

**Original citation:**

Mason, Emma. (2016) Punctive grace : reading religion in Barthes' Mourning Diary. *Textual Practice*, 30 (2). pp. 327-343.

**Permanent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/79205>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in . *Textual Practice* on 18/02/2016, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1129735>

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)

**Punctive grace:  
reading religion in Barthes' *Mourning Diary* [draft]**

**EMMA MASON**

~ What "grace" might have enlightened me?<sup>1</sup>

~ Qu'est-ce que cela fait? Tout est grâce.<sup>2</sup>

This essay suggests that the doctrine of grace affords one way of negotiating the frequent references to Christianity in Barthes' late writings. As a trigger for transformation, redemption, change and conversion, grace is the dynamic influence of the divine experienced by the believer through faith. Touched by its dispensation, the believer is placed 'under' its favour and granted the ability to transform suffering into a meditative or 'neutral' thinking that dissolves the 'I' or ego. No longer an isolated individual, the grace-full subject feels him or herself to be part of a unified, divine body: as Paul writes, 'The body is a unity, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body' (1 Corinthians 12. 12). Grace has the capacity to end isolation and suffering, then, but its reality is predicated on the existence of suffering: grace is given by God through the crucifixion to absolve creation of anguish and sin.<sup>3</sup> For the grieving Barthes, whose late writings constellate around the mitigation of the painful experience of mourning, grace promises relief without negating the course of bereavement. Following Henriette Barthes' death on October 25, 1977, Barthes begins to associate grace with the 'female' and maternal, both possible sites of redemption to which he might access through his love for his mother. As he writes in the notes that would later comprise *Mourning Diary*:

Anguished because I don't know how to restore generosity to my life – or love. How to love? – Closer to the Mother of Bernanos's *Country Priest* than to the Freudian schema. – How I loved *maman*'.<sup>4</sup>

Barthes' reference to George Bernanos' 1936 novel, *Diary of a Country Priest* is significant because it hinges on the question of whether the individual can find respite from suffering in religion, specifically in the reception of grace. The novel's closing line – 'What does it matter? All is grace' or 'Grace is everywhere' – is born out by the novel's protagonist priest, whose story is so miserable that his faith appears relatively miraculous. Amidst a narrative of huge challenge and physical pain, the priest's defining accomplishment is to 'convert' the character Barthes calls 'the Mother', Mme la Comtesse, who is herself close to death. His compassion towards her provokes confession, forgiveness and a newfound happiness, convincing the priest

that he has been a vessel for the 'grace' of 'Our Lord'.<sup>5</sup> After Mme la Comtesse's death, the priest finds solace in other female figures, hallucinating a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and nursed until his own death by a friend's mistress, whose kindness confirms his belief in grace.

The question of why the grieving Barthes might prefer Bernanos' invocation of the Marian maternal to the Freudian Oedipus sets the scene for this discussion. I suggest that Bernanos' maternal offers a grace-full reprieve from the torpor and lassitude of acedia by triggering simple loving thoughts ('How I loved *maman*') that come into being through another religious idea, that of 'conversion'.<sup>6</sup> Conversion is the consequence of the working of grace, which moves the believer into faith. Barthes realises this 'conversion' in his writing, in particular his notes for a 'new life' conceived in a plan to write a novel in the projected *Vita Nova*.<sup>7</sup> As Diana Knight observes, Barthes revealed his desire to write a novel at a conference on his work at Cerisy in northern France, where he declared he would 'enter into a life of asceticism as Proust did . . . I too was going to enter into the novel, just as you enter into religion'.<sup>8</sup> Discussed throughout *The Preparation of the Novel* (1978-80), the *Vita Nova* is given a date and place of birth ('April 15, 1978. Casablanca'), and an epiphanic affect, a "'literary" conversion' both 'miraculous and euphoric' and *satori*-like, 'a kind of bedazzlement'.<sup>9</sup> This 'conversion' from 'uninterrupted sadness' to the 'novel' relies on a language of rehabilitation, resurrection and grace that resonates throughout *Mourning Diary*. Here, Barthes yearns not simply to recover lost time in a new life, but to 'restore generosity to my life', to be 'soothed' and 'recover equanimity'.<sup>10</sup> Barthes' proposed writing out of a 'new life' offered the chance to make sense of his bereavement by rehearsing the 'idea that death serves some purpose' and revive 'loved ones' by 'drawing them out of non-Memory'.<sup>11</sup> Although never realised, the *Vita Nova* imagines the act of writing as a process of awakening from sadness into irenic composure and 'faith'. In his essay on 'Listening' (1976), Barthes calls this mode of communication 'religious', just as I suggest here that his own writing is driven by the dynamic of grace.<sup>12</sup> Incarnated as writing, grace allows Barthes to listen again to his mother's lost voice, and so counters what he calls a 'localized deafness' in *Mourning Diary*.<sup>13</sup>

As a dynamic Barthes translates into writing, grace functions as a curative or 'movement towards' equanimity in his work, one he describes in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) as the 'action of grace'.<sup>14</sup> I trace this 'action' in three ideas in his late works: 'twinklings', the brief illuminations of truth that feature in *The Neutral* (1977-78); the '*punctum*', sketched out in *Camera Lucida* (1980) as an acute detail that affectively pricks the reader; and the tears Barthes sheds in *Mourning Diary* (2009). Each of these ideas serve to map the way to his 'new life' and so place him 'under' grace and within a meditative and non-egoic thinking akin to that evoked in Pascal's *Pensées* (1670) as much as Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27). As Barthes writes in his *Vita Nova* notes: 'No more *I*. At any rate, no more than Pascal . . . "Pensées" in which, References to the Scriptures (quotations) [would be replaced by References to

literature (quotations)'.<sup>15</sup> For Barthes literature is his religion, or, as he writes in his essay 'Deliberation' (1979), 'literature is *like* religion'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, his writing is like grace, both aesthetic and spiritual, and so defies empirical theorizing for evocations of 'truth'. *Mourning Diary* in particular attempts to conjure this truth by searching for a neutral space in which to live with grief following his mother's death. Less than two months into the narrative, Barthes associates himself with a 'sincerely devout woman' defined by her search for 'salvation', 'hope' and 'joy' in her God. I suggest that Barthes too searches for peace through faithfulness, not in God, but in the grace of writing, which also 'moves' the reader and places her 'under' its influence.<sup>17</sup> His religious references are never quite centre stage in his work, but like 'grace notes' that enhance a piece of music but are melodically peripheral to it, these references help Barthes to figure literature as worth believing in, and writing as the dynamic that enables such faith. Part one of the essay defines grace in relation to Barthes' engagement with Christianity and mysticism, in particular his comments on monasticism, Pascal and Proust. The second part suggests that twinklings, *punctums* and tears each incarnate grace as affective moments that undertake to restore his mother back to him, a potential Barthes preserves by writing them out. These three instantiations of grace not only illuminate the religious context of his late writing, but they also suggest that the particular thinking associated with these texts – pensive, attentive and reflective – is rooted as much in Christianity as the more widely explored influence of Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

### 'THE ACTION OF GRACE'

Barthes frequently draws on Buddhist, Jewish and Christian ideas and symbols in his writing, especially their mystical manifestations. From mysticism Barthes borrows both a language and a meditative thinking that allows him to conceptualize ways of retreating from the world into utopia and converting to his 'new life'. William James directly associates conversion with grace – 'To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance' – signalling it as the foundation of those 'illuminations' and 'revelations' he calls 'mystical states'.<sup>19</sup> For James, grace ensures that 'the spirit of God is with us' in our most 'dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way' by conjuring 'an inner state which before all things is one of love and humility, of infinite confidence in God, and of severity for one's self, accompanied with tenderness for others'.<sup>20</sup> In *How to Live Together* (1976-77), Barthes' reading of Christianity is analogous with James', focusing as it does on the monastic life of coenobitism to describe retreat within community, 'a way of life that's not productive in economic terms – but extremely productive spiritually and/or intellectually'.<sup>21</sup> The 'luxury of symbolic systems' within a condition of asceticism allows for a 'contemplative *Telos*' Barthes projects into his own 'new life', grounding it in two spheres: the 'Orient', wherein the '*Telos* is essentially mystical' and believers seek 'not to achieve perfection, but to "breathe", join together'; and the 'Occident', wherein 'the contemplative *Telos* is consigned to monasteries'. Both,

however, are brought together in ‘the *Telos* of all forms of coenobitism: faith’, which Barthes defines with reference to Saint Basil of Caesarea as an ‘unhesitating consent to God’s teaching’ taught ‘by the grace of God’.<sup>22</sup> Cenobitic monasticism is significant because it is one of the few religious orders with Christian and Buddhist communities, both organized to offer support to monks whose only other option was solitary eremitism. But, for Barthes, it also creates a form of faith available to all forms of conversion, from the cenobite to the Sadean libertine converting to Eros. As Diana Knight points out, Barthes directly connects faith and desire through conversion, equating his decision to ‘take the plunge’ into the novel with André Gide’s use of the expression to describe ‘your “first visit to a brothel” or to your “first communion”’.<sup>23</sup>

This framing of grace through conversion brings together Catholic and Protestant positions on the concept. Both denominations draw on Paul and Augustine’s sense of grace as the unmerited gift of God’s love as a counter to human sin: grace at once liberates human beings from the tendency to sin, and heals those sins they have already committed. For Aquinas, the gap between God and creation means that humans need to prepare to receive God’s love by opening what James calls the ‘subliminal door’ of consciousness towards it.<sup>24</sup> This allows the substance of grace to ‘infuse’ and ‘act upon the soul’ in the same way as ‘whiteness makes a thing white, and justice, just’.<sup>25</sup> In the Catholic reception of these ideas, grace completely eradicates sin so that the individual is revealed as holy in the sight of God; grace then sanctifies her so that she is capable of performing good works. The believer is continually ‘topped up’ by habitual grace in sacraments and rites, her faith strengthened and good works continued: grace rhythmically renews and restores and so perfects the nature given to her at birth. Protestantism, while comprising many diverse views on grace, begins from the premise that sin cannot be eliminated from human nature, which is instead covered by grace before God. Since the individual remains sinful, good works are always tainted, meaning that salvation must be reached by faith alone (*sola fide*). In Catholicism the believer is justified (made acceptable to God) through a continual dispensing of grace in the sacraments; in Protestantism the believer is made suddenly righteous by witnessing God’s love, which gives instant access to the Christian life. Barthes moves between the two accounts: on the one hand, his ‘new life’ is intended to be one of continuous writing, a habitual rule of life to replace that ‘silent dailiness’ once shared with his mother; on the other, he seeks an epiphanic grace akin to that described by Augustine on reading the Psalms, ‘I was inwardly pricked’ and so commenced ‘the purpose of a new life’.<sup>26</sup> As Barthes undergoes his literary conversion, he too is ‘pricked’ by what he calls ‘the grace of the *punctum*’ in *Camera Lucida*, allowing him access to the resurrections of photography.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he experiences the deep suffering associated with the perpetual reception of grace inherent to Catholicism. As Bernanos’ novel reveals, grace may well be free and abundant – ‘grace is everywhere’ – but few willingly cooperate with it because of the profound suffering one must acknowledge in its reception.

Barthes' imagining of grace as that which is at once immediate and continuous is dependent on his reading of Pascal and Proust. Both the *Pensées* and *In Search of Lost Time* inscribe grace as that which promises a peaceful release from worldliness, but is dispensed so slowly that illumination is always deferred: Pascal's book remains an incomplete series of glosses and notes; and Proust's narrative begins only at its end. The anxiety inherent to both texts – that grace might fail to bring salvation – is inseparable from the fear that the aesthetic cannot communicate its content. In *Pensées*, for example, Pascal troubles over the relationship between 'grace and beauty' as a way into articulating the mystery of 'poetical beauty':

*Poetical beauty.* – As we speak of poetical beauty, so ought we to speak of mathematical beauty and medical beauty. But we do not do so; and the reason is that we know well what is the object of mathematics, and that it consists in proofs, and what is the object of medicine, and that it consists in healing. But we do not know in what grace consists, which is the object of poetry.<sup>28</sup>

If mathematics evinces and medicine heals, poetry brings unknowing or the willingness to surrender ego and admit the human incapacity to comprehend or source the origin of grace (and so God). This does not mean that grace is entirely unfathomable: later, Pascal writes that grace is the route by which God 'puts' religion 'into the heart', and that its spirit might even counter that 'hardness of heart' Barthes identifies in *Mourning Diary* as acedia.<sup>29</sup> Grace also actuates those 'visible miracles' that provide 'images of the invisible': the things of creation, that is, humans ('man by grace is made like unto God') and nature, embody grace in visible form.<sup>30</sup> But there is also something 'supernatural' about the link between things and grace, or what Pascal calls 'outward' miracles' and their 'inward' form, that cannot be explained away, just as for Barthes, the outward form of writing – the book – escapes 'blind, mechanical' meaning to open 'onto a new world'. Any such new world cannot hope to offer 'a masterable, scriptable sum-total' knowledge (which would be too vast and impossible to universalize), but it can 'initiate' the reader into 'a knowledge of the soul' that is ultimately superior to encyclopedic data.<sup>31</sup> Like grace, soul-knowledge makes little sense within the framework of reason or materialism: as Barthes writes in *Mourning Diary*, 'how barbarous not to believe in souls – in the immortality of souls! the idiotic truth of materialism!'<sup>32</sup> His new life would thus have to make sense through methods of inquiry capable of embracing soul knowledge, such as contemplation and reflection, or as Pascal suggests, prayer and meditation.

Proust's vision of grace pertains to beauty and music rather than God, but it does so through a Catholic language of incarnation and fellowship. Elstir's wife and model, Gabrielle, for example, appears 'moving and divine' in the flesh, and 'mysterious' and sacramental on canvas: in C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation, she is even 'filled with saving grace'.<sup>33</sup> Albertine too confers grace on the narrator, but by virtue of the suffering she causes him, slipping 'her tongue into my mouth like my daily bread'.<sup>34</sup> For Barthes, the entire sequence of *In Search of Lost Time* transfigures suffering into grace through the narrator's concluding revelation that he must write

his life. The narrative thus merges ‘sum-total’ knowledge with soul-knowledge because its ‘proof’ (the ‘work’s Necessity’, its ‘true meaning’) lies not in ‘the detail’, but in its ‘mystical movement’ towards ‘the certainty that *it exists*’.<sup>35</sup> Barthes appeals to this movement towards ‘existing’ as a way of breaking with everyday time to embrace instead a monastic ‘smooth time’ without disturbance or interruption. While this time has ‘no endpoint’ with ‘no appointments’, it ‘does have to be scanned, to be subjected to a *Rhythm*, to the Strophes of Labor; regular tempo: that of *Rule*’.<sup>36</sup> The writer’s ‘rule of life’, like the cenobite’s, is rhythmic, regular and habitual in order to enable to way of thinking capable of registering a mystical movement into soul-knowledge and grace.

In *Mourning Diary*, grief itself is rhythmic: he refers to the ‘*measurement of mourning*’ before proclaiming that ‘Each of us has his own rhythm of suffering’.<sup>37</sup> In preparing to write a novel, however, Barthes summons the ‘Grand Rhythm’ or ‘methodical life’ that counters suffering with moderate, everyday work that alternates with bursts of intensity: like the religious life, this is a rhythm of daily practice resonant with moments of insight.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps this is also why Proust describes religion as a ‘poem’: exploring the essence of religious art in the Balbec church, for example, Elstir sees before him a ‘poem of adoration . . . dedicated to the glory of the Madonna’. Turning specifically to the stone-carved story of the Assumption of Mary, Elstir deems the image a ‘gigantic theological poem written on the face of the church’ to a departed, but saved, ‘mother’.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Barthes imagines conversion as a poem in his essay on ‘Chateaubriand’, arguing for his *Life of Rancé* as a ‘literary work’ that ‘takes us very far from religion’ to depict the ‘*literally*, poetic’ conversion of its subject into the penitential life.<sup>40</sup> While literature substitutes religion, its thinking of time as both duration and immediacy (the reader of Chateaubriand’s *Life* conceives of Rancé’s conversion as happening ‘all at once’ within a historical narrative) accommodates grace as that which both ‘moves’ and illuminates, rather than statically commands. For literature ‘is *like* religion’ because it bypasses dogma to produce instead ‘an effect of truth’ that carries the reader into flashes of revelation or conversion motivated and carried by grace.

This rhythm of grace also accords with Barthes’ preference for ‘incidents’ over ‘fragments’ in his essay ‘F. B.’ (1964).<sup>41</sup> As Nicholas De Villiers argues, the essay, a footnote to the works of an unpublished and anonymous writer, introduces an idea Barthes later developed into *Incidents*, a book that collates ‘various encounters with boys and hustlers in both Morocco and Paris’.<sup>42</sup> Previously imagined as a *Journal of Desire* in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the book is projected as ‘the discourse of homosexualities . . . *Incidents* (mini-texts, one-liners, haikus, notations, puns’ and so on).<sup>43</sup> As De Villiers shows, Barthes’ is not interested in the journal form as a sincere expression or confessional mode, but rather as a transformational and ‘rhythmic form’ that reveals no secrets – whether of sexual preference or religious belief – but allows for writing without doctrinaire assertion.<sup>44</sup> The ‘effect of truth’ is thus protected from its potential in totalitarian thinking by its constant modulation

through grace, one that brings moments of insight without stalling the flow of meaning into creed or conviction. An example of this ‘action of grace’ appears in *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) in the entry for ‘Waiting’, founded on an imagined play wherein Barthes waits for someone in the interior of a café.<sup>45</sup> Without grace, the drama feels tense and uncomfortable: if the person waited on does not arrive, act one can only stage the ‘anxiety of waiting’; act two a consequent anger; and act three the ‘anxiety of abandonment’. This tension dissipates, however, with the fulfilment of arrival: ‘if the other arrives in Act I, the greeting is calm’ and ‘if in Act II, there is recognition, the action of grace: I breathe deeply, like Pelléas emerging from the underground chambers and rediscovering life, the odour of roses’.<sup>46</sup> In this reference to *Pelléas and Mélisande* – an 1892 play by Maurice Maeterlinck, and 1902 opera by Claude Debussy – Barthes implicitly connects the movement of grace to that of breathing, continuous and measured, but transformative when focused on. Barthes turns specifically to Pelléas’ gradual ascent from the stifling underground chambers into which he is led by his brother: breathing fresh air, he is brought affectively back to life in a passage from suffocation to vitality engendered by the ‘action of grace’. Here is a grace that comes from the individual’s peaceful awareness of present being (soul-knowledge) without debt to any deity: it is a free and unmerited gift that lies outside of the demands of reciprocity. In this context, grace fulfils Derrida’s desire for a gift that refuses the idea of return by rhythmically repeating the feeling of love and benediction.<sup>47</sup> No wonder Derrida insists that we read Barthes ‘with an ear to music’, listening for repeated rhythms and cadences to which our attention is drawn in moments of heightened expression.<sup>48</sup>

## GRACE NOTES

The musical ornament of the grace note might be melodically and harmonically peripheral to the music’s essential notation, but it more often than not delights the listener by magnifying details of the main score. So too do Barthes’ twinklings, *punctums* and tears engage the reader with the affective content of his writing, especially in their shared ambition to undo and suspend the oppositional thinking that structures and produces meaning. His 1977-1978 lecture course at the Collège de France on ‘the neutral’, for example, elucidate a concept that ‘baffles the paradigm’ of binary thought through a series of twenty-three chapters or ‘twinklings’ that begin with ‘Benevolence,’ ‘Weariness’ and ‘Silence’, and close with ‘Wou-wei’ and ‘The Androgyne’. The glimmer of the ‘twinkle’, with its indeterminate wavering light, is suggestive of such ‘baffling’: Barthes’ twinklings adopt a form that is ‘neither creative nor academic, neither nonsense nor entirely clear’ and serving like a Jamesonian ‘biblical stumbling block’ that provokes reflection through perplexity.<sup>49</sup> The neutral thus comprises a fragile archive that, Barthes admits, has a ‘bad press’, not least because of its relationship with Abrahamic and Dharmic mysticisms, which are difficult to square with his semiotic and linguistic theories for many secular academics.<sup>50</sup> Yet the religious context of this archive is immediately apparent from



the opening twinklings on the neutral, which separate ‘a desperate vitality’ set against death from a gentler ‘will-to-live’.<sup>51</sup> This vitality belongs to the Roman Catholic, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and contrasts Barthes’ will-to-live beyond the certainties of dogma or reason:

it matters little to me to know if God exists or not; but what I know and will know to the end is that He shouldn’t have simultaneously created love and death. The Neutral is the irreducible *No*: a *No* so to speak suspended in front of the hardenings of both faith and certitude and incorruptible by either one.<sup>52</sup>

This grammar of negation joins many other references to mysticism in the lectures, satori, the ‘sacred’, the tao and zen puzzled over alongside Emmanuel Swedenborg, Jakob Boehme and John Cage, witchcraft, paranoia and madness. Barthes synthesizes ideas from different religious traditions in order to find a way of intuiting and hearing that ‘other music’ that moves him through the mourning process. His session on the retreat, for example, comprises a series of twinklings on those who have withdrawn from the world in search of moments of communion, whether with God through monasticism and meditation; in a reflective acknowledgement of the ever-changing path of Taoism; or in mourning itself, manifest in Proust’s withdrawal from the world after his own mother’s death.<sup>53</sup> Swedenborg’s mystical revelations and visions of the Apostles thus appear alongside myths about Proust’s writing spaces as a way of envisioning an escape from worldly pleasures and an end to associated distractions such as narcissism, agitation, torment and desire.<sup>54</sup>

Like mourning, these distractions are permanent and fixed because they are not routinized and repeatable and so open to transformation. As Barthes writes of mourning, ‘*it does not wear away*, because it is not continuous’, and any diversion from it accelerates its impact on return so that ‘depression only increases’.<sup>55</sup> Mourning only becomes ‘continuous’ in a state of ‘*indescribability*’ or neutrality.<sup>56</sup> The neutral – as retreat, silence or wou-wei (non-doing) – privileges a movement that is continuous in its reaching for nothingness and the ‘abolition of dualisms’, and so allows for ‘sporadic’ changes that ‘make for silence, inwardness’ and shifts ‘the wound of mourning’ towards ‘a higher realm of thought’.<sup>57</sup> Without recourse to the transcendent, this higher realm petitions what Barthes calls the ‘internal doctrine’ of ‘atopia’, a ‘drifting habitation’ that releases him from worldly labels.<sup>58</sup> This drift of the neutral is analogous to grace, and Barthes figures it as such as part of a discussion on Kabbala in his second session on wou-wei. Here Barthes alludes to the ten emanations or *sephirot* of God in Kabbala, which correspond to levels of spiritual experience capped by a crown or *keter* that signifies the highest point of divinity:

the crown: worn by male [the father: intelligence, force, glory] and female [the mother: wisdom, grace, victory] *sephirot* -> the one who reaches it abolishes the contraries<sup>59</sup>

Incomprehensible to human thought (it sits literally ‘above the head’), the *keter* is depicted in Kabbala as a luminous dot or point, a *punctum*, comprising both fatherly law and motherly grace. Barthes configures a similar equation in the much earlier *Michelet* (1954), wherein ‘grace’ is essentialized as female, poetic, Christian and rhythmic and borders on ‘justice’, male, forceful and revolutionary.<sup>60</sup> While Michelet embodies an amalgam of the two (‘I am a complete man, having both sexes of the mind’), the female is more perfect because it signifies cyclical creation, ‘an undivided world in which contraries are abolished’.<sup>61</sup> Similarly in *The Neutral*, the androgyne neuter is described as a ‘mixture’ or ‘dose’ of ‘masculine and feminine’, even as it is ‘any subject within whom there is something maternal’: contraries are abolished, but the maternal, and so grace, is continuous.<sup>62</sup>

Barthes accompanies his declaration that the androgyne is always maternal with an unscripted reference to Proust, with whom he shared an affinity with the maternal.<sup>63</sup> Proust structures his novel with mariological memories of his mother and grandmother that are heightened by references to the Blessed Virgin Mary; and, in *Contre Sainte-Bouve*, as Barthes notes in *Mourning Diary*, recalls his mother’s ‘countenance . . . , deeply stamped with Christian sweetness and Jansenist [Protestant] courage . . . ’<sup>64</sup> Barthes adds the word ‘Protestant’ here to remind the reader of his own religious upbringing, one he also remembers in *Camera Lucida* as a ‘religion-without-images where the Mother is not worshipped (Protestantism)’. Refusing to ‘reduce’ Henriette Barthes to ‘the Mother’, Barthes recognizes that his reading of the mother and religion was ‘doubtless formed culturally by Catholic art . . . In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother’.<sup>65</sup> This core, so apparent in the Winter Garden Photograph, is given affectively to the viewer as an acute detail that pricks or stings, a ‘*punctum*’, that contrasts with the general impact granted by an image, its ‘*studium*’.<sup>66</sup> For Barthes, the *punctum* is accidental and immediate, a detail that pierces the consciousness of the viewer like a lightning strike, ‘a boy’s big cloth cap, another’s necktie, an old woman’s scarf around her head, a youth’s haircut, etc’. Like grace, the *punctum* must be felt, received and intuited ‘by that additional vision which is in a sense the gift, the grace of the *punctum*’, a referent that opens the image out and makes the invisible visible.<sup>67</sup> Jay Prosser connects the ‘opening’ out effect of the *punctum* to Buddhist *satori* (‘sudden awakening or enlightenment’) and *śūnyatā* (‘the emptiness of form’), both of which Barthes figures in *Camera Lucida* through the flash of the camera and the ‘thisness’ (‘*that, there it is, lo!*’) of the *punctum*.<sup>68</sup> But the ‘grace of the *punctum*’ also has a Christian source in the doctrine of compunctive tears, which, as James Elkins notes in his reading of *Camera Lucida*, are ‘tears that pierce you: they come from Jesus’ suffering, and you owe them to him in return’.<sup>69</sup>

Shed as part of Christian practices of bodily renunciation and discipline, compunctive tears are significant because they serve as evidence that one has been touched by grace, awakening the believer to compassion and pity. In her book on the doctrine of compunction, for example, Sandra McEntire explains that ‘compunction is a grace, gratuitously given’ and that tears are the ‘exterior expression’ of the ‘deep

interior sorrow one feels before the greatness and mercy of God': the 'interior' touch of grace is expressed in the 'outward sign of tears'.<sup>70</sup> The 'grace of tears' would have been familiar to Barthes from his work on Michelet, as well as Ignatius of Loyola's diary of tears, cited in *Preparation of the Novel*: 'Loyola using signs to count and gauge how often he weeps'.<sup>71</sup> *Mourning Diary* is itself a record of weeping, Barthes' tears granting the journal an emotional structure in which reader and weeper are joined in grace:

'I kept on crying quite a while back in the silent apartment'

'More and more wretched. Crying'

'I burst into tears'

'A violent crying jag'

'I am overwhelmed, on the verge of tears'

'A fine bass aria from Handel's *Semele* (act III) makes me cry'

'An onset of grief. I cry'

'I weep'

'in deperate straits, tears over *maman*'s death'<sup>72</sup>

The affective pull of these painfully private moments is 'punctive': the specificity of each moment creates 'tiny shocks' of sadness that awaken in the reader personal memories of sorrow as well as empathy with the narrator. Barthes is sensitive to the tears and suffering of others too, *Mourning Diary* a catalogue of literary, philosophical and musical references to melancholy and grief. He also cites one of the most often quoted lines of the New Testament – 'Jesus wept' (John 11. 35) – but embeds it in the larger narrative of the story, in which Jesus worries for his sick friend and 'groaned in the spirit and was troubled'.<sup>73</sup> Barthes' focus on Jesus' anxiety and tears remind the reader that the grace through which Jesus 'resurrects' Lazarus is also that secured by his own suffering at the crucifixion: love and joy are guaranteed but only through a movement towards God mobilised by suffering.

Like Jesus' tears for Lazarus, Barthes' tears for his mother also come before a resurrection, one enabled by the chemical process behind the photograph. In *Camera Lucida*, he connects his astonishment at photography's 'emanation of the referent' to 'the religious substance out of which I am moulded; nothing for it: Photography has something to do with resurrection'.<sup>74</sup> The 'nothing for it' here is itself a grace, a miraculous operation by which 'religious substance' is resurrected by photography. Barthes' example is the Shroud of Turin, on which Christ's image was revealed only after a photographer processed it inside a darkroom.<sup>75</sup> In the English translation, however, the example given is St Veronica's napkin or veil, the cloth offered to Christ as he carried his cross to Golgotha to wipe his tears and sweat:

receiving the cloth back, Veronica found it impressed with an image of his face (*divino rostro*). Both shroud and veil are *acheiropoieta*, icons made without human intervention and moved into being by miraculous grace. For Barthes, the photograph too appears to be miraculously moved into being by its ‘air’, that ‘exorbitant thing which induces from body to soul – *animula*’, its spirit or soul. Looking through photographs of his mother, Barthes ‘recognizes’ her in a moment of *satori*, but the air that ‘gives’ the image to him is grace, a ‘kind of intractable supplement of identity, what is given as an act of grace’.<sup>76</sup> Suddenly awakened to his mother – ‘There she is!’ – he sees her ‘soul’ twinkle into presence through a prayerful soul-knowledge.

Barthes gives another instance of such discernment in *Mourning Diary* in his recollection of a walk he took through the Parisian Roman Catholic church, Saint-Sulpice. Delighted by its architecture, he sits ‘down for a moment’ and experiences ‘a sort of instinctive “prayer”’: that I finish the *Photo-Maman* book’. Noticing that he is ‘always asking for something’, Barthes longs for a future moment, wherein he will ‘sit in the same place, to close my eyes and ask for nothing . . . Nietzsche: not to pray, to bless’.<sup>77</sup> Such negation – of nothingness, not praying, not blessing – is itself a kind of apophatic grace capable of enlightening the suffering individual precisely because it is unknowable and neutral. The religion with which Barthes associates his mother in a note for April 15, 1977 is also one that signifies through its non-verbal declaration of kindness, nonviolence and faith:

- *Maman* and religion
- Never verbalized
- An attachment (but what kind of attachment?) to the Bayonne community
- Kindness to minorities?
- Nonviolence<sup>78</sup>

These fractured lines evolve into a commentary on Christianity in the following entry for June 7, 1978, wherein the Church, once ‘associated with the State, with Power, with Colonialism, with the Bourgeoisie, etc’ might ‘now’ be the ‘one place where you can still conceive *nonviolence*’.<sup>79</sup> As a neutral, androgyne absence of violence, ‘faith’ suddenly appears possible, especially when observed by what he calls ‘triumphant’ ‘dropout’ Christians, of whom we might count Dante, Pascal, Rancé, Chateaubriand, Michelet and Proust. Such faith has no doctrinal anchor for Barthes, and any conjectured affiliation with Christianity or Buddhism is complicated above by his reference to the Jewish Bayonne community.<sup>80</sup> Yet his scriptures were literary, as he confirms in the notes to *Vita Nova*, and his ‘salvation’ anxiously hoped for in writing. As he remarks in *Mourning Diary*, the redemption of writing is itself an appeal to a love and joy not unlike that felt by a believer: ‘only, in snatches, the image of writing as “something desirable”, haven, “salvation”, hope, in short “love”, joy. I imagine a sincerely devout woman has the same impulses towards her “God”’.<sup>81</sup> Like those

‘dropout’ Christians he celebrates, Barthes also finds in its language an irenic potential in which he might be moved out of his old life and into the new. If literature is like religion for him, then writing is like its grace, embedded in the experience of hope and suffering alike, but promising deliverance from the excesses of both.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> George Bernanos, *Journal d’un cure de champagne* (Paris: Pion, 1936), repr. Ebooks libres et gratuits, [www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/bernanos\\_journal\\_cure\\_champagne.pdf](http://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/bernanos_journal_cure_champagne.pdf), p. 263; quotations from *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> This discussion is focused on Christian grace because of its relationship to suffering. Some theologians also read Judaism as a religion of grace, embodied in God’s election of Israel as his people and his gift of the covenant.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Bernanos, *Country Priest*, p. 182.

<sup>6</sup> See Victor Burgin, ‘Barthes’ Discretion’, in *Roland Barthes: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Badmington, 4 vols (London: Routledge, 2010), III, 194-204 (p. 201).

<sup>7</sup> Barthes made no claims on belief, but, as part of a family that included a Catholic father, Protestant mother, and half-brother whose father was Jewish, he was not unfamiliar with religious language. On Barthes’ religious background, see Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 209-10; and Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: Biographie* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Diana Knight, ‘A Life Cut in Two: The Conversion Narrative of Barthes’s Vita Nova’, *Roland Barthes at 100*, University of Cardiff, 30-31 March, 2015; and see *Prétexte: Roland Barthes, Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Union Générale d’Éditions, 1978), p. 366.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 5, 7, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, pp. 178, 219.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Listening’, in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), pp. 245-260 (p. 249).

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, ‘Listening’, p. 249; Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, p. 405

- 
- <sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Deliberation', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 359-373 (p. 367).
- <sup>17</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 59.
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, Jay Prosser's 'Buddha Barthes: What Barthes saw in Photography (That he Didn't in Literature)', *Literature and Theology*, 18.2 (2004), 211-222; Gregory Steirer, 'The Other Who Does Nothing', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 13. 1 / 25 (2002), 159-167; and Steve Odin, 'Derrida & the Decentred Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 17. 1 (1990), 61-86.
- <sup>19</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008), p. 145.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 195.
- <sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces: Notes for a lecture course and seminar at the Collège de France (1976-1977)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 90.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 46.
- <sup>23</sup> Knight, 'A Life Cut in Two'; and see Compagnon, *Colloque de Cerisy*, p. 280.
- <sup>24</sup> James, *Varieties*, pp. 201, 379.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (CCEL online, 1947), p. 2550, [www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.pdf](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.pdf)
- <sup>26</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 192; St Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Albert C. Outler (CCEL online, 1955), IX. iv. 10 (p. 138), [www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.pdf](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.pdf)
- <sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1982), pp. 45, 82.
- <sup>28</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées (Thoughts)*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: F. F. Collier, 1910), 32, 33 (pp. 16-17).
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 185 (p. 68); 507 (p. 168).
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 434 (p. 148); 675 (p. 219).
- <sup>31</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 181, 185.
- <sup>32</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 159.
- <sup>33</sup> Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 425; and *Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 497.
- <sup>34</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner*, trans. Carol Clark, with *The Fugitive*, trans. Peter Collier (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 185, 196.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- <sup>37</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, pp. 19, 162.
- <sup>38</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 271, 250.
- <sup>39</sup> Proust, *Young Girls in Flower*, pp. 415-417.
- <sup>40</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Chateaubriand: *Life of Rancé*', in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), pp. 41-54 (p. 50).
- <sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 162
- <sup>42</sup> Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 69.
- <sup>43</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 150.

- 
- <sup>44</sup> Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, p. 71.
- <sup>45</sup> Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, p. 38.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- <sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 40-45.
- <sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 34.
- <sup>49</sup> Rudolphus Teeuwen, 'An Epoch of Rest: Roland Barthes' "Neutral" and the Utopia of Weariness', *Cultural Critique*, 80 (2012), 1-26 (8); Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 180.
- <sup>50</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 69.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-151.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- <sup>55</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 95.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95; Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 193.
- <sup>58</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 49.
- <sup>59</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 193.
- <sup>60</sup> Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 56-57, 148.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 182, 129.
- <sup>62</sup> Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 194.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255fn.61.
- <sup>64</sup> See M. J. Jackson, 'Proust's Churches in *A la recherche du temps perdu*', *Literature and Theology*, 5. 3 (1991), 297-310; Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 184.
- <sup>65</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 75.
- <sup>66</sup> See Mireille Ribière, *Barthes* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2008), pp. 64-65.
- <sup>67</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 30, 45.
- <sup>68</sup> Prosser, 'Buddha Barthes', pp. 212, 214; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 5.
- <sup>69</sup> James Elkins, *What Photography Is* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 86.
- <sup>70</sup> Sandra McEntire, *The Doctrine of Compunction in Medieval England: Holy Tears* (Lewiston, NY, 1990), p. 55.
- <sup>71</sup> Barthes, *Michelet*, p. 196; Barthes, *Preparation*, pp. 248, 445, fn25, *The Spiritual Journal of St Ignatius Loyola*, trans. William J. Young (Kessinger Publishing, 2006).
- <sup>72</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, pp. 37, 45, 47, 83, 107, 120, 141, 143, 238.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- <sup>74</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 80, 82.
- <sup>75</sup> See Keith Broadfoot, 'Barthes's Religious Substance: Photography and Acheiropoietos', *Image & Narrative*, 13. 3 (2012), 141-154.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- <sup>77</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 136.

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Jay R. Berkovitz, *Rites and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2007).

<sup>81</sup> Barthes, *Preparation*, p. 405; Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, p. 59.