The Gesture of Photographing

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Mr. D. felt himself the dense focal point of the dark room in which he had not left for more than three weeks. His lungs were filled with fluid, just as his soul was heavy with fatigue. There was a sharp pain which accompanied each shallow breath, just below his left shoulder blade, which insinuated itself as a kind of swallowed, stubborn second pulse, measuring the seemingly interminable passage of his illness. The thick velvet curtains protected him from almost all external light, even though the clock was conscientiously ticking itself just past noon, and a gas lamp hissed near his bedside, should he gather the strength to read. (Something which happened only for minutes at a time, if at all, on some days.) The patient both welcomed and dreaded the almost hourly appearance of his solicitous sister, who would fluff his pillows, and bring him tea, broth, medicine, soporifics, and news from the outside world — whether it be of the village, or the wider world.

Mr. D. was dying. He could feel it. Slithering through his fleshly vessel like a thousand tiny black serpents, breeding and hatching the end of all tomorrows. And yet he did not feel the dread he expected. He trusted in God to receive him; despite his sins and faults, having spent his later years repenting, scrub-
bing his thoughts with strict mental hygiene, and collecting an accumulation of banal but surely effective good graces. As he stared at the ceiling—a dark blue, featureless landscape which had become the very shade and texture of his monotonous consciousness since falling ill—the gas lamp sputtered and died. Mr. D. had no breath to call for assistance; and so he stared into the sudden darkness, half-wondering if he had indeed just died. Slowly, however, a few rays pushed their way past the velvet curtains and wormed their way into his retinas; and the sounds of passing horses persisted in cantering across his eardrums. It appeared to the patient that he hadn’t been snuffed out just yet.

Indeed, the sudden darkness soothed him, and he felt as free from troublesome thoughts or prickled emotions as the unseen, but intimately felt, furniture in the room. Suddenly, however, as his eyes adjusted, a vision emerged out of the void, and imprinted itself on the ceiling above him. It was a colorful carbon copy of the small church across the road; inverted. For a moment, once again, Mr. D.’s rather uncertain mind took this as a sign from his Maker. But the patient was sufficiently a gentleman of his era that he soon guessed at the scientific reasons for this unexpected spectral visitation. By virtue of accidental physics, the bedroom was acting as a camera obscura, thanks to the absence of the gaslight, and the sun’s rays, which were now—thanks to organic optics—sending him a natural photograph of the world outside. The somewhat watery image—rusty colored stone, and the delicate green of the ivy wrapped around the spire—were exquisite to the invalid, who had been staring at a featureless, flat canopy for weeks. It was a delicate thing of beauty.

Occasionally the floating photograph would shift into motion, like a magic lantern, as when a slight breeze obliged the ivy leaves to rustle in little wavelets; or when a carriage went by, revealing only a trio of top hats and a single ivory-colored parasol, extending down from the top of the “frame.” Mr. D. felt unexpected tears pricking his eyes, and the image became blurry. He was entranced by this spontaneous window on to an upside-down world; a world that he was surely departing soon.
Here was a souvenir to travel to the next life with, in the front pocket of his memory.

Indeed, the rather tranquil and Spartan room of his mind was suddenly jolted, as if an overstuffed suitcase, that he had placed on top of a wardrobe in a deliberate act of planned negligence, had finally toppled from its perch, and come crashing the ground, flinging its forgotten contents to every corner of his soul.

One specific memory rose up to him, as vivid as the little church scene, superimposing itself upon it. He was standing in the garden of the L. family; seized in the fierce pincers of both anger and misery. He was facing away from the house that he had been trying to summon signs of life from, for many minutes. The sun was setting, and he distinctly recalled the wheelbarrow propped up against the wall, as well as the intricate Oriental bells that hung from the lime-tree (one of his many offerings to this domestic clan). The family had clearly fled in relative haste, as the house had not been “turned down” for the off-season. He sensed once again in his bones, reliving the humiliation, that he was likely the spur for this sudden, and untimely migration back to the city. But it had been a misunderstanding! A misunderstanding, I tell you! And yet, no matter how many letters he would subsequently write, explaining the size, shape, provenance, and dire repercussions of this misunderstanding, the only reply he ever received came in the form of a very deliberate silence, monogrammed with the L. family seal.

Peeling loose from the present, Mr. D. felt himself traveling to the same place, there in the warm garden, with thunder rumbling and a blustery breeze pawing the treetops of the valley, even as he was still stricken to his bed. His skin was etched with papery creases, this time, and his hair was shot with grey. But there he was. Again. As before. Abandoned.

And yet, on this occasion the bitterness had lost its poison. Indeed, he could not taste it at all. The projections continued, originating deep in his being, spooled across his memory, and shimmering out into the room; as if his entire life was now a camera obscura, and his every breath a gaseous glass plate that bore a message of release. He saw the young girl, A., posing for
him, in the same garden, since his magic machine required the long exposure of the outdoors. He heard her sisters making gentle fun of the hasty, musty and old-fashioned props that he assembled around the young sylph. He felt her parents watching with some concern from the conservatory; but reassuring each other, more with subtle elisions and tea-spooning gestures than actual words, that a man of the cloth could have no unsavory motives. He had assured them that this device neither stole nor entrapped souls, but rather captured the essence of its subject, only to return it tenfold, through the miracle of motherless reproduction. Did they themselves fear for their souls when sitting for an oil painting? Well, then! This is no different. Indeed, there is less cause for misgivings, as the process is much faster, and clearly occurs with God’s blessing, since it happens with little or no human intervention. One would spend one’s time more wisely admonishing the stones for remembering the shells, leaves, or fish that persist in the fossil.

Indeed, at times Mr. D. felt more like a gardener than that strange new creature, the gentleman photographer. He would push the sturdy wooden legs of his camera into the soft ground, and then he would plant seeds. Soon enough, photographs would bloom. It was still unclear to him whether he was engaged in an art, science, craft, or technique. Either way, he felt more continuity with the practices of his forebears than rupture. After all, weren’t the trees themselves photosynthesizing? Isn’t the sun itself a flashing device, with an inordinately long exposure? Aren’t our fellow men and women sensitive plates of a sort, registering the specificity of light at any given moment, and storing each layer in their hearts. A type of animation. Was not God the ultimate photographer, staging and memorializing every moment on this earth? From this perspective, Mr. D. himself was merely paying homage to the grace of holy sight and sacred insight. “Let there be light.”

And let there be things to write of, in the divine medium of light.

Such were the inchoate philosophies that Mr. D. had starting developing in a little treatise, that he had dedicated and given
to the L. family, in order that they might better understand his quiet and unusual passion for recording their lives. Here he had explained, with a Deacon’s modest mastery of rhetoric, that there was little difference whether the subject was the household fruit bowl, pet dog, or daughter. These all were aspects of God’s plan, each with their place and purpose, for which the machine would capture but one fleeting moment, to enable reflection and gratitude. “The man with the apparatus is not hunting for reflected light,” he had written in his portable notebook, while drafting his treatise, “but rather selecting specific rays of light within the parameters of those available to him.” Everything upon which Mr. D. turned his glassy third eye towards responded to being watched, whether it was the youngest maiden of the house, or the horses in the fields. Even the pond, empty of all visible life shimmered differently, under the passage of the water-striders. Every exposure was a portrait. Even a landscape. So that giggling girls and silent trees were equally self-conscious under his mnemonic gaze. (A phrase which he borrowed for the title of his little book on the subject.) This new way of seeing — a way of seeing which fixes what is seen — encourages an appreciation for singularity, he insisted. It selects this tree, from this angle, at this moment. And through the very framing of the unique, it creates one piece in a never-to-be-completed collage called the Eternal.

But such high-sounding words soured on the page, after the Misunderstanding. Indeed, the book itself had served as a missile thrown at Mr. D.’s person on that unfortunate afternoon, the hard-leather corner catching him on the cheek, and leaving a bruise. A. herself had vanished upstairs during the commotion, and that was the last time he had seen her in person. Thankfully Mr. D. still had her image, imprinted on paper. But he half-suspected even these traces would evaporate soon enough, by virtue of her ongoing absence. (Did she forgive him? Did she miss him? Did she understand him?...He would never know.)

After this incident, he continued to refine his photographic praxis. But it never felt quite so devout again; no longer tied to a greater mission. Indeed, at times he wondered if he was in fact fingerprinting the world, as one takes the fingerprints of a crim-
inal: a thought that led him to abandon the whole enterprise years before he found himself, unable to get out of bed, indeed, unable to cling much longer to his own vitality.

He realized now the hubris of his former years, and how much time he had spent upon it. The gentleman photographer thought he had been doing God’s work, but was instead naively attempting to play God. In posing his young muse just so, he was attempting to precisely capture the enigmatic intersection of time and space. But these two coiling lines will forever escape the mortal desire to fix their secret congress. The image which remains is merely a caricatured phantom of what is. Or what was.

The true camera is the one we stumble upon, or find ourselves within, like this room in the North end of town, with the creaking pipes along the walls. We are forever inside the mechanism, and should understand ourselves as the subjects of its gaze; and not the master observer. Moreover, “writing in light” is not at all about preserving the past, or being haunted by what was (despite both popular and expert opinion). Rather, it is about fashioning steps upon which we can more mindfully walk towards the future. Had he the time, energy, and materials to revisit his treatise on the subject, Mr. D. would have emphasized this unacknowledged aspect of the art, with its forward-looking orientation. Indeed, had he himself fully appreciated that the gesture of photographing permits us to see, concretely, how choice functions as a projection into the future, then he may not have forsaken the practice, which had become for him mildewed with melancholy.

Indeed, as Mr. D.’s vision began to blur and withdraw, an eternal moment of great lucidity visited him. The eyes in our heads are cameras, he realized, with no film upon which to print what it sees, save for the dubious medium — the unfaithful clay — of memory. Our fellow creatures are the living images, written in light. Were it not for the sun, we would be virtual whispers of being, blindly groping about in shadows, pressed against the walls of a glass darkly. But with God’s grace, the sons and daughters of Adam — our intimates especially — provide pinhole perspectives on the universe. And it is up to us to appreciate that specific
illuminatiun of the whole, via our own fleeting flames. The ancients believed that every object had a phantom film, that would fling itself, layer by layer towards the human eye, in order to be seen as such. And as always, the ancients were not far wrong.

And the rusty vision of the church persisted on the ceiling, even as it faded in Mr. D’s pupils, until he saw nothing. Heard nothing. Felt nothing.

But still, the living photograph on the ceiling persisted, shimmering in the afternoon breeze, until his sister entered the room mid-sentence, throwing open the curtains and inadvertently banishing the picture she was never privileged to see; instead finding her brother in the state she had dreaded for weeks.