A Photographer Develops: Reading Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron

Jonathan R. Fardy
_The University of Western Ontario_

Supervisor
Sharon Sliwinski
_The University of Western Ontario_ Joint Supervisor
Helen Fielding
_The University of Western Ontario_

_A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy_
© Jonathan R. Fardy 2014

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd)

Part of the Theory and Criticism Commons

Recommended Citation
[https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2486](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2486)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Abstract

This study examines the historical emergence of the photographer by turning to the writings of three important photographers of the nineteenth century: Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901), Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813-1875), and Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879). The photographic works of each of these photographers has been the subject of much historical and interpretive analysis, but their writings have yet to receive significant scholarly attention. It is the claim of this study that this archive opens a new set of questions: What did it mean to claim: “I am a photographer” at photography’s advent? How did these individuals come to identify themselves through a new technology, medium, and practice whose identity itself was constituted by a set of contested and competing techniques, aesthetics, discourses, and critical perspectives? Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s texts speak to the fractious field of early photography and to how that discursive field positioned practitioners in novel ways. This study develops a historically specific and theoretically general conceptualization of the photographer, making a case for the ways this figure can be addressed as an object of study in its own right. This study’s focus on the writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron constitutes an effort to move beyond the well-plowed field of image analysis towards a consideration of how subjectivity is constituted and shaped by photographic practice.

Keywords
Photographer, Photography, Robinson, Rejlander, Cameron, Autobiography, Nineteenth Century, Foucault, Sloterdijk
Acknowledgements

This work has many authors. Without the steadfast patience, intellectual generosity, and enduring commitment of my supervisors Sharon Sliwinski and Helen Fielding, this dissertation would never have come into being. Their attentiveness to my work and their genuine care for my success was palpable from start to finish. I wish to also thank Matthew Rowlinson for his careful reading of my work and for his interest in the project that began when he attended my Theory Session on Julia Margaret Cameron. I am also very grateful to Thy Phu and Shawn Michelle Smith for taking the time to examine my dissertation and giving me the invaluable opportunity to develop my ideas at the annual Toronto Photography Seminar. Many thanks also to Jan Plug who served on my examining committee. I look back on my seminar with Professor Plug on deconstruction in 2009 as among the happiest memories of my time in graduate school.

I would also like to thank the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism. My years at the Centre will be remembered as among the most satisfying and enjoying period of my intellectual life. I wish to say a special thank you to Melanie Caldwell who graciously assisted me with all manner of issues in my journey through the Centre – the Centre would be lost without you Melanie! I made many friends over the years at the Centre whose conversations have been truly transformative: thanks to Kamran Ahmed, David Jantzen, Kate Lawless, Will Samson, and Jason D’Aoust.

Special thanks also to my friend Christopher Langlois whose work and work ethic continues to be a model to which I aspire. My conversations with Chris have been incredibly intellectually rewarding – indeed they count among the most rewarding – and he has also supplied me with a good dose of humor while writing this dissertation. Finally I wish to thank Andrew Weiss. Andrew has been a true friend, a trusted confidant, and an intellectual force.

Finally, I want to thank my family: my Mom and Dad, Richard and Lydia, my brother and sister, Jim and Lisa. Thank you so much for being there for me whenever I needed you. Last but not least I thank my grandparents: William and Barbara Jewell and Worsley and Doris Fardy. I dedicate this work to their memory.
### Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................................................ iv

List of Plates .................................................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 1

1.1 The Photographer .................................................................................................................................. 2

1.2 A Photographer ................................................................................................................................... 8

1.3 Photography, Theory, and Biographical Criticism .............................................................................. 9

1.4 Scope .................................................................................................................................................. 27

1.5 Outline of Chapters .............................................................................................................................. 28

Chapter 2. Framing the Cases ....................................................................................................................... 32

2.1 The Cases ............................................................................................................................................. 33

2.2 Points .................................................................................................................................................. 39

2.3 Bubbles .............................................................................................................................................. 45

2.4 Language and Embodiment ................................................................................................................. 51

2.5 Interiorizing ...................................................................................................................................... 58

Chapter 3. Photography and Pedagogy: The Case of Henry Peach Robinson .............................................. 67

3.1 Pedagogy of Pictorialism ....................................................................................................................... 68

3.2 The Vacant Studio .............................................................................................................................. 78

3.3 Moral Education ................................................................................................................................ 83

3.4 The Subject Supposed to Know ........................................................................................................ 87

3.5 The Itinerant Photographer ............................................................................................................... 92

Chapter 4. Ways of Life: The Case of Oscar Gustave Rejlander ................................................................. 95

4.1 Painter and Photographer .................................................................................................................... 95
List of Plates

Plate 1. Henry Peach Robinson, *Fading Away*, 1858. .......................................................... 70

Plate 2. Henry Peach Robinson, *A Merry Tale*, 1882. .......................................................... 72

Plate 3. Oscar Gustave Rejlander, *Two Ways of Life*, 1857.................................................... 114

Plate 4. Julia Margaret Cameron, *I Wait*, 1872. .................................................................... 138

Plate 5. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Annie*, 1864. .................................................................... 142

Plate 6. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Pray Bring God Bring Father Safely Home*, 1874......... 147
Chapter 1

Introduction

A passerby takes a photograph. It’s an everyday scene, a contemporary commonplace—a banality. But this very banality signifies something historically remarkable. At the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, such a scene was scarcely conceivable. Nineteenth-century photography was the province of specialists who possessed the requisite skills, science, and resources necessary for the production of photographs. Over the course of more than a century, photography exited the sphere of specialists and professionals and came to inhabit the realm of the everyday. Professional photographers still exist of course. But many who possess the tools and the technique do not see themselves as photographers. In fact today it is no longer clear precisely what the term “photographer” denotes. The term “photographer” is sometimes used to designate one whose livelihood, passion, or art is photography. But one can with equal justice call one a photographer who simply takes a photograph. Today being a photographer and taking photographs do not necessarily inhabit a continuous space. How did this happen? How did the photographer develop?

This study examines the historical emergence of the photographer by turning to the writings of three important photographers of the nineteenth century: Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901), Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813-1875), and Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879). The works of each of these photographers has been the subject of much historical and interpretive analysis. But their writings have yet to receive significant scholarly attention. It is the claim of this study that this archive opens a new set of questions: What did it mean when one said “I am a photographer” at photography’s advent? Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s texts speak to the fractious field of early photography and to how that field positioned practitioners in
novel ways. These texts constitute an autobiographical archive. Each text is marked by the narrative struggle to make sense of the claim of what it meant to be a photographer. But this autobiographical archive is not solely a set of “personal” statements. These texts undoubtedly reflect the personal interests and concerns of each photographer, but those interests and concerns are also indicative of the wider regime of early photographic discourse. These texts can be read, then, as simultaneously reflecting the personal concerns of each photographer and the field of concern that was early photography. This study develops a historically specific and theoretically general conceptualization of the photographer. Its overarching aim, therefore, is to make a case for how the photographer can be addressed as an object of study in its own right. This study’s focus on the writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron constitutes an effort to move beyond the well-plowed field of image analysis towards a consideration of how subjectivity is constituted and shaped by photographic practice. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk among others, this study interrogates the formation of the nineteenth-century photographer from an “interior” perspective. It focuses on how the process of writing on the experience of being and becoming a photographer, as evidenced by the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron, forged novel ways of seeing and constructing selfhood and interiority.

1.1 The Photographer

The nineteenth-century photographer occupied a unique position in the strata of material and discursive practices that included optics, chemistry, aesthetics, art and science. It is this complex assemblage that is conveniently called “nineteenth-century photography.” My conceptualization of “the photographer” as a subject position, node, or point within the constellation of nineteenth-century photographic discourse and practice draws principally on the work of Michel Foucault.
A subject for Foucault is constituted in and through historically specific discursive and material practices: knowledge, power, and discipline primarily. These factors or forces “position” and condition the subject in a particular way at a particular moment in history. The Foucauldian subject is positioned by an epistemic system—a system of knowledge—that is regulated by disciplinary procedures, processes, norms, and power. This view of the subject opposes the conception of the subject enshrined by Descartes.

Descartes’ famous invocation—“I think, therefore I am”—grants sovereignty over knowledge to the “I” of consciousness and identity. Descartes’ instantiation of the “I” as the foundation for the possibility of knowledge rests upon the axiom that the “I” of thinking (res cogitans) is fundamentally different than the world of spatially extended bodies it perceives (res extensa). The “I” of Cartesian thought maintains a critical distance from the world. It is supposed that this distance allows the “I” to remain impartial in its judgment of perceptual stimuli. This conception posits the “I” as an internal eye that judges perceptual objects as true or false. As Richard Rorty notes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Descartes’ institutes “a conception of the human mind as an inner space in which…ideas pas[s] in review before an Inner Eye.”¹

Foucault rejects this model of the subject. The subject for Foucault is not the foundation or final arbiter of knowledge. Rather the “I” is itself a *subject of knowledge*. For Foucault, the subject is not the sovereign, immobile center upon which trans-historical knowledge (and truth) is inscribed, but rather an effect produced by a specific regime of knowledge. According to Foucault, every system or regime of knowledge produces a particular subject. The subject in this view is not a causal agent of knowledge, but rather a “knowledge-effect” – an effect of a particular historical mode of discursive and material practices. Foucault writes: “The positions of

the subject are...defined by the situation that it is possible for him [or her] to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects; according to a grid of explicit or implicit interrogations” or knowledge practices.²

Discursive and material practices—that is to say, knowledge—define the parameters within which a historical subject is positioned and, to an extent, subjects the subject to a set of historically determinate conditions that regulate what it is possible for that subject to say, think, or do. Foucault, especially the early Foucault, draws a rigorous distinction between a subject and the individual. The former designates a subject position within a knowledge/power structure; the latter is a way of speaking about the subject that can be traced to a specific historical situation, namely, the early modern period. “Subject” for Foucault has effectively the same meaning as it does in the context of monarchical power. One is called the king’s “subject” in that one is subject to the king’s power of rule. Similarly, for Foucault one is a subject insofar as one is subject to a specific regime of knowledge and power that governs and maintains a given socio-epistemic order. The position one occupies with respect to a knowledge-power structure defines “who” a subject is or can become. Foucault puts it eloquently and economically when he writes that a subject position designates both “the space in which we are and which we are.”³ It is in this sense that here the photographer is defined as a subject position.

The nineteenth-century photographer was historically conditioned by the positions it came to occupy within the discourse of early photography. The historical category of “nineteenth century photography” does not name one thing, but a complex set of technological, aesthetic, and social practices. Even that most privileged metonym of photography – the camera – is not itself

---

one thing. The camera names a complex amalgam of technologies (optics and chemistry, primarily) and a host of aesthetic and scientific practices.

The genealogy of the photographic camera traces back to the *camera obscura*. This device was known to ancient philosophers including Aristotle and Euclid but it gained exceptional prominence among artists and scientists of the seventeenth century.⁴ A *camera obscura* is made by completely sealing off a room or small chamber from any light source save for a pinhole-sized aperture. Light is focused as it passes through the narrow opening, and the result is that an inverted image of the world outside forms on the inside wall opposite the aperture exactly as it does in the modern day mechanical camera. Thus the basic technology of the modern camera was already existent well before the nineteenth century. Seventeenth-century thinkers including Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz were intensely interested in the *camera obscura* and optics generally.⁵ The device is frequently referenced in their writings. The *camera obscura* offered a fitting material analogue to the rationalist conception of the subject as an “inner eye” (*pace* Rorty) that sees the world from within the hermetically sealed chamber of the mind. The idea that the world could be best seen and understood from a specified distance with the aid of a rational representational schema prepared in advance the discursive space for nineteenth-century photography.

The technological and discursive continuities between the *camera obscura* and the camera notwithstanding, the two technologies are very different. Each technology makes possible very different modes of observation, and hence gives rise to very different kinds of observers. As Jonathan Crary notes in *Techniques of the Observer*, “the *camera obscura* and the

---

photographic camera, as assemblages, practices, and social objects, belong to two fundamentally
different organizations of representation and the observer, and the observer’s relation to the
visible." The observer standing in a camera obscura sees the world as an inverted projection on
the wall opposite the aperture. The observer stationed behind the camera looks out onto the
world. The positioning of the observer—the subject position—circumscribed by the camera
obscura and that framed by the camera lens are spatially and even psychically distinct. The way
the world is seen in the camera obscura versus the camera, and how in each case that seeing is
seen and understood by the observer, are radically dissimilar.

The photographic camera developed from centuries of research into light but it was
chemistry that provided the means to fix fragile and fleeting images. The origins of photographic
chemistry are notoriously complex and seem almost a conspiracy on the part of history to
confound any historian who seeks and elegant and simple narrative. The diorama painter Louis-
Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) is popularly regarded as the “father of photography.”
Daguerre’s name quite literally entered photography history when in 1839 the French Academy
of Arts and Sciences awarded him a patent for a photographic process—daguerreotypy—that
employed photo-sensitized copper plates. While Daguerre has become a virtual metonym for the
origin of photography, there were many others who played significant roles in photography’s
development, including Daguerre’s research partner Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833). Indeed
Niépce’s View from a Window at Le Gras of 1826 is the earliest known photographic image. One
must also mention the work of William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877)—Daguerre’s chief
rival—for his work on the calotype or talbotype process. Talbot’s 1844 book, The Pencil of
Nature, which outlined both the aesthetic and scientific potential of photography, marked a

6 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 32.
highly significant discursive event in the history of early photography. Further still one would have to include the name of John Herschel (1792-1871) who made remarkable botanical studies by laying plant specimens on photo-sensitized papers and exposing them directly to the sun thereby circumventing the need for the camera entirely. Finally one would also have to make mention of Thomas Wedgwood who in the late eighteenth century pioneered chemical processes for the fixing of silhouettes. Suffice to say, the history of photographic technology did not follow a singular trajectory. Already by 1839, as Geoffrey Batchen has clearly shown, there were multiple and very different processes competing for the title of “photography.” But certainly the official recognition of photography by the French Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1839 was a watershed moment in the constitution of photography as a historico-discursive object. The publication in 1839 of the “Report” on photography by François Jean Dominique Arago (1786-1853) did much to establish and bolster the nineteenth-century image of photography as at once a scientific and aesthetic phenomenon. Walter Benjamin was to later remark in his seminal essay “Little History of Photography” that the “beautiful thing” about Arago’s “Report” is “the connection it makes with all aspects of human activity....In a great arc, Arago’s speech spans the field of new technologies, from astrophysics to philology: alongside the prospects of photographing the stars and planets we find the idea of establishing a photographic record of the Egyptian hieroglyphs.”

The chemistry of photography provided the technological capability to fix what seemed to be an indubitably empirical picture of the world. Yet the very fact that this world was a world

---

of pictures meant also that photography opened a new aesthetic field rife with argument and contest. Hence nineteenth-century photographic discourse was obsessed with the question of whether photography was a science or an art. Very different material practices emerged from this divided constitution. Pictorialism, for example, the first art movement of photography (discussed in chapter three) codified an aesthetic program for photography in order to raise it to the cultural respectability of the fine arts. But simultaneously photography was pressed into the service of the sciences, particularly sociology and criminology, with the aim of making them more “objective.” Nineteenth-century photography’s divided constitution – divided between art and science – struggled over what the veridical status of photography was. Was photography objective or not? Could it express or only record? The photographer of the nineteenth century, like the field of photography itself, was also divided by philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific contestations. This fractured figure of the photographer is imaged in the writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron in the form of explicit arguments and, just as frequently, through implicit rhetorical tensions, lapses, contradictions, and paralogisms. At the level of argument and rhetoric there is a marked symptomatic ambivalence and uncertainty in these texts concerning what photography was and what as a consequence it meant or could mean to be a photographer. Each text also has a marked psychological dimension insofar as each poses the question: Who (or what) am I as a photographer?

1.2 A Photographer

To access this psychological dimension, it is necessary to press beyond the theoretical confines of subject position theory. Whereas Foucault, or at least the early Foucault, was content to theorize the subject solely in terms of its position in a field of historical discourse and knowledge practices, it is the claim of this study that it is necessary to also take note of how that
position was experienced, lived, and narrated by those who occupied it. The strong form of subject position theory, which de-emphasizes the subject’s lived life, fails to account for the fact that the way historical subjects understand their experience recursively affects how they are socially positioned at any given time. Hence subject position theory is here supplemented with a view that theorizes the relation between the discursive positioning of the photographer and how a photographer understands and experiences that positioning as a dialogical and dynamical system. This dissertation seeks a third way between the structural view of the subject as a position in a knowledge-power grid and a psycho-biographical view that sees a knowledge subject as an embodied and psychical being. Methodologically, this study aims to maintain a double vision: one eye is focused on the photographer as a subject position and the other is on a photographer, in their respective cases, Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron. This study thus takes a “parallax view” in Slavoj Žižek’s sense in its attempt to methodologically oscillate between the perspective of the photographer and the perspective of a photographer. In order to properly situate the arguments of this study, it will be helpful at this point to sketch the genealogy of photography studies. What this sketch reveals is a theoretical convergence of two lines of inquiry—photography theory and biographical criticism—that stretches from at least the 1960s to the present. It is at the juncture of this theoretical convergence that this study is situated.

1.3 Photography, Theory, and Biographical Criticism

Despite the abundance of studies on the lives and works of individual photographers as well as the expanding corpus of theoretical writings on photography, there has yet to be any sustained investigation of the photographer’s emergence as a historical subject. Monographs on photographers typically follow either implicitly or explicitly the methodological cues of art

---

history. The force of art history’s impress on photography studies is due to the simple fact that art history was the first discipline to take photography seriously as a subject of academic inquiry. The art-historical institutionalization of photography by the mid-twentieth century led by major institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art in New York catalyzed a vast academic territorialization of photography. Edward Steichen (who was also a photographer), Helmut Gernsheim, John Szarkowski, and many other art historians developed historical models as well as formal criteria with which to aesthetically assess photographs and the achievement of individual photographers. Szarkowski’s work in particular offers a precedent for this study.

Szarkowski curated an exhibition titled The Photographer’s Eye for the Museum of Modern Art in 1966. The exhibition’s catalogue essay lays out five elements that Szarkowski claims characterize the essential features of the photographer’s way of seeing: the thing-in-itself, time, frame, detail, and vantage point. The photographer, Szarkowski argues, sees the world as a series of spatio-temporal cuts—“slice[s] of time as well as space” in Susan Sontag’s words. The photographer’s eye prizes the spatio-temporal fragment: the photographic analog to the thing-in-itself of philosophy. The photographer according to Szarkowski is principally a way of seeing or observing (a thesis that presages Crary’s to some extent). Szarkowski’s reading of the photographer ingeniously presses beyond the coordinates of art history. Szarkowski is less interested in arguing that the photographer is an artist than in showing that the photographer is a way of being conditioned by the particular and peculiar exigencies of seeing the world through the camera. Despite its promises, however, Szarkowski’s project passed into history underdeveloped in part because the intellectual climate of the mid-1960s was soon to change in

ways that would prove hostile to Szarkowski’s seemingly subject-centric account of photography.

The humanities underwent a profound shift in the late 1960s. Politics, history, the subject, the unconscious, and much else were radically re-theorized in an effort to forge a path beyond the enclosure of rationalism. One text in particular defined the emerging theoretical climate of the 1960s: “The Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes, who as will be shown, all but reversed his position in his last book on photography. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes memorably argues that the Author (always capitalized) is a metaphysical idea: the literary equivalent to the god of theology and the “subject” of Cartesianism. Against the theological imposture of the Author, Barthes asserts the reader’s interpretive rights. The essay’s last lines are among its most memorable and polemical:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin [the Author] but in its destination [the reader]. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, and psychology…We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer…we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.13

These impassioned lines sum up Barthes’ thinking at this time. His critical work of this period advocates an anti-humanist and anti-psychological mode of criticism in favor of one based on the findings of linguistics. A literary text in Barthes’ view is to be studied not as the psycho-biographical expression of an Author but rather as a constellation of linguistic structures, rules, and conventions that condition and regulate a text’s meaning. Barthes’ strident call to liberate

literary studies from the theological thrall of the Author and subject resonated with similar calls to “deconstruct the subject” and to dispense with humanism issued by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and many others. However, Barthes’ critical stance steadily transformed throughout the 1970s. By the time of his last publication in 1980, it had changed radically. Barthes’ last text—*Camera Lucida*—is about photography.

*Camera Lucida* is intensely personal and intensely speculative. Barthes’ text traces out a theoretical trajectory from the search for the essence of photography to the search to find in photographs the essence of the author’s mother who had recently died. That this seeming reversal of Barthes’ critical stance—from a largely anti-humanist, anti-authorial, and anti-biographically oriented criticism to an autobiographical, pathos-laden, and deeply subjective mode—was effected through a critical engagement with photography should not go unnoticed. The critical strategies Barthes had employed in his studies of literature and culture seemed to break down in the case of photography.

Barthes sees photographs as affective instruments. Hence the psychological state and status of the viewer or the spectator is taken by Barthes to be a necessary component of the critical project he undertakes in his “reflections on photography.”14 This concern for the spectator echoes Barthes’ privileging of the reader in “The Death of the Author.” But the spectator of *Camera Lucida* is not synonymous with the reader of “The Death of the Author.” The spectator, Barthes’ “I,” is a melancholic subject and not that purely positional void or open “space” that he had earlier identified as the reader. Barthes’ takes his “I” with all its emotional baggage as both the final arbiter and subject of his analysis of the affective power of

14 The subtitle of *Camera Lucida* is *Reflections on Photography.*
photography. Barthes writes: “I decided to take myself as mediator for all Photography.” Barthes dispenses with the voice of the dispassionate critic and gives free reign to his taste and his emotional state. He writes: “I decided to take as a guide for my new analysis the attraction I felt for certain photographs.” Barthes then proceeds to systematize this attraction by dividing his responses into two sets to which he gives the Latin names: *studium* and *punctum*.

*Studium* names that part of a photograph that the viewer instantly recognizes because the viewer belongs to the world of signs of which it is a part. It is the part of the photograph that is subordinated or subject to one’s cultural knowledge. Barthes writes that the studium is that which “I invest...with my sovereign consciousness.” The *punctum* by contrast, Barthes notes, is that part of a photograph that surprises and can at times even overwhelm the viewer with affective force. It leaps out, writes Barthes, “like an arrow and pierces me” and with it the surrounding banality of the *studium*. While many scholars have made much use of the *studium/punctum* contrast for the analysis of photographs, the significance of Barthes’ insight lies elsewhere.

*Studium* and *punctum* are less elementary building blocks for a theory of photography writ large than elementary motifs of Barthes’ singularly therapeutic attempt to come to grips with

a confounding chiasmus of desire and grief: the desire he feels for certain photographs and the
grief that attends his desire to find his mother in them:

> at the moment of reaching the essence of photography in general, I branched off; instead
> of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a
treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in
my mind, be separated from the ‘pathos’ of which, from the first glance, it consists. I was
like that friend who had turned to Photography only because it allowed him to
photograph his son.²⁰

Barthes rather abruptly shifts his focus away from speculating on the ontology of photography.
He opts instead to do what he calls a “casual phenomenology” of his personal reactions to a
select set of photographs.²¹ This highly personal mode of criticism marks a complete break with
his earlier critical commitments. *Camera Lucida* marks Barthes’ turn from a theory based on the
sign to one based on psychical and embodied experience. The radically subjective approach
Barthes’ forges in *Camera Lucida* cancels out the possibility of deriving anything like a general
theory of photography or photographic spectatorship. What is nominated as *studium* and
*punctum* in every instance reflects the particular and peculiar view of Barthes – a psychically
situated and culturally specific spectator.

Shawn Michelle Smith has pointed out that the problematic subjectivism of Barthes
analytic schema – *studium/punctum* – is most strikingly revealed in the racist and paternalist tone
he strikes in his reading in *Camera Lucida* of James Van Der Zee’s family portrait of 1926.²²
Barthes sees the photograph as evidence of the photographed family’s “touching” attempt “to

---

assume the White Man’s attributes.”

Barthes goes on to assert that one of the two women pictured in the photograph is wearing a necklace, a “slender ribbon of braided gold.”

This necklace reminds Barthes of one worn by his aunt. He then recalls that his aunt had died an “old maid” and that he is “saddened” whenever he thinks of “her dreary life.”

Smith points out, however, that both women in the Van Der Zee photograph are wearing necklaces and neither of them is made of gold. Both are in fact necklaces of pearl. Smith writes: “Barthes’ failure to remember the precise attributes of a piece of jewelry is only a slight offense…What is disturbing is not the erasure of a pearl necklace for a gold but the effacement of an African American woman under the sign of Barthes’ aunt.”

Barthes’ reading of the Van der Zee photograph reveals less about the photograph and more about Barthes’ cultural and historical location, perspective, and habit of mind. What is specifically “white” about dressing up for a family portrait, and why does Barthes so uncritically assume that his aunt led a “dreary life” simply because she did not marry? Barthes presents his point of view as if it is a matter of fact, but in fact it is an ideological expression of racism and paternalism: the *studium* here is composed of the cultural codes of race and sex. Barthes’ reading of the Van der Zee family portrait, as Smith shows, provides a cautionary tale in the use of the *studium/punctum* dyad. Every invocation of *studium* and *punctum* is bound to reveal something about the spectator, but may reveal little to nothing about the photographic image in view. The strident subjectivism of *Camera Lucida* undermines its theoretical and critical value. Indeed, scholars such as James Elkins have gone so far as to argue that ultimately *Camera Lucida* is a failed project. Elkins notes:

---

23 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 41.
It is strange that after all the critical writing of the last twenty-five years on Barthes’s ‘little book’—so he called it, reminding us how much is really in it—it remains a central text, cited almost by default as a source of insights about photography’s ‘essential features’… despite the fact that readings by Derrida and others have shown how the text fails to provide the theory it initially promises.27

Elkins’ point about Barthes’ failure is important but arguably more so for reasons he overlooks. Barthes’ initial project to uncover the ontological essence of photography is importantly seen to fail in the text as it runs aground on the grief stricken shoals of Barthes’ stubbornly personal and problematic reflections. The text in this sense dramatizes the experience of loss in two ways. It dramatizes the loss of Barthes’ mother and dramatizes a theoretical loss of finding the ontological essence of photography. Camera Lucida, however, does accomplish a critical feat. By foregrounding the importance of the psychical and embodied spectator, Camera Lucida extends the reach of photography studies beyond the interpretive confines of the photographic image. Camera Lucida exposes the social, psychical, sensuous, personal, and biographical complexity of the photographic spectator. But while the spectator figures prominently in Camera Lucida, the photographer is all but left out of the picture.

Barthes makes only a passing comment on the photographer, whom he terms the “Operator.” He writes, “of that emotion (or that essence), I could not speak, never having experienced it; I could not join the troupe of those (the majority) who deal with Photography-according-to-the Photographer. I possessed only two experiences: that of the observed subject and the subject observing…”28 Barthes’ terms—“subject observing,” and “observed subject”—

---

28 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 7.
bears a family likeness to Foucault’s conception of subject positions in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* cited earlier. Barthes, like Foucault, defines a subject as a position within a relational field. Barthes’ quasi-subject position, however, is not a mere node or point locked in a grid of knowledge/power relations. Barthes’ spectator is a body with emotion, feelings, histories, and biographies: a subject of pathos, desire, and grief – or one might say simply – a spectator with interiority. Sitting for a photograph, Barthes notes, exposes to view “utter interiority without yielding intimacy.” A photograph of a person, Barthes suggests, enables one to see a being that has an interior or even secret life that lies beyond the pale of what can be seen. The photograph of a stranger, for example, does not afford the spectator an intimate glimpse into the depths of the being in the image, but the very opacity of the photographed subject’s interiority is itself an intimate reminder that what is visible in the photograph is also a negative index of what is invisible – a psychical and embodied depth that necessarily escapes the photograph’s depthless surface.

It is the argument of this dissertation that what is true of the photographed subject is also true of the one who identifies as a photographer. The appellation “photographer” like the photograph both accommodates and limits the one who is framed by the term. This study seeks to flesh out the operator or the photographer as position and passion. This requires constellating elements of biographical criticism with that of its seeming opposite – subject position theory. This move is not without precedent. Barthes’ critical enthusiasm for autobiographical thinking late in his career set precedent for certain postmodernists eager to find a way to revive the study of biography and autobiography without reanimating a Cartesian metaphysics of the subject. The

29 Celia Lury’s work on this aspect of Barthes’ thinking has been indispensable for my work. See Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory, Identity* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), especially chapter 4.
30 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 98.
renewal of scholarly interest in biographical criticism took a decisive turn in 1991 with the publication of a volume of essays titled *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*.

*Contesting the Subject* forges a third way between the critical binary of life and text. Contributors to the volume identify as “postmodern” insofar as they challenge modern conceptions of the author and its philosophical correlate, the unified self. But they part ways with many postmodernists in that they see much of postmodern criticism as offering a simplistic critique of the author and subject. The volume deepens the study and critique of the author and the subject through a sustained engagement of the canonical texts of the post-authorial critical tradition.

Stanley Fish strikes a strident tone in his contribution to *Contesting the Subject*. Fish argues that to interpret something is to ascribe an intentional agency responsible for the thing’s existence. To interpret something according to Fish is to see it as the product of “intentional behavior.” According to Fish, one simply cannot interpret rivers, snowflakes, beaches, icicles, and so on. But one can interpret utterances, buildings, paintings, bird calls, photographs, cars and the like. Fish writes that “the act of construing meaning is ipso facto the act of assigning intention…you just cannot do one without the other.” The only logically legitimate subject of interpretation, argues Fish, is intentional behavior; this is the only subject to which one can ascribe meaning. Snowflakes are, for example, meaningless in and of themselves. If snowflakes are said to be meaningful by some person, then it is to that person that one must turn for further clarification. The same is true of statements. Fish agrees that it does seem right to think that a critic can choose to interpret a statement as either the product of an intentional subject or solely

as a linguistic specimen. But this apparent choice, Fish argues, is an illusion since “the one thing you cannot do is read or hear [a] sentence without already having received it as the expression of an intentional being, with a particular, as opposed to a universal, history.”  

Fish argues thus that it logically follows that one cannot read any statement “independently of biography, of some specification of what kind of person – and with what abilities, concerns, goals, purposes, and so on – is the source of the words you are reading.” To interpret the meaning of any statement, according to Fish, necessitates inquiring as to who or what is speaking. And to understand a speaker means understanding something of the life of the speaker.

While Fish’s view of interpretation seems clearly opposed to postmodern conceptions of the subject promulgated by Barthes and Foucault among others, Fish rightly points out that Foucault acknowledges that to an extent the question of the Author cannot be resolved by simply turning the page as it were. In “What is an Author” of 1969, Foucault writes: “It is obviously insufficient to repeat empty slogans: the author has disappeared; God and man died a common death.” Foucault argues that facile attempts to dispense with the author by relegateing the invention of texts to social, historical, political, or linguistic codes and conventions are as unsatisfactory as ascribing metaphysical powers to authorial figures. Foucault notes that in reading a work by “delimiting psychological and biographical references, suspicions arise concerning the absolute nature and creative role of the subject.” But he avers that the subject should not be entirely “abandoned” but rather “should be reconsidered.” Having glanced at this possibility, however, Foucault quickly turns his back on it. Foucault reaffirms that questions of

32 Fish, “Intention and Biography,” 12.
33 Fish, “Intention and Biography,” 12.
35 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 137.
36 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 137.
the author are best confined to asking “under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse?”

Foucault readily admits, however, that this critical strategy effects an ultimately unsatisfactory transposition of “the empirical characteristics of an author into a transcendental anonymity.”

Fish concurs and responds by extending and radicalizing Foucault’s concern. Fish maintains that even “if the originating author is dissolved into a series of functions…, then we have not done away with intention and biography, but merely relocated them… [T]o read something as the product of any one of these ‘transcendental anonymities’ is to endow that anonymity with an intention and a biography.”

Fish’s argument can be transposed into photographic terms. A photograph can be interpreted solely in terms of its formal properties. But even a formal interpretation, Fish argues, implicitly ascribes an agency and a biography to it. To say that a photograph is composed is to state that it is marked by a structure of formal significance. The only reason this structure is significant is because it is meaningful and it is only meaningful, Fish argues, because it is the product of intentional behavior.

Fish’s argument is fascinating. It points up the weaknesses of taking either a hardline intentionality or anti-intentionality stance. Fish argues that agency and intentionality are categorically inescapable in that they are constitutive presuppositions of criticism itself. His argument retains the concept of authorial intent as a matter of logic. In this respect, Fish’s position reverses Barthes’s. Whereas Barthes positions himself against authorial intent by

37 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 137-138.
38 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 120.
39 Fish, “Intention and Biography,” 13.
drawing on linguistic-logical arguments, Fish uses the same form of reasoning to buttress an opposing claim. Barthes uses logic and language to pronounce the concept of the Author dead; Fish uses the same reasoning to grant the Author critical immunity. Neither Barthes nor Fish, however, press beyond the realm of language and logic to interrogate authorship as an experience. For Barthes and for Fish, the Author is a linguistic concept and not a mode of being.

Cheryl Walker, by contrast, seeks to understand authorship as an embodied and lived experience. Walker’s contribution to *Contesting the Subject*, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author,” argues contra Fish that authorial claims do not institute a biography *per se*, but rather construct a “persona” or “personae.” For Walker, Barthes’ contention that the Author is simply a metaphysical, even theological, fiction that must be put to death grossly inflates an author precisely into the Author. Walker views this inflation of the author as unnecessary and misguided. The author for Walker is a persona that emerges halfway between the text and the life of the writer. The claim of authorship does not itself make any particular claim on intentionality in anything more than a provisional sense. In the course of writing, Walker argues, it is in fact difficult to discern “who” is writing or whose intentions are at play for, to an extent, the author’s biography changes each time he or she writes since the biography comes to include whatever text the writer is writing at the moment. Thus rather than seek to reify a model of the author as an intentional subject, a god to be killed, or an inescapable law of language, Walker advocates the view that the author is as variable and various as the texts the writer writes. Each text gives rise to its own subject, its own personification, or persona that retrospectively comes to represent the author. On Walker’s view there is, for example, a persona germane to *Capital* by Marx and another persona germane to *The German Ideology*. This is the logic behind the oft-heard

---

40 Cheryl Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author,” in *Contesting the Subject*, 109-121.
construction “the Marx of *The German Ideology* is ultimately still Hegelian” or the “Marx of *Capital* is the mature Marx,” and the like. These “Marxs” are personae born of text, time, and interpretation. Personae exist in the interstices between texts and contexts. Hence Walker writes that “the persona critic” should “reflect on the way the forms of authorial representation available in the text open it to other texts.”[41] This critical strategy draws attention to the “diversity of investments” open to the writer, which “allows one to speak of authorship as multiple involving culture, psyche, intertextuality, as well as biographical data about the writer.”[42] Walker’s persona criticism plays a significant role in this study because it offers an invaluable means to conceptualize how an individual consciously and unconsciously shapes the image of themselves through creative action, which is always embedded in social and historical contexts.

By the late 1990s scholars of visual culture also began to rethink biographical criticism. Linda Haverty-Rugg’s *Picturing Ourselves* of 1997, for example, studies the relation between autobiography and photography. Haverty-Rugg’s interest is primarily in photography’s capacity to create a fiction of the self. She approaches the theme of the fabrication (and fictionalization) of the self by taking a case study approach to four writers: Mark Twain, August Strindberg, Christa Wolf, and Walter Benjamin. Her inquiry into each case study is framed by contemporary concerns over linguistic and historical reference. Haverty-Rugg writes: “Over the past two decades, an essential question has been debated by scholars of autobiography: can we ‘touch the world’ in writing? Can an autobiographical text refer to a subject outside the text? Does a self

---

create its autobiography, or does autobiography create its self.”⁴³ Haverty-Rugg argues that photography intervenes on this question in a unique and powerful way. Noting the complexity of the life/text relation in biographical theory and practice, Haverty-Rugg writes that closely paralleled with this is the question of “the relationship of photography to the world.”⁴⁴ Photography and biography both reveal the tangled complexities of representation and reference. Haverty-Rugg’s aim is to understand how the concept of referent in both biography and photography is shaped by one’s relationship to each as a reader or spectator. Haverty-Rugg is interested in how biographical and photographic referents are inferred through the embodied experience of reading and seeing. She thus resists the textualist temptation to reduce biography to a system of rhetoric or a photograph to a combination of light and shadow. Haverty-Rugg’s work is invaluable. But her focus on individuals leaves the larger social sphere of photography largely untouched.

Ariella Azoulay, by contrast, has forged a unique analysis of the social dimensions of photographic production and circulation. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay draws on eighteenth-century models of social contract theory in order to conceptualize how social formations arise through photography and what politically follows from them. Azoulay conceptualizes photography as a field of action in which the taking of a photograph constitutes a social “event.”⁴⁵ The actors involved in this event—the photographer, the photographed, and the photograph’s spectators—constitute what she calls a “photographic situation.”⁴⁶ The “photographic situation” theoretically spans the present location of the photographic event and

---

⁴⁶ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. This term is used throughout.
its future viewers situated in other times and locales. The “photographic situation” thus constellates together diverse social actors in different times and places that are brought actually and virtually together through photography. Photography as imaged by Azoulay is a contracting medium that binds people and places together.

Azoulay’s key argument is that no single photographic actor can reasonably claim sovereign ownership over the photographic situation since the event of photography establishes a sociality that is shared. In an essay simply titled “Photography,” Azoulay writes: “Human subjects, occupying different roles in the event of photography, do play one or another part in it, but the encounter is never entirely in the sole control of any of them; no one is the sole signatory to the event of photography.”47 The form of seeing made possible by photography, argues Azoulay, is technologically, and therefore socially and historically, mediated. Each participant in the photographic situation effectively signs away the “right to preserve his or her own autonomous visual field.”48 Photography consigns them to a form of social belonging “not synchronized or controlled by a sovereign power,” but one that is instead constituted at once in “different places and by different people who are bound together in civil association on account of photography.”49

Azoulay opens to view aspects of the social and political dimensions of photographic action, but her model neither accounts for the psychical specificity of the roles played by spectators, photographers, and photographed subjects nor the historical process by which they emerged. Media theorist, Celia Lury, attempts to cross this chasm by conceptualizing

photography as a prosthetic engagement that binds individuals, technologies, and social bodies, and produces novel modes of individuation and socialization.\footnote{It should be noted that the concept of technology as prosthetic has been considered by others, most notably by Marshall McLuhan. See Marshall McLuhan, \textit{Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man} (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003).}

In \textit{Prosthetic Culture}, Lury poses the question of how subjects come to see themselves and others though the prosthetic perspective of photography. Lury terms this practice of seeing simply “seeing photographically.”\footnote{Lury, \textit{Prosthetic Culture}, Photography, especially chapter 2} The camera, for Lury, is a prosthetic that simultaneously constructs and enables subjectivities to move into and inhabit what Azoulay calls “the arena of photography.”\footnote{Azoulay, \textit{The Civil Contract of Photography}, see especially chapter six titled “Whose Gaze?”} Because photography alters one’s perception of the world, it necessarily impacts the perception of oneself and others, whether consciously or not. Lury is ultimately interested in the psychical and cultural histories of how people come to see themselves though prostheses of their own making. The history of photography is Lury’s prime example. Photography gives its user a prosthetic eye and memory with which to capture and hold an image of others. This very capacity, however, changes the camera operator by reorienting her position and perspective with respect to the photographed subject and vice versa. Lury’s project admirably recounts the emergence of prosthetic culture by tracing the dissemination of photographic technologies and practices, and their impact on knowledge fields, but it does not specifically address the psychical and social novelty of the subject position of the nineteenth-century photographer since her focus is primarily on the development of twentieth-century prosthetic culture.

As previously noted, a groundbreaking account of the role of photography in subject formation is given by Jonathan Crary in \textit{Techniques of the Observer}. Crary breaks with art-historical (and art-history inspired) accounts of nineteenth-century visual culture. Crary’s
innovative work jettisons the narrative convention according to which changes in visual representation (and perception) in the nineteenth century are seen as the outcome of a dialectical antagonism between avant-gardism and academicism. As Crary puts it: “What this book takes as its object is not the empirical data of artworks or the ultimately idealist notion of an isolable ‘perception,’ but instead the no less problematic phenomenon of the observer.” Crary locates the emergence of the nineteenth-century “observer” at the nexus of a set of optical technologies – photography primarily – and related practices of seeing.

Crary’s Foucauldianism is clearly visible throughout Techniques of the Observer. While Crary’s focus on the “observer” might suggest a traditional subject-centered account, Crary is quick to clarify his theoretical intent. He writes: “If it can be said that there is an observer specific to the nineteenth century, or to any period, it is only as an effect of an irreducibly heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations.” The italicization of the term “effect” in the above passage signals Crary’s methodological identification with Foucault’s argument that a subject is produced by, and is an effect of, discourses and knowledge/power practices. Crary writes: “I want to delineate an observing subject who was both a product of and at the same time constitutive of modernity in the nineteenth century.” Crary argues that this novel observer of the nineteenth century, constituted by “a process of modernization,” became the prototypical modern subject – a subject “adequate to a constellation of new events, forces, and institutions that together are loosely and perhaps tautologically definable as ‘modernity.’”

53 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 5.
54 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 6.
56 Crary, Techniques of the Observer, 9.
Despite some similarities to Crary’s project, this study is in detail radically different. Firstly, this study argues that technical and technological processes, while important, are not as singularly determinant as Crary’s study suggests. The relation between techniques and technologies and subject positions is understood here not as unidirectional causal processes whereby a technologically specific technique (say of observation) effects the production of a specific subject position. This study instead advocates a dynamical, bidirectional model as will be explained in chapter two. Secondly, this study is concerned with the emergence of a much more specific subject position – the photographer – which is both an observing and producing subject. Thirdly, this study argues that it is necessary for historical and theoretical reasons to stress the role played by autobiographical narration in the production of the nineteenth-century photographer. Fourthly, the argument of this study is built on individual case studies. This difference is not only a matter of methodological preference, but of argumentative necessity. Whereas Crary seeks to de-personalize his account of the observer, I argue it is necessary to account for how practitioners understood themselves as photographers since that very self-understanding is part and parcel of the historical record.

1.4 Scope

The scope of this study is at once restrictive and expansive. It is restrictive in that it restricts itself to a detailed reading of three texts by three of the most important photographers of the nineteenth century: Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron. But it is expansive in that my aim is to sketch the broad historical and theoretical contours of the nineteenth-century photographer. It is my argument that the photographer qua historical subject position cannot be adequately described or theorized without reference to a photographer. But a photographer only makes sense when understood in the broader context of the emergence of the photographer as a novel
subject position. *The photographer* and *a photographer* are inextricably entwined: discussing one invariably circles round into discussing the other. But the relation between the two is not simply circular. The photographer, I argue, came into being through the interrelation of photographic technologies, discourses, and practices on the one hand and modes of self-understanding, including autobiographical narration, on the other.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

Chapter two lays out a theoretical framework for reading the case studies. I combine elements of Foucault’s concept of the subject position with the work of Peter Sloterdijk, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Walter Benjamin. Foucault, particularly the early Foucault of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, provides a way of interpreting the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron as what I call “points” that pinpoint specific discursive sites within the historical epoch of nineteenth-century photography. Robinson marks a site at which a discourse of the photographer as at once artist and bourgeois subject comes into focus; Rejlander indexes the fractious rhetoric of the art versus photography debate that divided the subject position of the nineteenth-century photographer; and Cameron illuminates the constraining norms of nineteenth-century photographic practice, particularly the norm of “still” photography, as well as the constraining norms of Victorian domesticity and femininity. I supplement this “point” reading of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron with the “spherological” perspective provided by Sloterdijk’s *Bubbles*, the first installment of his philosophical trilogy titled *Spheres*.

*Bubbles* offers a compelling retelling of the history of the Western conception of the modern subject, subjectivity, and selfhood as imaged by the sphere. With reference to a dizzying array of examples drawn from philosophy, literature, religion, medicine, cosmology, and more, Sloterdijk convincingly shows how the sphere has been central to the subject of the Western
imaginary. Sloterdijk’s main argument is that modernity – beginning sometime in the early fifteenth century – underwent a succession of traumatic events from Copernicus to Freud. The protective shells or spheres that had metaphysically protected the human subject were successively shattered. With each de-shelling of the subject, modernity responded with various social, political, psychical, and spiritual therapies that sought – but always failed – to reestablish the protective metaphysical enclosure of the pre-modern world. Sloterdijk’s perspective resonates, as I show, with Merleau-Ponty’s recasting of the subject as a subject of embodiment and Walter Benjamin’s vision of the modern subject as traumatized by the onslaught of the modern world. Together Foucault, Sloterdijk, Merleau-Ponty, and Benjamin enable me to read the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron with an eye to their significance both as historical documents that speak to the emergence of the nineteenth-century photographer in and through a set of discursive contexts, and as autobiographical attempts to hollow out a space – a bubble – to house and develop Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s emergent sense of themselves as photographers.

Chapter three examines the case of Henry Peach Robinson. I focus largely on a close reading of Robinson’s 1891 text – *The Studio and What to Do in It*. I argue that the text presents a vivid picture of the ontological crisis that attended pictorialist photography, art-photography’s first major aesthetic movement, of which Robinson was a pioneer and chief theoretician. I argue that despite repeated and failed attempts to ground photography, and the photographer, on the seemingly contradictory bases of art and middle class values, Robinson’s text ultimately fails to provide a coherent ontological definition of photography. What precisely one is to do in the photography studio ironically is unanswered by Robinson’s text despite its confident,
pedagogical tone. Hence the text negatively points to the problematic nature of the cultural identity of the nineteenth-century photographer.

Chapter four examines the case of Oscar G. Rejlander. My reading focuses largely on Rejlander’s 1863 text, “An Apology for Art-Photography.” The text’s title suggests that it provides a defense or an apology for art-photography. It does not. The text is actually a strange, often baffling, autobiographical fragment in which Rejlander attempts to retrace his entrance into photographic practice. Multiple personae and sudden shifts in scene and setting undermine the text’s coherence. But this incoherence, I argue, reveals Rejlander’s struggle to narrate and come to grips with what he had become in becoming a photographer. The “Apology” provides the reader with a personal and paradigmatic portrait of the advent of a photographer, and thus also the photographer.

Chapter five examines the case of Julia Margaret Cameron. The chapter focuses on a reading of Cameron’s autobiographical text – Annals of My Glass House – published in 1874. Like Rejlander’s “Apology,” Cameron’s Annals presents the story of Cameron’s entrance into photographic practice. But unlike Rejlander’s writing, and for that matter Robinson’s, Cameron’s text is apparently free of ontological anxieties concerning the nature of photography. Her text rebounds with the joys of becoming in ways otherwise than those prescribed by nineteenth-century norms of photographic practice – her use of soft-focus being the most obvious example of this – as well as the joys (and trials) of becoming otherwise than the norms of Victorian domesticity and femininity demanded. Cameron’s writing opens to view the emergence of the photographer who saw the identity crisis of early photography as an incentive and an opportunity to transcend its conventions and prescriptions, and in so doing change not only how photography could be made but also what one could become in and through that making.
Chapter six offers a conclusion in which I return to where I began – to the contemporary photographer. Using my mother as an example of the contemporary photographer’s position, I ask: what is different and the same about the contemporary photographer as compared to its nineteenth-century predecessor? I argue that the question of the identity of photography and the photographer has lost the existential gravitas it held in the nineteenth century. But nonetheless this very shift is in part a historical consequence of the advent and development of the nineteenth-century photographer.
Chapter 2

Framing the Cases

The photographer *qua* subject position and a photographer are historically intertwined. The social and historical forces that converged to produce photography opened operational positions that new subjects called “photographers” came to occupy. Photographers have historically inflected the social and historical condition of photography and in turn opened other ways to be a photographer by incorporating photography into the sphere of self-understanding. The self-conscious photographer is at once a position in the historical and social field and a set of lived practices. To do justice to the words, works, and lives of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron and to the history of the photographer’s emergence, it is crucial to resist reductionism in either direction. Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron are neither solely a set of points that mark the historical emergence of the nineteenth-century photographer nor are they names for three irreducible biographical singularities. These names mark points in the emergence of the nineteenth-century photographer and they signify a set of lived practices.

The processes by which each photographer came to an awareness of himself or herself as a photographer is a case study in the formation of identity through photography, a technology which in the nineteenth century was still in its infancy. At that time photography’s position in the social and historical field was constitutively unsettled and fraught with contest and controversy by the ontological dispute that split photography between art and science. Thus the writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron are cases studies in the formation of autobiographical personae within the contested space of early photographic discourse and practice.

This chapter theorizes the photographer as iterated in texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron by combining aspects of Foucault’s conceptualization of the subject as a position in the
social and historical field with Peter Sloterdijk’s re-thinking of human interiority in *Bubbles*, Merleau-Ponty’s prizing of embodiment, and Benjamin’s concept of modernity as traumatic condition. I begin with a brief introduction to the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron. Section two draws on Foucault’s early work, particularly *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in order to situate the subject position announced in these texts as well as to point out the methodological limits of this approach. Section three supplements Foucault’s privileging of positionality with Sloterdijk’s re-conceptualization of interiority through what he calls a theory of “microspherology.”

Whereas Foucault sees the subject as historically produced by external (social and political) forces or more broadly “power,” and is generally dismissive of psychology, Sloterdijk is interested in the history of how subjects have developed interiorizing perspectives. Neither embracing nor rejecting the metaphysics of various forms of Cartesianism, Sloterdijk instead seeks to describe the historically human impulse to picture oneself as a container of emotions, thoughts, dreams, fantasies, fears, and hopes. I go on in turn to supplement Sloterdijk’s model of the subject with the concept of embodied discourse provided by Merleau-Ponty, and finally end with Benjamin’s thinking of the modern subject as a subject of trauma, which resonates with Sloterdijk’s picture of the fragile, always-about-to-be-de-shelled subject. In sum, the chapter seeks to forge a third way between Foucault’s subject position and Sloterdijk’s sphere in an effort to establish a perspective from which it is possible to see the photographer as at once a subject position and a photographer as a set of lived practices.

### 2.1 The Cases

Nineteenth-century photography was a diverse amalgam of discourses, practices, and technologies that constructed new ways of seeing and knowing that in turn engendered

---

competing theories on the nature of photographic vision. Confusion and controversy centered on the question of whether photographic practice was a means to reveal objective optical truth or whether it was a medium for subjective expression. Cutting through this complex discursive manifold were social, cultural, and political concerns with what it meant to be a photographer, who had the right to call oneself a photographer, and what openings and obstacles confronted the effort to envision oneself as a photographer. The contestations that constituted nineteenth-century photography positioned the photographer in multiple and differing ways. Each case study offers a unique perspective on the incredibly diversified field that was early photography. It will be useful at this stage, then, to briefly introduce my three case studies.

Henry Peach Robinson was born in Ludlow, England and died in 1901. He was the eldest of four children born to John Robinson, a teacher, and his wife Eliza. The young Henry took drawing lessons for a brief spell before taking up an apprenticeship in the bookselling trade. He stayed in the book trade through the early part of his adult life. He first started taking photographs in 1855. In the same year he opened a portrait studio in the town of Leamington.\textsuperscript{58} Portraiture provided a stable source of income for Robinson, but he was avidly seeking to do something more aesthetically adventuresome. At that time a trend was beginning to take shape amongst aesthetically ambitious photographers in England. These photographers, later known as “pictorialists,” took their cues from the so-called Pre-Raphaelites of England. The Pre-Raphaelites and the pictorialist movement are discussed at greater length in chapter three, but it is important to point out for the moment that the Pre-Raphaelites were a group of painters, poets, and critics who opposed the doxa of nineteenth-century realism. They rejected both the idealized

realism of the Renaissance and that of their contemporaries such as Manet. They instead sought to reinvigorate a pre-modern, pre-Renaissance, or pre-Raphaelite aesthetic committed to allegorical and spiritual illumination. The Pre-Raphaelites were anti-modernists. Collectively they sought to re-enchant realism for the purposes of moral edification. In time Robinson would become one of pictorialism’s most steadfast champions and its chief theoretician.

Robinson’s pictorialist work met with high praise and his studio practice flourished. But at the age of thirty-four he was forced to retire from photography due to ill-health brought on by prolonged exposure to hazardous photographic chemicals. His retirement from studio work provided him with the opportunity to reflect and, eventually, to write extensively on the practice of photography and to engage in the ensuing debate on the aesthetic and artistic merit of the new medium. Beginning in 1869 and continuing on for roughly thirty years, Robinson wrote instruction manuals for students of photography. Robinson’s *The Studio and What to Do in It*, published in 1891, which is discussed at length in chapter three, exemplifies Robinson’s strategy for securing the cultural legitimacy of pictorialist photography. Rather than enter into the academic debate on the question of the artistic merit of photography, Robinson sought to secure photography’s cultural legitimacy by codifying and disseminating in teachable form pictorialist techniques. Rather than win the case for the legitimacy of art-photography through academic discussion, Robinson sought to win it practically by training a generation of photographers in pictorialist principles. The strategy of converting abstract aesthetic concerns into practical, teachable principles centered on an effort to codify a set of techniques for the formation of a particular kind of photographer, a particular subject position, namely, that of the pictorialist photographer.
What Robinson was unable to do, however, as will be shown in chapter three, was to identify what photography specifically was beyond vague and unconvincing comparisons to the arts of painting and poetry. Likewise too, Robinson gives no account of what it might mean to be a photographer in ways not prescribed by pictorialist principles. Robinson’s fidelity to pictorialism betrayed a profound anxiety concerning what photography and the photographer was or could be.

Oscar Gustave Rejlander was born in 1813 in Sweden and relocated in England as a young man. He studied art in Rome in the early 1850s. He married a woman named Mary Constable and settled in the industrial town of Wolverhampton. He pursued a career as a painter but with limited critical or financial success. In 1852, Rejlander travelled again to Rome where he first encountered photographs that struck his interest – reproductions of artworks. Rejlander sensed what a benefit these could be to painters who wished to study the Masters but who did not have ready access to museums. On his return to England he and his wife moved to London where Rejlander began to actively pursue a career as a photographer, first by making photographic studies for use by painters. It was through this practice, which proved to be financially rewarding, that Rejlander began to experiment with photography in a more profound way. Rejlander pioneered the technique of combination printing in which multiple negatives are printed together to form the illusion of a single photographic image. It was his mastery of this technique that enabled Rejlander to make his most famous photograph, titled The Two Ways of Life of 1857. With its forthright depiction of naked women, Two Ways of Life, upset many photography critics, including Thomas Sutton who all but dismissed the work as obscene. The

ensuing controversy prompted Rejlander to write a short paper that year, titled “An Apology for Art-Photography.” He read the paper first at the London Photographic Society, to which he had been elected president. It was soon after printed and circulated widely through the photographic press.

Despite its academic sounding title, the “Apology” is really a brief autobiography in which Rejlander retraces the steps that led him to take up the study and practice of photography. The writing follows an aleatory, meandering path. Unlike Robinson’s writings, this text neither presents a case for art-photography in any detail nor does it address the question of how it should be made. Rejlander speaks from a place of ambivalence and uncertainty as to what he himself is doing in doing photography. The life-story told in the “Apology” is a stitched together collection of multiple and conflicting accounts of Rejlander’s origins as a photographer. These accounts are told through a series of narrative personae that consistently undermine the essay’s autobiographical coherence. The essay demonstrates a self-conscious admission of the crisis of identity that haunted early photography and those that practiced it. The “Apology” represents a nascent attempt to come to grips with photography on its own terms, which meant embracing the crisis of identity that marked its early discursive formation.

Julia Margaret Cameron was born Julia Margaret Pattle on June 11, 1815 in Calcutta, India. She was the third daughter of James and Adeline Pattle. James Pattle was an official with the East India Trading Company. The family was comparatively well off and young Margaret was educated in France. Julia Margaret met Charles Hay Cameron, a rising legal scholar and practicing lawyer who was twenty-six years her senior and also in the employ of the East India Trading Company. Charles Cameron’s intellectual interests were not confined to law.

For biographical details see chapter one of Victoria Olsen, From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003).

37
He was also avidly interested in aesthetics. In the early 1840s, Charles published his *Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Charles’s interest in aesthetics was one reason he was supportive of Cameron’s decision to pursue photography. The couple married in February of 1838 in Calcutta and moved to London in 1848.

In England, Cameron began to cultivate an impressive social network that would eventually include the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, the philosopher Thomas Carlyle, and the biologist Charles Darwin, among many others. Cameron was an expert socialite and her connections proved invaluable for her studio practice. Around 1850, Cameron began to spend more and more time at the family’s retreat in the village of Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. Her life there was enlivened by frequent visits from Tennyson and other notables from her elite social circle. But she was also often lonely as her letters from this time clearly indicate. As her children grew, married, or left for school, and with Charles frequently away on business trips abroad, Julia Margaret found herself increasingly bereft of the daily domestic routine she was accustomed to.

By the late 1850s, Cameron began making photography albums as a hobby. These lovingly and carefully decorated albums were often made as gifts to her family and friends. It was Cameron’s interest in making photographic albums that likely motivated her daughter Juley and her husband Norman to give Cameron a camera for a Christmas gift in 1864. Cameron began to study photography in earnest at this time. At Freshwater she converted the family chicken coop into a studio, which she called (as was common at the time) her “glass house” owing to the many skylights she had installed as was needed in the days before electric lighting. Her social network provided her with models of means, which enabled her to establish her reputation as a portraitist in influential social circles. But her ambitions did not stop there.
By the late 1860s, Cameron followed the pictorialist turn and began making art-photographs based on Classical and Christian themes. She forged a unique aesthetic marked most significantly by her use of “soft-focus.” In 1874, Cameron’s work was publicly recognized through a travelling retrospective that toured England, America, and the Continent. Cameron wrote a short autobiographical memoir titled *Annals of My Glass House* to accompany the exhibition. The text traces Cameron’s entrance into photographic practice and charts her early successes and failures. Her writing, like her work, as chapter five demonstrates, offers a profound rethinking of the act of photography by foregrounding the body in motion as opposed to the poised or forcibly restrained body of “still” photography. The *Annals* recasts photography as a fluid medium in contrast to the rigid codification of techniques espoused by dogmatic pictorialists. The *Annals* marks out a position in the field of nineteenth-century photography beyond the stylistic enclosure of pictorialism and its unspoken identity crisis. The very ambiguity of photography offered Cameron degrees of freedom for the practice of photography, which in turn opened up novel social and psychical spaces within the otherwise restrictive field of Victorian gender and class relations.

Schematically, the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron illumine three distinct subject positions within the variegated and contradictory field of nineteenth-century photography. Robinson marks the position of the photographer as middle class professional and aesthetic challenger to the fine arts. Rejlander marks the confrontation with photography’s ontological identity crisis giving rise to a split subject position of the photographer. Cameron marks the gendered space of photographic production and the challenge to that space and to the rigid, inflexible aesthetic norms of popular and pictorialist practice.

2.2 Points
The texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron mark social and psychical stress points in the constitution of the nineteenth-century photographer. These points or positions lie at the interstices between art and science, between nature and machine, between subjective expression and objective truth, and masculine and feminine. From a subject position perspective, Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron are names for differing sets of statements and the correlative conditions of possibility for making them. It is the Foucault of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* who radically sets the terms of this form of historical reading when he notes:

the subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation – either in substance, or in function. He [or she] is not in fact the cause, origin, or the starting-point of the phenomenon of the written or spoken articulation of a sentence; nor is it that meaningful intention which, silently anticipating words, orders them like the visible body of its intuition; it is not the constant, motionless, unchanging focus of a series of operations that are manifested, in turn, on the surface of discourse through the statements. It is a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals.\(^{61}\)

Foucault jettisons the idea that a statement is the product of an intentional subject. Rather for Foucault it is the speaking or stating subject which is produced through discourse. At any given historical moment there exist, Foucault argues, implicit and explicit social rules that regulate what can be said. But these rules are flexible.

In an earlier text, *The Order of Things*, Foucault stressed that discourse in any historical period is governed by a fixed set of rules that he calls an “episteme.” But in *Archaeology* he abandons the use of that term and calls the system of rules the “archive.” The archive, for

---

Foucault, is not simply a collection of historical facts or documents. Foucault writes: “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.” Archival analysis, in Foucault’s sense, aims to understand how new or “unique” statements appear as such within the regulative structure of a given historical epoch. The Foucauldian archival researcher thus seeks out not only what constrains statements at a certain historical moment, but also what makes it possible for novel ones to appear. The archive (unlike the episteme) is conceptually characterized by flexibility, by the recognition of the possibility that the rules of statement making are subject to change. As Lois McNay notes in her study of Foucault, “the archive is...not a limiting or constraining formation but an enabling system of rules which is never entirely complete and which is, therefore, always open to change.” Researching the archive, in Foucault’s sense, means researching not merely what it was possible to say or do during a certain historical period, but also what rules enabled the transformability of statements and acts during that particular time.

While the Foucault of Archaeology aims to discover the rules for the production of novel historical statements, he is for the most part silent on how “individuals” arrive on the scene of discourse and embody positions within it. As McNay notes, “the social processes that determine how individuals come to occupy the ‘vacant place’ [of discourse]...is not considered” by Foucault. McNay continues:

Discursive subject positions become a priori categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion. Indeed ‘different individuals’ [Foucault’s phrase] creates difficulties because it implies that individuals have a unified, prediscursive

---

62 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 145.
63 McNay, Foucault, 66.
64 McNay, Foucault, 77.
existence which enables them to step freely in and out of the different available subject positions.⁶⁵

Foucault’s later work, however, does seek a more nuanced account of subject formation. From the third volume of his *History of Sexuality*, titled *The Care of the Self*, clear through the Collège de France lectures, Foucault’s thinking focuses squarely on the question of how subjectivity and specifically selfhood are constituted through what he calls “techniques of the self.”⁶⁶ Foucault traces the emergence and transformation of the care of the self from Ancient Greece and Rome through the Christian era. Foucault’s aim in this later work is to show how the care of the self transformed from an ascetic practice in the Ancient world to a moral hindrance in the Christian era. Foucault’s late work shifts to a micrological focus on how power and knowledge are exercised in intimate relations, including the introspective relation between one’s thought and one’s sense of self. Foucault asserts in an interview in 1984 that his later work seeks to grasp the historical evolution and function of the “exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and attain a certain mode of being.”⁶⁷ The interviewer finds this surprising. He confesses that he assumed that he, Foucault, had always steadfastly “refused to speak about the subject in general.”⁶⁸ Foucault responds:

No I had not ‘refused.’ I perhaps had some formulations which were inadequate. What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a theory of the subject –as could be done

---

⁶⁵ McNay, *Foucault*, 77.
⁶⁸ Fornet-Betancourt, *et al.*, “The Ethic of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984, 112.
in phenomenology and existentialism—and that, beginning from a theory of the subject, you come to pose the question of knowing, for example, how such and such a form of knowledge was possible.\textsuperscript{69}

Foucault is keen to point out that, in his view, his work does not seek to displace the subject \textit{per se}, but rather to displace the philosophic practice of inquiring into the conditions of knowledge according to a trans-historical, a-priori model of the subject. Foucault insists on a methodological reversal of the ratio-centric knowledge schema. Foucault theorizes the subject as an “effect” of certain knowledge practices or what he later calls “games of truth.”\textsuperscript{70} Foucault’s historico-ontological method does not jettison the subject; it jettisons the idea that there is one, unique, and true subject that is the ground of all knowledge. Foucault here, as in his essay “What is an Author?,” is keen to distance his position from an uncritical rejection of the subject \textit{tout court}. Foucault instead sees the subject as a historical variable. For the philosopher there has been a host of subjects produced though historically specific processes of discourse formation and diffusion. \textit{Where there is a discourse, there forms a subject} is the constant refrain of Foucault’s work. His late work supplements a macroscopic view of the subject as a product of socio-historical discourse with a microscopic focus on processes of self-constitution – the discourse of the self to the self. Foucault comments:

You do not have towards yourself the same kind of relationships when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up at a meeting, and when you try to fulfill yourself in a sexual relationship. There are no doubt some relationships and some interferences between these different kinds of subject but we are not in the

\textsuperscript{69} Fornet-Betancourt, \textit{et al.} “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 121.

\textsuperscript{70} Fornet-Betancourt, \textit{et al.} “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” Foucault uses this term throughout the interview.
presence of the same kind of subject. In each case, we play, we establish with one’s self some different form of relationship.\(^{71}\)

Foucault here presents a model of the subject as changeable from moment to moment as it is (re)produced though relations of knowledge and power. Foucault concludes that “it is precisely the historical constitution of these different forms of subject relating to games of truth that interest me.”\(^{72}\) This concluding remark exposes the central problem of Foucault’s late work, namely, how to align his macroscopic view of the subject as an effect of historical discourse with his microscopic view of the subject as an effect of a continually shifting set of power/knowledge relations. Added to this, Foucault’s late work also seeks to account for the role of the self in its very constitution without falling into psychologism. The task was and remains immense.

Foucault’s late work clearly tries to move beyond his earlier formulation of the subject as a one-dimensional, historically specific and discursively situated position or point in a constellated field of historical discourse. Although it is manifestly evident in his late work, traces of his dissatisfaction with this point schema also show up in his early work. Consider his enigmatic aside in *Archaeology*, that discourse should not be imagined as having the “appearance of a monotonous, endless plain that I attributed to it…when I spoke of ‘the surface of discourse.’”\(^{73}\) Foucault goes on to note that if discourse could be morphologically figured it would be comprised of a plurality of “heterogeneous regions,” each with a “complex volume.”\(^{74}\) Foucault’s effort to see discourse as a shape may have sprung from a desire to better picture how discourse not only positions but psychically inhabits its subjects. While Foucault voices passing interest (in the same interview) in Freudian inspired psychological and psychoanalytical

\(^{71}\) Fornet-Betancourt, *et al.* “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 121.

\(^{72}\) Fornet-Betancourt, *et al.* “The Ethic of the Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 121.

\(^{73}\) Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 145.

\(^{74}\) Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 145.
concepts, including “repression and interiorization,” he is suspicious that this way of thinking inexorably reinforces individualistic conceptions of the subject that serve to obscure the shaping power of history and society. Foucault’s nascent attempt to re-picture the relation between discourse and subject or even outside (social and historical forces) and inside or interior life (dreams, memories, fantasies, etc.) has found its metaphysical pioneer, I argue, in the person (or persona) of Peter Sloterdijk, to whose work I now turn. Sloterdijk’s work provides a salient supplement to Foucault’s concept of subject position. Taken together these two perspectives allow for a richer description of the historical and psychical processes through which Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron constituted themselves as photographers.

2.3 Bubbles

Sloterdijk advances his theory of the subject in Bubbles, the first installment of his philosophico-historical trilogy titled Spheres. Bubbles aims at nothing less than a wholesale re-theorization of the relation between subject, object, and world in the Modern Age as told and imaged through the form of the sphere. This at first might sound whimsical if not preposterous. However, with reference to a dizzying array of examples from art, cosmology, psychology, mysticism, medicine, literature, philosophy, and much else, Sloterdijk shows how the sphere has been central to the imaginary of the Modern Age.

Sloterdijk begins with an oft-repeated truism. The Copernican Revolution destroyed the comforting illusion that humans dwell under the protective spheres of the heavens watched over by their creator. The ascent of humanism in the Renaissance, the scientific and political revolutions of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Age, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, in short the Modern Age, repeatedly exposed humanity to the cold indifference of an accidental world. In response, the Modern Age furnished itself with new structures designed to
protect it from the effects of its own progress. Sloterdijk writes: “To oppose the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere through the open windows of the Enlightenment, modern humanity...attempts to balance out its shelllessness in space, following the shattering of its celestial domes.”

For Sloterdijk, modernity is not simply The Age of Reason. It is also a deeply metaphysical even mystical period. It seeks through a host of means to recapture the protective guarantees of the pre-modern world. Sloterdijk’s analysis has a certain affinity with the view advanced by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely that modern Reason never broke with its supposed enemy – mysticism. As Adorno and Horkheimer argue, Reason underwent a mystical enchantment as it promised nothing short of redemption for a blind and ignorant humanity. Sloterdijk, however, takes an imaginative leap that would have made Adorno and Horkheimer deeply uncomfortable. Sloterdijk proposes a psychical and social metaphysics: human subjectivity is described as a fragile bubble—a self-enclosed sphere—floating haphazardly amidst the sharp edges of the modern world. The danger of the modern world has given rise, Sloterdijk argues, to a whole host of social, political, and psychological therapies designed ultimately to shield fragile subjectivities from the brute materiality of an unkind world. Sloterdijk writes:

What makes the Modern Age special is that after the turn to the Copernican world, the sky as an immune system was suddenly useless. Modernity is characterized by the technical production of its immunities and the increasing removal of its safety structures from the traditional theological and cosmological narratives. Industrial-scale civilization,

the welfare state, the world market and the media sphere: all these large-scale projects aim, in a shellless time, for an imitation of the now impossible, imaginary spheric security.\textsuperscript{77}

Modern subjects are “disappointed, cold and abandoned;” hence, Sloterdijk argues, they “wrap themselves in surrogates of older conceptions of the world, as long as these still seem to hold a trace of the warmth of old human illusions of encompassedness.”\textsuperscript{78}

Sloterdijk pictures the history of the Modern Age as a morphological venture on the part of humanity to create in-dwelling spaces – bubbles – to shield itself from the world it made. These bubble worlds seek to form inter-globular links through intimate encounter, love, domination, exchange, and so forth. \textit{Bubbles} presents a history of the Western subject as a subject in search of a lost metaphysical shelter to protect its transparently fragile self. Sloterdijk’s model, contra much contemporary theory of the last forty-plus years, privileges the concept of interiority (indeed the title of chapter two of \textit{Bubbles} is “Thinking the Interior”). Sloterdijk favors an epistemological prioritization of the psychical over the social – the inside over the outside – but with the caveat that the two in the end must be thought together. He writes: “though sphere theory by its nature begins as a psychology of inner spatial formation...it inevitably develops further into a general theory of autogenous vessels. This theory provides the abstract form for all immunologies.”\textsuperscript{79}

Sloterdijk refuses to refuse the concept of interiority as many of his contemporaries do. Rejecting what he calls “interior deniers,” Sloterdijk’s aim, however, is not to credit a notion of interiority as a pre-given innate kernel of identity exemplified by Descartes’ “I.” Sloterdijk

\textsuperscript{77} Sloterdijk, \textit{Bubbles}, 25.
\textsuperscript{78} Sloterdijk, \textit{Bubbles}, 26.
\textsuperscript{79} Sloterdijk, \textit{Bubbles}, 57.
instead is interested in charting the various ways in which the modern human subject has thought of itself as an interiorized and interiorizing being. Sloterdijk seeks to supplement the Foucauldian focus on the shaping power of external social and political forces with a psychological emphasis in order to render a fuller picture of the history of the Western subject. Sloterdijk conceptualizes interiority as at once inside and outside the subject. Taking a cue from psychoanalysis, Sloterdijk sees the inside of the subject as composed of experiences had in the world “out there.” But this inside is seared by the residuum of memory, which through individuated action in turn affects the outside world. Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens note that the Sloterdijkian bubble resembles “elements of a Foucauldian dispositif in its mesh of discourse, practice and objects and in its potential to ‘shape’ subjects.”

Foucault’s term “dispositif,” which can be translated as “apparatus,” refers to the assemblage of discourses, practices, bodies, and institutions through which subject formation occurs. Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens go on to note that Sloterdijk “directs his attention to what Foucault call[s] ‘practices of self.’ Indeed, Sloterdijk’s work appears to move through similar phases from macro-spheres to micro-spheres and practices of the self.” But the Foucauldian dispositif and the Sloterdijkian bubble are different in that the dispositif is not a theory of subjects but of the process of subject formation, whereas the bubble is a theory about subjects that stipulates that a subject – at least a Western modern subject – is a being that seeks with typological regularity to ground and enclose itself. Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens note: “With Sloterdijk, ontology becomes ontotopology.” They conclude: “What Sloterdijk gains with his description of ‘spheres’ is, ontologically, a way

---

82 Schinkel, Noordegraaf-Eelens, “Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Acrobatics,” 18.
83 Schinkel, Noordegraaf-Eelens, “Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Acrobatics,” 12.
to conceptualize social life as consisting of the precarious building and break-down of spatial collectivities.”

Sloterdijk thus proposes a psycho-sociological history of the subject. He credits the modern study of the psyche (psychology and psychoanalysis principally) for “explaining that all humans live constructivistically, and that every one of them practices the profession of a wild interior designer.” Sloterdijk sees modern psychology as archaeological evidence that the Western human subject sought to fashion its identity in the form of a psychical container filled with memories, regrets, dreams, ambitions, and so forth. Foucault would surely bristle at Sloterdijk’s praise for modern psychology’s poetics of interiority. Foucault’s work insists over and over that it is necessary to look outside the subject to understand subjectivity at all. But Sloterdijk’s bubble project in no way disputes this. To illustrate this, consider for a moment a soap bubble.

A bubble begins its existence as a flat shimmering liquid surface suspended precariously in the bubble blower’s loop. When blown upon, this thin fragile sheet expands and folds upon itself and forms a bubble. Now imagine that the bubble loop represents a certain point in historical time and space, and the soap represents a certain admixture of discourse. Foucault sees the subject as framed by the apparatus or dispositif of its production. He sees the subject as the soap suspended in the loop – a concentration of discourse at a particular historico-temporal juncture. Sloterdijk sees the subject as the formed bubble floating in historical and social space. What this illustration is designed to show is that Sloterdijk’s perspective does not replicate Cartesianism. The interior of the bubble is made of the same stuff as the exterior – air and soap. But the spaces are distinct. Likewise the interior of the Sloterdijkian bubble is composed of the

84 Schinkel, Noordegraaf-Eelens, “Peter Sloterdijk’s Spherological Acrobatics,” 13.
85 Sloterdijk, Bubbles, 84.
world “out there” – society, history, and experience. But the inside space is different from the outside, and this difference matters. The process of bubble formation is a process by which the outside becomes the inside – a process of interiorizing – which produces and is driven by the subject simultaneously.

Despite its somewhat esoteric nature, Sloterdijk’s project has affinities with some recent work in the sociology of knowledge. Neil Gross, a pioneer in this field, offers a methodological point of departure in his recent socio-biography of the American neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007). Gross’ work may seem far from the concerns of this study. But what is salient for the present discussion is Gross’ re-theorization of the relation between discourse and the formation of selfhood. The first section of Gross’ study presents a straightforward biographical account of the life and work of Rorty. But in the second section of the book, Gross offers an account of how it was historically and socially possible for a figure like Rorty to emerge within the academic sphere of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy. Gross asks: what made it possible for Rorty to reject the analytic tradition in the name of a revival of nineteenth-century American pragmatism and nonetheless continue to achieve academic success? How was it possible for Rorty to pull off this institutional shake-up and continue to thrive within the American philosophical establishment?

The finer points of Gross’ argument are obviously not relevant to this study. What is significant is that Gross argues that it is illegitimate to focus exclusively on social, historical, and institutional factors, and to ignore how a given historical actor understands oneself since the very process of self-understanding is part and parcel of the social mechanism. Gross describes the relation between discourse and selfhood not in terms of a unidirectional flow as Foucault seems to. Gross sees the relation between the external world of discourse and the interior psychical
sense of self as an autopoietic system. Gross writes that “much research by social psychologists and others suggests that social action is typically mediated by actors’ own self-understandings.”  

Self-understanding, the processes by which it occurs, the categories it comprises, the means of narration it offers, are all, Gross argues, socially and historically conditioned, but the mediating action of self-understanding recursively generates different modes of social action that reflect the social environment and in turn transform the discursive spaces in which selfhood is fashioned. The external world of discourse is interiorized, as it were, in the fashioning of self-understanding which then loops back into social space in the form of different social actions that are inflected by “actors’ conceptualizations of themselves and their lives.”

Practices of self-understanding such as autobiography in Gross’ view function within a dynamical socio-psychical process that produces the subject of the statement at the same time that the statement itself reconstitutes the social field, if only very slightly, and thus the individual in turn. Gross, like Sloterdijk, thus argues that subjectivity is best described as a constant dynamical relay between outside and inside – between the building of interiorized selfhood as response to and product of external social and historical conditions.

### 2.4 Language and Embodiment

To posit the spherical model (Sloterdijk) over the point model (Foucault) would simply replace one abstract model for another. What goes missing in Foucault and Sloterdijk’s contrasting views on interiority is an account of lived experience. Despite their divergent perspectives, Foucault and Sloterdijk share the same underlying methodological bias, which is that it is proper to treat interiority as a matter of archaeological research. Both steer clear of

---

opening the question from the perspective of its lived conditions. Both share – for different reasons – a resistance to phenomenology. But, as this study will show (particularly in chapter five), phenomenology offers an immensely powerful philosophical means for negotiating the complex relations between photographic practice, life-writing, the constitution of identity, and the performance of selfhood iterated in the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron.

For the archaeologist, phenomenology names a stratum of historical discourse (philosophic discourse in this case). The archaeologist can speak about phenomenology but not through it. To the archaeologist or the genealogist phenomenology is a subject to be investigated solely in terms of its historical conditions of possibility. But phenomenology, whose primary investigative subjects are sense, embodiment, and perception, lived experience is accessible to philosophical reflection. Phenomenology is not for this reason superior to archaeology. Nor should a facile distinction be drawn between the two perspectives. Archaeology investigates the historical conditions of possibility for phenomena. Phenomenology investigates the experience of phenomena. But arguably they both utilize a methodological procedure derived from the founder of phenomenology – Edmund Husserl.

Husserl’s method for investigating experience required what he called “bracketing” the truth/appearance distinction. The phenomenologist, for Husserl, is not to ask: is what I experience merely an appearance or the truth? Rather one is to bracket that question and concentrate one’s philosophic energies on describing the experience as a phenomenon in its own right. On this view, for example, a dream, though imaginary, is experienced as real. The fact that the dreamer wakes up and realizes she was dreaming, for the phenomenologist, is immaterial with respect to the reality of the dream as experienced. The procedure of bracketing also obtains – in a different form – for archaeological research. The archaeologist, as evidenced by Foucault’s
early studies, brackets the epistemological truth-value of the discourse under examination. This question is bracketed or suspended in favour of inquiring into the conditions of possibility for the discourse itself. Foucault, however, remained deeply suspicious of the concept of the phenomenological “given” of experience. In Foucault’s view, the power of discourse is primary in that it is discourse that shapes and to a large extent makes experience intelligible. Discourse for Foucault both describes and constitutes phenomena. Still, Foucault’s archaeological method employs a quasi-phenomenological bracketing procedure as Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus have shown in order to epistemologically open discursive practices to view.  

Phenomenology and archaeology/genealogy both “bracket” the question of truth in an absolute sense in order to inquire into the specific conditions of phenomena. One could plot this intersectional relation between phenomenology and archaeology as a chiasm. The phenomenologist studies the experience of phenomena. The archaeologist studies the history of phenomena. But at the centre of each project – and thus at the centre of this chiasm – is the bracketing procedure. In both instances, the elucidation of phenomena depends on a procedural decision to bracket the question of what is true in an absolute sense in favour of asking what is the experience of the phenomena (phenomenology) and what are its conditions of possibility (archaeology). To use a term favoured by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, there is an “intertwinement” of archaeology and phenomenology at the level of their fundamental methodological procedure.  

The passage from archaeology to phenomenology follows a folded path like passing from one side of the Mobius strip to the other. Thus to pass now from the historical question of

---

interiority raised by Foucault and Sloterdijk to the question of autobiographical experience via Maurice Merleau-Ponty is to pass along a methodological continuum.

To write the story of one’s life – to write autobiography – is a fraught task. But one need not rehearse the tired epitaphs that there is no “I” qua self for “I” is always a grammatical subject and not a person. Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and many others have insisted on eschewing metaphysical conceptualizations of the self as a discrete entity, complete unto itself and existing prior to acts of speech or writing. For poststructuralists, the self comes into being retrospectively through discursive acts either initiated by the subject or projected onto him or her by exogenous forces, and frequently both. The self that becomes accessible by writing is a paradoxical phantasm: it at once provides the language of personhood, identity, and individuality, and yet these very categories are linguistic and hence generalizable as an abstract code of signification. Language is understood to be not expressive, but rather productive of, the subject. This view, now well-entrenched, admirably broke free of metaphysically inflated conceptions of selfhood; it also obscured to some degree the complexity of self-creation. For it is one thing to insist that writing produces the self – in the form of the author, for example, retroactively – but it is another thing to assert in a general manner that all claims to selfhood necessarily lose their respectability on these grounds. Rather, one might say that it is precisely that a model of a non-stable, shifting, and linguistically iterable self opens with the structural/poststructural insight.

It is this conception of the self that proves methodologically useful for interpreting the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron. Their texts are case studies in the emergence of selfhood in and through photographic and textual production. Their work bears testament to a desire to know who they were becoming through photography and writing. To read Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron thus means reading not only the words signed by their texts, but the
desire to be readable for themselves and for others. Autobiography is not only a genre: it is also a desire.

To claim that autobiography is both a genre and a desire is to theorize language as an intersectional medium that spans body and system. To speak and to write is a gesture. It is a bodily event. But meaningful articulation is possible only by virtue of the existence of a linguistic system. A linguistic system is also a system of rules (grammar), and these rules are abstract, arbitrary—a matter of convention as Ferdinand de Saussure argued. The subject as a thinking being, the poststructuralist declares, is impossible to conceive outside the conditions of language, since it is through language that thought is made. Even the claim to be a thinking being is, of course, itself a linguistic claim. If it is through language that any account of the “I” is possible, then it would appear that all that can be said about oneself must be said through a linguistic system that is in essence an impersonal, abstract, and arbitrary set of rules—a code—that makes communication possible: “I” is a pronoun and never a person. Much important work has been accomplished through this perspective, and deconstruction is one name for that accomplishment, but other conclusions can be reached. One is offered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Merleau-Ponty takes aim at two views of language. One view of language he calls the “intellectualist” and the other the “empiricist.” The intellectualist sees language as a container and vehicle—a medium—for thought. On this view, language has no meaning in itself. Meaning is a matter of thought not of words. The intellectualist will ask for the “thought behind the words” and seek meaning there. Merleau-Ponty rejects this view on the same grounds as many a

---

poststructuralist would later. (But these reasons can also be found in many other philosophers, including Wittgenstein.) The position that there are thoughts behind words falls into a logical trap. The question – what thought lies behind words? – is answered always in words. The argument that “thought” determines the meaning of words can neither be confirmed nor falsified since “thought” in itself (if such a thing exists) is effaced at the instant it is cited or described. The “empiricist” view, on the other hand, sees linguistic meaning as entirely determined by the mechanical rules of a linguistic system: meaning just is linguistic in essence. The meaning of words, in this view, is determined by the system of which they are a part. The empiricist view holds that no thoughts – and thus no subject – can properly be said to “lie behind” words. The intellectualist view is an argument for the existence of a rational agent – a subject. The empiricist view is an argument for a subjectless system. Merleau-Ponty argues that this apparent antimony – subject or system – should be reformulated as subject and system.

Spoken and written meaning is, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, both a bodily gesture and an operational effect conditioned by a linguistic system. Meaning is made at the intersection of the two. Neither pole is solely determinate. Meaning in this model is neither prior to the utterance or inscription (the intellectualist’s view) nor is it determined ipso facto by the rules of a language system (the empiricist’s view). Meaning is a making, a process, which occurs through the intertwinment of body and system.

Taking bodily movement as his starting point, Merleau-Ponty writes: “I do not need to visualize external space and my body in order to move one within the other. It is enough that they exist for me, and that they form a certain field of action spread around me.”91 Conceiving language as a space too – a space through which the gesture of articulation moves – Merleau-

Ponty continues: “In the same way, I do not need to visualize the word in order to know and pronounce it. It is enough that I possess its articulatory and acoustic style as one of the modulations, one of the possible uses of my body.”\(^{92}\) To make meaning in language is to involve one’s embodied self in the logic of a linguistic system: neither system nor subject remains the same in this encounter. Articulation “brings to life...an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or new dimension of our experience.”\(^{93}\) An instance of language is an instance of a subject: the two are created in the ephemeral simultaneity of articulation. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, “thought is no ‘internal’ thing, and does not exist independently of the world and words.”\(^{94}\) Thought imagined as “prior to expression is thought already constituted and expressed...through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life.”\(^{95}\)

On this last point – “the illusion of an inner life” – one could argue that Merleau-Ponty is rejecting interiority. Not so. He is rather re-thinking the experience of inner life as a process cultivated intersubjectively. Inner life – selfhood – is philosophically retained as a phenomenal experience, but it is understood as an effect produced by moving through the shared articulatory space of language. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, “word and speech...cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world.”\(^{96}\) This “presence” is not a mere wrapping for thought. Nor is it an idea, a thought, statically present. It is the trace of movement in the space of language. It is the phenomenal registration of the act of meaning making that in one instant opens both a system and a body to

---

93 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 212.
95 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 213.
96 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.
view. One becomes an “I” though the gesture of articulation. The “I” is a thin index of the coming into presence of a subject. The subject here is a subject of language, but not subject to it. Collapsing the two into one another effaces the difference between body and system: a difference registered in the torsion of language itself.

Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s texts can be understood in Merleau-Ponty’s sense as figurations of a subject in the process of becoming. This subject is “the photographer.” The photographer emerges in and though their autobiographical articulations. To read the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron as evocations of the photographer as a subject of becoming provides a methodological pivot point to move back and forth between the discursive viewpoint offered by Foucault’s concept of subject-position (the point model) and Sloterdijk’s interiorized perspective (the sphere model). Phenomenology offers a go-between – a passage – between the archaeological conception of the subject, which privileges exteriority, and the spherological conception, which privileges interiority.

2.5 Interiors

In the case studies to follow, archaeology (research into historical discourse) and phenomenology (especially in chapter five) are intertwined in an effort to keep in view the biography of the photographer in question, and the autobiographical becoming of the subject of the photographer at the moment of its historical advent. Between historical system and lived life, between body and a language system, the following case studies are themselves studies in a method that refuses to relegate autobiography to linguistics or to the mere “illusion of inner-life.” To jettison what Sloterdijk calls “thinking the interior” is to abandon historical processes of self-
understanding to the realm of ideological mystification.\textsuperscript{97} To be clear discipline in its epistemological and punitive forms does shape one’s sense of self as Foucault rightly argues. It is also clear that the autobiographical “I” is not the expression of an indivisible, motionless, intentional being enclosed within a structure of self-identity. This is metaphysics and it is reified in the cultural sphere in the myth of the Author as both Foucault and Barthes demonstrate in different ways.\textsuperscript{98} But if taken as far as Foucault seems to in \textit{Archaeology}, this framework leads to a drastic and hasty conclusion: the “I” is simply an ideological illusion that compels humans to ignore how social and historical factors shape them and therefore leads to political and social apathy.

With Sloterdijk and Merleau-Ponty, however, it is possible to draw a distinction between interiorizing processes and interiority as such. Firstly, one can justifiably abandon the concept of the self as an indivisible kernel of interiority on the grounds that this is confuted by everyday experience. Martin Heidegger gave this practical experience a philosophic term: “beings-in-the-world,”\textsuperscript{99} and as Luce Irigaray notes, one of the effects of being in the world is that “cultivating interiority” becomes a necessity.\textsuperscript{100} To live in the difficult modern world requires fragile human subjects to establish conscious and unconscious strategies to withstand its onslaught. Photography was surely part of, and a response to, that onslaught.

Photography hurled modern subjects headlong into a regime of invasive visibility. Personal character and outward appearance already linked in the nineteenth century by physiognomy and phrenology became matters of seemingly “scientific objectivity” with the

\textsuperscript{97} See Sloterdijk, \textit{Bubbles}, especially chapter one.
\textsuperscript{98} See Foucault, “What is an Author?”; and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author.”
advent of photography. Writing on the invention of the “mug-shot” in nineteenth-century photography, Alan Sekula notes: “A physiognomic code of visual interpretation of the body’s signs – specifically the signs of the head – and a technique of mechanized visual representation [i.e. photography] intersected in the 1840s”\textsuperscript{101} The body was thus transformed into a site for the mapping of the self’s inner character. Physiognomy, as Shawn Michelle Smith argues in *American Archives*, underwrote the persistent belief that a photograph of someone can reveal something about that person. Smith argues that nineteenth-century photography “produced a model of subjectivity in which exterior appearance was imagined to reflect interior essence.”\textsuperscript{102} Smith subtly and powerfully extends the work of Alan Sekula and John Tagg among others by focusing on how nineteenth-century photography, bolstered by the “scientific” blessing of physiognomy and eugenics, constructed the idea that the external body visibly bore evidentiary traces of a person’s mental and moral profile. Photography appeared to promise the nineteenth-century observer not only an empirical record of the body, but also a readable text of interior essences. The utopia of at last securing a science of the visible via photography was extended to the fantasy of seeing the unseen inner essences of one’s character. Hence, Smith draws the profound insight that nineteenth-century photography “highlighted the very constructed and contingent nature of interiorities.”\textsuperscript{103} Smith continues that if interiority was the essence imagined to be stable as external signs fluctuated, it was stabilized only through the proliferation of surface signs, of representations of the body, called upon to make such essences readable, apparent, knowable. The photographic sign

\textsuperscript{103} Smith, *American Archives*, 5.
invited one to participate in a leap of faith whereby the body might serve as an index to an imagined essence.\textsuperscript{104}

Smith illuminates the problematic emergence of the photographic-based discourse she calls “superficial depths.” Of course, “superficial” signifies in two ways for Smith. On the one hand it refers to the depthless surface of the photographic image and on the other to the constrained and limiting character of the discourse of interior essences. But it must be asked: are “interior essence” and interiority absolutely synonymous?

Interiority need not be construed as solely the metaphysical assertion of the existence of interior essences and as such diametrically opposed to a social constructivist viewpoint. Indeed, the force of social construction may be said to produce the very division between one’s position within a social matrix and the unseen character of the experience of occupying that very position. Hence photography may be said to both reify the physiognomic gaze while simultaneously creating a discursive gap between what the photograph purports to show and what it does not or cannot. On this score, it is worth noting that the writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron speak most to what is not clear, articulable, visible, and knowable about being a photographer, and thus give voice to experiences of inarticulacy, conceptual invisibility, and sometimes downright stupefaction as to what photography might be and what it might mean to identify as a photographer. In their very struggle to articulate what it might mean to be a photographer, Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron indexed the emergence of a new form of subjectivity created in the interstices of photographic practice, photographic imagery, and modern technologies of reproduction as Walter Benjamin so aptly demonstrates in his reading of August Sander’s famed

\textsuperscript{104} Smith, \textit{American Archives}, 5.
photo-essay *Face of Our Time*. A brief digression through Benjamin’s text will help to clarify this point.

*Face of Our Time* is a suite of portraits of people. Almost all the people in Sander’s photographs are left unidentified save for a single line denoting their profession. The book showcases the diversity of Weimar culture at a moment when, with the advent of National Socialism, such diversity was becoming the object of paranoia and oppression. For Benjamin, the book allegorizes the modern physiognomic imperative to be seen and judged by one’s outward appearance alone. It illuminates this gaze – as ramified by photography – the photographic gaze. Benjamin grasps this gaze’s corrosive effect on the conception of the self as a private, autonomous agent. It’s this imperious photographic subjection that the photographer sets in motion with the clicking of the camera. This gaze, Benjamin argues, however, also establishes a new sociality bound by the demands of a new technology, a new form of seeing, and a new mode of subject production – photography. Benjamin expands on this point in his essay on Baudelaire.

Following to an extent the model of cultural historiography inaugurated by Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life” of 1848, Benjamin seeks out the trace of his own time in the new gestures of the body or what Baudelaire calls “the sketch of manners.” Benjamin writes:

In the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of the match brought forth a number of other inventions which have one thing in common: a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps…With regard to countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the “snapping” of the photographer had the greatest

---


consequences. Henceforth a touch of the finger sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time….Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic in a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery.  

The hand of the photographer functions here as what Benjamin calls a “thought figure.” Its sudden movement captures the speed of modernity: in a flash the body is made into an image; in a flash the haptic collides with the optic. The shock, the trauma, of modernity on individual and social bodies manifests itself, Benjamin argues, in a symptomatology of abrupt movements from the convulsions of the hysteric to the snap of the photographer. The body of modernity is convulsive. It is spurred on by schizophrenic commands to accelerate: work faster, drive faster, spend faster, produce, and reproduce. Thus the body of modernity is subjected to a new and brutal training commanded by the abstract logic of automation, which speeds and slows the body’s progression through the “dangerous intersections” of the modern maelstrom. The modern body is a battery for Benjamin: both battered and energized by a constant stream of shocks, collisions, and “nervous impulses.” The photographer, for Benjamin, thus figures the collision of industrial technologies and human bodies. Like the lighting of a match or the sudden lurch of the automobile as it shifts into drive at the instant the traffic signal goes green, the photographer’s “snap” is a symptom of life lived at modern speed.


Benjamin sees modernity as a time of trauma. His experience of the trauma of modernity was part of his living memory. Consider these lines by Benjamin that recount the introduction of the telephone into his childhood home.

Not many of those who use the apparatus [the telephone] know what devastation it once wreaked in family circles. The sound with which it rang between two and four in the afternoon, when a schoolfriend wished to speak to me, was an alarm signal that menaced not only my parents’ midday nap but the historical era that underwrote and enveloped this siesta. Disagreements with switchboard operators were the rule, to say nothing of the threats and curses uttered by my father when he had the complaints department on the line. But his real orgies were reserved for cranking the handle, to which he gave himself up for minutes at a time, nearly forgetting himself in the process. His hand, on these occasions was a dervish overcome by frenzy.109

Benjamin portrays the introduction of the telephone into the home from a personal and paradigmatic perspective. The ring of the telephone was an alarm in the Benjamin household: it awoke his parents not only from their daily nap, but from the historical epoch in which it had been possible to sleep undisturbed by its ring. Suddenly awakened by the ring of the telephone, the tempo of the Benjamin household was reset by the rhythms of modernity. Cranking the phone, snapping the camera, striking the match are indices of an emergent grammar of modern gestures; they are Benjamin’s freeze-frame studies of the traumatized modern body in movement. The Benjamin household was both the object of technological modernity’s intrusive reach and the subject from which protests and “curses were uttered.” The caller, as figured by Benjamin, like the photographer, is a combination portrait – a figure made of multiple images – a

figure of trauma, adaptation, and resistance. The snap of the photographer, like the cranking of the caller, were new gestures, new actions, by which the pelting abuse of technological modernity was both further energized and interrupted. The photographer, like the caller, for Benjamin brings the over-accelerated speed of modernity at least to the image of a halt and offers the chance to pierce its illusion of instantaneity and transparency.

Sloterdijk like Benjamin sees the modern subject as having to work tirelessly to insulate itself from the technological environment it creates supposedly to make its life easier. The photographer seen in the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron (on this Sloterdijkian-Benjaminian view) is likewise a figure who carved out a space for itself from which it was possible to momentarily arrest and redirect the flow of visual modernity. The autobiographical work of thinking one’s self as photographer can be understood then as a means of surviving the process of modern subject formation by cultivating a measure of interiority – at once an inside and an outside – which established a place or space for the photographer within the harsh light of modern visibility. The “I” of the photographer that Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron enunciate in different ways is not some prediscursive, motionless, subject sealed within the solid carapace of interiority. It is rather an “I” formed through a machinic and social relay between the operator and camera, a prosthetic assemblage, a complex discursive amalgam, which produces an interiorizing experience. Robinson sought to carve out a place, a studio, in the sphere of professionalized bourgeois labor. The “Apology” expresses Rejlander’s autobiographical desire to hollow out a place for his emergent sense of his self as photographer. And in writing the Annals, Cameron opened new dimensions, even a new “society” as she calls it, within the
strictures and structures of Victorian domesticity and femininity.\textsuperscript{110} These texts show how each photographer, in different ways, was engaged in processes of self-formation. The quest to understand what it meant to be a photographer was the lens through which Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron surveyed the relation between human and machine in the age of industrial-scale modernity. By posing the question of what it meant to be a photographer, Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron were in their own way seeking to find or construct a place, a shelter, a protective sphere or bubble to withstand the onslaught of the Modern Age.

Chapter 3

Photography and Pedagogy:

The Case of Henry Peach Robinson

Chapter two theorized the historical emergence of the nineteenth-century photographer by combining Foucault’s concept of subject position and Sloterdijk’s bubble model. This chapter examines the case of British photographer Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901) from these two perspectives. Robinson is widely recognized by photography scholars as one of the most influential of nineteenth-century photographers. He was a founding member of the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring in 1892, a group of photographers committed to establishing photography as an art. This group proved instrumental in developing a style of art-photography that came to be known as “pictorialism.” Robinson did more than any other photographer of his time to codify the principles of pictorialism (these will be explained in time) through the publication of instructional manuals. One of these manuals – The Studio and What to Do in It (1891) – is key to understanding the tremendous difficulty that early photographers had in not only conceptualizing what photography was or could be, but also what it meant or could mean to be a photographer. Robinson’s Studio seeks to establish not only a cultural place for photography on par with the fine arts, but also an opening, a space, for the photographer as an autonomous cultural figure. In a Sloterdijkian sense, Robinson’s Studio attempts to open a space for the photographer simultaneously within the sphere of fine arts and within that of the bourgeois order.

The *Studio* looks to the arts of writing and painting as aesthetic models for an art of photography. But by the end of the text, the argument encounters a problem. After having made the case that art has rules that can be learned and mastered, Robinson argues that art is ultimately un-teachable because the artist, he claims, is reliant on a form of knowledge that is unconscious. This problem positions the photographer in the text between art and photography in a conceptual space bereft of the cultural legitimacy of the former and the latter’s particularity. The text wanders over aesthetic, moral, and class themes in search of a framework to critically establish the cultural autonomy of the photographer. The Studio attempts, but ultimately fails, to ground the identity of photography and the photographer.

### 3.1 Pedagogy of Pictorialism

Robinson was a practitioner and an avid promoter of photography’s first artistic movement – pictorialism. He was also the movement’s chief theoretician. Beginning in the late 1860s, Robinson began publishing texts on photography. Almost all of his best-known texts, such as *Pictorial Effect in Photography*, *Picture Making by Photography*, *Elements of a Pictorial Photograph*, and *The Studio and What to Do in It* are a combination of instruction manual and aesthetic treatise. Robinson’s project in these texts aims to lay out the aesthetic program of pictorialist photography in teachable formulas that could in principle be learned by anyone. The aim of Robinson’s pedagogical project is to grant pictorialist photography the legitimacy of a bona fide art-historical style by making explicit its formal rules.

Pictorialism derived its aesthetic codes largely from the so-called Pre-Raphaelites of England, who flourished between the 1820s and the 1860s. Led by poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 –1892), the Pre-Raphaelites included notable artists such as William Hunt, Ford Maddox Brown, as well as the critic John Ruskin. The Pre-Raphaelites sought to
displace the prevailing norms of realism. They reacted against the legacies of Renaissance idealization and the brute realism of mid-nineteenth-century modernism. They took their cues from medieval art (pre-Renaissance or pre-Raphael). Beyond these vague aesthetic alliances and inclinations, however, it is difficult to define pre-Raphaelitism precisely. As art historian Robert de la Sizeranne notes in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, the movement was beset by internal contradictions. Pre-Raphaelitism “was composed of the most diverse and contradictory elements.” Sizeranne continues:

> There was a preference for imitating the thin, hard style of the Primitives [the nineteenth century’s term for pre-historic art and much of the art of Africa and Asia], whereas a single glance at the ample bosoms, round shoulders, and sensual mouths of Rossetti’s women evokes all the opulence and splendor of the Renaissance. There was realism, “uncompromising truth,” forbidding the addition of any imaginary element, but it is precisely the imaginary that is striking.

Pre-Raphaelitism is perhaps better defined as an outlook rather than a coherent stylistic framework. It favored realism but an enchanted one. It took inspiration from simple scenes imbued with pastoral, allegorical, magical, or spiritual meaning. It was this preference for enchanted over realist realism that marked pictorialism.

---


113 Sizeranne, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 77.

Robinson’s *Fading Away* of 1858 exemplifies the pictorialist style. *Fading Away* depicts a young girl lying on her deathbed. Mother and sister look on while father gazes out the window. The scene, like much of Robinson’s work, is highly staged with actors serving as sitters. The truth that the photograph aims to show is not that of so-called photographic “objectivity” but rather the truth of human emotion, in this case, grief over the loss of a child. Pictorialist aesthetics center on the depiction of “scenes” in both the pictorial and dramaturgical sense. Indeed, theatrical considerations including props, accessories, and backdrops figure prominently in Robinson’s texts.

In the *Studio*, for example, Robinson devotes one chapter each to backgrounds and accessories. Writing on the latter, Robinson advises the aspiring photographer to keep in store a wide variety of props and furnishings for every conceivable setting. He writes: “There is a great virtue in variety…. The monotony of making all men and women lean on the same chair, in the same position, and photographing them one after another, from week’s end to week’s end, must
be dreadful. The continual use of even a good thing is objectionable.”114 After carefully weighing
the pros and cons of certain styles of gates, fences, chairs, screens, and so forth, Robinson goes
on to carefully consider the use of somewhat more esoteric studio props. He writes: “The same
remarks apply to the ship’s mast and the swing, both good of their kind, when used occasionally
and in season, but not when they are pressed into service for all purposes against nature and
art.”115 As for seaside scenes, Robinson recommends that the photographer obtain a full-sized
row boat if possible “or half of one if you must economize space…. I have seen the bows of a
real old boat used with great effect, and it was found to be very suggestive of poses. A bit of old
rope, some netting, crab baskets, and other objects of the seaside, also aided in the realistic
effect.”116 Robinson’s ideal studio thus resembles a theatre barn with a whole range of props,
accessories, and backdrops for every conceivable scene.

The theatricality of pictorialism stems from its emphasis on narrative. Robinson argues in
Elements of a Pictorial Photograph that photography should aspire to more than mere imitation.
He writes: “In aiming at the truth we must not forget the spirit.”117 Robinson seeks to liberate
photography from the pursuit of visual objectivity. He writes: “It is not the copying of nature that
gives artistic delight, so much as the intellectual pleasure to be derived from getting the best
effect out of any given materials, or adding a beauty to that which is already beautiful.”118
Pictorialist practice systematically refuses the imperatives of visual fact. It prioritizes the
beautiful over the true. Robinson writes: “In photography fortunately, we are gradually

115 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 33.
116 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 33.
118 Robinson, Elements of a Pictorial Photograph, 39.
emancipating ourselves from the trammels of rigid fact, and are rising into the finer regions of artistic truth.”

The apparent incongruity of anti-modernist Pre-Raphaelitism and photography (paragon of modern image making) is symptomatic of pictorialism’s rejection of photographic realism, which differs in kind from the realism of nineteenth-century painting. Realism, even gritty realism such as Courbet’s, could still be counted as art in the nineteenth century simply because it was made with paint and canvas. But photographic realism came to be associated with an emerging regime of empirical visual objectivity. It is this objectivity that pictorialism rejects and which it seeks to aesthetically transform and transvalue. And it is narrative above all else that pictorialism deploys in order to raise photography out of empirical servitude into the “finer regions of artistic truth.”

---

Robinson defines the pictorialist picture this way: “our sort of picture—is a flat surface calculated to give pleasure to the beholder by the skillful way in which the intention of the producer is expressed by pictorial means, consisting of lines, lights, and shades….This is the material part of the picture and is held by some, a dwindling minority, to be all sufficient. Beyond, and as I think necessary to the complete picture, is poetry, sentiment, story, the literary part of the picture.” Robinson emphasizes on literary content or narrative is manifest in Robinson’s A Merry Tale of 1882. The scene depicts a group of women gathered on a country path sharing an intimate and evidently merry tale. The image speaks to the literary “beyond” at which pictorialist photography aims in its artistic effort to transcend base photographic empiricism.

While Robinson’s photography certainly aided in the dissemination of pictorialism, his writings did as much, if not more, to establish pictorialism’s cultural profile. Of all of Robinson’s texts, it was his Pictorial Effect in Photography of 1881 that was to have the most lasting and widespread impact on the development and dissemination of pictorialism. As photography historian Robert Hirsch notes, Pictorial Effect in Photography “was the most widely read textbook on photography in the nineteenth century.” In Pictorial Effect, Robinson elaborates on the concept of the picturesque, the cornerstone of pictorialist aesthetics. Robinson writes, “every scene worth painting must have something of the sublime, the beautiful, or the picturesque….The most obvious way of meeting with picturesque and beautiful subjects would be the possession of a knowledge of what is picturesque and beautiful.” The “picturesque,” for Robinson, is a specific combinatory of formal effects: light, shade, line, and overall composition. A photographer who learns this formal language, Robinson writes, “will be better qualified to

---

120 Robinson, Elements of a Pictorial Photograph, 13.
121 Hirsch, Seizing the Light, 127.
discover the picturesque in the visible world.”¹²³ Pictorial literacy enables the photographer to look at the world “with the eye of an artist.”¹²⁴ This seeing is also a form of knowing insofar as it is an informed seeing that can distinguish what is beautiful from what is not according to pictorialist principles. With this knowledge the photographer can learn to see not only “what is beautiful but why it is beautiful.”¹²⁵ Thus a “new world is open to him who has learned to distinguish and feel the effect of the beautiful and subtle harmonies that Nature presents in all her varied aspects.”¹²⁶

Robinson skips over the problematic meaning of the sublime, which in principle cannot be anticipated or governed by rules, in order to proceed on to a discourse about how the sublime, as a pictorial effect, can be produced. The text passes from a philosophical moment to a practical and pedagogic moment. A discourse on beauty shifts into a pedagogy of how to make a beautiful picture. This elision is symptomatic of Robinson’s two-fold aim: to produce a manual on how to make artistic photography while defending the cultural legitimacy of that aim.

Robinson was writing at a time when the question of the aesthetic potential and artistic legitimacy of photography was a matter of open and hotly contested debate. This debate was largely determined by two competing visions of photography. Conservative critics saw the camera as a mere machine for objectively recording visual phenomena and thus as fundamentally incapable of subjective expression. Those who promoted the merit of art photography stressed the technical skills necessary to compose a photograph. Robinson’s writing exemplifies the latter view. His pedagogical project is premised on the idea that a single formal language is common to painting and photography. Robinson’s answer to the question of whether photography is an art is

that art is not determined by the medium, but by the knowledge possessed by the one who wields it.

Robinson’s pedagogic strategy is to redirect abstract considerations on aesthetics towards matters of technique: he continually shifts from discussing photography writ large to prescribing techniques for the photographer to follow. The subject of Robinson’s pedagogy is always in the last instance the photographer. As he writes, “however prolific a man may be in his [creative] ideas, he cannot express these ideas intelligibly until he has learned a language and its grammar, or laws of construction.”

Robinson notes:

[I]t has happened too often that the art-teaching which has been supplied to photographers has dealt rather with the thoughts to be expressed rather than on the modes of expressing them; it is of little use endeavoring to teach a man to write poetry until he has learned to spell.

Robinson’s stresses the necessity of learning visual grammar. The visual sign of pictorial grammar in a photograph, for Robinson, is the signature of the non-machinic presence of a thinking being – the photographer. Robinson writes that just as the writer “must write grammatically or he will offend his readers. So with the photographer; if he does not show that there is a man behind the machine with rules…his result will be a machine-made article, and not an individual impression as every work of art should be.”

Robinson directs his pedagogical energies towards developing his ideal photographer by laying out the grammar or rules the practitioner is to follow.

Robinson’s pedagogical effort is given its most cogent and clear formulation in The Studio and What to Do in It, one of his final texts, published in 1891 at a time when Robinson himself had ceased his photographic practice due to ill-health. The Studio details everything a photography studio requires from foundation to skylights, from sitting room to dark room, as well as an entire set of instructions for what to do in the studio. The text hails, solicits, or positions the reader as a student-photographer and Robinson as a correspondence teacher conveying studio instruction across the distance between text and reader. The Studio sets up an educative environ in the manner of what Jacques Rancière in The Ignorant Schoolmaster calls the “explicative order.” For Rancière, pedagogy is a social practice that constitutes and relies upon a set of power relations. It is also an aesthetic formation. Educational instruction, writes Rancière, is a “singular art…the art of distance.” Pedagogy involves an entire repertoire of implicit and explicit signs and codes through which a pedagogic performance is enacted, the roles of student and teacher are assigned, and the social distance between the two positions maintained.

The explicative order positions the pedagogue as an agent of power, which Rancière calls an “explicator.” The distance of the explicator to the student confers an aura, in Walter Benjamin’s sense, of power upon the explicator. For, as Rancière surely knows, it is Benjamin who defines auratic power as “the unique appearance of a distance no matter how close.” Indeed, Rancière strikes a Benjaminian chord when he notes:
The master’s [or explicator’s] secret is to know how to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding. The explicator sets up and abolishes this distance—deports it and reabsorbs it in the fullness of his speech.\textsuperscript{134}

Through his texts, Robinson surely sought to define himself as the chief explicator of pictorialism. But he neither had the benefit of full speech nor a robust educational apparatus, such as the academy, at his disposal. However, he was working in a genre that did have a certain social status—the training manual. The genre of the training manual was a common form for the dissemination of photographic instruction in the nineteenth century. It helped establish the popular practice of photography on a mass scale. This genre rests on the implicit assumption that if one is in a position to author a training manual, then one must be an authority on the subject.

The training manual projects its writer into the pedagogic power structure of the student-teacher relation. But the training manual as such demands from the reader a measure of autodidactism. The training manual institutes a form of pedagogy parallel to the form of the correspondence course. While the training manual sets its author up as a master of sorts, this master is also divested of the voice – the teaching tool \textit{par excellence} of the explicator. Without the fullness of explicative speech and without a fully bureaucratized educational order, Robinson had no direct knowledge of how his teaching was received by his readers. This pedagogic anxiety is echoed in the manifest anxiety registered in the \textit{Studio} concerning what photography is and what it means to be a photographer. These two questions or lacunae mark the text. They are signified by rhetorical tensions, contradictions, and above all absences and invisibilities. The \textit{Studio} registers the ontological anxiety of nineteenth-century photography. This anxiety attains a

\textsuperscript{134} Rancière, \textit{The Ignorant Schoolmaster}, 5.
paradoxical visibility by the very invisibility of the subject “behind the camera,” in Robinson’s words – the photographer.

3.2 The Vacant Studio

The opening pages of the Studio contain blueprints complete with elevation diagrams for building a photography studio. Building a proper studio was a primary concern for the nineteenth-century photographer. Natural lighting was an imperative as the light bulb had yet to enter into photographic practice. Photography studios thus had to be designed so as to maximize and control sunlight. Ever the pragmatist, Robinson writes: “The arrangements for managing the light should be simple, so that they may be under the immediate and instant control of the operator; all complicated systems of blinds should be avoided.” Robinson’s preferred architectural model resembles a small lean-to cottage, facing northeast to catch diffuse rather than direct sunlight. It has a rectangular floor-plan topped by a partly slopped and flat roof. The slopped section is outfitted with skylights and the flat section houses the darkroom and is necessarily windowless. Ideally the size of the studio is supposed to “be large enough to admit of every necessary operation without inconvenience, but should not be so large as to…be difficult to manage.” Robinson quips that a large studio, “like a great book, is a great evil.”

Robinson also offers instruction in how to decorate the interior of the studio. He advises that the interior should be sober and above all practical. “I prefer that the studio have the effect of a moderately furnished living room, such as sitters may be expected to occupy in their own homes; avoiding shabbiness on the one hand, and ostentatious show on the other. Don’t let there

__________________________________________________________

135 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 12.
136 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 13.
137 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 13.
be a great display of anything, not even your own good taste.”

A middle class sentiment informs Robinson’s taste for interior design. The interior design that Robinson prefers is squarely opposed to the interiors a client of means would expect to find in the studios of the best portrait painters of the day, such as John Singer Sargent’s (1856-1925) studio, which was richly decorated with antiques, tapestries, and Japanese screens. Robinson by contrast opposes extravagance or clutter of any kind in the studio. But he is not opposed to the prominent display of the photographer’s tools. On the contrary, he notes: “You will not be able to hide the implements of your art, nor is it desirable that you should do so.” Indeed the camera is to take centre stage in the studio: “I like to keep the centre of my studio absolutely free, except for the camera.”

Robinson also offers careful and thrifty advice for setting up a darkroom.

No room is more neglected than this one. Any closet is thought good enough for a dark room; but no part of the establishment [the studio] should call for more thought and attention…There should be sufficient space to conduct all the operations in comfort. Table space should be ample, and there should be sufficient shelves to hold everything but dust [ruinous to film plates]. The sinks used to be made of wood…lined with pitch [but these]…were always causing trouble; white porcelain sinks were expensive…For several years I have used Doulton’s sinks; they are made of glazed stoneware, are very cheap, can be got of any size, and are useful for other purposes.

The attention to the minutest details notwithstanding, Robinson’s descriptions of the interior of the studio underscores a strange invisibility. One asks: where is the photographer? The figure of the photographer is signed only in the traces of the tools of the trade and the places of

---

138 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 16.
139 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 16.
140 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 16.
141 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 18.
work: camera (photographing room) and sinks (darkroom). The text describes the studio down to the smallest details complete with many diagrams and visual aids that establish a visual matrix that supports the pedagogy. But no explicit figuration of the photographer animates this pedagogy. The Studio is a vacant studio. What goes unseen and unspoken is the photographer. And yet the vacant place of the photographer is precisely the space – the “absolutely free center,” in Robinson’s words – which the reader is silently solicited to occupy. The rhetorical absence of the photographer – marked by the vacant studio with its empty rooms – circumscribes the open space that the reader comes to inhabit. The Studio textually constructs an open space. It allows for what Heidegger calls “making room” or “giving space” for the photographer.142 The Studio opens this “giving space.” It gives space and “makes room” for the being and becoming of the reader-as-photographer. This open, “absolutely free” and “giving space,” demarcates the subject position that a photographer can come to occupy. This open space is at once an open space for the reader-photographer to inhabit and a trace of the textual invisibility of the photographer.

This invisible dimension of the photographer of the Studio can be understood, in a slightly revised sense, as what Walter Benjamin calls an “optical unconscious.” Benjamin writes in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” of 1936 that it is “through the camera that we...discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.”143 Benjamin’s point is that prior to photography, the eye held sovereignty over knowledge in the oft-repeated formula: to see is to know. But photography exposed to view the fact that entire visual worlds – the very fast particularly – escape the grasp of the eye and human consciousness. The camera’s ability to see beyond range perceived by the

142 Heidegger, Being and Time, 103.
eye throws into question the entire tropological entanglement that links vision, self, and knowledge. Photography, and thus the photographer, renders visible and knowable phenomena that might otherwise go unseen and unknown. But this vision and knowledge is not one that the photographer possesses. The photographer simply marks the point at which this vision and knowledge is captured: the photographer is the figure that captures, while not possessing, the optical unconscious. Robinson’s *Studio* exposes to view a textually figured optical unconscious. What goes unseen in the text is the photographer or rather what is seen is the open space itself yet to be occupied by a photographer. In this sense, the space left vacant can be understood as the open subject position of the photographer that a photographer comes to inhabit. These spaces of openness and non-presence or invisibility frequently open at the site of comparisons to the art of painting. Consider the following passage:

The first aim of the student in lighting a head [a portrait] – leaving out the question of what may be called “fancy” lighting such as Rembrandt’s [sic] – should be to get roundness and relief, to obtain gradation, and to avoid patches of black and white; to so light the head that beauties are made prominent and defects hidden. Or as [the photographer] Mr. [John] Mayall once summed up the object of lighting: “To render age less garrulous; make beauty more lovely; to impart an expression of intelligence where nature has not been over bountiful; to light up the intellect, and to impart the quality of power in those heads on which she has lavished her most precious gifts; in short, to present human nature in its best form, by aid of a camera and a properly-lighted room.”

Rembrandt here figures the technique of “fancy” lighting or chiaroscuro. Against “fancy” lighting, Robinson invokes the popular photographer John Mayall (1813-1901) who advises the

---

144 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 37.
photographer to light the face in a way so as to soften nature in the manner of a pre-Raphaelite painter. A strange encounter and aesthetic debate is thus figured. The anti-modernist realism of pictorialism and pre-Raphaelitism is set against “fancy” realism as figured by Rembrandt. This opposition to what is presumed to be “fancy” is more than an aesthetic choice: it is a class choice. Rembrandt stands for a set of aesthetic values against which Robinson valorizes the middle class popularity of John Mayall. Here class and aesthetics cross the pedagogic matrix of Robinson’s pictorialism. The affirmation of Mayall over Rembrandt speaks to the emergent middle class sympathy for a photographic aesthetics of practicality: the simple over the “fancy,” the “properly lighted” over the dappled “patches” of chiaroscuro.

Pictorialism’s codification of a pragmatic poetics has had historical effects that have far outlived the movement, as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu found in his 1965 study of photography. In Photography: A Middlebrow Art, Bourdieu presents his findings after having surveyed amateur photographers from across the socio-economic spectrum. His research leads him to conclude that there exists a “canon” of “ordinary” or “popular” photographic practice. This practice, he argues, is primarily symbolic. Its function is to “solemnize” the individual, event, or place photographed.

Opposed to popular practice are those who seek, as the pictorialists did, to establish artistic legitimacy for photography. In words that seem to capture the pictorialist attitude, Bourdieu writes that devoted practitioners seek “to ennoble themselves by attempting to ennoble photography” by constructing a “body of technical and aesthetic rules” to distinguish their

---

146 Bourdieu, Photography. These terms are used throughout the volume.
practice from the norms “that govern popular practice.” This was certainly true of the pictorialists who likewise sought to “ennoble” photography and photographers by emulating the fine arts, particularly painting. As Robert Castel and Dominique Schnapper note in their contribution to Bourdieu’s study: “Painting is a noble art [hence it]…provides the clearest guarantee of aestheticism for an activity [photographing] in search of security.” The encounter Robinson stages between Mayall and Rembrandt dramatizes the central agon of nineteenth-century photographic culture—which continued in some form through the twentieth century: photography was seen as both handmaiden to, and middle class usurper of, high art. The gaze of pictorialist photography impressed itself most radically and explicitly upon such scenes of antagonism: painting versus photography; highbrow versus middlebrow tastes; Rembrandt versus Mayall.

### 3.3 Moral Education

The antagonism between painting and photography comes most forcibly to the fore in the second to the last chapter of Robinson’s text—“The Itinerant Painter.” The chapter outlines what a good portrait painter must do in order to be a success. While certainly not the mainstay of pictorialism, portraiture was the way most pictorialists, including Robinson, achieved a level of financial independence which was often necessary to pursue their artistic ventures. The “Itinerant Painter” figures the photographer as a responsible middle class entrepreneur in contrast to the rootless, irresponsible, and indeed immoral, “itinerant painter.” Robinson writes:

When a well-established photographer takes a portrait he looks for his profit, not only to the sum he receives for the first order of copies, but to the contingent potentialities which

---

may arise from the possession of the negatives, and to that end he goes to a great deal of trouble and expense cataloging and storing them. Of course the great portion of these negatives are never wanted again, and are an encumbrance; but all professional photographers know that there is so good a demand for copies from old negatives, that they find it to their interest to keep all they take, and to print prominently on the back of their cards, “All negatives are preserved. Copies or enlargements of this portrait can always be had.”\textsuperscript{149}

Copies can always be had – for a price, that is. “Copies” in nineteenth-century photographic practice signified quite differently than they do today. The norms of photographic production and circulation today (especially in the case of digital and online photography) have decreased (at least philosophically) the value of the copy, and indeed rendered the distinction between original and copy less meaningful. But in the nineteenth century, the copy was fixed, or at least Robinson wanted to fix it, within a fully rationalized system of exchange.

Robinson’s photographer is circumscribed by the norms of capitalist exchange. He is one “who looks for his profit.” Robinson’s Studio establishes a place for photography and hence for the photographer within the settled life of the small business owner. Robinson’s photographer is not only a master of certain photographic techniques, but a competent and prudent member of the professional class. This point is underscored when Robinson goes on to tell his reader a story from his own studio practice. He writes:

One day some years ago, a shabby old gentleman came into the reception room, and said he wanted his portrait taken. He was shown specimens [i.e. examples], but he said they were all too dear; he could only afford half a guinea….I liked the appearance of the old

\textsuperscript{149} Robinson, \textit{The Studio and What to Do in It}, 132.
man, who looked poor but respectable, so as a kind of charity I took a negative of him. I was so pleased with him that I offered to send him a dozen copies without charge, but he would not accept this offer…and paid his half-guinea. I found afterwards I had entertained an angel—a business angel—unawares, for I have done nearly £300 from that negative since. The fine old gentlemen died soon afterwards, and then I found out he was a famous manufacturer.¹⁵⁰

The “shabby” patron turns out to be a “business angel” and by the end of the story becomes a “fine” gentleman. The transparency of Robinson’s class values rivals a nineteenth-century parody of the middle class man on the make. Money, production, manufacturing are the means by which a “shabby” man becomes “fine” and “respectable.” The story rhetorically stages a photographic-like sequence in which the “shabby” patron becomes – by being photographed – a rare, even angelic creature. But this moment of aesthetic (even quasi-spiritual) transcendence is almost instantly commodified: the angelic photograph becomes a “business angel.” The aesthetic image is transfigured into a commodity.

Robinson’s middle class aesthetic emerges even more forcefully, however, in the chapter’s eponymous story: “The Itinerant Painter.” It is a complex tale and as such necessitates a long quotation.

There is a class of painter who misuse the great name of artist...who go round the country, and, by means of introduction or impudence, obtain orders for portraits, usually enlargements painted from photographs. As they never take an original [photographic] portrait themselves, they require the negative, and use every means, fair or foul, to obtain it, and are usually successful. The method of proceeding is something like this. A father

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 132-133.
of a wealthy family has been dead a short time; the itinerant painter hears of this, and before she [the widow] has time to apply to a photographer, [the itinerant painter] gets an introduction to the widow. A great deal of his success in his business depends on fluent and persuasive speaking, and the lady [the widow] is soon induced to order a portrait of her late husband.... [T]he “tramps” are so pressing and plausible that they [even]... get the widow to write for the loan of the negative.... [T]he photographer consents, seeing no way out of it; or properly and wisely refuses to lend the negative. In this case the itinerant brings more pressure to bear, showing his patron how selfish and inconsiderate the photographer is in preventing her from having a splendid portrait of her husband.... [T]he unfortunate photographer is placed on the horns of a dilemma; if he consents to lend the negative, he loses the benefits for which he has speculatively kept it for years, and if he refuses, he runs the risk of losing [a]... customer.151

The itinerant painter, like the professional photographer, is a man in search of profit. But the itinerant painter establishes no fixed address. He has no established studio, no place of business, and hence no place in the order of town or city life. The itinerant is a figure of wanton, ungrounded, non-localizable, or nomadic circulation. Unlike the professional photographer, the itinerant painter has no genuine fidelity to his clients. He is solely an opportunist who preys on innocents as figured by the widow. He is a mere “tramp,” a con-man, whose success relies on fast talking. He also preys on the photographer who in the account is forced into a moral “dilemma.” Should he keep the negative – the wiser choice in Robinson’s view – or give it away and keep his client happy? Unlike the itinerant painter whose only fidelity is to profit, the photographer is figured as a moral subject who must choose between profits and persons. While

151 Robinson, The Studio and What to Do in It, 133-134.
Robinson counsels that the wiser choice is for the photographer to protect his property, he sympathizes with the photographer who, in having to make this decision, is caught on the “horns of a dilemma.”

The story of the itinerant painter exemplifies the tense relation between pictorialism and painting. Painting is pictorialism’s model, and even muse. “Painting” is a code word for a visual grammar that the pictorialist photographer is expected to master. But the photographer is to establish his studio, his practice, within the “respectable” order of the professional sphere. The itinerant painter may be a “brother artist” to the photographer, but this brother belongs to an itinerant, and ultimately, lower class. While both the itinerant painter and Robinson’s photographers are capitalist subjects seeking to maximize their profits, the photographer is the more moral of the two. The photographer “looks for his profit” but does not stoop to the conning strategies of the itinerant painter. Hence while painting is the well-spring of pictorialist wisdom, the photographer is portrayed as morally superior to its master (painting).

3.4 The Subject Supposed to Know

The final chapter of the Studio, titled “The Education of a Photographer,” attempts to resolve pictorialism’s moral and social antagonism with painting. Robinson returns to the theme of the sublime. He moves from pedagogy (formal and moral) back to aesthetic philosophy. Robinson re-affirms the central tenant of the text – photography can be learned. But then Robinson argues that beyond technical facility lies the un-teachable realm of art. Here things become pedagogically contradictory. Robinson writes:

The study of art in its most comprehensive sense is, doubtless, the work of a lifetime; but there are one or two initial truths that should be clearly understood, and thoroughly impressed on the mind of the student. First, that very little art can be taught. Second, that
the chief portions of art which can be taught consist in tolerably definite and simple rules and principles easily understood and remembered, and not difficult to apply. These rules are to art what grammar is to literature. They will no more enable the painter to paint a Transfiguration than grammar taught Shakespeare how to write Hamlet; but neither the great picture nor the great poem could have been produced without, on the one hand, a knowledge of composition, and on the other an acquaintance with the construction of the English language. And third, that after the mastering of certain rules, art studies chiefly consist in constant observation and appreciation of the beauties of nature and art, and in attempts to realize in practice these beauties, aided by the principles and rules before acquired.  

There is a tension at play between what can be taught, under the sign of “principles,” “rules,” and “grammar,” and a comprehensive talent to make art. For Robinson, art in the last instance cannot be taught. Rules of composition – grammar – can be taught. But the study of art comes under the tutelage of nature. Rules are useful for the conversion of observations gleaned from the “beauties of nature” into representations. But knowledge of rules alone, cautions Robinson, is not enough to make art. There is an obvious contradiction: the student must first set about “mastering” rules and principles of composition in order to see the beauties of nature compositionally. The demarcation that Robinson makes between observation and practice is in this way a false one: to observe the beauties of nature as Robinson expects necessitates mastering the aesthetics or grammar of art. Robinson seeks a resolution to the contradiction via an elaboration of the aesthetic philosophy of William Thompson (1819-1890).

152 Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 139.
In *An Outline of the Necessary Laws of Thought* of 1879, Thompson discusses the rules of logic as a means to examine the nature of human reasoning. Robinson quotes the following: “The whole of every science may be made the subject of teaching. Not so with art; much of it is not teachable.”

Robinson in fact misquotes Thompson or more exactly puts words in his mouth. Thompson does say: “The whole of science may be made the subject of teaching.” But he does not follow by concluding: “Not so with art; much of it is not teachable.” Those words are Robinson’s. What Thompson does say is that logic is like art, but logic differs in one key respect. Whereas logic is a conscious operation, art is bound up with “the notion of unconsciousness.”

Thompson continues: “The man of science possesses principles, but the artist, not the less nobly gifted on that account, is possessed and carried away by them.” Further clarifying his point, he writes: “Shakespeare is admitted to be a consummate artist, but no one means by this that his plays were composed only to develop a certain express theory of Dramatic Poetry.”

Thompson then goes on to quote philosopher William Whewell (1719-1866), who notes: “The truths on which the success of Art depends, lurk in the artist’s mind in an underdeveloped state – guiding his hand, stimulating his invention, balancing his judgment, but not appearing in the form of enunciated propositions.”

Thompson serves as a philosophical buttress for Robinson’s claim that art is on the whole un-teachable. Since the special knowledge that the artist possesses is unconscious, it cannot be consciously transmitted in the form of clear pedagogical principles and rules of mastery. So even though Robinson misquotes Thompson, who bases his argument on Whewell, he appears to hold

---

153 Quote attributed to Thompson, in Robinson, *The Studio and What to Do in It*, 139.
155 Thompson, *An Outline of the Necessary Forms of Thought*, 29.
156 Thompson, *An Outline of the Necessary Forms of Thought*, 29.
157 Thompson, *An Outline of the Necessary Forms of Thought*, 29.
158 Thompson, *An Outline of the Necessary Forms of Thought*, 29.
to the spirit of Thompson and Whewell’s point: the knowledge of art is instinctual or unconscious and hence cannot be taught. In a conventional sense, education demands that things be clearly teachable and as such that pedagogy – its contents and its transmission – be fully amenable to conscious learning. But if art is a matter of the unconscious, then it cannot be taught consciously and conscientiously.

Art, as a teachable subject, might then be said to constitute the center and the aporia of Robinson’s pedagogic project. It is at once the heart of Robinson’s pedagogy of pictorialism and its recalcitrant and resistant kernel. This tension between the unconscious and education is explored in depth by Shoshana Felman. In “Psychoanalysis and Education,” Felman notes that the unconscious names the “discovery that human discourse can by definition never be entirely in agreement with itself, entirely identical to its knowledge of itself, since as the vehicle of unconscious knowledge, it is constitutively the material locus of a signifying difference from itself.” For Felman, psychoanalysis remains at bottom “*a critique of pedagogy.*” The resistance of the unconscious marks every pedagogical endeavor. Read in terms of Robinson’s pedagogic project, “art” is the term that auto-critiques or deconstructs the possibility of a pedagogy of pictorialism. This deconstructive fissure marks finally the “I” that carries Robinson’s authorial authority – the sign of Robinson *qua* explicator. This “I” fits the profile of what Jacques Lacan terms “the subject supposed to know.”

Lacan develops the idea of “the subject supposed to know” through a discussion of Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave. Lacan transposes Hegel’s terms: the psychoanalyst is

---


160 Felman, “Psychoanalysis and Education,” 28. Italics are in the original.

positioned as a master in that the analyst is “supposed to know,” but, Lacan argues, it is the analysand, the object of the master’s gaze, who makes this supposition unconsciously. In seeking out a psychoanalyst, the analysand has already answered to an interpellative solicitation which auto-positions the psychoanalyst as the master, or the subject who is “supposed to know,” what is wrong with the analysand. Even before the analysand sits down with the psychoanalyst, the scene of interpellation has already occurred and the position of mastery has been assigned to the psychoanalyst. Mastery in Lacan’s sense is not an attribute the psychoanalyst has innately; it is a position (of power and knowledge) that the psychoanalyst occupies as a function of an institutional discourse (the psychoanalytic discourse) and the interpellation that this discourse accomplishes.

It is insignificant whether or not the one who assumes the master’s position is actually a master. The master does not need to have knowledge to be a master. The master merely occupies the position of the master. Lacan puts the matter humorously by noting that student teachers know first-hand that one can play the role of a master while knowing very little about a given subject. Lacan writes: “It was students at the Ecole normale [supérieure]…these little princes of the university who know quite well that you don’t have to know something in order to teach it.”

As Lacan scholar Bruce Fink notes, “the master is unconcerned with knowledge: as long as his or her power is maintained or grows, all is well.” Lacan uses the example of citation to help illustrate the paradoxical nature of the master’s discourse.

When one cites Marx or Freud – I haven’t chosen these names by chance – one does so as a function of the part the supposed reader takes in a discourse. The citation is in its own

---

way also a half-said. It is a statement about which someone is indicating to you that it is admissible only insofar as you already participate in a certain structured discourse.\textsuperscript{164}

Here Lacan is doing a bit of autobiography. When Lacan cites Marx or Freud he invokes their authority on the presumption that his readers (and auditors) are already participating in the discourse of his version of psychoanalysis in which these names have already assumed the status of masters.\textsuperscript{165}

Citation in Robinson’s text functions similarly. In quoting Thompson, Robinson’s text invests his name and discourse with mastery, which recursively lends authority to Robinson’s “I.” The citation of Thompson is a philosophical alibi that supports the supposition of mastery that the reader invests in the \textit{Studio}, which itself is a function of the reader having already presumed that Robinson’s name signifies a master who is supposed to know what photography is and how one is to become a photographer. Robinson’s text sets his “I” up as a master, but Robinson the person in fact has no mastery over this position. The position of mastery is discursively produced by virtue of the fact that the \textit{Studio} is a bona fide instructional manual. The genre of the text \textit{qua} instructional manual positions Robinson’s “I” as an instructor supposed to know—a master of pictorialist photography. This position is ascribed by an automatic discursive function. In this sense, Robinson, like every supposed master, is in effect mastered by the discourse of mastery itself.

\textbf{3.5 The Itinerant Photographer}

Robinson situates his ideal practitioner at a nexus between aesthetics and commerce within the order of middle class professionalism. But aside from this, the \textit{Studio} is silent on

\textsuperscript{164} Fink, \textit{The Lacanian Subject}, 37.
\textsuperscript{165} A status he also claims for himself of course.
salient points. Why should one be a photographer? What is photography apart from its relation to the other arts such as painting? How can art-photography be taught if art is finally un-teachable? What is it that the Studio teaches one to do? These questions can be collectively restated as: what does it mean to be a photographer? The Studio gives no direct answer. Yet the question “what is a photographer?” is made strangely visible by its manifest textual obscurity.

Unable to establish an autonomous definition of photography, pictorialism as a program loses its pedagogical coherence. It is dispersed over a set of antagonistic scenes of class and aesthetic conflict. The pedagogy of pictorialism iterated in the Studio positions the photographer on “the horns of a dilemma” in Robinson’s words. Neither able to sufficiently close the gap between art and photography nor to set photography on its own path, Robinson’s pictorialist program for establishing cultural legitimacy for photography paradoxically produces the figure of an ungrounded, aleatory photographer or what might be ironically called the “itinerant photographer.” Unconscious or “blind” to its own ontological doubts concerning photography and the cultural status of the photographer, the figure of the photographer in the Studio hovers in the contested space between art and photography, paintings and photographs, the moral and the immoral, the itinerant and the settled middle class entrepreneur, Rembrandt and Mayall. The photographer exists only as an open space, an outline, thinly delimiting a middle class subject position, a hollow figure, haunting the pages of the Studio.

What the Studio accomplishes, however, is the opening of this very space into which the reader-photographer may enter. That is, the Studio, like an actual studio, contains an open space that the reader-student can inhabit. The open space of the pictorialist photographer provides a place for the reader-student to become a photographer. The Studio provides an imaginative place for the germination of the pictorialist photographer. The text creates a space apart, at a distance,
from the rhetoric of photographic objectivity. It is in this sense that the Studio functions as a Sloterdijkian bubble that encloses around the would-be photographer-reader. This space, to quote Sloterdijk, exists “initially only in constructs…of language” but from this develops, like a photographic negative, a photographer through the act of reading into the open space of the text.\(^{166}\) Hence, Robinson’s demonstrative failure to provide a clear definition of photography and the photographer, paradoxically, and perhaps unconsciously, nevertheless opens an in-dwelling space through which the reader-student projects a sense of self as photographer. The Studio provides a place for a photographer to develop.

\(^{166}\) Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, 84.
Chapter 4
Ways of Life:
The Case of Oscar Gustave Rejlander

Henry Peach Robinson’s *The Studio and What to Do in It* positions the photographer in a classed space caught between an uneasy attachment to the fine arts and a nascent desire for autonomy. A very different conception of the photographer appears in the writing and work of Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813-1875). This chapter examines Rejlander’s most important essay, “An Apology for Art-Photography,” published in 1863.\(^{167}\) The text traces in microcosm art’s paradigmatic shift into the age of its technological reproducibility and the emergence of photographic seeing – all from the perspective of Rejlander’s personal recollections.\(^{168}\) The narrative of the “Apology” is told through a motley collection of figures and settings: a market in Rome, a London gallery, a “young Miss” playing piano, a “ready-made photographer,” an anonymous gentleman, and a neighborly artist. Each of these figures is examined in the course of this chapter with an eye to how they illuminate the emergence of photographic seeing and the discursive context of *the photographer* as demonstrated by Rejlander’s struggle to see himself as a *photographer*.

4.1 Painter and Photographer

As noted in chapter two, Rejlander left his native Sweden for England as a young man and married an English woman, Mary Constable. The couple settled in the town of Wolverhampton in 1846. It was not a bucolic location for a struggling painter. Art historian and

\(^{167}\) A version of this chapter is due to be published by me as “Seeing Photographically: Reading Rejlander’s “Apology” in the journal *Photographies*.
\(^{168}\) I am here making reference to Lury’s work. See Lury, *Prosthetic Culture*. 
Rejlander specialist, Stephanie Spencer, notes that the “Wolverhampton region was commonly called the Black Country owing to the intensity of its ugliness.”\textsuperscript{169} An actor famous at the time once memorably remarked that the “route from Wolverhampton to Birmingham by night is the best guide to Dante that I know. The huge heaps of slag, the blast of the roaring furnaces, the sulphurous stench of the hell pits, the horde of half savage colliers...the gangs of half-naked women...amazed and horrified me.”\textsuperscript{170} Rejlander’s struggle to establish himself as a painter in Wolverhampton met with little success. No record of his participation in any major exhibitions survive from this time, save notice of a single painting – provocatively titled \textit{Oh yes, Oh yes!} – which appears on the exhibition register of the Royal Academy’s annual Salon of 1848.

Rejlander underwent a conversion (or diversion) that propelled him from his outcast invisibility as a painter in Wolverhampton to the centre of nineteenth-century photography. This transformation began in 1852 when he traveled to Rome. While browsing in a market, he came across a number of photographic reproductions of artworks. He recognized what a benefit these images could be to a painter. When he returned to England he took lessons with Nicholass Henneman, who had been an assistant to William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), one of the chief inventors of photography. Over the next decade Rejlander honed his craft. He began by making art studies of figures, draperies and the like, which he sold to fellow painters. In time his practice expanded and deepened. By the 1850s he had begun experimenting with the production of art-photographs, and shortly after he began to exhibit them widely. In 1855 he won his first medal at the Universal Exhibition in Paris.

His success as a photographer, however, did not inspire him to stop painting. He continued to paint right up until his death. \textit{The British Journal of Photography} noted this in their

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{170} Quoted in Spencer, \textit{O.G. Rejlander}, 6.
\end{flushleft}
obituary for Rejlander: “Until within a very short period of his demise he [Rejlander] was occupied in the duties of his beloved profession, resting at short intervals, moving from his couch to the camera or the easel feebly and slowly.” The obituary fittingly captures the sense of Rejlander’s creative life as caught within, and moving between, the poles of painting and photography. It was in this movement between these two worlds that Rejlander negotiated his self-understanding and autobiographical figuration as a photographer. It is within this drift back and forth that he established a sense of continuity with, and autonomy from, the nineteenth-century discourse of art and the figure of the artist.

The “Apology” marked the highpoint of Rejlander’s writing. He first read the essay before the prestigious London Photographic Society, to which he had been elected president in 1856. As president, Rejlander often gave addresses at the Society’s meetings. But as Spencer notes, “he often arrived unprepared” and would default into giving a casual talk on purely “technical” matters instead. This was not altogether surprising since throughout the mid-nineteenth century photographers were consumed with technical questions. Indeed the journal Athenaeum noted in 1850: “Perhaps, like young painters, the photographists are too intent at present on the mechanisms of their art to attend to its highest capabilities.”

By the 1860s, however, considerable technical advances had been achieved. As a result photographers increasingly turned their intellectual energies to addressing and debating philosophical and aesthetical matters. By 1863, the world of photography was ready for a paper like the “Apology.” Its influence was highly significant. The paper soon went into print and was disseminated widely though the expanding network of photography associations and societies in

\[171\] Quoted in Spencer, O.G. Rejlander, 6.
\[172\] Quoted in Spencer, O.G. Rejlander, 13.
\[173\] Quoted in Spencer, O.G. Rejlander, 15.
England and abroad. The paper struck a chord with photographers (and critics) because it zeroed in on the central debate in photography at that time: the question of whether or not photography was a form of art. Rejlander’s paper was one of many such essays of the time that tried in one way or another to resolve the question of photography’s artistic legitimacy. What makes the “Apology” unique, however, is that it addresses this question in the form of an autobiographical narrative. In the “Apology,” Rejlander’s narrative “I” re-traces how he “drifted into making photographic pictures.” Rejlander’s use of the word “drifted” is quite fitting. The “Apology” does not tell a linear story. It drifts from one origin story to another and deploys a host of figural personae along the way. The “Apology” is at once the story of a developing photographer and a study in the struggle to narrate this development.

4.2 When in Rome

Rejlander begins his story in Rome. “In 1852 I was in Rome, and saw photographs of the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoon, the Torso, Gibson’s Venus, &c., &c., which I bought and studied.” Rejlander’s list of photographed artworks spans centuries. The Apollo, the Torso and the Laocoon of Ancient Greece appear alongside John Gibson’s neo-classical rendition of Venus, completed shortly before Rejlander’s arrival in Rome. The market scene presents in miniature the anarchic disordering of art-historical time wrought by the advent of photographic reproduction. By 1863, art of all periods was steadily being archived within the virtual enclosure of photography – a “museum without walls” – as André Malraux would later famously term it. The repeated etcetera of the passage signifies in brief what Rejlander could only intimate at the time: the archival potential of photography to reproduce any artwork. The repeated etcetera

175 Rejlander, “An Apology for Art-Photography,” 141.
functions as a minimalist maxim that fittingly allegorizes the historical logic of technological reproducibility. Like the ellipses of a mathematical set, the doubled etcetera signifies that the logic of photographic reproduction is virtually unbounded. Every artwork can be photographically miniaturized and virtualized. The cultural treasures of Rome (or anywhere) can now be shipped in a tourist’s suitcase. The opening passage of the “Apology” thus contains in condensed form a first-person account of the paradigmatic shift that Walter Benjamin would later theorize as the historically irreparable loss of “aura” that attended the passage of art into the age of its technological reproducibility.  

4.3 Ackermann’s (Seeing Photographically)

Rejlander’s recollection of buying art-reproductions in Rome drifts into a narration of a prior scene in London: “I merely recollected having seen some reddish landscapes at Ackermann’s [gallery] in Regent Street [London, England].” Around the same time Rejlander also saw a show of daguerreotypes, but of these he noted that they “made no impression on me. What I saw...proved as evanescent as looking at myself in a glass.” The reader has been catapulted from Rome, city of the former Renaissance where the treasures of art are being cheaply sold as photographic reproductions to London, the present capital of the industrial revolution where photographs are being sold as art. Rejlander bears witness to the emergence of a new aura – the art-photograph – that in due course will become an insurgent medium in the art world of the industrial era.

The account also includes something else: Rejlander’s reflection in the glass. To be sure, Rejlander’s reflective recollection may have stemmed from Rejlander having actually seen his

reflection on the glassy surface of the daguerreotypes he saw. But even if this is so, it does not exhaust the statement’s autobiographical significance.

The scene as seen can be productively understood in terms of what Freud terms “condensation.” In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud identifies condensation as one of the means by which “dream work” is done. Condensation is the unconscious act by which multiple dream images are compositied to form a single image. Freud references the combination photographs of Francis Galton (1822-1911) to analogically illustrate his point. Galton was a pioneer in the now defunct and dubious “science” of eugenics. In an effort to discern racial essences, he made studies of the human face by overlaying multiple negatives of different faces to make a single photographic portrait. Freud sees in Galton’s portraits a fitting visualization of the dream-work of condensation. He explores this aspect of dreams through an analysis of one of his own dreams—the so-called “R. is my Uncle” dream.

Freud writes of having a dream in which a strange face appeared before him. Freud’s analysis reveals that the face he saw was in fact a composite or “condensation” of his Uncle Josef’s face with that of R., a friend and fellow colleague (Freud keeps the name confidential). For present purposes, the analysis of the dream is less important than the conclusion about psychical life that results from it. For Freud, the unconscious can see photographically. For as Freud notes: “What I did was to *adopt* the procedure by which Galton produced…portraits: namely by projecting two images on a single plate.”\(^\text{180}\) Freud’s analysis of the “R. is my Uncle” dream would not have been possible without the advent of photography generally and the technique of composite printing specifically. The conclusion Freud reaches – that he adopted the “procedure by which Galton produced…portraits” – opens a speculative wager that exceeds the

interpretive locus of Freudian dream interpretation. It opens a way towards thinking how consciousness, and the thinking about consciousness, are impacted, shaped, and transformed by the optics of photography. Freud’s analysis of his “R. is my Uncle” dream exemplifies how photography can impact the image of the psyche and hence the image of the self in a radical way. Freud’s interpretation of his own dream shows both how one’s psychical sense of self, and the reinterpretation of that sense of self, can be reconstituted photographically. It shows that photography can serve as a prosthetic device in service of a technique – in this case a psychoanalytical technique – of self-understanding and self-constitution. It is precisely this that Rejlander’s “reflection” also shows.

The evanescent reflection of Rejlander’s narrative “I” in the “Apology” is indicative of a psychically internalized photographic optics. Photography is textually entwined in that instant with Rejlander’s self-constitution as the subject of his autobiographical narrative. At that moment, Rejlander sees himself retrospectively as the photographer he would become, and he sees that image in the text through the literal frame of photography. He sees himself as the future photographer in a photographic frame: he sees himself photographically. Rejlander’s emergent “I” “adopts” (pace Freud) the landscapes at Ackermann’s for the purposes of constituting the image of itself as photographer.

Rejlander’s recollection, like Freud’s dream interpretation, exemplifies what Celia Lury describes as the peculiar and particular “subject-effects of seeing photographically,” a theoretical notion that Lury develops on the “assumption...that the photograph, more than merely representing, has taught us a way of seeing and that this way of seeing has transformed...self-understanding.”\(^{181}\) Rejlander’s use of the optics of photography in order to frame and focus his

autobiographical image is a study in the use of a prosthetic technology, photography in this case, to frame a novel self-understanding or what Lury calls a “prosthetic autobiography.”182

Prosthetic autobiography as Lury powerfully elaborates renders transparent an implicit structure of dependency external to the subject in order for the autobiographical subject to be constituted in the first place. This prosthetic autobiography via photography, Lury argues, catalyzes novel modes of individuation. Lury writes:

experimentation as a technique of the self makes possible a relation to the individual so produced (including previously defining characteristics of consciousness, memory, and embodiment) in which aspects that have previously seemed (naturally or socially) fixed, immutable or beyond will or self-control are increasingly made sites of strategic decision-making, matters of technique or experimentation.183

Such experimentation can take a host of forms, but Lury argues that it is photography that has most profoundly and paradigmatically catalyzed the development of modern prosthetic culture in which “visibility is an imperative.”184 Historically, photography initiated “novel configurations of personhood, self-knowledge and truth.”185

To tell the story of one’s life as a photographer is to enunciate a relation to an outside view – a view through the lens of photography. The life of the photographer denotes in autobiographical terms specifically the life lived in relation to photography. While this life is bounded by its prosthetic engagement with the camera, it is also freed from the totality of the life proper to the normative subject of autobiography. The photographer as subject of a “prosthetic autobiography” can be “dissociated from his or her biography, consciousness and memories but

182 Lury, Prosthetic Culture. This term is significantly developed in chapter two of Prosthetic Culture.
183 Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 1.
184 Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 2.
185 Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 2.
may then...acquire a prosthetic auto/biography or biographies.”¹⁸⁶ Lury re-signifies the autobiographical subject as a human maker. With a nod to philosopher Rosi Braidotti, Lury argues that prosthetic autobiography reimagines the human as “a crafty homo faber” who uses tools like photography for the purposes of “copying and multiplying the potencies of the human body.”¹⁸⁷

A photographer fittingly illustrates Lury’s point. A photographer comes into being through a prosthetic engagement with the camera. This prosthetic engagement also involves writing. It is in and through this prosthetic assemblage that Rejlander’s narrative “I” qua photographer emerges. It is through this assemblage of technological and psychological seeing – photographic seeing – that Rejlander’s autobiographical self-image as photographer develops.

This assemblage constitutes an apparatus in Foucault’s sense. It is at once what Foucault would call a “technology of the self,” which constructs a “relationship to the self,” as well as a medium through which to perform and produce “the work of the self on the self.”¹⁸⁸ Together this apparatus and the psychical form of seeing photographically conditioned by it make possible what Foucault calls the “discovery of the self by the self.”¹⁸⁹ By the “discovery of the self,” Foucault means a historically and culturally specific conception of the self. It is to this concept of the self – not the self itself – to which Foucault refers. For Foucault, the modern self as the inborn reference of one’s identity, is a Christian variant on the Ancient Greek “culture of the self.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 85.
¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 18.
¹⁸⁸ Foucault, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, 120.
¹⁸⁹ Foucault, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, 120.
¹⁹⁰ Foucault, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, 120.
In Foucault’s view, Rejlander’s autobiographical project – a search for the discovery of the origins of his self as photographer – is the sign and symptom of a particularly modern conception of self as something that lies within – a veritable kernel or soul. This modern conception of self, Foucault argues, is the historical effect of the workings of a discursive dispositif or an apparatus that emerged in the early modern period. It effected the production of the image and idea of the self as an interior essence that can be discovered by introspective reflection. That is, the modern discourse of the self produced the very idea that the self is discoverable through self-searching acts like confession and autobiography. The apparatus of the modern discourse of the self is what, in his translation of dispositif, Paul Veyne terms a “set-up” that frames a certain way of speaking about and acting in relation to the subject of the self.\footnote{Paul Veyne, \textit{Foucault: His Thought, His Character} (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 11. Veyne writes on page eleven that by “set-up” is meant “the laws, actions, words and practices that constitute a historical formation.”} This “set-up” is constructed around the idea that the self is waiting to be discovered by introspection. For Foucault, it is precisely this mode of self-surveillance that produces the object of its gaze – the modern self. It is in this sense that autobiographical narratives can properly be described as a kind of set-up or dispositif that catalyzes a “process of subjectification,” which is to say that autobiographical narratives “produce their subject[s].”\footnote{Agamben, “What is an Apparatus?,” 11.}

On Lury’s account, which is heavily influenced by Foucault, the subject of a prosthetic autobiography is effectively the subject of a photographic and discursive apparatus or a set-up that conditions and produces the idea that the self is discoverable through technological and linguistic prostheses. Lury’s point, following Foucault, is that the self that is discovered through the prosthesis of photography is in fact produced by this prosthesis. For Lury the subject of a photo-prosthetic autobiography makes, extends, copies, multiplies, and re-signifies itself through
photographic action. Through this prosthetic engagement, the photographic operator multiplies the possibilities of becoming and self-constitution. Seeing photographically, as Lury defines it, is one of the most visible aspects of this mode of becoming open to the photographic operator; it transforms not only the optical but also, as Rejlander’s case will show, the psychical aspects of seeing.

4.4 Coat Sleeve

The scene that Rejlander describes at Ackermann’s gallery soon fades and a new origin story takes its place. He recalls an event from his portrait painting days that unexpectedly impressed upon him the power of photographic vision. As Rejlander describes, it was a photograph of an anonymous gentleman with a curious fold in his coat sleeve that spurred him to devote himself seriously to the study of photography. He writes:

It is curious to notice how frequently trifles decide some men’s actions. What really hurried me forward [towards photography] was having seen the photograph of a gentleman, and the fold in his coat sleeve was just the thing I required for a portrait I was then painting at home, and could not please myself in this particular point. My sitter had no time or inclination to sit for it...but this [photograph] was just “life-like!” “Now,” said I, “I shall get all I want.” I could not exercise proper patience. I therefore took all the [photography] lessons at once, to turn out a ready-made photographer the next day.¹⁹³

A mere trifle, a fold in a coat sleeve seen in a photograph, was “just the thing,” Rejlander recalls, which finally propelled him to consciously and conscientiously take up photography. That this tiny detail so captivated Rejlander points to the cultivation of a sensitivity to minute visual detail, which as Szarkowski argues in *The Photographer’s Eye*, is indicative of

photographic vision. The camera attunes the eye to see details that can otherwise go unseen. There is a parallel here with the thought of Walter Benjamin on two points: the detail of the coat sleeve and the force of the optical unconscious. In his essay “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin writes the following about a photograph of the philosopher F.W.J. Schelling: “Just consider Schelling’s coat. It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the contours it has borrowed from its wearer are not unworthy of the creases in his face.” Like Rejlander, Benjamin’s photographic eye hones in on a mere trifle, a detail: a small fold in a coat sleeve. The curious fold in Schelling’s coat at the crest of the shoulder becomes a code by which Benjamin reads the lines of Schelling’s face and forces a dialectical coupling of the materiality of the coat and the philosophical idealism of its wearer. The fold itself folds a complex quasi-Marxist material reading of a modern image of one of the nineteenth century’s most important representatives of German Idealist philosophy.

The same visual detail – a fold in a coat sleeve – “spurs on” Rejlander’s narrative. This tiny detail functions as the keystone that critically supports the narrative arc that autobiographically spans the before and after of Rejlander’s passage into photographic practice. The form of seeing (photographic seeing) that the picture of the gentleman offers Rejlander is speedily appropriated by an emergent and insurgent “I” determined “now” to “get all I want.” What does it want? It wants to close the prosthetic distance between optical and photographic seeing. Rejlander’s “I” establishes a fantasy of self-sufficiency. The ego’s dream of liberation from dependency on anything outside itself finally expresses itself in the paradoxical pronouncement that this “I” is a “ready-made photographer.”

---

194 See Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye*. A summary is provided in chapter two of this dissertation.
There is an incongruity between the image of a “ready-made photographer” who by definition is already a photographer and thus was always already a photographer, and the photographer who took “lessons” in order to develop into one. Rejlander’s emergent ego as photographer seeks to efface the “other” of photography and supplant it with an image of a self-sufficient “I.” But the “lessons” shine like a penumbra that reveals what is otherwise eclipsed by this egoical claim: seeing photographically must be learned, whether consciously through “lessons” or unconsciously by mere exposure to photography. Photographic seeing is a technique and a technology for the production of the self qua photographer.

4.5 A Young Miss

No sooner has the confident persona of the “ready-made photographer” appeared in the “Apology” than it is effaced by a more ambivalent figure that speaks of the trials of tutelage, training, and “lessons” in development. Rejlander writes: “Alas! for a very long period my attempts at photography resembled those of a young Miss at the piano, looking alternately at the music and the keys. If I had to speak at the time of operation [photographing], I very easily went wrong.”¹⁹⁶ The time of learning that previously had been signaled by one day of formal training thickens and expands into a story of apprenticeship that now is said to cover a “very long period.” The autotelic “I” of the ready-made photographer now gives way to an “I” that “easily went wrong.” This “I” is figured as a “young Miss at the piano” clumsily playing both a music and an instrument she has not yet mastered.

This “young Miss” is an example of what Cheryl Walker might call an autobiographical “persona.”¹⁹⁷ Walker argues that because the “I” is never self-sufficient, it emerges in an autobiography through a collection of more or less visible personae. Personae in Walker’s view

¹⁹⁷ See Cheryl Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author.”
emerge through a complex interleaving of the “I” or ego, lived life, and the multiplicity of “literary voices” and intertextual traces that bear on the scene of writing.\textsuperscript{198} The “I” of autobiography “functions like an outline,” writes Walker, “a potentiality, rather than a fullness, which is always already depleted as it renders itself in discourse. One might even call a persona a thin description.”\textsuperscript{199} The persona is a vessel more than a mirror that conveys and transforms the subject, the self, or the “I” of the autobiographical reference. Coming as it does after the figuration of the “ready-made photographer,” the “young Miss” at once signifies and splits the “I” of the “Apology.” It at once makes possible its figuration while rendering that figuration manifestly multiple. With the appearance of the “young Miss,” Rejlander’s narrative “I” can no longer be read as a singular, self-sufficient ego. The self-sufficient “ready-made photographer” is exposed as a fantasy by the secondary iteration of the “young Miss.”

The “young Miss” appears on the scene of recollection playing the piano in \textit{media res}. Assuming that the “young Miss” is the persona of Rejlander as novice photographer, and that the music this figure plays is photography, some striking questions follow. Did she, photography, begin playing for Rejlander that fateful day in Rome or was it London? When did this music begin in Rejlander? The “young Miss” autobiographically personifies a place beyond which questions of Rejlander’s beginnings as a photographer become ever more clouded as if consumed in what Benjamin calls the “fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography.”\textsuperscript{200}

Rejlander’s narrative “I” cannot ground itself as an origin since photography conditions the very possibility of his seeing himself as a photographer. And strictly speaking photography did not have a singular origin. The modern photograph dates to the early nineteenth century. But

\textsuperscript{198} Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author,” 114.
\textsuperscript{199} Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author,” 115.
\textsuperscript{200} Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” 274.
the building blocks of photography – optics, chemistry, and rules of visual composition – vastly predate the invention of the mechanical camera. The fog that surrounds the origins of photography is re-imaged in Rejlander’s account by the confused and multiple origin stories of his beginnings as a photographer, which is itself iterated by the plurality of figures that narrate those beginnings.

The narrative drift in the “Apology” from the “ready-made photographer” to the “young Miss” splits the autobiographical trajectory and introduces a swerve, a clinamen, into Rejlander’s account. Rejlander intimates this when he notes: “I drifted into making photographic pictures.”\(^{201}\) This drift erodes the surety of the account and fractures the normative expectation that the “I” of autobiography is singular, and unique. It serves as unintentional critique of the illusory idea that the “I” is complete, coherent, and whole. The multiple personae of the “Apology” render the “I” as a series of images and fragmentary figures. On this point Szarkowski notes something especially prescient. Writing on the photographer’s problematic attempt to capture the world in fragments he notes: “The photographer...[can] not assemble these clues into a coherent narrative.”\(^{202}\) With the appearance of the “young Miss,” Rejlander’s autobiographical project loses its unity and coherence. At that moment it drifts into a narrative form that, like photography, is marked by reproducibility and fragmentation. Thus the “Apology” bears the impress of seeing photographically insofar as it catalyzes a logic leading ultimately, as Lury notes, to the “dissolution of the individual, the proliferation of multiple” personae and “the emergence of an optical unconscious.”\(^{203}\)

\(^{201}\) Rejlander, “An Apology for Art-photography,” 143.
\(^{202}\) Szarkowski, The Photographer’s Eye, introduction.
\(^{203}\) Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 220
4.6 You Photographers

The “young Miss” soon fades and is replaced for yet another figure and yet another origin story. Rejlander writes:

A very good artist was staying in the neighborhood, engaged in some commission. He called, saw [one of my] picture[s], was very much delighted with it, and so was I. Before he left my house he looked at the picture again, and said it was “marvelous;” but added—

“Now, if I had drawn that, I should have introduced another figure between them, or some light object to keep them together. You see there is where you photographers are at fault.”

Rejlander’s autobiographical persona is the object of the artist’s rebuke: “that is where you photographers are at fault.” But this negative identification soon assumes a more affirmative tone. Rejlander continues:

I snapped my fingers after he [the artist] had left – but not at him – and exclaimed out-loud, “I can do it.” Two days after I called at my artist friend’s hotel, as proud as anybody. He looked at my picture and at me, and took snuff twice. He said—“This is another picture.” “No,” said I, “it is the same, except with the addition you suggested.” "Never!" he exclaimed…“how is it possible?” Our interview ended with another suggestion that if a basket or [something] else had been on the left side in the foreground it would have given greater depth to the picture...I agreed fully with my friend’s criticism; and, after a week, I sent to him, in London, the picture amended as a present.

The passage showcases Rejlander’s skill at combination printing. At the prodding of the painter, Rejlander added figures and objects to his initial photograph by shooting the new elements

---


individually and compositing them into the original negative. But the passage indexes something else that for present purposes is of more interest. In the course of the passage, the painter drifts from the pole of a neighbor to that of “friend.” This “friend” is very different from the “brother-artist” figure found in Robinson’s Studio. Robinson’s use of the term “brother-artist” underscores an evolutionary theme internal to his pedagogic program: common descent. Photography, for Robinson, descends from painting which descends from a supreme source of Art. According to Robinson, one becomes a photographer by adapting the techniques and standards of art, particularly painting, to that of photography.

Rejlander, by contrast, images the photographer as a figure drifting between painting and photography. Rejlander writes: “The same way a painter goes if he means to paint a photographer must go if he wishes to make a composition-photograph.” But he adds: “The two go together – part here and meet again.” Finally he notes that where art and photography part “photographic art does not stand still, but proceeds and gathers other merits along another road.” This “parting” of the photographer from the artist signifies a swerve, a clinamen, in the historical development of the nineteenth-century photographer. The photographer for Rejlander takes another route, another “road,” that diverges from the path of the artist.

4.7 No Mind

Rejlander specifies further that photography can be distinguished from painting in terms of the contingencies involved. Whereas the pedagogic ideology of Robinson’s Studio is committed to the proposition that photography can be learned and practiced as an intentional activity. The “Apology” by contrast conceptualizes photography as a practice devoid of the

guarantor of intentionality. Consider the following strangely worded passage: “there is no mind in a photographic picture, so according to some it cannot contain any new idea, pose, light or expression.”209 The “some” was directed at critics, most especially Thomas Sutton whom the essay later mentions by name.

For Sutton, and like-minded critics, photography was not and could not be a form of art. Critics like Sutton held that photographs had “no mind;” they were thought to be devoid of the stamp of human consciousness and feeling. Such critics saw the photograph as a mechanically degraded and impotent copy of the vitality of phenomena comprehended by the human mind. An artwork by the hand of an “inspired” artist was thought to be indubitably imprinted with the vital power of the artist’s imagination. Rejlander’s rejoinder to Sutton and like-minded critics turns on a subtle revision of the concept of intentionality upon which his critics’ view rests.

Rather than presume that art is a matter of planned procedures by which the artist’s ideas and emotions are transferred to a material and relayed to the viewer, Rejlander instead highlights the contingencies of photographic production. Rejlander suggests that photography proposes a new “idea,” a new “expression,” a new “pose” (a new way of appearing); above all, he suggests, that it throws a new “light” on the conception of creative action. But the practice of photography also exposes the operator to the contingencies of the technological apparatuses involved, and to the contingencies of time, place, point of view, and angle of vision any of which can “easily go wrong.”

Rejlander intimates in brief a major insight that twentieth-century commentators on photography would develop, namely, that the frame of a photograph is a contingent boundary framing a contingent moment. As Barthes beautifully observes, a photograph “is wholly

ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope.” In the “world” of photography (Rejlander’s word), things can “go wrong” because, as he notes, photographic practice is marked by a contingent “drift.” This movement of drift, drifting, or deviations amidst the contingencies or those “trifles that decide some men’s actions” is the aleatory axiom upon which Rejlander establishes his life-story and his conception of photography. The drift of photography, Rejlander suggests, leads the photographer inexorably beyond the boundary of intentional certitudes. “I very easily went wrong” is yet another minimalist maxim that economically signals the “new” potential, the “new light,” but also the new darkness, the new opacities, revealed by photography. The photographic capture of the world, Rejlander suggests, involves the photographer in the contingencies that mark the precarious space of the present. To capture, to frame, to freeze, to fix the world in photographs is to become involved in what Barthes calls the “vast disorder of objects” – the vast disorder of things and times that is the world seen through the viewing pane of the camera. To photograph is to drift amidst the contingencies of the present in its fragile moment to moment temporality – brief moments in which so much “can easily go wrong” – times in which a flicker, a passing shadow, a twitch, a blink, a “trifle” can decide everything.

4.8 Two Ways of Life

The concluding pages of the “Apology” are devoted to a defense of what was to become Rejlander’s most famous photograph, Two Ways of Life of 1856. The photograph (of which there are multiple versions) is composed of thirty-two separately shot negatives that were

210 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 5.
211 Rejlander, “An Apology for Art-Photography,” 143
212 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 4.
painstakingly combined in the darkroom to form a single photographic image. The photograph depicts a wide but shallow-stage-like space framed in the center by an arch and columns. At center, an old man leads two young men into a throng of figures, some clothed and some nude or semi-nude. On the right is arranged a group of allegorical figures representing the path of virtue. These include figures of learning, industry, and chastity. On the left are figures of vice depicting slothfulness, promiscuity, and corruption. The picture presents a moral drama in which youth must choose which way in life to go. Rejlander elsewhere gave the following explanation of the work.

In the background is represented a country scene, where, far from the tumult of life, two youths have been fondly reared [the country side is visible in the photograph’s background]. The time has arrived when duty calls then to perform their part in the busy haunts of men. The father, with many misgivings, but with many prayers, conducts them from the home of their childhood, through an archway, which is symbolic of the boundary between town and country. Left [as] orphans at an early age, the spirit of the
mother is seen still hovering near them [in the foreground], instilling into their minds good desires.\textsuperscript{213}

Initial public reactions to \textit{Two Ways of Life} were good. One critic wrote: “This magnificent picture, decidedly the finest Photograph of its class ever produced, is intended to show of how much photography is capable.”\textsuperscript{214} However, over time the tone began to change. A critic writing for the \textit{Art Journal} wrote:

\begin{quote}
Virtue and Vice—Industry and Pleasure—are here displayed with an allegorical felicity, which is—under all the circumstances of producing such a picture—surprising. The pose of each figure is good, and the grouping of the whole as nearly perfect as possible. We do not, however, desire to see many advances in this direction. Works of high Art are not to be executed by a mechanical contrivance. The hand of man, guided by the heaven-born mind, can alone achieve greatness in this direction.\textsuperscript{215}
\end{quote}

In 1857, the Council of the Society of Photography in Scotland refused to hang the picture at its annual exhibition on moral grounds.\textsuperscript{216} The Council reversed its decision the following year but they hid the vices-half of the photograph behind a curtain.\textsuperscript{217} Thomas Sutton later wrote:

\begin{quote}
When the Council of the Society, some years ago, banished from the walls of its Exhibition a photograph entitled...\textit{Two Ways of Life}, in which degraded females were exhibited in a state of nudity, with all the uncompromising truthfulness of photography, they did quite right, for there was neither art nor decency in such a photograph...There is no impropriety in exhibiting such works of art as \textit{Etty's Bathers Surprised by a Swan}, or
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{213}Quoted in Spencer, \textit{O.G. Rejlander}, 97
\bibitem{214}Quoted in Spencer, \textit{O.G. Rejlander}, 101.
\bibitem{216}Spencer, \textit{O.G. Rejlander}, 102.
\bibitem{217}Spencer, \textit{O.G. Rejlander}, 102.
\end{thebibliography}
The debate between art and photography here the form of a moral contest. Nudity in art for Sutton and the like is acceptable, but nudity in photography is an obscenity. Despite the fact that the photograph was known to be a contrived composite image, the reality principle of photography foreclosed for critics like Sutton the possibility of seeing nudity in photography as little more than pornography.

It is in the context of this critical and moral condemnation of Two Ways of Life that one should also read the “Apology.” The reading of the text before the London Photographic Society was Rejlander’s chance to defend his work, and as Spencer points out, he was also keen to defend his female models from the charge of impropriety. Rejlander writes:

Those that objected to...Two Ways of Life being exhibited had a perfect right to their opinion; but they have no right to ask the names or profession or religion of [the] models, still less to use vile epithets in speaking of them, as Mr. Sutton has done in his paper read before the Photographic Society of Scotland.

Despite Rejlander’s effort to defend his work and his models, he could not stem the rising chorus of moral outrage. Rejlander never quite recovered. He felt his foray into art-photography had produced, as he later wrote in a letter to Robinson, “only cavil and misinterpretation.”

Spencer’s archival research has conclusively shown that of the nearly four hundred photographs attributed to Rejlander only twelve of them were intended by Rejlander to be seen as art-photographs. By 1860, perhaps due to negative criticism, Rejlander abandoned his practice of

---

218 Spencer, O.G. Rejlander, 102-103.
220 Quoted in Spencer, O.G. Rejlander, 106.
art-photography. He would continue to make portraits and study aides for painters, but his aesthetic ambitions by 1858 had all but died out.

The textual re-presentation of *Two Ways of Life* in the “Apology” might be said to constitute what W.J.T. Mitchell calls a “metapicture.” Mitchell elaborates on the concept of metapictures first in *Picture Theory* of 1995, but it is his formulation in his more recent *What Do Pictures Want* of 2005 that proves particularly useful for present purposes. Mitchell is interested in pictures (and images broadly) that picture their own picturing. Self-referential pictures are typically associated with postmodern imagery. But they can be found throughout history in sources like Rembrandt, Vermeer, Velasquez and many others whose pictures prominently feature painted images of paintings. Such works draw attention to their material status as pictures. Metapictures can also be found in photography as can be seen in the many pictures of photographs and cameras. The trope has been exploited to great effect by photographers such as Duane Michaels, Louise Lawler, Jeff Wall and others. Mitchell argues that metapictures make visible the fact that “all media are mixed media” and that diverse media are always “nested” within one another.²²¹ Mitchell takes media in the broadest sense. Media are made up of mediums. And a medium, Mitchell argues “is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that ‘mediates’ between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals, and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces.”²²² In Mitchell’s view, a photographer is a medium as much as photography since each mediates the transposition of the visual into

---

photographic form. Through Mitchell’s lens, Two Ways of Life might be conceptualized as what might be termed a metaphotograph of the photographer as a medium.

This reading intersects critically with Jordan Bear’s profoundly ingenious interpretation of Two Ways of Life. In “Dangerous Combinations,” Bear reads Two Ways of Life not as a moral allegory of virtue versus vice but as a political allegory of labour organizing. The invisible “joins” that make up the photographic image are read by Bear as signifying an “invisible” union of labour.223 Baer writes: “The idiom in which the critical response to Rejlander’s photograph was issued was one with striking affinities to a contemporary political condition that likewise seemed to be comprised of an invisible collusion: the organization of labour.”224 Bear goes on to point out that the term “combination” resonated in the England of the 1850s with “any undesirable community of men, who sought, in the words of the Combination Acts meant to suppress their activities, to ‘raise wages, or to increase or diminish the number of hours of work, or quantity of work, to be done.’”225 In short, Bear ingeniously suggests that both the means by which Two Ways of Life was produced and what it depicts – combination on the one hand and labour on the other –created a rhetorical and pictorial resonance that “would have been understood almost exclusively in relation to trade unionism” and labour more generally.226

Extending Bear’s insight, one might argue that Two Ways of Life, and the photograph’s re-figuration in the “Apology,” can be read as an allegory not solely of labour in general but also as an allegory of the labour specifically of the photographer at the very moment of its coming into historical existence alongside the art and labour of modernity. The “Apology” and Two

---

224 Bear, “Dangerous Combinations,” 141.
225 Bear, “Dangerous Combinations,” 141.
226 Bear, “Dangerous Combinations,” 141.
"Ways of Life" textually “nested” within it may be said to metapicture the nineteenth-century photographer as a split, internally divided, and contested cultural figure. The image (like the “Apology”) depicts the medium of photography, and thus also the photographer “nested” within it as composed of two figures bound to a world split by competing images of photography. The two paths confronting the young men may be said to personify two seemingly conflicting choices that confronted the nineteenth-century photographer. Should the photographer follow the path of art and sensual beauty or the path of rational and instrumental technology? The photograph as a metaphorograph figures the split historical figuration of the photographer emerging against the culturally and aesthetically contested backdrop of nineteenth-century photography.

The drama of the “Apology” passes from Rome to London; from a young girl clumsily playing piano to two young orphaned boys adrift in a “world” that branches and splits. The various figures of the photographer emerge in the “Apology” through multiple and multiply recollected photographic situations, apparatuses of desire, technology, image, and self-imagining, together point beyond the anemic outline of pictorialism and the whole edifice of the photographer-as-artist paradigm that went along with it. Unlike the ideal pictorialist figured in Robinson’s texts, the photographer of the “Apology” is a figure of self-division as signified by the multiple accounts of Rejlander’s entry into photographic practice and the plurality of personae that dramatize them. Whereas the photographer of *The Studio* is framed in terms of a narrowly defined, aesthetic program, the photographer of the “Apology” is a wayward figure whose meanderings in the world of photography lead the photographer in ways neither prescribed nor even envisioned by the pictorialist program. The “Apology” marks a moment in the historical emergence of the photographer when the question of what it might mean to be a photographer finds no single, direct, answer. But in its very uncertainty it carves out a possibility
only dreamed of in pictorialism: the possibility that the photographer could yet “gather merits along another road” parallel to that of the artist. The “Apology” establishes the possibility of autonomy for the photographer if only through the specific questions and uncertainties thrown up in the interstitial space between the practice of photography and the sphere of recognizably fine art. In the pages of the “Apology,” the photographer appears for what it was for a moment in the nineteenth century: a divided figure marking an uncertain field.
Chapter 5

A Transport of Delight:

The Case of Julia Margaret Cameron

Chapter four argued that Rejlander’s “Apology” illustrates a then emergent subject position in the field of nineteenth-century photographic discourse and practice: the photographer as a divided and fractured subject position split by the competing interests and demands of art and photography. The identity crisis in which the nineteenth-century photographer was embroiled was, however, interpreted by some photographers as license to reject the imposition of norms drawn from outside photography’s borders. This was the case with Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879).

This chapter examines Cameron’s brief autobiographical text, *Annals of My Glass House*. The text was published on the occasion of Cameron’s 1874 retrospective titled, *Mrs. Cameron’s Photography*, which toured England, Australia, America, and the Continent. “Glass house” was a common name for a photography studio in the nineteenth century owing to the fact that a studio in the days before electricity required many windows and skylights to sufficiently light the space. The central principle of the *Annals*, and arguably of Cameron’s conception of photography as a whole, is that of movement. Cameron often allowed her subjects, especially children, to move during the long exposure time, which created blurs in the final photograph. She also intentionally employed “soft focus” rather than the sharp and hard focus favored by most nineteenth-century photographers. Cameron’s stylistic emphasis on movement signified by the blurriness of many of her most important photographs parallels her philosophic prizing of mobility and fluidity in the *Annals*. Cameron’s *Annals* and her photographic work together
served to open spaces within what Azoulay calls the “arena” of photography. The arena of Cameron’s photography was her glass house. Both her physical studio and her textual glass house – her autobiography – functioned as spaces for experimentation that served to open novel degrees of freedom within the otherwise restrictive space of Victorian norms.

This chapter begins with a reading of the autobiographical work that the *Annals* perform. It then proceeds to investigate how the *Annals* re-conceptualize photographic action and the subject position of the photographer from the perspective of movement and fluidity. Lastly it examines how this conception is given form in one of Cameron’s most complex works, *Pray God Bring Father Safely Home* of 1872.

### 5.1 Safe Cover

Cameron was born Julia Margaret Pattle in Calcutta, India. Her father, James Pattle, was a British official for the East India Trading Company. Her mother, Adeline de l’Etang, had ancestral ties to Marie Antoinette. Julia Margaret married Charles Hay Cameron, a jurist and a member of the Law Commission stationed in Calcutta. By the mid-1850s the couple moved to the village of Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. Cameron over time cultivated an impressive network of influential friends, including the philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), Charles Darwin (1809-1882), and Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892). These contacts were to prove invaluable in the course of Cameron’s eventual rise to prominence as one of the most respected photographers of her generation.

The *Annals* opens with the following invocation: “‘Mrs. Cameron’s Photography,’ now ten years old, has passed the age of lisping and stammering and may speak for itself, having traveled over Europe, America and Australia, and met with welcome which has given it

confidence and power.” The third-person voice heard here is a function of the title of the exhibition, *Mrs. Cameron’s Photography*. Cameron, however, strategically enacts a poetics of prosopopoeia. The exhibition has passed the stage of stammering and matured into a “world traveler” endowed with “confidence and power.” This act of prosopopoeia slyly enables Cameron to claim her success by ascribing a voice to the exhibition.

Although women of the Victorian period did begin to assume roles in public life and the arts, the prevailing nineteenth-century norms remained largely intact. Women were expected to remain in the private sphere of family and married life. Men governed social life by (among other things) regulating and restraining women’s access to the public sphere through legal fetters. Hence in England, as elsewhere, Victorian women had little to no status as legal subjects. And what little legal status women did possess was largely taken away by marriage. Mary Poovey points out in her study *Uneven Developments* that married women in the eyes of the law were seen essentially as property of their husbands. This legal principle was known as “coverture.” Poovey notes: “the principle of coverture...dictated that married women were legally represented or ‘covered’ by their husband because the interest of husband and wife were assumed to be the same; as a consequence married women were not ‘bound’ as individual subjects by contracts, debts, or some criminal laws.” Hence “in Britain, when a woman became what she was destined to be (a wife), she became non-existent in the eyes of the law.”

The principle of coverture reflected and reinforced the ideology of “separate spheres”: public for men and private for women. Men were to participate in the public realm of work

---

231 Poovey, *Uneven Developments*. This concept is developed throughout the work.
and civic duty and women were to remain at home unemployed except in unpaid domestic labor and child rearing. The ideology of separate spheres was reinforced by the perpetuation of the view that women were “naturally self-sacrificing,” a view that drew considerable support from the pseudo-biological principle that women were naturally maternal creatures.²³² The domestic sphere was socially a “protected territory” in which married women’s “naturally” self-sacrificing maternal capacities were thought to “achieve their fullest expression and influence” without the fetters of legal oversight (or protection).²³³ Hence the paradox of Victorian domesticity was that married women were “free” to do what their maternal “natures” demanded: they were “free” to remain under the “cover” of house, home, and husband.

This in brief renders clearer the complex sexual politics that impinged on Cameron’s public emergence as a photographer and her self-figuration in the Annals. As Cameron’s biographer, Victoria Olsen notes, Cameron had to “walk a fine line between two poles: self-effacement would satisfy her public persona of self-sacrifice and devotion to her family but deny her ambition and personal talent; self-promotion would serve her art and career but potentially threaten her identity within her family and community.”²³⁴ In order to walk this “fine line,” the Annals deploys inventive strategies of discretion designed at once to satisfy and subvert Victorian norms of femininity. Letting the exhibition “speak” strategically enables Cameron’s persona as photographer to speak through it. Playing the self-effacing woman provides safe cover, the necessary cover, under which the Annals could slip the societal censors that “protected” the feminine sphere.²³⁵ This strategy of discretion via a self-effacing persona follows

---

²³² Poovey, Uneven Developments, 52.
²³³ Poovey, Uneven Developments, 52.
²³⁴ Olsen, From Life, 146-147.
²³⁵ See Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author.”
the cultural logic of what Homi Bhabha has called (citing nineteenth-century colonial discourse) “sly civility.”236

Bhabha argues that in the restricted zone of enforced civility, colonized subjects can and do find means and modes of address and social performance that simultaneously satisfy and subvert the demands of the colonizer. In his essay “Sly Civility,” Bhabha cites these lines from a sermon by Archdeacon Potts in 1818: “If you urge them [the colonized] with their gross and unworthy misconceptions of the nature and the will of God, or the monstrous follies of their fabulous theology, they will turn it off with a sly civility.”237 It is the ambivalence of colonial rule that the colonized reflects back to the colonizer as “sly civility.”238 The self-effacing acceptance of the colonizer’s social norms produces anxiety within the apparatus of colonial power by generating a series of unsettling questions. Why would anyone submit? Does anyone wholly submit? Is the submissiveness of the colonized merely a mask behind which some resistant kernel silently refuses to yield? Are they conforming or merely being sly? The performance of sly civility, writes Bhabha, “reveals that the other side of narcissistic authority may be the paranoia of power; a desire for ‘authorization’ in the face of a process of cultural differentiation which makes it problematic to fix...objects of colonial power.”239

There are obvious complications with adopting wholesale a postcolonial perspective in order to chart Cameron’s public presentation of herself in the Annals since the relation between colonizers and colonized is not symmetrical to that of men and women. But there are resonances between the two sites of power and resistance. Cameron’s public persona had to slip past the

238 The concept of ambivalence is crucial to Bhabha’s work. He locates ambivalence at the heart of the colonial project.
societal checkpoints zealously guarded by the masculine order. Cameron’s *Annals* deploys the strategy of sly civility by miming the Victorian norm of the mystique of self-effacing femininity. This mimicry of femininity (to use another of Bhabha’s important concepts) is, however, not simply a conscious strategy.\(^{240}\) It is also the sign of an ideological (which is to say unconscious) confirmation of prevailing norms. It was in and through this mixture of conscious and unconscious miming of Victorian norms of femininity that Cameron’s persona as photographer emerged. This conscious stratagem and ideological confirmation of Victorian femininity takes shape early in the *Annals*. Consider the following:

I think that the *Annals of My Glass House* will be welcome to the public, and, endeavoring to clothe my little history with light, as with a garment, I feel confident that the truthful account of indefatigable work, with the anecdote of human interest attached to that work, will add in some measure to its value.\(^{241}\)

The strategy of sly civility is obliquely visible. The *Annals* address a public, but the address is dressed in a “garment” of “light.” The text purports to offer a “truthful account,” but the account is discreetly covered “as with a garment.” Paradoxically, the text is clothed in the very thing that illuminates all things – light. This creates for the reader a certain interpretive free play. One can read this “little history” as a “truthful account” but only on the condition that one bears in mind that this accounting is also an act of concealing. The *Annals* at once expose Cameron as photographer to the public, and at the same time the text covers itself “as with a garment” in the garb of Victorian femininity. The text exists at the crucial intersection or interstice of two sites: public exposure and private discretion. In this interstitial space the *Annals* carves out a thin persona within “the public” of England in the year 1874. This persona lived its life between the

\(^{240}\) See Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man,” in *The Location of Culture*.

\(^{241}\) Walker, “Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author.”
interiorized space of the Victorian domestic sphere (feminine) and the “outside” world of “the public” (masculine) to which the exhibition and the Annals were addressed.

Public address in 1874 (as now) was regulated by norms derived from the quasi-juridical order of acts that include witnessing, confession, testimony, and autobiography. In The Limits of Autobiography, Leigh Gilmore draws out the juridical dimension of autobiographical address. She writes, “along with the dutiful and truthful accounting of a life one might find in autobiography, the self is not only responsible but always potentially culpable, given autobiography’s rhetorical proximity to testimony and the quasi-legalistic framework for judging its authenticity.”

Autobiography puts in question its own truthfulness since it is assumed that one’s image or story of oneself is never “objective.” But it is not only that the reading of autobiography is plagued with questions of veracity. The writing of autobiography is as well. To truthfully tell the story of one’s life to the public – to give a “truthful account” as Cameron says – is to put one’s life on the stand in the public court of opinion. Gilmore continues:

In the cultivation of an autobiographical conscience, one learns to be, and even strives for a sense of being, overseen. Thus autobiography can be viewed as a discipline, a self-study in surveillance. The prevalence of surveillance not only characterizes a relation between the self and others but becomes, as it is internalized, a property of the self as self-reflexivity or conscience.

Gilmore notes that the “self who reflects on his or her life is not unlike the self bound to confess or the self in prison, if one imagines self-representation as a kind of self-monitoring.”

Confessional autobiography proceeds on the implicit assumption that the public gaze is directed

at the self. In Cameron’s case, the public (male) gaze operationalizes a regulatory and coercive force, which compels the desire to give a “truthful account.” As an accompanying text to the exhibition, the Annals, like Cameron’s photographs, were circumscribed by a space of judgment. It was from within this space of aesthetic and social judgment that Cameron’s self as photographer emerged in the eyes of a male-dominated public gaze. Cameron had to satisfy the male-dominated public gaze’s demand for proof that her persona (if not person) was covered or clothed in the garment and garb of Victorian femininity. She had then to expose in public her social belonging within the private, feminine sphere. This was the paradoxical position Cameron was in: how to make the private public without appearing to sully its supposed sanctity? Cameron was caught in the increasingly confused borders of the private and public, which in no small way was a direct consequence of the advent of photography. The photographic image became a virtual vehicle for the transgression and partial breakdown of the public and private distinction. The family photograph, one of Cameron’s genres, is at once a private document and yet made for collective and even at times, as in Cameron’s case, public consumption. As Barthes notes, photography “corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public…the private is consumed as such publicly.” Commenting on this passage, Lury writes that the photographic “display of the private…the making external of the internal both denies and depends upon the boundary of the two. It erases only to redefine this boundary, reconstituting the private within the public.”

It is from a position within the interstice of the private and the public that the Annals speak. “Autobiography,” T.L. Broughton notes, “in its modern, introspective form at least, situates itself at the very juncture of the public world of announcement and the private world of

\[245\] Barthes, Camera Lucida, 78.
\[246\] Lury, Prosthetic Culture, 78-79.
self-analysis and meditation.” The private world of autobiography can only be “read,” or otherwise understood, insofar as it conforms to (or contests) public expectations and norms concerning autobiographical truthfulness. And the semblance of truthfulness has to be effected according to the gendered genre norms of autobiography. Cameron’s “truthful account” had to be dressed or clothed in the language of femininity. The Annals thus symptomatically show how the truthful autobiography addressed to the public requires a dressing of the truth. The truth must be dressed as a witness is dressed for court – in conformity with the rules, regulations, and procedures of public truth telling. To tell a private truth to the public, one must tell it in the language of public address. It is within this ambivalent space of enunciation that Cameron’s “truthful account” must be understood as an iterative production in the present rather than a statement corresponding to a set of historical events only. Here one finds that, as Bhabha notes, “the ‘true’ is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself.”

The question of autobiography and its relation to the public/private distinction thickens considerably when the Annals suddenly break off into a quotation from Tennyson’s poem “The Gardener’s Daughter.” Cameron contextualizes her use of Tennyson’s poem by prefacing it with these words: “details strictly personal and touching the affections should be avoided, is a truth one’s own instinct would suggest, and noble are the teachings of one [Tennyson] whose word has become a text to the nations.” Cameron’s appropriation of the poem (which goes unacknowledged) retools the famed Laureate’s poem as an autobiographical para-text. The first quotation reads:

248 Homi K. Bhabha, “The Commitment to Theory,” in The Location of Culture, 22.
249 Cameron, Annals of My Glass House, 181.
Be wise; not easily forgiven
Are those, who setting wide the doors that bar
The secret bridal chamber of the heart
Let in the day

Cameron’s prefatory contextualization of Tennyson’s poem appropriates and transforms it. Firstly it covertly buttresses Cameron’s strategy of discretion: the public will not easily forgive a woman for exposing the private domestic sphere as signified by the hallowed space of the “bridal chamber.” The poem thus signals to the public that Cameron acknowledges the prevailing norms regarding the privacy of the “feminine” domestic sphere. Yet this acknowledgement also serves as safe cover for the exposure of that sphere though the exhibition of her photographs, many of which were of Cameron’s family. The appropriation of the poem acts to solemnize the Victorian sanctity of the domestic enclosure while at the same time it opens that enclosure to the light of photography and public spectatorship. In light of photography, the “secret bridal chamber” barred from view is in a sense re-signified as a hidden “camera” in the original Latin sense – a chamber. The advent of the modern mechanical camera descends from the camera obscura: a dark chamber through which light is only permitted to enter through a small aperture. This optical device produces an image of the outside world on the opposite wall inside the chamber. In a lovely rhetorical inversion, then, the “glass house” as a text becomes a camera obscura (or dark chamber) that “captures” Tennyson’s poem within its photo-rhetorical enclosure. This inversion is significantly at odds with pictorialist sentiments.

Cameron is considered a pictorialist. But her writing on photography demonstrates a conviction to dispense with fine art as a model from which to derive norms of photographic

practice. She asserts photography’s aesthetic rights in the *Annals* by re-signifying the relation between photography and the fine arts. She subordinates Tennyson’s poetry to a photographic rhetoric and in doing so slyly inverts the nineteenth-century cultural hierarchy of the fine arts over and above photography.

The heliocentric rhetoric of the *Annals* also transforms the “The Gardener’s Daughter” through an intensification of the poem’s photographic resonances. The *Annals* re-contextualization of the poem recodes “light” and “chamber” as elements of an amorous, even sexual, “bridal” drama replete with penetrative rhetoric: light flooding the chamber. But the penetration goes unseen. Light does not illuminate the privatized interiority of the bridal chamber of the heart. It is barred from view by the doors of the locked “chamber of the heart.” The heart chamber rhetorically houses the presumed subject of the *Annals*, Cameron’s true self. Cameron’s heart of hearts, as it were, dwells unseen in the otherwise apparently transparent autobiographical enclosure of the *Glass House*. The heart as seat of the soul or self in modern vernacular has a long history. The heart is the master signifier of Western interiority. As Sloterdijk writes, “emotional disciplines have spawned a universe of subtle physiologies whose only aim is to deepen and emphasize the equation of the heart and the center of the self...heartiness is the epitome of affective core subjectivity.”

Cameron’s barred chamber of the heart with its connotations of chastity, of limit, of a barrier, a refusal to fully disclose, fully disrobe, unclothe or strip bare is the *sine qua non* of an intimacy, which functions to fabricate the assumption that some truth lies hidden in the *Annals*, but in the form of a personal and private intimacy that remains discreetly unexposed.

251 Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, 102.
This strategy of photographic re-signification is echoed in a letter Cameron wrote around 1870. Describing her relation to Tennyson, she writes: “Tennyson is the Sun of the Earth and I am the Priestess of the Sun of the Heavens so that my works must sometimes surpass his.”^252 By the time she peened those lines, Cameron had completed a suite of photographs illustrating Tennyson’s epic poem *The Idylls of the King*. Cameron relished the opportunity to transform Tennyson’s words into images. It is in the context of that project that her statement should be read. Naming Tennyson the “Sun of the Earth” certainly valorizes him and by extension the art of poetry as a whole. Yet at the same time by giving herself the title “Priestess of the Sun,” Cameron fashions herself as an intercessor with the power to re-render Tennyson’s poetry into images made of light. Cameron’s photographic images of the *Idylls of the King* do in a sense “surpass” the poem as Cameron says. They do so in kind more than quality. The photographic representation of Tennyson’s poem surpasses it by traversing the bounds of verse by transposing it (with a difference) into the language of photography.

5.2 The Gift

Having established the groundwork for a project of autobiographical discretion, Cameron proceeds to tell the story of her entrance into photographic practice. She writes: “I...restrain the overflow of my heart and simply state that my first lens [or camera] was given to me by my cherished departed daughter and her husband with the words, ‘It may amuse you, Mother, to try and photograph during your solitude at Freshwater.’”^253 What Cameron fails to mention is that prior to 1863 she had already been exposed to photography, and was by all accounts already avidly interested in it.

^252 Quoted in Olsen, *From Life*, 227.
As early as 1857, Cameron began making photo-albums. Many of these were given as gifts to her friends and relatives. These albums, often artfully decorated, were filled with photographs of family, famous persons, and even reproductions of artworks as well as photo-reproductions of found photographs. Olsen points out that the gift of the camera from Juley (who died before Cameron published the *Annals*) and Charles “almost certainly at Christmas in 1863 was a natural return gift for the photographic album Cameron had given her daughter for her birthday the year before.”

The year Cameron obtained her first camera coincided with the arrival of Oscar Rejlander in the village of Freshwater. Rejlander soon found himself immersed in the Cameron’s lively social calendar. On occasion Rejlander used the Cameron family, sometimes Julia Margaret herself, as models for his pictures. Olsen notes that Rejlander’s prints “often ended up in Julia Margaret’s albums,” which indicates Cameron’s admiration for Rejlander’s work. In some images Rejlander is also seen in the photograph. Such pictures point to “the tantalizing possibility that at least in some cases Julia Margaret may have been the one behind the camera.” Olsen concludes that “the production of this series of photographs [by Rejlander] at [Cameron’s] home in the same year she took up photography herself suggests that there was some form of collaboration or apprenticeship between the two photographers.” While the scholarship on this particular point remains speculative, it is certainly true that Cameron was exposed to photography well before 1863.

To what extent, then, is the account offered by the *Annals* simply a fiction designed to facilitate Cameron’s success? This question is not easy to answer. The *Annals* tells the truth in

---

some respects. Cameron did receive a camera as a gift from her daughter and son-in-law. And the gift came at a time when the lively house at Freshwater had faded to a quiet routine. Her children had grown up and left, and her husband was frequently away on business. And while friends like Tennyson, Rejlander, and other notables were given to dropping by, they were not family.

Family life for Cameron, as for many Victorian women, was deeply tied to her own sense of identity. Olsen and other scholars point out that Cameron had a deep and abiding need to remain connected to her family throughout her life. It is therefore simply not the case that Cameron used her family as a cover for her own professional ambition. Rather it is more likely that Cameron understood her budding identity as a photographer through her family. That is, family was a lens through which Cameron charted and made sense of her emerging identity as a practicing photographer. Olsen writes, “the autobiography probably reflects an emotional truth: the acquisition of the camera and the resulting photographs marked a shift in identity.”258 It was though narratives of familial belonging that Cameron charted her passage beyond the familial enclosure through photography and out into the public sphere.

5.3 From the Hen House to “My Glass House”

The founding of Cameron’s studio features prominently in the *Annals*. Cameron writes: “I turned my coal-house into my dark room and a glazed fowl house I had given to my children became my glass house!”259 The words “became” and “my” and the exclamation point frame the text of the “glass house” in the rhetoric of autonomy (“my”) and transformation (“became”). However this claim is couched in the language of mothering and feminine domesticity considered proper to a Victorian woman of Cameron’s class. Note that her autobiographical “I”

258 Olsen, *From Life*, 134.
259 Cameron, “Annals of My Glass House,” 181
or the persona that operates through that “I” takes possession of the darkroom – formerly a coal-house – but the glass house or studio is prefaced by a narrative of familial belonging. Only after this set-up does the narrative “I” take possession of it with the designation “my glass house.” Despite this the statement is also transformative, even, to an extent, transgressive. The “glazed foul house” that formerly belonged to the family “became my glass house!” In this transitional rhetoric of becoming, the autobiographical “I” straddles the borderland between the domestic interior and the world of the studio – the glass house – from which Cameron accessed the public sphere. Cameron continues:

The hens were liberated, I hope and believe not eaten. The profit of my boys upon new laid eggs was stopped and all hands and hearts sympathised in my new labour, since the society of hens and chickens was soon changed for that of poets, prophets, painters and lovely maidens, who all in turn have immortalized the humble little farm erection.260

The founding of Cameron’s glass house in the Annals is framed in the language of family and domesticity but it operates within a transitional framework. The cancelled profits that would have come from the sale of hens’ eggs function as a preamble to a transition from family to “society.” The hen house as domestic sphere is “changed” to a space for a “society” of artists and visionaries. The theme of liberation, even female liberation in the form of the once cooped-up and now possibly “liberated” hens, is tempered by the stress laid on the support of her family for Cameron’s “new labour.” So while the scene of the founding of Cameron’s glass house marks a transition in the Annals from the domestic enclosure to “society,” this transition remains transitional, occupying a liminal zone somewhere between the actualization of, and merely a

hope for, liberation. The narrative here (as throughout the text) straddles a precarious line. It at once affirms and resists Victorian standards of feminine domesticity. As Olsen notes:

Between the lines she [Cameron] seems to be defensively saying: yes, we lose the income from the eggs, but we will all gain from my art and my family encourages me to do this!...Professional work was certainly not impossible for Victorian women, especially in the cultural fields, but it was difficult and strewn with obstacles. For a bourgeois woman suddenly to take up a paying job might imply that her husband could not support her, that the family was in dire straits, that the wife was insubordinate...Cameron’s autobiography, many of her letters, and her portraits of Charles Hay [her husband] and her children function rather like a signed permission slip that Cameron could present on demand.261

Performing a public persona capable of straddling the line between family and society demanded a tightrope walker’s dexterity. Negotiating the Victorian line between family and society meant negotiating the hazards of self-division. As a public persona, Cameron had to be seen as both mother and photographer. Cameron’s autobiographical “I” had to bear the mark of the socially sanctioned space of the domestic enclosure. But paradoxically she had to wear this garment of domesticity in public. Cameron’s confirmation of Victorian values of femininity and domesticity strategically enabled her to (partially) transgress the social limits imposed by them.

Persona-making, however, is not only a volitional process. Cheryl Walker points out that persona production is both a conscious and unconscious process. It proceeds both (and often not equally) by volitional agency and by internalizing the prevailing ideologies of the social order. The persona is shaped not by the sole sovereignty of the “person,” but emerges in the confrontation with society. For this reason a persona is not always a medium for liberation or

261 Olsen, *From Life*, 146-147.
self-improvement. Indeed Walker notes that “it is rarely the case” that the persona is solely a “delightful aspect of human experience.” Persona production is often a fraught and fractious process born of difficult conditions. Cameron saw that the only way it would be possible for her to occupy the position of a self-proclaimed photographer was for her to be seen to occupy the position of the dutiful Victorian wife and mother.

To what extent Cameron believed in the Victorian values she professed cannot really be answered. Were Cameron’s professed convictions heart-felt or was she merely being sly? The strangeness of the mask of persona is that it can often grow into one’s sense of self often without one necessarily being aware of it. As Alicia Ostriker notes, the “I’ of self-narration might in certain cases mark the site at which “the mask has grown into the flesh.” For Walker and Ostriker asking “who” appears behind the mask of figures in an autobiography, however, is the wrong question. The questions to be asked are rather: who and how many have become through these masks and by what volitional strategies, social norms, and ideological constraints?

Personae abound not only in the Annals but also in Cameron’s photography. Role-playing was a key feature of Cameron’s studio work. Photographs of her children dressed as cherubs, her

\footnotesize

263 Quoted in Walker, *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, 11
maid as the Virgin, friends and relatives dressed as characters from literature and mythology appear frequently in her photographs. So while Olsen is right to point out that Cameron’s pictures of her family helped bolster her “respectable” public persona, it is also true that many of her family photographs are not portraits in the strict sense but rather character studies. Moreover, many of her portraits are distinctly out-of-focus. Cameron’s penchant for costuming and unfocusing together constituted a profoundly powerful material and stylistic arsenal for de-familiarizing her subjects and her relation to herself as mother, socialite, Victorian woman, in short for estranging herself from the historical norms of her gender and class.

Cameron’s poetics of de-familiarization cut in two ways: she de-familiarized herself and those she photographed. She was given to subjecting her family models to a tasking process in which family relations were momentarily severed and re-threaded through Cameron’s demanding aesthetics. Cameron’s great niece Laura Gurney Troubridge recalls posing with her sister as angels of the nativity. Laura remembers Cameron’s “ungentle hand” tousled their hair
“to get rid of its prim, nursery look.”264 Each child was “scantily clad” and had “heavy swan wings” fastened to “her slim shoulders.” To the young girls, “Aunt Julia appeared as a terrifying, elderly woman, short and squat...[d]ressed in dark clothes, stained with chemicals from her photography (and smelling of them too), with a plump, eager face and piercing eyes.”265 “No wonder,” Laura continues, “those old photographs of us, leaning over imaginary ramparts of heaven, look anxious and wistful. This is how we felt.”266

Here in a childhood memory, the reader catches a fleeting glimpse of another side of Cameron’s persona—the working photographer. In the “liberated” space of the ex-chicken coop turned glass house, Cameron could distance herself from Victorian expectations of femininity and maternal nurturing and become, through photographing, some other seemingly unrecognizable figure. Laura and her sister (like many of Cameron’s other intimates) were put through an estranging process in the course of being photographed in which the familial bonds were momentarily dissolved into a semi-anonymous encounter between model and photographer. Costuming intensified this sense of estrangement and de-familiarization by materially re-configuring identities. For Cameron, the “world of theatre and fantasy allowed room to explore other selves and identities.”267 Upon entering the “society” of the glass house, Cameron and her models left behind the domestic sphere of Victorian norms of social comportment.

5.4 I began

In charting her beginnings as a photographer, Cameron writes: “I began with no knowledge of the art. I did not know where to place my dark box, how to focus my sitter, and my

264 Quoted in Helmut Gernsheim, Julia Margaret Cameron: Her Life and Photographic Work (London: Gordon Fraser, 1975), 30.
265 Quoted in Olsen, From Life, 152.
266 Quoted in Gernsheim, Julia Margaret Cameron, 30.
267 Olsen, From Life, 161.
first picture I effaced by rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass.” Of this effaced image little is known. Cameron notes that she paid the model, a farmer living nearby, half a crown per half hour for sitting and that “after many half-crowns...I effaced it while holding it triumphantly.” That Cameron makes mention of this mistake twice in this short text should not go unnoticed. Rejlander’s “Apology” for comparison will help to flesh out the significance of Cameron’s statement.

Rejlander projects his novice years onto the figure of a “young Miss” clumsily playing piano on one occasion, and on another he attempts to efface it altogether through the figure of the “ready-made photographer.” Cameron by contrast begins by openly declaring her beginnings as a photographer as an “I” that “began with no knowledge of the art.” The passage from the sphere of homemaking to the glass house is marked, then, as the passing into a knowing that one must say is Socratic, for to know that one does not know is the beginning of knowledge in the Socratic tradition. Cameron’s “I,” unlike Rejlander’s, does not displace its novice beginnings. No “ready-made photographer” arrives to block from view this point of unknowing.

Cameron’s figuration of herself initially as an “I” with “no knowledge” also follows her pattern of using a self-effacing gesture as a springboard to a more affirmative self-narration. Cameron writes,

my son, Hardinge, being on his Oxford vacation, helped me in the difficulty of focusing. I was half-way through a beautiful picture when a splutter of laughter from one of the children lost me that picture, and less ambitious now, I took one child alone, appealing to her feelings and telling her of the waste of poor Mrs. Cameron’s chemicals and strength if

---

she moved. The appeal had its effect, and I now produced a picture which I called ‘My First Success.’

The “splutter” of laughter by the children breaks the photographic enclosure that connects the children to the photographer. The break results in the separation of the children and the singling out of one child, Annie. It is to this now displaced photographic subject that Cameron makes her appeal by placing herself as photographer in the third-person. It is as if she has steps out of her role as photographer like one removing a mask or costume. The photographer becomes a third person figure with only the property of photographic chemicals to her name: “poor Mrs. Cameron’s chemicals.” She then takes a step back behind the camera. Her son, the photographer’s assistant, readies the lens and her “first success” is realized.

The scene as seen traces a complex series of moves in, again, what Azoulay calls the “arena” of photography. Cameron moves out from behind the camera to the space of the photographed subject, Annie, and back again. This movement re-codes a series of intimate relations relative to the unmoving observer – the camera. The mediating presence of the camera recodes the mother-son relation as photographer and assistant. At the same time it recodes Annie as photographed subject. But when Cameron moves out from behind the camera and approaches her subject a shift in subject positions occur. Who is it that speaks to Annie of “poor Mrs. Cameron’s chemicals?” And who, figuratively speaking, is it that Hardinge sees speaking to Annie? Does he see his mother, a photographer, or some other figure? And who does Annie

271 Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography. This is a concept Azoulay develops throughout the text. I think it is most fully elaborated in chapter seven.
encounter when this figure approaches her? Does she see a photographer, Mrs. Cameron, who? And who does Cameron see if she glances back at Hardinge from Annie’s perspective? Does she see her son or her assistant? The camera here is like a May Pole that sets a group of subject positions in motion. The photographic arena as seen here is “a montage of heterogeneous viewpoints.”272 The “success” of the photographic event occurs in the scene through a narrative remapping of positions within the photographic arena. It is within this very movement, and in the renegotiated subject-positions it effects, that the act of photography is seen to take place. The camera is at the centre of the photographic action, but it is not where the action of photography is seen to take place.

The *Annals*’ de-privileging of the camera as the determining actor in the photographic situation reflects Cameron’s career as a whole. As already noted, Cameron came into

---

photography initially by making albums, perhaps serving as an assistant to Rejlander, and on occasion posing as a model herself. She thus encountered photography as a variety of actions, including the operation of the camera. The camera in Cameron’s case must be seen as contributing actor in a larger and complex set of photographic situations and not what it has become in modern histories of photography – the central historical figure.

Azoulay has done the most in recent years to pioneer a way out of the paradigm in which the camera has dominated the field of photography studies. For Azoulay, the camera should be seen as simply one actor in a complex ensemble of actions that take place within, while holding open, the social space of photography. The arena of photography delimits the space of action in which photographer and photographed reside. But it also marks the space of a photograph’s future spectators. The arena of photography thus covers a very wide spatio-temporal expanse and encloses within its theoretical grasp all the acts that produce and perpetuate the existence of a photograph. Only a fraction of this space, however, can be seen in the frame of the photograph. Never does a photograph show the totality of its viewers who further the life of the image by reproducing it through memory, conversation, or otherwise. As Azoulay notes in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, the arena of photography is a “complex theatre of relations...only some of which are manifested in the single photo...The photograph always includes more or less than what they [photographers] seek to deposit in it.”


Azoulay has provided a much needed critique of the prevailing image of photography in which the camera and the photograph are seen as the two poles between which all photographic
meaning is created and contained. As impressive and unique as Azoulay’s insight is, however, Cameron seems to have reached a similar view in the late nineteenth century.

Through her innovative photographic practice, Cameron came to see that the site or arena of photography is not wholly circumscribed by the camera and its cognate operations: it is an expansive arena of social action, as well as chemistry, and optics. Olsen captures the point precisely. She writes:

Cameron’s photographic career did not begin behind the camera. Nor, for that matter, was it the invention of the camera that inaugurated the field of photography—it was the discovery of photochemicals that could fix the image. Likewise, it was not necessarily the gift of the camera that marks the official beginning of Cameron’s career as much as her experiments in printing and album making. To privilege the camera is convenient for the field of photography because it emphasizes the moment of interaction between artist and subject.274

To reduce the conception of photography to the moment of photographing is to fix and freeze (like a photographic image itself) the relation between photographer and photographed. Cameron’s *Annals* (and her practice) depict the act of photography as a fluid exchanging of roles that involves, but is not wholly subsumed by, the camera. The arena of photography for Cameron revolves around the camera only in the sense that it is the unmoving pivot around which a dynamical movement of bodies and subject positions occur.

### 5.5 Motion Pictures

Motion was central to Cameron’s conception and practice of photography. Cameron’s style of un-focused images resulted both from her purposeful use of soft-focus and because she

---

274 Olsen, *From Life*, 159.
allowed her sitters to move during the long exposure time. One should briefly pause to note the unprecedented quality of the un-focused image in the history of photography prior to Cameron. The idea that focus was to be focused in photography was (and still largely is) assumed. Cameron reflects on her use of soft-focus in the Annals by noting: “when focusing and coming to something that to my eye was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all other photographers insist upon.”

Cameron’s speaks here to a desire to plumb the depths of the photographed subject, a desire to see the physiological and psychological depth of the subject before her lens. She wanted to see beyond the “topographic” form of the body. Only a year after beginning her career, she remarked in a letter to a friend that “conventional topographic Photography” results only in “skeleton rendering of feature & form without that roundness & fullness of form and feature, that modeling of flesh & limb which the focus I use only can give.” For Cameron, soft focus was a technique for giving life to the photographic image. She saw in the sharply delineated focus favored by most of her fellow photographers little more than dead figures – skeletons – lifeless, stiff impostures of living flesh.

The body in its fullness and motion as a corporeal entity of flesh and bone is the figure on which Cameron’s re-conceptualization of photography turns. She dismisses the reduction of photographic seeing to the semblance or skin of the world. The dimensional fullness of the body is the axiom through which focus emerges as a question of phenomenological import. It becomes a problematic through which the fact of the corporeal body becomes photographically re-thought. Central to Cameron’s photographic conception of the body – as evidenced by her photographs – is a phenomenological grasp that the living body is always a body in motion

276 Quoted in Olsen, From Life, 155.
through space and time. And as Cameron shows, space and time are not abstract measurements from the standpoint of the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty seems to speak for Cameron when he beautifully observes in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them and include them. The scope of this inclusion is the measure of my existence.²⁷⁷

For Merleau-Ponty the body that one has, and through which one experiences the world, is not merely in space and time. It is taken up in it. The bodily experience of moving through time and space cannot be likened to observing a ball rolling down an inclined plane. The distances and times traveled by one’s body are experiential phenomena. One, for example, can observe someone taking a walk, and the distance travelled can be measured. But how the travel is experienced by the walker is disclosed only to her on account of her having the body, life, and memories she has. Space and time are measurable units. But the bodily experience of space and time is the measure of one’s existence. Cameron’s desire to grant her subjects psychological depth through movement and soft-focus opens a space for the subject to preserve their existential autonomy and mystery. In order to further explore this it will be helpful to turn to one of Cameron’s best known and most complex images – *Pray God Bring Father Safely Home* of 1874. The photograph depicts a scene set in a sparsely furnished living room.

On the left, brightly illuminated, sits the mother in whose lap, appearing slightly blurred in the photograph, sits her daughter who prays urgently for the safe return of her father. The

²⁷⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 162.
mother, eyes open, gazes into the child’s plaintive face. On the right stands the father. His torso is shrouded in nets suggesting that he is a fisherman and at present away perhaps on a fishing expedition. His son, also somewhat blurred out in the photograph, wears a boyish naval uniform. He stands at a slight angle in front of his absent father, but remains symbolically connected to him by the fishing net that partly wraps about his torso. Between mother and father spans the hearth. On the mantle, and above on the wall, are objects of utility and mementoes: a fire bellows, a kettle, a jug, an iron, a hat (the father’s perhaps). The hearth visually spans the spatial distance between mother and father, suggesting that domesticity stretches across time and space uniting the family during a time of separation. This connectivity is echoed by the fishing net that spills across the floor and wraps around the pedestal on which the daughter wistfully kneels. But of course, and this is strange, the father is not absent. He looks directly out at the viewer. He is
not depicted as a spirit, but as a presence every bit as material as the netting he holds. It is the mother, by contrast, who appears spirit-like, aglow as she is an atmospheric haze of bright light.

Pray God Bring Father Safely Home depicts a seeming reversal of presence and absence. The mother is supposed to be present in the home, yet she is depicted as an ethereal emanation, whereas the father who is supposed to be absent is shown as solidly present. Cameron gives a clue for how to read this when in the Annals she notes that a photograph can be likened to “the embodiment of a prayer.” Cameron here presents an image of photography as a medium in the literal sense: a vehicle through which a prayer or incantation achieves materiality as if the act of photography is an act of conjuration. What relation is Cameron building between memory, prayer, concern, absence and embodiment? How is one to think this strange non-rational dialectic in which absence becomes material presence by a concern on the part of the mother, son, and daughter, but seemingly at the expense of their own visual materiality as signified by the bright glow of the mother and the children’s blurred faces? Here again the ideology of separate gender spheres surfaces.

The space between the mother and father is almost a hyperbolic illustration of the Victorian ideology of the separate spheres of the paternal and maternal. Mothers were to stay at home and raise the children while fathers were to go out into the world and make a living for the family. It was thought that the domestic space was necessary to protect and nurture women’s “natural” maternal instincts just as it was thought that men were “naturally” suited for the demands of work and public life. What Mary Poovey calls “the ideological work of Victorian gender” stabilized and concretized not only a sexual, but also an economic order. She notes: “The ideology of separate spheres...positioned women as moral superiors and economic

dependents."\textsuperscript{279} Women were thought morally superior from a male perspective on the grounds of the presumed sanctity and innocence of children which it was the mother’s duty to raise properly.

The world of work and public life was seen by contrast as morally inferior, but necessary to support, maintain, and protect the domestic enclosure. Work was thought to be tied up with the brute masculine materiality of the outside world whereas the domestic sphere was coded as “feminine,” a space of softness, innocence, and spiritual renewal. On this point it is interesting to note the remark made by the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, a close friend of Cameron. Recalling a social occasion at Cameron’s home, he remembers Cameron as a “strange apparition in a flowing red velvet dress...welcoming us to [her] fine home.”\textsuperscript{280} Thackeray’s comment illuminates the fact that the ideology of separate spheres of masculine and feminine could also cut along the materiality and spirituality axis.

This ideological work of gender is reproduced in \textit{Pray God Bring Father Safely Home} through the figuration of the children. The son and daughter figure the promise of reproduction as the sign of the “bountiful” marriage and also signify the promise that the ideology of separate spheres (masculine and feminine) will be reproduced and perpetuated. This reproductive narrative is of course materially underscored by virtue of the fact that photography is a reproducible medium. The ideology of family reproduction and the reproduction of the ideology of the family is materially ramified through the reproductive medium of photography. It would appear from this vantage that the photograph’s arena of meanings is foreclosed by the theme of reproduction and with it the gendered significations of masculine materiality and feminine

\textsuperscript{279} Poovey, \textit{Uneven Developments}, 52.
\textsuperscript{280} Quoted in \textit{From Life}, 79.
spirituality. One element, however, distorts this hyper-thematic of reproduction: the blurriness of the children’s faces.

The blurriness of the children’s faces introduces a visual trace that materially distorts the readability of the photograph and thus disturbs the placid surface of its ideology. The blurriness is the registered trace of the children’s movement during the exposure time. The trace of their movement introduces a third term between the materiality of the father and the ethereality of the mother. The children are photographically captured in movement through a liminal space between the poles of absence and presence, maternal and paternal, feminine and masculine, and spirit and body. Their movement opens a space within the arena of the photograph, which is bounded by, but not subordinate to, the polarized and fixed coordinates of Victorian domesticity. It is this blurriness of movement that marks a zone of autonomy. What the viewer sees and what the children saw are not the same. The viewer does not and cannot know what the children saw or what they experienced in moving as they did. Neither their vision nor their movement can be read clearly by the viewer. It reads only as a blur. With Merleau-Ponty, one might say finally that the viewer can take the measure of their movement – he or she can read the signs of movement in the blurs – but only the children know what it meant to inhabit and live that movement. The blurs signify the gap between what the viewer sees and what the children experienced.

The blurs of the children’s faces in Pray God Bring Father Safely Home also render material Azoulay’s insight that a photograph is a material tracing of the “heterogeneous viewpoints of those who participated in the act of photography.”281 Here Azoulay echoes Merleau-Ponty’s crucial observation: “The space and time which I inhabit are always in their

different ways indeterminate horizons which contain other points of view.”

Pray God Bring Father Safely Home likewise opens an indeterminate horizon made of a plurality of perspectives within the otherwise frozen monologic ideology of separate spheres.

Cameron’s prizing of motion radically displaced the entire nineteenth-century framework that linked photography with the so-called “still image.” Cameron’s emphasis on motion countered standard nineteenth-century photographic portraiture epitomized by the use of cold metal neck clamps and back straightening rods that held the photographed subject still in what Barthes calls “the mortiferous layers of the Pose.” Barthes capitalizes the word pose because it is a proper name for a specific genre of photography. The head-on, profile, and three-quarters view are types of the Pose genre. The head-clamps and back rods are material traces that signify with brutal clarity that there is nothing natural about posing for the camera: posing always involves real or virtual “constraints” or norms that discipline the body to conform to the “look” of the photographed subject and the social norms that maintain the repertoire of poses by which that look is represented.

It is in this sense that the visible artifice of works such as Pray God Bring Father Safely Home should be understood. Cameron’s staged photographs demonstrate with almost ironic clarity that photography involves elements of what Barthes calls “primitive theatre.” Paradoxically by allowing for movement, Cameron’s photographs show up the artifice of the forcibly restrained body of the posed and poised photographic subject.

Cameron’s practice put movement into photography and in so doing put focus in question. Her intervention remade the image of photography: the still image is displaced for a

282 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 162.
283 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 15.
284 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 30.
moving body. In this sense, Cameron’s photographs might be called “motion pictures” in the literal sense. Paradoxically, Cameron’s blurry images render clear a simple but powerful insight: the living body is always a body in motion. Even the still body still moves. Blood pulses through the arteries. Lungs inflate and deflate, etcetera. This has of course long been known. But Cameron’s photography introduces this fact into the problematic of the still-image. The body in motion, for Cameron, is her chosen medium and means for breaking the link between the still body and the photographic image. Her work shatters the illusion that the “realist” photographic image perpetuates: that a body is still. It shows that behind the posed and poised body of the photographed subject lie real or virtual constraints.

5.6 Fluid

The traces of movement in Cameron’s photographs lend her subjects a sense of fluidity. Cameron refuses to atomize movement as did other nineteenth-century photographers such as Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904). Cameron figures movement as flow. Movement for the mover is not a discontinuous atomized itinerary of gestures. It is fluid. Focus is her technique for rendering visible this fluidity. Many of Cameron’s critics, however, opposed her use of soft-focus. In a letter Cameron responds to this criticism by asking: “What is focus and who has the right to say what is the legitimate focus [?]”285 In posing the question of who has the right to say what focus is the correct one, Cameron gestures towards the same problematic that Azoulay has recently unfolded: neither the rights of the camera operator nor the spectator nor the photographer takes priority in a photographic situation. There are always multiple viewpoints and differing perspectives that are actively negotiated within the situation. Focus for Cameron is the index of the dimensionality of bodies (camera, photographer, and photographed) that

285 Quoted in Olsen, From Life, 166.
comprise a photographic situation. The photographic situation is understood by Cameron not only as an image-space but also as body-space. It is by virtue of the dimensionality of this space that movement and fluidity are possible.

Fluidity and movement are also reflected in the fluid movement between subject positions in the *Annals* as is seen in the studio scene of her “first success” photographing Annie. Cameron’s emphasis on fluidity also has a gendered dimension: the lived experience of the fluidity of “femininity.” Cameron negotiated the problem of being identified in various contexts by different gazes: wife, mother, hostess, Mrs. Cameron, the photographer, and so forth. For women of the nineteenth century, the experience of being identified according to criteria not of their making or choosing had the effect of all but emptying out the “feminine” of anything but the meanings projected onto it by men. Luce Irigaray notes in her essay “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids” that playing multiple roles as “woman” is only “feasible by virtue of her ‘fluid’ character, which has deprived her of all possibility of identity with herself.”\(^\text{286}\) For Irigaray, the “feminine” is a space upon which identities are projected (usually from men) but precisely because of this it is a “fluid character.”\(^\text{287}\) Feminine fluidity is the un-thought apparition that haunts the presumed stability of solid (phallic) masculinity. The masculine bias for solidity, argues Irigaray, appears in the rhetoric of forms, grounds, and objects of philosophy and the postulates of the “hard sciences.”

Nineteenth-century photography was similarly governed by stiff bodies, rigidly posed portraits, sharply delimited and delineated forms. Cameron’s work visually proposes an answer to Irigaray’s difficult question: “how are we to prevent...the subject from being prorogated as

---


such, indeed diminished in its interpretation, by a systematics that re-marks a historical ‘inattention’ to fluids?" Cameron’s work and words re-think the language of solidity through its necessary (albeit spectral) other. Cameron’s work and words re-mark (and deconstruct) photography’s complicity with the masculine language of solidity and rigidity.

The sense of motion, mobility, and fluidity that mark Cameron’s work does not, however, undermine its insistent materiality. Rather it is precisely the materiality of the moving body and the materiality of photography that underwrites Cameron’s aesthetic. Cameron’s work (and thought) points up the fact that much of what has been (and continues to be) thought about photography tends towards what might be called photographic idealism. Despite the fact that nineteenth-century photography was a material and very physically demanding practice—heavy cameras, dangerous chemicals, fragile glass plates, and more—the obsession with the image tended to blind commentators to this physicality.

Part of this had to do with a persistent belief that the camera shares some kind of resonance with mental processing (as seen in Freud). There was and continues to be a seemingly natural linkage between concepts and images and hence between photographic images and mental pictures. An iconic example of this view is found in the American philosopher George Santayana’s (1863-1952) essay “The Photograph and the Mental Image” of 1907. Although written in the early twentieth century, Santayana’s view of photography was formed by the nineteenth-century context. The essay abounds with the familiar earmarks of nineteenth-century photographic idealism. Santayana writes: “The eye has only one retina, the brain a limited capacity for storage; but the camera can receive any number of plates, and the new need never

---

blur nor crowd out the old. Here is a new and accurate visual memory, a perfect record of what the brain must necessarily forget or confuse.”

The camera, Santayana thought, would surely complement and improve the faculties of human cognition and memory. Human thinking would be improved by photography with its mechanical eye, brain, and memory. Santayana notes, “a photograph is produced by a machine, just as the images of fancy and memory are reproduced by a machine; both the camera and the brain transform their impressions in many ways.” The nineteenth-century camera with its seemingly magical power of reception and impression catalyzed a whole series of false analogies between the mind and the camera, the eye and the lens, pictures and memories, photographs and mental images. Santayana’s essay epitomizes the forgetting of the body in the work of photography (as well as in the work of thought). Indeed it forgets the work of the work of photography. It forgets the physicality of the process. Santayana’s view – still popular today in the era of digital speed – relegates photography to a kind of non-physical, automatic reflex, something that happens in the blink of an eye.

The Annals, by contrast, bring to light the physicality of photographic action. Cameron’s language emphasizes the point when she writes (as already noted) “from the very first I handled my lens with tender ardour and it has become to me as a living thing.” The camera was a body for Cameron. It was a physical thing, not a disembodied recording machine. When she speaks of her first efforts in photography, she quite literally comes to grips with photography. As she says, she “effaced” her first picture by accidentally “rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass.” By giving voice to the physicality of the process, Cameron underscores the presence of

---

291 Cameron, Annals of My Glass House, 181.
the laboring body within the photographic situation and in so doing her autobiography “re-
marks” the idealist conception of photography with an embodied and materialist accent.

This re-marking of photography as an embodied and materialist practice flows into the
theme of fluidity when in the *Annals* Cameron writes:

> Personal sympathy has helped me on very much. My husband from first to last has
watched every picture with delight, and it is my daily habit to run to him with every glass
upon which a fresh glory is newly stamped, and to listen to his enthusiastic applause.
This habit of running into the dining room with my wet pictures has stained an immense
quantity of table linen with nitrate of silver, indelible stains, that I should have been
banished from any less indulgent household.\footnote{Cameron, “Annals of My Glass House,” 183.}

Of course it is doubtful that Cameron’s husband watched over the creation of every photograph. The presence of her husband in the scene functions as another “permission slip” in Olsen’s sense that allows for the assumption of Cameron’s autobiographical “I” to revel in the delight of photographic creativity. The “indelible stains” of silver nitrate that spoiled the table linen materially signify the physicality of photography. That material sign remarks and recodes the domestic enclosure. The dining room is forever stained with the fluids of Cameron’s fluid practice of photography.

The image of Cameron the photographer, wife, and mother running through the dining room with a new picture still wet with photochemicals encapsulates the three central elements of Cameron’s theory and practice of photography: fluidity, movement, and embodiment. It is the penultimate image of a thorough-going conceptual revolution in photography. The static camera and its correlate the still-image are displaced for a moving body carrying an image suspended...
like a photographic embryo in its filmic sac. Cameron here represents the photographer as a subject of becoming who re-marks the architecture of the enclosure of Victorian domesticity with an “indelible” and fluid signature. Her photography provided Cameron with what she memorably calls a “transport of delight.” The photographer of the *Annals* is an embodied actor: a subject of movement, a “transport,” a medium who reanimates the frozen stillness, the “skeleton rendering,” of nineteenth-century photographic imagery. Through her fluid conception and practice of photography, Cameron slipped the restraints of Victorian photography and femininity through a slyly subversive strategy of ideological conformity and contestation.

---

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This concluding chapter argues that Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s autobiographical desire to narrate their emergent selves as photographers was, in part, a response to the imperious de-subjectivizing power of nineteenth-century photography. Their effort, then, was partly an effort to house or re-shell (*pace* Sloterdijk) their sense of self in the face of the very thing that did so much to shatter it – photography. I conclude with a comparative analysis of the nineteenth-century photographer with that of the contemporary epoch. My example is my mother. I argue that her example shows that identifying as *a photographer* and doing photography are no longer urgently linked matters. I argue further that the contemporary photographer is a performative subject that emerges through photographic practice. This shift represents a “pragmatic” resolution, in William James’ sense, to the question of identity that preoccupied the nineteenth-century photographer. The chapter concludes with a retracing of this project.

6.1 The Death of Topaz

The texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron demonstrate that the question of what it meant to be a photographer was an urgent problem for the nineteenth-century photographer. This problematic is humorously echoed in the story of “Topaz, the Portrait Painter” found in a collection by P-J Stahl, illustrated by J.J. Grandville, and published in 1887. “Topaz, the Portrait Painter,” tells the story of a monkey who fails as a portrait painter, but later finds success, albeit short-lived, as a photographer. The story is worth recounting here for it captures the existential import of the question of identity that marked the early photographer.
Topaz was taken from his home somewhere on the Amazon. He ended up as a pet in the house of wealthy Parisian socialite. All went well until the day Topaz bit the lady’s husband. For this, he was sent packing. His new master was a portrait painter. Topaz decided to try and follow in his master’s footsteps, but he found he had no talent for painting. Around this time, Topaz heard of Daguerre’s new invention. He decided to give photography a try. One day he stole a purse belonging to one of his master’s clients. With the money Topaz bought a camera and a boat ticket. He sailed back to his home on the Amazon.

On arrival he set up shop. After some initial disappointments, his fame spread. Topaz became a successful and critically admired photographer. The elephant-king, having heard of his fame, invited him to his court to serve as his royal highnesses’ portraitist. Upon arriving in the elephant-king’s court, Topaz wasted no time in taking his first portrait. In short order, he presented the king with his image. The king was mystified and outraged, having expected the image to be life-size. He exclaimed: “it is owing to my great size and strength that I have been chosen king. Were I to exhibit this miserable portrait to my subjects they would imagine I was an insect, a weak, hardly perceptible creature, only fit to be dethroned and crushed.” Humiliated by the great king, Topaz, with camera around his neck, hurled himself into the waters of the Amazon and sank to his death. The story is both comic and tragic. The final image of Topaz drowning himself with his camera fittingly pictures the photographer as a prosthetic subject: camera and monkey go down together. The story of Topaz is one of the first popular stories of the death of a nineteenth-century photographer. Not merely a profession, the photographer here is a figure of life and death.

Grandville, the illustrator of *Private and Public Life of Animals*, was part of that fated generation of lithographers, miniaturists, and engravers whose livelihoods would all but disappear by the end of the nineteenth century. The story of Topaz marks a brief historical moment in which photography existed peaceably alongside other popular image making technologies. It was a brief peace. In “Little History of Photography,” Benjamin notes: “Things developed so rapidly that by 1840 most of the innumerable miniaturists had already become professional photographers, at first only as a sideline, but before long exclusively...This transitional generation disappeared very gradually.” With the disappearance of engravers, lithographers, and so forth, photography also suffered a loss. As photography gradually diffused into popular culture photography’s identity crisis of identity began to subside. It was “naturalized” by habituation. Through diffusion and habituation, the figure of the nineteenth-century photographer dogged by doubt, anxiety, and ambivalence gradually disappeared. The death of Topaz in a sense foretells the death of the nineteenth-century photographer for whom one’s identity as photographer was a matter of social and cultural crisis (if not life and death).

### 6.2 Identity Crisis

The photographer was not a unified historical subject position, and its evolution did not follow a discrete trajectory. The photographer of the nineteenth century, like photography itself, was multiple. It was split and fractured along deep and divisive lines: art and non-art, aesthetics and science, highbrow and middlebrow, masculine and feminine. Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron experienced these divisions in unique ways to differing degrees of intensity. But in their effort to register their experience in words, each photographer sketched out a position that

---

provides a rough guide to what it meant to identify as a photographer at that time, as well as what it was possible to say about that identity.

Robinson staked out the position and promise of the pictorialist photographer. Pictorialist technique promised to at last set the photographer upon a firm foundation of clearly defined rules and aesthetic standards derived from the traditional arts, particularly painting. But Robinson’s texts, especially the Studio, ultimately (unknowingly) demonstrated the limits of this approach. The entire question concerning the identity of photography and the photographer was obviated through a passionate and misplaced identification with the fine arts. Robinson’s pictorialist orientation sought to quiet the very identity crisis out of which pictorialism emerged. Pictorialism sought to resolve a question that it was not really prepared to raise: what does it mean to be a photographer? It is this question that Rejlander (and photographers like him) sought to answer.

Rejlander hoped to legitimate the cultural claim of art-photography not by codifying a set of rules and procedures as Robinson did. Rejlander rather sought a justification for his own practice of photography, and by extension to find or found a justification for creative photography as a whole. He reasoned that by examining his own life he could find a general justification by which anyone might legitimately take up the practice of creative photography. But the use of multiple personae and sudden shifts in location trouble Rejlander’s autobiographical account. The “Apology” neither provides a clear autobiographical picture nor does it make good on its titular promise to provide an apology or rational defense for art-photography. But this failure renders apparent the identity crisis that underwrote pictorialism. The “Apology” brings that identity crisis to the surface.
Cameron by contrast explored and exploited the ontologically ungrounded condition of photography to powerful effect. Becoming a photographer meant becoming precisely something culturally fluid and indefinite. It was that very fluidity that provided an opening in which Cameron’s persona developed within the otherwise restrictive spaces of self-constitution available to a woman in Victorian England. What Robinson and Rejlander saw as photography’s chief problem – its identity crisis – was for Cameron an open space in which she could carve out for herself a new sphere (*pace* Sloterdijk) to inhabit. Each case study illuminates an important facet in the historical constitution of the photographer, and each case showcases the important role that writing played in that constitution.

6.3 Who am I?

The advent of the self-conscious photographer occurred at the historically non-localizable moment when practitioners looked out through the camera onto a new vision of the world and asked themselves: What am I doing? What have I become? Who am I? It was at that moment that the subject position space opened by the camera was inflected and inscribed by an ongoing process of self-understanding and self-constitution in and through photographic practice. It was at that moment that photography and those that practiced it became the subject of a series of questions and controversies that are now readable as the history of the nineteenth-century photographer. That is to say that the advent of the photographer as a self-conscious subject was neither synonymous nor synchronous with the advent of photography. There was a delay or an interval between the technology and the production of the self-identified photographer. Here what Jonathan Crary says of the nineteenth-century observer applies with equal justice to the case of the photographer. Crary writes that if there was a “revolution in the nature and function” of vision in the nineteenth century, it did “not happen independently of the remaking of the
subject." But this in turn must be supplemented with the following: if there was a remaking of
the subject, then there was a remaking of the discursive and technological space out of which it
emerged. Neither a historical survey of nineteenth-century photographic discourse nor its
technological topoi is sufficient to explain the peculiar particularities of the texts by Robinson,
Rejlander, and Cameron. The figurations of the photographer that animate the *Studio*, the
“Apology,” and the *Annals* have no one, single, or discrete genealogical origin. The figures that
animate these texts are born of a tangled web of prosthetic relations between memory, self, the
unconscious, and photography. It is this complex of relations that historically constituted the
nineteenth-century photographer: a historical subject position constructed of words, images,
memory, the (optical) unconscious, and technologies of vision and capture.

6.4 The Photo-Sphere

Sloterdijk argues that the story of the modern subject is a story of de-shelling. The
sequence of metaphysical disenchantments called modernity produced a new subject that sought
to insulate itself from the cold indifference of the world its own reason made. Sloterdijk writes:
“To oppose the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere through the open windows of the
Enlightenment, modern humanity...attempts to balance out its shellessness in space, following
the shattering of its celestial domes.” The writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron when
seen through Sloterdijk’s lens appear as texts seeking to re-establish an insular conception of
selfhood through the very technology that in many ways shattered that conception, namely,
photography.

Many scholars, including Alan Sekula and John Tagg, have pointed out that the origins of
nineteenth-century photography stem from the need to track and control the then newly mobile

and expansive population of the modern metropolis. Following events such as the Paris Commune of 1848, State authorities were eager to develop seemingly more reliable forms of surveillance for the tracking and management of social and political “deviance.” The work of French police officer Alphonse Bertillon (1853-1914), for example, proved crucial in the development of criminological photography or what became known as the “mug-shot.” The standardization of mug-shot aesthetics, and the use of archival methods for organizing a criminal database for cross-referencing images and deeds according to a method of comparative taxonomy, enabled law enforcement agencies to at once produce, capture, and control social “deviance.” Sekula writes that “photography came to establish the terrain of the other, to define both the generalized look—the typology—and the contingent instance of deviance and social pathology.” 299 Photography therefore became a means of pronouncing State judgment: the camera functioned as the presumed panoptic seer and judger of its subjects, and its sight was thought to be purely mechanical, impartial, sound, and even perfect. Photography instituted a de-subjectivizing gaze by positing an image of the subject as available to sight. Yet subjects also wrote back against this by seeking to remake the image of photography as something other than the imperious unblinking eye of technological reproduction. The writings of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron could be morphologically figured in Sloterdijk’s terms as cases of bubble building – the building of immune spheres – in which photographers sought to develop a humane counter-image to panoptic photographic discourse. These fragile spaces were constructed at the nexus point of photography and its conceptualization and autobiographical encirclement. They were spaces in which a re-thinking of the human interior became possible

precisely and paradoxically through the externality of photographic apparatuses: a new inside – a new bubble. Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s writings transform the gaze of photography into a medium of self-making, or as Foucault might call it, a “technique of self.”

The texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron are stories and studies in the historical adaptation of the body and the psyche to the invasive technologies of modern photographic surveillance and the corresponding levelling of the social down to the modern anonymous mass. They are texts that confront the gaze of mechanical automation with the gaze of psychical introspection. These texts counter the calculus of mass re-production with the idiosyncratically singular temperament of existential doubt and self-searching. The photographer, as Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron understood it, came into being at this interstice between the human and the machine. This space of collusion, combination, and conflict provided the crucible for their self-understanding as photographers. One may object to the humanist impulse of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron but one cannot deny that this humanism was (perhaps paradoxically) the medium through which the relation to the machinic realm of photography became autobiographically possible. Humanist sentiment, insofar as it was the means for relating to the camera, is part and parcel of the social history of the emergence of the photographer. As Neil Gross notes, social history is in part determined by the “cognitive and affective processes” among which “actors’ conceptualizations of themselves and their lives figure prominently.”

Gross does not advocate reducing the social to a plurality of persons, but neither does he see the social as something utterly distinct from that plurality. His position does not exclude the thesis that actors often “act in instrumental” ways in accordance with the norms and policing policies of a social order, but “instrumental action of this sort, just like every other form of social action,

300 Gross, Richard Rorty, 261.
is mediated by interpretations of the action environment coloured by actors’ past experience and self-understandings – experiences and self-understandings to which they may and often do give conscious attention.”

The texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron are in effect testimonies to, and a poetics of, interiority. The interiority figured in these texts is not that of classical metaphysics – the indestructible selfsame kernel of the subject. Rather these are texts that testify to an effort to “cultivate interiority” as Irigaray says. These photographers, and many more less famous than they, sought to cultivate interiority not within the irretrievably narcissistic spaces of selfhood, but in the peculiarly prosthetic spaces that open between operator and machine: the spaces of the self as prosthetic autobiography. These texts speak to the interior world of selves formed at the intersection of external photographic prostheses and the “reflective” spaces of autobiographical narration. It is this dual world – what Sloterdijk calls the “dual bubble” – that formed the interior space of the photographer.

For Sloterdijk as for Irigaray there can be no possibility of imagining the self without instituting a division in the self. The heart of interiority for both Sloterdijk and Irigaray is not the undivided, singular, univocity of selfhood. Rather the self comes into being qua self-consciousness only by way of the necessary division of the singular self. To understand oneself as a self is to institute a “double dialectic” of oneself to oneself. By producing photographs and reflecting on that production in writing, each photographer practiced what Sloterdijk calls “the profession of the wild interior designer.”

---

301 Gross, Richard Rorty, 261.
302 Irigaray, I Love to You, 53.
303 Sloterdijk, Bubbles, 60.
304 Irigaray, I Love to You, 62.
305 Sloterdijk, Bubbles, 84.
of the poststructuralist deconstruction of the subject in that it proposes to figure interiority as a hollow center around which selfhood is manufactured. It is by virtue of its hollowness, its openness, that the bubble is morphologically possible. Sloterdijk thus rethinks interiority – the core and coring of the subject – in terms of a profound hollowness, as a radical absence, as the product of a division, spacing, and splitting of the subject: it is this very interior spacing that makes the construction (as much as the deconstruction) of selfhood possible. Sloterdijk wagers: “Should we not understand the strongest subject as the most successful metabolic agent – the person who makes the least secret of his hollowness, penetrability, and mediality.”

Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron might then be understood as profoundly mediated figures in Sloterdijk’s sense. Opening their identities to the radical alterity of photography, and photographic seeing, enabled them to metabolize the new technology for the purposes of creating precisely what Lury means by a “prosthetic autobiography.” Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron each became a photographer by turning their photographically mediated view of the world upon themselves. That is, each interiorized his or her sense of self by dividing that self into a pre and post-photographic self. The self of Robinson’s Studio asks only after it enters the space of photographic production: what am I to do? Reflecting back on his career after he took up photography, Rejlander is able to ask: what have I become in becoming a photographer. Cameron’s history of herself qua photographer – her Annals – chart the story of herself as told from the perspective of her glass house.

6.5 Mother

What has happened to the figure of the nineteenth-century photographer – that figure of introspection and existential doubt? The context in which photographers work today has changed

---

306 Sloterdijk, Bubbles, 95.
radically since the time of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron. By the mid-twentieth century, photography was at last officially endorsed by the museum and the art world. It also continued to service evidentiary demands of the courts, the police, and journalists, as well as an expanding public that continued to use it to remember. Today the question of photography and the photographer continues to be a question, but it is not one that is likely to provoke the joy, despair, and anxieties of the nineteenth century. The ontological status of photography, the cultural legitimacy of art-photography, and the question of photographic truth still command the interests of specialists, but these issues have lost much of their former urgency. Today it is commonly understood that there are many ways to practice photography and therefore many ways to identify (or not) as a photographer. And it is the latter – the non-identification of oneself as photographer – that is ascendant.

My mother, to give into my own autobiographical impulse, exemplifies the contemporary photography practitioner. My mother grew up in an artistic household. Her father was a painter. Her father also loved taking photographs, although he never considered this his art. He converted most of his photographs to slides for the Sunday slideshows that took place in the family room of my youth. My mother surely inherited her passion for taking pictures from her father. But like him she never believed or thought it necessary to stake an identity – much less an artistic identity – on her practice of photography. If asked about the subject, my mother will say something like: “You know me, I like taking pictures.” Indeed she does. Her camera is never far from her. It’s usually in her purse so she can quickly fish it out when the moment strikes her. Her practice appears to confirm Bourdieu’s thesis regarding what he calls “canons of ordinary practice.”

---

307 Bourdieu, Photography, 41.
This practice consists in the use of photography chiefly as a means of “solemnization.” When my mother takes out her camera, the moment becomes a family event. It ceases to be simply an occasion. The gesture of photographing solemnly particularizes the birthday, the first day of school, anniversary, holiday, graduation, etcetera. But despite the vast number of photographs my mother has taken and will no doubt take in the future, she remains a photographer in practice only. She does not identify as a photographer. She never calls herself a photographer. It would be wrong, however, to construe a contemporary photography practitioner like my mother as simply someone who thoughtlessly takes pictures. Rather practice is today the means by which the question of what it means to be a photographer is resolved. The existential question of the photographer’s identity is resolved by the immanent practice of photography as it happens in the moment. Contemporary practitioners, like my mother, resolve the question of the photographer’s identity “pragmatically.” To clarify this, a brief detour into pragmatism will be helpful.

In his 1907 lectures on pragmatism, William James defines pragmatism as a philosophy that springs from the “pragmatic method.” The pragmatic method consists in settling philosophical disputes by tracing what consequences if any follow from taking one view rather than another. James argues that in cases where no consequences follow from taking one side in a philosophical dispute rather than another the matter should be deemed quite literally “inconsequential.” James writes:

It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence. There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a concrete difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and

---

in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.\textsuperscript{309}

James argues that thought is a form of action that takes place in the world and not in some imaginary realm sealed off from the contingencies of everyday life. Practical action is not for James a secondary “reflection” of philosophical truths, but a space in which praxis as thinking is contested and new modes of thought-action are developed. Practice is socially embedded and embodied thinking. One of the consequences of pragmatism is that philosophy ceases to be the special province of professional thinkers, universities, or books. Philosophy, says the pragmatist, occurs in the seemingly mundane practice of daily life. Hence one way to study philosophy is to study the practice of everyday life. James captures this sentiment beautifully when he notes in his lecture:

I know that you, ladies and gentlemen, have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines the perspective in your several worlds. You know the same of me.... [But] the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is more or less a dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{310}

Freud too (a contemporary of James) shares this “pragmatic” respect for the practice of daily life as itself a profound philosophic riddle for which observation of everyday actions provides some


\textsuperscript{310} James, \textit{Pragmatism}, 11.
clues. To understand the psyche, Freud advised that one listen to how people talk about everyday experience. Likewise James advocates the study of philosophy via the study of everyday life.

In a like manner it might be said that the contemporary photographer can be conceptualized by simply observing the plurality of ways in which photographers work today. Here however it is important to stress a Jamesian point: contemporary photographic practice is a philosophical practice. Practitioners like my mother are therefore in this pragmatic sense also thinkers whose thinking-practice, among other things, importantly de-couples the photographer from the field of identity questions that haunted nineteenth-century photography. If my mother, and contemporary photographers like her, have a philosophy embedded in their social action, it is one in which the whole idea of the photographer as a singular identity has been displaced for a pluralistic conception based on the contingent operations forged moment to moment in the shifting photographic field of action. My mother takes out her camera when the situation strikes her. My mother does photography. She doesn’t think about being or not being a photographer.

The photographer today in practice embraces its contingent formation. This is part and parcel of a larger epistemic shift away from essentialist conceptions of subjectivity towards ones based on shifting performative contexts. The neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty captures this shift economically when he notes in “The Contingency of Selfhood” that today it is commonplace to regard the self as a “tissue of contingencies rather that...a well ordered system of faculties.”311 People like my mother who do photography without identifying as a photographer represent a lived realization of the historical shift towards thinking identity in terms of practice rather than being. The current paradigm of the photographer thus stakes its ground at a considerable distance from the territory of nineteenth-century photography ruled as it

was by the implicit or explicit claim of the sovereignty of the photographer as a conscious agent working through the pull and pressure of contested social, cultural, and philosophical debates. The relative ease with which my mother (and those like her) do photography while not identifying (or feeling the need to identify) as a photographer speaks to a significant working-through of the problem of identity in relation to photography in the manner of what again Lury would call the prosthetic re-conceptualization of the self.

The photographer as a historical figure has passed out of the nineteenth-century world of photographic controversy. Nobody worries much anymore about the cultural or scientific status of photography. What matters today is less the status of the photographer or photography itself than the workings and effects of the photographic situation, as Azoulay conceives it: the social arena of bodies, places, and times that the event of photographing contracts together. The contingent and spontaneous movement that organizes and punctuates the photographic situation has pressured to the point of dissolution the nineteenth-century conception of the photographer as a unique historical actor: the figure of the contemporary photographer is seen as inextricably tied to the field of actors and sites of seeing, which make the production and dissemination of photographs possible. Arguably this was always the case. But in the nineteenth century, the photographer’s relation to her subjects and to the present and future spectators of the image was philosophically mediated by a questioning after her own status within the cultural field. Today that philosophic mediation has been substituted for a thinking of the act of photography as more or less a fully habituated means of making relations: relations that knit bodies, times, places, and images together. The photographer of the nineteenth century – the photographer for whom the question: what does it mean to say “I am a photographer?” was an urgent question – has, like Topaz, passed away. But while the question of what it means to be or become a photographer
may have receded with the general acceptance of photography as a fact of cultural life, photography remains a powerful and popular medium for the construction of selfhood today.

6.6 Coda

In this dissertation I have argued that the photographer can be understood at two distinct but inseparable levels of generality: the photographer and a photographer. The former names a novel subject position that came into being with the advent of photographic technologies in the mid-nineteenth century. The latter refers to a particular photographic practitioner. It is my contention that the photographer qua subject position emerged in and through the intersection of photographic technologies, discourses, practices, and modes of self-understanding, particularly autobiography. This prosthetic, mixed-media assemblage provided a medium through which individuals came to see themselves as photographers, and in so doing simultaneously re-inflected the space of the subject position opened by photography.

It is this dynamical process that the texts of Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron illuminate. Robinson opens to view the photographer as a figure in search of the ontology of photography. Despite having codified a system of photographic aesthetics called pictorialism, Robinson was unable to settle the haunting question of photography’s identity. In turn he could not fully settle the cultural identity of the photographer despite his attempt to carve out a space for the photographer in the regime of settled, middle class life. Rejlander’s account of how he entered into photographic practice promises to offer a defense, an apology, for art-photography. But his text ultimately fails to deliver a coherent aesthetic theory of the kind found in Robinson’s writings. Despite its theoretical failure, Rejlander’s “Apology” reveals the difficulty early photographic practitioners faced in understanding themselves as photographers. The plurality of figures and the branching narrative trajectories of the “Apology” reflect the ungrounded,
multiplicitous nature of photography. In Cameron’s autobiographical *Annals*, the ontologically ungrounded condition of photography becomes itself the ground for a destabilization of the rigid roles prescribed by Victorian norms. In the studio, her glass house, and within the spaces of writing, Cameron could slip the confines of family and domesticity. Cameron saw the ontologically open space of photography not as Robinson and Rejlander did—as a crisis to be resolved— but as a “transport” beyond the rigidly defined world of nineteenth-century photographic aesthetics, and Victorian gender and class norms. Her practice of photography enabled Cameron to challenge both.

These texts offer three stories of the nineteenth-century photographer: the photographer in search of photography (Robinson), the photographer in search of himself (Rejlander), and the photographer as self-creation (Cameron). Like a triptych, these instances of the photographer are a series of snapshots: stations of the photographer, episodes in the emergence of a novel subject position, a mode of subjectivity, and a figuration of selfhood. It has been my aim throughout this study to show that to properly theorize the photographer, it is necessary to go beyond the confines of hard-line Foucauldian imaginings that would reduce the photographer to an effect of discourse. I have sought to counter this by showing how Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron were not only fashioned by the discourse of photography, but fashioners of it as well. Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron as figures of the photographer must be understood as intersectional figures that exist at the border of photography and life-writing: from a position at once on the outside of photography and the psychical inside of autobiographical imagining. My effort has been to show that to conceptualize the photographer necessitates a rethinking of the concept of interiority, which, however, does not necessitate a retreat into the dark night of the Cartesian metaphysics of the subject. Finally I have sought to demonstrate the historical importance of the
nineteenth-century photographer to any understanding of contemporary photographic practitioners for whom, on the whole, the question of photography and the photographer are no longer matters of existential import. But now (as then) the photographer figures the effort to construct a personal relation to the technological present in and through the very means of technological reproduction afforded by photography. It is this process, and the attempt to come to grips with that process, that Robinson, Rejlander, and Cameron’s writings illuminate: writings born of the personal and paradigmatic effort to ask what it might mean to be or become a photographer.
Bibliography


Fornet-Betancourt, Raúl, Helmut Becker, and Alfredo Gomez Müller. “The Ethic of the Care for


———. “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids.” In *This Sex Which is Not One.* Translated by Catherine


———. “The Contingency of Selfhood.” In *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge:


Curriculum Vitae

Name: Jonathan R. Fardy

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:
Framingham State College, Framingham, Massachusetts, United States
1998-2002 B.A.
Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, United States
2006-2008 M.A.
The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada
2009-2014 Ph.D.

Honours and Awards:
Graduate Thesis Research Award
2012
Scholarship to School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University
2011

Related Work
Instructor
Ontario College of Art and Design University
2013-Present

Publications: