

IMAGES OF THE DEAD: AN EXPLORATION OF THE HIDDEN WORLD OF NATHALIE RHEIMS'S *LUMIÈRE INVISIBLE À MES YEUX*

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Nathalie Rheims is one of today's most unusual French writers, one who engages with major metaphysical and ethical issues in fictions that are enigmatic and highly poetic. Rheims is in many ways a member of the Parisian cultural establishment: she is the daughter of Maurice Rheims (1910-2003), a Member of the Académie Française from 1976 and one of France's most eminent experts on art and antiquities, and the younger sister of the photographer Bettina Rheims, best known for being the official photographer of Jacques Chirac; she was a well-known actress from 1978 until 1983, and then became a television producer before devoting herself to writing. However, she is marginal in her writing, both stylistically and in terms of her subject matter. Her first three texts, *L'Un pour l'autre* (1999), *Lettre d'une amoureuse morte* (2000), *Les Fleurs du silence* (2001), are quasi-autobiographical and marked by a preoccupation with death, be it the death of her father, of her brother, or of the actor Charles Denner, or the death of love.¹ In her next two novels, *L'Ange de la dernière heure* (2002) and *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* (2003), she establishes an authentic voice, which speculates on the nature of presence and absence through narratives that are both mysterious and mystical. In her recent fictions, she demonstrates a preoccupation with the way in which we inhabit the world and with the ways in which the physical is inextricably bound up with the metaphysical, creating a universe where bodies materialize and dematerialize, ghosts appear and speak, and angels and demons shape daily lives.²

1 Nathalie Rheims, *L'Un pour l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), *Lettre d'une amoureuse morte* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000) and *Les Fleurs du silence* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

2 Nathalie Rheims, *L'Ange de la dernière heure* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2002) and *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2003). Rheims's career has continued in this mystico-metaphysical vein with *Le Rêve de Balthus* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2004), *Le Cercle de Megiddo* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2005) and *L'Ombre des autres* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2006). For an analysis of the mystical dimension of *L'Ange*, see my 'Comment vit la femme là où elle réside? Clôture et transcendance dans *L'Ange de la dernière heure* de Nathalie Rheims', *La Revue des Lettres et de Traduction*, 11 (2005), 437-52.

There is a fascination with disappearances and with the dead and voices of the dead in much contemporary writing in France,³ and in this sense Rheims's *L'Ange de la dernière heure* and *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* are very much in tune with the *Zeitgeist*. They are also importantly distinctive in the way in which their explorations of the disappearance of the body involve the supernatural, the metaphysical, speak of transcendence, and encourage the reader to reach out through the phenomenal to the spiritual.

L'Ange de la dernière heure is the story of a happy, healthy young woman at the end of the twentieth century who chooses to enter an enclosed religious order. A novel about the struggle against evil and the role of religious vocations, it is saturated with references to the body that must be denied (for example, 'Je Te donne mon corps afin de l'oublier' (p. 12); 'un corps vide' (p. 94)), but it engages much more radically with 'le corps', exposing the word itself as polysemic and ambiguous and thereby alerting us to read on several levels by offering us reminders that 'le corps' is not to be thought of purely in physical terms and by staging enactments of the profoundly sylleptic nature of the term (for example, p. 24). *L'Ange de la dernière heure* ends with the nun's willed dying to the world in order to save it through prayer, even although this entails a loss of everything outside the convent. Indeed, at the heart of all Rheims's work is a preoccupation with loss and mourning – for the death of a loved one, for the death of love itself, for one's past life or for the world as one knew it – and her writing is driven both by a personal desire to accept and transcend loss and by an impulse to universalize. In an interview with Céline Darner, she explains:

Dans ce qu'on écrit, il y a une fonction thérapeutique. J'écris pour ne pas mourir. C'est une épreuve qui, surmontée, procure une réelle satisfaction. L'écriture de l'anecdote ne m'intéresse pas. Je l'apprécie chez les autres mais l'écriture essentielle m'intéresse davantage. Mon écriture est directe parce qu'elle est vitale. Écrire sauve beaucoup de choses.⁴

If *L'Ange de la dernière heure* considers disappearance, presence and absence through the somewhat esoteric prism of mysticism and philosophy, *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* deals with these themes through the form of what its publisher calls a 'thriller métaphysique', infused with a darkly

3 See, for instance, Marie Darrieussecq's *Naissance des fantômes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999) and Philippe Besson's exquisite *Un garçon d'Italie* (Paris: Julliard, 2003).

4 Nathalie Rheims, *J'écris pour ne pas mourir*, <http://www.amazon.fr/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/61451/171-8722510-5638663>. Last accessed 19 April 2006.

metaphysical vision reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe, in which the ghosts of the dead haunt a woman in search of belonging and identity. These spirits have been 'captured' in daguerreotype portraits of the dead, but these portraits do not so much represent the dead as serve as sarcophagi for them. The tale itself is short, illustrated in the latter pages by photographs, and then followed by a series of uncommented, 'silent' mortuary daguerreotypes of dead children, spouses, parents – which Rheims and her publisher, Léo Scheer, had been collecting for several years.⁵ The novel tells the story of a young woman writer who has been summoned to see a lawyer. As she sits there waiting, she suddenly has the sensation that she is between two worlds, with no sense of her physicality: 'Je restai là un moment suspendue, seule, comme dans un rêve, avec l'étrange impression de ne pas être moi, de ne pas sentir mon corps, de n'entendre plus ma voix' (p. 9). She discovers that she has inherited a house from someone of whom she had never heard. As she leaves the lawyer's office, the first of a series of ghostly encounters occurs. A man puts his hand on her shoulder and, addressing her by name, says 'Il faut y aller!', but when she looks round there is nobody there (p. 11). All she knows is that she has been given two keys tied together with a label on which is written a word that she thinks initially is 'indivisible' but which she finally realizes is actually 'invisible' (pp. 11-12). She takes the train to the location given to her. There is nobody on the train, yet when she leaves her carriage for a few moments, she returns to find a man reading a book there – but he does not even acknowledge her presence. She arrives in the village named Lumière, which is empty, like a Surrealist painting, 'un Magritte, un Delvaux' (p. 15): reality is so strange that it can be described only by reference to art.

She is met at the station by a beautiful but deathly pale young man who takes her by the hand to show her the way before suddenly disappearing 'comme évaporé' (p. 16). This encounter serves to heighten her misgivings about why she has agreed to come to this house where she is surrounded by 'ces êtres qui apparaissent puis disparaissent sans rien me dire' (p. 17). However, in her meetings with ghosts, she is struck not only by their disconcerting ability to dissolve into nothingness but also by their

5 Rheims and Léo Scheer had been collecting mortuary photographs for four years before the publication of *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* and showed their collection as an exhibition at the Galerie Léo Scheer, 14-16 rue de Verneuil, Paris in September 2003. This collecting activity poses ethical issues that I shall address elsewhere. The four photographs I discuss in this article are reproduced here with the kind permission of Éditions Léo Scheer.

corporeality, by their emotional as well as physical strength and by the impression she sometimes has of always having known them. When she finally meets her mysterious benefactor, a glacial corpse lying on his bed, it is to discover beside him a letter which explains why he has chosen her as his heir to the house and its contents:

Voici le moment, pour moi, de mourir, je le sais, je connais le jour et l'heure. Moi qui suis mort pour le monde depuis longtemps déjà, comment faire, une fois mon souffle éteint, pour maintenir ce désir de retrait.

Vous ne me connaissez pas, mais je vous ai lue et je sais que pour vous l'écriture ne doit rien dévoiler. C'est la raison pour laquelle je vous ai choisie pour m'aider à accomplir cette ultime volonté: ne pas réapparaître au-delà de ma mort. Si vous lisez cette lettre, cela veut dire que le notaire a réussi à vous trouver et que vous avez accepté mon legs. Cette demeure, qui fut celle de ma disparition, est désormais la vôtre. Veillez sur elle et sur ce qu'elle abrite. (p. 19)

In other words, she has been chosen because as a writer she has sought never to 'dévoiler' and thereby betray. His 'disparition' is now to be more than just a euphemism for his death; he is to disappear completely, and she is to start her own 'disparition' and become 'la gardienne du néant' (p. 20). Of course, in French 'disparition' is often used to connote death, but in this novel, as in *L'Ange*, verbal forms of 'disparaître' oblige the reader to focus on the process of disappearing, rather than on a single finite act of disappearing or having disappeared, and consequently to interrogate the finality of disappearance and of death, both for the dead and for the living who are faced with the death of others.

The house-owner has amassed a collection of portraits of the dead and then lived as a recluse, disappearing with them from the world in order to protect them from improper eyes and improper use and thereby giving dignity – through invisibility, total disappearance – to the dead. The young woman explores the silent house, finally returning to the bedroom to find that the corpse has vanished; she lies on the bed in his place and falls into a dream in which she strolls through corridors hung with the death-bed photographs of famous people, including such celebrated mortuary icons as Victor Hugo by Nadar, Marcel Proust by Man Ray and Sarah Bernhardt by Nadar. Powerfully evocative as these death-bed images are for modern viewers, she realizes that none of them serves to make the dead present again; rather, they absorb and annihilate the mobile subjectivity of each individual model, giving them a recognizable iconic force which paradoxically plunges into oblivion their specificity and vitality: 'Ces

images ne les représentaient pas, elles les engloutissaient, faisant s'effondrer leur présence dans l'abîme' (p. 27).

The portrait collector had been obsessed by the time between death and burial, when the dead person cannot see but becomes an object of gazes: 'Ces quelques heures où le corps subsiste aux yeux de tous sans que les vôtres puissent voir la lumière. Ce moment qui précède l'ensevelissement, présent sans être là, sans résistance aucune' (p. 29). It is this obsession with the first days after death, when the bereaved strive to retain – and make – comforting images of their dead, that had led him to collect the portraits and to hide them, to 'anti-display' them, in his house-mausoleum. Aware of the force of the intimate histories behind their creation, he had not gone as far as destroying them, seeking, rather, to protect them from inappropriate gazes and misuse. However, as the young woman reads letters left by the dead and hears the ghosts of the dead speak to her, she realizes that what they really want to do is to leave the closure of the dark, protective house in *Lumière* and return to the alternative, 'real' world of light ('la lumière'), where they will be gazed on again by the living. She consequently decides to betray the trust put in her by the house-owner and go against the original terms of the legacy: she packs all of the portraits into a trunk and returns with it to the station to await the train that will take them back to light – and display (p. 65). In this, the writer-protagonist's impulse to expose the portraits to the light and subsequently to the gaze of others parallels Rheims's decision to co-curate an exhibition of her own collection; a blurring occurs between the fictional writer and the novel's author, with the reader being encouraged not necessarily to agree with the 'liberation' of these once highly personal relics but to interrogate their latter-day place and function as mementos, as art-works or as historico-anthropologically interesting artefacts.

The narrative ends as the young woman waits at the station, yet the text continues, as Rheims provides the reader with a sequence of daguerreotypes of the dead, which are initially accompanied by explanatory utterances by the ghosts (a sort of textual ectoplasm), but in the latter part of the novel are simply offered to the gaze of the reader with no commentary whatsoever. These photographs are removed both from their original cultural context (the tradition of death bed photography) and from the personal context (most of them are not famous people and no family context is given, so we have no idea who they are). There is, of course, a long western tradition of representing the eminent dead in statuary, painting and death masks in churches, mausoleums, palaces, etc., whose purpose

was to commemorate great men and women. The context for these memorials is self-consciously a public one, whereby mourning is intended to have a socially binding and aspirational, uplifting function. There is also a semi-public tradition of remembering the dead through visual representation in many Catholic countries, where cemeteries are full of photographs of the dead, laid on graves to remind those left behind of their departed loved ones whenever they visit to lay flowers. The photographs collected by Rheims and Scheer and included in *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* are of a somewhat different order and were intended for a purely personal use by those who commissioned them.

Mourning takes many culturally determined forms as well as intimately personal ones, but at the heart of all of these is a desire to retain a sense of the reality and the presence of the lost one. Our dead are almost invariably 'shared' with others (other family members, friends, colleagues, etc.), and representations of them can serve a purpose that is simultaneously private and public, as we transform them into enabling screens onto which we project emotions that are as complex and varied as they are deep-seated. As Mary Roach suggests: 'One's own dead are more than cadavers, they are place holders for the living. They are a focus, a receptacle, for emotions that no longer have one.'⁶ For this reason, we want to give some material form to them, be it in public statues or private photographs. The discovery and development of photography in the nineteenth century meant that the middle classes had access to ways of memorializing their departed, and photography is particularly appropriate for this since, as André Bazin puts it, 'it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption'.⁷ More recently Susan Sontag has emphasized photography's place in – and as – the rhetoric of death and mourning: 'Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art... All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.'⁸ Or, as Mary Price puts it, 'to photograph is one way of arresting time in order to contemplate it'.⁹

6 Mary Roach, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (London and New York: Viking, 2003), p. 12.

7 André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp 9-16 (p. 14).

8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 77.

9 Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 177.

In the twentieth century, photographs have become so common, so ubiquitous, that they have become almost invisible. In the case of many photographs, the presumption is that the image is intended to provide information and to be shared with others; this is the case most obviously with journalistic photographs, but it is also the case with family photograph albums. Most of these photographs are the type of photograph that Roland Barthes calls 'la *photographie unaire*', that is to say, photographs that we glance at with interest, but that we never remember and that, crucially, we do not love.¹⁰ With photographs that we take or have taken of dead loved ones, the over-riding impulse is love mingled with grief. The images are not conceived in aesthetic terms nor (perhaps especially not) in terms of achieving an exact reproduction of the dead one. Rather, they are intended as images of *what we would like the loved one to look like* in our future memories.

Price defines a photograph as 'a picture of that which is about to become a memory, a capturing of what, in the present which is about to become the past, is to be remembered'.¹¹ This is a complex definition, but one which appropriately locates the photograph as a go-between between past and future, one which seeks to modify the future. In other words, the photography of remembrance seeks to create promises of memories; it is also therefore necessarily an act of idealization, and also one of essentialization as we strive to capture in one image that which will contain in distilled form all that the loved one was (and could/should have been). As Peggy Phelan reflects parenthetically in thinking about Barthes and the Winter Garden photograph of his mother in *La Chambre claire*: 'We are, despite our best intentions, stuck with essences, and essentialisms. And perhaps never more fully than when the body of the beloved has vanished. For in that disappearance we are made to feel again the grief of our own essential absence from our deepest selves, our failure to answer our most central questions: "Margaret, are you grieving?"'¹²

Barthes's theory of photography is really a theory of reading photographs and emerges from his yearning for some sort of healing and emotional reparation after the death of his mother, hence his desire to

10 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Éditions de l'Étoile, Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1980), p. 69; original emphasis.

11 Price, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

12 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 35. The quotation is the first line of Gerard Manley Hopkins's wonderfully elegiac 'Spring and Fall: To a Young Child' (1880).

believe that photography in its essence can transform mourning into reunion: 'la Photographie a quelque chose à voir avec la résurrection'.¹³ For him, looking at the Winter Garden photograph of his mother was (or at least came to be) an epiphany. Every photograph may well contain on one level or another 'le retour du mort',¹⁴ but in cases where the photograph is the tangible link with a lost one, the photograph goes beyond the *memento mori*, not so much reminding us of the departed one as reminding us that we have loved. It bears witness to a love that must always be unknowable to others, hence Barthes's decision not to reproduce the Winter Garden photograph in his book. Why then do people put their mortuary photographs on mantelpieces, making public that which by its very nature is intensely personal?

Mortuary photographs function as creations of (and often subsequently as substitutes for) memories; in their creation, moreover, they are frequently motivated not only by an impulse to idealize and essentialize, but also by anxiety: anxiety about forgetting, anxiety about one's own ageing or future death, anxiety about not having said all that one wanted to say or should have said to the departed. Such photographs are born out of deep emotional needs and desires. Crucially, it is not the photographer who determines how and what to represent; s/he is, rather, essentially a technician operating under the instructions (and desires) of the bereaved. This means that the uninvolved, uninitiated spectator is faced not only with powerful, disturbing images whose original purpose has been to reassure (someone else); we are faced with the essential unknowability of the emotional tie between the commissioning bereaved and the dead individual represented. We are thus faced with a reality which we can comprehend on one level, in that we have all experienced or apprehended the loss of a loved one. On the other hand, the reality portrayed in these photographs is so personal that it exceeds representation. The trauma of loss and the struggle to mourn cannot be represented in a single two-dimensional image. These images therefore raise issues around the inadequacy of representation; they also raise perhaps even more important questions about the inappropriateness of representation.

In many cultures, it is considered important for family and friends to *see* the dead departed, usually, in the West, lying in his or her coffin. The corpse has been prepared by the undertakers and lies, cleaned, coiffed, dressed in

13 Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

day clothes and often made up. The act of ritual spectation, of ritualized gazing, is intended to bring some initial closure and to prepare the long healing work of mourning. A corpse is made to look as lifelike as possible and, above all, to appear at peace. For the grieving family, to see an image of serenity is hugely comforting, and for close family members, there is also an urgent need often to go beyond gazing on the constructed icon of peace and calmness and to bend to kiss the forehead, cheek or lips of the departed one. However, at that moment, one's lips encounter the cold harshness of alabaster or marble skin; the serenity generated by the apparently peacefully sleeping departed is destroyed as the image is revealed *as image*, and the terrible reality of loss invades and envelopes the mourner.

The decision to commission mortuary photographs is a defence against having to come to terms with the physicality of the dead and an attempt to prolong the reassurance of the image of serenity and to maintain the lost loved one as present *in a continuing relationship* with the mourner through the image. In *La Chambre claire*, Barthes insists on the evidential force of the photograph, emphasizing its authenticating power more even than its representational capacity.¹⁵ For the bereaved, the mortuary photograph becomes evidence, proof of the love that existed between him/herself and the departed beloved and also as a guarantee that this love will continue. It serves to engender dialogue between the dead and the bereaved. The photograph therefore is a performance of desire, of will, as much as, perhaps even more than, being a representation. What is at stake in such photographs is intensely private and personal and therefore to look at such images as illustrations in a novel poses real issues for us as readers, as viewers, as consumers of culture.

Rheims's novel requires the reader-viewer to engage with the nature both of the images that it contains and also of itself as a coherent text, rather than, say, an illustrated novel, an artist's book, or whatever. When we first encounter them, the portraits are presented as images which speak – and which speak quite literally, in that the novel includes things that they say. For instance, the husband who is sitting beside his dead wife, hand posed on the bed clothes and gazing ahead (Figure 1), is thinking:

Près de toi allongé, rien ne nous séparera. Je reste à tes côtés afin de te rejoindre, de nous fondre dans ce jour qui descend, dans cette lune froide, dans ce cercueil qui tombe dans la fosse sans fin, dans l'absence, la tienne, que je

15 See *ibid.*, pp. 138-9, 166

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Figure 1. From *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*, p. 55. © Éditions Léo Scheer, Paris.
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Figure 2. From *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*, p. 76. © Éditions Léo Scheer, Paris.
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ne peux pas vivre. La mort n'est rien, car plus elle nous joint à jamais, pour les temps infinis, plus elle nous unit pour que l'on parte ensemble. (p. 54)

This utterance is typical of how the depicted bereaved incorporate into the constructed image of loss a commitment to constant, ongoing love and make the photograph into a locus of implicit dialogue: death is countered by freezing an idealized moment of togetherness, which becomes the starting-point for – and the guarantee of – verbalized articulations of eternal love and fidelity.

As I have indicated above, the young woman's quest for understanding in *Lumière invisible à mes yeux* ends confidently and optimistically with her 'saving' the daguerreotypes and returning them to light. For the reader, however, this marks the beginning of new and different interrogations where the novel offers little support, since the text goes on to present us with fifty portraits without any commentary – although it does include one, the portrait of a young girl, which is accompanied by a verbal reflection on the nature of the portraits:

Ces portraits sont singuliers, aussi mystérieux que fut leur vie, emplis de secrets, de silence, de non-dit. La frontière est passée. Nous sommes là, impuissants, à vouloir emporter cette dernière image, épuisant nos regrets et nos doutes, avec la certitude que le peu de chemin qui nous reste avant de passer nous aussi nous permettra d'attendre, plus sereins, ces retrouvailles incertaines. (p. 78)

The portraits give the bereaved a certainty: the certainty that, although they cannot be absolutely sure that they will one day be reunited with the beloved, their waiting for that moment will be less anguished because they have the images to comfort them. In an interview after the publication of *Lumière*, Rheims was asked about the 'présence angoissante, presque obsédante, de la mort' in her work and whether this was due to either 'fascination ou hantise'. Her answer is revelatory: 'Ni l'une ni l'autre. La mort fait partie de notre existence, mon obsession est plutôt celle du secret, du respect de la parole donnée, de la communion entre les morts and les vivants.'¹⁶ Rheims's works are predicated on the possibility and, indeed, the necessity of dialogue between the living and the dead – and ultimately between the reader-spectator and the novel's images.

In other words, this novel obliges us to examine a series of ethical questions. First of all, we need to ask why one would want to take

16 'Interview with Nathalie Rheims', *Nathalie Rheims.com* <http://www.nathalierheims.com/Lumiere-invisible-a-mes-yeux.html>, last accessed 19 April 2006.

photographs of loved ones when they are corpses, rather than keeping and gazing upon images of them made while they are alive – or, indeed, trusting to one's memories of them. No consent, of course, can be involved, so the resulting image is a construction of the griever, and not necessarily an accurate expression or representation of the relationship. Such photographs come from the need to maintain a relationship with the lost loved one, but what becomes of these photographs once the pain of mourning has diminished or even vanished? Precisely because of their physicality, photographs can work against real remembering, since they are apparently tangible 'evidence' of what the beloved looked like and so can come to replace our mental image of her or him, which necessarily fades with time. Furthermore, in the case of photographs of the dead, we have images of physical presence which are chosen – and which will remain as defining icons even when the exact reasons for the choice of poses have been forgotten by the originating models. As Price argues, 'peering into a photograph, studying it closely, will result not in finding ideas but in recovering what may be identified as reality; then in an instantaneous process ideas will be constructed to account for that reality'.¹⁷ This applies even to the most involved and knowing of spectators, since the reality of the moment has vanished for ever, and so is always to be (re)constructed through the image.

In *Lumière*, the mortuary photographs are, of course, completely removed from all context except that of the imagined supernatural tale (and that of their original elaborate gilt frames), and are gazed on by complete strangers a century on from their creation. However, the novel as a narrative frame prevents us from regarding them simply as artworks, in that it stages for some of them – and therefore implicitly for all – the textual expression of loss and longing. We gaze and seek meaning, but we also experience a sense of intrusion on private grief. This is particularly acute in the case of the mothers holding their dead infants. Each mother sits stiffly and formally, gazing out over the head of her child. What first strikes the viewer is that in all of these images, the mother is the central focus and the idealized figure, whereas the child is a dead body, an accessory, a prop. In other words, we are presented with a partial family portrait, wherein we seek to find the maternal anguish that we expect from our twenty-first-century perspective. In one, the mother is immaculately coiffed and stiff-backed, whereas her daughter is rather untidy, with a lolling head and loose

17 Price, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

legs (Figure 2); furthermore, the photograph has been enhanced after printing by the addition of a shining gold edging to her mourning gown and a bright gold ring on her right hand. In another, the gathered lines of the mother's tartan dress draw the eye to her dead baby, where the viewer is soon fascinated by the incongruously up-ruffled fan of the undergarments of its christening robe (Figure 3). In yet another, a mother with pink-tinted cheeks and dangling jet earrings, silhouetted against a cumulus cloud backdrop, gazes over and away from her apparently sleeping and equally pink-cheeked child (Figure 4).

These daguerreotypes testify to the power of public and private expectations of mourning. Within the novel, they are also without any specific textual support, so the viewer's activity moves swiftly from what Barthes calls the 'dressage' of culture-specific responses,¹⁸ wherein viewing occurs within the normative, determining coding of the *studium*,¹⁹ to a quest for the *punctum*, which, according to Barthes, is a detail which is not intended or even remarked by the photographer, but which centres our gaze perspectively and, crucially, emotionally. A 'wounding' detail which pricks the spectator, the *punctum* wrenches his or her attention away from the controlled and controlling flow of the narrative content of the photograph and inscribes subjectivity into the reading of the image. Barthes is clear that the *punctum* is 'un supplément: c'est ce que j'ajoute à la photo et *qui cependant y est déjà*'.²⁰ In the case of the 'floating' mortuary photographs in *Lumière*, the viewer creates meaning through analysing a personal(ized) *punctum*-detail, such as the manipulations operated to the sitters or to the images themselves (the handkerchief held in the husband's hand or his awkwardly placed right hand in Figure 1; the hand-painted gold ring and golden cord ornamenting the mother's dress in Figure 2; the matching rouged cheeks of mother and child in Figure 4, etc.). Each *punctum* draws the viewer into a relationship with the image which may sometimes be morally or aesthetically judgemental, but which always starts from and repeatedly returns to our shared anxiety about death and loss. Therein lies the complexity of reading this novel and its images.

Art has an astonishing ability to render universal the individual and to essentialize the normal, the ordinary. On the other hand, 'ordinary' photographs (Barthes's unary photographs) can normalize the essential, as

18 Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 89; original emphasis.

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Figure 3. From *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*, p. 98. © Éditions Léo Scheer, Paris.
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Figure 4. From *Lumière invisible à mes yeux*, p. 94. © Éditions Léo Scheer, Paris.
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when journalistic or even war photographs are scanned and then forgotten. Due to the insistence in the novel on the role of literary and visual art, *Lumière's* mortuary photographs have a dual unary and artistic function. They present images which on one level are of a mainly historico-anthropological interest. However, the tale's anxious speculations about life and death and their possible interaction transform its normalizing processes into (positive) essentializing ones, whereby the repeated images of anonymous and forgotten mourners are rescued from banality and enabled to serve once more as markers of loss and promises of reunion.

Rheims's novels are all meditations upon loss and the ways in which loss is experienced and articulated. Like the photographs that she collected and included in *Lumière*, they are secretive and worrying works, inhabiting and communicating from worlds that may best be defined as worlds within our conventional worlds. Hidden from our daily routines, these oneiric worlds are peopled by characters whose language unmasks the haunting nature of all poetic and metaphysical language. These novels pose problems of interpretation and challenge their readers to revisit their own moral positions and to reconsider their notions of loss and of how the experience of loss, even when experienced vicariously through fading daguerreotypes, can – strangely, miraculously – be a bridge between absence and presence.

In Rheims's work, disappearance is always bound up with re-appearance. On one level, *Lumière's* heroine is evocative of Rheims and her own preoccupations with life, death, loss and representation, and the novel can thus be seen as a continuation of her earlier autofictional texts. What marks *Lumière* (and, indeed, *L'Ange*) as a much more challenging and substantial novel is the extent to which the almost spectral questing quality gives it a certain universality – as a paradigm of humanity searching for truths beyond the physical. *Lumière* raises issues about mourning and memory-work, about presence and absence, and about remembering or forgetting those who have died. It also demands an interrogation of the ethics of photographing, displaying, collecting and trading in photographs of dead bodies, insisting that the reader-viewer engage in a work of speculative interpretation in order better to understand the processes of loss, recuperation and ultimately the rebirth that is self-affirmation.