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Photographs of the Dead: Posthumous Identity Assertion and the Possibility of Empathy in Sharon Olds's *The Dead and the Living*

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写真の中の生きる死者：
Sharon Olds's *The Dead and the Living*

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Summary

Epicurus once famously proclaimed, "Death... is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not." Art, however, can create a curious phenomenon in which one's life and death coexist in the same space; as long as the artwork lives, it continues to give life to those represented in it, even when they are corporeally dead. That is to say, the life of those portrayed in the artwork can remain "present"—in the same way that things that happen in a book are always retold in the present tense—even as their real-life models might be long "past." In the case of photography, however, theorists such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Susan Sontag contend that this phenomenon of posthumous living engenders ethical concerns, in that photographs often compromise their subjects' authenticity and individuality.

Sharon Olds's ekphrases in *The Dead and the Living* explore the possibility of a more ethical model of empathy in photographic representations of the dead, and they do so by restoring the subjects' individuality through an insistent focus on their identity. This approach is exemplified by "Photograph of the Girl," a poem based on a photograph of a girl who died in the Russian famine of 1921; in this poem, the girl in the photograph, even as she undergoes emaciation, is described as someone who would, if all had gone right, reach womanhood, as intimated by such images as the ovaries letting out the first eggs. These gendering imageries create a sense of artificial authenticity by sustaining the living identity of the dead photographic subjects. The salve of Olds's ekphrases is that, because they are cognizant of their own fictionality, their imagistic authenticity generates a more ethically conscious empathy that is less usurpatory and exploitative.

Keywords: Sharon Olds, photography, ekphrasis, gender identity, empathy

要　旨

本論文、「写真の中の生きる死者：Sharon Olds's *The Dead and the Living*」では、現代アメリカ詩人 Sharon Olds の詩集 The Dead and the Living を題材に、生きているときの死者の写真を見る、という行為の中で感じられる間接的な喪失感と、そこから生まれる共感の可能性について考察する。

William Shakespeare が Sonnet 18で表現しているように（"So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee"）、芸術作品は、その作品に描かれたものをその死後も永続させる力を持つ。死者の生前の写真の場合、そこに「芸術的生」（artistic life）と作品の中の対象の実際の死が共存するスペースが生じ、本の中の出来事が常に現在形で表されるのと同様に、死者の生が、過去のものであるだけでなく、現在にも存在し続ける。ただ、それは Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag らの代表的な写真理論で示唆されているように、倫理的な問題を孕む、オーセンティックな主体が失われたものとしてである。

Olds の ekphrasis は、この芸術的生と現実の死を通して、より倫理性の高い共感を作る可能性を模索している。"Photograph of the Girl" に代表されるように、Olds が描く死者は、写真で失われるオーセンティックな主体性を修復するかのように、その生及び性を主張する。この主体主張による「創られた真実性」（artificial authenticity）とそのフィクション性の認識の中から倫理的な共感が発生しうること、そして、それが喪失の間接性によって隠された、本当の喪失の知覚を可能にするということが、本論文の主旨である。

キーワード： シャロン・オールズ、写真、エクフラシス、アイデンティティ、共感

Epicurus once famously proclaimed, "Death… is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not" (Epicurus 169). Generally, we think of life and death as either opposites, or a part of one another that nonetheless are not simultaneously present, but art can create a curious phenomenon in which its artistic life can coexist at the same time as the death of its subject; survival is bound up with the artwork's ability to preserve both the artist and the model, since, to paraphrase Shakespeare, as long as the artwork lives, it gives life to those represented in it: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (Shakespeare 13-14). That is to say, the lives of those portrayed in artwork can continue to be "present"—in a sense that things that happen in a book are always retold in present tense—even as their real-life models might be long "past," creating a condition that may be referred to as afterlife or "life in death."

In *The Dead and the Living*, Sharon Olds introduces a series of poems that portray this "life in death," where the lives of those presumed dead are preserved in the form of photographs. *The Dead and the Living* is divided into two parts, "Part I, Poems for the Dead" and "Part II, Poems for the Living," and the first part is subdivided into "Public" and "Private." In the "Public" section of "Part I, Poems for the Dead," Olds collects instances of photographic witnessing of historical disasters and atrocities that have taken place all around the world, such as executions of Chinese revolutionaries in 1905, the Russian famine in 1921, the Armenian genocide, the Rhodesian Bush War, the Pinochet dictatorship, among others. The poems in the "public" section of *The Dead and the Living* are written from the perspective of an uninvolved, casual news reader, rather than from that of an activist, participant, or direct witness. As such, these poems present us with the following questions: what kind of emotions do these ekphrastic renditions of sufferings evoke in the readers, and

what kind of possibilities for empathy can the readers find in these poems, where losses are indirect—in a sense that they are mediated through photography and poetry—and distant—in a geographical and historical sense?

Ekphrases like Sharon Olds's "Photograph of the Girl," a seminal piece in this collection that is about a photograph of a girl who died in the Russian drought and famine of 1921, point to this juxtaposition of the actual death and the artistic life of the photographed subject, while resisting the universalizing aestheticization of the subject; in the case of "Photograph of the Girl," the poem is marked by the description of the girl's physicality, which, even when it undergoes emaciation, preserves the identity of a girl who is on the verge of reaching womanhood. With a particular focus on gendering images, Olds's poems highlight the effort to assert the photographed subjects' individualized identity, and in that process, the vague feeling of discomforting identification one initially feels when looking at photographs of disasters and sufferings in some historically or geographically distant locale develops into a fuller empathy. Gender imageries, such as those employed in the Olds poem, can produce a representation of the dead that enables viewers to feel as though the deceased subject continues to assert his or her living identity, and that is one anchor that triggers readerly empathy in the cases of indirect, distant loss.

Before examining the possibility of empathy in the instance of distant loss mediated through ekphrasis, it helps to survey the nature of photography as art by examining some of the canonical texts. In the development of critical theory, photography has often been associated with the sense of death, inauthenticity, and deindividuation. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes makes this comment on a photograph of a young man condemned to death: "By giving me an absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this

catastrophe" (Osborne 38). Here, Barthes talks about the elusiveness of the photographed subject, inability to find his true likeness in the photo, and seeing death in the living figure of him. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin remarks on the loss of authenticity, or aura, in photography: removal from the specific context denudes the art of its tradition, history, and uniqueness of existence that he calls "aura."

> In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art, its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence and nothing else that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. (Benjamin 253)

And Susan Sontag, most notably in *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* and elsewhere, cautions us on the deindividuating effect of photography, claiming that concerned photography has done as much to deaden our conscience as to arouse it. Below are the memorable words from her New Yorker article in 2002, "Looking at War":

> Making suffering loom larger, by globalising it, may spur people to feel they ought to 'care' more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed. (Sontag 2002)

Combining these theories together, we get a panoramic view of photography as a medium of impersonality, with deindividuation and inauthenticity as keywords: it is a venue where universalization goes hand in hand with the loss of the particularized subject, triggered by deindividuation that creates inauthenticity. In Barthes, it occurs because the photograph is a catastrophe, in that one can never find the actual likeness of the photographed subject in it. In

the Benjaminian sense, reproducibility removes photographs from history and context, and makes it a manipulatable medium, fading the aura of the subject. And in Sontag, universalizing—or "globalizing," which is to say deindividuating—tendencies of the photograph strip the photographed subject of what makes the subject who he or she is. After all, to "photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed," according to Sontag (Sontag 2005, 10). In short, a photograph is a medium in which the photographed subject becomes as lost as it is retained in the process of its still preservation.

The objective of the present paper is not so much to criticize these views of photography—as influential as these theories are, plenty of critics have long debated over various aspects of them—but rather to analyze the poems in *The Dead and the Living* as instances of the curious coexistence of life and death that is made possible despite this deindividuating, inauthenticizing process of photography. An ekphrasis like Olds's "Photograph of the Girl" is a representative case of this "life in death" phenomenon, where the photographed subject continues to retain and assert her identity. "Photograph of the Girl," published in 1984, is largely composed of a description of the girl in the photograph from the 1921 famine in Russia. Like the photograph of the condemned young man in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, this poem also describes a girl who is about to die in the not-so-distant future. The most notable feature of this poem is that its gaze is on the evidence of the girl's life. In this poem, only the caption suggests her impending death, and little else does: "The caption says / she is going to starve to death that winter / with millions of others" (12-14). This interlocution makes it seem as though the speaker of the poem is not convinced, or is not able to find evidence, of the girl's looming death anywhere in the photograph itself, outside of the words of the caption. And the

caption's universalizing—that she would die with "millions of others"—also casts a doubt as to whether this specified girl would actually die or not: did the photographer or the caption-writer actually confirm this particular photographed girl's death? Her death may be a simple presumption on the part of the caption-writer, and the lyric speaker's interlocution raises this very possibility: viewers of the photograph still see her as alive, and they wouldn't know if she'd actually die.

Part of this skepticism stems from the poem's particularization of the girl in the photograph. This girl is referred to with a definite article: "the girl." Even if the girl remains unnamed, she is given dignity as a definite, particularized individual, rather than one of the deindividuated many, as in "a girl." In contrast, the title of the poem refers to the photograph as a concept noun; the photograph is not specified, or even made into an indefinite singular, but is turned into a conceptual object. That may be a function of the fact that this particular photograph may not have actually existed, but this antithetical treatment of the photograph and the girl in the photograph is strange enough to draw our attention.

Furthermore, what's especially striking in this poem is the focus on the gender and sex identity of this girl. Side by side with drought, heat, and hunger, the poem focuses on her biological maturation: puberty, ovaries, and her first eggs let out from them.

> ... Each day she grows thinner, and her bones
> grow longer, porous. The caption says
> she is going to starve to death that winter
> with millions of others. Deep in her body
> the ovaries let out her first eggs,
> golden as drops of grain. (11-16)

Reproductive organs are odd things to focus on in the time of famine. Menstruation is one of the things that can stop in times of starvation, and this imagery functions as a resistance to that reality, as the biological fertility extends to and merges with the sight of agricultural fertility: "golden as drops of grain." And this resistance takes a form of particularization of identity, which is achieved through the poetic descriptions of the girl's physicality; body parts are meticulously described, such as in the depiction of bony features and the radius of her arm.

Another curious feature of the poem is the statement in line 10: "She cannot be not beautiful" (10). Conspicuous for its double-negative, this statement may, on one hand, suggest an assumption that, extrapolating from her features in the starved state, the girl's "normal," non-starved appearance would be that of a beautiful girl; on the other hand, it could also point to this poem's effort to extract the truth of this girl. John Keats has famously argued in "Ode to a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." In this passage, beauty does not necessarily mean that she is physically attractive; what it means is that the beauty of this girl lies in her truthfulness to her existence. The word beauty is used here in two ways: first, as a sign of her gender identity, a criterion of judgment associated more routinely with women than with men; and secondly, as visibly extractable evidence of the girl's truth, her true state as a living being.

Furthermore, line 8 focuses on the "layers of clothes" worn by this girl in the midst of the heat season; wearing multiple layers of clothing is a social act of doing gender, a concept formulated by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (West and Zimmerman 1987, 125-151). If the puberty imagery is suggestive of the girl's biological identity, this clothing imagery solidifies the girl's gender identity as it arises in the interactional level of social expectations. Traditional gender imagery is used purposefully here; in a normative social setting, doing gender can be "a new trap house understanding of gender" where

noncompliance with the prescribed gender code can become punishable as social deviance (West and Zimmerman 2009, 112-122), but in this drought—a condition in which the girl is so emaciated that she is hard-pressed to assert her gender identity—doing gender is an act of resistance. Adding up these features—attention on body parts, the statement about beauty, and the attempt to do gender—this poem adumbrates the gender identity of the photographed girl by focusing on her physical, biological, social existence.

The strange "life in death" in "Photograph of the Girl" is achieved precisely by this focus on identity, which is sustained through particularized attention to the photographed girl's gender. While there is a plethora of theories on identity, one common thread is that identity is a product of history, which this poem reconstructs: 1921, Russia, drought, famine, the presumed age of the girl. If obfuscation of history and context leads to inauthenticity, as Benjamin suggests, this ekphrasis restores, even as a poetic reconstruction, precisely this historical dimension—that is, both personal and social histories behind this photograph. With the addition of this historical element, the photographed girl is brought to life as an individual in this artwork through her biological operation and social attribution, as "the" girl in the photograph. She is, of course, not entirely free of universalization; there are, after all, "millions of others" who died in that winter alongside her, as the caption reminds us, and much of the biographical information about this girl continues to remain inaccessible to viewers of the photograph. And as critics like to caution us, "the poem ends ambiguously" (Walker 201); a totalizing triumph of individuality over deindividuation is not what this poem presents to us. But even as other starvation victims loom large in the background, she's alone in this ekphrasis, and her body is hers alone; she's not an idea, but a palpable form. In this sense, the photographed girl continues to be an individual even in the pressure of universalization, and she is alive, even if she's in actuality dead.

Another example of this ekphrastic identity-assertion of "life in death" is "Nevsky Prospekt." The title indicates that the photographed location is the main street in the city of St. Petersburg, Russia. The subtitle of the poem suggests that the photograph was taken in July, 1917: the transitional period between the February and October revolutions, after the old regime was replaced in the initial revolution by the provisional government, which was later removed by the Bolshevik government in the latter revolution. The target of this poem's sympathy is clear enough from the sarcasm of the closing line: "*This is more important than your life*" (19). History books may indicate that these revolutions are important events, but this poem deems the lives of people depicted in this photo to be more important than the revolutions. "Nesvky Prospekt" and other poems in the "public" section of *The Dead and the Living* are—to put it bluntly, if one must remain faithful to one's aesthetic assessment of the poetic work—less artistically accomplished than "Photograph of the Girl," but all poems in this section have the shared goal: the project of "Nevsky Prospekt" is also the restoration of the individual.

This restorative effort, however, is not a facile process. In the first two lines, the poem acknowledges, "It's an old photo, very black and / very white" (1-2). Distance between the event and the viewer is made apparent, in terms of time—"old"—and medium—"photo." And the black and white photo—"very black and / very white"—creates even more distance, as something symbolic of age and as something divergent from the color vision through which the majority of people see the world. This distance becomes an obstacle to the identity-assertion of the victims in the photograph and the empathy that is engendered from it.

The trope to overcome this distance is largely similar to that of "Photograph of the Girl"—the gendering images of a woman lifting up "her heavy skirt as she runs" (3), an old woman "in massive black" turning and

looking behind her (6-7), among others—but "Nevsky Prospekt" adds something extra: a model of empathy that goes beyond mere identification. In *Empathy: Its Nature and Uses*, Robert L. Katz modifies Theodor Reik's classic theory in *Listening with the Third Ear* and proposes a theory of empathy that develops in four stages: identification, incorporation, reverberation, and detachment (Clark 100). In this model, the first three stages explore various levels of intersubjective entanglement between the empathizer and the empathized, ending with detachment that pulls away the empathizer's subjective involvement. The defining feature of this model is the paradoxical dynamics of engagement and disengagement: one is at once emotionally engaged and also sufficiently disengaged with the target of one's empathy, so as to retain fuller cognition of the other's condition. And "Nevsky Prospekt" analyzes what is at the heart of this paradox:

> The wide grey stone square
> is dotted with fallen inky shapes
> and dropped white hats. Everything else is
> heaving away like a sea from the noise we
> feel in the silence of the photograph
> the way the deaf see sound... (12-17)

All things, except for the men, women, and children depicted in the photograph, are receding away, and all that's left is the "noise we / feel in the silence of the photograph": the feelings evoked by the photograph. The "noise" we feel from the silent photograph is an imagined construct. The photographs do not speak; the noise is a synesthetic creation. This imagined noise is likened to "the way the deaf see sound." The deaf cannot hear, but the auditory, a sense inaccessible for the deaf, turns visual in their mind's ears. The

engagement-disengagement paradox of empathy arises from this inaccessibility, and the process of empathy is at once an acknowledgment of this inaccessibility and an imagination, understood as fictive construct, of what we know to be inaccessible.

As we go further into the "public" section of *The Dead and the Living*, the initially invisible speaker becomes more and more involved. In "Issues," Olds depicts a scene from the Rhodesian Bush War; the subtitle indicates that the photograph is from 1978. In this poem, the speaking "I" appears for the first time in this volume, paving a way for a fuller intersubjective engagement that culminates in the final poem of the section, "Things That Are Worse Than Death." The "public" section begins with a speaker who describes the photographs but steadfastly remains in the background, and ends with the speaker taking on an active role, imagining herself in the position of the Chilean family who is tortured in front of each other.

In "Issues," the sudden surfacing of the "I" suggests that the lyric speaker is beginning to assert her own subjectivity, rather than remaining a mere observant. Through this clear demarcation of her subjectivity that is separate from those of the victims, the speaker guards against one of the pitfalls that compromises the ethics of empathy: usurpation, which, to put it flatly, is an act of putting one's words into someone else's mouth.

> I can see the pale spider-belly head of the
> newborn who lies on the lawn, the web of
> veins at the surface of her scalp, her skin
> grey and gleaming, the clean line of the
> bayonet down the center of her chest.
> I see her mother's face, beaten and
> beaten into the shape of a plant,

a cactus with grey spines and broad
dark maroon blooms.
I see her arm stretched out across her baby,
wrist resting, heavily, still, across the
tiny ribs. (2-13)

One of the distinguishing marks of this poem is the repeated phrase: "I can see," "I see," "I see." The repetitions ascertain that the scene depicted here is subjective, mediated and circumscribed by the speaker's vision; the speaker refrains from making assumptions beyond what she sees with her own eyes. The emergence of the speaking "I" voice signals the speaker's recovery of her own sense of identity, as well as her awareness that she too is an individual that is different and separate from the victims. That is to say, the speaker wants to respond to the victims as a person and, to borrow the language of clinical psychotherapy, not "as an object in a climate of empathic understanding" (Clark 101).

Although the Reik-Katz model of empathy may move prescriptively from identification, incorporation, reverberation, to detachment, Olds's model is not so neatly compartmentalized: while the "I" voice signals a move away from the immersion in the photographed subject's subjectivity, it also does not mean total detachment. That the speaker observes the scene of the suffering but avoids speculating into the interiority of the victims does resemble the behavior of a clinician who objectively tries to make sense of the situation of the victims. But at the same time, the voice also turns into a crude outburst of a frustrated witness that is hardly like one of a clinician—"Don't talk to me about / politics. I've got eyes, man" (14-15). Keeping a precarious balance in the attachment-detachment threshold, Olds's lyric speaker walks the tightrope to avoid exploitative usurpation and to strive toward ethical empathy by

engaging with the photographed subjects intersubjectively: shunning speculative imaginations but hearing imaginative "noise" from the photographs.

The project in the "public" section of *The Dead and the Living*, at least as it regards the poems in which the photographs depict the dead subjects while they were still alive, is the subjectivation of those victims. This subjectivation emerges from the lyric focus on the identity of the victims; as best as one can gather as a viewer of the news in a faraway land, Olds scrupulously collect details, in a manner that one critic characterizes as "modified naturalism" (Wright 160). Those details enliven the photographed subjects and sustain their life in death, allowing them to assert their own living identity, against the pressure of universalization and against the erasure by death. And what gives life to those details that Olds collect in these poems is the gendering imagery: the multi-layered clothing, skirts, ovaries, the first eggs, and beauty. These images, while sometimes oppressive in a gender-normative society, become affirmative in the otherwise nameless, estranged photographic subjects, for they create a sense of artificial authenticity: a kind of authenticity that we understand to be imaginary, but that we are willing to delude ourselves into believing in its genuineness despite our full awareness of its falsity.

In all, there are three implications in the identity-assertion in this state of ekphrastic "life in death." First, this shaking of the boundary between life and death can lead the living viewers to question their own status as a living being: if the dead can be alive, even if only in an art form, can the living be also dead? If the dead can be represented as alive in art, our death may also be captured in it, and this reversibility reveals the profound loss, where, as hypothesized in Paul de Man's theory of prosopopoeia, the living can be "struck dumb," frozen in the anticipatory occurrence of their own death (de Man 928). As early as the Roman period, writers often saw their subjects', as well as their own, survival as being bound up with the art form's survival. Aside from Shakespeare's

proclamation in Sonnet 18, Romantic poets, in particular, are known for this culture of posterity, the desire to live in the afterlife of an artwork; the threat to the survival of books is literally and figuratively a nightmare, as seen in the dream of the Arab Sage in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which portrays the deluge that destroys books as a palpable embodiment of this threat. And for these writers, writing their own epitaphs isn't an uncommon action, whether it's W. B. Yeats's later poems or John Berryman's "opus posthumous" sequence of *The Dream Songs*. There is a certain sense of discomfort in seeing a dead person alive in a photo; it makes us discover death in our living existence.

The second implication is a derivation of the first; most reductively speaking, the simplest and most straightforward feelings that we have when we see a photograph of someone who we know is dead are varying degrees of sadness and identification—the feeling of "what if it happens to me?" These feelings stem from this shaking of the boundary effected by art forms; a curious system of anticipatory identification is triggered in the living, as the living and the dead become connected through this reversibility, where the dead can be given a representation of a live subject while the living authors can write their own eulogy in anticipation of their own death. In addition to our doubt about our own existence, these photographs also create this tenebrous bond of identification between the dead and the living.

The third implication of this identity assertion of the dead, as living in a poem, is that it creates a new possibility for the ethics of photography. Sontag's criticism of universalization, Benjamin's opining of the loss of aura, and Barthes's confessed discomfort with not finding the true likeness in the photos of his deceased mother despite the objective similitude—these all come from the same root: ambivalence about universalizing and individualizing, where reproducibility takes the photographed subject further away from the origin. While universalizing is inevitable in many ways, a portraiture that accentuates

identity assertion, as done in Olds's ekphrasis, creates sufficient waverings that bring the photographed subject closer to her origin, and allow for a more ethical identification with the subject. That softens the "violence" of photography, and helps to maintain a portion of the authenticity, in an effort to enable the photograph to survive its death. Sharon Olds's poem points to a possibility that ekphrasis, as an interpretative site, can facilitate this process of identity assertion. And this ambivalent interpretation can become the seed of a more ethical form of empathy.

As for what this "ethical empathy" entails, it may help to review some of the currently dominant assumptions about empathy. In general, empathy is thought to be automatic. Adam Smith explains this process in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

> The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation. (Smith 4)

Smith's model of empathy is that it is similar to reflex; it occurs in us without us knowing it, as we do when we watch a tightrope walker in the air. The passage suggests that it involves a certain type of identification: "as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation." In plain English, one might be tempted to say that empathy is about "putting oneself in someone else's shoes." According to Smith, this process occurs naturally and unconsciously.

Psychologists have noted, however, that this feeling of empathy is not always automatic—nor is it necessarily desirable that it be. Perceivers commonly fail to empathize with outgroup targets, and sometimes even enjoy outgroup members' suffering (Cikara & Van Bavel, as quoted in Zaki 2014, 1608). Furthermore, the famed phenomenon of "diffusion of responsibility" has

shown that empathy often diminishes even in response to seemingly irrelevant contextual shifts, such as when multiple observers, as compared to a single observer, witness a target's suffering (Darley & Latane, as quoted in Zaki 2014, 1608). Aside from the failure of empathy, conventional wisdom tells us that clinicians, caregivers, and others in professions that demand a certain level of emotional involvement with clients or patients are advised to withdraw empathy in some contexts. After all, empathy is draining, and it makes us vulnerable.

An experiment conducted by Mark Pancer in 1979 at the University of Saskatchewan suggests that we shut down empathy when we find it expedient to do so. In this experiment, a table was set up in a busy tunnel between the library and the arts building at the University of Saskatchewan campus. The researchers secretly measured the distance people kept from the table while walking past it. Two features of the situation were manipulated. The first was whether or not the table had a box placed on it requesting charitable donations. The second was who was manning the table: no one, an undergraduate, or an undergraduate sitting in a wheelchair. Both the request to donate and the presence of a handicapped person were considered triggers to empathy. The end result was that, instead of approaching these triggers, students avoided them: they were found walking a wider arc around the table in the presence of either of the triggers and keeping the greatest distance in the face of both the handicapped student and donation box (Pancer, et. al., as quoted in Zaki 2013). Aside from the well-known phenomenon of "collapse of compassion"—a theory that stipulates that, as needs for help increase and become overwhelming, the degree of compassion people feel ironically tends to decrease (Cameron and Payne 1)—what this experiment suggests to us is that there is a switch that turns off our empathic capacity: in this instance, an unwelcome nudging to donate to charity, in the form that people may have found coercive.

By reversible logic, however, if we're able to turn off our empathy, we may also be capable of turning it on. And testing the human capacity to choose to be empathic seems to be the enterprise of *The Dead and the Living*, particularly in the Public section of Part I, Poems for the Dead. All of the poems in this section are, from the point of view of an ordinary American reader, things that happened somewhere faraway, in some distant enough past, or in some unfamiliar enough people who aren't like them: people that many of the readers might classify as "outgroup" and thus are not automatically a natural target of empathy. The list of poems collected in this section, along with their locations and time periods, reads as follows: "Ideographs," in China, 1905; "Photograph of the Girl," in Russia, 1921; "Race Riot, Tulsa, 1921," in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1921; "Portrait of a Child," in Armenia, 1910s to 1920s; "Nevsky Prospekt," in Russia, 1917; "The Death of Marilyn Monroe," in USA, 1962; "The Issues," in Rhodesia, 1978; "Aesthetics of the Shah," in Iran, 1978-79; "Things That Are Worse Than Death," in Chile, 1970-80s. Among these, "The Death of Marilyn Monroe" is somewhat of an outlier, in that it occurred in the United States just twenty years or so ago at the time of the publication of *The Dead and the Living*; one might, however, be able to make a case that celebrities live lives that are far enough distant from ordinary people's that they become difficult to empathize. "Race Riot, Tulsa, 1921" is the only other poem that takes place within North America, but the incident was over half a century old. Other than those, the poems' locales are all somewhere remote, geographically and chronologically.

The aforementioned list suggests that the question that Olds asks through these poems may be this: How can we, ordinary people sitting comfortably in our living room couch, be responsibly engaged, and be able to choose to empathize with these geographically, chronologically "foreign" people, through an indirect medium of photography, one fraught with ethical conundrums, in a way that isn't usurping like an act of putting one's words into their mouths? As

far as we know, Sharon Olds had not gone abroad to witness or participate personally in the resistance in El Salvador, Chile, Russia, or elsewhere; she did not join the Peace Corps, work as overseas correspondents, or volunteer for partisan armies abroad, unlike some of her contemporaries who became poet-witnesses or poet-activists, in the modes of Carolyn Forché or Margaret Randall. How do we respond, as human beings, to fellow human beings who suffer from our own inhumanity, and speak and act upon what we've seen and heard, and not directly experienced?

The Dead and the Living proposes that the unsettling discomfort that we feel when we see photographs like those captured in its poems can be the rumblings of ethical empathy. According to the theories of photography surveyed earlier in this paper, photographs are, in some ways, an exploitative, appropriative form of media that robs the photographed subject of its individuality. As such, photographs of people's suffering often make us feel as though we're being coerced into being empathic, and that is an uncomfortable feeling. In a recent example, the photograph of a drowned three-year old Syrian boy was powerful enough to sway many people in Europe to admit refugees into their countries. At the same time, numerous accounts of how this photograph was forged—unsubstantiated allegations that the boy's body was moved to a more optimal location for a photo opportunity—popped up, and some sizable minority of people continue to believe this largely discounted claim. While these particular claims of fakery are in no small part driven by egotism or xenophobia, there also are people who feel a genuine hesitation about turning the suffering of a small child into a tool to coerce people into taking empathic actions. This hesitance, as resulting from a clash between profound sorrow and resistance toward it—between the inclination to empathize with other people's suffering and the reluctance to exploit or usurp it for the sake of promoting one's cause—holds within it the germ of a more

ethical form of empathy. And one building block of this ethical empathy—particularly in these cases of distant or distanced loss, of strangers, in photographs—is artificial authenticity, which burgeons forth from the identity-assertion of the dead, their life in death, gendering imagery, and power of detail, as exemplified in poems like "Photograph of the Girl."

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