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LOOKING THROUGH WORDS:  
HISTORIES OF THE VISUAL IMAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE

By

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William Galperin

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by NELLICKAL JACOB

Dissertation Director:  
William Galperin

“Looking Through Words” explores the intersection of the literary and the visual in the nineteenth century—a period distinguished by an unprecedented investment in new visual technologies that created and fed the demand for mechanically produced images in an increasingly lucrative visual culture. But alongside this exponential increase in specular technologies, which seemed to release the image from intentional control, the nineteenth century was also witness to a range of intellectual developments that relocated the idea of sight to an increasingly psychologized register of mental images.

Literature in the nineteenth-century represents an important venue for the elaboration and mediation of the high stakes involved in this partitioning of the visual image. Even while marking its distance from the exponential growth in technologies of commercial reproduction, literature finds itself frequently engaged with the idea of visual image.

My dissertation is about the enduring drive within the literary to re-visit this breach in the idea of the visual. It tracks four different literary engagements with the modalities of

this internal division over the course of the nineteenth century. While the first chapter examines the unique word-picture experiments of Blake's illuminated poetry, the second analyzes Shelley's ekphrastic poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci" and places it against the broader canvas of Romantic ekphrastic poetry. The third chapter places Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alongside nineteenth-century photography and explores the novel's discursive engagement with the legal debates on copyright and authorship occasioned by the advent of photography. My final chapter extends this analysis of literature and photography through an examination of the magic-picture tradition—a literary sub-genre consisting primarily of short fictional texts preoccupied with paintings or photographs that behave out of character. In all four chapters the visual is the site of a conceptual turbulence that occasions a re-negotiation of the modalities through which real and imagined images inhabit literary forms.

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## INTRODUCTION

The turn of the nineteenth century marks a Copernican revolution in the idea of the visual.<sup>1</sup> The eye as the passive receiver of external images separates out from the notion of an ideal vision that strives to rid itself of servitude to an objective reality. The Romantics in particular, it is alleged, attempted to secede from the realm of sight understood in narrow sensory terms and institute a more idealist aesthetics that eschewed the pictorialist poetics of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, for instance, drives a wedge between the “waxen image[s]” assumed by a specular model of sight and the “living images” illumined by the imagination.<sup>3</sup> The mirror and the lamp, as Abrams has shown, take antonymic positions and in doing so set up an opposition between the reflective optics of the mirror and the active visionary optics of the lamp.<sup>4</sup> This cleavage, between, what de Man calls, the intentional structure of Romantic image and mechanistically derived images of the material world, institutes a hierarchy between the

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<sup>1</sup> For the more well known versions of this thesis in visual studies see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jean Starobinski, *1789: The Emblems of Reason*, trans. Barbara Bray (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential versions of this view is Fredrick Pottle’s “The Eye and the Object in the Poetry of Wordsworth” in Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 273-287. See also Harold Bloom, “Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry”, in *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 37-52 and Kenneth R. Johnston, “The Idiom of Vision”, in Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth* (New York: Columbia UP, 1972) 1-39. For two more recent attempts to deconstruct this opposition between the external eye and inner sight, employing Freudian and cognitive science perspectives, respectively, see William Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed., E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), bk. 8, 435 and bk. 6, 313.

<sup>4</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953).

ideal images generated by the imagination and the fallen images of a discredited sensationalist epistemology.<sup>5</sup>

However, such a falling out between the image and imagination cuts both ways. While the imagination struggles to shadow forth that which it sees without the aid of a pre-existing visual lexicon, the image also finds itself cut adrift from its familiar moorings. As Forest Pyle puts it, “if the imagination can take leave of the image, this also means that the image can circulate without the imprimatur or authorization of the imagination.”<sup>6</sup> The visual image thus bifurcated embarks on a dual career prone to frequent chiasmic crossings in the course of the nineteenth century. Historically, the nineteenth century is distinguished by an unprecedented craze for “optical gadgetry” that created and fed the demand for mechanically produced images in an increasingly lucrative visual culture.<sup>7</sup> But alongside this exponential increase in specular technologies, which seemed to release the image from intentional control, the nineteenth century was also witness to a range of intellectual developments that relocated the idea of sight to an increasingly psychologized register of mental images.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984)

<sup>6</sup> Forest Pyle, “The Romantic Image of the Intentional Structure”, *Releasing the Image: From Literature to New Media* Ed. Jacques Khalip and Robert Mitchell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 188.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase is from Susan R. Horton’s essay “Were They Having Fun Yet?: Victorian Optical Gadgetry, Modernist Selves” in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* Ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For the Romantic reaction against the popular entertainments that new visual technologies afforded see Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the shift from sight understood in terms of Cartesian perspectivalism to a new interest in the visible as located “within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body” see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 70. For the emergence nineteenth-century theories of visual perception that attempted to connect the physiology and psychology of vision, see Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c.1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 30-40. See also Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machines of the Visible” *The Cinematic Apparatus* ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980). Comolli, describing the “frenzy of the visible” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, writes: “At the very same time that it is fascinated and gratified by the multiplicity

Literature in the nineteenth-century represents an important venue for the elaboration and mediation of the high stakes involved in this partitioning of the visual image. Even while marking its distance from the exponential growth in technologies of commercial reproduction, literature finds itself frequently engaged with the idea of visual image.

My dissertation is about the enduring drive within the literary to re-visit this breach in the idea of the visual. It tracks four different literary engagements with the modalities of this internal division over the course of the nineteenth century. While the first chapter examines the unique word-picture experiments of Blake's illuminated poetry, the second analyzes Shelley's ekphrastic poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci" and places it against the broader canvas of Romantic ekphrastic poetry. The third chapter places Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* alongside nineteenth-century photography and explores the novel's discursive engagement with the legal debates on copyright and authorship occasioned by the advent of photography. My final chapter extends this analysis of literature and photography through an examination of the magic-picture tradition—a literary sub-genre consisting primarily of short fictional texts preoccupied with paintings or photographs that behave out of character.

While all four chapters focus on literature's transactions with the visual, the historical span covered is not restricted to a recognizably discrete literary period. Moving across and between divergent moments of the long nineteenth century, this dissertation aims to explore continuities and transformations over a temporal expanse that covers both the Romantic and Victorian periods. Two of the literary-visual intersections under

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of scopic instruments which lay a thousand views beneath its gaze, the human eye loses its immemorial privilege; the mechanical eye or the photographic machine now sees *in its place*, and in certain aspects with more sureness...Decentred, in panic, thrown into confusion by all this new magic of the visible, the human eye finds itself affected with a series of limits and doubts", 122, 123.

consideration here are located in the Romantic period, while the other two focus on mid to late nineteenth-century literary texts.

Such a long historical perspective brings into focus a number of enduring themes and chronic blockages in the ongoing debates around literary-visual relations. For instance, the notion that visual images are static, spatially oriented representations that are formally resistant to motion and temporality is an idea that persists notwithstanding considerable conceptual pressure throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, it is possible to discern over the long span of the nineteenth century both a separate history of steadily evolving attempts to conceive of the animated image as well as an equally robust record of attempts to re-affirm the petrific and non-dynamic quality of pictures. The modalities as well as the literary stakes involved in negotiating the visual undergo a variety of alterations over the course of the nineteenth century but a number of familiar features of the longer debate about images and their relationship with words endure.

Another advantage of not locating an investigation of this sort within a narrowly defined literary period is the freedom it affords in selecting contingent moments that even while lacking in the capacity to epitomize a particular period, possess a radiating power that illuminates a particular constellation of ideas that most often does not confine itself to clear temporal boundaries. Such concretely local moments when allowed relative freedom from their period moorings enable a perspective of the larger whole that can discern new trajectories and linkages within the field of literary-visual relations.

Barring Blake's composite texts, the visual images that come to haunt the literary texts I examine are constructed by words alone. Their formal invisibility reflects and accentuates the thematics of recalcitrance and alienation that mark these images and their

relationship to the words that attempt to describe them. The medial distinction, I argue, provides the necessary traction that keeps the visual and the verbal in a state of suspended animation—although these images are verbally produced, their fundamental foreignness often places them beyond the cognitive armature of the narrative. Their double alienation, resulting from their medial difference from the texts that contain them and the notions of intractability they represent, gets fused, explicitly or otherwise, and come to represent an alternate axis of meanings within the text.

Conceptually, Blake's illuminated poetry lies at both the beginning and end of the visual-verbal trajectory that my dissertation describes. His transmutation of the visual sign represents the first and final attempt within the literary to 'show' images that are simultaneously external and internal to cognition.

For the denigration of a visual economy that takes for granted the "ontological priority of the sensory object" does not lead on to a repudiation of the visible in Blake.<sup>9</sup> His illuminated poetry creates an inter-medial zone of contact between words and images in which the magic of pictures can no longer be a function of their absence from the text. In other words, his poetry does not participate in the "virtually institutionalized bracketing" of the visible that sets the stage for its uncanny return in many of the Romantic and Victorian texts that are the subject of later chapters.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Blake attempts to emancipate the fallen visual image—tainted through its association with the mechanistic epistemology of Locke and Newton—by staging its dialectic encounter with the verbal. The synthetic products that issue from the uncompromising dialectical energy

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<sup>9</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Galperin, *The Return of the Visible*, 31.

between the words and pictures of Blake's illuminated books transvalue the gap between the sensory and the ideal image.

To that end, Blake's illuminated poetry continually draws our attention to the space that lies at the cusp of the visual and the verbal. While Blake heroically resists the subsumption of this space into either the visual or the verbal, his image/texts mark the limits of a certain kind of inter-medial experimentation.<sup>11</sup> His utopian desire to restore the divided sign to a prelapsarian unity, ironically, focalizes and perhaps, even precipitates the more or less absolute distinction between words and images in the nineteenth century. Blake's dialectic images occupy a heterotropic zone of intermediality that set in motion a set of related thematic trajectories that I will briefly outline below.

In attempting to bring about a rapprochement between words and pictures, Blake's poetry continually draws our attention to the intersection of the inside and the outside, a theme that endures in all the texts that I examine later. The mixed-media of Blake's illuminated poetry draws us into a vortex of signs that forces us to recognize the fragility of our distinctions between mental and phenomenal.

In Blake's poetry, as in most of the other literary texts I examine in later chapters, the recasting of the visual is brought about by defamiliarizing it from its condition of static pictoricity. Pictures, once released from their role as inert representations come to occupy a position that destabilizes the ratio between the inside and the outside. In all the texts under consideration here, the idea that pictures can have an 'inside' produces a rupture in time-space relations predicated on the distinction between the objective truth of pictures and the dynamic model of consciousness that words represent. In undoing this distinction

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<sup>11</sup> My usage of the term "image/text" follows W.J.T. Mitchell's use of the same, which he distinguishes from "imagetext" and "image-text" in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 89.

these texts set up an encounter with ‘mobile’ visual images that have a profoundly destabilizing effect on their narratives.

The mobility of the image, in the texts I explore, is continually in tension with the idea of still images. Such a dialectics of immobility and animation, as I demonstrate below, constitutes a major connective thread that runs through all four chapters. To see its persistence over the century-long span examined in my dissertation is to recognize that the notion of the image as the spatialization of a frozen temporality was never immune from contestation. Visual images had dreamt of their release from the immobility of their spatialized prisons, long before the Lumiere brothers showcased their new technology before an awestruck audience in 1895. The history of visual technology, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is deeply engaged with the possibility of images that have a temporality other than that of the frozen instant.<sup>12</sup>

Blake’s creative retooling of the visual sign is particularly designed to free his image/texts from the petrifications of a naturalist or illusionistic view of pictures. But, in Blake the forces of congealment and expansion are subject to a relentless dialectical process that prevents a static differentiation between Urizenic forces of solidification and redemptive power of the imagination to restore animation and flow. As Mitchell has demonstrated Blake’s pictures seem to be structured in terms of a “kind of systole and diastole of expanding and contracting forms.”<sup>13</sup> Often, therefore, one finds “the paradoxical fusion of expansion and contraction, movement and stasis” within the same

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<sup>12</sup> For a relatively recent elaboration of this idea see Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c.1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 53.



image or figure.<sup>14</sup> But in addition to this recurrent contest between petrification and animation, Blake's illuminated texts allow images an unprecedented mobility within and between his texts. His unique method of composition not only rids the image of its illustrative function but also endows it with an active and agential role within the interpretative field of the text. This is achieved primarily through images that intersect with the verbal plane in ways that are only possible when they are conceived in non-static terms. Furthermore, as my reading of Blake's *First Book of Urizen* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* suggests, the use of reverse ekphrastic images is one indicator of Blake's attempts to introduce and assimilate a narrative principle within the space of the visual image.

Romantic ekphrasis, the subject of my second chapter, marks the distance between Blake's virtuoso, multi-media experiments and a poetics that derives its traction from the acknowledgement of an unbridgeable gap between real and imagined images. Ekphrastic poems thematize the absence of the visual artifact by an ironical over-investment in the attempt to 'verbalize' their presence. In drawing our attention to the absent presence that resides at the heart of these poems, ekphrasis offers a full-scale engagement with the gap between the seeable and the sayable.

Romantic ekphrasis is a symptom of the ideal interiorizations of the visible in Romantic poetry and its sheer numbers attest to the pervasive anxiety about the perceived gulf between the fallen image and its ideal re-construction in the poet's imagination. The alienated visual artifact and its critical location within the body of the ekphrastic text is

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<sup>14</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Poetic and Pictorial Imagination in Blake's *The Book of Urizen*", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1969) 103. See in particular Mitchell's reading of Plate 8 of *The Book of Urizen* on p. 103-104.

the focus of my second chapter, which takes Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci" as representing the very limits of the ekphrastic gamble to narrate the image.

In Shelley's poem, the idea of the animated image, although not present before our eyes, is the Trojan horse admitted into the citadel of language. Shelley's engagement with the potent image of Medusa—a classical figure representing the perils of looking and being looked at—offers us, in my reading of the poem, a revisionist view of the visual image and its relationship to motion. Premised on the relative immobility of the visual image, the ekphrastic project in Shelley recognizes its own false premises and attempts to come to terms with a mobile image that outpaces the verbal in terms of its kinetic powers. It is this repressed kinesis, lying unnoticed and outlawed within the visual sign, which gives Medusa her storied power to petrify all who dare to countenance her. Her proto-photographic power to 'transfix' her victims—thereby reducing them to the level of static images—makes Medusa a particularly apt symbol of the rich ambivalence that mechanically produced images evoke in the nineteenth century.

Photography provides the context for my exploration, in the third and fourth chapters, of the magic-picture tradition that organizes itself around the unnatural influence wielded by pictures on the events that are narrated in the text. But before I introduce the linkages between photography and the magic-picture tradition, let me briefly discuss how the photograph is a material embodiment of some of the conceptual tensions that are evident in earlier chapters that focus on the pre-photographic past of the nineteenth century.

Photography potentiates the breach between mental images and images that derive from the world of phenomenal reality by appearing to confirm the secession of mechanically produced images from the pictures originating in and produced by the

mind. The automaticity of the photographic image underscores its freedom from the intentional circuits within which the visual image was hitherto embedded.<sup>15</sup> The third and fourth chapters document nineteenth-century reactions to photography that both excoriated and celebrated the photographic image for precisely this ability to detach the scene of figuration from the interposition of subjectivity.

But, paradoxically, this very mechanical quality becomes the source of photography's unique power to produce pictures that were far from being regarded as merely superficial optical illusions.<sup>16</sup> Despite a long list of detractors, the enormous cultural investment in photography during the nineteenth century testifies to its compelling power as a means of self-presentation. Its unique blend of indexical and iconic qualities—for it is the bearer of the trace and the likeness—makes photography the site of a powerful mix of veridical and affective value. As numerous studies show, photography in the nineteenth-century also gets associated with a variety of spiritualist projects that regarded the photograph as a medium that enabled communication with the dead.<sup>17</sup> In short, the 'depth' of meaning that photographs seemed to possess was inversely proportional to the flatness of its mechanical surface truths.

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<sup>15</sup> A prominent advocate of this position is Roger Scruton in "Photography and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): 577-603. For the idea of automaticity, see Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections of the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971; 1979). Noting the "inescapable fact of mechanism or automatism in the making of these [i.e. photographic] images", Cavell argues that, "[P]hotography overcame subjectivity...by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction" (23).

<sup>16</sup> A number studies of photography remark on this paradox, which I examine in some detail in Chapter three. More recently, Agamben has noted the contrast between "the insignificant or even silly moment" that photography records and the manner in which it "collects and condenses in itself the meaning of an entire existence." See Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007) 24.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Tom Gunning, "Haunting Images: Ghosts, Photography and the Modern Body", *The Disembodied Spirit* ed. Alison Ferris (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdon College Museum of Art, n.d.).

The nineteenth-century photograph's doubleness is also evident in its contradictory articulation in the law. As my third chapter will demonstrate, the photograph as a mechanical product precipitates a crisis in copyright law, and its inclusion into intellectual property relations necessitates the careful discursive management of a number of divergent energies within the discourse of photography.

As a technology, photography thrives also because of its ability to stage within itself the dialectics of control and contingency. Even while being instrumentalized for a range of cultural practices, photographs do every now and then reveal what Benjamin calls the "tiny spark of contingency" that reminds us that the photograph is not quite under our control.<sup>18</sup>

The texts I examine in the last two chapters are uncanny reminders of the fact that images do not yield to our fantasies of control. The unstable visual images that preoccupy these narratives are read in the context of the particular epistemological questions posed by the advent of photography. Chapter three reads the famously mobile picture of the eponymous hero of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in relation to the conceptual tremors produced by photography in the nineteenth century. My focus is on the connections between the spontaneously kinetic image in Wilde's novel and the anxieties of authorship produced by the ambivalent provenance of the photographic image. The perceived auto-origination of the photograph is explored in terms of its encounter with the discourse of copyright—a brush with the law that ultimately ushers the photograph into the regime of authorship and property relations.

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography", trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999): 510.

The ‘picture’ of Dorian Gray, Wilde suggests, is both a product of Dorian’s mind as well as an external agent that acts on him from the outside. The crisis of subjectivity and authorship that the novel depicts, born out of a dissonance at the heart of the visual image, can be appreciated only when placed against the fragile fictions of copyright law which tries in vain to still the velocities of the image.

My final chapter examines the wider corpus of magic-picture texts from which Wilde’s novel draws much of its literary materials. It attempts to explain the restless pictures described in magic-picture stories in terms of the specific intervention that the nineteenth-century photograph makes in the concept of the visual instant. Both literally and metaphorically the photograph overloads the instant with meaning even as it compels its dislodgement from a temporal sequence. I trace a similar imperative operating on paintings and photographs that routinely violate the conditions of pictoricity in these texts. Since such resistance and alienation from the protocols of visibility form the *raison d’être* of the literary text, it is not surprising that these narratives end, most often, when the visual image is restored to static normalcy.

My final chapter also focuses on the co-implication of the magical and the mechanical nature of the photographic image. My analysis of the magic-picture tradition demonstrates how this co-existence of the enchanted and the banal within the photograph can be seen as a crucial narrative principle operating in these texts. For instance in “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes”, a short story published in 1852, we see how such a dialectics is inscribed into the technological as well as ethical dimensions that the text invites us to consider. The unmediated and ‘soul-less’ quality of the photographic image requires, I

contend, the supplement of magic to achieve and sustain its veridical function in culture. This doubleness that resides in the heart of the photographic image manifests itself in the magic-picture tradition through enchanted pictures that are able to represent themselves as both surface and depth. The broad focus of my textual analysis in this chapter is the manner in which the literary registers as well as mediates the reception of new visual technologies like photography in the nineteenth century.

In temporal terms my dissertation covers the distance between Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), which describes the "infernal method" of printing, using "corrosives" that remove "apparent surfaces" to reveal "the infinite which was hid" and, exactly a century later in 1890, Basil Hallward's examination of the magically altered picture of Dorian Gray in Wilde's novel, which leads him to conclude that "the surface seemed to be quite undisturbed...It was from within that the foulness and horror had come."<sup>19</sup> This distance is indeed a long one, but at no point in the journey are we free of the anxieties produced by a visual image divided against itself.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 39; Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin Books, 1985; 2003), 150.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE MARRIAGE OF WORDS AND PICTURES: A READING OF BLAKE'S ILLUMINATED BOOKS

The founding gesture of Urizen's career in Blake's *The Book of Urizen* is the institution of "the Book / of eternal Brass" that promulgates a new monotheistic regime of order based on a unitary conception of value:

One command, one joy, one desire,  
One curse, one weight, one measure  
One King, one God, one Law.<sup>1</sup>

The weightiness and univocality of the book's message is underscored by the hard, adamantine medium on which Urizenic law is transcribed. In Urizen the metallurgist and legislator conspire to produce a book in which all meanings are abstracted from their particular contexts and embalmed into permanence. Such an "aggregate Moral Law" is built on the necessary murder of "Minute Particulars" and produces a text that Urizen approvingly calls "solid without fluctuation"—a medium and a message that is immune to flux (J; E 251, BU; E 71).

Blake's illuminated books can be read as an extended artistic meditation on the following set of related questions: How can one fashion an anti- Urizenic book? Is it possible to reproduce, circulate and interpret a book without conforming to the Urizenic dream of order? Can a book escape its own history? And, finally, is it possible to "frame"

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<sup>1</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 72. All quotations from Blake's works are from this edition. Subsequent citations will be incorporated into the text of my chapter and will use the following abbreviations followed by the letter "E" and page number: *There is No Natural Religion*, TNR; *Songs of Innocence*, SOI; *Songs of Experience*, SOE; *The Book of Thel*, BT; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, VD; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, MHH; *The First Book of Urizen*, BU; *Jerusalem*, J; *Public Address*, PA; *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, VLJ; *The Four Zoas*, FZ; *Tiriel*, T; *Annotations to Joshua Reynolds*, AR.

the “fearful symmetry” between the spatial condition of the visual image and the temporal dynamics of the written word? (SOE; E 24)

Blake’s lifelong engagement with these questions informs multiple levels of his artistic practice and range from his method of composition and printing and coloring techniques, to his editorial practice and uniquely mythopoeic imagination. But perhaps the most original dimension of Blake’s determined effort to recast the very “idea of the book” was his ability to orchestrate the dialectic energies between words and pictures.<sup>2</sup> It is now a truism in Blake studies to speak of the chiasmus in Blake’s poetry between images that approach the condition of the word and words that acquire a visual character.<sup>3</sup> Blake’s poetic vision is materialized in the alchemical transmutations that are produced in his word-image laboratory. Such experiments necessitated the transvaluation of the fairly entrenched eighteenth-century distinctions between the ‘sister arts’.<sup>4</sup> The unorthodox rapprochement between words and pictures that Blake forges in his illuminated poetry will be the focus of this chapter.

The first section of this chapter analyzes the role of images in Blake’s illuminated books with a view towards understanding one of its enduring paradoxes—namely its

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The phrase is from the title of Viscomi’s excellent account of Blake’s compositional methods, which is my chief source for information regarding the material aspects of Blake’s production and printing.

<sup>3</sup> See Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). For example, Hagstrum writes, “Blake’s words are visual, his paintings literary and conceptual” (10).

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting critical debate on whether Blake eschewed the precepts of the sister-arts tradition or persisted in invoking and building on it, see the exchange between Jean Hagstrum and W. J. T. Mitchell. Jean Hagstrum, “Blake and the Sister-Arts Tradition,” in *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 82-91. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Blake’s Composite Art,” *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic* ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 57-81. See also W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 14-17. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to Mitchell will be from this book.



ability to articulate a vigorously anti-visual, anti-ocularcentric position from within a fertile and highly charged pictorial grammar that is unfailingly mindful not to compromise the independence of both words and pictures. The focus of my analysis will be on Blake's reverse-ekphrastic images that engage words through a visual representation of reading or writing. I demonstrate how Blake carefully orchestrates the tensions between mobility and stasis, time and space, and surface and depth to achieve specific effects within the textual economies of these intermedial encounters.

This will be followed by a section on language in Blake's illuminated books that analyzes the various anti-narrative and anti-linear strategies that Blake employs to resist the temporal dimension of language. I will examine the implications of this deliberate spatialization of language in Blake's poetry, in terms of its particular transactions with the spatial properties of his images.

### **1. THE IMAGE: Picturing the Book**

The role of vision and visual images in Romantic writing has found itself at the focal point of many revisionist accounts of the period.<sup>5</sup> The critical commonplace that regarded Romantic disinvestments in the visible as a characteristic signature of Romantic poetry had effectively outlawed visual studies from mainstream Romantic criticism. Paul de Man's 1962 essay, "The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" powerfully delineated the dialectic between the "nostalgia for the natural object" in the Romantic image, which often produces a overlay "between object and image, between imagination

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<sup>5</sup> See William Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

and perception” and the more heroic and authentic counter-force in Romantic poetry that portrays the imagination “tearing itself, as it were, away from a terrestrial nature”, which suggests the “possibility for consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship with the outside world.”<sup>6</sup> The repudiation of the natural image and visible world perceived through the poet’s eye in favor of a more ideal vision that derives its strength from within the imagination rather than piggybacking on the “ontological priority of the sensory object” is a project that de Man locates as a sporadically glimpsed horizon towards which poetry must aspire.<sup>7</sup> The devaluation of the visual in favor of the visionary, inherent in de Man’s essay, formalizes the hierarchy between the image and imagination, thereby ratifying the anti-visual bias of Romantic criticism.

However, revisionist readings of Romantic visuality over the last couple of decades have allowed for a thicker understanding of literature’s embeddedness within the visual culture of the period. Since then we have seen nothing short of a “return of the visible” in Romantic studies—both as the repressed element that re-surfaces to disrupt the anxious interiorizations of Romantic poetry and as a subject that finds itself frequently at the dead center of Romantic conceptualizations of itself and the material world that it responds to.<sup>8</sup>

That the putative retreat from the visible that Romantic literature enacts, paradoxically provides the stage for a unique re-articulation of the visible, is a case that has been made

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<sup>6</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 6, 7, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Paul de Man, 6.

<sup>8</sup> See William Galperin, *The Return of the Visible*.

with reference to a number of Romantic poets. But one figure who always seems to elude the unexceptionable nature of such critical judgments is William Blake.

Blake's uneasy incorporation into a number of literary-historical categories is particularly stark in relation to his relationship with visual images. While this angularity is partly a product of his unique method of composition, Blake scholarship has only been partially successful in explaining the obvious paradox that suggests itself—the prodigious visual output of a poet who seemed convinced, no less than Wordsworth or Shelley, of the impotence of sight and the dangers of relying solely on the eyes as a guide to the visual. That such an anti-visual poetics could produce such a rich yield of visual images demands a critical account that can read Blake's poetry without taking recourse to any version of Blakean exceptionalism that ends up damning him with faint praise while sidestepping the need to encounter Blake's complex relationship with visual images on its own terms.

In later chapters I explore literary representations that outlaw 'real' images from the ambit of their operations even while elevating visual images to thematic centrality. Pictures have the potency of the uncanny in these texts, owing, in part, to their own absence; their disruptive presence in these texts seems to derive from the fact that they cannot be made visible.

However, while it is fascinating to study the eruptions of the visible in purely linguistic expressions that disavow the visual, this chapter will attempt to ask the counter-question: namely, if the critique of the visual is articulated from within the language of images, how does this change the terms of the critical discourse on anti-visual poetics? . Blake's challenge to the "tyranny of the eye" employs, in addition to the textual, the very

infrastructure of visibility to critique the paradigm of the “Vegetative Eye” that he describes as a “little narrow orb, closd up & dark” (VLJ; E 566, J; E 198) How does his language respond to the repudiation of the visible that emanates from *within* a visual text?

Blake’s extraordinary investments in the mechanics of image production suggest an enduring engagement with the very idea of vision and visual representation. As Robert Essick notes, Blake’s “technical experiments in a wide range of graphic media testify to his deep concern with the methods by which images are communicated.”<sup>9</sup> That Blake was very critical of a number of prevailing pieties regarding the way visual art was produced and evaluated is evident in his annotations to Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art* (AR; 635-662).<sup>10</sup> It is in reaction to the neoclassical orthodoxies of powerful figures like Reynolds that Blake’s illuminated poetry attempts to reconstitute graphic signs so as to express a new relationship to the phenomenal world and the world of naturalistic representation.

A number of Blake’s illuminated texts can be seen as renegotiating the idea of the visual image through constructing a new grammar of visual images. While his pronouncements against the dead letter of the law or the oppressive nature of the Book for its ability congeal meaning into artificial stasis is a view that drives his understanding of power in society, Blake is equally wary of the transparent innocence of the image. He considers such images the product of a naïve naturalistic dream that is for him equally illusionary in its tendency to create static visual pleasures that merely dull the senses instead of “rousing the faculties to act”.<sup>11</sup> In his annotations to Wordsworth’s poems he

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Essick, *William Blake, Printmaker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 13.

<sup>10</sup> See also Morris Eaves, *William Blake’s Theory of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 133-138.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase is from Blake’s famous letter to Dr. Trussler, in which Blake classes images which are “...not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act”. Letter to Trussler; E 702.

wrote: “Natural Objects always did and now do Weaken deaden and obliterate Imagination in Me Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is not to be found in Nature” (Annotations to Wordsworth’s Poems; E 665).

Blake’s images clearly militate against the conventions of illusionistic representation and to that extent it would be fair to call Blake anti-ocularcentric. A number of his images are abstract renditions of visual forms that do not occupy familiar perspectival or spatial co-ordinates; they seem to be approaching the direction of the symbolic, not by renouncing their iconic function but by consciously detaching themselves from the conventions of naturalistic representation. His human forms seem to float free of an identifiable spatial plane. They defy gravity and high visual definition to occupy a zone that distinctly approaches a symbolic domain without quite abdicating its imagic status. However, Blake is also keen to avoid producing images that lend themselves to any easy conventional iconographic reading that offers a stable ‘key’ for decoding his images. His visual forms permit an extremely wide range of interpretative possibilities, and, in keeping with Blake’s profoundly dialectical vision, come to represent contrary values at different times or contain within them the possibility of straddling such contrariness. In Mitchell’s assessment Blake’s art “is a curious compound of the representational and the abstract”.<sup>12</sup>

But Blake also de-familiarizes the pictorial by repeatedly staging its head-on confrontation with the verbal. This re-figuration of the verbal in the visual produces a set

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<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, 37. The paragraph is largely based on Mitchell’s seminal study of Blake’s ‘composite images’ and Morris Eaves’ *William Blake: The Early Illuminated Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

of internal pressure points within the texts that need to be interpreted in terms of the particular intermedial transactions attendant upon such staged encounters.

From among Blake's numerous intermedial experiments it is possible to isolate one category that figures almost throughout the Blake canon—the visual representation of reading and writing, also known as reverse ekphrasis. Not only does Blake re-mediate the linguistic sign in order to endow it with a graphic function but repeatedly offers to our gaze pictures of reading and writing. Books and other written artifacts are 'pictured' and these visually embodied scenes in Blake's poetry perform the 'reverse' function of returning the book to its status as a visual object situated amongst other objects in a pictorial field. Pictorial representations of reading and writing permit us to 'see' the production and consumption of language as a visualizable activity that can be framed within a set of pictorial forms, even though the mental state of the reader or writer is reduced to one externalized moment of an otherwise "invisible depth of field."<sup>13</sup> Garrett Stewart's study of pictured reading in Western art since the Renaissance, locates this depth in the intrinsic property of symbolic language to weave a narrative sequence, which in turn afflicts all visual art with what he calls "duration envy": "Reverse ekphrasis deposits within the halted or embalmed moment of the seen, with its pictured body and held object, the inferred duration of the read."<sup>14</sup> Like other absorptive states explored by Michael Fried's seminal study,<sup>15</sup> pictured reading or writing constitutes a site that is always located at an angle from the visual field of the image, signaling its own limit by

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<sup>13</sup> Garrett Stewart, *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2006) 81. Stewart's study, however, does not focus on any of Blake's reverse ekphrastic images.

<sup>14</sup> Stewart, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

picturing the “absorptive space of an engaged textual energy insulated from all picturing.”<sup>16</sup> The suggested depth that the book represents is the foreignness that resides within the image, which in turn attempts to picture this depth through visual signs that clearly cannot represent this “resident alien” completely.<sup>17</sup> The blurred lines and squiggles that signify the words on the page, which, unlike the readers and writers within the picture, we are not privy to, mark the very outer rim of the visual image. This is the pictorial boundary that is notional and real, sensible and intelligible, visible and invisible. To move beyond this boundary and render legible the particular words being processed by the figure in the picture is, of course, to call the bluff of the reverse ekphrastic gamble, which achieves its traction solely by being able to mark this limit.

Blake employs reverse ekphrasis in order to visualize this sort of internal limit so as to set off specific kinds of frictional energy between words and pictures. But in almost every instance, Blake’s purpose is strategic. Even while invoking the temporality of language and the conventional protocols of reading and writing, he subverts and challenges our distinctions between texts and images by placing the pictured book at the junction between contradictory interpretations of its function and value. Books therefore never settle into a stable iconographic significance, in fact they are crucial tools in questioning our desire for such stability.

Blake’s fascination with pictured reading dates as far back as his very first poem in illuminated printing, “There is No Natural Religion” (1788). Plate 9 and 10 of the poem

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<sup>16</sup> Stewart, 88.

<sup>17</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 157. Mitchell uses the term in describing the “otherness” that marks the status of the visual image in its verbal rendition. In this sense, ekphrastic texts, to reverse Stewart’s phrase, can said to be stricken with “stasis envy” in never being able to achieve the spatiality of the image.

offer an interesting prefiguration of Blake's profoundly dialectic understanding of the printed page. In Plate 9 the text of the poem states: "The desires and perceptions of man untaught by anything but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense" (E 2). The image which appears directly below the text shows us a female figure (the gender of the figure clearly discernible in Copy B and G) lying down and reading a book. Long leaves or grass from either side seems to form an arch over her, suggesting the enclosure and limitation of the senses suggested in the text of the poem. The melancholic and absorptive state of the figure shown reading what appears like a book, clearly suggests the linkage between the finitude of the senses and the experience of reading. Books, it appears, circumscribe mental boundaries and therefore limit the imagination. By extension, bookish knowledge is therefore a closed system like the empiricism that Blake denounces as the barren "[r]atio of the five senses" (MHH; E 35).

However the very next plate contains a figure, this time male, lying on the ground in a similar posture gazing intently at a book. This time, though, there are no arching leaves that appear to engulf him and the text directly above the image delivers a message that affirms Blake's conviction, contra Locke, that mental conceptions are not tethered to sense impressions alone: "Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover".(TNR; E 2).

That the book and its reader 'illustrate' both textual messages, suggests not just that pictures do not serve as a transparent and stable visual code to illuminate Blake's poetic language, but also point to the contradictory assessment of such 'textual' scenarios. The book can be an emblem both for the depressing finitude of the human sensorium as well as its redemptive capacity to exceed itself through the imagination. Just as the senses can



be both the instruments that bind us into a solipsistic isolation (“He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only”) as well as a porous perimeter fence that cannot prevent infiltration (“...the chief inlets of the soul in this age”), the book too is capable of being both a prison house and a median that invites us to cross over into a non-finite perception (TNR; E 3, MHH; E 34). Reading, like seeing, is an activity that can be both stultifying and liberating.

Such a dual conceptualization of the book and its relationship to the graphic and verbal is a prominent feature of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* that offers numerous examples of this constitutive tension organizing the representation of the book. The title page of *Songs of Innocence*, depicts two young children kneeling down beside a seated nurse or mother who holds a book in her lap which the children obediently read. All three figures seem to have fixed their attention on the book to the exclusion of the world around them in which numerous commentators have detected ominous and threatening symbols.<sup>18</sup> To picture this reading trio at the very outset of this dialectical journey between innocence and experience is an index of both its prefigurative function and the centrality that Blake is investing in the concept of the ‘pictured’ book. The broad surface of the book on the mother’s lap seems to present to us the very threshold between inside and outside and the temporal and spatial rhythms that structure the poems to follow. It is on this cusp between words and images embodied by the visualized book that Blake attempts to enact the encounter between innocence and experience.

Another early example of the conceptual tension with regard to books is “The Nurse’s Song” in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*.<sup>19</sup> The nurse is depicted sitting under a tree

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance Zachary Leader, *Reading Blake’s Songs* (Boston: Routledge, 1981) 68, 69.

reading a book, while the children with whom she is in dialogue occupy an open space beside her and play in a circle (fig. 1). She is shown absorbed in her book even while the children parley with her about the proper time to stop their game. The dialogue is framed by two opposing movements: the nurse, citing time and propriety, asks the children to “Come come leave off play” and the other a more spontaneous and organic argument, based on the evidence of their senses, responds to the nurse with the plea “No no let us play” (SI; E 15).

The nurse’s posture is one that suggests the stillness and fixity produced by the absorptive condition of reading. Her immobility is an index of her involvement in the invisible temporal depth that she is drawn into through her engagement with the book.<sup>20</sup> To take this reverse ekphrastic site as the crucial ‘joint’ in the plate allows us to read the poem in somewhat different terms than has traditionally been used to analyze the poem.<sup>21</sup> The nurse’s inert perusal of her book while sitting in a distinctly shaded area at the foot of a tree with the branches of the tree stretching laterally over her like an arboreal ceiling, underscores her spatial and cognitive detachment from the children. She sits in obvious isolation from the children engaged in active play in a circle under the clear light of the

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<sup>19</sup> Other poems that are notable in this regard are “Introduction” (*Songs of Innocence*) and “The School Boy” (*Songs of Experience*).

<sup>20</sup> In a different context Stewart describes such scenes of reading as marked by the “the muting and paralysis of the body’s enforced plastic activity” necessitated by “the painted stasis of reading”. See Garrett Stewart, “The Minds Sigh: Pictured Reading in Nineteenth-Century Painting”, *Victorian Studies*, 46 (2004) 217.

<sup>21</sup> Critical approaches to the poem have generally either tried to interpret the poem in the light of the dialectics of imagination and cynicism that structure the collection as a whole or read the poem as a specific attempt to critique the logic of adult authority through a figure who mimics but is in fundamental disagreement with the imperatives of such a discourse. For a representative example of the former see Hazard Adams. “The Two Nurse’s Songs.” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Ed. Morton D. Paley. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969) 100-04. For an instance of the latter approach see Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake’s Songs and Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).



Figure 1. "The Nurse's Song", *Songs of Innocence*.

sun (“for it is yet day”), all physically connected to each other through their interlinked hands. Theirs is therefore a collective voice, which “all the hills echoed” in stark contradistinction to the nurse whose solitariness seems to leave her no choice but to assent to the collective appeal of the children.

The liminality of the reading figure, whose investment in an invisible textual axis that does not show up on the visual radar of the text, generates an ambivalence that is prefigured early on in the poem. The first four lines introduce a pre-reflective mental state that appears to precede her relapse into the ratiocinative mode expected of an authority figure :

When the voices of children are heard on the green  
And Laughing is heard on the hill,  
My heart is at rest within my breast  
And everything else is still.

The word “still” bears the weight of the stanza even as it performs the task of bringing to a state of rest and equipoise, both the internal (“My heart is at rest”) and the external (“And everything else is still”) processes that organize the poem.<sup>22</sup> It is as if within the dual velocities of the inside and the outside the nurse has discovered a moment that causes all motion to cease. For this one moment the nurse’s heart and the world around her fall into step and it seems as if time is suspended for the duration of this brief pause—as if the world has been allowed a moment’s respite from the ceaseless flux that agitates it. It is, also, as if the world has changed tracks from a temporal to a spatial mode that integrates the ambient details (including sound) into the stillness of a picture.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kreiger’s seminal study of ekphrasis, which argues that plastic art in ekphrastic poetry is invoked as a “symbol of a frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world in order to “still” it”. See “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoön* Revisited” in Murray Krieger, *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 107.

But the next line abruptly ripples this still surface with an insistence and urgency that betrays self-reproach for having momentarily lapsed into a state of timelessness: “Then come home my children, the sun is gone down”. The children are summoned back to clock time, which being indifferent to nature’s particular nuances cannot know what the children know almost intuitively. The sudden change in tack from carefree listlessness to a hastily re-asserted tone of authority can be explained as the return of precisely that which the first stanza represses—the acknowledgement of time. This unexpected irruption of the consciousness of time can only issue from a source that cannot be visualized on the surface of the picture, since it represents that which militates against the very stillness that pictoricity stands for.

I am suggesting that it is the textual temporality of the book that the nurse seems absorbed in, that shatters the stasis produced by the first stanza. For the temporality that the nurse invokes is ‘bookish’ in the sense that it runs counter to the spontaneous and organic quality of the children’s sense of time, which is at variance with the abstraction of clock time. The book, in other words, is like the core of a vortex that threatens to drag into itself the substance that swirls around it—“the part” object in the frame of the text that, in Stewart’s terms, threatens to “vacuum up the whole.”<sup>23</sup> Although that threat is never realized since the nurse is persuaded to allow the children to continue playing, in the world of *Songs of Innocence* such dangers are always lurking around the edges of the text.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Garrett Stewart, “Painted Readers, Narrative Regress”, *Narrative*, 11.3 (2003) 142.

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, it is instructive that the “Nurse’s Song” in *Songs of Experience*—a collection that significantly outlaws the kind of dialogic mode that we see in the *Innocence* version—depicts a little girl who sits in a posture of resignation and is bending over what appears to be a book. The illustration, which bears a striking resemblance to a 1791 illustration that Blake produced for Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life*, now shows a nurse who towers over the two children framed by the tight linearity of

But this capacity of the ‘pictured’ book to disturb the pictorial surface on which it figures, belies the fact that it this very same book that initially allows the nurse to lose herself in the absorptive state that enables her to experience a moment of transcendence—a state that briefly transports her into the world of the children. The book can, therefore offer release from the prison-house of the self but at the same time can serve to reel in all those who stray too far.

These contradictory articulations residing in the book-as-picture receive greater elaboration in two reverse ekphrastic images from Blake’s illuminated books that afford interesting insights into his understanding of words and pictures. The first of these is the visually arresting Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the second, Blake’s justly famous title page of *The First Book of Urizen*. In both cases Blake employs the dual nature of the book to produce a provisional rapprochement between words and pictures. In the former this is achieved through a technique of dispersal and distribution, while in the latter the same is produced through the visualization of a hyper-absorptive state of concentration.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a poem that is remarkably focused on the idea of printing, copying and the process by which “knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation” (MHH; E40). Since the conviction that “Opposition is true Friendship” serves as the principle that energizes Blake’s poem his images and formulations on the reproduction of pictures and words is dramatized as a clash of ‘contraries’ (MHH; E 42).

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the doorway next to which they figure. The children have been re-assigned to a new mental and physical supervision that has effectively rehabilitated them from their innocence.

Plate 10 offers one such encounter and visualizes a scene in which a kneeling devil with a large scroll in front of him sits between two seated figures who are in the process of transcribing (with the active assistance of the devil) the contents of his scroll into books or tablets (fig. 2). The figure on the left is absorbed by the task of copying what the devil appears to be reading or pointing out from the scroll while the figure on the right looks sharply to his right and unlike the figure on the left seems to be reliant on visual cues in order to proceed with his copying.<sup>25</sup>

Morris Eaves interprets the location of this picture that occupies the lower half of the Plate 10—the upper half of which contains proverbs interspersed with scattered foliage and human figures in varied postures of exultation—as indicative of the subterranean energy of the “nether regions.” It serves, he argues, to underscore the fact “that behind even the pastoral simplicity of the proverbs is the voice of a devil of imagination.”<sup>26</sup>

The viability of such a reading is evident when seen in conjunction with the title page to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that features a similar vertical distinction between the two couples on the top half of the plate shown engaging in distinctly formal courtship rituals and the lower portion of the plate that depict amidst the leaping flames of hell an

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<sup>25</sup> The foreground of Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is among Blake’s most variable and inconsistent. In Copy F and G the foreground appears to consist of flames, in copy H and I a stream, and in other copies the foreground is either empty or indicative of a nondescript space. The contingency of the setting underscores Blake’s desire to depict the scene as a visualized form of a purely mental phenomenon.

<sup>26</sup> Morris Eaves, *William Blake : The Early Illuminated Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 134.

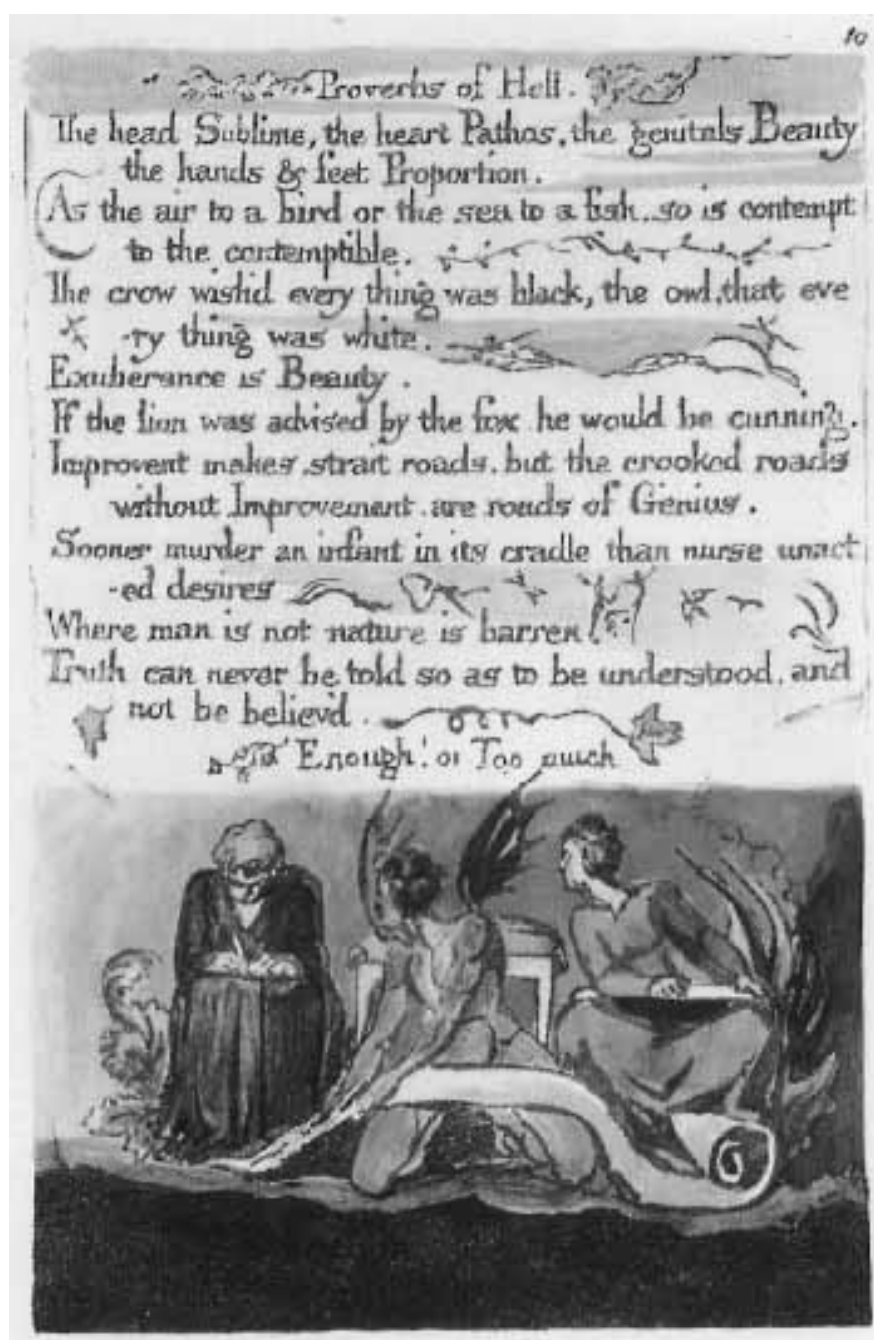


Figure 2. Plate 10, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*



androgynous couple in a close intimate embrace. The title page appears to gesture towards the deep structural embrace of contraries that is not visible on the surface.

But such surface-depth refractions are visible even within the visual image that occupies the bottom half of Plate 10 in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The divided labors of the three figures can be seen to allegorize the denigration of artistic labor—its transformation from its organic state in the natural spiral flow of the scroll into the rigid linear framing of the book.<sup>27</sup> Mitchell, for instance, reads the scene as transposing “the dialectics of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Prolific/Devourer; Active/Passive; Energy/Reason; Devil/Angel) into a scene of textual transmission” depicting the process whereby the voice of prophecy embodied in the scroll is transformed “into the dead, silent form of derivative book-learning.”<sup>28</sup>

But it is the lack of symmetry between the two scribes that prevents the image from fitting into a neat parable of the degeneration of the “hellish wisdom of energy” into the “conventional unwisdom of institutional reason.”<sup>29</sup> This disparity has often been parsed in terms of the distinction between the scribe who writes and the scribe who looks—suggesting that the former relies on his auditory senses and the latter on his eyes.<sup>30</sup> Such

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<sup>27</sup> On the distinction between books and scrolls in Blake’s images see W.J.T. Mitchell “Visible Language: Blake’s Art of Writing” in *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 130-144.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, “Visible Writing”, 139. Mitchell goes on to point out that the kneeling devil at the center of this image flanked by the two scribes on either side of him “is no ‘author’, but merely a reciter” who serves as the conduit for what must necessarily be “impersonal, authorless sayings whose authority comes from their repetition”. “Visible Writing”, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Jean H. Hagstrum, *William Blake: Poet and Painter: An Introduction to the Illuminated Verse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 94. Mitchell also points out this asymmetry but explains it in terms of the distinction between “canonical Jewish prophecy” and “noncanonical ‘gentile’ prophecy”.

<sup>30</sup> See *The Early Illuminated Books*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 134.

a reading, however, does not go far enough in examining such perceivable asymmetries between writing and looking within the frame of the visual image that Plate 10 so enigmatically represents.

To read this plate as a reverse ekphrastic image, I suggest, allows us to step back and examine the scene as one which plays out, on a thematic and formal level, the inherent tensions of pictured texts. Unlike the earlier scenes of pictured reading in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* represents a visual image that attempts a more complex interface with words. What the plate offers us is a visual representation of a textual problem, namely, the mechanical reproduction of text. But here, as in other reverse ekphrastic images, writing and the books that contain them are portrayed in a visual medium that necessarily has at its disposal only visual signs. Here the act of transcription is depicted through a triangulated model that involves three figures who are all absorbed with the textual materials before them. The triple emphasis on text is reinforced not only by the taut intensity of the gazes of the three figures, but also by their hands which in the case of the devil points to a place in the scroll, while the hands of the scribes hold pens that are in contact with the books before them. The spatial arrangement and posture of the three bodies also draws attention to the process of transcription—the scribe on the right sits with his body composed by the labor of his absorption in the tablet or book he writes in, while the devil and the scribe on the left angle their bodies towards him with a bodily torsion that serves to doubly redirect our attention to the first scribe. They all gaze into a textual space that seems to be of paramount interest for all three, yet this space can only be imagined since it lies beyond the visible world of the picture.

Two related pictorial rhythms can be seen to organize this reverse ekphrastic representation. Firstly, the suturing of the three different yet converging gazes allow the absorptive state of writing to be distributed into this triangulated network of gazes. This allows for a certain externalization of this absorption, which now becomes imaged in terms of this relay of gazes by interposing between the writer and the viewer, two further levels of looking that serve to render the absorptive gaze less opaque. In other words, the “invisible depth of field”<sup>31</sup> represented by the written text and the mental investment it demands, is made less invisible through multiplying the investment and the textual apparatus surrounding it. By fracturing the act of writing into this tripartite structure, absorption is made more picturable and thereby the relationship between words and pictures is rendered less absolute.

The second pictorial rhythm in the plate that produces a similar result relates to the quasi-narrative structure of the image. The world of writing and textuality, foreign to the visual idiom, is pictured in a manner that allows writing to ‘unfold’ as a multi-stage process that begins with the scroll and travels through the devil to the scribe on the right and then is further copied by the scribe on the left. This ‘picture of writing’ introduces a narrative movement within the spatial economy of the picture—a narrative sequence that is visually embodied by the very circuit of textual transmission that the image organizes itself around. Writing as *process* is made visualizable precisely through its mediation by multiple levels of transcription. In other words, it is writing in its disaggregated form, distributed among more than one ‘author’, which makes it less alien to the world of images.

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<sup>31</sup> Stewart, 81

The fragmented and decentered nature of artistic labor suggested is thus, in a characteristic Blakean inversion, also the source of a unity between words and pictures. The opposition between the visual and the verbal is therefore rendered less stark when examined from the perspective of an ‘infernal’ scene of production. Similarly, the “Printing House in Hell” that Blake describes in Plate 15 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is separated into six chambers and encapsulates a creative process that is no less prophetic for being divided.<sup>32</sup> For Blake only such an “infernal method” could effect a marriage of that which appears to man as being radically opposed: “But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid” (MHH; E 39). That the unique printing technology outlined above can affect a re-conceptualization of the body establishes the overlay between textual and bodily economies in Blake’s poetry.<sup>33</sup> Like the body/soul dualism that appears to man as absolute when viewed “thro’ the narrow chinks of his cavern”, words and pictures (and more specifically, ‘pictured’ books and scrolls and their composition) represent an opposition that Blake attempts to both figure and re-constitute in his illuminated poetry (MHH; E 39).

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<sup>32</sup> Harold Bloom in his commentary on the poem in the Erdman edition interprets this Plate as an “allegory of artistic creation”.

<sup>33</sup> Stefani Englestein makes a similar point in her analysis of the same passage from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “This corrosive technique clearly refers to Blake’s own engraving method. His claim that he can alter both body and text simultaneously through a printing process establishes a correspondence between these two materials...Blake’s illuminated works merge physical structure and meaning in just this way”. Stefani Englestein, “The Regenerative Geography of the Text in William Blake” *Modern Language Studies* 30 (2000) : 61-86.

The title page of *The Book of Urizen* offers another interesting version of the scene of textual production. The plate shows Urizen engaged in a hyper-productive mode of textual production (fig. 3). His feet appear to be tracing the letters of a large book and seem to serve as the conduit for words that he transcribes into the two stony books on either side of him. His right hand holds a quill and his left an engraving burin, both poised over the two books that flank him on either side. The Urizenic figure appears to be engaged in an act of multiple transcription that appears machine-like in its ability to pursue three different tasks simultaneously.

The tripartite structure in Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* returns here, with the difference that the exact spatial arrangement between the three parts is now restaged *within* the body of Urizen. Urizen's foot occupies the place held by the devil of the earlier plate while his hands accomplish the task undertaken by the two scribes. Urizen now incorporates within himself the three stages of textual production and by doing so assumes the role of the 'composite' author who controls every aspect of his production. While this maybe a parodic version of Blake himself, now appearing as the obsessive Urizenic artist who unites within himself the multiform capabilities required for textual production, it is certainly suggestive of a more complex network of meanings that serve to emblemize the entire poem.<sup>34</sup>

The first chapter of *The Book of Urizen* describes Urizen creating the fallen world through an act of self-absorption. He is spurned by the Eternals when they discover him, "Dark revolving in silent activity...A self-contemplating shadow" whose "soul-shudd'ring vacuum" creates the "abominable void" (BU; E 71, 70). From the "depths of

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<sup>34</sup> For a fuller discussion on the parallels between Blake and Urizen see John H. Jones, "Printed Performance and Reading 'The Book[s] of Urizen': Blake's Bookmaking Process and the Transformation of Late Eighteenth-Century Print Culture", *Colby Quarterly* 35.2(1999) 73-89.

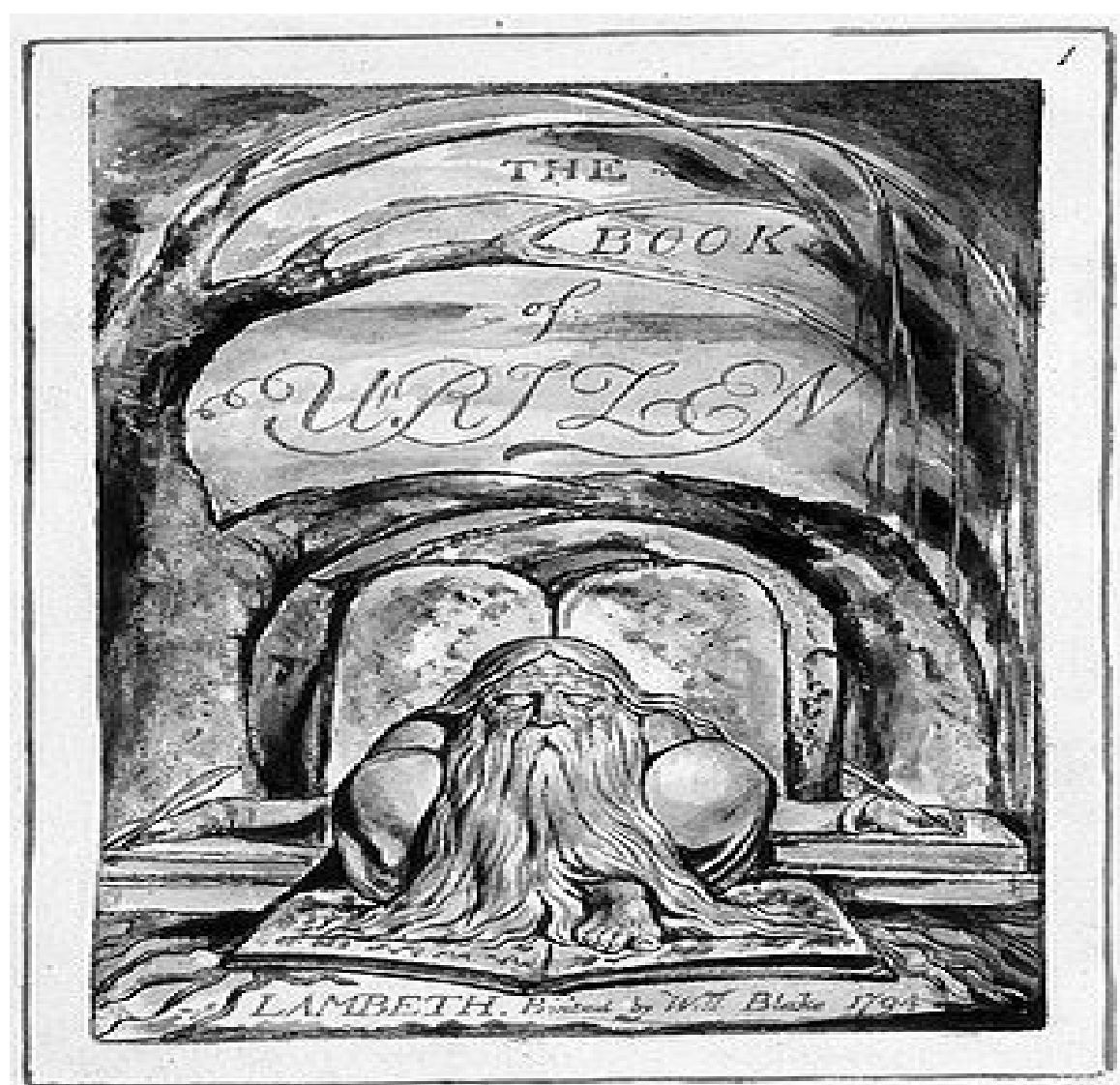


Figure 3. Title Page, *The Book of Urizen*

dark solitude” Urizen creates an abstract emptiness through his “enormous labors”—a void that separates itself from the plenum by marking limits and setting boundaries between the “secrets of his dark contemplation” and fluidity and formlessness of desire that Urizen abhors (BU; E 71, 72). Urizen’s obsession with standardization and the iron laws of equivalency is a consequence of this fear of flux, the “unquenchable burnings” which must be brought under the yoke of a severely attenuated but structured regime of order (BU; E 72). A repressive legal system is for Blake an apt symbol of this incessant need to subject the many to the tyranny of the one and therefore it is no coincidence that Urizen’s “Book of eternal brass” is a statute-book, which claims for itself the immunity of scripture. Urizen’s obsessive fear of alterity and difference, anything that eludes the reach of his iron laws, is evident on Plate 23 of *The Book of Urizen* when he curses his children on seeing “That no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment” (BU; E 81).

As the inaugurator of this repressive system, Urizen embodies the principle of a regimented reality by shunning the very possibility of interiority within himself. The profound introspection of Urizen in the title page to the poem is not to be confused with depth, either intellectual or psychological. As Mitchell points out “although Urizen is consistently described as the original author of all his writings, producing them alone from his self-absorbed contemplations, Blake presents him pictorially as a copyist...a mere scribe or exegete in design, making books out of books rather than out of his imagination.”<sup>35</sup> The Urizen figure then is very much the anti-type of Blake himself whose creative control over the editing and production of his books serve to preserve his poetry

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, 141.

from the kind of mechanical reproduction visible on the title page of *The Book of Urizen*.<sup>36</sup>

The reason Urizen accomplishes this feat of mechanical reproduction is directly related to Blake's dire prognosis for an art that sells its soul to the machine. The prerequisite for any act of mechanical reproduction is the ability to render a unique act of creation into a standardized template, which in turn can be exploited repeatedly in order to give off a potentially infinite number of copies. Copper-plate engraving, as Makdisi ably demonstrates, gave Blake a unique insight into industrial production and its central concern with "the reproduction of the image" which derived from copper-plate engraving the technique of "producing a stream of theoretically identical copies based on the same original 'impression'".<sup>37</sup> Blake was also aware of how the factory system 'improves' on this model by "eliminating the need for a highly elaborated and unprofitable—uncommodified—original, and requiring the generation instead of nothing but the 'copies', images with no real referent".<sup>38</sup>

Blake's resistance to the idea of such machinic reproduction informs the very soul of his artistic enterprise. In his *Public Address* he denounces the mediation of the machine in artistic production: "A Machine is not a Man nor a Work of Art it is Destructive of Humanity and of Art" (PA; E, 575). The translation of unique productions into mechanical reproductions requires a level of semantic and textual standardization that

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<sup>36</sup> Engelstein describes the difference between the Urizen figure on the title page of *The Book of Urizen* and Blake thus: "Blake positioned the engraver Urizen as his nemesis. Blake's own desire to regulate his work must not be confused with a desire to standardize its reception. Instead, his excruciating attention to minutiae... work in the interest of including and encouraging multivalencies". Engelstein, 81

<sup>37</sup> Saree Makdisi, *Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 87.

<sup>38</sup> Makdisi, 147



Blake's poetry constantly chafed against. By uniting within himself the entire continuum of artistic labor from conception to execution, Blake resists the splintering of artistic labor into distinct economically efficient parts. He achieves this not only by mastering each stage but by re-uniting them into an artistic whole that does not separate conception and execution, either in theory or in practice. This radically challenges the prevailing logic of artistic manufacture that aimed at improved reproductive efficiency.

Such efficiency feeds the "Maw" of "Commerce [that] Cannot endure Individual Merit" and demands instead a form of labor that "all can do Equally well" (PA; E 573). Such practitioners of what Blake called the "Contemptible Counter Arts" enervated art so as to serve the "Purposes of Commerce". (PA; E, 580, 573) Under the shadow of commerce, the concept of artistic labor gets atrophied into a form that is marked by formal, not substantive efficiency: "The Lifes Labor of Mental Weakness scarcely Equals One Hour of the Labor of Ordinary Capacity like the full Gallop of the Gouty Man to the ordinary walk of the youth and health" (PA; E, 573). The 'gallop' of mechanical efficiency, like Urizen's hyper-productivity is therefore only an illusion, that conceals an emptiness that renders such efficiency hollow.

The hypnotic stupor that Urizen's scribal duties appear to have induced in him in the title page of *The Book of Urizen* is not unlike the "fatal Slumber" that according to Blake "Booksellers and Trading Dealers" produce by "artfully propaga[ting] [the] pretence that a Translation or a Copy of any kind can be as honorable to a Nation as An Original" (PA; E 576). In all but Copy B Urizen appears with his eyes closed or looking directly below with a fixed gaze at the book at his feet.<sup>39</sup> Urizen's somnolent expression suggests that this feat of multi-tasking is, in fact, one that represents mechanical perfection rather than

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<sup>39</sup> Even in Copy B Urizen stares fixedly ahead of him with eyes that seem to blank not focused.

mental hyper-activity. Urizen appears to be reduced to a purely mechanical state of reproductive efficiency—one that requires very little of his mental energy.

By combining within himself the labors that Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* distributed among the devil and his two scribes, Urizen has paradoxically become a picture of physical and mental inertness. This is in ironic contrast to the vividly physical nature of transcription, evinced by the rapt attentiveness and dynamic bodily response to the labor of copying in the earlier plate.

The title page of *The Book of Urizen*, therefore, forces upon us the counterintuitive suggestion that a hyper-absorptive state, like the kind necessitated by the multiple textual labors of Urizen, produces not a deeper level of mental concentration but its opposite. In other words, absorption when multiplied beyond a point produces a mental shut-down or automaticity that makes Urizen machine-like in his lack of interiority. Blake seems to suggest that the repetitive nature of tasks such as copying get routinized by the body into an involuntary process.

As a reverse ekphrastic representation the image of Urizen performs an interesting inversion of the norm, which usually represents books as spaces that alienate pictures from themselves by virtue of the unpicturable nature of the mental states they produce. Although he is surrounded by books and tablets, Urizen does not appear to occupy a textual depth that is screened from the visual space of the image. In fact, precisely because of his over-investment in books and their reproduction he fails to escape the purely spatial condition that the picture frames him into.

In this instance, unlike Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the gulf between words and pictures is bridged not by re-distributing the absorptive energy among a group

of figures, but by neutralizing absorption through a hyperbolic or excessive textual engagement. By abdicating its threatening inwardness the absorptive state becomes accessible to the modalities of the image. In other words, Urizen has taken the temporal depth out of books and returned them to the spatial logic of the image. The flat two dimensionality of the image underscores the anti-absorptive quality of the plate.

Both, Plate 10 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the title page of *The Book of Urizen*, therefore, in contrasting ways, serve to underline Blake's distrust of a text-induced interiority that can only be inferred from the graphic sign, but eludes its grasp.

However, this homology between the two plates belies an important distinction. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with its promised "Bible of Hell", offers us a view of the redemptive function of the book, which carries in form and substance a message that is meant to defog "the doors of perception" in order to see "the infinite which was hid". The book understood in terms of "its infernal or diabolical sense" releases us from the prison house of our senses. (MHH; E, 39, 44) But in *The Book of Urizen* the book is conceived in terms of its ability to shut out the infinite and unlike "the infernal method" of book production, is created by a process that engenders such stupefaction that man is reduced to nothing more than what Tiriel calls "a worm of sixty winters" (T; E, 285). This ambivalence regarding the status of the book suggests that it is reductive, as Engelstein points out, "to insist that Blake identifies text only with the fallen body and fallen world, rather than with a potentially liberated and liberating body and world".<sup>40</sup> Under the control of Reason, books get disconnected from the Imagination and "closing itself as in steel" becomes "a ratio of the Things of Memory" which "frames Laws & Moralities to destroy Imagination" (J; E, 229). But this Urizenic book does not preclude the possibility

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<sup>40</sup> Engelstein, 81.

of the anti- Urizenic book because books are also comparable to the visual sense that permits us “To see the World in a Grain of Sand” (“Auguries of Innocence, E, 490), which in its fallen state functions as the “perverted and single vision” of the “Vegetated Mortal Eye” (J; E, 202). To denounce the book would be as grave an error as rejecting the potential power of vision: “I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight I look thro it and not with it” (VLJ; E, 566). For Blake, as Northrop Frye points, “The eye does not see: the eye is a lens for the mind to look through.”<sup>41</sup> Books that claim to contain incontrovertible truths produce “Single vision and Newtons sleep.”<sup>42</sup> The form and content of Blake’s illuminated poetry communicate to us that books that purvey absolute truths are like naturalistic paintings—they produce the illusion that the empirical world reflected by this “Vegetable Glass of Nature” is the only reality we have (VLJ; E, 555). But this does not prevent the cherub in the “Introduction” to *The Songs of Innocence* from enjoining the Piper to “write [in] a book that all may read” songs which “Every child may joy to hear” (SOI; E, 18).

### **The Word: The Spatial Dimension of Language**

Blake’s attempt to remediate the word in many ways parallels his experiments with the visual image. Just as Blake’s non-illusionistic, non-perspectival images embody his critique of the fetishization of the phenomenal world at the cost of inner vision in naturalistic art, Blake relentlessly tries to free language from its disembodied, temporally

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<sup>41</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969) 25.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to Thomas Butts, E 722.

–oriented condition. In Peircean terms, Blake’s experiments with language seek to add an iconic and indexical level to the anemic symbolic system that words are trapped in.

Blake achieves this in a number of organically related ways. In Blake’s poetry the texts and images are united at birth, i.e. in conceptual or practical terms his method of composition does not grant precedence to either.<sup>43</sup> This is integrally related to the fact that “invention and execution” are not discrete stages in Blake’s creative process: “Invention realized in and through drawing unites thought and act, making material execution a part, and not a consequence, of the act of discovery that is invention.”<sup>44</sup> The immediate fallout of this unity between invention and execution is a similar symmetry in the relationship between words and images. As Viscomi ably demonstrates, Blake’s practice of composition allowed “text and illustration to be designed directly on the plate” so as to ensure “that their ‘proportions and relationships’ were not predetermined.”<sup>45</sup> At the level of composition therefore, words are at par with images and no less dependent on ‘drawing’ and ‘material execution’. This compositional leveling is of crucial significance in recasting language and ridding it of its claim to an “intentionality” that was “prior to and outside the artist’s medium.”<sup>46</sup>

The effects of this compositional method can be felt at many levels of Blake’s poetry. In linguistic terms there are at least two clearly observable consequences. Firstly, the abstract signifying function of language is frequently ‘humanized’ by having language peopled with the human forms that inhabit the space of the alphabet in ways that displace

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<sup>43</sup> Viscomi, 29, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Viscomi, 42, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Viscomi, 30

<sup>46</sup> Robert Essick, Qt. in Viscomi 42

language from formal to real space—space that can be trodden on, sat on, played on, slept on etc. This relocation of language is unique in that it not just juxtaposes words and pictures but depicts them both sharing the same visual plane and often existing on a spatial continuum. By doing so Blake succeeds in canceling out the hierarchy between them by making language inhabitable in a way that materializes its symbolic function.

Secondly, language exceeds its signifying function and assumes a pictorial function that is not easily separable from it. Numerous examples can be found in Blake's illuminated books of words and/or letters that curl, loop, and assume pictorial forms that allow them to infiltrate into the domain of images. The visual form of words, are therefore unmistakably present before our eyes and very frequently literalize the bond between meaning and the pictorial form that alphabets embody. For instance, it is hard to miss the significance of the different typographic styles used on the title page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. This visual distinction, commented on by numerous Blake scholars, is inseparably woven into the meaning of the poem, tying together form and content in ways that are only possible in a 'composite art'. For instance, Mitchell argues, that Blake's art "pushes alphabetic writing toward the realm of pictorial values, asking us to see his alphabetic forms with our senses...to pause at the sensuous surface of calligraphic and typographic forms."<sup>47</sup>

The pictorial nature of Blake's writing, as the above quote from Mitchell suggests, makes us "pause" over the words and this deceleration plays a crucial role in altering the temporal dynamics of his poetry. The eye does not, in reading Blake's poetry, "skim frictionlessly at a regular rate over the page" but is brought to "a mode of fuller sentient

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<sup>47</sup> Mitchell, "Visible Writing", 147.

contact” with words.<sup>48</sup> Narrative time is retarded and the syntactic energy of words is made to contend with the spatial stasis of the visual image.<sup>49</sup>

Blake’s language attempts to “invalidate the idea of objective time” in other ways as well.<sup>50</sup> Language unfolds in the illuminated books, in ways that militate against the narrative structures that subject language to the demands of linear time. Visual images are juxtaposed with narrative elements to retard and cancel out the effects of sequential time to produce a number of interesting temporal effects within the poem. The well known Blakean technique of employing the visual register in a manner that doggedly follows its own temporal logic whereby the textual and the graphic unfold along non-synchronous and most often non-linear pathways is a feature that stands out in Blake’s poetry. These two autonomous temporal registers rarely coincide and the visual can both lag behind the textual as well as frequently outrun it in ways that reveal the brittleness of narrative structures. This produces a very specific readerly effect whereby events in the text re-surface in the visual even after their appearance in the text has been superseded by other events. The textual moment having yielded its place to other moments re-appears and gets doubled in the visual register thereby ensuring the re-kindling of such dying moments. This results in a unique pictorial framing, which succeeds in counterbalancing the syntactic nature of the text with the internally generated simultaneity of the visual. The resulting co-presence of narrative moments produces a narrative structure that

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<sup>48</sup> Carol Bigwood, “Seeing Blake’s Illuminated Texts”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (1991) 312.

<sup>49</sup> The difficulty of reading Blake’s texts, which numerous commentators discuss at length, is in no small measure produced by the pictorial character of his words, which prevents a mode of reading that tries to “read through” the “concrete presence” of the text.

<sup>50</sup> Mitchell, 34.

acquires a pictorial quality that like a visual image is able to keep many moments in simultaneous focus. However, the illuminated books do not compromise on narrative energy, and this ensures that the text does not acquire the static quality of a picture. Blake's texts ensures a balance between the spatial and the temporal, mirroring the balance achieved between the tectonic (closed) and atectonic (open) forms that Mellor identifies as the governing compositional principles guiding Blake's images.<sup>51</sup> For Blake, clock time is limiting and reductive ("The hours of folly are measured by the clock, but of wisdom: no clock can measure") although time and eternity are not mere negations of each other since, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" (MHH; E, 36).

*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* presents an important example of Blake's experiments with language and temporality. Like a number of his early illuminated books the poem is marked by a relatively straightforward directness that makes it possible to see Blake's pictures depicting scenes that roughly approximate the action being described by his texts. However, the directness with which the designs depict moments of narrative action belies a complex relationship organizing the words and images in Blake's poem.

The poem's motto inscribed at the bottom of the title page reads: "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows". This gnomic utterance—the cause of much critical vexation—has been often taken to reverse a well-known dictum in Romantic poetry that devalues the superficialities of optical data at the expense of internally generated images that are redolent of feeling and passion. The eye versus heart dichotomy appears to be inverted by Blake in the motto to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in favor of the sensory input that the eye receives. This not only flies in the face of Romantic orthodoxy but also seems to

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<sup>51</sup> Anne Kostelanetz Mellor, *Blake's Human Form Divine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).



contradict Blake's own pronouncements on the unreliability of the senses as a guide to human action. Blake's valorization of 'Vision' over 'vision'—the latter being a denigrated and relatively mechanical process in comparison to the prophetic and spiritual qualities of the former—appears to follow an entirely different semantic calculus in comparison to the enigmatic motto which clearly promotes the eye over the heart. One way to understand this contradiction is to read the poem's motto in the light of Oothoon's attack on the Urizenic figure of Bromion whose system of knowledge denies the possibility of irreducible particularity. For Bromion, to *know*, as opposed to *see*, involves the capacity to synthesize information about the world and thereby parse the world into a system of equivalencies. A world thus reduced would have the virtue of being transparent and totally mappable on to such a conceptual grid of equivalence and exchange. Nothing could or would exist in the no-man's land beyond the grid. But it is this no-man's land that interests Blake. Oothoon, a passionate advocate for the irreducible particularity that characterizes the world around her, argues for the importance of sensory information—visual data, more specifically, in relation to the motto—that resists being processed into the falsifying Urizenic categories that eliminate the possibility of non-conforming particulars.<sup>52</sup> By doing so Oothoon rejects, as Heffernan argues, “the limits that empiricism places upon the senses” as well as “the Urizenic dogma that all creatures experience the same sensations.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Reynolds notion that such particulars and “peculiarities” in a work of art are just “so many blemishes” is met with a characteristic Blake outburst: “Infernal Falshood” [sic] (AR; E, 657).

<sup>53</sup> James Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 110.

*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is a critique of a regulated morality that delegitimizes irreducible particulars so as to reduce the world into a network of equivalencies. The latter is the means to achieve the former since it is precisely through the erasure of difference that a standardized system can claim universal validity. Oothoon embodies this critique through her agonized appeals to Theotormon and Bromion: “How can one joy absorb another? Are not different joys / Holy, eternal, infinite... / How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant? / How the industrious citizen the pains of the husbandman” (VD; E 48).

Oothoon’s critique reverberates through many levels of the poem, but none more poignantly so than the sexual politics of which she is the tragic victim. Reduced to the category of a whore after being raped by Bromion, Oothoon offers a scathing critique of the system of values that reduces a woman’s body to a mere counter for a symbolic exchange between men. Such a system is by definition blind to the identity of the specific woman in question and merely applies the inexorable law that distinguishes the pure from the fallen female body. It is against the blindness of such laws that Oothoon’s critique reserves its most impassioned outbursts: “Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast... / How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?” (VD; E, 46, 47). The appeal to ocular verification of her purity defies the blindness of a sexual economy that can only see Oothoon as the impure woman. It is this blindness that the poem’s motto seems to be addressing when it pits the *seeing* eye against the *knowing* heart. Seeing here denotes a condition of sensory receptiveness that is anterior to the synthetic function that produces the fallen knowledge of Bromion and Theotormon.

Oothoon is however not merely a representative of such a ‘pure’ vision, but formulates her critique precisely by being able to straddle both worlds—that of the fallen world of enervating equivalencies and the world of “Minute Particulars” (J; E 185). It is through the dialectical interpenetration of these mutually hostile worlds that Oothoon is born. The motto is not therefore a simple claim that valorizes perceptual purity over the epistemic violence of a systematized scheme of knowledge, but rather it turns on the mutuality that marks such opposed conditions. The stalemate that the poem enacts is a result of a failed attempt to find a way out of the stultifying dialectic prison that Oothoon finds herself in.

The main action of the poem is telescoped into the first sixteen lines and describes the rape of Oothoon by Bromion who “rent[s] her with his thunders, on his stormy bed” after her spontaneous expression of sexual love for Theotormon (VD; E 46). The rest of the approximately two hundred lines of the poem comprise the reactions of the above three characters to this event—the longest response being that of Oothoon herself, who besides lamenting the event, also draws attention to the sexual politics that determine the meaning that such sexual violence holds for women. The foreshortening of the narrative element therefore casts the bulk of poem as a static response that does not engender action but reinforces the futility and impotence of action. Blake therefore replaces the temporality of narrative action with the temporality of speaking voices organized in a sequence that is circular rather than linear. The poem begins with the voice of Oothoon and after brief perorations by Bromion and Theotormon the poem records Oothoon’s long response that produces no effect on Theotormon who remains unconvinced by Oothoon’s arguments. The poem therefore structurally mimics Oothoon’s tragedy in quarantining

itself from narrative progression. This renders the text's relationship with images rather complex, imperiling the distinguishing marks that separate texts from images.

*Visions of the Daughters of Albion* offers us many interesting insights into the manner in which Blake conceived of the relationship between the linguistic and the graphic. The spatial dimensions of Blake's images in the poem both declare their ontological distinction from temporal and narrative movements within the text and at the same time reveal the extent to which such distinctions are always vulnerable and fragile.

In what follows I will attempt to demonstrate how the 'meaning' of Blake's poem cannot be disentangled from the specific modes of visual/verbal interpenetration that constitute the semantic field of the poem. My aim in doing so is not to demonstrate the truth of the oft-repeated caveat about the dangers of truncating Blake's texts by lopping off its graphic component. Instead I wish to call attention to the extent to which a text like *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, when read in terms of the specific dialectics that organize the relation between the verbal and the visual, can be seen as offering an extended meditation on the very nature of its own project of mixing two mediums.

Like a number of Blake's illuminated texts the visual images in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* play fast and loose with the narrative structure of the text. One such image is the frontispiece, which depicts the three central characters, Oothoon, Bromion and Theotormon, sitting in varying postures of despondence at the mouth of a cave that looks out on to a body of water framed by mountains (fig. 4). Above and behind the mountains a red, angry sun dominates the horizon. The scene depicted is one that is



**Figure 4.** Frontispiece, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.

fundamentally static since Bromion and Oothoon are chained to their positions and are thereby rendered immobile, while Theotormon the one figure in the entire poem who is free to act and re-act to the events in the poem is paralyzed into inaction by his own

“mind-forged manacles” (SOE; E 27). Theotormon’s condition is visually evident in the frontispiece by the extreme torsion of despair that seems to root his body into the ground. The narrative stasis implied by the frontispiece is underscored by the arresting gaze of the red sun that appears to fix the human tableau into a state of petrification.

The frontispiece depicts a crucial scene that the text describes on Plate 5 and therefore visually foreshadows a moment that will unfold only half way into the poem. Such prolepsis is however by no means the special property of images, since the case is frequently reversed by Blake both in this poem and elsewhere—illustrations trail behind texts and frequently visualize moments in the narrative that have already been given linguistic form.<sup>54</sup>

In the case of the frontispiece, however, the temporal lag which marks the delayed textual articulation of the scene represented by the frontispiece bears a complex relationship to the idea of time. The visual image may well correspond to a moment that is yet to find textual confirmation and in a limited sense may therefore suggest an alternate temporal logic that undergirds Blake’s images to the poem. But the image itself, focuses on a special moment, that within the structure of the poem appears to be represent a ‘still point’ that even while belonging to a particular point within the succession of moments that comprise the narrative, takes on the position of an emblematic figure for the narrative as a whole. This is so, not because it represents a high point or pregnant moment that can easily serve as a synecdoche for the poem, but rather the poem’s narrative structure is one that implodes into a condition that never succeeds in getting beyond the moment represented in the frontispiece. In other words, the scene depicted in

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<sup>54</sup> For example in *The Book of Thel* Plate 4 visualizes a scene that is described in Plate 3 and in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* the image that corresponds to Plate 18 appears on Plate 20

the frontispiece is that of a narrative *cul de sac*, a moment of stasis that mirrors the existential stagnation which attends on the figure of Oothoon herself. The image is, therefore, a citation from a narrative that itself never manages to get beyond this moment.

One could approach this conversely from the direction of language and argue that Blake's narrative in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is one that approaches the condition of the graphic image because of its own narrative form that eliminates the possibility of progression. The text of the poem is a lament that is framed very much like a painting by the uniformity of response by the choric voices of the daughters of Albion, which open and close the poem. Oothoon's passionate arguments that comprise much of the poem is not productive of action, but is met by an unmoved Theotormon whose response underscores the static nature of all that has transpired thus far. It also coincides with an ending in which the poem loops back to its original moments—the frontispiece is doubly proleptic in that it both represents a particular moment, but one that the poem cannot get enough of and never manages to put behind itself. The possibility of temporal progression is then neutralized by the spatially enacted paralysis of the frontispiece, which extends its spatial dominion over the entire poem.

However, this image of stasis that the poem is tethered to is one that exists both in physical space and visualizes a state of mind. It is both a tableau that describes the poem and also a description of the inner landscape of the mind that places the action in a space that seems to be far from physical. Essick has noted that there is an uncanny sense in which the entire scene could be seen as a representation of a human face in profile—the roof of the cave and the position of the sun suggesting the contours of a human head and

eye respectively.<sup>55</sup> Such a reading allows the image to be a depiction that refers to a scene that transpires within mental rather than physical space; the three characters that dominate the foreground representing a dramatic snapshot of an internal state of mind.<sup>56</sup> The eye of the sun that beholds the human scene can thus be seen as a principle of vision that mediates between the inside and the outside. However, the bifocal nature of its gaze in rendering visible the world both within and without reveals one of Blake's most cherished beliefs—that the physical world is a product of the human imagination: "For All Things Exist in the Human Imagination" (J; E, 223). For the reader then, the red eye of the sun is a mirroring of her own gaze, but this time, however, returning the gaze and placing the scene of human despair at a point that is equidistant from both the eye of the reader and the eye of nature. The vanishing point is thereby visualized and counterbalances the gaze of the reader. Under the pressure of the double gaze the scene depicted in the foreground is frozen into stasis.

Such a reading of the frontispiece that sees it as partially representing an introjected internal state adds another layer of meaning to the compelling influence it wields on the text. In fact, as a representation, it is precisely its capacity to straddle external spaces and internal mental states that endows it with the elasticity to stretch itself like an impenetrable film that confines and restrains the narrative movement of the poem. The dialectics of movement and stasis in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is therefore

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<sup>55</sup> See *Visions of the Daughters of Albion by William Blake* Ed. Robert Essick (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2002) 18. Copy J, in fact, makes explicit the eye-like nature of the sun.

<sup>56</sup> As Mitchell points out, "[p]ictorial space" in Blake's work, "does not exist as a uniform, visually perceived container of forms, but rather as a kind of extension of the consciousness of the human figures it contains". (Mitchell, 38).



reinforced through a carefully staged intermedial contest between the image and the word.

It is from within this bleak psychologically entombed state that issues some of the most moving and radically subversive lines in Blake's poetry. For these claustrophobic interiors cannot stifle Oothoon from speaking in a language that Heffernan describes as, "copulative, open, and richly inclusive, embracing multiple meanings and multiple pleasures," enabling her to "radiate power" even "[t]hrough the veil of powerlessness."<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Since Blake rejected a purely physical nature foreign to the life of the mind his images often demonstrate that "the external is a metaphor invented by the imagination itself."<sup>58</sup> Pictorial space, Blake's images suggest, is not over-stepping its bounds when it visualizes interiority because words and images as well as space and time are not ontologically independent from each other. Blake's illuminated poetry embodies this inter-penetration of poetic and graphic signs and the reality they invoke with a view to "expose as a fiction the bifurcated organization of that reality."<sup>59</sup>

Blake's insistence that "Mental Things are alone Real" (VLJ; E 565) and his critique of the separation between external nature and the mind suggests that for Blake the human imagination is the generative core in which the distinction between the outside and the inside disappears. This is not solipsism or a form of retreat into the mind, but the marking out of a space within which the very gap between the inside and outside is closed. It is a

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<sup>57</sup>Heffernan, 108, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Eaves, 32

<sup>59</sup> Mitchell, 31.

space that marks the coincidence of an external reality, “this Vegetable Glass of Nature”, and an internal reality, the “Eternal Vision or Imagination of All that Exists” (VLJ; E 555, 554). As Gleckner argues, “[a] total apprehension of inward reality, then, is also a total sensory perception of outer reality.”<sup>60</sup> As *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* suggests, it is “an improvement of sensual enjoyment” that immediately precedes the “displaying [of] the infinite that was hid” (MHH; E 39). The space that marks the intersection of the inside and outside is also one that embodies the marriage between the multiplex nature of the senses and the ideational realm of the infinite.

However it is also a space that marks the point of contact between the unique identity of each moment and the extreme interchangeability of such moments. No two copies of Blake’s illuminated works are identical and while each plate is unique in itself its position within the sequence of plates is not sacrosanct.<sup>61</sup> Blake’s method of composition and printing thwarts ordinary mechanical reproduction on the one hand but at the same time ensures a prolific but orchestrated iterability on the other. Commercial reproduction is therefore countered not by retreating into a pure, irreducibly particular textual form, but by transvaluing the principle of iterability altogether. Iterability is not the un-intended consequence that shadows Blake’s texts but lies at the very compositional heart of his illuminated poetry. As Makdisi points out, his texts comprise “a number of actually or potentially reiterated images, both verbal and pictorial, and yet neither solely pictorial nor verbal: that is, similar but heterogeneous *graphemes* capable of—and subjected to—

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<sup>60</sup> Robert F. Gleckner, “Blake and the Senses”, *Studies in Romanticism* 5 (1965) 7.

<sup>61</sup> For an excellent account of the implications of this absence of a stable text read Makdisi, 155-208.

repeated iterability.”<sup>62</sup> It is under the aegis of this Blakean iterability that the marriage of words and pictures is staged.

The anti-Urizenic book, then, is one that offers a field of play for a full range of dialectic energies. The textual spaces of such a book cannot be conceived in terms of a template, for templates frame and circumscribe the edges of such an enterprise. Nor can it be thought of in terms of an infinitely malleable space that lacking any identity of its own assumes multiple forms, for Blake was extremely critical of art that lacks clear outlines and definite form.<sup>63</sup> It also cannot be explained solely in Makdisi’s terms, which invoke a Bergsonian understanding of the image to describe Blake’s poetry as “something in between...representation and object.”<sup>64</sup> Such a formulation does to a large extent capture the spirit of Blake’s hybrid productions but fails to offer a credible account of the active dialectic processes that continually shape and re-shape his illuminated poetry.

Perhaps, the only way to fathom the anti-Urizenic book then is to see it as the sporadically glimpsed, utopian possibility that resides in every book. Blake’s illuminated books would therefore, only serve to illumine this dimension in other books—the reverse ekphrastic images in Blake’s work gesture towards this possibility.

The idea of the anti-Urizenic book is therefore the *supplement* that keeps the field of book production in play. That probably explains why Blake’s illuminated texts fight shy of getting concretized as a book, and remains a potent but provisional assemblage of words and images that are always on the verge of being realized.

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<sup>62</sup> Makdisi, 187

<sup>63</sup> See Eaves, 15- 30 and Mitchell, 44-52.

<sup>64</sup> Makdisi likens Blake’s texts to a Bergsonian notion of the image that constitutes matter and memory. Makdisi, 187.

## CHAPTER TWO: EKPHRASIS

When ekphrastic poems venture a leap of faith across the chasm that separates words and pictures they display a bravura that can be misleading. Most often they pause midflight to reflect on the recklessness of such leaps and display a sharp awareness of the perils involved in such an enterprise.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Duke in Browning's "My Last Duchess" (1842) embodies both the hubristic attempt to 'write off' the image as well as the risks and insecurities attendant on such virtuoso performances. In excoriating this unrepentant and brutal Duke, generations of critics have unwittingly generated testimonials to the power of the silent image to thwart the dubious expansiveness of language. The fact that the Duke's proprietary gaze and impressive arsenal of rhetorical skills fails to silence the image, demonstrates that even the most subtle web of words cannot stem the 'leakage' of meaning in pictures.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I explore early nineteenth-century ekphrastic poems. My special focus is on poems that invoke objects from the world of plastic arts, not in order to rein in their meanings, but rather to meet head-on the high stakes involved in the enterprise of writing across the gulf that separates linguistic and non-linguistic signs. While the ekphrastic tradition stretches all the way from Homer's remarkable description of Achilles' shield in

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<sup>1</sup> See James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993). Needless to say, ekphrastic poems enact this leap from *within* language, a condition of possibility which both defines and frames the attempt to inhabit another medium. Heffernan puts it thus: "When the war between word and image is fought on the field of language, it becomes essentially a war of words... ekphrastic poetry... can be seen as a museum of words—a gallery of art constructed by language alone". This limiting condition is circumvented to some extent in pattern poetry (84, 8).

Unless otherwise indicated all references to Heffernan will be from this book.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes uses the word "leakage" in a similar sense in "Is Painting a Language" in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 149-152.

the *Illiad*<sup>3</sup> to John Ashbery's justly famous "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and beyond, the nineteenth century certainly saw a major spike in ekphrastic productions.<sup>4</sup> The Romantic period in particular saw an unusual efflorescence of ekphrastic poems that display a rich ambivalence about the artistic objects they verbalize.<sup>5</sup>

Under consideration here are a few Romantic poems that in addition to being cognizant of the limits of ekphrasis embody these limits by serving as vehicles for an extended meditation on those moments that display a heightened tension between the verbal and the figural. In these poems, the poet's gaze at the non-verbal artifact is not lacking in penetration and insight, but as bracingly self-reflexive intermedial encounters these ekphrastic texts get drawn into an interpretative quagmire that calls into question the very linguistic prowess that occasions the ekphrastic venture. Furthermore, these poems, by seriously engaging with the intermedial friction inherent in ekphrastic representations, put a great deal of pressure on the intellectual and cultural protocols that maintain the distinction between words and images. At the centre of this study of ekphrasis is my analysis of Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci", a poem that, in my view, stands at the very vanishing point of the nineteenth-century ekphrastic landscape, serving as its limit case.

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent reading of the ekphrastic moment in the *Iliad* see William H. Race, *Classical Genres and English Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 56-79. See also Heffernan, 10-22.

<sup>4</sup> See Roy Park, "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Nineteenth-Century Aftermath" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28(1969) 156 and Grant F. Scott, "Shelley, Medusa and the Perils of Ekphrasis," in *The Romantic Imagination: Literature in England and Germany*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Jurgen Klein, *Studies in Comparative Literature* 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996). For an account of the "unprecedented proliferation" of ekphrasis in late Romantic poetry see Peter Simonsen "Late Romantic Ekphrasis: Felicia Hemans, Leigh Hunt and the Return of the Visible" *Orbis Litterarum* 60:5, (2005) 319.

<sup>5</sup> For a list of historical reasons that explains the increase in ekphrastic poems during the Romantic period see Simonsen, 319.

Since my next two chapters focus on the role of images in the novel and short story, a brief note on the generic distinctions between the way ekphrasis plays out in poetry and prose would be in order here. In prose fiction, ekphrastic moments are embedded within a larger narrative dynamic and, as such, are in conversation with the larger thematic structures that drive the text. They often call into question the narrative structures and representational protocols of such texts by either arresting time or violating its sequential logic by virtue of their powerfully proleptic powers.<sup>6</sup> Ekphrastic poetry, while sharing many features with ekphrastic passages in prose fiction, distinguishes itself by a greater attentiveness to the very modalities of intermediality. As discrete units of poetic expression they enjoy a greater portability and tend to be “detachable fragments” that often put pressure on the part-whole relations of the texts that contain them.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ekphrasis: The Paragonal Model**

The ekphrastic impulse in literature—the desire to represent visual objects in a non-visual medium, i.e. language—can be located across periods and genres. Scholarship on this literary phenomenon has often despaired at finding a valid definition that can encompass the diverse terrain that ekphrasis covers. But perhaps the most serviceable definition of ekphrasis that has become the basis of a number of recent theorizations is

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<sup>6</sup> For two relatively recent essays on ekphrasis and the novel see Abigail S. Rischin, “Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Desire in *Middlemarch*” *PMLA*, Vol. 111, No. 5 (1996) 1121-1132 and Brian Donnelly, “Sensational Bodies: Lady Audley and the Pre-Raphaelite Portrait” *Victorian Newsletter* 112 (2007) 69-90.

<sup>7</sup> Heffernan, 5.

one that limits itself to the “verbal representation of visual representation.”<sup>8</sup> This definition, by Heffernan, helped refocus critical attention on the fact that ekphrastic texts derive their frisson not in their encounter with the field of vision, but from the fact that they verbalize a visual *representation*: “What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be representational.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, ekphrasis is the product of linguistic representation traversing the plane of visual representation and involves the intersection of one medium by another.<sup>10</sup>

But no account of ekphrasis would be complete without reference to Krieger’s 1967 classic essay, “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoön* Revisited”, which in a sense, inaugurates the theory of ekphrasis.<sup>11</sup> Krieger begins by noting that notwithstanding Lessing’s plea for abstinence, the traffic between the visual and the verbal has always been marked by a fair degree of promiscuity.<sup>12</sup> That language is the far more persistent and compulsive offender in this regard is borne out by the long and distinguished literary tradition of ekphrasis. For Krieger, ekphrasis describes the need for literary texts to invoke the world of plastic art as a technique for the “circularizing of its linear movement” and sees the “plastic object as a symbol of a frozen, stilled world of

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<sup>8</sup>Heffernan., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Heffernan, 4.

<sup>10</sup> More recent scholarship on ekphrasis has tended to follow Heffernan who delimits the field so as to exclude a number of literary phenomena that can be said to belong to the longer continuum of inter-art relations such as iconicity, pictorialism, and visual description.

<sup>11</sup> “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laocoön* Revisited” in Murray Krieger, *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 105-128. This essay was later incorporated into a book on the same subject by Krieger. See *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See G.E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature's turning world in order to "still" it."<sup>13</sup> Krieger offers us the broad spectrum view of ekphrasis that offers specific examples of poems that verbalize art works, such as Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar", and then moves outward to elevate ekphrasis to "a general principle of poetics, asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity."<sup>14</sup> What makes the ekphrastic principle the very engine that drives all poetry is the need to marry space and time in order to fuse the temporal, empirically progressive elements of a poem with its archetypal, circular and timeless elements. The world of plastic arts, (specifically urns, vases and jars) happily furnishes ekphrastic poems with apt symbols of stasis and spatiality allowing such poems to achieve the seemingly impossible union of the universal and the particular. Ekphrasis, for Krieger, is merely the symptom that pervades all poetry and shows us how literature "can defy the apparently mutually exclusive categories of time and space."<sup>15</sup>

Although Krieger quite effectively puts paid to Lessing's purist aesthetics, he does not question his fundamental alignment of time and space with poetry and the plastic arts, respectively. While many of Krieger's universalist and formalist assumptions have subsequently come under review his identification of the 'stillness' that resides in the plastic arts—providing the necessary traction for ekphrastic poetry—has remained by and large unchallenged.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Krieger, 107.

<sup>14</sup>Krieger, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Krieger, 128.

<sup>16</sup> Critiques of Krieger include John B. Vickery's review of *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* in *Modern Fiction Studies* 39.2 (1993) 433-435 and James Heffernan, "Lusting for the Natural Sign" Review



A direct consequence of the conviction that the plastic arts represent the silence of frozen time is the burden of exegesis that falls on the ekphrastic poet. Since art objects do not speak, they have to be spoken for, about, to and against. In Hagstrum's somewhat more narrow definition, ekphrasis was marked by the "special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object".<sup>17</sup> It is, therefore, incumbent on the poet to employ rhetorical techniques such as prosopopeia as a means for "envoicing" the silent art object and by doing so it "releases the narrative impulse that graphic art typically checks, and it enables the silent figures of graphic art to speak."<sup>18</sup>

But the absolute power of language in the face of the art object's grave silence produces a deep anxiety and ambivalence towards plastic representation. While Krieger may cite a kind of stasis envy as the primary drive that motivates ekphrasis, more recent theorizations grant a more complex range of reasons to explain the insecurities of language. For Heffernan there is both iconophilia and iconophobia at work in ekphrastic literature: "To represent a painting or sculpted figure in words is to evoke its power—the power to fix, excite, amaze, entrance, disturb, or intimidate the viewer—even as language strives to keep that power under control."<sup>19</sup> Since ekphrasis speaks on behalf of a mute art object, the writer is drawn into a quasi-erotic linguistic free fall that leaves the poet plagued by doubt and inadequacy. For Mitchell, "this 'working through' of ekphrastic ambivalence is...one of the principal themes of ekphrastic poetry" since the art object

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of *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign, Semiotica* 98 (1994): 219-228. On the Lessing legacy in ekphrasis studies see Grant F. Scot, "Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology", *Word and Image* 7.4 (1991) 306-310.

<sup>17</sup>Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1958), 18n.

<sup>18</sup> James Heffernan, "Ekphrasis and Representation", *New Literary History* 22.2 (1991), 304.

<sup>19</sup> Heffernan, 7. For iconophobia see also W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image Text Ideology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986) 112-115.

once produced in language becomes what he calls an “unapproachable and unrepresentable ‘black hole’ in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.”<sup>20</sup> That the poet seeks to fill this absence with language, even while realizing the Sisyphean nature of the task, grounds Mitchell’s claim that the history of ekphrasis can be studied under the aegis of “hope, fear, and indifference.”<sup>21</sup>

This ambivalence with regard to the world of plastic arts is often manifested in ekphrastic poetry by a paragonal or contestatory element that attempts to stage the usually gendered antagonism between word and image. The specifically inter-medial nature of this contest sets the stage for a number of studies that explore ekphrastic literature as the incursions of language into the alien territory of visual representation—an attempt that betrays the expansionist agenda of literature and the violations involved in the hostile takeover of the visual by the verbal. Describing this “exclusionary agenda” Grant Scott laments that ekphrasis is most often understood as “a one-way street: what is outside must be taken in, translated, assimilated, and therefore altered.”<sup>22</sup>

The roots of this hostility, of course, go back to the long history of theorizing the relation between the arts, often subsumed under the sister arts tradition. Horace, in a sense, inaugurates this tradition with his comparative dictum, “ut pictura poesis”, which Simonides, a century later, in his reworking of Horace’s inter-art mantra, loads in favour of poetry: “painting is mute poetry, and poetry is a speaking picture.” In giving a voice to pictures, poetry appears to add a sensory dimension that fills a lack in painting; painting

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<sup>20</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 163-164, 158

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Grant F. Scott, “The Rhetoric of Dilation”, 301.

on the other hand is merely poetry minus voice. Such asymmetrical models have been reversed in the long history of inter-art comparisons and Leonardo's well known account of painting's victory over poetry in terms of the former's unmatched vividness and Dante's insistence on the greater creative scope of poetry in comparison to painting are cases in point.<sup>23</sup> However, as will be discussed in the next section, the long history of these "sisterly antagonists", so ably documented by Hagstrum, reaches a chiastic impasse in the Romantic period which is often overlooked and belied by the more flagrantly anti-visual rhetoric of its practitioners.<sup>24</sup>

To see ekphrasis as the playing out of a deep structural antagonism between words and images spawns a deep suspicion that every ekphrastic exercise is a "cunning attempt to transform and master images by inscribing it" and is therefore a "self-serving and diabolical project."<sup>25</sup> Such a view tends to discourage an analysis of ekphrasis that grants a more "divided" and "ambivalent" set of motivations to the ekphrastic drive in literature.<sup>26</sup>

The paragonal model tends to overlook the complex affiliations between poetry and the plastic arts in its conviction of an absolute difference between the two classes of signs. Such a rivalrous basis for studying the relationship between poetry and the plastic arts has been challenged by three different approaches to ekphrasis.

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<sup>23</sup> See Hagstrum, 66-70.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most oft-quoted example of this denigration of sight is Wordsworth's reference to the "despotic" eye in *The Prelude*.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, "Rhetoric of Dilation", 302.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, "Rhetoric of Dilation", 302.

The first, questions the reflexive antagonism that is employed in ekphrastic studies—a tendency to see words and images as eternal combatants in the arena of art. It relies on evidence, marshaled from both the recent and ancient history of ekphrasis, of a real collaboration and mutuality between poetry and the plastic arts. For instance, Andrew Becker in analyzing the motives behind the tendency to foreground the rivalry between the visual and the verbal, cites a variety of examples from ancient Greek and Latin writing to show how a consideration of the visual in language “tend[s] toward admiration” rather than contest.<sup>27</sup> For Becker the trope of inter-art rivalry has led to an over-investment in the business of “teasing out latent agonistic implications” in ekphrastic texts and in the bargain, he notes, “we have tended to discount the more patent, appreciative, statements of admiration.”<sup>28</sup> A similar, more historicist, case was made, more recently, by Peter Simonsen, who finds in romantic ekphrasis a clear refutation of the alleged anti-visual bias of Romantic poetry. His reading of late Romantic ekphrasis—in particular the poetry of Felicia Hemans—cogently demonstrates that for Hemans the “two art forms are mutually reinforcing sisters.”<sup>29</sup>

But the same case can and ought to be made with reference to early Romantic poetry and Blake would be the obvious candidate to demonstrate the collaborative use of words and pictures. As a composite artist Blake reveals how the sisterhood of the arts can be

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew S. Becker, “Contest or Concert? A Speculative Essay on Ecphrasis and Rivalry Between the Arts”, *Classical and Modern Literature*, 23.1 (2003) 12.

<sup>28</sup> Becker, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Simonsen, 332.

made to complement each other in ways that not only prevent the subsumption of images by words but also enable a mutually enriching poetics.<sup>30</sup>

The second challenge sees the contest between words and images as fundamentally open-ended. Such a model co-opts the idea of conflict into a theoretical formulation in which victory or defeat is irrelevant to a real or full understanding of the nature and function of ekphrasis. Such theories subsume the question of medial supremacy under the notion of an infinitely generative gap between the arts that underwrites the longevity and unfinished nature of all ekphrastic projects. Nelson Goodman in his *Languages of Art* describes the essential incommensurability between painting and language thus: “No amount of familiarity turns a paragraph into a picture and no degree of novelty makes a picture a paragraph.”<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein Foucault’s reading of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* acknowledges at the outset that “the relation between language and painting is an infinite relation ... it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.”<sup>32</sup> Such a view is echoed by Barthes in his essay “Is Painting a Language” when he describes a picture as that which has its identity “ceaselessly deferred”: In ekphrasis “the signified [is] always displaced (for it is only a series of nominations, as in a dictionary), the analysis is endless....”<sup>33</sup> The fundamental inexpressibility of pictorial meaning in

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<sup>30</sup> Since my previous chapter on Blake’s poetry elaborates this thesis, I will not discuss it here.

More recently, Mieke Bal in her special issue on inter-art relations in the journal *Style* argues for a “mutual collaboration” between the arts. She also specifically tries to articulate a new model of “visual poetics” that “tries to overcome the word-image opposition implanted in our culture from antiquity on”. Qt. in Scott, “Rhetoric of Dilation”, 308.

<sup>31</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), 231.

<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, 150. It must be pointed out that Barthes is here referring to all writing about art, including art criticism, and not just ekphrastic poetry.

another medium such as language alters the dynamics of the contest between words and pictures, for the laurel is to be won by neither. The impossibility of taking the image hostage renders the ekphrastic exercise non-competitive. In this connection, it must be pointed out that the trope of inexpressibility in ekphrastic poetry has been identified with the notion of “deference” and an “increased admiration for the work of art”, both of which can be seen to militate against “the view that sees ekphrasis as creating a rivalry.”<sup>34</sup>

The third, more extreme, challenge to the paragonal model questions the very distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic signs. W. J. T. Mitchell, for instance, has argued that the disjunction between words and images do not constitute an essential difference. He argues that neither are the “visual arts inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely,” nor are “arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives” the unique domain of language.<sup>35</sup> While granting that language and visual media differ “at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions”, Mitchell points out that “from the *semantic* point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap to be overcome” by ekphrasis.<sup>36</sup> As a social practice, ekphrasis merely feeds off and helps in the regulation of a culturally produced gap between words and images that wears the garb of an ontological difference. For Mitchell, since “all media are mixed media, combining different codes, discursive

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<sup>34</sup> Becker, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 160.

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 161.

conventions, channels, sensory and cognitive modes” there are no “‘pure’ visual representations” nor do “‘pure’ texts” exist.<sup>37</sup> In Mitchell’s view, the difference between words and images, therefore, do not seem to rest on a stable theoretical ground, making it possible for him to argue against a comparative model of inter-artistic relations that assumes an essential difference. It is no surprise that Blake’s illuminated books represent for Mitchell the ideal example of texts that force one to acknowledge the “temptation and arbitrariness of comparative studies of visual and verbal art”.<sup>38</sup> Blake, as I argue in my previous chapter, takes us to the very core of the word- picture dialectic to force upon us the realization that at the dead centre there is no opposition, but not before taking us on a journey that requires us to experience the full range of relations between the visual and the verbal.

Such a synchronic view of the various critiques of a paragonal model can be brought to bear on the poetry and criticism of the Romantic period—a period that offers many instances of a substantive re-definition of inter-art relations. These instances offer a way out of the sterile combativeness of earlier conceptions of the sister arts often by transvaluing the very opposition between poetry and the plastic arts by re-conceiving the mimetic function of art. Incorporating facets of these three critiques of the paragonal model, my analysis of Romantic ekphrastic poems in the next two sections, will largely be focused on their complex relationship to the idea of the paragone.

### **Romantic Ekphrasis**

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<sup>37</sup>Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 95.

<sup>38</sup>Mitchell

M.H. Abrams's pronouncement on the replacement of the visual arts with music as the natural ally of Romantic literature typifies a view that took for granted a kind of reflexive anti-pictorialism in the Romantic period: "The use of painting to illuminate the essential character of poetry... almost disappears in the major criticism of the romantic period... In place of painting, music becomes the art frequently pointed to as having a profound affinity with poetry."<sup>39</sup> While Abrams's claim might be valid, at best, for a generalized reaction against a pictorialist poetic, it clearly fails to acknowledge that the visual arts were not simply jettisoned but, as I demonstrate below, underwent a conceptual recalibration vis-à-vis language in Romantic poetry and criticism.<sup>40</sup>

Painting and the plastic arts in general, feature prominently in Romantic poetry and besides an obvious spurt in ekphrastic productions during the period, there is already a growing consensus that the visual culture of the period informs and shapes the movement's conception of itself.<sup>41</sup> While a valorization of the eye and visible surfaces may have produced a negative reaction most notably in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, the period saw an increasing interest in works of plastic art. This paradox is manifested by what Roy Park describes as the "tension between the honorific and the pejorative employment of pictorial allusion" in Romantic poetry.<sup>42</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1953) 25.

<sup>40</sup> For the view that Romanticism rethinks its relations with the visual arts see Lawrence Starzyk, "Ut Pictura Poesis: The Nineteenth Century Perspective" *Victorian Newsletter*, 102 (2002), 1-9. See also Roy Park, 159-164.

<sup>41</sup> See William Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and Sophie Thomas, *Romanticism and Visuality :Fragments, History, Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Park, 163.



relationship to the visual in the Romantic period was clearly marked by ambivalence and doubleness.

For instance, Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* contains lines that decisively elevate poetry at the expense of painting, but in doing so, finds itself drawn into a semantic confusion that both connects and disconnects poetry from painting :

Language...is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our eternal being ...than color, form or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments and conditions of art have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression.<sup>43</sup>

It is language's freedom from a dependence on materiality—its relatively direct, uninterrupted access to the ideational realm—that makes it a superior medium of representation. But ironically, the subordination of the plastic arts is premised on poetry's possession of an even greater plasticity—albeit, one which concerns the reproduction of thoughts. Conversely, the plasticity of the plastic arts proves to be compromised by their reliance on the very materials of plastic representation. There is a complex relationship to the very idea of mimesis here. Language employs non-plastic, arbitrary means to achieve a mimetic ideal that at one and the same time exceeds and substantively differs from the narrower mimesis produced by the plastic arts—its mimesis, therefore, differs in degree and kind. It is ironic that the very idea of plasticity—a concept germane to arts that deal in so-called natural signs—lingers and needs to be recalled to the service of a non-natural, arbitrary sign system like language.

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<sup>43</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraisat, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2002), 513.

Nowhere is this semantic confusion more poignant and sharp than in the oft-quoted lines from the *Defence* that describes poetry as both representational and anti-representational: “And whether [poetry] spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life’s dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being...and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being.”<sup>44</sup> In the above quote, the word “whether”, throws a film of epistemological doubt over the very nature of poetry. It suggests that poetry may *either* be a special kind of representation (“figured curtain”) that shows the “being within our being” through its unique representational powers *or* a process that rids us of the very need for representation (“withdraws life’s dark veil”). Besides the tremendous metaphorical slippage here between poetry and the visual arts in Shelley’s language, it is interesting to note that poetry may either be a kind of picturing through the magic of figuration or a freedom from pictures—both representational and the end of representation. Shelley leaves us to decide whether it can be both or is indeed one and not the other, and in doing so symptomatizes the period’s fundamental ambivalence regarding the relation between poetry and the plastic arts.

This ambivalence is to some extent explained by the fact that when Romantic aesthetic theory rejected an empiricist and mimetic model in favor of an ideal which represented what Roy Park calls the “involution of the individual and the generic” this necessitated a thoroughgoing re-assessment of the adversarial model of sister-art relations. Since mimesis loses some of its currency in the context of what has been described as “the dialectical involution of the subjective and the objective”, the visual and the verbal can only be measured with reference to the figure of the artist and his interiorizations.

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<sup>44</sup> Shelley, 533.

The altered calculus of inter-art relations is evident, in different ways, in the three major Romantic poems that I will consider briefly, before I turn to Shelley's "On Medusa."

In Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" this shift in the sister arts paradigm finds expression through the enactment of what seems at first like a fairly direct and impassioned comparison between verbal and figural. However Keats' ode, as I argue below, pushes this comparative model to a point where it implodes under the pressure of its own questions. But while the poem is able to reveal the limits of ekphrastic rivalry, it fails to effectively overcome the gap between the sister arts—a failure evident in the poem's ambivalence about its own attempts to effect a rapprochement between poetry and the plastic arts. In Wordsworth's "Peele Castle", the second of the three Romantic poems under consideration in this section, the paragonal model is conspicuously absent. Although the poem stages the collision between a visual image and the images of the mind, there is no struggle for supremacy here. Instead, visual representations are shown to initiate a recalibration of the word-pictures of the mind. "Peele Castle", therefore, suggests the terms for a new dispensation under which to consider a more co-operative relationship between words and images. Finally, in Shelley's "Ozymandias" there is a similar absence of an adversarial relationship between words and plastic representations. But here the new equations between the two are not formulated under the aegis of collaboration. Instead, as I discuss below, even in the face of their inexorable ruin, it is their uncanny recalcitrance to perishability that paradoxically levels the ground between words and images.

The most famous ekphrastic poem of the Romantic period is without question Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" (1819)—a poem often invoked as the paradigmatic example of ekphrasis in general.<sup>45</sup> Since so much has already been said about the poem, even from within ekphrasis studies, I will restrict myself to a few general observations about its particular strategy of dealing with paragonal aspects of words and images.

Disturbed by the total lack of access into the world depicted on the urn, Keats' narrator seeks to penetrate the wall that sequesters poetry from the plastic arts. After finding the interrogative mode of the first stanza an unproductive means of securing entry into that world, the poem begins a full-fledged inquiry into the merits and demerits of plastic representation in which the Lessing-esque verities of time and space are invoked to establish the absolute difference between visual arts and language. In this sense, Keats' poem is intensely paragonal.<sup>46</sup>

But by the final stanza the comparative model collapses under the weight of its own procedures. This breakdown is dramatized primarily through the remarkably "transgressive act" of having the urn speak. In Heffernan's words, "...the urn crosses the line between visual and verbal representation, between fixed, silent beauty of graphic stillness and the audible movement of speech."<sup>47</sup> Since the visual has now bridged the gulf that separated it from the verbal, we are ushered in to witness a momentous rapprochement between the estranged sisters. But the chiastic prison ("Beauty is truth,

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<sup>45</sup> *Keats's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2009), 461-462. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

<sup>46</sup> With regard to the questioning mode of the poem, Helen Vendler writes: "The constitutive trope of the poem is interrogation, that trope of the perplexed mind". *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) 118. For a detailed study of the poems paragonal aspects see Grant F. Scott, *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Heffernan, 114-115.

truth beauty”) that its speech evokes is not particularly reassuring as an example of the synthesis of the visual and the verbal. The declaration that the sterile divisions between the arts have been done away with, coincides with our realization that there is a deep ambivalence that accompanies such assertions. The aphoristic utterance of the urn suggests an impenetrability that is no less than that evoked by the figures on the urn and in this sense the poem comes full circle, like the urn itself.<sup>48</sup>

While Keats does succeed in writing a poem that embodies both the comparative model of the sister arts as well as its deconstruction he fails to articulate a new idiom with which to speak about our newfound realizations.

But the notion of a contest or rivalry between the sister arts is nowhere in sight in one of the most important examples of ekphrasis from the Romantic period—Wordsworth’s 1805 poem titled “Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle Painted by Sir George Beaumont.”<sup>49</sup> In this poem the subject of the poet’s musings is the actual castle which is refracted in the poem through several pictures: the castle reflected on the surface of the water that surrounds it (“sleeping on a glassy sea”); the idealized memory- picture that the poet imagines he would have bestowed on the first picture (“if mine had been the

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<sup>48</sup> For a masterful reading of the poem that both attempts to demonstrate the philosophical weight behind the urn’s utterance as well as acknowledge its ultimate failure to build bridges between words and pictures see, Klaus Hofmann, “Keats’s Ode to a Grecian Urn” *Studies in Romanticism* 45.2 (2006): 251-284. He writes: “The Ode is robbed of its formal generic integrity and thereby fails in its endeavor to win the contest of the sister arts by incorporating the virtues of visual art into the literary mode...The urn’s verbal participation in the poem forfeits the urn’s non-verbal power” (281). However, for Hofmann the enactment of this failure is accomplished in a manner that transforms failure into triumph: “...a secondary beauty settles on the poem’s surface, spreading a bloom which suffices to win over the aesthetic judgment” (284).

<sup>49</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), 258-259. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

Painters hand”); and Beaumont’s actual portrait of the castle in stormy weather (“This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear! / And this huge Castle, standing here sublime”).

The first half of the poem deals with the reflected image and the idealized image, both of which are, in varying degrees, marked by stasis and a tranquil permanence. The reflected image is potentially threatened, but immune from the violence of nature:

“Whene’er I looked, thy image still was there; / It trembled, but never passed away.” The memory-picture is an ideal synthesis of time and space, motion and stasis: “Thou should have seemed a treasure house divine / of peaceful years...No motion but the moving tide, a breeze, / Or merely silent Nature’s breathing life.” The ‘moving tide’ does not disturb the picture of repose, but generates the illusion of stasis. Here is a picture of immobility underwritten by a perpetual motion. By incorporating motion into stasis, Wordsworth’s memory-picture, therefore, blocks out the violence of change and flux, exempting the picture in his mind from the horror of mobility.

But this fragile immunity is soon shattered by the intrusion of Beaumont’s visual representation of Peele castle besieged by a violent storm (“This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear”), which visibilizes the latent turbulence of the earlier two pictures rendering their calm unity impossible: “Not for a moment could I now behold / A smiling sea, and be what I have been...I have submitted to a new control...A deep distress hath humanized my Soul.” Beaumont’s painting revokes the harmonious view of nature and installs in its place a view that requires not just a radical recalibration of the visual register and the language appropriate to its expression, but necessitates a realignment of the poet’s mental landscape.<sup>50</sup> The “heart that lives alone / Housed in a dream” is

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<sup>50</sup> For a similar argument see Starzyk, 5,6.

replaced by a new maturity consisting of “fortitude and patient cheer.” The painting, in other words, accomplishes what the last lines of Rilke’s famous ekphrastic poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” orders the reader to do: “You have to change your life.”<sup>51</sup>

But Wordsworth succeeds in avoiding the paragonal conflict between words and images in this poem by suggesting that the picture is not the external agent that remedies the fallacious word-pictures of the mind, but is more an occasion for the mind to recognize and work through its own blind spots (“humanized my Soul”) and allows the poet to experience, what Heffernan calls, a “new experience of the world, which embodies a new, stoic version of transcendence.”<sup>52</sup>

I disagree with Heffernan, though, that it is the poet’s “remaking” of the Beaumont painting in his own words that allows Wordsworth to resolve the paragonal conflict. The visual representation, here, must be granted the agency of disrupting the verbal not so as to trump it, but to allow the poet, and by extension the reader, to rethink the very modalities that obtain between words and images. Beaumont’s painting might represent the eruption of the sublime into the beautiful memory-picture of the poet, but, as in numerous poems by Wordsworth, it merely permits the mind to see itself more clearly. The imagined ‘happiness’ of the earlier state “wherever it be known, / Is to be pitied; for ‘tis surely blind.” The false securities of the picture in the poet’s mind is replaced through an ekphrastic encounter with a far more robust and dynamic image that revitalizes both the conception of images and the ekphrastic ability to verbalize such images.

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<sup>51</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke: *Selected Poems*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940), 93.

<sup>52</sup> Heffernan, 107. See also Sylvie Crinquand, “‘If Mine Had Been the Painter’s Hand’: When Wordsworth and Keats Re/Un-write Paintings” *Interfaces: Image Texte Language* 29 (2009-10) 231-244. Reaching a similar conclusion she writes, “In the two poems, the painting serves as go between, between reality and the poet’s dream, a necessary passage for the poet to question his art and his own creative act.” 240.

Shelley, too, attempts to formulate a non-paragonal relationship between words and pictures, although many of his poems display an acute understanding of the perils of looking at images. He recognizes in “Mont Blanc”, for instance, that “the mysterious tongue” of the silent images of nature, “teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild.”<sup>53</sup> His ekphrastic poem “Ozymandias”, written in 1817, reminds us of this ambivalence that resides in the heart of all plastic representation.<sup>54</sup> It symbolizes, more than anything else, the beguiling permanence and stasis with which sculpture entraps its subjects.

Ozymandias seeks to perpetuate his glory forever through his image, but the traveler’s description of the dismembered bits of his sculpted form now inspire pity rather than awe: “Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, / Tell that its sculptor well those passions read.” The shattered visage then, is a symbol that exposes the illusory permanence of visual representation, laying bare the empty quality of the instant embalmed by the image. But the poem’s iconoclastic purpose makes us wonder about the status of the words that appear on the pedestal: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings, / Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair.” If the sculpture has been laid low by time, so have the words inscribed on it, which time has demoted to bathos. The downgrading of both the visual and the verbal, it would seem, leave us only with a pervasive despair.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism* Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002) 99.

<sup>54</sup> All textual references to “Ozymandias” are from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 109-110.

<sup>55</sup> See Heffernan, 115-119. This is exactly Heffernan’s point in his reading of the poem. In an earlier essay, he finds that the same applies to Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn” and writes: “In these two ekphrastic poems, then, Keats and Shelley use the verbal representation of graphic art as a way to reveal the ultimate inadequacy of all representation”. See Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation”, 312



But, the “shattered visage” of Ozymandias offers us something else beside despair. The “frown” and “sneer of cold command.../ “Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things” testify to an obduracy of the stony materials that even in its dismembered state persist in signifying against all odds. In the end, what proves to be adamant in its longevity is not the sculpted form whose formal integrity has been reduced to a “colossal Wreck” but the expression on the decapitated head of Ozymandias. The “sculptor well those passions read” if they represent the irreducible aspect of the representation that does not perish with time. The same could be said of the inscription, the ironized valence of which is possible only because we can still read the original intent it was meant to convey.

If sculpture and writing resists perishability in this sense, we would still have to acknowledge that, that which endures in them both is framed by the wreckage that contains them. The non-perishable is able survive only by virtue of a profound indifference to the shifting sands of context. Their longevity is a function of the fact that, like Medusa, who retains her capacity to petrify her victims even after her decapitation, their signifying powers have an afterlife that prevents their complete objectification into death. There is something uncanny about their messages that seem undeterred by the radical re-configurations of context. The visual and the verbal appear both vanquished by the “lone and level sands” that “stretch far away” and at the same time they seem unyielding in their capacity to outstrip the ravages of time as far as their meanings are concerned.

In “Ozymandias” Shelley only gestures towards this uncanny quality in words and images that occupy a strange place between life and death, but, as I demonstrate below, it is “On Medusa” that it gets developed as an idea.

While all three poems in various ways discard the paragonal model and attempt to establish a new rapport between poetry and the plastic arts, their success at both dramatizing the stakes involved in transitioning from one paradigm to another and imagining the repercussions of such a shift is somewhat limited. These limitations become especially apparent on placing these poems alongside Shelley’s “On Medusa”.

### **"On The Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci"**

Thanks to a spate of recent studies, Shelley’s poem, “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery”, first published in 1824, has now acquired the status of a chestnut in ekphrastic criticism.<sup>56</sup> It is worth pointing out at the outset that unlike a number of ekphrastic poems that focus on visual artifacts that either do not exist (notional ekphrasis) or have been subsequently lost (making the poem the bearer of a verbal trace left behind by the perishable art object), Shelley’s poem, about an early seventeenth-century Flemish painting of Medusa mistakenly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, is about a visual image that exists as a real visual referent (fig. 1).<sup>57</sup> Serious critical engagement

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<sup>56</sup> In addition to Heffernan’s *Museum of Words*, Mitchell’s *Picture Theory*, and Scott’s “Rhetoric of Dilation” cited above, important readings of the poem include Carol Jacobs, “On Looking at Shelley’s Medusa,” *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985) 163-179 and John Hollander, “The Poetics of Ekphrasis” *Word and Image* 4 (1989) 209-219.

All citations from the poem are from *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Selected Poetry* ed. Neville Rogers (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 357-358.

<sup>57</sup> The painting, by an unknown Flemish painter, is still displayed at the Uffizi Gallery of Florence where Shelley saw it in the autumn of 1819.

The term “notional ekphrasis” was coined by John Hollander who was also the first to point out that notional ekphrasis precedes actual ekphrasis. See “The Poetics of Ekphrasis”, *Word & Image* 4(1988) 209-



**Figure 5. *Head of Medusa***

with Shelley's poem necessitates 'looking' both at the painting of Medusa and Shelley's verbal rendition of it. As our bifurcated critical gaze crosses and re-crosses the

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219. For more on the relationship between the permanence of poetry and the perishability of pictorial art see Heffernan, 91, 92.

intermedial space between the poem and the painting we soon come to realize that we are no way immunized from the perils of looking that lie at the thematic heart of Shelley's poem.

For the high stakes involved in the act of 'looking' is precisely what a poem about a representation of Medusa must be mindful of. The uncanny power of Medusa's gaze, Shelley's poem suggests, is based on the fact that she does not lose her power to petrify even *after* her decapitation by Perseus. According to the myth, her head affixed to Athena's shield continued to transfix her victims, albeit controlled and instrumentalized by Athena. Her 'look' therefore retains its power even as a "trunkless head" detached from its body. Configured into the center of an already wrought field of representation on the shield, the Gorgon visage is inserted into a new economy of textual effects. That her petrific powers can thus be recruited through a citational procedure that 'extracts' her reified gaze in order to strategically 'cite' her in the indefinite future, allows us to recognize the special quality that representations of Medusa contain. Her apotropaic powers survive the dismemberment of quotation by never ceasing to astonish those mortals who dare to look at her.

Perhaps, owing to this irrepressible after-life of the Medusan gaze, Shelley's ekphrastic poem about Medusa encounters a strange parallelism. If ekphrasis, as is commonly believed, releases the frozen moment of plastic representation from its static state, by verbalizing its repressed narrative energy, then it is the very antithesis of the Medusan gaze, which freezes into fixity the dynamic consciousness of its victims.<sup>58</sup> An ekphrastic poem about a painting of Medusa thus becomes the site for the convergence of

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<sup>58</sup> As Mitchell puts it, "She exerts and reverses the power of the ekphrastic gaze." Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 172.

two contrasting processes—one attempts to thaw that which the other freezes. On the one hand Medusa, to import a parallel from Barthes’ study of photography, is like a lethal camera before which one is permanently transfixed because we never hear the click of the shutter that releases us from the immobility of the pose.<sup>59</sup> Contrastingly, ekphrasis comes to the rescue of sleeping beauties in the world of plastic art by releasing them into temporality with the gift of language. Shelley’s poem, then, is the ultimate ekphrastic gamble, a kind of endgame in which the ekphrastic gaze that is usually met with the mute indifference of the art object is here brought face to face with its own dispersion and dissolution.

As Mitchell points out “If ekphrastic poetry has a ‘primal scene’, this is it”, since, “Medusa is the image that turns the tables on the spectator and turns the spectator into an image.”<sup>60</sup> Shelley’s poem, well aware of the fact that a poem on Medusa marks the limits of ekphrasis, embodies this knowledge in two ways.

Firstly, as a direct consequence of this high-risk spectatorial face-off, there is a total disavowal of all narrative energy in the poem. Ekphrasis, as Heffernan reminds us is an “obstetric” exercise “delivering from the pregnant moment of visual art the extended narrative which it embryonically signifies.”<sup>61</sup> Such midwifery, however, is not performed by Shelley’s “On Medusa”. The burden of narrative explication does not encumber the poem’s encounter with the image. The non-narrative, seemingly unmediated poetic gaze weaves a verbal picture that is a careful assemblage of discreet visual details concerning

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<sup>59</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980)15. Here Barthes describes the click as “breaking through the mortiferous layers of the pose.” For a reading of the Medusan gaze as proto-photographic see Craig Owens, “Barbara Kruger and the Medusa Effect”, *The Medusa Reader* Ed. Marjorie B. Garber and Nancy Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003) 203-209.

<sup>60</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 172.

<sup>61</sup> Heffernan, 113.

the Medusa head, its “serpent locks”, the chiaroscuro effects produced by the play of light, the other creatures that crowd the immediate foreground, and the unique atmospherics of the setting. The poem therefore follows the image in dwelling on one moment in the Medusa story and while it verbalizes the visual and spatial dimensions of that moment it scrupulously avoids any reference to a before or after. In narrative terms, like the fragmented, decapitated Medusa the unfinished poem could well be described as “the fragment of an uncreated creature.” In this sense, the poem seems to be a victim of “the Medusa effect” which freezes and fixes the poem without the hope of exit from the instant of vision. The poem ends where it begins, in looping back to a synoptic view of the figure that it describes: “A woman’s countenance, with serpent locks, / Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks.”

Secondly, so transfixed is the poem with the image of Medusa that, barring the title, Shelley’s poem does not install ekphrastic frames that are a typical feature of many ekphrastic poems. Such frames serve both, to emphasize the concrete distinctness of the visual artifact being viewed, and to highlight the inter-medial gap that exiles and at the same time protects the poet (and by extension the reader) from the visual image. In contrast Shelley’s ekphrastic poem looks at the Medusa as if it were innocent of mediations of painting. Carol Jacobs asks, “Does the text expose *us* directly to the gaze of the Medusa or does it function like the shield of Perseus, mirroring the Gorgon’s head and protecting us from its effects?” There is no explicit inter-medial friction here—this does not appear to be a “verbal representation of a visual representation”, as Heffernan would have it, but a verbal representation of a direct visual experience.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, 3.

But this unfiltered look at Medusa, as we will see, comes at a cost. For how does one “figu[re] the traits of a monster whose horror thwarts every attempt at figuration?”<sup>63</sup> Perseus’ solution of this problem, according to the myth, lies in realizing that time is of the essence here and as the previous stage of his adventure has taught him, it is only by being able to strike at “the precise instant, the brief and mysterious interval” between instants that success is possible.<sup>64</sup>

In keeping with this, Shelley’s poem, therefore, extracts one moment from the Medusa narrative—a disincorporation that sits well with the anti-narrative principle that Medusa herself stands for—and holds that moment in a state of tremulous suspension. The moment itself seems germane to the principle of selection Lessing recommended, i.e. it avoids the instant of violence in favour of a moment that is sufficiently distanced from it.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, by picturing a Medusa whose reign of terror seems momentarily suspended and whose countenance does not address us directly, the painting also avoids the kind of visual excess that Lessing would have found aesthetically repugnant.

The painting’s choice of the particular moment after Medusa’s decapitation and before her re-insertion into the technologies of war is significant because it allows both the painting and the poem to ‘see’ her and study her effects on the viewer/reader, without

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<sup>63</sup> See Jean-Pierre Vernant *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays* ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 144.

<sup>64</sup> Vernant, 145.

<sup>65</sup> The painting selects a moment that has a curiously unclear relationship to the narrative since there is no definite point in the narrative sequence that it corresponds to. Most versions of the myth suggest that after Perseus slays her using the polished surface of the shield as a mirroring device he affixes it on the centre of the shield, which is then returned to Athena. A visual representation that features the decapitated head of Medusa lying atop a “cloudy mountain-peak” must therefore represent a moment that lies sandwiched between two moments of the narrative—after her slaying and before her redeployment in battle. Such a hypothetical moment can only be assumed to lie hidden between the more recognizable stages of the narrative.

any direct narrative interference.<sup>66</sup> Although it is an instant that seems sandwiched between contiguous instants of the Medusa story, it represents a moment that has been wrested out of narrative control—a parenthesized moment that allows us a kind of phenomenological insight into the Medusa figure.

Such an insight is also enabled by a very distinct feature of the painting that occasions Shelley's ekphrastic poem. In stark contrast to other representations of the Medusa figure such as Caravaggio's arresting *Head of Medusa* that features a frontal representation designed to present the full horror of the Gorgon face, Shelley's poem is about a painting that portrays a Medusa whose decapitated head positioned horizontally lies "gazing on the midnight sky."<sup>67</sup> She appears to be looking diagonally upwards towards a point that lies far beyond the upper right side of the frame.

By presenting a figure whose Gorgonian power does not issue from an optics of frontality, the painting departs from a central feature of classical iconography governing representations of Medusa.<sup>68</sup> By depicting a gaze that does not address the viewer, the painter transforms Medusa into an object that does not appear threatening at first, since it appears to have been released through death from the loop of looking.

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<sup>66</sup> An early poem of Shelley's titled, "How Eloquent are Eyes" (1810) describes a similar view of how sight trumps time:

Love! Look thus again  
That Time the Victor as he flies  
May pause to gaze upon thine eyes  
A victor then in vain!

See *The Esdaille Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley* Ed. Kenneth Neil Cameron (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).

<sup>67</sup> See Sophie Thomas, "Ekphrasis and Terror: Shelley, Medusa and the Phantasmagoria" in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-century Literary and Visual Cultures* ed. Luisa Calè and Patrizia di Bello (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Vernant, 112. In this connection Vernant writes, "Whether mask or full figure, the Gorgon's face is at all times turned frontally toward the spectator who gazes back at her" (112).



So total are the exclusions of this visually bracketed moment that we do not see what she sees or appears to be seeing in her dying moments. All we find ourselves faced with is the representation of Medusa looking. This agrees well with the Medusa myth, according to which, one of the critical elements of Perseus' success was Athena's gift of a helmet, which made him invisible. In the context of Medusa to see without being seen is therefore that which allows us to see properly. Medusa, at one level, becomes representable, therefore, only after her transformation into an object who rather than being the bearer of the deadly look, is now pictured seeing—not any kind of seeing, but a sightless seeing. A gaze without a target—a seeing that has been denatured and objectified into a thing to be consumed by the eyes of others, or as Thomas puts it, “a represented scene of seeing.”<sup>69</sup> Sight downgraded from verb to noun—transformed from a lethal look into a “showing of seeing” seemingly indifferent to our gaze.

This indifference finds its way into the opening lines of the poem that present an image of the Medusa that seems disarmingly benign: “It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky/ Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine.” For an opening couplet in a poem about the dreaded Medusa and her lethal gaze, these lines seem designed to defuse and defamiliarize the Medusa figure and resituate her in an attitude that bespeaks a certain atemporal withdrawal from the dialectic pressures of gazing. The fact that she does not gaze at us and the effect of words such as “lieth” and “supine” suggests a figure far removed from the world of action, violence and danger. This is clearly a Medusa whose very status as a sentient subject is withheld, as is suggested by the pronoun “it”—the very first word of the poem. Her face is a metonym of a fuller identity that is carefully

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas, 25

cordoned off from the poem. Her abbreviated form, therefore, renders her more conducive to this act of extreme narrative focusing and engages our attention as a figure represented in a special kind of seeing.

For even as the weight of the first line falls on the verb, gazing, that activity is re-oriented from a threatening frontality and is instead depicted as a gaze into the indefinite space of the “midnight sky”. As a gaze without a specific focus or target the Gorgon’s gaze seems to issue from an absent subject, producing in turn a gaze that lacks intentionality. A gaze without a destination or an address, Medusa seems to be released from the violent viscosity of its past. Looking into uncertain distance of the heavens, Medusa’s gaze is a disembodied gaze that cut adrift from its terrifyingly concrete embodiment serves merely as an aesthetically distanced reminder of what once had the power to petrify those who dared to look directly at her.

The representation of such a pure and intense absorptive state produces and mirrors the absorption of the poet (and by extension that of the readers) who find themselves drawn into this theater of captivation.<sup>70</sup> An optical effect of this absorptive state can be seen early on in the third line of the poem (“Below, far lands are seen tremblingly”). The observer is now placed in relation to the Medusa head and located at a height and a distance that allows him/her to see the foreground and background of this exemplary scene. But this acknowledgement that “far lands are seen tremblingly” suggests not just, what Carol Jacobs calls a “precarious” view, but more precisely a view that is so focused

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<sup>70</sup> See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 51. Fried points out that the seventeenth century saw the efflorescence of the tradition of absorptive painting—a tradition that was interrupted by the Rococo until it was re-invented by painters like Chardin in the eighteenth century, 43.

on the foreground that the background has taken on a quality of flickeringly indistinctness.<sup>71</sup> It is this exemption from background that reinforces the general blindness to context. As a model of gazing the observer's view is characterized by this intense absorption: a hyper-focused looking that casts a veil of obscurity over the surrounding space and contextual information.<sup>72</sup>

Is this the effect of gazing at the Medusa? If, as Thomas suggests, the poem “brings a telling density to the act of looking figured by the Medusa”<sup>73</sup> is this density a specific kind of visual pathology that by ‘(trans)fixing’ the gaze crowds out the consciousness of ambient details? Is this the Medusa effect—the gaze that produces not the stiffening of the body but a petrification of the gaze? A gaze that circles helplessly around the same image without the possibility of escape until “thought no more can trace.” The circularity of the petrified gaze of the narrator is matched both by the immobile, prone Medusa head and the oppressive atmosphere (“solid air”) that denies the possibility of exit. Seen through Shelley's poem, Medusa entraps us within the non-dynamic spatiality of the image.

But although Shelley's poem produces the effect of a painted stasis, it relentlessly disturbs the very idea of a spatial ‘fix’. Even while scrupulously containing itself within the instant, thereby reproducing the spatial condition of the painting itself, it tracks a ceaseless mobility *within* the instant.

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<sup>71</sup> Jacobs, 167.

<sup>72</sup> For a seminal discussion on the notion of the ‘gaze’ and its distinction from other kinds of looking see Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983) 94-96. For Bryson the gaze is a highly focused and concentrated mode of looking, which acts as “a transcendent point of vision that has discarded the body...and exists only as a disembodied *punctum*” 107.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas, 25.

Shelley achieves this in at least two different ways. Firstly, the poem frequently reiterates the antithetical values that struggle for expression beneath the surface of the Medusan representation. The poem enacts the failed attempt to process the antinomies of horror and beauty into an equilibrium that can admit “the tempestuous loveliness of terror”. This processing begins early on and as early as line 5 -8 in which we see beauty as the subtext of horror:

Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie  
Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,  
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,  
The agonies of anguish and of death.

“Loveliness” shadows the “anguish”, or is, more precisely, the shadow cast by the “fiery and [the] lurid”. But at the same time these lines allow us to see the shadow of loveliness emanating its own light. The shifting play of light and shade worry the line between cause and effect even while emphasizing the special nature of the poem’s use of optics. Medusa’s painful death leaves its fearful stamp on her face, but beneath the surface of that terrible death lies her beauty, which cannot be masked by the contorted expressions of pain and anguish.<sup>74</sup> It is this intricate, yet unstable ratio between beauty and terror that accounts for the particular power that her image wields over all who dare to look at her.<sup>75</sup>

Thematically the Medusan visage indexes the unstable admixture of qualities that are “struggling underneath.” The writhing vipers all around her head symbolize the

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<sup>74</sup> In a similar sense, Pater’s commentary on the painting goes to the heart of the matter when he writes that “the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch[Medusa’s] exquisitely finished beauty.” See Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 106.

<sup>75</sup> In this respect it is interesting to note that the Medusa figure is able to symbolize the transformative nature of revolutionary power and the chaos and futility of terror during the French revolution. In short she was used to represent both the dangers of Jacobinism *and* serve as a symbol of revolutionary power or heroic victimhood. See Neil Hertz, “Medusa’s Head: Male Hysteria Under Political Pressure”, *Representations* 4 (1983) 27-54. In this connection see also Barbara Judson, “The Politics of Medusa: Shelley’s Physiognomy of Revolution.” *ELH* 68.1 (2001): 135-154.

“unending involutions” between “loveliness” and “terror”, “beauty” and “pain” and “light” and “obscurity.” This produces a representational turbulence, which rather than achieving a happy marriage of contraries embroils interpretation in “inextricable error”.<sup>76</sup> To the extent that her decapitated head becomes the site for the unresolved struggle between such elements, she represents both, a state of *suspended animation or death in progress* and as a “trunkless head” stands for the inexorable finality of death. That she is both dying and dead at the same time is evident in the phrase from the last line of the poem, “Gazing in death”, which suggests both the death gaze and the more agential sense of an active looking. This doubleness is especially evident in the final lines of the additional stanza where life and death are not just thematically counterposed, but are presented as a conflict that has been internally integrated into a single formulation:

It is a trunkless head, and on its feature  
Death has met life, but there is life in death

Here, “Death has met life”, suggests a finality that gets revised by the final clause (“but there is life in death”) in which the very terms of the opposition are rendered unstable. Similarly the last two lines enact at the level of syntax the fluid boundaries that separate life and death:

The blood is frozen—but unconquered Nature  
Seems struggling to the last—without a breath

Syntactically the line is an example of ‘involution’ in the grammatical sense. It succeeds in mimicking the idea that life is never quite extinguished through death by showing how the sub-clause nestled within a main clause both gets contained by it even while ceaselessly qualifying it.

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<sup>76</sup> Carol Jacobs, “For Shelley’s poem is about nothing if not our interpretative predicament as readers”, 169.

In this sense the internal conflicts that Medusa's body endures are permanently incomplete because they resist the finality of resolution. She is therefore an "uncreated creature", for her death is at the same time a foregone conclusion as well as an unfinished project, a noun and a present continuous verb.

Secondly, as an object that escapes objectification, Medusa is precisely that which both invites and frustrates the gaze. The poem presents this paradox as a perceptual problem. We see the Medusa through a pervasive "darkness" that is offset by "a hideous light...a light more dread than obscurity", which creates an atmospherics in which that which is solid melts ("watery rock") and that which is formless achieves solidity ("solid air"). By transvaluing such binaries, the poem establishes a perceptual condition that is radically unstable, an "ever-shifting mirror" that refuses to settle into pictoricity.

But this perceptual disorientation is one that we unsuspectingly get drawn into because this is a poem that initially beckons us with the deadpan neutrality of its first line to look at the Medusa looking: "It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky." For the kind of looking that the poem invites is intimately related to the Medusan gaze itself. It is her disembodied gaze that tempts us to fix our gaze on the scene of her looking, thereby making us overlook our own incorporation and capture.<sup>77</sup> But we soon realize that looking is a fraught activity, that "the lineaments of that dead face" have the power to inscribe themselves on our spirit.

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<sup>77</sup> In this connection it is significant to recognize the poem's ambivalent relationship to mimesis, which both creates the illusion of mimesis that draws in the reader as well as deconstructs the assumptions that underwrite mimesis. Carol Jacobs remarks on the "simplistic mimetic thrust that seems intermittently to govern the poem". In her reckoning, Shelley's poem "functions like the vaporous mirror, ever shifting between a mimetic concept of reproduction (stanzas 1, 4, 6) and another that has yet to be traced". These "seemingly simple descriptive moments", she writes, "are, from the very beginning, *images* of the mimetic". Jacobs, 174 n24.

The prelude to our capture is our false sense of being external to the representation of Medusa. Not only does she *not* address us but seems caught up in a hyper-absorptive death gaze that appears self-contained and oblivious of being watched. As an absorptive state her ‘gazing’ becomes the object of other gazes (i.e. our gaze and the gaze of the eft and the bat ) but is itself ‘within quotes’, so to speak, in the theater of seeing that the poem constructs. She makes a spectacle of her seeing, by opting out of the relay of looks. In Fried’s terms, her state of absorption in a sense de-theatricalizes the image and reinforces for the viewer the “conviction of his absence from the scene of representation.”<sup>78</sup> Carol Jacobs points out, that at one level, the poem, “allows the spectator to regard it from a safe distance, as object” and our co-option into the visual economy of the poem is assumed<sup>79</sup>. But this observational imperative clearly belies the perils of looking, that the poem quickly clarifies is not related to the terror-inducing capacity of the Medusan gaze but rather the shock of realizing that we cannot know what we see, that even as we look our vision clouds over into blindness.

But the optical breakdown that the poem leads us into is not related to the perceptual impurities that interfere with vision, but is produced by the absorptive quality of our gaze which screens out crucial aspects of the Medusa figure.<sup>80</sup> The ‘Medusa effect’ works by first eliciting a particular gaze, which in attempting to ‘fix’ what it sees finds itself led through “inextricable error” into a state where “thought no more can trace.”

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<sup>78</sup> Fried, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Jacobs, 172

<sup>80</sup> See Grant Scott’s “Shelley, Medusa and the Perils of Ekphrasis” for a similar point about how the poem retrains our masculine gaze. In this connection Scott writes of “Medusa’s ability to suspend the viewer’s reflexive visual impulses” and the poem’s assertion of “a poetics of aesthetic encounter which remains wholly antithetical to the predatory gazing of the eighteenth century, a benevolent poetics which embraces silence, difference, and the other.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;  
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
Are graven, till the characters be grown  
Into itself, and thought no more can trace

The image that is imprinted on the gazer's spirit sounds like the visual image that is received by the retina, but the "graven" nature of the "lineaments" of Medusa's face suggest otherwise.<sup>81</sup> This is not a natural optical image being described here, but an artificially inscribed image that produces on the spirit of the gazer the distinct contours of the Gorgon face: in short, a representation. As a 'graven' image it succeeds in inscribing itself on the 'spirit' of the beholder thereby obtruding into the seemingly impervious space of the gazer. The 'eye' of the beholder, which is meant to be a 'roving mirror' which does not retain permanent traces of the images that fall on it, is transformed from a active medium (through which images pass) to an inert screen on which the Medusa inscribes herself. From a consumer of art the eye gets consumed by art, allowing itself to be objectified into a material substratum for the image to imprint itself on.

To read the above lines thus is to recognize the 'artistic exchange' taking place between the gazer and the image of Medusa. The artist is Medusa herself here and she is

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<sup>81</sup> I join a number of other critics like Thomas, Mitchell, and Jacobs in rejecting Heffernan's suggestion that the "gazer" in line 10 is Medusa herself. Heffernan argues that such a reading confirms the involuted structure of Medusa gazing at an image of herself. To immunize the reader from the effects of gazing and see Medusa as the "gazer" locates her within a closed circuit of looking in which she becomes the source and target of her own looks. Such a reading does seem germane to the logic of involution that governed notions of the self and other, in Romantic theory, but leaves the reader outside the frame of such a scene of looking.

Heffernan's interpretation of the 'gazer' leaves too many features of the poem unexplained. For instance, the perceptual crisis, that marks the narrator's (and by extension the reader's) encounter with the image seems to suggest a situation in which Medusa is only part of the theater of looking that the poem constructs. Secondly the fact that Shelley does not let us enjoy the distancing that ekphrastic frames produce makes us feel as if we look directly at the real Medusa without the comforting logic of substitution that makes the 'representation' pleasurable. This suggests that he is at pains to transport us to the scene of looking. As I argue above, it is this ekphrastic brinkmanship that tempts us to forget that we are looking at a painting and draws us into the visual field of the poem.



the active presence that engraves her own image on the ‘gazer’s spirit’. By the same token, it is her animated presence that materializes our invisible and non-corporeal spirit so as to transform it into a receptive medium like stone on which ‘characters’ can be ‘graven’. In doing this she leaves us stranded and immobile on the very stage at which we had come to voyeuristically spectate. If ekphrasis is a kind of inscription that ‘writes’ the image then it would be fair to say that at this point of the poem that very process produces an ekphrastic recoil and the spectator herself becomes the material on which the image ‘writes’ itself.

An image that produces such cognitive paralysis is one before which language must bow its head, and would constitute the limits of writing the image. But given that the relation between seeing and saying is an infinite one with no hope of the two parallel lines meeting, ekphrastic energies are theoretically indefatigable. Therefore, an image that succeeds in applying the brakes on language must indeed be a magic image—an image that not only allows words to bounce off its surface with an attitude of indifference but actively blocks a verbal response by transforming the gazer into the ‘supine’ immobility of stone.

In Medusa’s case this capacity to induce speechlessness is one that is perhaps indexed by the line “... till the characters be grown/ Into itself...” What does it mean for a character or a sign to grow into itself? In terms of the foregoing analysis, it would appear that the representation of Medusa becomes a hyper-iconic visual sign that loses its status as sign precisely because it takes on a life of its own. An image that exceeds its identity as image is one that robs the viewer of the power of speech, since an image’s mute objecthood is the security or collateral that enables speech. When that collateral is

damaged or withdrawn then the very traction that produces language is absent. The ekphrastic hope of writing the image is dashed by the effects of the image in the presence of which “thought no more can trace.”

Evidently, the radical atrophy of the ‘gazer’s spirit’ is paralleled by Shelley’s remarkable success in transforming the Medusa figure herself. For the static pose of her death-gaze is animated by the peculiar atmospherics that transform this immobility into a bewildering kaleidoscope of meanings. As an “ever-shifting mirror” the image of Medusa refuses to yield a singular picture and therefore becomes opaque to the gaze. But in addition to adumbrating a fractured optics the suggestiveness of the phrase, “ever-shifting mirror” also leads us in another direction--that of the eye itself.

Not merely a mobile image, the Medusa is also capable of being a reflective surface that mirrors our predicament as gazers and presumably we catch a glimpse of ourselves in this “vaporous mirror.”<sup>82</sup> This logically leads us to the possibility that what we see ourselves momentarily reflected in, is the eye of Medusa herself. The “ever-shifting mirror” becomes a hypostatized figure of sight itself.

Thematically, then, the ‘graven’ image on the gazers spirit stands in ironic contrast to the “ever-shifting mirror” of the Medusan image. The eye has changed sides. The return of the Medusan gaze turns the tables on the optimism of all ekphrastic encounters by petrifying our gaze even while securing its own release from the stasis of pictoricity.

On the one hand, therefore, there is the fact of her yielding up an image of herself. She offers herself to be seen gazing, she shows seeing thereby making it available as a

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<sup>82</sup> Heffernan, 123.

disembodied act that is exempted from the endless relay of looks. She is therefore the perfect object to gaze at—her deadness makes her an already objectified visage that invites an easy gaze. This is the kind of availability that allows Lancelot to look at the corpse of the Lady of Shalott and say, “She has a lovely face.”<sup>83</sup> This is the ekphrastic dream—the inert, silent, body waiting to be absorbed into language. To that extent the dead Medusa represents the triumph of the gaze, the trophy that one proudly displays to strike fear in other antagonists.

But at the same time Medusa refuses to yield herself up to this sort of gaze. As an image of an ongoing struggle she is depicted as the unstable compound of binaries that refuse to settle into any sort of fixity. Like the rippled surface of a pond that never allows us to see clearly the mysteries that lie below, the poem is a record of the narrator’s frustration at trying and failing to catch a glimpse of the Medusa.

Since she invites and frustrates the gaze at the same time, Medusa’s image is both frozen and mobile.<sup>84</sup> By embodying the duality of movement and stasis she forces us to recognize the fragility of the ekphrastic mirror and the limitations of the ekphrastic gaze.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Tennyson: Poems*, ed. W. E. Williams (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 26. I recognize that Tennyson’s poem is open to divergent views on this point, but propose this particular reading only to help illustrate my reading of Shelley.

<sup>84</sup> This dual mode brings to mind Freud’s notes on the Medusa myth, which he describes in terms of the fear of castration that the sight of Medusa produces. But Freud’s remarks on the sexual connotations of the “stiffening” of the victim’s body suggest that there is both fear and sexual fascination involved in our relationship to the Medusa figure. See “Medusa’s Head.” *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*. Ed. Philip Rieff. (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 212-213. For a similar reading of Freud see Laurens de Vos “To See or not to See: The Ambiguity of Medusa in Relation to Mulisch’s *The Procedure*”, *Image and Narrative*, January, 2003, <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/uncanny/laurensdevos.htm>.

<sup>85</sup> In this connection read Bryan Wolf’s Emersonian reading of ekphrasis in “Confessions of a Closet Ekphrastic: Literature, Painting and other Unnatural Relations” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3.2 (1990) 181-203. About the unnatural silence imposed on visual images he writes thus: “When we attribute to visual materials a power that transcends all language...we transform ekphrasis into a reductive cultural program.

But more importantly Shelley's poem reveals the profound hubris of ekphrastic attempts to envoice the image and give it the gift of mobility. It shows us how images do not require language to find release from fixity. On the contrary, the Medusa figure is an unconscious symbol of our fear that images might freeze us before we do them—that it is the limitations of our gaze that makes them appear as if they do not have the power of movement, that, in fact, they do have the power to petrify language and reduce it to the condition of silence.

The critical payoff of Shelley's Medusa poem, then, is the awareness that ekphrasis is not the meeting place of the temporal and the static as Lessing led us to believe. The real reason why language is often unable to 'write' the image is not because pictures are static but because they move too fast for language, that to write about the Medusa is to realize that language is not competent to still the mobility that inheres in the image, that the only way to do ekphrasis seriously is to rid language of its self-image and recognize that the distinction between words and images is itself a kind of mirage. Shelley's poem embodies this knowledge, but in doing so creates a word-picture or image/text that in being neither text nor image must itself be a "fragment of an uncreated creature."

Shelley's Medusa is the brief mysterious interval between words and images where both words and pictures recognize their "unending involutions" and "show their mailed radiance" as they "curl and flow" around each other, "as it were to mock" the fictitious

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We render painting mute—we mute-ilate it—and then proceed to hide our actions, perhaps even to ourselves, by mystifying this silence as a characteristic intrinsic to the visual arts" (185).

lines that we use to separate words and images.<sup>86</sup> This knowledge is not the kind that can be peeped at from behind the safety of the ekphrastic curtain, but the kind that writes itself on the “gazer’s spirit.”<sup>87</sup>

The poem succeeds in achieving all this not by trying to bridge the paragonal gap through the collapse of time and space in circular, cryptic utterances, as we saw in Keats’s “Ode to a Grecian Urn”. Nor does it sidestep the idea of the paragone altogether in favour of a higher resolution of words and pictures in the poet’s mind or in the uncanny after-life of all signs, as is evident in Wordsworth’s “Peele Castle” and Shelley’s “Ozymandias” respectively. In Shelley’s “On Medusa” it is by whole-heartedly embracing the intense paragonal energy of his Medusan encounter that he succeeds in dismantling it—and in so doing he raises the bar for ekphrasis immeasurably.

The word ekphrasis has affiliations with the noun ‘ecphractic’, which Scott, points out is “a medical term referring to any purgative process.”<sup>88</sup> Perhaps it is this dimension of its semantic range that operates in Shelley’s poem. The ‘Medusa effect’ is another name for the role that Shelley assigns to literature in the *Defence of Poetry*: “...it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being”.<sup>89</sup> More than Medusa’s apotropaic powers it is her purgative powers, then, which

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<sup>86</sup> An index of such involutions is the difficulty I have faced in maintaining a clear separation between the painting and the poem in the foregoing analysis. To look at the painting through Shelley’s poem and to read Shelley’s poem as a description of the painting, is to realize how the seepage of meaning between the two is multi-directional.

<sup>87</sup> As Scott writes, “[i]nstead of putting Medusa back in the picture, the speaker bears her lineaments finely etched on his soul, and carries them out of the museum and into the world”, “Perils of Ekphrasis”, 331.

<sup>88</sup> Scott, 301.

<sup>89</sup> *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 533.

cathartically cleanse us of our comforting illusions regarding the difference between writing and picturing.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE GHOSTS OF AUTHORSHIP: PHOTOGRAPHY, COPYRIGHT, AND *THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY***

There are a number of competing narratives that seek to account for the birth of photography. These range from locating the genesis of photography in a particular tradition of realist painting, to seeing photography originating in the crucible of science, to regarding photography as the love child of science and art. Perhaps, owing to this uncertain parentage, photography has an unsettling effect on a number of nineteenth century discourses. The first section of this chapter begins with a short sketch of photography's multiple lineages in order to trace how the fissures that mark its early history determine its reception and circulation on the broader stage of nineteenth-century culture. This will be followed by two sections that track the career of the photograph in two discourses that occupy distinct locations in culture: the juridical and the literary. The section on the juridical offers a reading of an important judgment in 1884 that refereed the encounter between photography and the discourse of intellectual property. The case required the courts to consider whether or not the photographic image could be accommodated within copyright law. By juxtaposing photographic production and the question of copyright, the case not only brings into focus a number of disparate energies that characterize the way photographic images were understood in the nineteenth century but also reveals certain inherent tensions in Anglo-American copyright law. The third and final section of my chapter will explore how some of these very same questions are refracted in the writings of the subject of the photograph that occupies the eye of the legal storm: Oscar Wilde. It demonstrates that the status of the visual image in Wilde's novel

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) can be read as a rich metaphorical elaboration of the anxiety that photographs generated in the nineteenth century. My reading of Wilde's novel goes on to argue that the apparent contingency that links Wilde to the legal judgment enables the articulation of a new question with regard to the visual image that lies at the imaginative center of the novel: Is the picture of Dorian Gray actually a photograph of Dorian Gray?

### **Photography: History and Theory**

Nineteenth-century photography found itself, both in theory and practice, pressed into the service of a variety of cultural functions. The history of its birth and subsequent recruitment into the divergent protocols of science and art—to name two fields that registered a strong reaction to its implications—is one that resists incorporation into a neat narrative structure.<sup>1</sup> Part of this recalcitrance is owing to an enduring debate, from its very inception, about photography's status as representation. Early scientific accounts of photographic production saw its use as a technology to produce images for popular consumption as nothing short of a sell-out to the populist demands of a burgeoning mass culture, which was in turn quick to sniff out the immense possibilities that photography promised in terms of the mechanization and cheap circulation of images.<sup>2</sup> Although the

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<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Batchen demonstrates the historical and methodological impossibility of dating the 'invention' of photography as well as writing its history in a linear narrative form. He offers instead an account of "the discursive formation of a *desire to photograph* within the European epistemological field of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (180).

<sup>2</sup> See Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) for a detailed account of the gradual consolidation of scientific photography in contradistinction to amateur and commercial photography over the course of the nineteenth



desire to retain photography for strictly scientific uses was implicated in the elitism that informed the derisive attitude towards the popular, scientists like Jean-Baptiste Biot, one of the leading French authorities in optics, also feared the outcome of bastardizing a scientific process through its forced union with the dubious realm of illusionism—a collaboration that produced a thriving industry in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Such flamboyant practices of image making were perceived to be naturally at odds with the premises of a scientific project. Scientists like Biot, understandably, felt betrayed by the likes of Louis Daguerre himself and Francois Arago, secretary of the Academy of Sciences in France, who were far more impressed with the representational possibilities that photography promised for the popular domain of image production.<sup>4</sup> Theresa Levitt demonstrates how it was imperative for scientists like Biot to stall the ‘over-exposure’ of photography in the non-specialist domain of cultural consumption in order to prevent “photography from descending into public spectacle or showmanship.”<sup>5</sup> For Biot, to prematurely publicize photography before realizing its full scientific implications, was to both prevent its full development and to pander to a crass desire for the miraculous:

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century. See also Theresa Levitt, “Biot’s Paper and Arago’s Plates: Photography and the Transparency of Representation,” *Isis* 94 (2003): 456–476.

<sup>3</sup> For a convincing account of the manner in which “scientific institutions used spirit photography as an ‘Other’ against which to define a distinctively masculine, profession or amateur scientific subjectivity” see Tucker, 124. For a catalogue of spirit-photographic practices see Clement Cheroux, et al., eds. *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004). Interestingly, on the question of illusionism and the fairly obvious photographic sleight of hand that marked such practices, the authors are keen to reserve their judgment. The ‘Foreword’ declares at the outset that the goal is to “...present the photographs on their own terms, without authoritative comment on their veracity” (9). For a lucid examination of spirit photography see also Tom Gunning, “Haunting Images: Ghosts, Photography and the Modern Body,” *The Disembodied Spirit* ed. Alison Ferris (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdon College Museum of Art, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Daguerre, one of the primary contenders for the title of ‘inventor’ of photography, began his career as a theatrical scene painter.

<sup>5</sup> Biot cited in Levitt 466.

“Nobody would be able to appreciate [it]...The results would have the air of miracles....It would be better not to speak of them at all than to announce them, mangled like that.”<sup>6</sup> Biot’s reaction was also motivated by the fear of a hostile discursive takeover of photography by art. Science needed to be protected from encroachments that were summed up by what he called the “artistic point of view.” For scientists like Biot, “the ‘artistic point of view’ was equated with the venal world of surface appearances.”<sup>7</sup> Such a tension between art and science is evident also in the development and use of different photographic technologies. For instance, calotypes were perceived as more conducive to aesthetic effects while the collodion process was regarded more suitable for scientific experiments.<sup>8</sup>

Allan Sekula points out that nineteenth-century photography, “is haunted by two chattering ghosts: that of bourgeois science and that of bourgeois art.”<sup>9</sup> Each inserts photography into different discursive circuits and mobilizes it for disparate kinds of ideological projects. To adjudicate between these divergent claims was to take sides with a well known cleavage between two antithetical positions that photography had generated in the nineteenth century. Photography, Sekula argues, is located

between faith in the objective powers of the machine and a belief in the subjective, imaginative capabilities of the artist. In persistently arguing for the harmonious co-existence of optical truths and visual pleasures, in yoking a positivist scientism with a romantic metaphysics, photographic discourse has attempted to bridge the philosophical and institutional separation of scientific and

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<sup>6</sup> Biot cited in Levitt 475.

<sup>7</sup> Levitt 466.

<sup>8</sup> See Tucker, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Sekula, “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal* 14.1 (1981): 15.

artistic practices that has characterized bourgeois society since the late eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The discursive gap that photography attempts to bridge is manifested in the sharply divergent reactions and attitudes that photography elicited. The most apparent divergence concerned photographic production and the question of human mediation. The history of the birth and reception of photography in England and France in the nineteenth century reveals an overwhelmingly large number of reactions to photography that were impressed or disturbed by it precisely because of its perceived authorless nature. In fact, the nineteenth century provides ample testimony to the fact that photographs were often regarded as being significantly independent of human mediation. Joseph Niépce, a strong claimant to the title of the ‘inventor’ of photography, described it as a “spontaneous reproduction, by the action of light.”<sup>11</sup> Other pioneers like Henry Fox Talbot, creator of the calotype process in England, prided themselves on the fact that photographs were “impressed by Nature’s hand”<sup>12</sup> and therefore emphasized the view that photography displaces the artist’s hand from the scene of creation. Walter Benjamin, describing the shift from lithography to photography, points out how “photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens.”<sup>13</sup> The camera therefore, in such a view, is not a prosthetic device that

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<sup>10</sup> Sekula 15.

<sup>11</sup> Qt. in Mary Warner Marien, *Photography and its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 3.

<sup>12</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: De Capo Press, 1969), 7. The title of Talbot’s book underscores the assignation of authorship to nature. See also Gillen D’Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 185-194. Wood offers an interesting account of how Talbot’s later publication, *Sun Pictures in Scotland* (1845) failed commercially due to the “shock effect of photographic realism...which represented a pre-mature challenge to Romantic aesthetic ideology” (194).

replaced the hand with the machine. The disconnection from human labor that the camera represents necessitates a radical re-conceptualization of the notion of representation. The apparent de-humanization of the process of image making, places photography outside the intentional circuits of representation. Nature collaborates with the machine to deliver images for human consumption. The mechanical nature of the photographic image therefore encouraged the view that unlike painting, photography is marked by a degree of what Stanley Cavell has called “automatism.”<sup>14</sup> This view that photographs are pure images unsullied by the subjective traces of a cognitive apparatus persists in many current versions of visual theory. Early in his career, Barthes famously described photographs as representing a “*message without a code*”:

In the photograph—at least at the level of the literal message—the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of ‘transformation’ but of ‘recording’ and the absence of code clearly reinforces the myth of photographic ‘naturalness’: the scene *is there*, captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity). Man’s interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein Roger Scruton suggests that while painting is an intentional act a photograph’s relation to its subject is better understood as a causal relationship.<sup>16</sup> Earlier, Kracauer described the difference between painting and photography thus: “...in the artwork the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 219.

<sup>14</sup> See Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections of the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971; 1979). Noting the “inescapable fact of mechanism or automatism in the making of these [i.e. photographic] images”, Cavell argues that, “[P]hotography overcame subjectivity...by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction” (23).

<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1981): 577-603.

the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning. The two spatial appearances—the ‘natural’ one and that of the object permeated by cognition—are not identical.”<sup>17</sup>

The extent to which photography was referent-dependant in a manner that other kinds of visual representation were not, often led to the view that the photograph was a mechanically produced image that allowed a kind of faithful, visual citation from nature—a fact that was also mobilized as proof of the evidentiary quality of a photograph.<sup>18</sup> The ascription to photography of the status of a non-mediated production that is capable of dislocating sight from its somatic location by externalizing its production, explains in part its pre-eminence in the nineteenth century. It was precisely its mechanical production that justified the belief in its evidentiary and truth-telling powers.

The mimetic fidelity of photographic representations also generated the view that photography was the culmination of an evolutionary path towards greater visual verisimilitude that some earlier representational practices had striven for. For Valéry, the invention of the photograph finally enables a representational ethic that is uncorrupted by Romantic falsehoods:

with the advent of photography, and following in Balzac’s footsteps realism asserted itself in our literature. The romantic vision of beings and objects

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<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993): 427.

<sup>18</sup> This was recognized early in history of photography. In Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) he writes describing a photograph of a collection of antique china: “And should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures—if the mute testimony of the picture be produced against him in court—it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind...” (Plate III).

For an excellent discussion of the recruitment of the photograph into different positivist agendas, see Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986) 3-64.

gradually lost its magic....A new imperative held sway, requiring that poetic invention stand clearly apart from any narrative claiming to represent reality.<sup>19</sup>

The camera, for Valéry, purifies sight by ridding the eye of its reliance on a cognitive apparatus, thereby making possible the idea of an unmediated sight:

It must be admitted that we cannot open our eyes without being unconsciously disposed not to see some of the things before us, and to see others which are not there. The snapshot has rectified our errors both of *deficiency* and *excess*. It shows us what we would see if we were uniformly sensitive to everything that light imprints upon our retinas, and nothing else [Emphasis in original].<sup>20</sup>

In an argument strikingly similar to that which Lessing makes in *The Laocoön* regarding the deleterious effects of pictorialism in poetry, Valéry argues that literature should be appropriately chastened by the optical prowess of the camera and therefore retreat to domains in which it is better suited to operate. From Valéry's perspective, it seemed logical to have recruited the realist potential of photography in the service of an earlier aesthetic project that valued the mimetic function of art.

Photography was mobilized, much as Valéry desired, to meet the market demand for a more affordable means of visual production. This produced a boom in studio photography and other lucrative visual productions like the *carte de visite*. Such photographic practices were able to broaden the market that was hitherto served by portrait painting and offer an increasingly affordable means of visual self-presentation.

However, the claim that the photograph declared its autonomy from human mediation through the mechanization of image production also provoked a sharply negative response that unequivocally relegated it to a much lower position in a hierarchy of cultural production. Photography was perceived as plagiarizing from nature and therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Valéry, "The Centenary of Photography" (1939), *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) 194.

<sup>20</sup> Valéry 196.

merely a slavish copy that could never compete with art. This view is best represented by Baudelaire who famously diagnosed the craze for photographic images as a “form of lunacy, an extraordinary fanaticism [that] took hold of these new sun-worshippers.”<sup>21</sup> For Baudelaire the success of the photograph represented the dangerous encroachment of industry into the domain of art:

it is simple common-sense that, when industry erupts into the sphere of art, it becomes the latter’s mortal enemy...If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art’s activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally...[I]f once it be allowed to impinge on the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, on anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul, then woe betide us!<sup>22</sup>

Here Baudelaire distinguishes between mental and external reality and warns of a fixation with the latter that followed from buying into the allurements of photography. Keenly aware of the dangers involved in art “prostrating itself before external reality”,<sup>23</sup> Baudelaire’s reactions to photography foreshadow the work of Kracauer who argued that the ‘realistic’ nature of the photographic image is merely the ‘real’ in its most attenuated and atrophied form. For Kracauer, to be invested in the photographic promise of realist representation is to engage in a gamble in which the stakes are dangerously high. For him, the camera guarantees incontrovertible referential truths only at the cost of reducing truth to a ghostly shell of itself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography” (1862), *Classic Essays on Photography* ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980) 87.

<sup>22</sup> Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography”, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Baudelaire, “The Modern Public and Photography” 88.

<sup>24</sup> Kracauer, “Photography”, 435.

In Kracauer's devaluation of the photographic image we hear not even a faint echo of the excitement of Nadar,<sup>25</sup> arguably the most famous nineteenth century French photographer, who imagined in photography the semblance of divine creativity: "Is it not possible then for man, who today can seize the fleeting flash of vision and cut it into the hardest of metals, to believe that he is involved in the process of creation?"<sup>26</sup> One direction that the answer to Nadar's question took was that of the invisible and the supernatural. As Rosalind Krauss has demonstrated, the "sense of mystery" that attached itself to early nineteenth-century photography is a vital component of photography's history and formed an "aspect of the most serious aspirations of the early makers of the photograph."<sup>27</sup> Nadar writes in his memoirs of the unmistakably magical and supernatural quality of the photographic image:

But do not all these miracles [Nadar stockpiles a long list of inventions that include, electricity, the telephone, the phonograph, anesthesia and neurology] pale when compared to the most astonishing and disturbing one of all, that one which seems to finally endow man himself with the divine power of creation: the power to give physical form to the insubstantial image that vanishes as soon as it is perceived, leaving no shadow in the mirror, no ripple on the surface of the water?<sup>28</sup>

The camera's ability to fix the intangible image was perceived as nothing short of miraculous and Nadar notes that no less a personage than Balzac registered a profound

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<sup>25</sup> Nadar was the pseudonym of Gaspard Félix Tournachon, a French photographer, caricaturist and balloonist. He was the first person to take aerial photographs and one of the first to use artificial lighting for photography. His fame as a portrait photographer was such that a number of contemporary artists came to his studio to have their photograph taken.

<sup>26</sup> Nadar, "Nadar: My Life as a Photographer" (1900), trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 5 (1978): 8.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar", *October* 5 (1978): 38.

<sup>28</sup> Nadar, 8.



“uneasiness” with photography. This is evident in Balzac’s theory of the photographic process described by Nadar:

According to Balzac’s theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other...[H]e concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life.<sup>29</sup>

Although Nadar later joked about how Balzac “...squander[ed] a great many specters...”<sup>30</sup> in his photo studio, Nadar was acutely aware of the minimal gap that separated the science of photography from the spectral luminosity of the supernatural image: “It required only the slightest effort of the imagination to transform our filters into philters.”<sup>31</sup>

Describing the tendency of photography to appear as “natural magic”, Mary Warner Marien notes that “[t]he highly illusionistic quality of the daguerreotype put audiences in mind of magic.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly Rosalind Krauss has shown that the early history of the photograph reveals many instances of it being understood in terms of the ‘trace’—an idea that in the early nineteenth century was “at the crossroads between science and spiritualism.”<sup>33</sup> She goes on to demonstrate how recognizing such a lineage for the photograph helps explain how its spectrality fed into many of its nineteenth-century

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<sup>29</sup> Nadar, 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Nadar: Dessin et Ecrits*, ed. Phillipe Néagu (Paris: Arthur Hubschmid, 1979) 1:977 qt. in Wood 209.

<sup>31</sup> Nadar, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *Photography and its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 9.

<sup>33</sup> Krauss, “Tracing Nadar”, 35.

forms. These include spirit-photography<sup>34</sup>, the post-mortem photograph, and the deathbed portrait.

The photograph's affinity with the invisible made it appealing not just to those who dabbled in the ghostly and the supernatural but also highlighted its utility for science. For instance, in the emerging field of bacteriology, photography was used to provide proof of that which could only be studied under a microscope.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, photography had important scientific implications for the study of invisible radiations. The camera in the French scientist Biot's work is able to render visible that which the human eye fails to discover. This tendency to regard the photograph as a mechanical device that managed to fix intangible images on material surfaces led to its use in scientific experiments that were concerned with studying optical phenomenon that lay beyond the field of human vision. The appropriation of photography into the technologies of mass-mediated visual culture was therefore at odds with these other affiliations that photography developed.

However, despite the fact that photography came to occupy conflicting positions in nineteenth-century culture it is important to reiterate that photography's peculiar appeal was predicated on the rapprochement of its contradictory articulations through the ideological resolution that photography appeared to perform. Inhabiting multiple cultural locations at once, photographic discourse mediates between the demands of science and art, representation and truth, and the human and the mechanical and by bridging these gulfs exponentially increases its power through the nineteenth century.

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<sup>34</sup> The title of Georgiana Houghton's 1882 work, *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*, suggests the productive slippage between the phantasmal nature of the photographic image and the idea of invisibility.

<sup>35</sup> For a historical account of the complex relationship between bacteriologists and the use of micro-photography see Jennifer Tucker, 159-193.

An important instance of this mediation is represented by the genre of commercial studio photography that occupied a troubled zone between art and mechanical reproduction. The work of a figure such as Nadar and others, in whose studios even the most vocal critics of photography, like Balzac and Baudelaire, came to be photographed, challenged the very idea that one could draw a clear line between artistic and mechanical representation. Like Nadar, a number of early studio photographers were portrait painters and carried over into their photography many painterly techniques. Benjamin, in his brief history of photography, points out the degree to which photographers like Nadar belonged to the “pre-industrial heyday of photography”, a time when painting and photography had not separated out into distinct kinds of activity.<sup>36</sup> Benjamin implies that the ephemeral quality of photography, after the passing away of this generation, was a result of the absence of creative labor that went into the making of earlier photographic portraits. The formulaic rendering of the very artistic choices that photographers like Nadar and later Napoleon Sarony in America made,<sup>37</sup> resulted in a easily reproducible set of photographic codes that studio photography could mechanically exploit: “In the end, though, businessmen invaded professional photography from every side; and when, later on, the retouched negative, which was the bad painter’s revenge on photography, became ubiquitous, a sharp decline in taste set in.”<sup>38</sup> The industrialization of image production to

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<sup>36</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999): 507.

<sup>37</sup> Although I conflate Nadar and Sarony as examples of artistic photographers, it must be pointed out that Nadar belonged to the tradition of portrait painting that had a much more distinguished claim to high art than Sarony whose commercial success depended in large part on the star system in American theater that his Broadway studio took advantage of. Nadar’s work also preceded Sarony by over a decade. For the significance of such distinctions see Jane Gaines, *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 72-73.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, “Little History”, 515.

meet the demands of a growing market for photographs dispensed with the artistic component of photographic production.

But despite such industrialization, the boundaries between artistic and mechanical production continued to remain vexed and the status of the photographic image seemed to resist classification. The next section of this chapter will focus on one such moment in the history of photography that revisits a moment that preceded the industrialization of image production.

### Photography and Copyright Law

The encounter between photography and the law represents one of the most decisive moments in the history of the photograph in the nineteenth century. Conversely, one might argue that photography put an enormous amount of pressure on conceptual categories that informed notions of authorship, property, and art in juridical discourse. If, as Bernard Edelman pointed out, the technological leap that the camera offered for techniques of reproduction, “surprises the law in the quietude of its categories” it was in photography’s incorporation into copyright law where this surprise was most evident.<sup>39</sup>

Most copyright historians acknowledge that the copyright race as we know it commenced with the Statute of Anne in 1710.<sup>40</sup> Since that event it became possible, more

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<sup>39</sup> Bernard Edelman, *Ownership of the Image: Elements for a Marxist Theory of Law* trans. Elizabeth Kingdom (London: Routledge, 1979) 44.

<sup>40</sup> The idea of authorial copyright was codified for the first time in the Statute of Anne. See Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Lyman Ray Patterson, *Copyright in Historical Perspective* (Washington D.C.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967). For the early history of copyright see Jody Greene, *The Trouble with Ownership: Literary Property and Authorial Liability in England, 1660-1730* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Joseph Loewenstein *The Author's Due: Printing and the Prehistory of Copyright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a lucid account of how the history of copyright informs the terrain of more recent

than ever before, to think of an artist's relation to his or her work in terms of ownership and property. Thereafter copyright law steadily enlarges its scope, expanding both the duration of the artist's copyright and the kinds of artifacts that qualify for copy protection.

This section focuses on a particular moment in the path of this legal juggernaut, namely 1884, when the United States Supreme Court decided on the question of whether or not a photograph could seek copy protection. The case, known as *Sarony v. Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company*,<sup>41</sup> subsequently became an important legal precedent that has ever since been a point of reference in cases regarding the copyright of visual images.

The background of the case is as follows: Napoleon Sarony, a well-known New York portrait photographer, brought a lawsuit against Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company for infringing his copyright of a photograph of Oscar Wilde. The photograph in question was one among a series of photographs that Sarony took of Wilde during the latter's immensely successful tour of America in 1881-82. Sarony charged the Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company with producing 85,000 illegal copies of No.18 of his 20 original photographs of Wilde. The defense lawyer representing the Company followed two main lines of argumentation: one, that the photographer had given insufficient notice of his ownership by using the initial N to signify his Christian name, Napoleon. This the courts easily dismissed. The defense's second line of argumentation was a weightier one, namely, that Congress did not have the constitutional right to offer copyright protection

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copyright law in America see Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Copyrights and Copywrongs: The Rise of Intellectual Property and How it Threatens Creativity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company v. Sarony*. 111 U.S. 53; 4 S. Ct. 279. Supreme Ct. of the US. 17 March 1884. All further references will be incorporated into the text of my paper with the abbreviation, Sarony.

to photographs. By therefore challenging the very constitutionality of the statutory protection that had been extended to photographs by American copyright law in 1865, the defense made it necessary for the court to engage with the basic principles and assumptions involved in the classing of photographs with other kinds of copyrightable visual representations. The court had therefore to assess Sarony's complaint of the infringement of his authorial property right in the photograph against the defense's claim that photographs were "mere mechanical reproductions" and did not constitute a form of "writing, nor a production of an author...and involve[d] no originality or novelty of thought" and that photography was "simply a manual operation... the accuracy of representation being its highest merit" (Sarony 3).

It will come as no surprise, of course, that Supreme Court's judgment affirmed that the photograph in question was indeed an act of authorial creation and ruled in favor of the plaintiff Napoleon Sarony. Concurring with the lower court's findings, the judgment states in one of its key passages that Sarony had "made" the photograph,

entirely from his own original mental conception, to which he gave visible form by posing the said Oscar Wilde in front of the camera, selecting and arranging the costume, draperies, and other various accessories in the said photograph, arranging the subject so as to present graceful outlines, arranging and disposing the light and shade, suggesting and evoking the desired expression, and from such disposition, arrangement, or representation, made entirely by the plaintiff, he produced the picture (Sarony 4).

As is evident in these lines from the judgment, the Supreme Court decided to cast the process of photography in a formulation in which photographs are the visible manifestation of original mental processes, materialized through their expression in texts. The photograph, the court affirms, is thus a text that gives 'visible form' to the invisible mental conception of the author.

Copyright history reveals how visual representations ranging from woodcuts, engravings and paintings gradually got included into the ambit of copyright law.<sup>42</sup> While photographs were brought under statutory protection in American copyright law in 1865, the Sarony case represents the first legal decision to engage seriously with the theoretical implications of granting the photographic image copy protection.<sup>43</sup> As already mentioned, this is an important moment in copyright law since the case forces the courts to negotiate the question not just of authorial property and the level of originality that justifies a claim to ownership, but also, of the line that separates mechanical and artistic production.

The arguments deployed in the course of the Sarony case are reflective of more than a century of debates about authorship and copyright as well as a number of nineteenth-century assumptions about photography. They play out, provisionally resolve, and in some senses exacerbate a number of tensions that structure the discourse of photography.

The inclusion of photographs into the already bulky group of copyrightable products required a significant re-statement and enlargement of some of the core ideas that underpinned the law. One of these ideas, known as the “idea-expression dichotomy”, referred to the fact that while the courts protected the expressions of an author in order to incentivize creative labor, they did not protect the ideas and facts that were contained in

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<sup>42</sup> English copyright law extended copyright privileges to engravings in 1734 and photographs in 1862. In America engravings were brought under copyright in 1802 and photographs in 1865. For an account of American copyright law from 1790-1840, see Meredith L. McGill, “Copyright in the Early Republic,” *A History of the Book in America* Vol. 2, Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelly, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> In *Wood v. Abbott* (1866) the U.S. courts declined to grant protection to photographs of two crayon drawings of human figures on the grounds that they were taken before 1865 (the year copyright protection was extended to photographs), and therefore would have to be governed by the 1831 act in which printing could not be stretched to include “the delineation of pictures by light operating on sensitive surfaces”. *Wood et al. v. Abbott et al.*, no. 17, 938, Circuit Court, S.D. New York, July 1866.

those expressions.<sup>44</sup> Ideas and facts were part of the public domain and could not be copyrighted, but expressions—the particular linguistic forms or material instantiations—were secured from unauthorized copying. Doing so, the law assumed, would provide a sufficiently attractive incentive to the creator, who could then exert control over his/her expressions. Meanwhile, public interest would be served by enabling others to access the ideas and facts of the author in order to build on the advances made by the original author. Expressions embody the author's particular creative articulations of ideas that presumably exist in a common pool that in itself cannot be cordoned off for private use.<sup>45</sup> While the boundaries that separate ideas from expressions have not always been easy to track as a legal distinction in copyright law, the idea-expression dichotomy is a powerful concept and provides an important rationale for the twin foci of copyright—the incentivizing of creative labor and the protection of public interest.<sup>46</sup> James Boyle, pointing out that the “distinction [between ideas and expressions] which sounds formally realizable, even if on closer analysis it turns out to be impossible to maintain,...provides a moral and philosophical justification for fencing in the commons,[and] giving the author property in something built from the resources of the public domain.”<sup>47</sup> By

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<sup>44</sup> See Siva Vaidhyanathan 29. The idea-expression dichotomy goes back at least to 1876 in the U.S. Vaidhyanathan points out that the notion evolves for a whole century in the discourse of copyright until its final codification in 1976.

<sup>45</sup> The philosophical foundations of the idea-expression dichotomy lie in late eighteenth-century German philosophy, especially in the work of Fichte who distinguished between the physical aspect of a book and the ideas it contains and the particular expressive form that these ideas took. For a discussion of German philosophy and copyright see Martha Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the Author,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (1984): 425-448.

<sup>46</sup> See Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003) 1-15. In Saint-Amour's words, “...intellectual property is a frail gondola that ferries innovation from the private to the public sphere, from the genius to the commons” (2).

<sup>47</sup> See James Boyle, *Shamans, Software and Spleens: Law and the Construction of the Information Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 56.



subjecting the photograph to the idea/expression dichotomy, the judgment therefore attempts the difficult task of disentangling the idea of the photograph from its expressive elements. It does this by re-staging the particular epistemological basis of the idea/expression dichotomy, i.e., that ideas are anterior to expressions, the latter being the highly personalized vehicles through which an author gives legibility to his or her ideas.

To perform this intellectual operation on the photograph the court has therefore both to identify an authorial presence that can be shown to have informed the surface of the photograph from within, as well as enumerate a list of expressive marks that prove that the photograph is a materialization of an authorial intentionality. This also brings the photograph into alignment with another intellectual tradition that informs copyright law, which argues that an author has a moral right in his or her productions because such productions are an expression of an author's personality. Moral right theories conceive of texts not in the commercial language of property and ownership, but regard the text as embodying authorial personality and therefore needing to be protected from violation on moral grounds.<sup>48</sup> By inserting an author into the photograph through an enumeration of the authorial traces in the photograph, the *Sarony* case authenticates the existence of an authorial personality that inhabits the textual body of the photograph. In turn, the photograph is elevated into the status of a text that bears the signifying marks of an authorial intentionality, thereby validating the photographer's claim to be recognized as the author of his production and his right to claim protection for the integrity of his work. Proving that the photographer 'makes' a photograph, rather than 'takes' a photograph was

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<sup>48</sup> The concept of *Droit moral* figures more directly in European and Canadian copyright law, but in Anglo-American copyright law moral rights occupy a strangely conflicted and often strategically passive role. See Paul Hirst, introduction, *Ownership of the Image* by Bernard Edelman, 14-18. See also Rose 18.

therefore the key moment in the judgment that validated the claim that a photograph has an author.<sup>49</sup>

Why did the courts undertake the controversial task of investing photographs with authors? For Edelman the answer lies in the increased commercial interests that were clamoring for property rights in the photograph. The ‘author’ in the photograph is for Edelman a necessary “juridical fiction” that like other kinds of intellectual property law “permits the transition from the invisible—‘intelligence’, ‘creation’, ‘genius’—to the visible—real estate, the ‘tangible’, the ‘true’, the transition from the immaterial to the material...It is a matter of giving to the *invisible*—the thought of man—the character of the *visible*—private property.”<sup>50</sup>

An example of the efficacy of this fiction is provided by Kant’s 1785 essay, “On the Wrongfulness of Unauthorized Publication of Books.” Here Kant critiques illegal reprinting of books on the grounds that books embody the ‘speech’ of the writer: “In a book, as a writing, the author *speaks* to his reader; and the one who has printed the book *speaks*, by his copy, not for himself but simply and solely in the author’s name... [Books] belong exclusively to the person of the author, who has in them an inalienable right.”<sup>51</sup> However Kant refuses to extend this model of authorship to the visual arts on the grounds that they do not bear the unique imprint of personality, like speech does: “On the other hand, *works of art*, as things [as opposed to books], can be copied or cast from a copy that has been rightfully acquired, and copies of it can be traded publicly without the

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<sup>49</sup> See Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography & Autobiography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997) for a brief discussion of the significance of the verb form ‘take’ associated with photographs.

<sup>50</sup> Edelman, *Ownership of the Image*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 30, 35.

consent of the artist who made the original...[A]s always, what someone can do with his thing *in his own name* does not require the consent of the other.”<sup>52</sup>

Kant’s reluctance to elevate the graphic arts to the same status as writing was mirrored later on in the nineteenth century by a similar reluctance to see photography on the same level as painting and engraving. As Edelman reminds us, in the French courts, “The law recognized only ‘manual’ art—the paintbrush, the chisel—or abstract art—writing. The irruption of modern techniques of the (re)production of the real—photographic apparatuses, cameras—surprises the law in the quietude of its categories.”<sup>53</sup> The legal objections in France to the demand that photographs be regarded as artistic productions underscore the counter-intuitive nature of such a claim. In its initial response the French courts argued that “the art of the photographer does not consist in the creation of subjects as its own creation, but in the getting of negatives and subsequently in the making of prints which reproduce the image of objects by mechanical means and in a servile way.”<sup>54</sup> But this legal resistance to the inclusion of the photograph into the purview of copyright law soon underwent a revolution. Under pressure from industry, “the courts utilized the concept of ‘imprint of *personality*’ to wrest photography from the machine and to bring it into the domain of the actuating subject...The *subjectivisation of the machine* reverses the relation: means/end. The labor of the machine becomes the labor of the subject.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Edelman, *Ownership of the Image*, 44.

<sup>54</sup> Tribunal de commerce, Turin, 25 October 1861 qtd. in Edelman 46.

<sup>55</sup> Edelman, *Ownership of the Image*, 51.

It is in the context of this dilution of the boundary between artistic labor and non-artistic labor that we need to return to the Sarony case. Arguing that photographs are representations that qualify for copyright protection, the Sarony judgment implicitly elevated the camera from its status as a mechanical recorder of reality, to a means of representation that can admit of human mediation and creativity. In such a formulation the photographer is able to imagine himself as performing a kind of labor that is fundamentally transformative in nature. It is the ability to insert creative labor into the process of photographic reproduction that endows it with the crucial supplement of additive value that makes it no different from other kinds of labor that seek property rights in their products.

The very idea that Sarony succeeds in arranging and positioning the body of Wilde so as to accord with his mental conception also reveals a well-known function of the photograph as enabling a visual re-presentation that differs from the automaticity of mechanical representation.<sup>56</sup> Thousands of nineteenth-century photographic portraits testify to its powers of visual self-fashioning that over the course of the century democratized the process begun by portrait painting. The judgment clearly foregrounds this feature of photography's history by concluding that the photograph is able to manufacture its reality effects.

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<sup>56</sup> I have failed to uncover any material regarding the actual encounter between Wilde and Sarony in the latter's studio. Sarony was known to demand complete compliance from his photographic subjects and went to great lengths to produce the perfect setting, facial expression, pose etc. Given what we know of Wilde, such compliance is unlikely to have been forthcoming. One can only speculate that the photographic sessions would have been 'interesting'. It is, therefore, difficult to say how much Wilde himself contributed to the manufacture of these photographs. For an interesting case that debated whether the artist of a photograph is the photographer or the sitter see *Falk v. Donaldson*, 57 F. 32 (S.D.N.Y. 1893). Here again the courts decided in favor of the photographer.

For an account of Sarony's methods for evoking the desired expression and pose in his subjects and the *Falk v. Donaldson* case see Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 74. Gaines writes that "...Sarony's artistic practice might be better described as 'provoking' a representation in his patrons, since he often threw tantrums and left the room during the photographing session if a subject refused to cooperate with his vision" (74).

How do these divergent constructions get accommodated within the discourse of photography? One account insists on its non-mediated access to the real and the other claims for itself the status of a product of human labor and creativity. The first version suppresses the element of human intervention in the photograph, while the other proclaims the creative input of the photographer in his/her finished product.

In the *Sarony* case we witness a unique formulation of the relation between the photograph's evidentiary value and its ability to represent what lies inside the mind of the photographer. This is evident in the court's curious reluctance to offer a prognosis of how its judgment would have implications for photography in general. In one of its responses to the argument made by the defense that photographs are merely mechanical authorless productions, the *Sarony* judgment observes: "This may be true in regard to the ordinary production of a photograph, and that in such case a copyright is no protection. On the question as thus stated we decide nothing" (*Sarony* 5). The curious reserve regarding the status of the photograph in general is portentous and copyright history reveals the slippery slope that the *Sarony* case produced for the determination of authorship in later cases that soon granted nearly all photographs protection against the infringement of copyright.<sup>57</sup>

The judgment's implicit rejection of the idea that all photographs contain unmediated representations of reality, throws into some confusion the very epistemological status of the photograph. By granting *Sarony* a proprietary claim over the photograph, the

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<sup>57</sup> The *Sarony* case inaugurated a process that gradually lowered the threshold of originality to its most minimal form. The *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographic Company* judgment (1903) which decided that a circus poster with no obvious aesthetic value could seek copyright protection because: "Personality always contains something unique. It expresses its singularity even in handwriting, and a very modest grade of art has in it something irreducible, which is one man's alone...It would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only to the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside of the narrowest and most obvious limits." See *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographic Company* 188 US 289 U Supreme Ct. of the U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1903.

judgment is forced to acknowledge that the photograph can be manufactured like all other kinds of visual representation. But in order to say this, it does not find itself obligated to demystify photography per se. In an important sense, the judgment proposes that the artist or author-driven nature of the photograph can be folded into its fidelity function—the idea of a reality-effect can be made to appear continuous with reality itself. By reserving its judgment on the contradiction between the photograph's unmediated nature and its highly mediated nature the court effectively side-steps the dissonance that lies at the heart of nineteenth-century photography. This internal dissension in the nature of photography is not perceived as doubleness; instead, the judgment reformulates the doubleness so as to render it non-conflictual. The photograph is now in the eyes of the law both a producer and recorder of reality. The photographic mirror magically both reflects and generates images.

The subsumption of the mechanical nature of the photograph into the widening arc of copyrightable products of labor that appears in the *Sarony* judgment, thus inducts photography into the class of intellectual products that qualify for copy protection. Jonathan Crary warns against a tendency that manifests itself in the view that photography is part of a gradual unfolding of the trajectory of the Western pictorial tradition:

Photographs may have some apparent similarities with older types of images, such as perspectival paintings, or drawings made with the aid of a camera obscura; but the vast systemic rupture of which photography is a part renders such similarities insignificant. Photography is an element of a new and homogeneous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged. To understand the 'photography effect' in the nineteenth century, one must see it as a crucial component of a new cultural economy of value and exchange, not as part of a continuous history of visual representation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 13. For the opposite view that photography did not represent a break

The Sarony judgment represents the suturing of the ‘vast systemic rupture’ that Crary describes, in order to humanize the alienated images produced by the camera.

A related issue concerning intellectual property on which the Sarony case puts an undue amount of pressure is the question of originality. Since photographs do not appear to be original creations in the sense that music or literature are, the law is forced to re-configure the notion of originality in a manner that would enable it to accommodate the production of photographs. Jane Gaines points out how the judgment in the Sarony case separates out the notion of originality into its two inherently unstable parts.<sup>59</sup> It does so by conflating the idea of originality that references a Romantic concept of an authorial personality that creates the work of art with the idea of originality as merely the point of origin. This latter conception of originality is evident in the language the court uses to define an author: “he to whom anything owes its origin” (Sarony 4). Such a formulation of originality leans towards the zero degree of originality where it denotes not an index of an artist’s originality of conception but merely the fact of his or her physical proximity to the moment of creation. In other words, it defines originality as a temporal and spatial relation to the artifact’s materialization. This is, of course, a crucial aspect of the Sarony case, which as Jane Gaines argues marks the evacuation of authorial subjectivity from the idea of originality. She demonstrates how the case invokes originality in the defense of Sarony only to whittle it down to “nothing more than a point of origin.”<sup>60</sup> She proceeds to

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from painting but actually emerged as a natural consequence of certain developments within the history painting see Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981).

<sup>59</sup> Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 56.

argue that, “the intervention of the subject in the photographic work also marked the point of exclusion of the subject.”<sup>61</sup>

The notion of the labor involved in photographic production is also analyzed by Scruton who argues that even the labor of a studio photographer, far from being original, is marked by impotence and futility with regard to the substantive body of the photographic image:

Even if he [the photographer] does, say, intentionally arrange each fold of his subject’s dress and meticulously construct, as studio photographers once used to do, the appropriate scenario, that would still hardly be relevant, since they seem to be few ways in which intentions can be revealed in a photograph...we lack all except the grossest features of style in photography...there will be an infinite number of things that lie outside his control.<sup>62</sup>

He does however grant that the attempt “to paint things out or in, to touch up, alter, or *pasticher* as he pleases” brings the photographer within a hair’s breadth of being a painter: “The photograph has been reduced to a kind of frame around which he paints, a frame that imposes upon him largely unnecessary constraints.”<sup>63</sup>

The Sarony case, however, insists on elevating the photographer into the company of the painter by citing precisely the kind of labor that Scruton describes above and by doing so produces a model of the artist that seems to have been reduced to a pale ghost of his distended Romantic version.

How does one explain this ironic evacuation of the subject at the very moment that the photograph is given a paternity through acknowledging its status as an authored text? By placing the photographer’s “original mental conception” within the frame of the photo the

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<sup>61</sup> Gaines, *Contested Culture*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” 593.

<sup>63</sup> Scruton, “Photography and Representation,” 594.



Sarony judgment, in a significant sense, gives a body and material basis to the ghostly creation of the photographic image. The photograph is, in a sense, domesticated and mobilized into the service of a more recognizable mode of artistic production and more importantly, returned to the demystified, secular realm of intellectual production. In other words, the judgment domesticates the potential instability within the photograph by anchoring it within the framework of individualized labor.

### **The Photograph of Dorian Gray**

At this point it might be worth reminding ourselves that the judgment and the crisis it generated thus far, seems indifferent to an absent point of reference: Oscar Wilde, whose cool and languid gaze staring out of the photograph appears vaguely bemused at the multiple ironies playing themselves out before him (fig 1).<sup>64</sup>

Wilde's writings showcase a wide spectrum of responses to the conflicting energies of the image, nearly all of which also acknowledge both the malleability and inherent instability of the visual image. Critical of the ways that the visual was usurping the domain of the literary,<sup>65</sup> he was at the same time keenly aware of the importance of the

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<sup>64</sup> As far as we know, Wilde did not comment on the Sarony case either publicly or in his letters.

<sup>65</sup> In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde writes: "...there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye and less and less to the ear..." See Oscar Wilde, *Intentions* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004) 113.



Figure 6. Oscar Wilde by Napoleon Sarony (Number 18).

image as a mode of self-presentation.<sup>66</sup> Wilde's writings return to one question: how do pictures structure the way we understand the relationship between appearance and reality? At once an epistemological and an aesthetic question, Wilde's articulation of it across a range of generic registers that stretch from the short story and the novel on the one hand to journalistic prose and letters on the other, demonstrates the diverse and often contradictory responses that the question elicited from him.

Wilde's own theory of the visual image, evident in a number of his texts, especially essays like "The Truth of Masks" and "The Decay of Lying," and short stories like "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." reveal a complex understanding of visual surfaces. For instance, in "The Decay of Lying" Wilde writes: "...what is interesting about people in good society ... is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind that mask. It is a humiliating confession, but we are all made out of the same stuff.... Where we differ from each is purely in accidentals: in dress, manner, tone of voice, religious opinions, personal appearance, tricks of habit, and the like."<sup>67</sup> The list of attributes that constitute the 'accidentals' is indifferent to the fact that 'religious opinions' and 'dress', for instance, have been flattened in this formulation to the single dimension of the 'mask'. Wilde frequently waxed eloquent on the generative properties of masks and the value of the 'pose': "The first duty in life is to assume a pose, what the second duty is no one has yet found out."<sup>68</sup> For Wilde the images that we create for ourselves are not expressive vehicles that reveal who we really are, but quite literally produce who we are through

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<sup>66</sup> See for instance, Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 1-44.

<sup>67</sup> Wilde *Intentions* 14-15.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 311.

their visual expressions. "Truth", for Wilde, "is entirely a matter of style" and "[a]rt never expresses anything but itself."<sup>69</sup> His short story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." once again demonstrates that the truth value of the portrait has little to do with its status as a forgery, implying thereby that visual surfaces are self-validating and cannot be measured against the codes of authenticity or sincerity.

How do Wilde's own changing conceptions of the visual image speak to the status of the photographic image that seems to mutate in strange ways under the legal gaze? In what follows I hope to demonstrate that one can trace in both the Sarony judgment and in Wilde's writing a concern with the question of whether or not an image has an inside, and if so, what the ontological status of such an inside may be. If visual representations cannot be safely anchored in the world of copyright and authorship, then who owns, or owns up to visual images? This section will now pose this question in the context of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>70</sup>—a novel deeply engaged with the question of the image—in order to see whether it yields any different answers in the light of the Sarony judgment and the debates surrounding photography in the nineteenth century.

My reading of the novel is motivated by the hypothesis that the novel metaphorizes both the uncertain status of the photograph in the nineteenth century and the anxieties that uncertainty generated. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a rich elaboration of the question of whether a visual image is a pure surface that freezes people and objects into immobility or whether it has an inside that is capable of signifying depths that lie beneath the surface.

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<sup>69</sup> Wilde *Intentions* 29, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin Books, 2003). All subsequent references will be incorporated into the text of my paper.

Wilde's novel posits a scenario where the surface of the image is not tethered to its authorial inside but rather embodies the fantasy of a mobile visual surface that appears to have ceded from a depth model and become a self-maturing image. Can the picture in the novel be interpreted in terms of a photograph? As has been suggested by earlier critics, Wilde's choice of the word 'picture' as opposed to 'portrait' in the title of his novel broadens the novel's concerns beyond the confines of portraiture and invokes the more general theme of visibility and the culture of images.<sup>71</sup> My reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* will attempt to interpret the novel's elevation of the image to a position of structural and thematic centrality as a symptom of a broader cultural anxiety regarding the proliferation of images in nineteenth-century culture.

An enduring theme in the literary critical responses that the novel has inspired is that of the Doppelgänger or double<sup>72</sup>—a theme that has often been expressed in psychoanalytic terms.<sup>73</sup> Photography, I suggest, provides a crucial material context to understand the particular valence that the notion of the double connoted in the nineteenth century. Inserting this missing context into a reading of the novel embodies the idea of the double in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thereby giving it both a history and a location within a broader cultural space.

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<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Michael Patrick Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: 'What the World Thinks of Me'* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995). Gillespie writes: "Picture offers a broad non-prescriptive concept of representation, one that immediately opens up the possibility of a number of alternative perspectives. By contrast, portrait signifies a fairly specific and narrowly defined form of depiction, subject to very specific generic conventions" 36.

<sup>72</sup> See Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1993) 186.

<sup>73</sup> For instance see Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).

Tom Gunning, in a suggestive essay on spirit photography, points out that it was "the uncanny ability of the photograph to produce a double of its subject that gave it its unique ontology as much as its existential link with its original source."<sup>74</sup> Locating this feature of the photographic image within the Freudian notion of the uncanny, Gunning demonstrates how photographs reproduce a "parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism", thereby materializing visual records of people and objects while simultaneously producing their "specter-like double[s]."<sup>75</sup>

The protagonist, Dorian Gray, recognizes the uncanny nature of the portrait from the moment he first sees it: "A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time...as he stood gazing at the shadow of his own loveliness"(27). This narcissistic identification is disrupted by the Faustian bargain that Dorian makes with his double, which thenceforth becomes the visible symbol of the degeneration from which his own body is immune. Freud in his essay on the uncanny points out in reference to the double that "a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other's self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged."<sup>76</sup> Describing the double as "originally an insurance against the extinction of the self..." and in "primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and primitive man", Freud's essay focuses on the career of the double in later stages of the ego's development:

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<sup>74</sup> Tom Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny", *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 43.

<sup>75</sup> Gunning 43, 47.

<sup>76</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 142.

the double is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development, a phase that we have surmounted, in which it admittedly had a more benign significance. The double has become an object of terror, just as, the gods become demons after the collapse of their cult...the meaning of the double changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.<sup>77</sup>

Dorian's portrait similarly traverses the distance between narcissism and its reverse aspect—a fascinated horror at the corruption and mortality that the body is heir to.<sup>78</sup> He remarks to the painter, Basil, "There is something fatal about a portrait. It has a life of its own" (120).<sup>79</sup>

This identification between the portrait and its fatality is reinforced in the novel through an exemplary passage in which the narrator recounts Dorian's reaction to the portraits of his dead ancestors: "He loved to stroll through the gaunt, cold picture-gallery of his country-house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed in his veins...Had some strange poisonous germ crept from body to body till it had reached his own?...He felt he had known them all, those strange, terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world..." (137,138). Here, Dorian's own portrait serves as a reminder of his own mortality and the common fate he shares with his ancestors. The faces staring back at him from the gallery provide a visual tableau of his own mortification in Basil's portrait. The notion that his picture too, not only represents him but also memorializes his body forms a major part of Dorian's reaction.

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<sup>77</sup> Freud 142-143.

<sup>78</sup> Sarah Kofman uses a similar idea of the 'double' in her reading of the novel, but uses it for completely different ends. See "The Imposture of Beauty: The Uncanniness of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*" rpt. in *Enigmas: Essays on Sarah Kofman*, ed. Penelope Deutscher, Kelly Oliver (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 25-48.

<sup>79</sup> In Wilde's short story "The Birthday of Infanta", the mirror proves fatal to the dwarf who dies of grief on seeing his own grotesque image. See also Ellmann 356-357, for Wilde's interesting variation on the Narcissus myth.

The symbolic logic that connects the visual image to death is one that photography solidifies and for which it provides a material basis. The idea of the photograph as an exfoliation from the natural body elevates it above the realm of cultural production and authenticates its function as a lasting visual record of the mortal body. Eduardo Cadava, in his work on Benjamin and photography, describes this linkage between death and photography thus:

the photographic event reproduces, according to its own faithful and rigorous death-bringing manner, the posthumous character of our lived experience. The home of the photographed is the cemetery...the photograph tells us we will die, one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here as we have always been here, as *images*. It announces the death of the photograph...In order for a photograph to be a photograph, it must become the tomb that writes, that harbors its own death...Photography is a mode of bereavement. It speaks to us of mortification.<sup>80</sup>

The long association of photography as a technology for both representing death and keeping death at bay through memorialization is a subject I have already touched on in the first section of this chapter, but let me note here briefly that Wilde's novel is centrally concerned with this doubleness at the heart of the visual image. The novel is marked by an anxiety about the duplicitous nature of the image that is manifested in the difference between its seductively mimetic surfaces and profound capacity to capture and mirror the depths of the soul. Like the doubleness of the photographic image that claims both a mimetic function and an ability to function as an indexical trace, the picture in Wilde's novel is both a visual representation of Dorian and a dynamic material 'trace' of his subjectivity.

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<sup>80</sup> Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 8-11. For a classic formulation of the relationship between death and photography see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 9, 15, 31.



Notwithstanding his acquaintance with Lessing's theorization of the difference between literature and painting in terms of their spatial and temporal domains, Wilde's novel proposes a generic transvaluation of the very rules that he earlier had endorsed in "The Critic as Artist".<sup>81</sup> This is hinted at in the very first page of the novel, when the narrator points out how the "fantastic shadows of birds in flight...across the long tussore-silk curtains" in Basil Hallward's studio, put Lord Henry Wotton in mind of "those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion" (3) [sic]. In some senses, the novel is an extended fantasy of just such a reverie about 'magic pictures'.

However, the idea of a 'magic picture' that behaves out of character was not an original idea. In fact, for the writer of fiction in the late nineteenth century there would have been many literary precedents in which the idea gets elaborated. Kerry Powell, in a seminal essay on the tradition of "magic portrait stories" points out that, "by the 1880s, especially towards the close of the decade, the number of magic portrait stories swelled to the proportions of a deluge."<sup>82</sup> This efflorescence of magic picture stories was not limited to Europe and was a particularly trans-Atlantic phenomenon, featuring writers like Poe and Hawthorne, both of whom were much admired by Wilde. Not surprisingly, Wilde borrowed liberally from this sub-genre, to produce its most famous example. Powell,

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<sup>81</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 312. In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde writes: "The image stained upon the canvas possesses no spiritual element of growth or change...Movement, that problem of the visible arts, can be truly realized by literature alone" and, "The painter is so far limited that it is only through the mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul...For a painter is limited, not to what he sees in nature, but to what upon the canvas may be seen." Wilde *Intentions* 135, 146.

<sup>82</sup> Kerry Powell, "Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray: Magic Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction," *Philological Quarterly* 62 (1983): 151. See also Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 182-193, for the American response to the magic-picture tradition and Wilde's novel.

describing this Wildean ability, writes, “Wilde, the most derivative of writers and yet a striking original one, actually plundered a host of sources in composing his novel, borrowing the names and personalities of characters, reprising plot situations, and even (perhaps unconsciously) ‘remembering’ words and phrases from other works and writing them into his own story.”<sup>83</sup> Powell, however, does not offer any explanation for this exponential increase in fictional tales that feature portraits that behave out of character. By juxtaposing Wilde’s novel with the debate on the nature of the photographic image and its ownership, I hope to provide a cultural context for the magic-picture tradition that Powell’s work shows to be a fairly broad-based cultural symptom.

Like many of the magic pictures that Powell lists in his essay, Dorian Gray’s portrait represents the fantasy of the mobile image. It does so by imagining the possibility of a visual image that can exchange its temporally static nature for one that can register historical change over time. More specifically, it translates into visual signs the moral transgressions that Dorian commits and does so in a manner that can keep pace with his moral degeneration. The portrait is therefore able to breathe life into its own visual surface by rendering it sensitive to time and moral decay.<sup>84</sup> This imaginative animation of the surface of the portrait in order to have it play the role of both reflective surface and visual image puts an unusual conceptual weight on the idea of the surface.

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<sup>83</sup> Powell 150-151. See also Paul K. Saint Amour, *The Copyrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003) 90-120. Saint-Amour offers an interesting account of Wilde’s plagiarism and its ability to “disrupt the ethical codes that protect private literary property” 97. My reading of the novel, however, runs counter to the spirit of Saint-Amour’s argument, since it focuses on Wilde’s ambivalence towards a world in which images are in a free fall from the fixities of ownership and property.

<sup>84</sup> Like the aging, fading photograph that over time fails to fix the image properly, the image in the novel ‘develops’ indefinitely. The idea of the photograph as a technology for arresting such fading was in tension with the anxiety that photographs like memory fade with time. For a discussion of the relationship between photographs and the problem of transient memory-images and the manner in which photographs become a metaphor for memory itself see Jennifer Green-Lewis, “Not Fading Away: Photography in the Age of Oblivion”, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22 (2001): 559-585.

The issue of surfaces is also crucial in the Sarony case. The judgment had conceded the fact that the photograph is not just a surface but also possesses an inside where authorial consciousness resides. But by formulating this inside in terms of a minimalist mode in which the inside is so close to the surface so as to almost coincide with it, the judgment makes possible a new conception of surfaces—one that relocates the author to the very subcutaneous skin of the photographic image. The judgment thus lowers the threshold of authorship by thinning out the space that separates the inside from the outside.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* also attempts to explore the dialectic relationship between insides and outsides, surfaces and depths. Reduced to such a schema, the novel can be shown to organize itself around the moral and epistemological implications of abandoning the notion that appearances are the integuments that either conceal or reveal deeper truths. It is important to note here, that some of Wilde's non-fictional expressions of this theme display a bravura that is countered in the novel by the figure of Basil Hallward, the hapless painter of Dorian's portrait<sup>85</sup>. In fact just as the Sarony judgment adjudicated between the competing claims that photographs were either all surface or expressions of pre-meditated artistic intentions, the novel, in an important sense, plays out a similar thematic encounter. On the one hand, we have Lord Henry Wotton who believes that there are only surfaces since authentic interiors are an illusion, and on the other, there is Basil Hallward who for the most part is strongly invested in the idea of a governing interiority that serves as the guarantee and ethical anchor for the world of expressive surfaces.

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<sup>85</sup> For instance Wilde's essay, "The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion", ends with the dramatic claim that, "The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks." See Wilde *Intentions* 263.

Through the figure of Lord Henry the novel offers a sustained meditation on the aesthetics of the surface, a theme that recurs throughout the novel. Lord Henry, at one level modeled on the figure of Wilde (or on at least a part of Wilde's understanding of himself), is the articulate and charismatic ideologue for the view that expressions do not derive their constitutive essences from content. Neither do they gain intelligibility through anchorage in a field of intentionality: "...the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it" (12). Dorian recounts Lord Henry's maxim that, "It is simply expressions...that give reality to things" (114). He repeatedly invokes the idea that surfaces are far more profound than depths: "only shallow people do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (24).<sup>86</sup> The world he inhabits is one in which the circulation of commodities have trumped an older notion of value: "Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing" (47). In such a world fidelity and consistency have lost their purchase: "...the people who love only once are really the shallow people" (49). Lord Henry's worship of surfaces also produces a disconnect from all ethical and moral imperatives: "I never approve or disapprove of anything now...We are not sent into the world to air our moral prejudices...If a personality fascinates me, whatever mode of expression that personality selects is absolutely delightful to me" (72). This aesthetic withdrawal from a world of moral accountability also places him at variance from the category of experience and from a temporal model of a knowledge bank that experience deposits in individual memory: "Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of

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<sup>86</sup> Lady Bracknell says in *The Importance of Being Earnest* "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces." John Lancaster Ed., Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) Act III, 79.

warning, had claimed for it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of character...[But] it was as little of an active cause as conscience itself'(57). Consequently, Lord Henry advocates "a new Hedonism... [whose] aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be" (126) Translated into the realm of aesthetics such a philosophy finds itself arguing counter-intuitively that art is not a form of expression, but rather, that art expresses nothing but itself: "Good artists exist simply in what they make, and consequently are perfectly uninteresting in what they are" (56).

The novel embodies this aesthetic philosophy in the figure of Sybil Vane whose success as an actor is inversely proportional to her ignorance of "the reality of love" (113). Like Willie Hughes in Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." whose ability to "mimic a passion...without realizing it"<sup>87</sup> accounts for his success, Sybil's brilliance as an actor lasts only as long as she does not see performative surfaces and masks in terms of "the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of empty pageant..." (84). Her fall into a belief in authentic interiority necessitates her brutal expurgation from the novel. Predictably, this reading of Sybil's fate is most clearly articulated by Lord Henry, who describes her death in terms that chillingly aestheticize her tragedy by remarking that, "The moment she [Sybil] touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled...But don't waste your tears over Sybil Vane. She was less real than they are" (100).

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<sup>87</sup> "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." in Russell Fraser, ed. *Selected Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969) 329.

Basil Hallward represents for Dorian (and for the reader who is witness to the struggle between Basil and Lord Henry over Dorian's 'soul') the contrary view that constantly cautions Dorian against relinquishing his belief in the idea that appearances are merely the epiphenomena that symptomatize a deeper reality. Basil imagines artistic creation in a language that is redolent of a Romantic faith in artistic feeling and the personality of the artist. He sees his portrait of Dorian as marred by virtue of being burdened by an excess of his own feelings: "I have put too much of myself into it...every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself.... I am afraid that I have shown in it the secret of my soul" (6, 9). For Basil aesthetic surfaces are prone to be expressive of the artist's own interiority, and while he expresses doubts about whether or not to endorse such an artistic credo in practice, he is convinced about the ontological basis of such an interiority. This is most clearly confirmed in his assertion that the human body is a surface that bears an indexical relationship to the soul: "Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the molding of his hands even" (143).

One version of this belief in expressive surfaces is enacted in a crucial scene when Basil is finally allowed to examine the painting by Dorian and is horrified by the hideously altered face on the canvas. His first impulse, after making sure that the change was not due to some chemical reaction of "some mineral poison" in the paint, is to hold the light up to the canvas as if to look for the inside from which the decay was being

secreted (150). He concludes after this examination that “the surface seemed to be quite undisturbed...It was from within that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away” (150). Here, Basil seems to represent the authorial voice that cannot stop believing in depths beneath surfaces, and like the judgment in the Sarony case, decides to insert a depth in what is pure surface. The surface has to double for the mysterious depth in which Basil cannot stop believing.

There is, however, a heavy price to pay for those who cling to notions of a depth that anchors the world of surfaces. Shortly after this scene, the painter is murdered by Dorian Gray thereby short-circuiting the triangulated relationship between painter/painting/and painted, but also releasing the portrait once and for all from authorial control, leaving the image orphaned and tenuously connected to the material world only by its referent, Dorian Gray.

The figure of Dorian Gray is located at the structural center of the contrasting philosophies of Lord Henry and Basil who both compete over him. In fact, under the intense tensile strain he literally cleaves into two separate bodies—one, obeying Basil’s view that the body registers signs of moral degeneration, and the other following Lord Henry’s belief that beautiful surfaces are immune from displaying the visual symptoms of sin.

Lord Henry sees Dorian as an embodiment of his conviction that it is possible to preserve surfaces so long as they are untroubled by the illusion of depths. Towards the end of the novel he exclaims: “...we have given up our belief in the soul...What an exquisite life you have had! You have drunk deeply of everything. You have crushed

grapes against your palate. Nothing has been hidden from you. And it has all been to you no more than the sound of music. It has not marred you. You are still the same” (205-206). To a large extent, Dorian tries to put into practice Lord Henry’s view that one “was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience” and instead to focus “upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (126). Accordingly, he spends many years living the life of a serial hedonist—indulging in one passion after another, and having “caught their color and satisfied his intellectual curiosity, le[ft] them with that curious indifference that is not incompatible with a real ardor of temperament” (127). This non-cumulative, anti-historical impulse is a desire for pleasure without the burden of memory—an insatiable appetite that is fed by the comforting guarantee that the career of his desire will be resistant to narrativization. This effectively turns his life into a series of photographs or snapshots whose resistance to narrativization mimics the fragmentary nature of the photographic ‘instant’.<sup>88</sup> He craves “a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colors, and be changed, or have other secrets, a world in which the past would have little or no place, or survive at any rate, in no conscious form of obligation or regret” (127).

But Dorian’s attitude towards his portrait betrays a profoundly conflicted view of his own bifurcated self. The portrait alternately horrifies and fascinates him—at once a reverse image of the incorruptibility of his own personal beauty and a reminder of his degeneracy revealed to him in all its visual detail. Ed Cohen, describing his divided self-image, writes: “Dorian comes to view his body as distinct from his soul and misrecognizes the certainty of his aging and death. Splitting his self image into two,

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<sup>88</sup> See John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).



Basil's visual representation and Lord Henry's verbal portrait, Dorian internalizes an identity that excites his body only to make it vulnerable to the passage of time."<sup>89</sup>

An interesting enactment of this conflict is elaborated through a splitting of Dorian's gaze along two different axes of specular reflectivity. In Chapter XI Dorian stands before the portrait and a mirror in order to compare the two images—fascinated not only by the contrast, but also by his power to position himself at a vantage point between these two images:

...stand[ing] with a mirror in front of the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and aging face on the canvas, and now at the fair young face that laughed back at him from the polished glass. The very sharpness of the contrast used to quicken his sense of pleasure. He grew more and more enamored of his own beauty, more and more interested in the corruption of his own soul. ...He would place his white hands beside the coarse, bloated hands of the picture and smile (124).

Here Dorian, standing between splintered images of his self, realizes both the voyeuristic pleasures of being a spectator of his own corruption visually manifested, as well as the horrible inevitability of that corruption, which prevents him from an unproblematic pleasure of gazing at his own degeneration: "...he would sit in front of the picture, sometimes loathing it and himself, but filled, at other times, with that pride of individualism that is half the fascination of sin..." (135). The "most magical of mirrors" that Basil creates for him is both a superficial visual image that can hold his fascinated gaze, and a reflective surface that can mirror the corruption that Dorian's body conceals (103). The magic of Basil's 'picture' is that it can be both surface and depth at the same time.

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<sup>89</sup> See Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation", *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Jonathan Freedman (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996) 172.

Suspended between the pleasures of voyeurism and the agony of watching the inexorable erosion of his soul, Dorian fails to meet Lord Henry's condition for converting one's own life into a mode of self-spectatorship. For Lord Henry, "To become the spectator of one's own life...is to escape the suffering of life" (107). However, undisturbed by the conflictual energies that Dorian experiences, he sees this as a pleasurable act: "We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us" (98). Accordingly, Lord Henry casts himself in the role of the privileged participant observer of human subjects: "Human life—that appeared to him the one thing worth investigating.... and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, seemed to promise rich and fruitful results" (56, 58).

An index of the novel's attempts to mediate between the dichotomous structures that it sets up is the discourse of materialism that periodically (and strategically) crops up in the novel. Both Lord Henry and Dorian, at different times, muse about the possibility that the soul and body, thought and matter, or even form and content might be connected in more complex ways than are immediately apparent. Dorian, on realizing the magic properties of the portrait, wonders: "Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and color on the canvas, and the soul that was within him?" (93). Later Lord Henry, cautioning Dorian about the dangers of self-denial says: "Life is not governed by will or intention. Life is a question of nerves and fibers, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself and passion has its dreams" (206). However the novel's concession to the possibility that thought and intentionality might exist, albeit in less direct and governable circuits than one might imagine, only underscores the flattening of the depth model into a pervasive material dynamic that re-

writes a vertical model of surfaces and depths into a horizontal model that imagines a complex circuitry that networks both surfaces and depths into a single plane.

Dorian, however, cannot sustain his precarious suspension between surfaces and depths, and the end of the novel sees him take a vertiginous fall into the very depth model that the portrait permitted him to keep at bay. Ironically, the collapse happens at the very moment he decides to transcend the dialectic between appearance and reality. Realizing that the only way to be free from the accusatory return of his own gaze from the portrait which mirrored back to him his inner corruption was to destroy the “monstrous soul-life” it represented, he stabs the portrait, and realizes that in doing so he is affirming the existence of his own soul. The portrait of Dorian Gray is an image that cannot bear the weight of its own referentiality. The portrait’s uniqueness concerns its relationship to its subject who not only recognizes himself in the portrait but also feels that the picture is a part of him or an appendage of himself. In the early part of the novel when Basil attempts to rip the painting in a moment of frustration, Dorian intervenes, crying passionately, “Don’t Basil, don’t...it would be murder” (29).

In the beginning of the novel when Lord Henry offers to buy the portrait from Basil Hallward, the painter replies, “It is not my property, Harry.” On being asked who the owner of the portrait is, he replies “Dorian’s of course” (27). So unusual is the status of the painting that Hallward decides that it belongs more properly to Dorian Gray, the subject of the painting. Unlike Sarony who demanded that he be recognized as the owner of the photograph, Hallward seems quite convinced that he has no proprietorial claim over the portrait. The portrait also has an unusual relationship to its own genealogy. It is the last in a series of portraits that Basil Hallward makes of Dorian Gray. All the earlier

ones had cast a classical veil over their subject and had painted Dorian as representing mythological figures. However, this portrait was the result of painting without as he calls it a “mist or veil”: “One day—a fatal day I think—I determined to paint a wonderful portrait of you, as you actually are, not in the costume of dead ages, but in your own dress, as you actually are” (110-111). However, the painting also signals the demise of Basil’s career as a painter, for after this, his paintings descend into mediocrity. The portrait is therefore sufficiently unlike all his other work to merit the special status of not just disrupting existing authorial practices, but also of marking the beginning of the end of Hallward as a painter.

What is so special about the painting of Dorian Gray that even before it acquires its magic properties later on in the novel, it seems to obituarize the painter? The novel does little to demystify for us the mysterious qualities of this portrait besides the painter’s passionate declaration that the personality of Dorian Gray has “...suggested to me an entirely new manner of art, an entirely new mode of style” (13).

The picture, thus, early on in the novel, detaches itself from the painter and re-attaches itself to its referent Dorian Gray. Hallward relinquishes all ownership and the painting becomes the property of Dorian Gray. The painting, therefore, much like a photograph, is an authorless text, which obviously owes its birth to Hallward but does not submit to the protocols of authorship. This rupture from the world of author-functionality and a copyright-governed system of artistic production is the crisis that the novel seeks to mediate.

The novel offers one imaginative response to the question of authorship by imagining the horrors of a world in which images are owned not by their makers but by

the objects or persons represented in them. Like the photograph of Oscar Wilde that threatened to stray from its authorial locus in the Sarony case, the portrait of Dorian Gray is displaced from its authorial location. But Wilde's novel also depicts how the denatured image can be imagined as not only alienated from its author but also from its own pictorial nature. The image loses its imagic quality and turns into the magic mirror of Dorian's moral transgressions.

Like other magic pictures which abound in late Victorian fiction, the picture of Dorian Gray is a fictional response to the advent of the photographic image. The emergence of the magic image is a way of dealing with the orphaning of visual production from a system of naming that had traditionally operated within an earlier copyright regime. The camera not just detaches the image from the hand but creates the illusion of an un-authored representation. Besides feeding into the fantasy of a culture of images that can finally dispense with the real, it also created an anxiety of a world that will increasingly be controlled by surfaces that do not possess the comforting guarantee of an authorial signature.<sup>90</sup>

Such signatures, besides producing a system of ownership and property and providing a face-off between owning and owning up to one's cultural productions, are also an efficient means of regulating and secularizing texts and their production. To apportion authors to texts is to retrieve them from the domain of anonymous production as well as to put the lid on the idea of an authorless proliferation of texts—thereby

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<sup>90</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 96-125. Ginzburg briefly discusses the role of the signature as a mark of unique identity and goes on to point out that, "...it was not until the closing decades of the nineteenth century that new and competing systems of identification [as opposed to signatures] began to be proposed from various quarters" (119).

managing the gothic possibility of un-authored acts.<sup>91</sup> To attribute authorship is to assign intentionality and rational control over the domain of cultural signs. Photography appears to dissever the links between representation and intention since unlike other acts of mimesis that are at one remove from the real, photography is like a mimesis that has been out-sourced to a machine that produces exfoliations of the real.

The novel, in imagining this dystopian world in which the image can transgress its own conditions of possibility, betrays its own ambiguous response to the idea of a world where visual surfaces take on the attributes of depth. The portrait, thus launched on an independent career of its own, becomes the gothic engine that propels the plot into a dizzying sequence of moral degeneration that can only be arrested by the destruction of the rogue image.<sup>92</sup>

Two instances in the text underscore the novel's ambivalence towards representations cut loose from an authorial locus. The first occurs when Basil sees the horribly disfigured painting and is skeptical about his own authorship of it:

But who had done it? He seemed to recognize his own brushwork, and the frame was his own design. The idea was monstrous, yet he felt afraid. He seized the lighted candle, and held it to the picture. In the left hand corner was his own name, traced in long letters of bright vermillion. It was some foul parody, some infamous, ignoble satire. He had never done that. Still it was his own picture. (149).

The painting, disconnected from its author, decomposes into a hideously altered image: “The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful” (150). Its very identity is destabilized in its free fall into a kind of visual corruption. Ironically, it is only the non-

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<sup>91</sup> For a related argument with regard to the effects of electricity and electric technologies and their destabilizing effect on the discourse of intellectual property see Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions: Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) 271-283.

<sup>92</sup> See Cohen 168. Cohen makes a similar point regarding the picture as the “absent presence (which motivates narrative development)”.

visual stamp of ownership, the author's signature, "traced in long letters of bright vermillion", that confirms the identity of the portrait. Coincidentally, Sarony's "flamboyant personal style" was "epitomized...in the *bold red embossed signature* on his work" [italics mine].<sup>93</sup> Just as the signature allowed the courts to identify Sarony as the photographs author and thus arrest the free fall of the image into an authorless state the arbitrary 'mark' of authorship in Basil's painting, is the only point of reference in the visual field of the painting that is immune from decay. The linguistic sign of ownership unlike the visual image is resistant to the radical instabilities of the image.

The other instance of such ambivalence regarding the free-floating visual sign detached from the co-ordinates of identity occurs at the very end of the novel. Through much of the novel the body of Dorian, like the picture, is de-natured from its temporal locus and frozen in time, permitting Dorian to escape recognition for the acts he commits. For example, James Vane, Sybil's brother who plans to murder Dorian for wrecking his sister's life, falters at the final moment before he commits the act, when he realizes that the man he is looking for would have to be much older than the person he beholds who "...had all the bloom of boyhood, all the unstained purity of youth" (182). However this visual misrecognition comes full circle in the last scene of the novel when the dead body of Dorian "...withered, wrinkled and loathsome of visage" fails to be identified by his own servants. Ironically, the body, having returned to its natural condition after its career of deception and sin, cannot be re-attached to the identity that it once had borne. Again, it is the supplementary marks of selfhood, the accoutrements that make any identification possible: "It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was"

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<sup>93</sup> Gaines, 72. Although Gaines mentions this detail in her account of Sarony, she does not link this fact to Wilde's novel.

(213). The extra-bodily signs that the rings represent remain the only traces of Dorian that can re-assemble the body of Dorian Gray and his name. The alienation of his identity from his natural body and its division into the dynamic physical body of the picture and the pure, immobile visual sign of his own body produces an extraordinary sequence of events that may appear to be liberating for Dorian. However, this last scene represents the narrative recoil, which calls into question the notion that pure visual surfaces can roam free without the leaden weight of authors and owners.

Wilde's novel imagines a post-referential world in which images become their subjects and give their subjects the space to not be themselves anymore. Since images can now become their subjects, Wilde fantasizes the reverse formulation: can subjects become their images? The result is the uncanny realization in the novel that if image exchanged its place with the subject then the subject would be able to regress into a world that is both fascinating and horrifying at the same time.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, the American poet who Wilde met on his American tour remarked on the advent of photography that, "Form is henceforth divorced from matter. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing...and that is all we want of it."<sup>94</sup> Photography stages for Wilde just such a division between form and matter. While Holmes is euphoric about the possibilities of the new invention, Wilde remains far more ambivalent about the effects of the internal absence within the photographic image.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph", in Trachtenberg 80.

<sup>95</sup> While Wilde did not offer any sustained reflections of photography, he had this to say about photography in a letter to Robert Ross on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1900, six months before he died: "My photographs are now so good that in moments of mental depression (alas! not rare) I think that I was intended to be a photographer. But I shake off the mood, and know that I was made for more terrible things of which colour is an element." Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) 1190.



Copyright law attempts to banish this ghostly, internal absence from the body of the photograph: “In its panicky, trumped-up claims to ideological closure and ontological immunity to such haunting, copyright *is* an exorcism.”<sup>96</sup> But with post-mortem copyright the ghosts return to haunt intellectual property. To the extent that it protects the rights of the dead author, it serves as one instance of the resurrection of the undead.<sup>97</sup>

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* also calls up the spirits of the photographic image, and imagines just such a world that constantly haunts the secular domain of ownership and copyright—reminding us of both the legal fiction that props up the idea of authorship and the horrors that await us when we have demystified that fiction.

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<sup>96</sup> Saint-Amour, 130.

<sup>97</sup> For an excellent discussion of post-mortem copyright see Saint-Amour 123-158.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MAGIC-PICTURE TRADITION

The frenzied nature of nineteenth-century visual culture can be adduced with reference to a number of its main features. These include the exponential growth of new visual technologies, major advances in the circulatory power of visual images that new printing techniques made possible, the institutionalization of what Tony Bennett calls the ‘exhibitionary complex’ with its new protocols of looking and display, and the increasingly veridical nature of the mechanically-produced visual image.<sup>1</sup>

But alongside the scopic triumphs of its ‘optical gadgetry’, the nineteenth century also exhibited an equally impressive range of visual pathologies that registered its profound uneasiness with such transformations.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I examine a forceful expression of this ambivalence: the magic-picture tradition—a lesser-known site that manifests the restless nature of nineteenth-century visual culture in both its enthusiastic embrace of the visual and the epistemological agitation caused by such an embrace.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture: 1790-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Tony Bennett, ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’, *New Formations* 5 (1988): 75-102 and *The Birth of the Museum: History Theory Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); John Tagg, *The Burden Of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is from Susan R. Horton’s interesting essay “Were They Having Fun Yet?: Victorian Optical Gadgetry, Modernist Selves” in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* Ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). See Jonathan Crary, “Unbinding Vision: Manet and the Attentive Observer in the Late Nineteenth Century” *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 46-71. See also Jean-Louis Commoli, “Machines of the Visible” *The Cinematic Apparatus* ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980). Commoli, describing the “frenzy of the visible” in the latter half of the nineteenth century, writes: “At the very same time that it is fascinated and gratified by the multiplicity of scopic instruments which lay a thousand views beneath its gaze, the human eye loses its immemorial privilege; the mechanical eye or the photographic machine now sees *in its place*, and in certain aspects with more sureness...Decentred, in panic, thrown into confusion by all this new magic of the visible, the human eye finds itself affected with a series of limits and doubts” (122, 123).

The magic-picture tradition is a literary subgenre focusing on visual images—primarily photographs and paintings—that behave out of character by directly or indirectly exerting an unnatural influence on the events in the text.<sup>3</sup> The ‘magic picture’ in most of the stories under consideration here generates the central crisis in the text, and the denouement of the plot usually coincides with the ‘return’ of the visual artifact to its natural pictorial condition. This “thriving subgenre of fiction”, which arguably reaches its apotheosis in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) saw an unusual efflorescence in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Kerry Powell, one of the earliest critics to attempt a definition of the subgenre, notes that “especially towards the close of the decade [the 1880’s] the number of magic-portrait stories swelled to the proportion of a deluge.”<sup>4</sup>

The magic-picture tradition represents the recrudescence of a familiar topos of the Romantic Gothic, which it isolates and recruits in the service of a new narrative structure that organizes itself around such magical images. This ‘citation’ of an identifiably Gothic convention allows the texts that make up the magic-picture tradition to both reference the

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<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging the substantial and growing body of scholarship that theorizes the relationship between painting and photography in terms of both its continuities and discontinuities, for the purposes of this analysis I shall assume a metaphorical substitution between painting and photography that is underwritten by the fact that the ‘unnatural’ visual images of the magic-picture tradition frequently transgress the boundaries that separate one visual medium from another. For an account of the different ways in which the relationship between photography and painting has been theorized see Jonathan Friday, *Aesthetics and Photography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Kerry Powell, “Tom, Dick and Dorian Gray: Magic Picture Mania in Late Victorian Fiction,” *Philological Quarterly* 62 (1983): 147, 151. Existing scholarship on the magic-picture tradition is sparse. In addition to Powell see also Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) for a Todorovian reading of the different literary stages into which magic-picture stories can be divided. See also Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 182–193, for a lucid though somewhat simplistic analysis of the magic-picture tradition in nineteenth-century America. For two excellent anthologies on the cross-referentiality between literature and photography see *Literature and Photography: Interactions 1840-1990: A Critical Anthology* ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995) and *The Short Story and Photography: 1880’s-1980’s: A Critical Anthology* ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

Gothic and, by virtue of the new centrality given to the motif of magic pictures, re-situate it within the co-ordinates of mid to late nineteenth-century visual culture.

The sheer volume and intensity of this resurgence in magic-picture stories suggest that such narratives were performing significant cultural work and were articulating and negotiating a particular bundle of Victorian anxieties regarding the idea of the image. While the magic-picture corpus is relatively voluminous and assumes a variety of generic forms as well as cultural locations, this chapter bases itself on nearly forty prose examples from the mid-to-late nineteenth century—titles, authors and dates of which are listed in the appendix.<sup>5</sup> Although I offer sustained analyses of only five important instantiations of the magic-picture tradition from among this longer list, a number of my claims are based on the generic features suggested by the wider corpus.

Previous attempts to study the magic-picture tradition have sought to organize the field in terms of analytical categories and chronological stages that fail to do justice both to the range and variety of texts that constitute this sub-genre and the unique contextual pressures that impinge on them.<sup>6</sup> The magic-picture tradition, in mediating and reflecting the critical pressures that marked nineteenth-century visual culture, displays a suppleness that prevents its easy incorporation into any simplistic typologies. Although my chapter attempts to understand these texts in terms of their transactions with the broader context

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix. It is important to recognize that the magic-picture tradition extends way beyond the end of the nineteenth century and that it does not confine itself within national boundaries. There are a number of excellent early twentieth century examples of the subgenre including stories by Edith Wharton and M.R. James. As a literary phenomenon, the magic-picture tradition was also transatlantic in nature and therefore I will be focusing on texts published in both England and America.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Susan Williams, *Confounding Images*. Williams divides magic-picture stories into the Gothic and the Sentimental modes. Ziolkowski in *Disenchanted Images* distinguishes between different categories into which the “haunted-portrait stories” fall—that of *genus loci* (where the portrait is rooted in a specific place), the *figura* (where the portrait prefigures events in the present or future) and, *anima* (where the portrait is magically connected to the fortunes of a particular character).

of visual culture, the focus of much of my analysis will be on one particular context, namely, nineteenth-century photography. Reading these texts as mediated by and in turn mediating a set of conceptual tensions in nineteenth-century photography furnishes us, I argue, with the means to track the larger transformations in the fortunes of the nineteenth-century visual image and to understand the unique formal and thematic pressures that structure these texts. The magic-picture tradition registers the radical transformations in visual technologies and articulates a specific response to them that helps shape the broader nineteenth-century understanding of the visual image. More specifically, it achieves this through a set of formal and thematic maneuvers that redraws the conceptual boundaries between texts and images on the one hand, and the magical and the mechanical on the other.

While the first section of this chapter explores the idea of authorial intentionality and its relationship to the photographic instant the second section will examine the question of magic and its relationship with the disenchanted photographic image.

### **Photography and the Visual Instant**

Visual images, to the extent that they are framed by a different temporal dynamic in comparison to linguistic and/or narrative structures, present a peculiar problem to texts that focus on them. The magic-picture tradition negotiates this asymmetry by producing a rich osmotic exchange between texts and images across a temporal register that is rendered especially permeable with regard to the idea of the visual instant.

Photography occasioned a major philosophical re-negotiation of the ‘instant’ of visualization—a crucial element in the conceptual scaffolding that supports the images that populate the magic-picture tradition. The photographic ‘instant’ revitalizes the discussion regarding the selection of the appropriate moment from among a series of possible moments that a painter chooses to materialize. Lessing’s discussion in *Laocoön* of the ‘pregnant moment’ that needs to be carefully selected in order to maximize a painting’s capacity for imaginative suggestiveness through its strategic withholding of ‘too much’ information, is an early articulation of the central importance given to the idea of the visual ‘instant’.<sup>7</sup>

The isolation of highly charged moments of significance from the larger continuum of time assumes the possibility of isolating flashes of significance from what in the nineteenth century was increasingly appearing as an overwhelmingly fleeting present marked not just by ephemerality but also by fragmentation.<sup>8</sup> Such islands of clarity succeeded in reconstituting meaning by re-designating the instant as the new locus of coherence.<sup>9</sup> The ‘instant’ performs this function precisely through its ability to liberate

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<sup>7</sup> G.E. Lessing *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). While Lessing’s theory references both the need to elevate the affective dimension and range of readerly effects intrinsic to the visual arts, its visual conservatism also expresses disgust at the idea of the pornographic potential that the visual is heir to in terms of its capacity to show ‘too much’, crowding out of the imagination through over-exposure. See also Dorothea von Mücke, “The Powers of Horror and the Magic of Euphemism in Lessing’s ‘Laocoön’ and ‘How the Ancients Represented Death’ ” *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century* ed. Veronica Kelly and Dorothea Von Mücke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 163-179.

<sup>8</sup> See Helen Groth, *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) for an account of how Victorian poetry, in particular, can be read as involved in giving literary form to this idea of the “arrested moment”(7).

<sup>9</sup> See Crary, “Unbinding Vision”, for the idea of technologically produced moments of synthesis and coherence amidst the increasing fragmentation in the nineteenth century. See also Jennifer Green-Lewis, “Not Fading Away: Photography in the Age of Oblivion” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22 (2001) 559-585. Green-Lewis in a similar vein argues that “the stasis of photography’s absolute present represented a kind of respite” from “incomprehensible immensity” of geological time that the Victorians had to contend with. Helen Groth in *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia* makes the parallel case when she argues that

itself from the confines of time and to transgress the very condition of its momentariness. The instant, thus culled, can potentially bleed into the larger continuum of time and space, infecting the very substance of ordered sequential time.

Early photographic practice offers a material instantiation of this concept of the instant conceived in elastic terms by virtue of the long exposure times needed to take photographs.<sup>10</sup> Holding a pose before a camera, often through mechanical aids like head clamps, knee braces and the eye-rest, underscores the connection between the photograph and the extractability and elasticity of the ‘instant’. For Henry David Thoreau it is this capacity of the camera to seize the right instant that endows it with its powers of penetration, preventing the photographic image from being a mere recorder of outward form. Writing in 1841, Thoreau contends that as in the case of sympathy, the “...instant of communion is when, for the least point in time, we cease to oscillate, and coincide in rest by as fine a point as a star pierces a firmament.”<sup>11</sup> In his 1856 treatise on the stereoscope David Brewster, similarly, sees the camera as capable of collapsing time and space into the visual instant and describes photography as a technique where “[t]he truths of nature are fixed at one instant of time...The incidents of time and the forms of space are thus simultaneously recorded.”<sup>12</sup> Almost a century later the celebrated photographer

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“to fix a moment, a famous face or favorite literary scene, to arrest time, in effect, in the face of the relentless pace of history, would become an increasingly seductive prospect in an era when advances in transport and communication were pressing against the limits of what the mind could take in at a glance” (18). See also Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) for the idea of imaginary visual omnipotence produced by new visual technologies like the panorama and the diorama.

<sup>10</sup> In the first decade after the birth of photography exposure times were generally long. Daguerreotypes could take anywhere between fifteen and thirty minutes. It was with the introduction of the wet collodion process in 1851 that exposure times were gradually reduced to a few seconds.

<sup>11</sup> Qt. in Trachtenberg, 22.

Henry Cartier-Bresson makes a similar claim when in a 1952 essay called “The Decisive Moment” he writes, “we work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.”<sup>13</sup> Although most aspects of photographic practice could be learnt, as evidenced by the multitude of photographic manuals published in the nineteenth century, there was a fair degree of consensus on the fact that to discern “the precise and transitory instant” and to decide on exactly how long to hold that moment was primarily an aesthetic choice.<sup>14</sup> An 1887 photography manual notes that the ability to discern just how long one must ‘hold’ the moment of exposure was purely a matter of intuition: “Exposure is largely a matter of inspiration, of feeling. There is no royal road to its attainment. You must learn how, just as you must acquire musical excellence or master a language.”<sup>15</sup> A number of photographers, however, embraced this potential in photography to capture the fleeting and instantaneous and chose to focus on “those moments when time appeared to stand still”, or when the instant could be grasped in all its contingent richness.<sup>16</sup> Nineteenth century attempts to capture motion—most

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<sup>12</sup> David Brewster, *The Stereoscope: Its History, Theory and Construction* (London: John Murray, 1856), 179.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographs*, trans. Diana C. Stoll (New York: Aperture, 1999), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Edward L. Wilson, *Wilson's Quarter Century of Photography: A collection of Hints on Practical Photography Which Form a Complete Text-Book of the Art* (New York: Published by Edward L. Wilson, 1887) 225. See also Cartier-Bresson who in “The Decisive Moment” writes, “Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move” (384).

<sup>16</sup> See Ian Jeffrey's account of Nadar and Henry Peach Robinson as two nineteenth-century examples of photographers who embraced the instantaneity of photography and made it their chief artistic credo. 45.



notably Muybridge's experiments with photography and movement—paradoxically re-affirmed the fact that movement could only be suggested through photographic images of discrete, discontinuous instants.<sup>17</sup> The concept of the photographic instant also supported the idea that the camera could assist in criminal investigations by seizing and making a permanent record of the instant of transgression—a belief that taken to its limit generated the idea of the optogramme, which posits that the retina of the dead retains a frozen image of the final visual instant witnessed.<sup>18</sup>

The photographic record that congeals one instant of time however, straddles a dialectical tension between the fleeting and insubstantial moment captured by the camera and the larger claim that this moment can be indefinitely dilated to cast its shadow over a wide swathe of time. At one level the photograph can only claim to be a relatively unmediated record of any one instant but often spills over semantically to stand in for truths that tie in a variety of moments. The photograph is wedded to the extreme particularity of the moment that it visually disengages from a longer duration of time and therefore can only base its representational claims on this thin slice that it 'cuts' from the world. At the same time, it attempts to compress into this one instant a semantic payload that seems inversely proportional to its instantaneity. This conflict between the

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<sup>17</sup> See Leo Charney "In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity" in *Cinema and the Invention of Modernity* ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1995) 279-296.

<sup>18</sup> For a fascinating discussion of the optogramme see Tom Gunning "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography Detectives, and Early Cinema" in *Cinema and the Invention of Modernity*, 15-45.

photographic ‘instant’ and its capacity for distension has been frequently noted.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Benjamin describing this potential in the photographic image writes:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of the long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may re-discover it.<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand the automatic character of photographic production draws attention to the fact that the camera is formally blind to ‘special’ moments. On the other hand, it invokes the idea of the ‘pregnant moment’ that enables the isolation of a moment of prophetic clarity to disrupt the flow of empty, homogeneous time by enabling the ‘stretching’ of a single moment in its intended range of effects over a wide expanse of time.

The photograph, therefore, both attenuates and intensifies the meaning of a visual image. On the one hand, “...photographic authority is a sign for the loss or absence of trans-historical meaning. What one knows about the photograph is merely that its subject was once before the lens. Being trivially true, the photograph cannot be false.”<sup>21</sup> Since the ‘trivial truths’ are evacuated of the idea of artistic control, the photographic image can also be perceived as being “weak in intentionality.”<sup>22</sup> Since the photograph is “predicated

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<sup>19</sup> See John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) for a memorable articulation of this theme.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 512.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *Photography and its Critics: A Cultural History, 1839-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Berger 90.

on its relation to nature before it is mediated by a code of legibility”<sup>23</sup> there is a semantic vacuum that inheres in all photographic images. Commenting on this aspect of the photograph Berger writes: “All photographs are ambiguous. All photographs have been taken out of a continuity ... Discontinuity always produces ambiguity.... An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.”<sup>24</sup> This latter process is usually accomplished through its assimilation into narrative by a variety of textual appropriations, the paradigmatic example of which is its ‘arrest’ by the accompanying ‘caption’.<sup>25</sup>

However, not all photographs are marked by such “narrative poverty”.<sup>26</sup> The “single constitutive choice of a photographer” that produces the “shock of discontinuity” for Berger does not necessarily place all photographs at an equal disadvantage.<sup>27</sup> Some photographs, that include for Berger both expressive and private photographs, succeed in loading the ‘instant’ with an extraordinarily rich bundle of traces of past moments. This power to articulate an instant that marks a dialectical compression of its own history and the corresponding latencies that inhere in that moment makes the photograph uniquely capable of suggesting “another way of telling”:

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<sup>23</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Berger, 91, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Not co-incidentally the word ‘caption’ derives from the Latin word *captio* signifying “seizure” or “capture”. *The New Collins Concise Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Collins, 1982) 164.

<sup>26</sup> The phrase is from Szarkowski. See also Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library*, 2..

<sup>27</sup> Berger 119, 86.

the discontinuity which is the result of the photographic cut is no longer destructive ... Through their specific coherence at a given instant, they articulate a set of *correspondences* which provoke in the viewer a recognition of some past experience ... A photograph which achieves expressiveness thus works dialectically: it preserves the particularity of the event recorded, and it chooses an instant when the correspondences of those particular experiences articulate a general idea.<sup>28</sup>

For Berger, therefore, the very immunity from narrative, which results from the photographic 'cut' in the temporal register, allows the photograph a special kind of cognitive access: "Yet the very same discontinuity, by preserving an instantaneous set of appearances, allows us to read across them and find a synchronic coherence. A coherence which, instead of narrating, instigates ideas."<sup>29</sup> The photograph as a visual record of an event bears an ambiguous relationship to history since it both feeds the archival appetite of the historian and at the same time has the capacity to "look across history towards that which was outside time [and]...under certain circumstances, can be used in order to break the monopoly which history has over time."<sup>30</sup>

The visual image in the magic-picture tradition allegorizes such a poetics of the instant. By drawing upon such a poetics, magic-picture stories enact the literal and metaphorical consequences of allowing the visual instant to cast an anamorphic shadow over the rest of the narrative. They do so primarily through staging the chronological disjunction that the visual image produces in the narrative. The paintings, photographs

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<sup>28</sup> Berger 122.

<sup>29</sup> Berger 128.

<sup>30</sup> Berger, 109. See also Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Benjamin, describing the task of "brush[ing] history against the grain", writes thus: "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up only at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again". Such moments, according to Benjamin, "in which time stands still and has come to a stop" need to be "blasted out of the continuum of history" in order for them radicalize the present (255, 257).

and other visual artifacts that magic-picture stories focus on frequently disrupt temporal continuities and boundaries and in doing so literalize the capacity of the ‘photographic instant’ to unbind the co-ordinates of narrative time. The perceptual crisis that these images produce in the text most often center on the capacity of these images to escape their temporal immobility in order not just to prefigure events that are yet to transpire, but also to chafe against the boundaries of the instant that they visualize in order to render such boundaries porous and fragile.

This is accomplished through a variety of means, but perhaps the most common strategy used in this regard is the unnatural projection of latent meanings that lie unrealized in the visual instant onto the narrative, by having such latencies disrupt the otherwise ordered flow of time. Such disruption becomes the sign for the elasticity of the instant in these texts where the image stages just such a dialectic between congealment and flow. This often produces an inversion of the relationship between the narrative and the visual images they embed since the narratives provide the occasion that permits the visual image to actualize their latencies—so powerful is the narrative force that lies coiled in the image that it hastens the playing out of the narrative.

This process parallels the temporal *delay* that resides in the heart of nineteenth-century photographic technology, which disconnects the moment being captured from its appearance as a developed image. Stanley Cavell describing this delay writes, “[Y]ou cannot know what you have made the camera do, what is revealed to it, until its results have appeared.” This leads to what he describes as a “metaphysical wait between exposure and exhibition”, a temporal blind spot that produces an “internal opacity” in all

photographs.<sup>31</sup> Such an account of the photograph casts an interesting light on a similar semantic intractability that inheres in the visual images that populate the magic-picture tradition. These visual images are often marked by ‘undeveloped’ latencies that over the course of the narrative achieve expression in a manner that interrupts the flow of narrative time.

A fairly typical example of this is represented by W.H. Pollock’s novella “The Picture’s Secret” (1883) in which the relationship between the visual instant and its re-enactment provide the temporal frame for the action.<sup>32</sup> Here the painting in Lord Falcon’s ancestral home represents a dark event in the past that involved the murder of a man suspected of a clandestine relationship with the wife of a seventeenth century ancestor of Lord Falcon. The picture depicts a moment after the violence has been committed in which Lord Falcon’s ancestor stands with blood-stained sword drawn while the mortally wounded lover looks at Lord Falcon’s wife with inexplicable horror. The wife is represented in the picture as bearing an expression that defies interpretation: “...and on her face is an expression difficult to describe, so much is there in it of horror, so much also of fierce joy”(101).

The specific instant frozen into immobility by the picture from the larger historical event in the seventeenth century is so powerful that its temporal effects are reputed not only to cause several supernatural occurrences in the vicinity of the picture but also cast a shadow over the contemporary sequence of events that the text unfolds. The text narrates

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<sup>31</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> W.H. Pollock “The Picture’s Secret” in *The Pictures Secret with An Episode in the Life of Mr. Latimer* Walter Herries Pollock (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984). Hereafter cited in text.

the story of the present-day descendant of Lord Falcon who, along with his new bride Lilith von Waldheim, begins to live in Falcontree Hall, where the picture is housed. At one level the picture bears silent witness to the gradual deterioration of the relationship between Lord Falcon and Lilith—a process hastened by the entry of Lord Falcon’s friend Arthur Vane who begins a clandestine relationship with the wife. But the picture also becomes the unconscious point of reference towards which the narrative is drawn. Like a slow moving pageant the story progresses until it pauses at a moment exactly parallel to that which was originally captured by the picture. In the climactic scene, Lord Falcon stabs Arthur Vane, who in his dying moments is said to look towards Lilith with the same expression of horror that was evidenced in the picture. The enigma of appearances is dispelled and the look on Lilith’s face, paralleling the expression of the woman in the picture, is described as one of a “tigerish joy and a ruthless craving for destruction” (215). Lord Falcon declares, “Ah! ...the picture is complete at last”, spelling out the implicit trajectory that the narrative is made to describe from the start (215).

The secret of the picture turns out to be its ability to compel a re-enactment of that which it represents.<sup>33</sup> The reproductive power of the image seems to derive from its power to abstract the essence of the narrative into a visual instant that appears to be located outside the temporal logic of the tale. The visual instant thus detached compels the narrative into a re-iterative loop—time is no longer chronological and narrative progression is deceptive, as the story moves forward only to implode back into its static visual center. The fact that the narrative serves primarily to disambiguate the

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<sup>33</sup> Other examples of stories that similarly center around portraits that seem to compel the narrative to actualize moments arrested within them are Hawthorne’s “The Prophetic Pictures” (See Appendix) and Margaret Oliphant’s “The Portrait” (See Appendix).

interpretative dissonance within the picture also produces a temporal delay in our ability to ‘read’ the picture. That is, the meaning of the picture only becomes clear when the narrative unfolds far enough in time to reach a ‘still point’ that once again achieves a pictorial quality—this time round, rendering legible the relay of looks within the painting. This time-lag in our comprehension of the full import of the picture highlights the power of the visual instant by demonstrating how the synchronic unity of the visual image can only be actualized through its translation into the diachronic register of narrative time. The visual image at the heart of “The Picture’s Secret” achieves full prophetic legibility only through its temporal effects.

Another version of this process is instantiated in the short story “The Portrait’s Warning” (1867) by H. Saville Clark.<sup>34</sup> Here the protagonist Fredrick Raymond, a frequent visitor to the Mainwaring household, who is in love with the young Miss Ellen Mainwaring, begins to feel discomfited by the portrait of Mr. Mainwaring—Ellen’s father—who has “an artistic but rather expensive mania for pictures” (429). Fredrick describing his aversion to portraits, writes, “I don’t like a man having a portrait of himself in his room, especially if it is well painted and is a good likeness. It always gives me an uncomfortable ghostly feeling, as if he had his *double* in the house, silently watching people from the canvas” (429). His vague uneasiness is concretized when one day he sees the portrait transformed under his very gaze to reveal a bloodied face “severely battered and bruised” (431). The fearsome nature of the facial injury, visible to no one but Fredrick, turns out to be a premonition of an actual accident that Mr. Mainwaring suffers soon afterwards. The portrait’s capacity to forecast events is

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<sup>34</sup> H. Saville Clark “The Portrait’s Warning” *Belgravia* 4 (1868): 429-437. Hereafter cited in text.



manifested once again, but this time, despite his best efforts, Fredrick is unable to save Mr. Mainwaring who dies in a train accident. This produces a rift between the young lovers, since Ellen Mainwaring traumatized by the death of her father, refuses to marry Fredrick. After a hiatus of three years when Fredrick returns to London, a chance meeting with Ellen results in a rapprochement between the two and they get married. Soon afterwards the magic- portrait is destroyed when “it fell down striking a table in its descent, the face of the picture...utterly destroyed” (437). Fredrick, throughout the story, is the only viewer who has the eyes to read the portent but is powerless to alter the course of events.

“The Portrait’s Warning” is a good example of a text that uses the picture as a mobile visual surface that is able to anticipate moments in the future and thus worry the line separating the omniscience of the narrator from the unfolding of the plot over time.<sup>35</sup>

The two most compelling episodes in the text are visually enacted on the surface of the portrait prior to their articulation in time. The chronological unfolding of events, therefore, ‘lags’ behind our anticipation of them and the tension between these twin temporalities—one following the ‘natural’ course of chronological time and the other representing a powerfully proleptic mode that is able to offer a prognosis of the future from within the confines of the present — propels the narrative forward. Significantly the narrative exhausts itself at exactly the moment when the portrait is withdrawn from the story, suggesting the generative role that the portrait plays in the text.

Fredrick’s discomfort when looking at the portrait, even before the portrait displays its prophetic qualities, is noteworthy here. In this case the visual image is not just a surface

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<sup>35</sup> A good example of a story that similarly features a portrait that offers a visual forecast of the future is “The Shadow of a Shade” (1869) by Tom Hood. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also features a portrait that both mirrors and precipitates the action of the novel.

but is able to participate in a relay of looks that suggests that it contains an inside capable of emanating visual marks from within. The portrait can simultaneously serve as “an excellent likeness” and depart from the canons of resemblance to anticipate the traumatic events of the future (432). What disconcerts Frederick in particular, however, is the sense of being ‘watched’ by the portrait: “I speak to the man and then find myself looking up at the portrait for an answer; or if a thought unfavorable to him crosses my mind for an instant, I always have an uncomfortable feeling that the portrait will know of it” (430). For Fredrick, being under the surveillance of the portrait produces the uncanny feeling of being watched by an inanimate visual surface that has the power to look back. Paradoxically it is the portrait’s excellence as a likeness— its irreducible particularity as a ‘double’ of the subject—that enables it to return the gaze and visualize future events. In this latter capacity it becomes a figure for a special kind of omniscience—one that parallels and competes with that of the narrator himself. As a figure of omniscience the magic picture bifurcates the narrative authority within the text. Having insight into the future and more generally being able to represent a higher consciousness that floats above the logic of the narrative, the magic picture introduces into the text a double of the narrator itself.

The fundamentally circumscribed nature of authorial control in photographic production—where the range of modulations that the photographer can institute are strictly speaking prior to and distinct from the photographic instant where light from the object falls on a sensitive surface—makes the photograph specially apposite for such a meditation on the idea of authorial intentionality. Since a photograph cannot be planned

or programmed to achieve its effects beyond a point there is a fortuitousness that shapes its destiny.

A number of nineteenth century accounts of photography remark on the ‘incidentals’ that get recorded due to photography’s fidelity to minute detail.<sup>36</sup> Many such details appear to have slipped into the frame of the photograph unbeknownst—a quality that endows the photographic image with its evidentiary power.

Barthes’ well known conceptualization of the photographic *punctum*—the arresting detail or aspect of a photograph that “pricks” or “wounds” the viewer—is similarly a quality that he deems resistant to authorial intention. For Barthes it is the *punctum* that redeems the image from being all *studium*—the “body of information” that a particular photograph references. The *punctum* represents that built-in element of contingency that inheres in the photographic medium. Its very existence is based, as Barthes argues, on that which the photographer “could not *not* photograph”.<sup>37</sup>

The lack of authorial control that distinguishes the photograph from painting, therefore paradoxically bestows on it a new kind of ontological guarantee—the visual sign of that guarantee being the refractory ‘detail’ that creeps into the photograph. As nineteenth-century portrait photography amply demonstrates, the sheer numerical excess of such photographs (as evidenced in genres like the *cartes de visite*, for example) draws its sustenance partly from the endlessly re-vitalizing potential offered by the photograph’s capacity to both conform to visual ‘types’ and to introduce irreducibly

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<sup>36</sup> See Beaumont Newhall, Ed. *Photography: Essays and Images Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980) for an interesting account of incidentals. See also Ian Jeffrey, *Photography: A Concise History*, 12-14

<sup>37</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 47.

individuating ‘marks’ that authenticate the photograph’s freedom from the sterile typologies of visual genres and stereotypes. As Stephen Bann argues, “in each case, it is the excess of unknowable physiognomy over the signs of status, the self-manifestation of the body refusing to be read, that constitutes the special effect of authenticity”.<sup>38</sup>

In a number of the magic-picture stories under consideration here, the idea of the *punctum*—the capacity of a visual image to signify in ways that trespass beyond the intentional field of an artist by virtue of ‘stowaway’ details—plays a central heuristic role. It represents the ‘wound’ or ‘prick’ that arrests the reader and communicates to him from a place that seems to exist despite the author. The magic-picture tradition by therefore thematizing the problem of authorial control that photography generates not only articulates a critique of narrative omniscience but also exacerbates the tensions between texts and images in nineteenth-century fiction.

“The Mezzotint”, M. R. James’ short story published in 1904, is a good example of a text that uses the visual image as a parallel narrative authority within the text.<sup>39</sup> In this story Mr. Williams, a curator, having recently acquired a mezzotint on behalf of the museum he works for, begins to notice an unusual mark on the foreground of the mezzotint.<sup>40</sup> A large manor house is depicted in the background of the mezzotint and in front a large open space. The mark—“hardly more than a black dot on the extreme edge

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<sup>38</sup>Stephen Bann, “Erased Physiognomy: Theodore Gericault, Paul Strand and Garry Winogrand” in *The Portrait in Photography*, ed. Graham Clarke (London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 45.

<sup>39</sup> “The Mezzotint” in M.R. James *Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories* (Oxford: OUP, 1998)14-25. Hereafter cited in text.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Benjamin’s distinction between ‘signs’ and ‘marks’ in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Vol. I 1913-1926* ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings [Cambridge, Mass. : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996; 2002] 83-86. ‘Marks’ for Benjamin unlike signs appear from within and usually on living bodies.

of the engraving”—appears like “the head of a man or woman, a good deal muffled up, the back turned to the spectator, and looking towards the house” (17).

Williams very soon realizes, much to his consternation, that the figure that initially appeared like an unaccountable mark or blur on the surface of the mezzotint begins to change shape and position and soon conveys the idea of a man or ghost stealthily moving towards the house. Hurried enquires reveal the history of the manor house to be one which witnessed the ghastly kidnapping and murder of young boy, the last male heir of the family that owned the manor and the surrounding estate. This discovery is made after the ghostly figure is seen carrying the child away from the manor and then disappearing from the surface of the image.

Here, as in the Pollock story, the image begins to re-enact an earlier crime. However, rather than forming the main subject of the picture, it appears initially like a puzzling detail that seems to exist despite the intentional field that organizes the visual surface of the mezzotint. This detail contains an autonomous capacity to signify and appears to introduce into the immobile surface of the image an element of motility thanks to which the mezzotint becomes a screen that depicts movement.

The sequence of events unfolding on the mezzotint has already occurred in real time but now, in a manner that parallels the stealth of the figure of the kidnapper, has crept into the space of the visual rendering it both static and dynamic at the same time. Space and time converge on the mezzotint which now wields a narrative authority that seems to occupy a discreet ontology that marks itself off from that of the narrator who merely serves as the guarantor who authenticates the story that plays itself out on the mezzotint. The gruesome history of the manor house is re-confirmed retrospectively in a manner that

makes the narrative appear to play an auxiliary function—the visual instant in this case appears to carry within it the capacity to embody a temporal sequence through the refractory detail that creeps into the frame of the image.<sup>41</sup>

In all three magic-picture stories discussed above, the visual instant casts a shadow over the larger narrative, thereby compelling the text to retroactively complete events that are depicted on the surface of the visual image. The ‘play’ between the text and the image acquires a specific character in these stories and it appears to be the case that the instant depicted in the visual images projects itself outward only to draw in the text into its visual condition. The image, in other words, exerts a centripetal force that drags the text into itself—the story coming to an end at the precise moment that the image completes this task and returns to a condition of normalcy.

The conceptual tension between texts and images with regard to the idea of the arrested visual moment get exacerbated in these texts. They test as well as transgress the boundaries that distinguish images from texts, but eventually the gravitational pull of the images are balanced by that fact that these images exist in linguistic articulation and the ensuing dialectic between texts and images results in a dilution of limits that cuts both ways—visual images spill over beyond their frozen temporalities while the text starts congealing into an image.

### **The Magic of Mechanical Images**

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<sup>41</sup> The intractable detail within the visual image that eludes incorporation into the visual field of the image is most often the eyes of the person depicted in portrait. “The Picture on the Wall” by Katherine Tynan and “The Ebony Frame” by Edith Nesbit are good examples of such magic picture stories. (See Appendix).

The encounter between text and images embodied in magic-picture tradition is underwritten by the persistent logic that associated magic with visual images in the nineteenth century—a connection that gets re-iterated across many different cultural registers and settings ranging from spirit photography to the phantasmagoric productions of the magic-lantern. The perception of the ‘magical’ nature of the daguerreotype and later that of the photographic image dates at least as far back as 1839, the year that Daguerre’s invention was announced. Writing in 1839, Fox Talbot, the pioneering English photographer described the phenomenon of what he then called “photogenic drawing” as “partak[ing] of the character of the *marvelous*.” For Fox Talbot, thanks to this new invention, “a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our ‘*natural magic*’ and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy.”<sup>42</sup> There were numerous instances of such a conflation of magic and photography in the nineteenth century, but rather than rehearse that topic here I want to place this conflation against the larger disenchantment attendant upon the birth of mechanically produced visual images.

The magic-picture tradition—very much part of the larger tendency to draw attention to the ‘enchanted’ nature of visual image—must be placed against the fundamental demystification brought about by the birth of the machinic image. This latter event is most clearly exemplified by the birth of photography, a development that having freed the subject from the scene of visual production leaves vacant a conceptual space that generates a crisis regarding the possible ways to close this gap between the ‘intentional’ image and the machinic image. My previous chapter described how this automatic

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<sup>42</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing” (1839) in *Photography in Print*.

character of photographic production threatened to jeopardize notions of authorship and artistic control and explored two instances—one legal and the other literary—in which this threat is articulated and managed with varying degrees of success.

The idea of the ‘magic picture’ represents another important nineteenth-century cultural response to the mechanically produced visual image. Speculating on the cultural logic that motivated photography’s invention stories Marien writes:

By presenting the invention of photography in the age-old terms of magic, these stories declare that there is no change in change...These stories attempt to prove that behind or beneath change, the old, still world of magic and metaphysical wonder continued to hum along...[and] pitch mystery, magic, and alchemy against banal technological accounts of photography’s advent.<sup>43</sup>

Magic is deployed as a throwback to a past that is invoked in order to diminish the shock of technological change and produce an illusion of continuity. Furthermore, magic counters the effects of banality through re-inserting into mechanically produced images the possibility of unsuspected depths—in a sense, re-enchanting images by redeeming them from the disenchantment of mechanical production.

However, as Marien’s work suggests, the re-mystification of images cannot be understood merely as a strategic use of the past to enable the smooth transition to a new visual economy, or even as a moment of resistance to technology through retrogression. To argue in these terms is to tend towards a view that sees culture as merely a rejoinder to a technological base that always has priority over and precedes such cultural expression.

Magic-picture stories, as I demonstrate below, are less reactive in nature and more directly engaged in both mediating the reception of mechanical images and in articulating

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<sup>43</sup> Marien, 54. See also Batchen for photography’s invention stories.



the nascent possibilities that dwell in them.<sup>44</sup> Just as the scientific use of photography, in Jennifer Tucker's analysis, is not a self-evident outcome but "the product of social efforts to establish through new theatres of persuasion what counted as objective and subjective, credible and ridiculous", the magic-picture stories in my analysis are similarly engaged in shifting and redrawing the conceptual boundaries of the visual image.<sup>45</sup> The wayward images of the magic-picture tradition are clearly an index of the provisional and unstable status of visual images in the nineteenth century, but also perform a difficult balancing act between representing photographic images as both full of mystery and magic, as well as being fundamentally unmediated and 'soul-less'.

Benjamin, in his well-known essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" argues that the denudation of the aura attendant upon the birth of photography was, similarly, a process that was far from univocal. In charting the transition from an age that endowed images with a "cult value" to that which re-invests images with "exhibition value" through the radical de-mystification of the auratic image, Benjamin writes:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But the cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge of the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The French novel *Giphantie* (1760) by Tiphaigne De La Roche is considered to be the first fictional articulation of the photographic process, almost eighty years prior to the formal announcement of photography's invention.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Tucker *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) 234.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 225, 226.

The auratic nature of ‘early photography’ attests to the fact that it is not photography *per se* but rather it’s later development and incorporation into more formulaic and mechanical economies of the production and circulation that denudes the image of its aura.<sup>47</sup> This is a crucial acknowledgement, since to grant the imbrication of magical properties and secular disenchantment is to recognize that the magic-picture tradition and other cultural responses to nineteenth-century visual technologies that sought to re-invest the mechanical image with auratic powers were not engaged in an anachronistic or nostalgic project to re-mystify images. The magical and banal natures of images co-exist within the frame of the early photograph.<sup>48</sup>

It is this co-implication of the magical or enchanted image, and the mechanical and therefore unmediated image that characterizes a number of the images of the magic-picture tradition. The perceived lack of control over the process of generating photographic images endowed the photograph with a special status that hastened its appropriation, both into discourses like magic and the occult sciences as well as more positivistic endeavors like criminology, where its veridical qualities were invoked to authorize identity or serve as evidence. The magic-picture tradition thrived on the threshold between these two radically different energies—one, stressing the natural affinity between the ‘ghostly’ productions of photography and the occult, and the other bestowing on the photographic image an almost oracular authority that underscored its indexical connectedness with identity and presence. The productive friction between

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<sup>47</sup>See Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, 1927-1934 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999)

<sup>48</sup> A forceful expression of this coexistence is the controversy surrounding spirit photography, which often tried to legitimize its ‘magical’ productions by claiming for itself the air of scientific verifiability. See Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed*, 65-125.

these contradictory articulations of the photographic image enables a doubleness<sup>49</sup> that exactly parallels that of the images in the magic-picture tradition.

Although a number of tales listed in the appendix would bear out such a thesis about the doubleness in the magic-picture stories, a particularly striking example is the 1852 short story called “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes.”<sup>50</sup> Here the narrator and his soon-to-be bride, Elora, visit the studio of Professor Arioivistus Dunkelheim who claims to have improved on the daguerreotype process to the extent that renders the mere “fixing of the reflection...a trifle” (353). Unaware of the nature and extent of the professor’s evil genius, they pose for the professor in front of “two plates of highly polished steel” that mirror their own images back to them (354). After what appears to be a remarkably brief but successful exposure, which the professor requires them to repeat in order to take another copy, they are given the plates bearing their images with the caveat that they are not to view them before twelve hours have elapsed.

The same evening, the narrator, this time alone in his apartment, on viewing the finished images realizes to his great amazement that the daguerreotypes are in fact not, as he expected, images frozen in time but rather are mobile, living images that provide a direct visual record of their subjects in real time. With his gaze transfixed on the image of his beloved as she sleeps, he notes how the magical surface of the daguerreotype is able to picture even the minute changes of expression that flicker across her face that “...had

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<sup>49</sup>See Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book* (Cambridge:MIT Press,1998) for an interesting account of photographic doubleness vis-a-vis its indexical and iconic properties and its relationship both inductive and deductive logic.

<sup>50</sup> “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” *The Photographic Art-Journal* 3 (1852): 353-359. Hereafter cited in text.  
See also Alan Trachtenberg, “Photography: The Emergence of a Keyword” in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* Ed. Martha A. Sandweiss (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1991) 25.

become the index of her dreams” (355). The rapturous lover, looking at the living image of Elora, is not unaware of the sexual nature of his gaze and muses, “How superior to the cold ghastly, shadowy immobility of the mere daguerreotype, were these living portraits of Dunkelheim’s” (355).

However his evident delight is short-lived as he soon recalls that the Professor had made two pairs of magic images. The horrible recognition that the Professor now has it in his power to observe them both takes on a sinister quality when he realizes that the image of Elora’s sleeping form is providing pleasure to another pair of eyes besides his own. To have his own sexualized gaze mirrored back to him, this time rendered both unnatural and grotesque in the form of Dunkelheim, naturally makes him recoil from his own visual pleasures and he resolves to obtain the copies of the images from the professor at any cost.<sup>51</sup> The narrator’s tortured reflections on his plight indicate, on the one hand, that the “magnetic daguerreotypes” have violently torn the veil that previously screened the ‘private’ world of the lovers from the invasive public gaze: “A loathsome and accursed and accursed fantasy! to live forever in the presence of such a man as Dunkelheim, to be forever subject to an excruciating moral espionage! to be denied for life, the security and luxury of privacy! to be haunted, in solitude, by an unseen tormentor!” (355). But in raging conflict with such considerations is the narrator’s inability to tear his eyes away from image of the reclining Elora: “But an irresistible fascination withheld me, and I continued to gaze and gaze with an intense and burning ardor that threatened to disorder my intelligence” (355).

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<sup>51</sup> The polished surfaces of daguerreotypes were often noted to have mirror-like qualities that reflected back the image of the viewer when the optical focus was shifted to the surface of the plate. See Alan Trachtenberg, 23.

On learning the truth about the images from the narrator the next morning, Elora declares that their marriage would have to be put off until the duplicate images are retrieved—thereby underscoring the loss of her power to control access to her own body and sexuality which in her mind renders her unfit for marriage. Later, after an unsuccessful attempt to get back the illegitimate copies of their daguerreotypes from the professor, Elora relents and the couple gets married. However, the constant awareness of being watched by the lascivious eyes of Dunkelheim prevents the consummation of the marriage: “But a spectre haunted us—an invisible basilisk withered our delights—an unseen hand dropped bitterness into our cup of ecstasy” (358). A second attempt to retrieve the images from Dunkelheim results in the narrator murdering the professor and then successfully obtaining the sought after “plates of metal which had been the cause of so much suffering, and so fearful a catastrophe” (359). Finally, even after having their privacy finally restored to them the couple does not succeed in completely ridding themselves of the alien gaze that blighted their marriage: “But still at times, the phantom of the murdered Professor, with cold green eyes, will haunt our fancies”(359).

In “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” the magical nature of Professor Dunkelheim’s improvements on the daguerreotype is alleged to arise out of the manipulation of the subtle magnetic properties obtaining between his subjects and the polished metal plates that enable the production of the “living spectrum” of the sitter (357). It is this piece of fiction that introduces the element of magic into Dunkelheim’s images—an element that has to be purged to enable the narrator and Elora to lead relatively normal lives again. The daguerreotype is imagined as inherently prone to such unsavory technological

inducements by the likes of Dunkelheim who merely serves to render visible a range of anxieties that the daguerreotype, and later the photograph, produced.

The magical properties of the daguerreotype in this story provide an interesting commentary on a number of cognate themes that organized the field of visual production in the two decades after Daguerre announced his invention. But perhaps the most pertinent one foregrounded by the story is the question of whether or not photography generated an anxiety about the loss of control over visual images. Both daguerreotypes and photographs produce authentic visual records of the individual, but unlike daguerreotypes which are unique visual artifacts that cannot be reproduced, photographic negatives made paper prints easy to reproduce. The idea that to be thus represented in a medium that has the capacity to be multiplied in a way that might enable the secession of copies from its original referents posed a number of questions in the nineteenth century regarding the question of ownership and property in photographs.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly however, in this story the question is posed not through the idea of photographic reproducibility but through the presumed developments in the daguerreotype that are imagined to have evolved to a point where it presents a full blown crisis regarding the legitimacy of permitting the public circulation of private images. This projection of the crisis back onto daguerreotypes (although by 1852, at the time the story was published, the invention of the collodion or wet-plate process made photography far more efficient in producing copies) refracts the anxieties generated by photography to a prior technological moment. By doing so the story is able to render magical the very idea of multiple reproductions to which fictional property it adds the idea of moving images that

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<sup>52</sup> I examine these questions in my previous chapter on photography and Anglo-American copyright law.

would seem to anticipate the pornographic potential of modern day spy-cams. It is through such a historical projection that the story generates the necessary traction, which allows the articulation of the problem of privacy and self-alienation.<sup>53</sup>

By formulating the crisis produced by the daguerreotype in terms of the unnatural tendencies that inhere in the technology, which in turn is vulnerable to the demonic energies of Professor Dunkelheim, the story succeeds in tapping into a much wider set of fears that the increasing popularity of the photograph appeared to conceal from view. However, by projecting these fears back onto the ‘magical’ properties of Dunkelheim’s daguerreotypes, the story frees itself from its contemporary moment in order to gesture towards questions that pertain to not just the 1850s but way into the future of mechanically produced images.

By coupling the power of mechanically generated visual representations with the imagined ‘improvements’ of Dunkelheim, the story stages the contest between the unmediated visual images of the daguerreotype and magical and demonic capabilities that lie unrealized in the technology. Such a contest can only be decided with the exorcism of the demonic Dunkelheim, whose death appears to restore the daguerreotype to a condition of normalcy. However even the redemption of the daguerreotype from its associations with magic is depicted as doomed to remain incomplete, and the uncanny persistence of the shadow cast by Dunkelheim over the married life of the young couple metaphorizes the shadow that magic casts over photography.

The co-existence of the mysterious and the mechanical as represented in “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” suggests also that such a co-existence is constitutive of the

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<sup>53</sup> For a reading of “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” as a story that explores the relationship between privacy and male heterosexual desire, see Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 15-19.

very nature of photographic image. Dunkelheim is not just the thorn in the flesh that must be removed before the couple can be restored to marital health, but is an index of how fragile and insecure the concept of ‘privacy’ had become even by the 1850’s.<sup>54</sup> The narrator’s relationship with Elora derives its own erotic charge from the terrible knowledge that Dunkelheim represents in the text—a knowledge that makes the murder of Dunkelheim an erotic ritual, a rite of passage into a sexuality that must learn to live in the shadow of the photographic image.

Such a reading prompts the counter-intuitive suggestion that perhaps “The Magnetic Daguerreotype” offers a poignant commentary on the qualitative difference between the daguerreotype and the photograph. Describing the difference between the daguerreotype and the photograph Trachtenberg, for instance, writes,

Although the daguerreian era has sometimes been described as a “primitive” moment in the history of photography, daguerreotypes were in fact more intricate physical artifacts than later photographs...The paper prints which succeeded the metal image in the 1850s lost those original daguerreian qualities of brilliance, vividness, and presence. Moreover, as a one of a kind image produced directly on the plate, without the mediation of the negative, the daguerreotype defied mass production; it possessed the aura of a unique thing. It was that uniqueness, the magical verisimilitude and mirror-like presence of an astonishingly new kind of image, that the word photography brought into common vocabulary.<sup>55</sup>

In such a reading the loss involved in the movement from daguerreotypes to photographs is one that dulls the sense of the magical and hastens the process of image-making into the world of mass production and commercial viability. Located at a roughly transitional moment between the two allied, though different, visual technologies, “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” can be seen as an attempt to reclaim some of the magic of

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<sup>54</sup> For an essay on the changing legal notion of privacy in the American context see Robert Mensel, “‘Kodakers Lying in Wait’: Amateur Photography and the Right of Privacy in New York, 1885-1915”, *American Quarterly* 43.1 (1991): 24-45.

<sup>55</sup> Trachtenberg, 20.



daguerreian images from the disenchantments that paper-based photographs produced. To argue thus would be to re-emphasize the ambivalence towards magic and photography—and Dunkelheim must be perceived as the very symbol of this ambivalence. The compelling fascination and horror that the ‘magnetic daguerreotypes’ hold for the narrator is both an index of what is right and wrong with magic. The exciting possibility of possessing images that represent “living spectrums” of their subjects does not go unnoticed by the narrator who muses thus on the professor’s daguerreian images: “Delicious thought! From the present moment to the hour of our nuptials, our parting would be nominal and not real. Spiritually united, we could hardly be said to be materially separated; since the magic mirrors would, by the medium of the most noble of the senses, render us forever present to one another” (355). Such exultations are of course tempered by the knowledge of how such “magic mirrors” are also capable of rendering the subject vulnerable to the transgressive gaze of strangers. Magic therefore insinuates itself into the very structural co-ordinates of the text, making it difficult to see “The Magnetic Daguerreotypes” as merely an attempt to recuperate photographic images from the baleful effects of magic.

The text brings to light the doubleness inherent in all photographic images that on the one hand are referent-dependant like no other previous form of visual representation and on the other are fundamentally detachable in terms of their ability to multiply and circulate.<sup>56</sup> This doubleness manifests itself in diverse ways in the magic-picture tradition, the most obvious of which is the tendency of the image to represent itself as

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<sup>56</sup> See Tom Gunning, “Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema” 12.

both surface and depth.<sup>57</sup> However, my immediate concern is not to demonstrate what Norman Bryson calls “the proscenic surface of the image” or the play between surface and depth in magic-picture stories, but to explore the implications of this doubleness in terms of its relation to the idea of the enchanted or magical picture.<sup>58</sup>

The idea of the photograph as an insubstantial surface is apparent in a number of early responses to photography. The metaphorical substitution of the photograph as a sort of ‘skin’ of the object that in keeping with the photograph’s indexical quality is perceived as literally “scale[d] off its surface” often led to the perception that photography failed to capture the “core.”<sup>59</sup> Some of the more strongly adverse reactions to photography in the nineteenth century excoriated it not just for encroaching into the domain of art, but also denounced its ‘soul-less’ quality. More than a century later, Barthes powerfully expresses this aspect of photography in his description of the photographic image as marked by an absence of depth: “I must therefore submit to this law: I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the Photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The photograph is *flat*, platitudinous, in the true sense of the word, that is what I must acknowledge.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> My previous chapter reads Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a text organized around the thematic tension between surfaces and depths.

<sup>58</sup> Norman Bryson *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983)171. Bryson’s seminal study offers an excellent heuristic distinction between two dimensions of the visual image that he describes in terms of the ‘gaze’ and the ‘glance’. This distinction has directly contributed to my understanding of the images of the magic-picture tradition. For Bryson’s definition of these terms see pages 94-96.

<sup>59</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph” in *Photography: Essays and Images: Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography* ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980) 60. The full quote reads, “We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their *skins*, and leave the carcasses of little worth”.

This perception of flatness or two-dimensionality associated with the photograph is often set off against the profound depths that photography conceals in terms of a whole range of subjective effects that it occasions in its viewers. Such a dichotomy between the objective surfaces of the photographic image that merely operate according to the laws of chemistry, and the inversely proportional affective dimension that appears to generate a wide gamut of visual pathologies in the subjects who consume these photographs has often been noted. In 1864 the Reverend H.J. Morton writing in the *Philadelphia Photographer* reveals this growing tension between the neutrality of the camera and the subjective dimension of human vision: “We have abundant ocular delusions, but the camera is never under any hallucination. Behind the most accurate human there is often a very prejudiced human mind, refracting its vision...But the camera’s eye of microscopic minuteness and exactness of vision has behind it a crystal plate that has no partiality.”<sup>61</sup> Here the very conception of the camera’s lens is based on its difference from the human eye that is marked by its fundamentally subjective character.

Heidegger argues in “The Age of the World Picture” that “the more extensively and the more effectually the world stands at man’s disposal as conquered, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively, i.e. importunately does the *subiectum* rise up...It is no wonder that humanism first arises where the world becomes picture.”<sup>62</sup> Building on this idea, a number of modern visual theorists demonstrate the

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<sup>60</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 106.

<sup>61</sup> Qt. in Alan Trachtenberg, “Photography: The Emergence of a Key Word,” 27.

<sup>62</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1977) 133

inverse relationship between the unmediated camera image and the heavily pathologized human eye.<sup>63</sup> Describing this relationship Nancy Armstrong writes,

Throughout the nineteenth century...optical science and aesthetics came to think of the eye as increasingly embedded in a highly individuated physical body subject to mood swings, flagging attentiveness, hallucinations, and a variety of outside pressures...In comparison with the eye, the modern optical apparatus seemed relatively neutral and impervious to such influences, as only a machine could be.<sup>64</sup>

This dichotomous understanding of the difference between the machinic image and the image perceived by the human eye yields a number of specific tensions in the visual field. A consequence of this dichotomy is the relationship that gets set up between the objective character of the photographic image and the distortions and subjective effects it produces in the eye of the human beholder, who projects his or her own subjective compulsions onto the photographic image. This renders the neat separation between mechanical images and retinal images an unstable fiction that constantly threatens to breach its boundaries.

A good example of such an intercourse between the objective character of photographs and their highly subjective effects on the individual is T.A. Janvier's "In Love With a Shadow" (1870).<sup>65</sup> Here the hero Richard Wentworth sets off on a quixotic pursuit to discover the real woman whose photograph was the basis for the picture on a casket containing a delicate vase of Eau de cologne. Richard, despite recognizing the

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<sup>63</sup> This position is now commonly associated with Jonathan Crary in his *Techniques of the Observer: Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990). See especially 67-96.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999) 76-77.

<sup>65</sup> T. A. Janvier, "In Love With a Shadow" *Lippincott's Magazine* 6 (1870): 518-531. Hereafter cited in text.

absurdity of his romantic obsession with the woman in the picture, is convinced that it “was *not* the shadow of a painting, and that somewhere the photograph had a living breathing reality” (520). With little more to guide him on his hunt besides the knowledge that the photograph was taken in France, he approaches an eccentric cousin, who being an amateur photographer, uses his formidable knowledge of photographic science to chalk out for Richard a plan for conducting his search amongst the community of photographers in France. Finally, after an arduous four month search all over France Richard discovers the identity of the woman, only to learn that she is engaged to be married to the very same cousin from whom he had sought advice before commencing the search. The cousin justifies this deception arguing that “the temptation for a little practical joke” was too compelling and that the pain and effort occasioned by it was more than balanced by the countervailing absurdity it produced (530). Richard is made painfully aware of “how absurd [a] figure he had cut in the matter” (530). The narrator further clarifies that Richard’s “love was only for a “Shadow” after all, and that the passion, though violent, was not so deep-seated as it would have been if the shadow had been a reality” (530).

What is of particular interest here is the profound ambivalence regarding the status of the photographic image. Richard’s entire quest is underwritten by the fact that the mechanical image always has a referent, by virtue of which the woman he imagines himself to be in love with has to have existed.

This certainty is further buttressed by the fact that the organized nature of photographic activity both among amateurs and professionals made it possible to record and track particular photographers and even photographs. Highly technical clues about

the identity of the photographer, including the fact that his use of “bichloride of nitrate of silver” determines his affiliation with a particular group of photographers, enable Richard finally to succeed in tracking him down (521). This is clearly a world where the individual and his or her image cannot be kept asunder for too long and the re-connecting of the two, even if the expedition involves crossing national boundaries, is distinctly within the realm of possibility. However, in stark contrast to this triumph of photographic detection is the text’s profound skepticism towards the ontological status of the photographic image. The photograph authenticates the existence of the woman it represents and this in itself offers an irresistible temptation for Richard. He infers that since the woman in the picture “was arrayed in the costume ordinarily worn by ladies of the present day,” the photograph is unlikely to have been that of a painting. Although, “[h]is ground for this assumption was very slight ... for a hopeful man this was quite sufficient” (520). For Richard it is the possibility of finding the subject of the photograph that ignites his desire and prompts him to set off on his quest: “When he had, on this slight proof, convinced himself on the being of the Reality, he became fired with the purpose of going in search of her, and, when found, marrying her right out of hand” (520). It is this tendency of the photographic image to inspire passions that seem imprudent and reckless, that the text appears to castigate. The sentiment of the story’s title, “In Love With a Shadow”, is reiterated throughout the text. For instance, the reader is reminded early on in the story that the picture on the casket is many removes away from the ‘real’ woman and therefore to conceive an affection for a ‘shadow’ is unreasonable and irrational: “An absurd thing even if the shadow had been a shadow of a flesh-and-blood woman; but the shadow of a picture!—the idea was preposterous” (520).

The picture thus becomes the site of an irresolvable tension—on the one hand it is the photographic nature of the image that gives Richard hope that he can track the subject appearing in the picture, on the other the futility of such a quest is writ large.

Photographs seem to allow a new regime of visual order where the image becomes an authentic record of identity, but at the same time such objectivity proves to be a chimera for Richard. The story's last lines give further evidence of this conceptual tension. Even after depicting Richard as acknowledging the outrageous nature of his passion and participating in the general merriment at the joke made at his expense, the text is not quite able to achieve closure and ends on a note rich in ambiguity: "After this of course any attempt at dignified sorrow was out of the question...Richard accepted his destiny" (531).

By leaving open the gap between the dual articulations of photography, "In Love With a Shadow", like a number of magic-picture stories, reflects a general uneasiness about the status of the photograph and marks the shift between the nature of image before and after the birth of mechanically produced images.

The images of the magic-picture tradition occupy a space that lies between the magical and the disenchanted. It is this generative space that permits these images to partake of the magical even while proposing a new kind of authenticity for visual images. This dual articulation mediates our response to mechanical images that succeed in straddling the divide between the magical and the mechanical. Perhaps the longevity and reach of photography as a technology is owing to the opposing energies that hold the photograph in a delicate equilibrium which retains both its mystique and its truth-telling

powers—allowing photographs even today to exist both on our mantelpieces and in police files.

The magic-picture tradition mediates our reception of photographic images by articulating as well as managing the dissonance that lies at the heart of the photograph. It succeeds in doing so, as my earlier section on the visual instant demonstrated, by staging an encounter between texts and images and imagining a productive blurring of lines that separate one media from the other. Conversely, this cross-fertilization of texts and images requires the catalysis of magic and disenchantment to achieve its effects. In this inter-play between texts and images on the one hand and the magical and the mechanical on the other a new set of identifications become possible. The mysterious images that populate the subgenre of the magic-picture tradition appear to be folded into the larger structure of a demystified textual apparatus resulting in both the partial demystification of the images and the selective enchantment of texts.



## APPENDIX

- 1) "The Prophetic Pictures" (1835)—Nathaniel Hawthorne *Twice Told Tales and Other Short Stories* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1971), 159-174.
- 2) "The Portrait" (1835)—Nikolai Gogol *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 340-393.
- 3) "Schalken the Painter" (1839)—J. S. LeFanu *Best Ghost Stories of J.S. LeFanu* Ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 28-46.
- 4) "The Oval Portrait" (1842)—Edgar Allen Poe *Grahams Magazine* 1 (1842): 245-249.
- 5) *Love at First Sight; or, the Daguerreotype* (1848)—Ned Buntline, (Boston: Jones's Publishing House, 1848).
- 6) "Saint Agnes of Intercession" (1849-50)—Dante Gabriel Rossetti *Collected Works* Ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis and Scruton, 1886), 399-426.
- 7) "My Lost Art" (1851) *The Atlantic Monthly* 10 (1862): 228-235.
- 8) *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)—Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Penguin, 1986).
- 9) "The Magnetic Daguerreotypes" (1852) *The Photographic Art-Journal* 3 (1852): 353-359.
- 10) "The House on Aungier Street" (1853)—Sheridan Le Fanu *Madam Crowl's Ghost, and Other Tales of Mystery* ed. M.R. James (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1923), 69-86.
- 11) "The Two Daguerreotypes: A Temperance Tale" (1854)—Oliver Optic [pseud. William Taylor Adams] *Indoors and Out: or, Views from the Chimney Corner* (Boston: Brown, Bazin & Co. 1854), 31-39.
- 12) "The Inconstant Daguerreotype" (1855) *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (Vol. 10, Issue 60), 820-826.
- 13) "The Daguerreotype" (1858)—A. Mortimer Cleveland *Ballou's Pictorial and Drawing-Room Companion* 15.3 (1858): 38-39.
- 14) "The Haunted and the Haunters; Or, The House and the Brain" (1859)—Edward Bulwer-Lytton *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (1859): 224-245.

- 15) "The Portraits Warning"(1868)—H. Saville Clarke *Belgravia* 4 (1868): 429-437.
- 16) "The Shadow of a Shade" (1869)—Thomas Hood in *Victorian Ghost Stories* ed. Montagu Summers (London: Fortune Press, 1933), 190-212.
- 17) "In Love With a Shadow" (1870)—T. A. Janvier *Lippincott's Magazine* 6 (1870): 518-531.
- 18) "An Artists Model"(1871)—*Belgravia* 4 (1871): 176-184.
- 19) *The Pictures Secret with An Episode in the Life of Mr. Latimer* (1883) Walter Herries Pollock (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984).
- 20) "The Portrait and the Ghost" (1888)—S. Weir Mitchell *Lippincott's Magazine* 41 (1888): 677-692.
- 21) "A Spoilt Negative" (1888) E.W. Hornung in *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's—1980's: A Critical Anthology* Ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 1-15.
- 22) *The Veiled Picture, or The Wizard's Legacy*(1889)—Elizabeth Lysaght (London: Simpkin, 1889).
- 23) "The Portrait" (1889)—Margaret Oliphant, *Margaret Oliphant: Selected Stories of the Supernatural* Ed. Margaret K. Gray (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 125-161.
- 24) "At the End of the Passage" (1890) Rudyard Kipling in *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's—1980's: A Critical Anthology* Ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998),16-34.
- 25) "The Portrait of Concitta P---"(1891)—E. Gerard *Longman's* 17 (February 1891), 412-39
- 26) "The Strange Case of Muriel Gray"(1891)—Ross George Derring *Temple Bar* 93 (1891): 397-409.
- 27) "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) Arthur Conan Doyle in *The Short Story and Photograph, 1880's—1980's: A Critical Anthology* Ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 35-56.
- 28) "A Phantom Portrait" (1891)—M. Kemper *Cornhill Magazine* 16 (1891): 164-170.
- 29) "An Artist's Romance" (1893)—*Argosy*, 55 (January 1893): 77-83.
- 30) "The Portrait of Phillis Cromartie" (1893)—Fitzgerald Molloy, *Temple Bar*

98(1893): 524- 535.

- 31) "The Portrait of an Unknown Gentleman" (1893)—Sidney Pickering *English Illustrated Magazine* 10 (December 1893): 176-81.
- 32) "An Imaginative Woman" (1894) Thomas Hardy in *The Short Story and \ Photography, 1880's—1980's: A Critical Anthology* Ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 57-79
- 33) "The Picture on the Wall"(1895)—Katherine Tynan *English Illustrated Magazine* 14 (December 1895), 297-304
- 34) "The Moving Finger" (1901)—Edith Wharton *Crucial Instances* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909) 153-180.
- 35) "The Mezzotint" (1904)—M. R. James *Casting the Runes and Other Stories* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 14-25.
- 36) "The Cruel Painter" (1905) George Macdonald in *The Cruel Painter and Other Stories* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1905).
- 37) "The Ebony Frame" (1910)—Edith Nesbit *Fear* (London: Stanley Paul, 1910) 86-104.

## CONCLUSION

How would Blake have reacted to photography? There are at least two ways of imagining his response to this critical event in the history of visual representation. Blake's life-long engagement with the technology of 'fixing' images and his innovations therein, suggest an enduring concern with the methods by which pictures are produced and circulated. While this technical virtuosity would justify his inclusion in the long list of innovators who jostle for a space in photography's nativity narratives, one would also need to take cognizance of the fact that photography, as a commercialized mode of mechanical reproduction, would exemplify that moment in the history of the art which Blake spent his whole artistic career trying to counter.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the photograph would mark, for Blake, the triumph of, what he termed the "Contemptible Counter Arts", which were created to serve the "Purposes of Commerce."<sup>2</sup> The rapid commercialization of photography after the mid-century invention of the collodion, or wet plate, process would have confirmed Blake's apocalyptic fears of a world where the machine usurps the function of the individual artist: "A Machine is not a Man nor a Work of Art it is Destructive of Humanity and of Art."<sup>3</sup>

In stark contrast to Blake's hyper-authorial capacities to unite within himself the multiple tasks involved in 'producing' texts, the photograph shows a very minimal degree of authorial control. Having out-sourced the act of figuration to the machine, the photographer's role in 'making' the image appears peripheral to the mysterious chemical

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<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 580, 573.

<sup>3</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 575.

reactions happening within the interiors of the machine. Such a whittled down conception of the author would be anathema to Blake who heroically resisted mechanical encroachments into the world of art. The efficiency of machine-based art, he argued, feeds into the “Maw” of “Commerce [that] Cannot endure Individual Merit” and demands instead a form of labor that “all can do Equally well.”<sup>4</sup>

In short, therefore, the monocular vision of the camera almost seems a fulfillment of Blake’s prophecies regarding the devastating effects of the “perverted and single vision” of the “Vegetated Mortal Eye.”<sup>5</sup> “May God us keep” he writes earlier in a letter to Thomas Butts, “From Single vision and Newtons sleep”. Blake is clearly not arguing in favour of binocularity, but a “double vision” produced by the radically different products of the “inward Eye” and the “Corporeal or Vegetative Eye.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Blake would see photography as causing the enervation of the former through its celebration of the latter.

But from another angle, the image/texts produced in Blake’s studio do not seem so distant from the images that emerge in the photo studio and share an unexpected kinship with the unique visual instant that the photograph gives visible shape to.

As my last two chapters attempt to document, the photograph is the point of convergence for a range of radically disparate meanings. It embodies a dialectical tension between evanescent instants and enduring truths, surfaces and depths, the mechanical and

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<sup>4</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 573

<sup>5</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 202

<sup>6</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 721, 566.

the human, the indexical and the iconic, optical truth (science) and visual pleasure (art), the disenchanted and the magical and the controlled and the contingent.

Such a dialectic compression of antithetical values within the photograph makes it an unusual visual sign that never ceases to invite ambivalence. Agamben, commenting on this unique feature of photographs, writes, “The photograph is always more than an image: it is the site of a gap, a sublime breach between the sensible and the intelligible, between copy and reality, between a memory and a hope.”<sup>7</sup> For Agamben, then, the success of photography lies in its failure to resolve this dialectic tension within itself.

But in reminding us of this “sublime breach”, photography embodies a unique dialectical energy that does not seem a far cry from a Blakean aesthetic based on a dialectical vision of continually clashing contraries. The dramatic contest of contraries in Blake’s poetry is guided by the knowledge that the imagination can only be accessed through the fallen world of ‘real’ images. This is especially evident in his conception of the singular and contingent image, which Blake does not denigrate in favor of an ideal image. In opposition to Reynolds’s prescription to disregard the accidentals that attach to particular images, Blake writes, “Singular and Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime”.<sup>8</sup> It is this attempt “To see a World in a Grain of Sand” that seems homologous to the potential of the photograph, which by embracing its ephemerality succeeds in showing us that instantaneous flash of the moment that is always capable of escaping its momentariness.<sup>9</sup> “Eternity”, as Blake demonstrates, “is in love with the productions of

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<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007) 26.

<sup>8</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 733.

<sup>9</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 490.

time.”<sup>10</sup> His belief that the “road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” seems to work in favor of photography as it turns its radical contingency to its own advantage.<sup>11</sup> For the superficial and fragmentary flashes of visual ephemera that the camera throws up, paradoxically conceal truths that are both surprisingly deep and haunting. It is this ‘surprise’ lying hidden within the folds of the photographic image that constitutes the magic of pictures and promises to bridge the gap between the mirror and the lamp.

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<sup>10</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose*, 38.

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