleur ou un cristal de neige dont la beauté est inséparable des origines végétales ou telluriques.”

[“[Photography] affects us like a ‘natural’ phenomenon, like a flower or a snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from their vegetable or telluric origins.”]

André Bazin 243

In the preceding chapters we’ve shown that, since shortly after the invention of photography, some photographic portraits have been felt to make a peculiarly strong claim on their viewers. As early as 1857, Lady Elizabeth Eastlake noted the peculiar power and appeal of some anonymous photographic portraits of Free Church ministers, and noted that some other photographic portraits contained a “strength of identity” so far beyond the reach of other kinds of portraiture that non-photographic art-forms did not even seek it.244 A few decades later, Eastlake’s observations on the powers of those portraits were echoed by Walter Benjamin, who felt an “unruly demand” (ungebärdig verlangend) to identify and name the women portrayed in a series of portraits by David Octavius Hill.245 Yet neither Benjamin nor Eastlake gave us the means to understand this peculiar power of photographic portraits, and it was not until Roland Barthes found a photograph which seemed to capture the essence of who his mother had been that an explanation of this peculiarity of photography began to take shape.

As a result of our analysis of Barthes’ discussions of that portrait of his mother, we

244 Eastlake. “Photography” 65.
proposed that some photographic portraits can indeed fully communicate the *ipseity* of a person, so long as that portrait functions as a fragment in the sense proposed by Friedrich Schlegel. By suggesting myriad (often conflicting) narratives about the person in question, and by preventing the viewer from privileging any one of these narratives over the others, the fragmentary photographic portrait is able to both communicate and perform the inherently and irreducibly heterogeneous *ipseity* of the portrayed person.

However, if the power to communicate ipseity is fully explainable through the hermeneutics of the fragment, then that power cannot be said to be peculiar to photography. After all, any fragmentary work (whether textual, musical, or plastic) is in principle capable of communicating irreducibly complex subject matters such as *ipseity*. If photographic portraits do indeed have “a strength of identity which art does not even seek,” to borrow Eastlake’s phrase, then photography must be shown to have some peculiar feature which directly impacts its ability to communicate the *ipseity* of the portrayed person.246

In this chapter we will propose that, while fragmentary works of art in any medium can, in fact, communicate the *ipseity* of a person, fragmentary photographic portraits can do so in a particularly forceful way due to the way in which beliefs about the photograph’s creation affect the interpretive process. From its inception, the art of photography has been thought by many to have a peculiar connection to reality, despite the various and obvious ways in which photographs can be misleading. Indeed, the question of whether photographs have an intrinsic connection to reality, as well as what the precise nature of that connection may be, remains the subject of much controversy. Thankfully, however, we do not need to prove that photographic realism actually holds in order to demonstrate that the photographic portrait has a privileged ability to

246 Eastlake, “Photography” 65.
communicate *ipseity*.

Rather, we only need to show that photographic realism is believed to hold by viewers in order to argue that this belief about photography has important effects of the interpretation of photographic works. After all, irrespective of whether the belief in the veracity of photographs is well-founded, the widespread existence of such a belief with regards to photographic images (and the absence of a corresponding belief with regards to other forms of portraiture) suffices to prove that the hermeneutics of a fragmentary photographic portrait differs significantly from that of other fragmentary portraits. And as we are examining claims by Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes, we need only to show that these thinkers indeed believed that some version of photographic realism holds.

That Barthes subscribed to a theory of photographic realism has been shown above (see note 41), but the same has yet to be demonstrated about Eastlake and Benjamin. As such, in section 4.1, we will examine a feature which these philosophers found to be among the most peculiar to photographic portraits – the unintentional inclusion of meaningful details – and we will argue that this amounts to a belief in photographic realism. Then, in section 4.2, we will argue that the beliefs in photographic realism detected in the abovementioned philosophers can be best explained by Kendall Walton’s theory of photography as a transparent medium. Then, in section 4.3, we will argue, with the help of Barbara Savedoff, that beliefs about photographic realism profoundly alter the way in which we interpret photographic images, creating novel ways for wit and irony to arise in the work. Moreover, we will see that by providing evidence that the portrayed person in fact existed, photographic portraits do in fact make an unruly claim regarding the uniqueness of the portrayed person with an urgency that no painted portrait can match. Finally, in section 4.4, we will examine a fragmentary photographic portrait in order to
confirm our findings.

But first, and in order understand how Benjamin’s and Eastlake’s fascination with details amounts to a belief in photographic realism, it is helpful to turn our focus to some of the earliest examinations of the photographic medium, by one of its inventors.

4.1. Details, Details: Appeals to Realism in Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes

The belief that photographic images are in some way more reliable and accurate than their drawn or painted counterparts is as old as the medium itself. In 1844, William Henry Fox Talbot published *The Pencil of Nature*, and explained that the images found therein “have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone, and without the aid of any one acquainted with the art of drawing.” Of course, the claim that the images were formed completely without human intervention is an exaggeration, as the photographer makes important decisions regarding framing, exposure, angle, as well as decisions about development and printing. Nevertheless, it is important to see Talbot’s point here: photographic images seem to result more directly from the reactions of light and chemicals than from the skill and will of an artist.

Because the practice of photography consists largely of chemical and optical processes, photographic plates “differ in all respects, and as widely as possible, *in their origin*, from [drawn or etched] plates of the ordinary kind.” The italicized qualifier is critical to Talbot’s argument, as the key peculiarity of photographs lies not in their appearance, but in their method of production. Talbot’s claim is not that photographs look particularly different from paintings or drawings (even if he later claims that they are more detailed), but that they are made in a

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significantly different way. Photographic images, Talbot explains, “are impressed by Nature's hand.”249 Talbot had made a similarly strong claim about the origin of photograms five years earlier, in an article he helpfully titled “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the Process by which Natural Objects may be Made to Delineate Themselves Without the Aid of the Artist’s Pencil.” Regardless of whether the creator of the photographic image is thought to be nature or the photographed object itself, the implied consequence is that the photographer is seen to have little influence on the resulting work, giving the photograph a freedom from bias (and therefore a claim to truthfulness) that handmade images cannot have. As such, even if Talbot did not explicitly formulate and defend a theory of photographic realism, he certainly opened the door for such a belief.

And if Talbot opened the door for a belief in photographic realism, Eastlake walked through it. Eastlake’s 1857 article refers to the Sun as the creator of photographic images, who “concentrates his gaze” to create images when Daguerre’s or Talbot’s techniques are used, but who, when the faster collodion emulsion is used, “literally does no more than wink his eye, tracing in that moment, with a detail and precision beyond all human power, […] the most fleeting smile of the babe, and the most vehement action of the man.”250 Such anthropomorphizing of the Sun highlights the diminished role of the photographer, and leads Eastlake to declare that photography cannot earn the title of “art” because it lacks sufficient human intervention.251 In so doing, Eastlake follows Talbot’s lead in exaggerating the lack of human intervention in the photographic process, but Eastlake goes further than Talbot in drawing the conclusion that photography has an inherent inclination towards veracity. Indeed, Eastlake

250 Eastlake, “Photography” 52.
251 Eastlake, “Photography” 66.
claims that photographs are reliable and unerring witnesses, and that what they depict ought to be understood as facts:

“Photography […] is the sworn witness of everything presented to her view. What are her unerring records in the service of mechanics, engineering, geology, and natural history, but facts of the most sterling and stubborn kind? […] What are her representations of the bed of the ocean, and the surface of the moon […] but facts which are neither the province of art nor of description, but of that new form of communication between man and man – neither letter, message, nor picture – which now fills the space between them?”

In other words, Eastlake here formulates a version of photographic realism which sees the photographic image as originating not from the artist’s mind, but from impersonal nature, and which therefore earns the status of incontrovertible fact.

Moreover, Eastlake seemingly locates the peculiarity of photographic portraits precisely in photography’s inherent veracity. Speaking of the mass of photographic portraits which began to flood England at the time, Eastlake asks: “What indeed are nine-tenths of those facial maps called photographic portraits, but accurate landmarks and measurements for loving eyes and memories to deck with beauty and animate with expression, in perfect certainty, that the ground-plan is founded upon fact?”

It is not difficult to detect Eastlake’s distaste for such “facial maps,” those countless photographs which fail to live up to the “spirit of Rembrandt” which she had identified in the early portraits of Free Church Ministers. Yet she admits that even such inferior portraits have their usefulness, for the likenesses they portray are given with a powerful certainty. Such inferior portraits may not match the power of Rembrandt’s masterpieces but, she thinks, they can depict the portrayed person with unerring accuracy. As we’ll see below, this belief in photography’s accuracy of depiction is ultimately unfounded, but the important thing to

252 Eastlake, “Photography” 65.
note is that Eastlake appeals to a brand of photographic realism – the realism of depiction – as the redeeming feature of the majority of photographic portraits. But what of the remainder – that minority of portraits in which something remarkable can be detected?

As we have seen above (see note 20), Eastlake locates the strength of superior photographic portraits in the presence of extraneous details in the images: “the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other.” This insight is later echoed by Walter Benjamin, who locates the strength of portraits in unintended details which infuse the image with reality (see note 26 above), as well as by Roland Barthes, who initially attributes the power of the Winter Garden photo to a punctum, or a small detail that pierces the viewer (see note 57 above). Eastlake’s, Benjamin’s, and Barthes’ attention to minor and unintended details is noteworthy, for they echo an observation made by Talbot in The Pencil of Nature. There he notes that “one advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature.” In other words, Talbot identifies in photography a propensity for the inclusion of minute details which defy painters and other artists, and sees this as a distinguishing feature of the medium. Indeed, the above quote comes as the caption to The Haystack, a photograph depicting a roll of hay so tall that one can easily mistake it for a cottage at first glance. Seen in juxtaposition with The Haystack, Talbot’s statement amounts to a challenge to painters and other artists, and it might as well have read “See how easily I can show each needle of hay in this stack, each blade of grass on the ground?”

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The problem, of course, is that even if one advantage of photography is its penchant for the depiction of minute details, there is nothing stopping a patient and meticulous painter from including just as much detail in her works. Indeed, draftsmen and painters were eager to rise to Talbot’s challenge, and by the mid-twentieth century an entire artistic movement defined by the quest to ever-increasing detail (variously labeled as Super-Realism, Hyper-Realism, or, tellingly, Photo-Realism) had come to existence. One need only look at paintings such as *Jone’s Diner*, by Ricard Estes, in order to see that the achievements touted by Talbot have been fully matched by painters.256 And if a reader here objects, and points out that Estes and others (such as Chuck Close) are only able to include such minute details in their works because their paintings are based on photographs which first capture those same details,257 then one need only turn to M. C. Escher’s *Still Life with Spherical Mirror*, or his *Hand with Reflecting Sphere*, for examples of meticulously detailed images made without the aid of photography.258 As Kendall Walton points out, the painter’s difficulty with reproducing perspective, shading, or detail with the proficiency associated with photographs is not unsurmountable. “More attention to details, more skill with the brush, [and] a better grasp of the ‘rules of perspective’” are all that a painter needs to match or surpass photography’s accuracy of depiction.259

If, by focusing on small details of the image, Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes indeed found something peculiar to photographs, then that peculiarity lies in something other than the

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256 Estes, Richard. *Jone’s Diner*. Oil on Canvas, 36.5 x 48 inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery. [http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/estes/art/05.cfm](http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/estes/art/05.cfm).


mere quality and quantity of detail depicted. Eastlake gives us a hint of what that something may be when she identifies what she considers to be, from the standpoint of art, a shortcoming of the photographic medium: it lacks “the power of selection and rejection.”

In other words, a photographer cannot pick and choose which details to include or exclude, and how carefully to depict each one.

Strictly speaking, of course, this is incorrect, since the photographer can select and reject details by changing the aperture of the lens, and thus expand or contract the depth of field, and can even tilt the lens (and therefore tilt the focal plane) relative to the film surface. Moreover, a photographer can choose a lens with a high degree of astigmatism (or other optical aberrations), which results in better rendered details in the center of the image, and less well rendered (or outright blurry) areas in the periphery.

Nevertheless, there is truth in Eastlake’s observation: when a photograph is made, anything that lies in the field of view of the lens, and which lies at the focal plane, is captured with the same amount of detail. In a photographic portrait where the person’s face lies entirely in the effective focus range, for instance, one cannot choose to carefully render the eyes but not the wrinkles around them: either both are depicted carefully, or neither is. But that’s not all: details are captured regardless of whether the photographer intended them to, or whether she was even aware of such details in the first place. Talbot himself had noted this in The Pencil of Nature, in the caption to Queens College, Oxford:

“It frequently happens, moreover—and this is one of the charms of photography—

261 Strictly speaking, within the field of acceptable focus, which is centered in the focal plane but expands in depth as the aperture of the lens becomes smaller.
262 One may here object and point out that such choices can indeed be made after the photograph is developed, by airbrushing or using an equivalent digital technique. But, as we will see below, such alterations are made through non-photographic means, and an image that has undergone manipulations of this kind are no longer photographs in the strict sense of the term.
that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it—unconsciously recorded—the hour of the day at which the view was taken.”

The indiscriminate, and often unconscious, way with which photography renders details not only accounts for the inclusion of “the very shoes of the one” and “the inseparable toy of the other”—details which a painter may or may not think to include—but it also accounts for part of what was so peculiar about the portraits of the Free Church Ministers which first caught Eastlake’s attention. After all, the notable thing about such portraits was that they embodied the spirit of Rembrandt despite the fact that they “showed no attempt to idealise [sic] or soften the harshnesses and accidents of a rather rugged style of physiognomy.” That is to say, unflattering details which a painter might have omitted are given the same treatment as everything else in the photograph.

Likewise, this inability to select or delete details accounts for the presence of Miss Friedrich’s wandering gaze in her portrait with Karl Dauthendey, which so captivated Walter Benjamin. The importance of that detail for Benjamin, we will recall, was that it “mit dem Wirklichkeit den Bildcharakter gleichsam durchgesengt hat” [“has seared the character of the image with reality”]. My argument here is that the presence of such a detail can only infuse the portrait with reality by serving as evidence that the image is, in fact, a photograph, and that it is therefore imbued with a privileged connection to reality. In other words, Eastlake’s and Benjamin’s appeal to the presence of certain details in their attempts to understand the power of certain photographic portraits can be best understood as an appeal to a form of photographic

265 Eastlake, “Photography,” 40.
realism. But this is not the realism of depiction, which claims that photographs accurately depict the look of things, but rather a realism characterized by an inability to add or delete things from images, a realism which Kendall Walton discusses under the rubric of “transparency.”

4.2. Seeing Through Photographs: Realism According to Walton

Kendall Walton’s “Transparent Pictures” begins with a pertinent observation: generally speaking, photographic images affect us in a markedly different way than painted or drawn images.267 As he points out, photographs are useful for blackmail in ways that paintings are not (“a sketch of Mr. X in bed with Mrs. Y – even a full color oil painting – would cause little consternation”); photographs of unwitting subjects are seen as invasions of privacy (whereas paintings and drawings are typically not); courts of law tend to admit photographs as evidence (but tend not to admit paintings and sketches); and images of war and disaster affect viewers quite differently depending on whether they are understood to be drawn or photographed.268 Yet the peculiarity of photographic images is not confined to its strictly documentary uses, and Walton notes that “photographic pornography is more potent than the painted variety.”269 But, the question immediately presents itself, what is the nature (and the origin) of this difference?

As we have seen above, the difference cannot consist simply of better shading, or better rendering of details, or even better employment of perspective, since paintings and drawings can (and often do) match or surpass photographs in those regards. In other words, as Talbot had already noted, the peculiarity of photographic images does not lie in the way they look – although such a “photographic” look may influence whether an image is identified as a photograph by its viewers – and Walton explicitly follows André Bazin in turning to the

Bazin distinguishes the comparatively objective nature of photography from the irreducibly subjective nature of painting and other arts, and traces this difference to the scientific and mechanical methods of its production. He argues that “la personnalité du photographe n’entre en jeu que par le choix, l’orientation, la pédagogie du phénomène ; si visible qu’elle soit dans l’œuvre finale, elle n’y figure pas au même titre que celle du peintre” [“the personality of the photographer only comes into play through the choice of, orientation towards, and pedagogy of the phenomenon being photographed; if it is visible in the final work, it is not there to the same extent as that of a painter”].

To be sure, the photographer has the power to present the phenomenon being photographed in a variety of different ways and with a variety of different agendas, and this power justifies claims that photographs can be works of art rather than mere mechanical copies. But “l’objectivité de la photographie lui confère une puissance de crédibilité absente de toute œuvre picturale ” [“the objectivity (or lens-like nature) nature of photography confers on it a power of credibility which is absent from all other pictorial works”]. It is important to note Bazin’s pun here, for the French “objectif” translates both “objective” and “lens.” As such, “l’objectivité de la photographie” names both the objectivity of the photographic medium and it’s source: the optical apparatus without which the photograph cannot be made.

Tying the “objectivity” of photography to the optical apparatus of the lens may strike the

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272 Of course, the English term “objective” can also be used as a synonym for “lens,” but the pun is much stronger in French, for a “camera lens” is always a “objectif photographique,” and never a “lentille” – the latter naming only simple lenses, typically called “elements” in English, and not the more complex combination of such lenses found in telescopes and cameras.
reader as odd, since doing so overlooks the photographic medium (i.e. the film or digital sensor) entirely. And although it is true that the photographic medium must be taken into account in any serious consideration of photographic realism, it is important to see why Bazin placed such an emphasis on the lens. As the photographer Jerry Thompson would later argue, the photographic image is caused solely by the lens – all that the photographic medium does is fix that image into a stable picture: “lenses project images – visual representations of the actual light reflected from the actual things of which the lens has an unobstructed view.”273 The image projected by the camera lens is thus inherently honest in an important way: it can no more show things that are not there than it can erase the things of which it has an unrestricted view.

Bazin compares photography to the practice of making death masks, for although there is room for skill and decision making on the part of the craftsman, the resulting mask is largely dependent on the face from which it is molded. And “en ce sens on pouvait considérer la photographie comme un moulage, une prise d’empreinte de l’objet par le truchement de la lumière” [“in this sense one might consider photography as a molding, the taking of an impression of an object by means of light”].274 By viewing the photograph as a mold of sorts, the nature of its realism comes into clearer view: it is not a matter of accurately reproducing details, though such accuracy often follows as a side effect. Rather, the important thing is that, just as a death mask (even a badly formed one) cannot be made without a face from which it is molded, so the photograph cannot be made without something standing before the lens. That is to say, although details may be captured with various degrees of accuracy, they can only be present in the cast if they were likewise present in the original.

273 Thompson, Truth and Photography, 3.
274 Bazin, “L’Ontologie de L’Image Photographique” 12, fn. 1, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” 244, fn. 3. Translation modified.
As Walton puts it, “photographs are counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene even if the beliefs (and other intentional attitudes) of the photographer are held fixed.”

In other words, despite the various ways in which the photographer’s beliefs, choices, and agenda may affect the appearance of final product, what a photograph shows depends primarily on what lies before the lens. By adjusting his point of view, the contrast of the image, and by timing his photograph just so, a photographer might make a person look menacing, or comical, or terrified, when in fact that person would not have come across as such to someone looking at them with the naked eye. But if the photograph does indeed make the person look menacing, then it is only by subtly altering the presentation of what was there, before the lens, and not by inventing things that were not actually there (or deleting things that were).

This dependence of the photograph on what was there before the lens accounts for the importance which Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes attached to extraneous details in the image: the presence of such details serves as evidence, even if not irrefutable, that the image is indeed a photograph: an optical mold of the person portrayed. Bazin’s conclusion is particularly telling: “quelles que soient les objections de notre esprit critique nous sommes obligés de croire à l’existence de l’objet représenté, effectivement re-présenté, c’est-à-dire rendu présent dans le temps et dans l’espace” [“whatever the objections from our critical spirit may be, we are forced to believe in the existence of the represented object, effectively re-presented, that is to say, made present in time and space”].

And although Bazin commits an important equivocation here, Walton will ultimately agree with him.

The equivocation committed by Bazin is one which Patrick Maynard denounces as

275 Walton, “Transparent Images,” 100.
scandalous, and laments that it committed by most theoretical discussions of photography: the “failure to develop a simple terminological distinction between a photograph of something and a photographic depiction of something.” Bazin’s confusion is understandable, of course, since most photographs do depict the same phenomenon which was photographed. Susan Sontag commits the same mistake when she phrases the belief in photographic realism as a “presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.” But the fact that a photograph is counterfactually dependent on something does not mean that it will actually be a pictorial representation of that thing. In other words, the photograph’s transparency means that we actually see the photographed phenomenon through it, but it does not ensure that we will correctly interpret that phenomenon – that we will see it as the phenomenon it actually was.

As such, by distinguishing between what a photograph depicts and what it is a photograph of, Maynard allows us to easily deal with a common objection to photographic realism: that many photographs depict events that never happened. If we stick with Bazin’s mold analogy, then we can see that every photograph is an impression of something, even if the resulting work represents something other than the something which was photographed. To qualify as a photograph, the image must have resulted from focused (or otherwise concentrated) light striking and altering a prepared surface (be it film or an electronic sensor). This light must have either been emitted by or reflected from something, but the thing that emitted or

277 Maynard. The Engine of Visualization, 114.
279 Maynard defines “photography” as a “branching family of technologies, with different uses, whose common stem is simply the physical marking of surfaces through the agency of light and similar radiations,” and in so doing includes photograms and x-rays. I use “photography” in a narrower sense, referring to the practice of creating images with the aid of a camera, for the sake of clarity. See Maynard, The Engine of Visualization, 3.
reflected the light does not need to be depicted (or represented) in the image – even if it will inevitably be seen through it. Julia Margaret Cameron’s *Vivien and Merlin*, for instance, is a photographic depiction of the Lady of the Lake and a spellbound wizard Merlin, but it is actually a photograph of Cameron’s husband and an unidentified model wearing costumes in a decorated set.280

Maynard’s distinction allows us to correct Bazin’s argument in an important way: Cameron’s photograph does not force us to believe in the existence of Vivien or of Merlin (who are represented in the image) but it does lead us, with considerable force, to believe in the (past) existence of the man and woman who stood for that photograph. As Walton argues, “a photograph is always a photograph of something that actually exists,” regardless of what the photograph in fact depicts.281

Given that photographs are always photographs of something, Walton makes a bold proposal: “Photographs are transparent. We see the world through them.”282 Rather than understanding photographs merely (or even primarily) as images, Walton argues that we should understand them as technological aids to vision.283 As such an aid, a photograph functions in a similar way to other optical devices. After all, “no one will deny that we see [the world] through eyeglasses, mirrors, and telescopes.”284 Crucial to this argument is Walton’s causal definition of “seeing”: “to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused, in a certain manner, by what is seen.”285 Photographs, after all, are counterfactually dependent on the phenomena

280 Cameron, Julia Margaret. *Vivien and Merlin*. Albumen silver print from glass negative. 30.4 x 25.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/52.524.3.5/](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/52.524.3.5/).
284 Walton, “Transparent Images,” 86.
photographed – for if that particular object had not been in front of the lens, its image would not be formed in the photograph – just as the view from a pair of binoculars is dependent on the phenomena viewed.

Problematically, however, Walton specifies that “part of what it is to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused in a purely mechanical manner.” An uncharitable reader could here point out that much of what happens after light reaches the human retina is not mechanical in nature – for the impulses which are sent to the visual cortex are electrical, not mechanical – and could furthermore point out that a much more sophisticated theory of perception is needed if one is to offer such a bold definition of “seeing.” A charitable reader, on the other hand, might suggest that Walton is here referring to the preliminary stages of seeing which take place before light reaches the retina. His point is that, if we are to be said to truly see something, then the light rays which are emitted by (or which reflect from) that something must reach our retinas without any non-mechanical interference. Thus, to see someone though binoculars counts as truly seeing them, but seeing someone through a painting or sketch does not, for the intervention of the artists adds a non-mechanical link in the chain of causation.

Nevertheless, even such a charitable reading lands Walton in trouble, for by insisting in purely mechanical (or optical, if we are to be truly charitable) links in the chain of causation, Walton effectively argues against two of his own examples of seeing through photographic means: a security guard seeing a burglar through closed circuit television, and fans watching a sports event on live television. But here a charitable reader can again come to Walton’s rescue, for it is clear that the problem is simply terminological in nature.

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If we borrow William Mitchell’s distinction between *nonalgorithmic* and *algorithmic* images, we can easily rephrase Walton’s point in such a way that avoids the problems we have noted. Mitchell defines a nonalgorithmic image as “the product of many intentional acts,” and argues that such an image might reveal quite a bit about what the artist thought about the thing depicted, but that it cannot serve as evidence for the existence or appearance of the thing in question.\footnote{Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, 30.} An algorithmic image, on the other hand, is one “which to a large extent is automatically constructed from some sort of data about the object and which therefore involves fewer or no intentional acts.”\footnote{Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, 30.} That is to say, the ideal algorithmic image is one whose origins can be understood purely mathematically (be that mechanically, optically, chemically, or otherwise), without the unpredictable interference of a conscious being. To be sure, most photographs fall short of this ideal, given the photographer’s range of potential inputs. But if we conceive of nonalgorithmic and algorithmic images as poles of a spectrum, it becomes clear that photographs, like death masks, lie much closer to the algorithmic than the nonalgorithmic side (and that paintings and drawings lie closer to the other pole).\footnote{Mitchell, *The Reconfigured eye*, 30.}

It is easy to see that this is what Walton had in mind when specifying that purely mechanical means had to be used, for if we redefine “seeing” as “having visual experiences whose chain of causation lies in chiefly algorithmic condition,” we arrive at a concept which allows for seeing through binoculars (for the lenses bend light in a purely algorithmic manner) as well as closed circuit and live television.\footnote{At least at the time of Walton’s writing, before both the software and the computing power to manipulate live broadcasts were widely available.} The qualification “chiefly caused by” is important, for Walton takes care to note that “the manner in which things cause my visual experiences when
I see them is not one which rules out a causal role for human beings,” since people can help me see things by calling attention to them.292 If a friend points to an insect on the wall, or even just turns the light on so that the bug becomes visible, then that friend has indeed played a causal role in my seeing of the insect. However, when people show me things by pointing at them or by taking photographs of them, their causal role consists merely of enabling me to see such things on my own (so to speak) and does not constitute a significant interference in the path of the light which reflects or emanates from the thing I see.293 For while photographers may enable me to see something through their works, Walton contends, “surely that does not mean that I don’t really see them.”294 To put it another way, the key difference between a friend who sketches a bug he saw on the wall and another who points at it or photographs it is that the act of pointing or photographing allows for the light to reflect from the bug and strike my retinas with no nonalgorithmic interference, whereas the act of drawing does not. Hence, I see the bug when I’m show a photo of it, but I do not see it when I am merely shown a drawing of it.

To be sure, photographs of something often look markedly different from what that same thing looks like when seen with the naked eye. Black and white photos render a scene very differently than the way a person with color vision would experience it, telephoto and wide-angle lenses respectively compress and exaggerate perspective, most films and digital sensors exaggerate the perceived contrast of a given scene (as films and digital sensors typically have a smaller dynamic range than the human eye), and so on. But while such observations may constitute significant challenges to theories of realism of depiction, they are not problematic for a theory of transparency. As Walton argues, “seeing directly and seeing with photographic

assistance are different modes of perception. There is no reason to expect the experiences of seeing in the two ways to be similar.” After all, other aids to vision distort what is seen in very similar ways: binoculars compress the apparent distance between the various objects one sees through them, convex and concave mirrors can enlarge or diminish what is shown through them while exaggerating relative distances, sunglasses alter the contrast of a scene, and so on. Seeing through photographs, just as seeing through binoculars, might amount to an indirect form of seeing, but Walton contends that it amounts to seeing nonetheless.

Walton is careful to point out, moreover, that his argument for seeing through photographs does not preclude the possibility of being misled by a photograph. Photographs, after all, distort what they show, and such distortions may lead to misunderstandings. But such misunderstandings, even when intended by the photographer, do not preclude the viewer from actually seeing the thing she mistakes for something else. After all, “to see something through a distorting mirror is still to see it, even if we are misled about it.” The presence of distortion, in other words, does not take away transparency.

As such, if Walton is correct, a person who looks at a photograph sees the portrayed person in a way in which they wouldn’t when looking at an otherwise identical painting. Walton makes this point explicitly, in an attempt to make clear the strength of his conclusion: “my claim is that we see, quite literally, our dead relatives themselves when we look at photographs of them.” Yet for our present purposes, the question of whether Walton’s transparency thesis is correct is less important than the question of how the belief in such a thesis might affect the

hermeneutic process. The above analysis of Walton’s theory of transparency was not meant to prove that it is correct, as much as show that intelligent persons may have good reason to believe that it is correct.

Moreover, Walton’s transparency thesis is able to account for the stubbornness of photographic detail which was noted by Talbot, Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes. After all, given the largely algorithmic nature of the photographic process, the photograph will not discriminate between including different details. Everything which lies in its field of view and within the effective focus range will make an impression on the image according to the same algorithm. That is to say, light-frequencies will be captured and translated into certain tones in the same manner throughout the picture, so that any detail which emanates or reflects light within the working spectrum of the photographic medium will be “molded” into that medium, and will therefore be visible in the resulting photograph.

As such, the presence of “the very shoes of the one, the inseparable toy of the other” in a photographic portrait is important not simply because they are depicted with any degree of accuracy (the depiction, in fact, might be blurry or otherwise flawed), but because such details serve as confirmation of the algorithmic nature of the photograph. That is to say, it is not the fact that we see a competent depiction of the shoes (or of the toy) which makes the photograph notable, but the fact that we see the shoes (or the toy) themselves. Or rather, we believe that we see the shoes or the toy, if we assume that photography is a sufficiently algorithmic medium. Given the impact which Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes attributed to the details they found in the photographs they discussed, it does not take much to suggest that they in fact believed to be seeing such details, albeit it indirectly, through the photograph. In other words, they believed

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those photographs to be transparent.

That it is the belief in the transparency of the image, rather than this transparency in and of itself, that matters in the experience of photographs is readily acknowledged by Walton himself. Discussing Chuck Close’s *Big Self-Portrait*, Walton points out that once one finds out that the work is a painting, rather than a photograph, one’s experience changes dramatically. “We feel somehow less ‘in contact with’ Close when we learn that the portrayal of him is not photographic.”

It is crucial to see that what precipitates the change in experience in such a case is not a change in the picture itself, but merely a change in one’s beliefs about how the picture was made. Yet the impact that such a belief has in the experience of a photograph is not clear, and we would do well to examine the work of a philosopher who has explicitly investigated this issue. As such, we can now turn to Barbara Savedoff’s account of the implications of beliefs in photographic realism in encounters with photographic works of art, in order to see how such a belief would affect the interpretation of a fragmentary portrait.

**4.3. Barbara Savedoff and the Hermeneutics of Transparency**

Savedoff’s work is particularly pertinent to our inquiry for two reasons. First, her primary concern is not whether the thesis of photographic transparency is true or false, but rather how such a belief in realism affects the interpretation and experience of photographs. Savedoff gives Walton credit for his counterfactual defense of photographic realism, and echoes Bazin’s death-mask analogy by stating that “the photograph is like a cast in the realm of two-dimensional images.” But rather than argue that the photograph’s dependence on the existence of the

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302 Savedoff, *Transforming Images*, 42.
photographed subject is evidence that photography is indeed intrinsically tied to reality, Savedoff argues that an awareness of this mold-like quality of photographs means “that photographs are seen as transparent.”³⁰³

Second, she examines the effects of such a belief in the experience of photographs from a wide variety of genres, from journalistic and documentary photographs to surrealist and abstract photographic works of art. Her most pertinent observations concern the effects of this belief on photographic works of art, and even if she does not discuss photographic portraits in particular, her investigations of the aesthetic consequences of photographic realism are very illuminating for our present study. But in order to understand how the belief in photographic realism affects the experience of photographic works of art, we must first explain what Savedoff understands art to be.

Following Viktor Shklovsky, Savedoff understands a crucial (if not the main) function of art to be the defamiliarization of the familiar. “Photographs,” she says, “transform their subjects. They have the power to make even the most familiar objects appear strange, the most chaotic events appear structured, or the most mundane items appear burdened with meaning.”³⁰⁴ According to Shklovsky, this defamiliarization (or making strange) is important because, in our habitual perception of any given phenomenon, we tend to largely, and paradoxically, pass that phenomenon by. “If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously – automatically.”³⁰⁵ Compare, for instance, the experiences of holding a new pen for the first time with the experience of holding it after hundreds or thousands of uses. At first,

we note the size, texture, shape, and weight of the pen, and perhaps struggle with its new and awkward sense of balance. But as we become accustomed to the pen, we cease to notice most of these properties, and writing with it becomes automatic, or “second nature.” That is not to say, of course, that we do not perceive the pen when holding it for the thousandth time. By and large we do know that we are holding it, but we do not perceive the pen as fully as we did for the first time.306

It is important to note that Shklovsky is not accusing us of laziness, but merely recognizing what he takes to be a feature of human perception and of human thought in general: in order to function, we must automatize. Indeed, it would be impossible to pay full attention to every item we see, hear, touch, or smell in any given moment, as doing so would be overwhelming. So when sitting in front of a computer, for instance, one cannot simultaneously focus on (and fully see) all the notes, books, pens, and other office detritus that surrounds one’s laptop. “We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics,” as Shklovsky puts it.307

But necessary though it may be for our daily functioning, this habituation of perception carries a risk: that we may never return to seeing the thing or person (for it must be acknowledged that we often automatize our perceptions of others as well) for what, or who, it is. By bypassing our encounters with phenomena, “automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.”308 As habitual perception becomes expedited and fleeting, and as we reduce our perceptions of phenomena to generalizations, we become ever less

306 But notice how often one wonders around the house looking for a watch, or a pair of glasses, or an eating utensil without realizing that one is already wearing, or holding, that very thing!
307 Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 5.
308 Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 5.
aware of such phenomena and of our actions regarding them. If the automatization of perception is left unchecked, in other words, we end up living our lives ever more unconsciously until, finally, “life fades into nothingness.”

Given the risks of such automatization, the value of art as a device of defamiliarization becomes apparent.

Art presents us with familiar phenomena – phenomena which we have largely come to perceive automatically – in new and strange ways. “By ‘enstranging’ [or defamiliarizing] objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious.” By showing us familiar phenomena in unfamiliar ways, art challenges the generalizations we’ve made about such phenomena and forces us to slow down and encounter them as if for the first time. There are, of course, countless ways in which various art forms can help us see phenomena in new and laborious ways, but Savedoff argues that a belief in photographic realism opens unique opportunities for defamiliarization. That this is so becomes most clear if we turn to abstract photography.

This turn to abstract photography might come as a surprise, for abstraction and realism are opposing tendencies. Abstract art, after all, emphasize lines, colors, textures, and shapes while deemphasizing (or outright disguising) the things to which those lines, colors, textures, and shapes belong. Photographic realism, on the other hand, tells us that the photograph is necessarily a photograph of something, and that we can see that something through the photograph. Savedoff argues that it is precisely this tension that gives abstract photography its peculiar interest.

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309 Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 5.
310 Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 6. The edition quoted translates “остранение” (ostranenie) as “enstrangement,” but “defamiliarization” is a more common translation, and the one which Savedoff uses.
The reasons here are twofold: first, as Walton has shown, once we accept that photographs are indeed photographs of *something* which actually exists, we approach each photograph as a window to the world. Second, as Savedoff points out, “our faith in the documentary [i.e. transparent] character of the photograph is inappropriately, but irresistibly, transferred to the way things appear within the photograph.”312 The fact that a photograph documents a thing’s existence does not, of course, mean that it is guaranteed to document its appearance with any degree of accuracy – the photograph may be severely out of focus, under- or over-exposed, colors may shift during processing, wide-angle or telephoto lenses may distort perspective, and so on – but we nevertheless encounter photographs, by and large, as if that were the case. And indeed, photographs *can* reproduce appearances with high degrees of accuracy, so long as several variables are held within “normal” range: the phenomena in question is properly focused, the photographic medium captures light primarily in the visible spectrum, the lens used does not distort perspective beyond a certain limit, and the film and print are processed so as to best approximate the way the naked eye would see the scene, and so on. It is a mistake to assume that every photograph meets these criteria, but the fact that we make this assumption is not completely unreasonable. Otherwise, our insistence on including photographs on passports and other identification documents would be quite nonsensical.

Be that as it may, the important thing is that, convinced that the photograph depicts something real and that it depicts that thing’s appearance with considerable accuracy, “we feel driven to untangle any ambiguities or identify any puzzling elements that are presented.”313 Abstract photographs do not simply show us shapes and shades; they do so while proclaiming

313 Savedoff, “Documentary Authority,” 117.
“This is real!” and this proclamation compels to ask what, in fact, was photographed. Consider, for instance, Paul Strand’s *Abstraction, Twin Lakes, Connecticut*.\(^{314}\) Formally, it is a composition of wide arcs and straight lines intersecting at sharp angles, but immediately upon viewing it one begins to wonder which objects can create such lines, and how those objects could have been so arranged as to create this composition. One probably has little trouble identifying the round table-top which dominates the frame, or the shadows which account for the repeating sharp angles. But one is left wondering what could be causing those shadows, and if one identifies the fence-post on the top of the frame, one is left to wonder how the table, wall, and fence are so arranged as to create this composition.

Had the image been identified as a drawing or a painting, even a hyperrealist or “photo-realist” one, we would be much less inclined to identify what (if anything) lies behind those shapes and textures. As a photograph, however, the image shows us a familiar arrangement (a table on a porch) made strange, and it claims that this strange arrangement existed, at least when the photograph was made. From this claim, it follows that what is made strange in the photo really *is* strange, when looked at this way. “When a photograph defamiliarizes,” says Savedoff, “it is as though something is being revealed to us about our world.”\(^{315}\) But when a painting or drawing defamiliarizes, on the other hand, “we know that the transformations, equivalences, and ambiguities shown are most certainly the creation of the artist,” and are therefore more likely to see the defamiliarizations as revelatory of the artist or her worldview rather than of the world itself.\(^{316}\)


\(^{315}\) Savedoff, *Transforming Images*, 92.

\(^{316}\) Savedoff, *Transforming Images*, 85.
Perhaps one eventually solves the puzzle posed by Strand’s photograph – *the table is lying on its side!* – and notices that in doing so the impact of the photo is greatly diminished. That decrease in impact can be easily explained by Schlegel’s fragmentary hermeneutics: while the image remained a puzzle it contained wit, for it compelled the viewer to consider various interpretations of the image. But once a solution is found, the image’s wit largely disappears, and the image loses its depth. Yet we should not take that to mean that the compulsion to identify the source of the abstract shapes was misplaced, for if it were not for that compulsion, the photograph would have not had its initial wit and appeal. As Savedoff points out, “whereas with abstract painting it is often misguided to ask ‘what is this?’ (in the sense of identifying a real-world object), with photography the question always has its place,” for the photograph is necessarily a photograph of something.\(^\text{317}\) The problem lies not in our desire to identify the objects in Strand’s photograph, but in that photograph’s inability to frustrate our efforts of identification. The solution, therefore, is not a less ambiguous (i.e. less witty) photograph, but a photograph that resists disambiguation – an ironic photograph.

In fact, had Strand’s photograph contained more irony, our engagement with it would not only have lasted longer, it would have been considerably stronger from the beginning. As Savedoff points out, “the drive to identify the subject of a photograph does not disappear when confronted with hard-to-identify or abstract works; in fact, the more difficult and challenging the identification, the more we may find ourselves concentrating our efforts on it.”\(^\text{318}\) Consider Minor White’s *Hexagram (Chichi) Water over Fire*, and compare its impact with that of Strand’s

\(^{317}\) Savedoff, “Documentary Authority,” 121.

\(^{318}\) Savedoff, “Documentary Authority,” 121.
photograph.\textsuperscript{319} There are several notable differences between the images, as White’s image contains more complex shapes and more subtle tonal gradations than Strand’s. But perhaps the biggest difference lies in our inability to identify what, precisely, White aimed his camera at when making his image. Depending on where in the image one focuses, one may be inclined to say that it is the cross-section of a stone or of a tree trunk, but then one sees what seem to be ice crystals or snowflakes on at the top of the image, and is forced to abandon or revise the previous interpretations. As a puzzle of identification, White’s photograph is both witty and ironic.

And as was the case with Strand’s photograph, had this image been a painting or drawing (or had it been identified as such) it would lose much of its impact. In fact, the loss would be even greater here, for the image’s irony would likely prove overpowering. “The stronger the defamiliarization of a photo-realist painting, the more likely we are to question the correspondence of image to reality,” so that a painting which looked identical to White’s \textit{Hexagram} would probably strike a viewer as nonrepresentational, rather than abstract.\textsuperscript{320} That is to say, if White’s \textit{Hexagram} had been a painting, we would be much less inclined to see it as a depiction of anything in particular or, if we were told that it depicts ice formations atop burnt wood (to take another guess at it), we would be less likely to believe that this strange depiction is at all accurate. As a photograph, \textit{Hexagram} is compelling partly because we seek to know what part of the world could possibly look so strange. As a painting, however, we would encounter it as a purely formal (i.e. non-representational) exercise, and would have no reason to see a connection between it and the world around us. It is interesting to note that, given the belief in photography’s transparency, a photograph can never be non-representational, but at most

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\textsuperscript{319} White, Minor, \textit{Hexagram (Chichi) Water over Fire}. Gelatin-silver print, 27 x 34.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art, \url{http://www.moma.org/collection/works/47143}.
\textsuperscript{320} Savedoff, \textit{Transforming Images}, 108.
If we shift our focus back to photographic portraits, we can see that our detour into abstract photography has already helped us solve an important puzzle from previous chapters: the nature of the “unruly claim” of identity noted by Walter Benjamin when studying some of David Octavius Hill’s photographs (see note 24 above). Just as the perceived transparency of photography compels us to try to identify what is contained and defamiliarized in abstract photographs, so does it compel us to identify the people whom we find in photographic portraits. This explanation allows us to account for Benjamin’s insistence that the claim originated from the very woman that was photographed – not from Hill’s skills as an artist – and that this woman “even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed into art.”

By encountering the photograph as transparent, as a two-dimensional mold cast from the depicted woman, Benjamin was able to see the photograph not only as evidence of her existence, but as a vehicle for her to make her own demands. It was not simply the artwork which demanded that Benjamin acknowledge who the woman was – though the work did play a significant part in presenting that claim – it was the woman herself, through the portrait, who made that demand. Had the image been a painting, this demand could not have been attributed to her, and would be she would have been “wholly absorbed into art.”

It is worth noting that Benjamin did not attribute such a claim to every portrait he viewed, but only to a few, and here our detour into abstract photography is once again helpful. The fact that only some portraits make such an unruly claim of identity finds its explanation in the same place as the fact that some abstract photographs are more intriguing than others: the fragmentary nature of such images. Just as the drive to identify what one sees is stronger when viewing

White’s *Hexagram* than Strand’s *Abstraction* because the former’s irony maintains its wit (and fragmentary nature) alive, so would a fragmentary portrait prompt a stronger drive to identify *who* was photographed than a non-fragmentary (or less successfully fragmentary) one. In order to illustrate this, we now turn a fragmentary photograph by a master of self-portraits: Lee Friedlander.

### 4.4. Who is Lee Friedlander? *Aloha, Washington* as a Fragmentary Portrait

Renowned for his street photography, Lee Friedlander also nurtured a decades-long fascination with self-portraits, creating ambiguous photographs where his own image figures with varying degrees of prominence. When creating his self-portraits, Friedlander employed various equivocating techniques which complicate the viewer’s attempts to understand who he is – such as photographing the shadow he cast on another person’s profile, capturing a faint and incomplete reflection of himself in a storefront window, introducing other photographic portraits in his own self-portrait, or combining various such ironic devices in one image. By juxtaposing traces of himself with mundane scenes and anonymous passersby, Friedlander’s self-portraits spur myriad narratives about who he is, and how he relates to the people and objects depicted in his photographs. And although other photographers, such as Pierre Fatumbi Verger, preceded Friedlander in purposively insinuating themselves in their images by the use of shadows or reflections, Friedlander is notable both for the endurance of his project and for the power of his images. As we seek to analyze the experience of a fragmentary self-portrait (and since Barthes refused to publish a copy of *Winter Garden*, the fragmentary portrait of his

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mother), we are well served by turning to Friedlander’s attempts to communicate his self via photographs. While many of his self-portraits would serve for our purposes, in what follows we will examine one photograph which has long fascinated the author of the present study: Friedlander’s 1967 *Aloha, Washington*.324

That image shows a mirror and three framed photographs sitting atop a dresser, with the image of Friedlander lying in bed reflected on the mirror. The juxtaposition of Friedlander’s image with those of the portrayed people in the framed photograph, alongside Friedlander’s stern expression and focused gaze (which is doubled by the mirror’s beveled edge) suggests various narratives to the viewer: perhaps the image is a composite family portrait, with Friedlander as the outcast son who has not earned a place among the portrait of his siblings. Or perhaps this is meant to contrast Friedlander’s loneliness with the contentment of the portrayed people, whom one presumes are related to one another. Alternatively, the photograph might mark the closing of Friedlander’s relationship with these people, just as it marks the end of the day (the clock tells us that it is shortly after 5, and the angle and intensity of the light suggests that it is afternoon rather than morning). Unable to decide from these and other possible narratives, the viewer begins to form a complex impression of Friedlander as an outcast or loner, but the uncertainty which surrounds each interpretation tempts the viewer back to the picture, in an attempt to better understand what – or *whom* – is shown. After all, as Savedoff has shown, the ambiguity of a photograph only serves to strengthen our efforts of identification.

But our attempts to craft narratives explaining Friedlander’s relationship to the people portrayed in the framed photographs is further complicated by the fact that we are tempted to

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read the mirror as another framed photograph. By echoing the framed photographs depicted below it, the mirror image suggests that it too is only a representation, and we feel somehow more distant from Friedlander as a result (the fact that his depiction is smaller than that of the other people helps to foster this feeling of distance). But once we discover that the rectangle which features Friedlander is a mirror, rather than a photographic print, we feel that Friedlander is somehow more real, somehow closer to us. By providing a contrast between Friedlander’s depiction and those which feature in the framed photographs, *Aloha, Washington* makes us feel more “in contact with” Friedlander, to borrow Walton’s phrase.325

That we should feel more in contact with Friedlander than with the people portrayed in the depicted portraits is important, but surprisingly difficult to explain. The most likely explanation would point to our awareness that, as a photograph, *Aloha, Washington* is transparent, and that we see Friedlander through it (albeit indirectly). Yet if the framed portraits on the dresser are also photographs, as they appear to be, then we must acknowledge that we also see through them. As such, the fact that we don’t feel such a close contact with those people ought to puzzle us. A few explanations suggest themselves: perhaps the fact that the depicted portraits are out of focus can account for that diminished contact – or perhaps it is the fact that the depicted photographs are one more step removed from us than Friedlander’s reflection in the mirror.

However, the fact that the depicted portraits are slightly out of focus does not mean that we do not see the people they portray: we see them less clearly, but we see them (in Walton’s sense of the term) nonetheless. Likewise, the fact that the people depicted in the framed portraits are at two steps removed from us does seem to make them any more distant from us than

325 Walton, “Transparent Pictures,” 91. See also Ibid. 87, note 13.
Friedlander. After all, what we see most immediately through *Aloha, Washington* is not Friedlander, but the mirror which shows us his reflection. And though we do indeed see Friedlander through that reflection, we only see him indirectly. As such, he is no less removed from us than the people depicted in the framed portraits, even if he nevertheless feels closer.

As Cynthia Freeland points out, however, it is a mistake to reduce the contact that we perceive through photographs to their transparency. To speak of a photograph’s transparency in Walton’s sense, and to determine how directly or indirectly we see something through it, “is to assert something about the image’s epistemic value,” says Freeland. But to speak of a sense being in contact with what is photographed, again in Walton’s sense of the term, is to speak of “the psychological force or emotional persuasiveness of certain images.”

Put another way, whether or not we see Friedlander just as indirectly as we see the people portrayed in the framed photographs is beside the point: what matters is that we believe that we see him more directly. And indeed, the difference in perceived contact may be partially explained by the fact that we have become habituated to being near what we see through mirrors, as what we typically see through mirrors is present in our vicinity.

However, our credence in the proximity of a reflection does not stabilize the status of Friedlander’s image, for regardless of our awareness that what we see is a reflection in a mirror, we are irresistibly tempted to fall back into a reading of the mirror as another framed photograph. As we do so, we again come to see Friedlander as distant (or we come to see the people portrayed in the framed photographs as comparatively closer), and this shift in perception upsets whatever narrative we had crafted about this image. As such, it is important to note and

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326 Freeland, “Photographs and Icons,” 51.
327 Freeland, “Photographs and Icons,” 51.
understand the ambiguity of that mirror image, for it accounts for much of the fragmentary nature of his photograph. But in order to understand this hesitation of Friedlander’s self-portrait as a photograph of a reflection or the photograph of a photograph, it is helpful to understand how ambiguity arises in the representation of representation through painting.

Take, to borrow one of Savedoff’s examples, Judith Leyster’s 1630 *Self-Portrait*, where Leyster has painted herself in the process of painting a man playing the violin.\(^{328}\) That work unsettles the comparative status of each depicted figure, for though we know that the violinist is two steps removed from us (as what we see is a depiction of a depiction of a violinist), we tend to interpret him as lying on the same level as Leyster herself. There are two main reasons for this: first, the figures are painted in very similar (even if not identical) styles, for though the violinist’s face is unfinished, his clothing is rendered with the same amount of detail as Leyster’s own. Second, as Savedoff points out, the gestures of Leyster and the violinist mirror one another.\(^{329}\) Since we tend to read the depiction of Leyster as “real” in the world of the painting, the similarities between her depiction and that of the violinist tempt us to read him as “real” as well. As such, the painting-within-a-painting comes to life, in a manner of speaking, regardless of the fact that we know it to be no more than an inanimate object in the world of Leyster’s *Self-Portrait*.

This confusion, argues Savedoff, is common in painted depictions of sculptures and painted images. For while a painter can indeed depict a sculpted or painted portrait in her work, the more realistically she does so, the more she risks an interpretation of the depicted sculptures or paintings as first-level representations (i.e. depictions of X) rather than second-level

\(^{328}\) Leyster, Judith. *Self-Portrait*. Oil on Canvas, 74.6 x 65.1 cm. National Gallery of Art, [http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/highlights/highlight37003.html](http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/highlights/highlight37003.html).

representations (i.e. depictions of depictions of X).\footnote{Savedoff, \textit{Transforming Images}, 43.} As such, a painting which depicts a painting has a tendency to lead to one of two readings: either the ambiguity between levels of representation raises the second-level depictions to the status of first-level depictions (i.e. they are endowed with an illusion that is too strong), or the awareness of the irreality of the second-level depiction leads us to question the status of the first-level depiction, therefore compromising the illusion of the entire work. The first reading, according to Savedoff, is common in depictions of depictions in works from the Renaissance to Impressionism, while the second reading is common in Post-Impressionistic works.\footnote{Savedoff, \textit{Transforming Images}, 30.}

Compare, to borrow another of Savedoff’s examples, the experience of Leyster’s \textit{Self-Portrait} with that of René Magritte’s \textit{La condition humaine}.\footnote{Magritte, René, \textit{La condition humaine}. Oil on Canvas, 100 x 81 cm. National Gallery of Art, \url{http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.70170.html}.} The latter depicts a painting which sits on an easel before an open window, but the depicted painting in turn depicts a landscape which perfectly matches the landscape that lies behind itself. Here the painting-within-a-painting also comes to life, in a way, as it demands to be interpreted with as much reality as the landscape which lies beyond the window. However, whereas a viewer of Leyster’s \textit{Self-Portrait} might salvage the illusion of the whole by either understanding the violinist as another person or by noticing that the painting within a painting is unfinished, a viewer of Magritte’s \textit{La condition humaine} struggles much more to reconcile the ambiguities in a way that salvages the illusion of the painting.

Here it is worth noting that from the standpoint of a fragmentary hermeneutics the effects of Magritte’s paintings are greatly preferable to those of Leyster’s. Both paintings have
considerable wit, for both present their viewers with deep-seated ambiguities about the status multiple levels of representations. But Leyster’s painting allows its viewers to settle on one interpretation or another, effectively killing off the wit and salvaging the illusion of the image. Magritte’s work, on the other hand, allows us no such respite. In other words, by preventing us from settling on one interpretation over the other, *La condition humaine* displays not only wit, but irony as well, and in so doing keeps its wit alive.

If we return now to Friedlander’s *Aloha, Washington*, we see something startling. While the ambiguity between the mirror’s reflection and the depicted portraits do in fact destabilize the status of Friedlander’s own image, it does not do so in a way that destroys the illusion of the work or our faith in its veracity. We are tempted, again and again, to see the mirror as just another photograph, and by doing so we manage to form a fairly coherent understanding of the whole. It is only the doubling of Friedlander’s eyes on the top bevel of the mirror which finally convinces us that we are looking at a reflection, and prompts us to again re-evaluate the whole image.\(^{333}\) And once we understand the mirror as a mirror, we immediately wonder if the framed photographs (particularly the bigger ones) are also mirrors. This leads us to see, however briefly, those portrayed people as animated and therefore closer to us.

In other words, *Aloha, Washington* manages to perform the ambiguities which Savedoff attributes to Renaissance and Impressionistic representation of representations as well as those which she attributes to Post-Impressionistic representations of representations. But by constantly appealing to the viewer’s faith in the transparency of the photographic medium, *Aloha, Washington* constantly forces us to accept the reality of what (and who) we see through it. And

\(^{333}\) The reflection of the photo frames on the bottom of the mirror image might also lead us to see it as a mirror, but they may also be seen as consistent with an understanding of the reflection as a photograph (e.g. they could be no more than the unwanted environmental details which sneak into most photographs).
since who we see is (or was) real, we are driven to enquire about that person’s identity. As such, while the ambiguities it performs prevent the viewer from settling on any one reading, the image also prevents that viewer from giving up the interpretive process.

A reader might object here, and argue that while *Aloha, Washington* may indeed be an exemplary fragmentary portrait, it does not do what Roland Barthes claims *Winter Garden* could do: communicate the ipseity of a person in its entirety. The wit and irony detected in Friedlander’s self-portrait might indeed account for various facets of who he is, such a reader might say, but it is likely to misrepresent much, and to entirely miss much more. But here it must be remembered that the purpose of this dissertation was to argue that it is, in fact, possible for a photographic portrait to perform and communicate a person’s ipseity. Therefore, the fact that *Aloha, Washington* falls short of the goal (if it indeed does so) does not prevent us from seeing that it functions in a way which, when conditions are right, can lead to such a communication. That is to say, *Aloha, Washington* allows us to see how a viewer’s faith in the transparency of a photograph would entice the viewer to keep up the efforts to understand precisely who the portrayed person was, even as the image wittily suggests myriad incompatible readings while ironically preventing the reader from declaring any one interpretation final.

A photographic portrait which succeeds in fully communicating the ipseity of a person must be a rare thing indeed, for such a communication depends on several conditions. First, of course, the image must be sufficiently fragmentary, but it must also be fragmentary in the right way. After all, the various interpretations suggested by the image must be accurate descriptions of, or be structurally analogous to, the ipseity in question. As we have argued above, a fragmentary work of art can communicate the ipseity of a person by descripting it or by performing its irreducibly heterogeneity (or both). But that is not to say that this same
fragmentary work of art would not suggest inaccurate understandings of that *ipseity*, for in all communication there is a risk of miscommunication. And as Gadamer has shown us, it is impossible to determine ahead of time which prejudices and assumptions are conductive to an understanding of a text, and which lead to a misunderstanding. “*Diese Scheidung muß vielmehr im Verstehen selbst geschehen*” [“Rather, this separation must take place in the process of understanding itself”].334 The fragmentary portrait requires what all other texts and works of art require: the constant re-evaluation of its interpretation in the light of what one already knows and what one presently learns.

That is to say, the fact that a work opens up possibilities for erroneous interpretations should not be held against it. Rather, we should remain vigilant of such possibilities in any interpretive process, and be ready to revise our interpretations in the light of new discoveries. As Gadamer reminds us, “die Ausschöpfung des wahren Sinnes aber, der in einem Text oder in einer künstlerischen Schöpfung gelegen ist, kommt nicht irgendwo zum Abschluß, sondern ist in Wahrheit ein unendlicher Prozeß” [“The extraction of the true meaning from a text or artistic creation never comes to completion, but in truth is an endless process”].335 That this is so in the case of fragmentary works has been shown above, but Gadamer’s insight applies to non-fragmentary works as well. Interpretation is an endless process because, as we acquire more information and revise our interpretation accordingly, we are led both to discover new meanings and to correct previous errors.336 As such, the interpretation of a fragmentary work is an endless process not only because its wit and irony prevent us from deciding on a final form of understanding, but because even such a “final” interpretation should be subject to future revision

334 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 301; *Truth and Method*, 306
as our changing prejudices and body of knowledge create new inconsistencies and suggest new solutions.

Given the infinite nature of interpretation, it becomes much easier to answer the complaint that the above analysis of Aloha, Washington misses much of Friedlander’s ipseity. After all, one cannot expect to deliver in a handful of paragraphs what Derrida declared it takes “centuries of books” to accomplish (see note 69 above). That is to say, Aloha, Washington might in fact be able to communicate Lee Friedlander’s ipseity its entirety, so long as it is fragmentary in a way analogous to (or which performs) Friedlander’s ipseity. But such a communication depends on a viewer who can keep the interpretive process alive long enough to identify all possible understandings while correcting any misunderstanding that crops up. A fragmentary work, after all, requires an audience that is à la hauteur, as Schlegel warned us (see note 200 above).

But even if such a cultivated viewer – who is able to willingly jump between each of the photograph’s endlessly variable interpretations – does not exist, a fragmentary portrait such as Winter Garden or Aloha, Washington remains invaluable to its viewers. As we have seen in chapter 2.4 above, Derrida suggests that fragmentary works can serve as guides in our efforts to repay what he and Dennis Schmidt call our debt towards the dead. This debt requires that we bear witness to the individuality of a person who is no more, and a fragmentary portrait helps this witnessing both by encouraging illuminating interpretations and by preventing us from prematurely declaring our interpretations complete. That is to say, the fragmentary portrait is valuable even if we fail to do justice to its wit, for its irony repeatedly lures us back into the interpretive process. The value of a fragmentary portrait, as such, lies not in the immediacy of the understanding of ipseity that it conveys, but rather in the encouragement it gives us not to give up
the endless task of understanding. It is by reminding us of our obligation to account for the uniqueness of the other, and by providing us with a means to undertake that endless task, that a fragmentary portrait helps us repay our debt towards the dead.

4.5. Digital Skepticism and Ipseity Through “Selfies”

The preceding chapters have argued that Elizabeth Eastlake’s, Walter Benjamin’s, and Roland Barthes’ claims regarding the peculiar power of some photographic portraits are justified, so long as the portraits are sufficiently fragmentary in nature, and so long as their viewers subscribe to a theory of photographic transparency. That photographic portraits can be fragmentary has been shown in the preceding analysis of Lee Friedlander’s *Aloha, Washington*, but we have stopped short of proving that a theory of photographic realism is true. Rather, we have argued that, so long as such a theory is believed to be true, important hermeneutic consequences follow. Such a belief has indeed been held for the vast majority of photography’s history, but with the advent of digital imagery and the accompanying ease of image manipulation, a concern arises that beliefs in the transparency of photographs are losing their foundation. If that is indeed the case, it may be argued, then the argument presented in the previous chapters may have some historical interest, but no real application in the contemporary reception of photographs. In what follows, however, I will argue that although the rise of digital imagery may have caused an erosion of the faith in photography’s veracity, this erosion has left one important subset of photographs unaffected: the photographs one has taken oneself.

It is important to note that the heavy manipulation of photographic images typically associated with Photoshop have been possible since the beginnings of photography itself. The earliest known instance of an intentional transgression of photography’s transparency came in 1846, when Calvert Richard Jones’s *Capuchin Friars, Malta* was altered so that only four men
were depicted.\textsuperscript{337} The application of India ink over a fifth figure sufficed to erase his or her image from the photograph, isolating the four friars in the foreground and balancing out the composition. And although the tourists who comprised the likely audience (and market) for Jones’ photographs would not have known that the image had been manipulated, the possibilities of such manipulations would become widely known in the following two decades.

In 1858, Henry Peach Robinson created \textit{Fading Away}, an image depicting a young woman dying of tuberculosis in the company of her family.\textsuperscript{338} While Jones’ \textit{Capuchin Friars} violates transparency by erasing the depiction of what lied before the camera, Robinson’s \textit{Fading Away} violates it by combining in one image various elements which had not actually shared the same space. Eager to overcome the limitations of the photographic medium, which could not have adequately captured such an image without over-exposing the outdoors scene (visible through the window) or under-exposing the interior scene, Robinson took five different photographs, many in a studio setting, and combined the negatives to produce the final image.

Mia Fineman notes that Robinson did not intend to fool his audience into thinking that such a scene actually ever took place, and that “the picture was notorious both for the ‘artificiality’ of its technique and for its subject matter, which was considered too morbid and painfully intimate to be represented photographically.”\textsuperscript{339} Yet a twenty-first century viewer, accustomed to viewing morbid photographs as well as photographs which can cope with such wide discrepancies of brightness would be forgiven for mistaking Robinson’s work for a straight

\textsuperscript{337} Fineman, \textit{Faking It}, 4. Both the print and the manipulated image of Jones’ \textit{Capuchin Friars, Malta}, 1846 are reproduced in page 2 of Fineman’s work.

\textsuperscript{338} Robinson, \textit{Fading Away}, 1858, Albumen Silver Print from Glass Negatives, 23.8 x 37.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, \url{http://metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b36d81705-241d-4934-ab02-fd7c8dbbb3e5%7d&oid=302289}.

\textsuperscript{339} Fineman, \textit{Faking It}, 25-7.
photograph. It is only once one is told that the image results from the collage of five glass negatives that one begins to see some signs of manipulation (such as the fact that the foreground and background are in sharp focus, but the curtains the middle ground are not). The composite image is convincingly, perhaps even masterfully, done.

It is remarkable that the widespread knowledge of the possibilities of manipulation from the dawn of the photographic practice did not prevent scholars such as Eastlake or Barthes from believing in the transparency of photographs, but this can be easily explained. As Kendall Walton readily acknowledges, the belief in the transparency of a photograph is built on a rather important set of assumptions: “that the camera was of a certain sort, that no monkey business was involved in the processing, and so on.”

340 For most of photography’s history, such assumptions could be safely made, for while the heavy manipulation of photographs had always been possible, in the age of analog photography such manipulation was largely done at the expense of intense and highly skilled labor, so that it fell “outside the mainstream of photographic practice.”

341 That is to say, while it has always been possible to add or delete people and things from photographs (thereby transforming such photographs into collages or illustrations), doing so convincingly was, by and large, prohibitively difficult. The most notable exceptions to this rule are Henry Peach Robinson’s composite images (which were generally recognized for montages), and William H. Mumbler’s so-called “spirit photographs” – composite images where a ghostly image was superimposed on a properly exposed photograph to create the appearance of supernatural phenomena caught on film. Mumbler’s “spirit photographs” are particularly interesting to us because, when exposed as frauds, they temporarily shook the

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public’s faith in photography.

Working in Boston in the early 1860s, and then in New York in 1868 and 1869, Mumbler sold photographs depicting faint ghosts alongside normally depicted people and objects. Mumbler’s images were likely produced through double-exposures, a very simple technique consisting of taking two photographs on the same photographic substrate, as this technique explains both the resulting look of his images and his ability to produce them in such large quantities. Mumbler was eventually tried for fraud and larceny in New York, and the extensive media coverage of the trial had a marked effect on the widespread belief in photographic realism. Fineman sees Mumbler’s trial (alongside the publication of Henry Peach Robinson’s *Pictorial Effect in Photography* that same year) as marking the end of the initial faith in photography as a direct record of nature, and the beginning of a widespread awareness of photographs as artifacts.

But it is important to recall that faith in photography’s transparency only holds when we can safely assume that no additions or erasures have taken place. The exposure of Mumbler’s “spirit photographs” as frauds would only affect such assumptions until the public became more proficient at spotting images produced through multiple exposures. And not only would increasingly sophisticated audiences be less likely to be fooled by simple manipulations such as Mumbler’s, their increasing awareness of the technical difficulty of masterly manipulations such

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343 Mumbler’s ability to depict some people as ghosts and others as “normal” can be easily explained: when the “ghost” is photographed, it is done against a black (or sufficiently dark) background. As such, only the image of the model who posed as a ghost is imprinted on the negative at that time, and whatever other expose is made will be recorded normally, with the exception of the faint, spirit-like, image which will be superimposed on it.
346 People and objects photographed through multiple exposures will exhibit a tell-tale translucence – the very effect which Mumbler exploited in his depiction of ghosts – whenever their image occupies the same space in the photograph as the image of anything else.
as Robinson’s *Fading Away* would help to re-establish the faith on the transparency of other photographs. After all, the vast majority photographers would not have the time, skill, or means to produce composites as convincingly as Robinson. In the end, despite the public’s awareness of the possibilities of photographic manipulation, a widespread faith in transparency would again dominate the reception of photography. Looked at this way, it becomes clear that the resurgence of a faith in photographic realism at the turn of the twentieth century was not, as Fineman argues, the result of an irrational and mysterious cultural need to believe in something.³⁴⁷

However, just as the public’s awareness of the skill and time needed to transgress photographic transparency accounted for the resurgence of its faith in photographic realism in the early twentieth century, so does it account for the erosion of such faith in the early twenty first century. So long as the cost of manipulation is high, William Mitchell notes, “when we look at photographs we presume, unless we have some clear indications to the contrary, that they have not been reworked.”³⁴⁸ But the dawn of digital imagery shook our faith in photographic transparency precisely because it replaced photographic film, which is notoriously difficult to alter, with a digital file. And as Mitchell points out, “the essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer.”³⁴⁹ And indeed, the onset of digital imagery was followed by rapid advances in software programs designed to ease the creation and manipulation of images.

Although this is not the place for a historical overview of the rise of Adobe Systems’ *Photoshop*, it is important to note the impact that it has had on the photographic landscape. In 2012, for instance, when New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art assembled an exhibition of

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heavily manipulated analog photographs, they gave it the title *Faking It*, but saw it necessary to clarify its scope in the subtitle: “Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop.” And in 2013 Adobe Systems celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of Photoshop by launching *Real or Photoshop*, a website which highlights the proficiency with which digital photographs can be altered by challenging viewers to guess which images are “real” (i.e. straight photographs) and which have been “Photoshopped” (or heavily manipulated digitally).\(^\text{350}\) Thanks to Photoshop and its competitors, the seamless addition or removal of a person or object from a photograph, as well as drastic changes to their appearance, have become increasingly trivial endeavors.\(^\text{351}\) And by placing such drastic manipulative power at the fingertips not only of photographers but of members of the public as well, Photoshop has made the public aware of just how easy it is to profoundly alter a photograph (*i.e.* to transform it into a digital illustration that passes for a photograph).

Of course, not every digital manipulation is cause for concern. Most of the alterations made possible by Photoshop amount to digital translations of techniques which analog photographers routinely employ in the lab or darkroom when developing or printing photographs which would be considered “straight” or “unaltered.” In other words, changes to a photograph’s contrast, brightness, color balance, or saturation – even when isolated to small parts of the image (as in “dodging” or “burning”) – are generally made in order to uphold a realism of depiction and do not amount to transgressions of the photograph’s transparency. As Scott Walden argues, “these [changes] function merely to compensate for various psychological idiosyncrasies of


\(^\text{351}\) While Photoshop is largely associated with the alteration of appearances in photographs, our main concern lies in the ease and seamlessness with which one can add or remove a person or object from a photographed scene. That is to say, we are concerned not with the impact of digital image manipulation on beliefs regarding the realism of depiction, but rather with its impact on beliefs regarding photographic transparency.
human perception (without them, images look fuzzy, dull, or tinted) and do not undermine the
objectivity of those aspects of the formative process subtending rationale for confidence in
beliefs we form regarding things that matter to us.”352 But even if the changes are not made out
of respect for the realism of depiction – that is to say, even if an image is manipulated so as to
make something look markedly different than it would with the naked eye – so long as they do
not infringe on the photograph’s transparency (typically by adding or removing elements from
the image), they do not pose a problem to us.

Our concern, then, is that the public’s awareness of the malleability of digital images will
affect the hermeneutics of transparency on which the communication of ipseity depends. As
Savedoff points out, and as we can see in Real or Photoshop, “all photographs are at issue,
because we cannot necessarily tell, just by looking, whether an image is (digitally) altered or
not.”353 Aside from the fact that photographs are increasingly and predominantly viewed on
electronic screens (which requires the digitization of analog photographs), digital images can be
printed on traditional photographic paper, rendering them indistinguishable from printed analog
photographs. And as digital manipulation ceases to be the exception and increasingly becomes
the norm, “our ways of reading photographs could change significantly.”354

If we cannot tell, judging by its appearance alone, whether an image has been heavily
manipulated or not, the presumption that a photograph is straight (and therefore transparent) will
tend to give way to a presumption that the image is a digital illustration posing as a photograph.
And as we begin to assume that photographs are manipulated rather than straight, Savedoff
warns, our drive to identify what was photographed will disappear, and we “will find our

354 Savedoff, Transforming Images, 126.
understanding and treatment of photography moving closer to that of painting.”

As manipulation becomes the norm, and as the public comes to suspect that any interesting or powerful photograph (indeed, any photograph which produces a strong defamiliarization) is in fact an illustration posing as a photograph, photographic images will lose their ability to maintain deep ambiguities which remain appealing to their audiences. Faced with a hard to identify abstraction, a skeptical viewer will be more likely to dismiss the photograph as a purely formal composition (i.e. as a non-representational illustration) rather than try to identify the objects which are responsible for that composition. And faced with a deeply fragmentary portrait, a viewer will be more likely to dismiss the image as the result of a digital illustrator’s fancy than heed to the photographed person’s demand to be acknowledged as the unique person that he or she is (or was). As such, it is easy to see why scholars such as Savedoff and Walden would fear that the age of Photoshop will mark the end of any peculiarly photographic hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, while the widespread awareness of digital manipulation has indeed eroded the public’s faith in the documentary authority of photographs, there is no need to declare the end of photographic hermeneutics. For while a viewer may be unable to tell whether someone else’s photographs have been altered or not, that same viewer remains able to encounter her own photographs with full confidence in their transparency. After all, the presumption that no “monkey business” took place in the creation of a picture becomes easier to justify if one has taken, processed, and printed the photograph (or prepared it for screen viewing) oneself. And while such control over the entire process of photography was historically inaccessible to the majority of analog photographers (since such control requires, at minimum, access to chemicals for developing film and to a darkroom for printing the photographs), such absolute control over

digital photography is currently accessible to anyone with a smartphone. Moreover, as the encounter with one’s own photographs bolsters one’s faith in the transparency of photographs, one may find oneself encountering other’s photographs as transparent as well, despite one’s awareness of the ease of digital manipulation. So long as one is a photographer oneself (and nowadays anyone with a smartphone quickly becomes a photographer), and so long as one refers to one’s own images as documentary evidence (e.g. of a family picnic; or of an unusual article of clothing spotted in a crowd; or of a car accident, should one need to file an insurance claim) one’s own practice serves to partially counter the prevailing skepticism of our age. As such, even those whose only encounters with photographs occurred in the context of widespread digital manipulation may still subscribe to a theory of photographic transparency – though they might be more cautious in declaring that any given image is a photograph rather than a digital illustration.

And even if a person born after the digital revolution struggles to look at a portrait such as Friedlander’s *Aloha, Washington* and feel the force of his claim to identity, she need only look at the portraits she has taken herself to feel such a claim. Indeed, the current obsession with “selfies” (or digital self-portraits) may be seen as a widespread struggle to communicate (usually via social media) *who* one is. And even if the majority of such portraits consist of efforts to construct one’s public identity rather than investigate and communicate who one actually is, and even if the majority of such portraits fails to be fragmentary (or to be fragmentary in the right way), the persistence with which they are taken and disseminated is worth close examination. Such an examination exceeds the bounds of this dissertation, but it is worth our while to give a brief overview of it, as it not only suggests a future area of study, but helps us understand how a photographer like Lee Friedlander manages to create a successful fragmentary portrait.
Jerry Thompson, a scholar of photography who writes from the point of view of a working photographer, argues that, when the practice of photography is properly undertaken, the photographer engages in a hermeneutic relationship with the world – a relationship made possible by the photographer’s faith in the transparency of her photographs. Turning to Heidegger’s analysis of μάθησις in *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, Thompson envisions the hermeneutic practice of photography as a form of dialectical engagement with the world. Heidegger defines μάθησις as both learning and the doctrine which is taught, but the important point for Thompson is that this “mathematical” doctrine consists of what is already known by the learner. *Ta μαθηματα* (or “the mathematical”), according to Heidegger, names “die Dingen, sofern wir sie in den Kenntnis nehmen, [...] als war wir sie eigentlich im voraus schon kennen” [“things insofar as we take cognizance of them as what we already know them to be in advance”]. Thompson understands Heidegger’s analysis to mean that μάθησις is any form of learning about the world which relies on “a model projected to enable understanding,” and contrasts it with a form of learning which relies on πάθημα, or “an experience passively received; acquiescence to what is seen.” But it is important to note that Thompson does not prescribe a purely passive form of photography; he merely argues that an element of passivity is crucial to photography as a tool for understanding what is photographed.

When properly done, according to Thompson, photography alternates between μάθημα and πάθημα and in so doing allows the photographer’s understanding to progress gradually.

“When photography is at its best, these two elements cooperate as in a dialectic: one side

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358 Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, 70; “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics” 274.
presents a proposition, the other counters it; a new proposition emerges, one also countered in a similar fashion, and on and on as a progressively refined result appears, something neither partner in the dialectic could have produced alone.  

Photography as a hermeneutic practice would thus let neither μάθημα nor πάθημα become dominant, and would remain intellectually engaged while open to challenges and surprises.

Staying true to the to-and-fro movement of understanding which Gadamer brings to our attention in *Wahrheit und Methode*, Thompson suggests that photography *qua* dialectics requires a persistent engagement with the person (or thing) the photographer seeks to understand. When such a photographer approaches the subject to the photographed, her prior understanding of that subject will surely influence how the photograph is made. But by functioning as a transparent window to the world, the photograph allows the object or person photographed to manifest itself and resist the prior understanding of the photographer (perhaps an unintended detail intrudes in the photograph, and shows the photographer her prior understanding was not fully adequate). Faced with such resistance, the photographer revises her understanding of that subject, and returns to photograph (and thus investigate) it once more. It is this process of photographing the subject, and having one’s prior understanding challenged in the contemplation of the photograph which comprises the dialectics of photography. But Thompson is careful to point out that one such back-and-forth is not enough: one must again photograph that subject, and contemplate this second photograph. And as one’s revised understanding of the subject is challenged by the second photograph, one must again pick up the camera and try again. “If this process continues without distraction,” Thompson notes, “thousands of such back-and-forths are possible.”

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It is easy to see how such a photographic practice would lead to the creation of a portrait which can fully communicate who the portrayed person is, even if the first few (or hundreds, or thousands) of photographic engagements with that person fail to be sufficiently fragmentary (or fail to be fragmentary in just the right way). It is thus indeed surprising (and lucky, as Barthes sees it) that a successful fragmentary portrait such as Winter Garden would result from a brief encounter between Barthes’ mother and “un photographe de campagne, qui [...] ne savait pas que ce qu’il fixait, c’était la vérité” [“a provincial photographer who […] did not know that what he was making permanent was the truth”].

But it is much less surprising that Lee Friedlander, whose project of self-portraits endured for decades, would succeed in creating photographs which communicate his own ipseity with increasing success.

Thompson seems to believe that the extent to which such a dialectical movement can be taken in photography marks an inherent superiority to other visual arts: “a thousand paintings is an enormous œuvre, but a thousand photographic pictures can be taken (and considered thoughtfully) within the span of months.” But while the average speed of photographic production may indeed be greater than the average speed of painting or drawing, there is no reason why a thoughtful painter could not be as prolific as a thoughtful photographer. Paul Klee, for instance, is said to have produced over ten thousand works in his lifetime, which is enough to sustain a very deep dialectical engagement with the world. As such, just as Talbot was mistaken to tout the superiority of photography’s rendering of fine details, Thompson is mistaken to tout the superiority of photography’s speed of production.

But just as Talbot was not entirely wrong, neither is Thompson. After all, the details

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which are captured by photographs are inherently significant in a way in which painted details cannot be, for not only do they serve as evidence of the photograph’s transparency, but they can also issue an unruly challenge to one’s prior conception of the subject matter – a challenge which stems from the photographed thing (or person) itself, and not from the subconscious of the photographer. Likewise, the dialectic movement of photography is inherently different (but not necessarily superior) to that of painting. A dialectical engagement through a photographic portrait amounts to an engagement with the very person who was photographed, but a dialectical engagement with a painted portrait amounts to an engagement with the artist’s understanding of that person. The latter kind of dialectic is no less important – for engaging with a thought (or with the act of thinking itself) is certainly a worthwhile endeavor – but it is a qualitatively different kind of dialectic.

The difference between the two becomes clearer if we consider how an artist might contemplate her work months or years after its completion. As time passes, and as the details of one’s intentions and impressions at the time the work was produced fade from one’s memory, a photographer will be better able to engage the object of the dialectic more directly through her work than a painter would through his. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the painter would be increasingly unable to distinguish the object of the dialectic from his previous understanding of that object in the work in question.

If we return to our discussion of selfies with an eye to the photographic dialectic described by Thompson, we see that the current obsession with selfies might signal the persistence of attempts to understand and communicate one’s own ipseity through photography. So long as each photographic attempt at communicating one’s own ipseity is preceded by a close examination of the previous attempt (and thus by a reframing of one’s understanding of oneself),
and so long as one’s focus remains firmly planted on that *ipseity* (and not on, say, how that image will be received by one’s peers or how one’s social standing might be affected by the public dissemination of the photograph), then one’s attempts amount to a true hermeneutic engagement with oneself. If one is a good enough artist, one will eventually begin to craft fragmentary self-portraits (as Lee Friedlander did). And even if not all such fragments are completely representative of who one is, such attempts are indispensable in the search for a photography which can fully communicate one’s own self. Even if one lacks the artistic genius to compose visual fragments, one’s quest will not be in vain, for it will amount to a close examination of oneself. Moreover, even if one never achieves a single photograph which captures one heterogeneity in its fullness, one might settle for success in another form: a body of work – a collection of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of portraits – which, taken together, provide a fuller picture.
5. Conclusion

But Photography [...] is a medium whose business is to understand some aspect of the world humans live in, a medium whose epistemological potential makes it unique among the picture-making arts, a medium more properly concerned with describing in the toughest, deepest, most penetrating way than with constructing fantasies pleasing to the eye or imagination.

Jerry Thompson 365

In the preceding chapters we have seen that, since the birth of photography, photographic portraits have been seen by scholars to have a peculiarly powerful ability to communicate who the portrayed subject was. In our analysis of works by Elizabeth Eastlake, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes, we have noted important commonalities in their experiences of photographic portraits. All three scholars agree that the photographs which have this power are able to communicate the identity of the photographed subject better than any other kind of pictorial portrait, but all also agree that only a minority of photographic portraits are capable of such a feat. Furthermore, all three scholars locate the power of the portraits they admire in small, otherwise minor, details captured in the image.

Eastlake and Benjamin claim that such details give the photographic portrait a “strength of identity,” or the power to make an “unruly claim of identity,” which goes beyond what can be expected from the pictorial arts. Unfortunately, neither Eastlake nor Benjamin are able to explain how these details are able to give the image such a power, and although Barthes attempts to understand such a detail as a punctum (a detail which pierces the viewer and breaks away from the merely cultural significance of the photograph), our analysis of Barthes’ text has shown that

365 Thompson, Why Photography Matters, 84.
his experience of the *Winter Garden* photograph is significantly different from those which Barthes has attributed to a *punctum*. As readers of their texts and viewers of photographs, we were left wondering just how it is that photographs can communicate the identity of the portrayed person, and whether they can indeed do so better than other portraits.

The answer to the first question began to arise as we turned to Derrida’s *Demeure, Athènes*, which analyzes the nature of our debt towards the dead and its possible repayment. Derrida’s text is performative as well as analytical, and addresses the need to do justice to the uniqueness of a deceased person by attempting to do justice to the uniqueness of the sentence “*nous nous devons à la mort*.” Derrida warns that doing justice to this sentence is an endless endeavor, given that the sentence is irreducibly and endlessly ambiguous. As such, rather than writing the unending stream of books which would be required to account for all of the sentence’s meanings, Derrida attempts to erect a monument in its memory – as one would by engraving it in stone of by taking a photograph of it.366

Unable build either kind of monument, Derrida writes a series of aphorisms in which the depth of the sentence gradually becomes apparent. Critically for our present study, he sees each of these aphorism as a textual photograph of the sentence (he calls each of them a *cliché*, or a snapshot). Since he uses his experience of “*nous nous devons à la mort*” as an analogy to the experience of one’s debt towards the dead, his choice to treat the monuments to the sentence’s memory as photographs amounts to an argument (by analogy) that photographs can serve as monuments in the memory of the *ipseity* of the dead.

Ultimately, we argued that Derrida’s choice of an irreducibly ambiguous sentence as a stand-in for the uniqueness of a person, as well as his choice of aphorisms as the medium for

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communicating that uniqueness, suggest a solution to the question of how a photograph can communicate who a person was. Just as each of his aphorisms tells us something about the meaning of “nous nous devons à la mort” while reminding us that such a meaning has not been exhausted, a photographic monument to the uniqueness of a person (i.e. a photographic portrait) would lead us to better understand who that person was while reminding us that our understanding has not exhausted the fullness of that ipseity.

It is important to see that it follows from Derrida’s analogy that the ipseity of a person, which must be remembered in the repayment of our debt to their uniqueness, is as irreducibly ambiguous or heterogeneous as the phrase “nous nous devons à la mort.” By turning to Roland Barthes’ Fragments d’un discours amoureux, we showed that Barthes also understood ipseity to be inherently heterogeneous, rendering Derrida’s insights more clearly applicable to our enquiry. After all, if we are wondering how photography is able to communicate ipseity in the manner described by scholars such as Barthes, it is important to understand ipseity in the same way that Barthes did. As such, Derrida’s attempts to do justice to an irreducibly heterogeneous sentence suggest a way in which photographs might be able to communicate ipseity, even if we take ipseity to be inherently irreducible to a single coherent narrative. That is the way of the fragment, as understood by Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis.

More than a simple aphorism or short essay, a Romantic fragment is a literary and philosophical genre defined by two characteristics: the inexhaustibility of its meaning, and its resistance to final interpretation. Friedrich Schlegel described these characteristics under the headings of wit and irony, but as we have shown above these terms are not used by him in their colloquial senses. Fragmentary wit and fragmentary irony can never be fully divorced from each other, for each depends on the other for its existence, but in our analysis of Schlegel’s fragments
we teased out the following understandings of wit and irony: fragmentary wit turned out to be a hermeneutic force which generates more and more meanings out of the same sentence or passage, while fragmentary irony is a complementary force which reminds the reader that other meanings (or nuances of meaning) are possible and thereby prevents the interpreter from declaring any one meaning as dominant. In other words, wit suggests a plurality of meanings, while irony prevents that plurality from being reduced to one overarching meaning.

Schlegel is quick to point out that the fragment cannot work unless its reader is up to the task. After all, it is up to the reader to decipher not only the full range of meanings intended by the author, but also those unintended meanings which are made possible by the words themselves but which had gone unnoticed by the author. An ideal reader should be able to fully commit to each interpretation (so as to feel its full force), while at the same time remaining able to abandon that interpretive stance in favor of another, perhaps wholly incompatible one. Schlegel compares such a reader to a musical instrument, which can not only be tuned to different pitches, but also to every intermediary position between such pitches – and can be so tuned at will. To be flexible in this way, to be cultivated, is to be inherently heterogeneous – not a coherent self, but a collection of selves which defy coherent descriptions or conceptualizations.

Schlegel is aware that no writer can realistically expect to find a reader who can attune herself at will to infinitely many interpretive stances, but insists that a fragmentary author ought to write as if such a reader existed. After all, even if the actual readers of the fragment are not as fully cultivated as one hopes, so long as they can perceive some of the wit and irony of the text they are able to join in the process of fragmentary hermeneutics and push the collective understanding of the fragment forward. That is to say, the even if the reader cannot perceive all of the meanings of the fragment, she may be able to detect a meaning that has hitherto gone
unnoticed, and by bringing this meaning to the attention of other readers she enriches the collective experience of the work. More importantly for us, however, Schlegel argues that by engaging in such fragmentary hermeneutics a reader further cultivates herself, and thus bring herself closer to the ideal reader posited by the fragment’s author. In fact, not only can a person increase her inner heterogeneity by becoming more cultivated, Schlegel argues that all people are heterogeneous to a degree. A person can only be understood piecemeal, he argues, for she is never wholly “there” at any one time, and whomever thinks of themselves as simple and coherent makes a caricature of herself.

It is easy to see here that an affinity exists between fragments and ipseity, for both are inherently heterogeneous – be it with a multitude of meanings or of selves – and both are irreducibly to an overarching concept or narrative. As we have argued above, Schlegel does not believe that one should write fragments about just anything, but only about those subject matters which defy straightforward conceptualization. One such subject matter is the Absolute, but there are others. Rodolphe Gaschê, for instance, argues that the Kantian notion of an Idea is also an appropriate topic for fragmentary works (in fact, he sees it as the main subject matter of Schlegel’s fragments). Given its inherent heterogeneity and its resistance to coherent discourse, we have argued that ipseity is another such topic (and we have pointed to passages in the fragments which suggest that Schlegel thought likewise).

As such, we have argued that a fragmentary work can, in principle, communicate the ipseity of a person by either suggesting or performing its heterogeneity. That is to say, a fragmentary work might suggest all of the (potentially conflicting) narratives which constitute a person’s ipseity, or it might suggest the movement of that person’s inner plurality by the analogous movement of its meanings. Yet our argument led us to the conclusion that fragmentary
works in any medium – paintings, novels, and so on – are able to communicate ipseity, and not only photographs. In order to argue that photographic portraits are somehow superior to other kinds of portraits in this communication of ipseity, we needed to ask if there is something peculiar to the photographic medium which would facilitate such communications.

We began this step of our investigations by turning to that which Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes saw as uniquely powerful in photographs: its ability to capture details which may have escaped the attention of the photographer. In our analysis of these scholars’ encounters with such details, we have argued that the force of such details can be best explained with recourse to theories of photographic realism. Yet we have turned not to the realism of depiction – the view that a photograph accurately captures the look of the photographed thing – but rather to what Kendall Walton calls the realism of transparency: the fact that a photograph’s very existence depends on the existence of that of which it is a photograph. In other words, we argued that one peculiar aspect of photography is that it serves as evidence of a thing’s (or of a person’s) existence (or prior existence, at the time the photograph was taken), rather than as evidence of the appearance of a person or thing.

The distinction between the two schools of photographic realism may be counterintuitive, but it is an important one. After all, the view that photographs accurately capture a thing’s appearance can be readily disproven: photographs can distort colors and perspective, or can be outright blurry due to movement or poor focus. Walton’s theory of transparency, on the other hand, is much more robust, for it merely claims that a photograph is counterfactually dependent on the photographed subject for its existence. Regardless of how well or poorly a photographed subject is depicted, and regardless of whether viewers correctly identify that subject, the photograph stands as evidence of that subject’s existence. But although we believe
that such a theory of transparency can stand up to counter-arguments by skeptics, we noted that a thorough defense of transparency would exceed the limits of this dissertation. Doing justice to debates on photographic realism would require, at minimum, a separate book-length project. Fortunately, however, such a thorough defense of photographic realism is not needed. In order to argue that photographic transparency sufficiently alters the interpretation of photographs so as to facilitate the communication of ipseity, all we needed to show was that viewers of photographs believe such a theory true, and have sufficient reason to do so. Moreover, for this argument to work in the context of this dissertation, we needed to show that Eastlake, Benjamin, and Barthes held such a theory of transparency to be true, so that their experiences of photographic portraits could be better understood in that light.

It is worth clarifying that a photograph’s transparency does not reduce it to the status of a mere copy, for the photographer still has the freedom to compose the image and change the photographed subject’s presentation by choosing among different possibilities of lighting, exposure, focus, framing, and so forth. That freedom often leads the photographer to create images that do not look like the photographed subject (thus speaking against theories of realism of depiction), but such freedom does not impact a photograph’s transparency. After all, so long as the image is a truly a photograph (and not a collage of various photographs, or an illustration posing as a photograph), the photographer cannot insert people or things where there were none, and cannot simply delete them where they did exist.

The impact of such a belief in transparency in the interpretation of a photograph became clear as we turned to Barbara Savedoff’s works, where she argues that such beliefs lead to very different receptions of artworks when viewers see them as photographs rather than as paintings (or illustrations). We see the nature of that difference most easily when we look at abstract and
non-representational works of art, for whereas it is often out of place to ask what an abstract or purely formal painting is of, such a question is never out of place with photography. Indeed, such a question is irresistible when viewing photographs, and it only increases in urgency the more we struggle to identify what, in fact, was photographed. In the case of paintings, drawings, and other illustrations, on the other hand, such efforts to identify are abandoned if the image is so ambiguous as to defy explanation.

As such, we argued that the irresistibility and increasing urgency of the questions “what is this?” and “who is this?” facilitate fragmentation in photographic portraits by encouraging viewers to maintain their engagement with the image even as each of their interpretations is shown to be incomplete or incompatible with other possible interpretations. Whereas a fragmentary painted portrait would risk losing its viewer’s interest and be dismissed as the clever creation of the artist, a fragmentary photographic portrait would continually remind the viewer that the photographed person did exist, and as such would demand that the viewer ask just who that person was.

That is to say, fragmentary photographic portraits are not the only works which can communicate a person’s ipseity, but the viewer’s faith in its transparency leads many viewers to remain more engaged with photographic portraits than they would with a similarly fragmentary painting. Schlegel’s posited ideal reader (or viewer) would likely not benefit from this hermeneutic peculiarity of photographs, for she would be able to expertly navigate the image’s wit in full. But in the case of actual and imperfect viewers, the belief in a photograph’s transparency serves as a stimulus to pursue the fragment further and deeper than they would otherwise. In other words, the viewer’s belief in transparency would give strength to the portrait’s demand that the photographed person be acknowledged for who she is, in her
uniqueness (i.e. her *ipseity*). While the portrait’s irony would prevent the viewer from settling on a reductive narrative of that *ipseity*, the photograph’s transparency would urge the viewer not to give up in their attempts to learn more and do justice to the photographed person.

Yet as we have pointed out, such a hermeneutic advantage only holds insofar as the viewer believes in photographic transparency. And while many people have experiences which tend to foster such a belief – such as the experiences of taking photographs and noticing that unintended details and previously unseen objects were included, simply because they were there – the advent of digital manipulation has given rise to various forms of skepticism regarding photography. The manipulation of photographic images (and consequently their transformation into illustrations) is nothing new, but software packages such as *Photoshop* have drastically lowered its labor cost, and as a consequence have made illustrations posing as photographs much more abundant than at any other time in photography’s history. When most photographs were still analog (*i.e.* made with a photographic substrate such as film or coated glass plates), viewers could safely assume that most images that looked like photographs were indeed photographs, and their awareness of the possibilities of manipulation were not enough to shake their faith in photographic transparency. In the age of digital images, however, viewers are increasingly faced with manipulated images which are visually indistinguishable from straight photographs, and their awareness of this gives them cause to suspend their belief that images that look like photographs serve as evidence of the existence of anything.

Most scholars of photography who defend some version of photographic realism have expressed fear and lament over this decline in the viewer’s faith, but in the preceding chapters we argued that the fact that most viewers of photography are also photographers themselves (thanks to the ubiquity of digital cameras in computers, cell phones, and so on) means that
contemporary audiences are constantly engaged in practices which re-affirm the transparent nature of photography. As such, even if the rise of digital manipulation has indeed eroded the widespread belief in photographic transparency which makes fragmentary photographic portraits superior to their painted counterparts, such an erosion has not been complete. So long as viewers are assured that no deceptive manipulation has occurred, they are still likely to see the photographic image as transparent – for their experiences as photographers shows them the counterfactual dependency between their images and what laid before the lens, and therefore re-habituates them into holding this belief. And even if there is no way to be assured that someone else’s image is a straight photograph, a contemporary viewer can still rest assured that photographs taken and prepared by her are transparent. As such, our arguments for the photographic portrait’s ability to communicate ipseity are not anachronistic, for even the most skeptical members of contemporary audiences are likely to see their photographs as evidence of someone’s (or some thing’s) existence.

So long as contemporary audiences continue to be exposed to the counterfactual dependency of photographs and what the photographs are of, photographic portraits will continue to hold a superiority over other pictorial media in the communication of ipseity. After all, so long as the audience knows that the photograph must be of something, they will feel the irresistible urge to ask what (or who) precisely this is a photograph of. For the most skeptical among contemporary viewers, this question might only arise in the contemplation of their own works – photographs they have made themselves, and which they can be confident were not manipulated. But other members of the audience might generalize from the experiences of their own photographs and continue to see most photographs as transparent, unless there is evidence to the contrary. And while the preponderance of manipulated images in the covers of magazines and
tabloids, on the internet, and on social media may lead viewers to become increasingly skeptical, the continued power of photograph in journalism, courts of law, and blackmailing suggest that the belief in transparency is far from dead. And so long as this is the case, viewers may still find themselves faced with photographic portraits which seem to fully communicate who a certain person was.
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