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Source: *October*, Vol. 5, Photography (Summer, 1978), pp. 29-47

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778643>

Accessed: 20/04/2010 10:40

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## Tracing Nadar

ROSALIND KRAUSS

Though it was written toward the end of his life, Nadar's memoir, *My Life as a Photographer*, was undertaken at a point when its author's activity in the medium had far from ceased. That is why the title's insistence on pastness (in French it is *Quand j'étais photographe*), its declaration of a chapter's having closed, seems somewhat curious. But Nadar's past tense has less to do with his personal fortunes and the trajectory of his own career through time, than with his status as witness. The man born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, who called himself Nadar, was aware that he had been present at an extraordinary event, and, like the survivor of some natural cataclysm, he felt duty-bound to report on what it had been like, or even more than that, to conjure for his listener the full intensity—emotional, physical, psychological—of that experience. Nadar writes his memoir with the urgency of the eyewitness and the conscience of a historian. Every passage of the text reverberates with this sense of responsibility.

Which is why the book is so peculiar. For it is structured like a set of old wives' tales, as though a community had entrusted its archives to the local gossip. Of its thirteen chapters, only one, "The Primitives of Photography," really settles down to producing anything like a historical account. And although this is the longest chapter in the book, it comes nearly at the end, after an almost maddening array of peculiarly personal reminiscences, some of which bear a relationship to the presumed subject that is tangential at best.

Perhaps it is this quality of rambling anecdote, of arbitrary elaboration of what seem like irrelevant details, of a constant wandering away from what would seem to be the point, that accounts for the book's relative obscurity. Published in 1900, it was never reprinted, and at this date its surviving copies are both very battered and very scarce.

The memoir on photography was hardly Nadar's only publication. The author of eleven other books, he was a frequent writer of short stories and a prolific essayist. His relation to the world of letters extended beyond the friendships he maintained with the most important writers of his day; it included an

intimate connection to the craft of writing, to the patient and careful construction of meaning. If Nadar undertakes the writing of history in the guise of a novelist, that is because the set of facts he hopes to preserve against time are primarily psychological. "People were stunned," he begins, "when they heard that two inventors had perfected a process that could capture an image on a silver plate. It is impossible for us to imagine today the universal confusion that greeted this invention, so accustomed have we become to the fact of photography and so inured are we by now to its vulgarization."

The immensity of the discovery is what Nadar wishes to communicate, not who did what and when. After listing the incredible stream of inventions that changed the course of 19th century life—the steam engine, the electric light, the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, bacteriology, anesthesiology, psychophysiology—Nadar insists on giving pride of place, in terms of its *peculiarity*, to the photograph. "But do not all these miracles pale," he demands, "when compared to the most astonishing and disturbing one of all, that one which seems finally to endow man himself with the divine power of creation: the power to give physical form to the insubstantial image that vanishes as soon as it is perceived, leaving no shadow in the mirror, no ripple on the surface of the water?"

What Nadar saw, from the vantage of 1900, was the conversion of this mystery to commonplace. And so a chapter was, literally, over, even though his own activity remained unchanged. If this was Nadar's historical message at the turn of the century, it repays our attention, especially now. For at this point, in our turn, we are realizing the immense impact of photography, the way it has shaped our sensibilities without our quite knowing it, the way, for example, the whole of the visual arts is now engaged in strategies that are deeply structured by the photographic.<sup>1</sup> The symptoms of a cultural awakening to this fact are everywhere: in the recent flurry of exhibitions; in the surge of collecting; in the rise of scholarly activity; and in a growing sense of critical frustration about just what photography *is*. It is like the man who, finally accepting his doctor's diagnosis, turns around and demands to know the precise nature of his illness. Cultural patients, we insist on something like an ontology of photography so that we can deal with it. But Nadar's point is that among other things photography is a historical phenomenon, and therefore what it *is* is inseparable from what it *was* at specific points in time, from a succession of responses which were not uniform. In his memoir Nadar treats himself like an analytic patient, fixing on details and elaborating them, in order to recover a past that will be resonant with its own meaning.

The opening three chapters of the memoir exemplify this method. The first is occasioned by an object in Nadar's possession: the only known Daguerreotype of Balzac, which he had purchased from the caricaturist Gavarni. The second,

1. This situation is presented in my "Notes on the Index: American Art of the '70s," *October*, nos. 3 and 4 (Spring and Fall, 1977).



*Nadar. Photograph of the daguerreotype of Balzac in Nadar's collection.*

triggered by the reality of long-distance transmission systems like telegraphy and radio, is the tale of a confidence trick played on him in the 1870s. The third is a seeming piece of trivia called forth by the certain success of aeronautical technology, which Nadar had always championed over aerostatics, or ballooning. Entirely different in scope, and increasingly peripheral to the history of photography proper, the disparateness of these accounts, their appearance of moving into a subject only by backing away from it, make of these chapters a very odd sort of beginning. Yet there is a connection between them, an underlying theme that Nadar wishes to dramatize.

The story about Balzac revolves around the novelist's superstitious reaction to photography, a reaction that was issued somewhat pretentiously in the form of a theory. Describing Balzac's Theory of Specters, Nadar writes:

According to Balzac's theory, all physical bodies are made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images, an infinite number of leaflike skins laid one on top of the other. Since Balzac believed man was



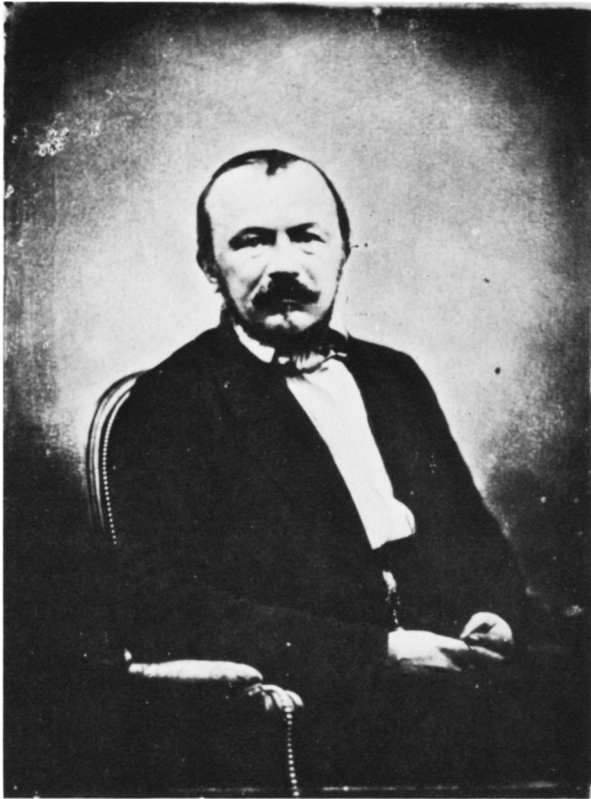
*Nadar. Théophile Gautier. c. 1856.*

incapable of making something material from an apparition, from something impalpable—that is, creating something from nothing—he concluded that every time someone had his photograph taken, one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph. Repeated exposures entailed the unavoidable loss of subsequent ghostly layers, that is, the very essence of life.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the rest of this account Nadar's tone is affectionately mocking. Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval had rushed to Balzac's side to become "converts" to his Theory, and Nadar focuses more sharply on the affectations of their discipleship than on any suspicions of Balzac's own insincerity. The man of science, Nadar is magnanimous as he indulges the self-consciously assumed, primitivist fantasies of his literary friends.

But the second chapter of the memoir is a replay of this fantasy, with its

2. See Nadar, "My Life as a Photographer," p. 9, above.



Nadar. Gérard de Nerval. 1855.

terms somewhat changed. “Gazebon Avenged” begins with a letter sent to Nadar in the 1850s from a provincial named M. Gazebon requesting a photographic portrait of himself. Nothing is unusual about this except that, on the assurances of a “friend” of Nadar’s, Gazebon expects the photograph to be taken in Paris while he himself remains in Pau. Deciding that he will not dignify this joke with an answer, Nadar forgets the whole business until twenty years later when a young man presents himself in Nadar’s studio claiming to have perfected the means for executing Gazebon’s demand: long-range photography (*photographie à distance*). While Nadar’s companion, convinced by the technological jargon with which the young man supports his claim, gets more and more excited by the prospect of carrying out the experiment, Nadar himself waits for “the touch” to come. When it does, Nadar pays out the money, knowing that he has been defrauded and that he will never see the young “inventor” again. No explicit connection is made between this story and the Theory of Specters, but the psychological point of the story—Nadar’s own, deep certainty that “remote-photography” is an impossibility—is a variation on the Theory, from the point of view of Science. Photography can only operate with the directness of a physical graft; photography

turns on the activity of direct impression as surely as the footprint that is left on sand.

It is this knowledge of the physical immediacy of photography that is given an emotional resonance in the story of "The Blind Princess," to which Nadar then turns. In the 1870s a blind woman is brought by her grown children to the studio to sit for her portrait. Because she is a member of the royal family of Hanover, Nadar takes the occasion to inquire after the young nobleman who had looked after him when Nadar was confined in Hanover two years previously, due to a rather grotesque ballooning accident. Nadar's interest in the other man had developed from their shared contempt for balloons and their joint conviction in the possibility of flight in craft that was heavier than air. Having heard that the nobleman had been exiled from Hanover because he had killed someone in a duel, Nadar asks one of the Princess's children if this is true. The drama of this question, which fortunately the Princess doesn't hear, turns on the fact that the victim of the duel was the sitter's eldest son, and though his death has been successfully hidden from the mother, Nadar's question could have revealed it to her. Remembering his own distress, Nadar closes the story with a series of reflections on the psychological consequences, and thus the potential power, of the circumstances of making a photograph: to the point where a life could be affected by the chance remark transmitted through "a visit to a photographer's studio, in a strange city. . ."

The focus of this ending is clearly on the kinds of changes that industrialization brings to every corner of society—collapsing distances, imploding separations of class—so that a French balloonist could be blown into the care of a German royal household, and a princess would engage in the new, social transaction of the photographic portrait-sitting. In thus dramatizing the intimacy of the photographic situation, Nadar fixes again on the physical proximity that is its absolute requirement, on the fact that no matter how any other system of information transfer might work, photography depends on an act of passage between two bodies in the same space.

In these three chapters, then, Nadar circles around what seems for him to be the central fact of photography: that its operation is that of the imprint, the register, the trace. As semiologists we would say that Nadar is giving an account of the photographic sign as an index, a signifying mark that bears a connection to the thing it represents by having been caused, physically, by its referent. And we would go on to describe the limited field of significance available to that type of sign.<sup>3</sup> But Nadar was not a semiologist, and sure as he was of the indexical nature of the photograph, of its condition as a trace, the inferences he seems to have drawn from this were peculiar to his century rather than our own.

For the early 19th century, the trace was not simply an effigy, a fetish, a layer that had been magically peeled off a material object and deposited elsewhere. It

3. In his essays on photography, Roland Barthes analyzes these limitations, which he attributes to the status of photography as "a message without a code." See, "The Photographic Message," and "Rhetoric of the Image," collected in *Image, Music, Text*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977.

was that material object become *intelligible*. The activity of the trace was understood as the manifest presence of meaning. Standing rather peculiarly at the crossroads between science and spiritualism, the trace seemed to share equally in the positivist's absolutism of matter and the metaphysician's order of pure intelligibility, itself resistant to a materialist analysis. And no one seemed more conscious of this than Balzac, author of the *Theory of Specters*.

When Barbey d'Aurevilly sneered that Balzac had made description "a skin disease of the realists," he was complaining about the very technique in which Balzac took the greatest pride and which allowed him to boast that he had foreshadowed the Daguerreotype. If written description was intended to skim the surface off a subject and transfer it to the novel's page, this was because of Balzac's belief that this surface was itself articulate, the utterly faithful representation of the inner man. "The external life," Balzac wrote, "is a kind of organized system which represents a man as exactly as the colors by which the snail reproduces itself on its shell."<sup>4</sup> The endless reworking of this metaphor produces the kind of character in the *Comédie Humaine* about which one could write that "his clothes suit his habits and vices so well, express his life so faithfully, that he seems to have been born dressed."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, as eccentric and fanciful as the *Theory of Specters* might at first strike us, the notion of man as a series of exfoliating, self-depicting images, is only a more whimsical version of the model of the snail. And this model, with its intentional connections to biological study, was meant to carry the authority of Science.

As Balzac never tired of explaining, the physical description through which he was confident that he could trap the vagaries of character had been tested in the laboratories of physiognomy.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the relative obscurity of Johann Caspar Lavater now, *The Art of Knowing Man by Means of Physiognomy* (1783) had enormous prestige in the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> As the title implies, physiognomy involved the decoding of a man's moral and psychological being from those physiological features which were thought to register them. In this reading, for

4. Honoré de Balzac, "Traité de la vie élégante," *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. XX, Paris, Editions Calmann Lévy, 1879, p. 504.

5. Gilbert Malcolm Fess, *The Correspondence of Physical and Material Factors with Character in Balzac*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania (Publications: Series in Romantic Language and Literature), 1924, p. 90.

6. The examples are everywhere. One, from the 1833 *Théorie de la démarche*, goes: "Nevertheless, Lavater said, before I did, that since everything in man is homogeneous, one's gait must be at least as eloquent as one's physiognomy; bearing is the physiognomy of the body. Of course this is a natural deduction from his initial premise: everything about us corresponds to an internal cause." Balzac, *Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. XX, p. 572.

7. In order to locate physiognomy at that point of convergence that it established for itself, and staunchly maintained, between anatomy, psychology, and moral philosophy, it is useful to consider Charles Darwin's need finally to attack this "science" in the 1870s. In his study, *On the Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin launches an assault on physiognomy as one of the principal strongholds of the opposition to the theory of evolution. Operating on the principle that many of man's facial muscles were put in place solely for the purpose of "expressing" his inner states, physiognomy based its investigations of this unique musculature on the belief that it was species-specific. That is, there was a mutual reinforcement between the idea that each species, man included,



example, thin lips are the index of avarice. Balzac made it no secret that his own characters were built as much from raids on the ten volumes of Lavater's work as on recourse to his own observation.

Lavater himself had paved the way for Balzac's extension of physiognomy to a system of indexical signs, or physical traces, that encompassed far more than the shape of a man's skull or the character revealing conformation of his mouth. The *Analytic Essays* from 1830, like "The Study of Habits by Means of Gloves," or "The Physiology of the Cigar," are elaborate Balzacian glosses on the kind of thing Lavater had in mind when he wrote:

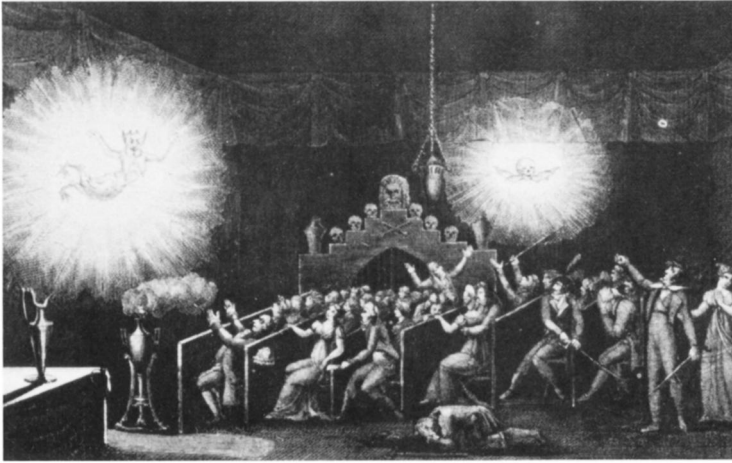
It is true that man is acted upon by everything around him; but conversely, he too acts upon his environment, and while modified by his surroundings, he in turn modifies them. It is on this basis that one can gauge the character of a man by his dress, his house, his furniture. Set within this vast universe, man contrives a smaller, separate world which he fortifies, entrenches, and arranges in his own fashion and in which we discover his image.<sup>8</sup>

In this view, character is like a generator of images, which are projected onto the world as the multiple cast shadows of the bearer. That Lavater's attention should have included the extremely minor art of silhouette making is not surprising insofar as these profile portraits were the literalization of the cast shadow. The very name of the "physionotrace," a type of silhouette produced in 1809 by quasi-mechanical means and included in most histories of photography as a forerunner of the aspirations (if not the actual process) that made the photograph inevitable, bears the mark of Lavater.

But the check that Lavater wrote for the systematic study of physiognomic traces could be cashed in other banks besides that of positivism. Balzac points to this when he speaks of the two sides of his interests, the one indebted to Lavater, the other focused on Swedenborg. And indeed, in *Mimesis*, when Erich Auerbach analyzes Balzac's technique he selects a passage in which both aspects present themselves. For behind the details of dress and bearing through which Balzac renders the *petit-bourgeois* avarice and cunning of Père Goriot's landlady, there gather a set of images drawn from an entirely different register of study, images that create "the impression of something repulsively spectral." These images, Auerbach writes, form "a sort of second significance which, though different from that which reason can comprehend, is far more essential—a significance which can

had come into existence in its present condition, and the notion that the musculature of the human species had been specially fashioned as the instrumentality of a unique capacity to feel and to express, which man shared with none of the lower animals. This capacity arose not simply from a psychological structure far richer and more complex than that of other species, but, ultimately, from the soul. In an argument such as this one, blushing, for example, is taken as a manifestation of a moral life not shared by lower animal orders.

8. Johann Caspar Lavater, *L'Art de connaître les hommes par la physionomie*, Vol. I, Paris, Depélafol, 1820, p. 127.



*A nineteenth century seance.*

best be defined by the adjective demonic.” And he adds, “What confronts us, then, is the unity of a particular milieu, felt as a total concept of a demonic-organic nature and presented entirely by suggestive and sensory means.”<sup>9</sup>

For the Theory of Specters to have issued from Balzac’s pen, there needs only one ingredient to be added to the Lavater system of physiognomic traces, one element that will transform the physical manifestations of character into the idea of a man as a set of spectral images, or ghosts. That ingredient is light. Light was the means by which the seemingly magic transfer of the photograph was effected, the way in which one could, in Nadar’s words, “create *something from nothing*.” And light, the keystone in the Swedenborgian system, was the conduit between the world of sense impression and the world of spirit. It was in terms of a luminous image that the departed chose to put in their spectral appearances at the 19th century séance. And after 1839 it required only a baby step in logic to conceive of recording these apparitions photographically. “Spirit photography,” is described by Huysmans in *Là-Bas*, and in 1882 Georgiana Houghton quite seriously published a work entitled *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings and Phenomena Invisible to the Material Eye*. Surely one of the most grotesque, but revealing suggestions about the possible applications of photography was the notion, broached in the 1890s, of the “post-mortem photograph.” Breathtaking in its loony rationality, it involved the reprinting of a photograph taken during life by using the crematorial ashes of the departed sitter. “They will adhere to the parts unexposed to light and a portrait is obtained composed entirely of the person it represents.”<sup>10</sup>

9. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 472.

10. Aaron Scharf, *Creative Photography*, London, Studio Vista, 1965, p. 25.

Now the spirit-photograph may have been a somewhat freakish idea and rather limited in its currency. But with the industrialization of portrait-photography that took place in the 1860s, came the wholesale production of deathbed photographs. The deathbed portrait is a phenomenon that most histories of photography acknowledge but pass by rather quickly. A combination of curiosity and embarrassment, very few of these objects survive relative to the enormous number that were made. Yet for the commercial photographer of the 19th century, the deathbed commission was one of the major staples of his practice.<sup>11</sup> It is our present-day inability to view this phenomenon as anything but ghoulish that indicates our own removal from a crucial part of photography's history: precisely that part Nadar hoped to evoke through his memoir.

The mysteriousness that surrounded the initial appearance of photography and permitted some of the more bizarre of its later practices is easy enough to patronize. But this sense of mystery is an aspect of the most serious aspirations of the early makers of photographs, Nadar included, and it is this seriousness which is harder to understand. Just as it is hard to understand as anything more than a piety of literary history the incredible, contemporaneous eminence of Swedenborg. It therefore might be helpful to draw a parallel between the initiation of Nadar's account of photography with a story of Balzac at his most Swedenborgian, and the inauguration of Immanuel Kant's career with a work called *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*—an unexpected text on Swedenborg.

In drawing this parallel I wish to point to more than just the prestige of Swedenborg—to the kind of fame and respect that was granted him in the late 18th century, and which made him a strangely persistent object of attention for the young Kant. As *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* makes clear, Kant's decision to take on Swedenborg as an adversary, to bother to attack the great visionary who was busy taking down dictation from the World of Spirits, arises from the way in which Swedenborg's solutions come as perfectly logical responses to the problems of 18th century metaphysics. In Kant's eyes the system of Swedenborg's *Celestial Arcanum* is no more benighted than any other metaphysical system. Why not write about him, Kant asks, "After all the philosophy which has helped us to introduce the subject is itself no more than a fairytale from the Wonderland of Metaphysics."<sup>12</sup> And he concludes by saying, "Questions which concern the nature of spirits, freedom, predestination and our future state, etc., etc., at first arouse all our energies and reason, and lure us by the excellence of their subject-matter into the arena of competitive speculations where we argue indiscriminately, decide, teach, reason, just as pseudo-knowledge dictates."<sup>13</sup>

11. Nigel Gosling speaks of Nadar's own scruples about participating in this industry: "He was rarely tempted (as his son was later to be) to exploit his talent in banal journalism and publicity pictures, and rarely accepted commissions for the ever-popular deathbed pictures (Victor Hugo and the gentle poetess Mme Desbordes-Valmore were exceptions)." See, Gosling, *Nadar*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 13.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, trans. John Marolesco, New York, Vantage Press, 1969, p. 76. This treatise was first published, anonymously, in Königsberg in 1766.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

But the point about Swedenborg cuts much closer to the bone. No matter how preposterous the outcome of his endeavors, the question that animates them in the first place was utterly serious for the founder of analytic philosophy: how to find data by which to prove the existence of an intelligible (as distinct from a merely material or sensible) world.<sup>14</sup>

Swedenborg's labors as scientist-turned-mystic compose an incredible *cazenza* on the theme of intelligibility. They turn, as I have said, on the issue of light. Beginning from Newton's view of light as corpuscular—made of infinitely small particles—and adding this to the Cartesian notion that matter consists of particles that are indefinitely divisible, it was possible to think of light as a spectrum that begins in the world of the senses and shades off into the world of spirits. Insofar as the universe is permeated by light, some part of which is divine, it can be seen as a system of symbols, as a great hieroglyphics from which to read off the meaning of divinity. This legibility of the world is Swedenborg's message; the *Celestial Arcanum* is a massive demonstration of how propositions from the natural sphere are transformed into their correspondence in the spiritual one.

Thus the visible world is, once again, a world of traces, with the invisible charged with imprinting itself on the visible. "It is a constant law of the organic body," Swedenborg insisted, "that large compounds or visible forms exist and subsist from smaller, simpler and ultimately invisible forms, which act similarly to the larger ones, but move perfectly and universally; and the least forms so perfectly and universally as to involve an idea representative of their entire universe." Glossing this passage in 1850, Emerson explains, "What was too small for the eye to detect, was read by the aggregates; what was too large, by the units."<sup>15</sup> It is the visibility of the noumenal world which thus concerns Swedenborg, and the demonstration of the way this is possible by light's acting on phenomena to produce an image.<sup>16</sup>

Photography was born in the 1830s by, in Nadar's words, "exploding suddenly into existence, surpass[ing] all possible expectations." And into the initial responses to this event are folded the themes of Spiritualism. For photography was the first available demonstration that light could indeed "exert an *action* . . . sufficient to cause changes in material bodies."<sup>17</sup>

Those are the words of Fox Talbot, published in 1844 in *The Pencil of Nature*, a book laid out as an object lesson in the wonders and possibilities of photography. On the face of it there is no reason why Fox Talbot's statement about light should be read as anything more than the comment of a gentleman-

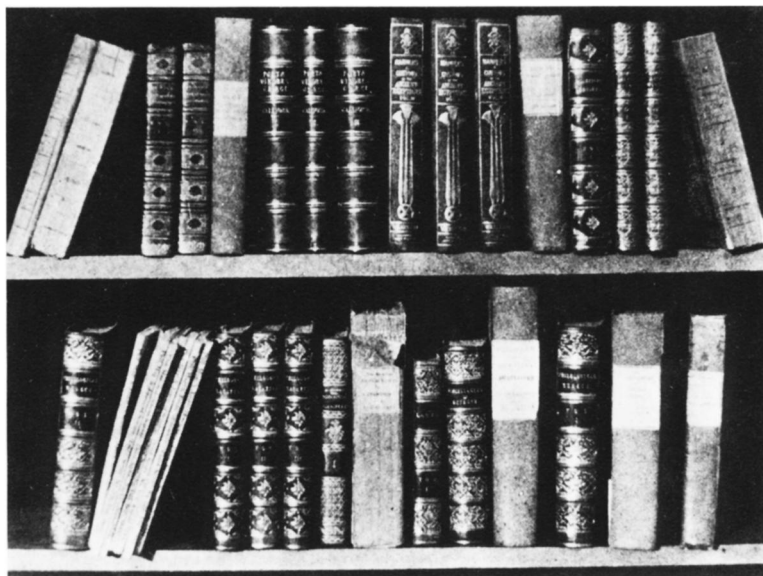
14. Kant's motives for undertaking *Dreams* . . . are discussed by Marolesco in his introduction to the translation.

15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures*, Boston, Phillips Sampson and Company, 1850, p. 115.

16. Thus Swedenborg writes, "Man is a kind of very minute heaven corresponding to the world of spirits and to heaven. Every particular idea of man, and every affection, yea, every smallest part of his affection is an image and effigy of him." Cited by Emerson, *Representative Men*, p. 116.

17. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, facsimile edition, New York, Da Capo Press, 1969, introduction, n.p.

*William Henry Fox Talbot. Scene in a Library,  
Plate VIII from The Pencil of Nature. 1844.  
(George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.)*



scientist. Yet it is the curious nature of certain of the plates, which form the bulk of *The Pencil of Nature*, that induces one to hear in his statement the overtones of metaphysics.

Most of the plates are just what one would have expected of such a volume: views of buildings, landscapes, reproductions of works of art. But some of the images are rather peculiar. One of these, Plate VIII, is entitled "Scene in a Library," and what it presents, head-on and in close-up, are two shelves of books. Minimal in the extreme, there is nothing picturesque or in any other way aesthetically arresting in this image. One turns, therefore, to the accompanying two-page text for an explanation of what it might mean:

Among the many novel ideas which the discovery of Photography has suggested, is the following rather curious experiment or speculation. I have never tried it, indeed, nor am I aware that anyone else has either tried or proposed it, yet I think it is one which, if properly managed, must inevitably succeed. When a ray of solar light is refracted by a prism and thrown upon a screen, it forms there the very beautiful colored band known by the name of the solar spectrum. Experimenters have found that if this spectrum is thrown upon a sheet of sensitive

paper, the violet end of it produces the principal effect: and, what is truly remarkable, a similar effect is produced by certain *invisible rays* which lie beyond the violet, and beyond the limits of the spectrum, and whose existence is only revealed to us by this action which they exert.

Now, I would propose to separate these invisible rays from the rest, by suffering them to pass into an adjoining apartment through an aperture in a wall or screen of partition. This apartment would thus become filled (we must not call it illuminated) with invisible rays, which might be scattered in all directions by a convex lens placed behind the aperture. If there were a number of persons in the room, no one would see the other: and yet nevertheless if a camera were so placed as to point in the direction in which any one were standing, it would take his portrait, and reveal his actions.

For, to use a metaphor we have already employed, the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness.

Alas! that this speculation is somewhat too refined to be introduced with effect into a modern novel or romance; for what a dénouement we should have, if we could suppose the secrets of the darkened chamber to be revealed by the testimony of the imprinted paper.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout *The Pencil of Nature* the photographic plates serve to illustrate the arguments in the text in the manner of object lessons, demonstrations. The photograph of a haystack, for example, supplies the visual proof of Talbot's contention that the mechanical image can suspend an infinitude of detail in a single visual plenum, where natural vision tends to summarize or simplify in terms of mass. Since the above discussion of "invisible rays" ends with a reference to novels, one wonders if the accompanying photograph of books is intended to represent these novels. Yet Talbot speaks of books that have not yet been written. So the status of the photograph as illustration becomes a bit more complicated.

Insofar as the photograph of books is the embodiment of a speculative projection, its role is on some level conceptual. But this is a role forced on the photographic object which is thoroughly integrated into the subject of this particular image. For as the container of written language, the book is the place of residence of wholly cultural, as opposed to natural, signs. To operate with language is to have the power to conceptualize—to evoke, to abstract, to postulate—and obviously to outdistance the objects available to vision. Writing is the transcription of thought, not the mere trace of a material object.

And the kind of photographic trace Talbot postulates, in the way that he describes it, is also to be a transcription of thought, or at the very least, of

18. *Ibid.*

psychological transactions ordinarily hidden from view. The photographs taken with “invisible rays” will be able to reveal the activities that occur within a “darkened chamber.” In the application Talbot projects for them, they will manifest not merely behavior itself, but its meaning. In this scenario of a trace produced by invisible rays, the darkened chamber seems to serve as a reference both to the camera obscura, as an historical parent of photography, and to a wholly different region of obscurity: the mind. It would indeed be a special kind of light that could penetrate this region “through an aperture,” and by means of its emanations, capture what goes on there through a series of traces.

This kind of speculation in *The Pencil of Nature* is what I mean by the serious aspirations of some of the earliest photographers. The condition it assumes is the inherent intelligibility of the photographic trace—a condition that in turn depends on those terms of 19th century thinking that I have been rehearsing: the physiognomic trace and its revelatory power; the power of light to transmit the invisible and imprint it on phenomena. For these things to be linked at all requires the marriage of science and spiritualism. We know this was a ceremony performed in many quarters in the period under discussion, and we know this union had many offspring. I am arguing that the initial conception of the photograph, as such, was one.

But where does that leave Nadar? He was after all not of Talbot’s, or Balzac’s, generation. The “primitives of photography” were his fathers and teachers, not his siblings. To judge from both his memoir and his photographic practice, the “metaphysical” expectation left Nadar in a condition of a certain ambivalence. Deeply aware of the photograph’s status as a trace, he was also convinced of its psychological import. That he was removed from a spiritualist reading of this import is obvious, not only from his treatment of Balzac’s Theory but also from his singular refusal to participate in the deathbed portrait industry. Yet if he rejects the premise of this expectation, there are certain ways in which Nadar is interested in both acknowledging and using it as a theme: one of the very few deathbed commissions Nadar consented to was to photograph the deceased Victor Hugo, himself a frequenter of séances; and, for the subject of the first of his series of underground photographs, he chose the catacombs of Paris, where skeletons heaped one on top of the other trace in archeological fashion their own record of death; and, as if to pay this theme a special kind of homage, he begins his memoir with the Theory of Specters.

To criticize a subject is not necessarily to annihilate it. Sometimes, as with Kant’s *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, it is to carry it, transformed, into a new method of inquiry. And for Nadar the question of the intelligible trace remained viable as an *aesthetic* (rather than a real) basis for photography. Which is to say that it is a possible, though not a necessary condition of a photograph that it render phenomena in terms of their meaning.

Nadar’s early ambitions in this respect can best be documented in a series of photographs that he took when he and his brother Adrien Tournachon were still working together. Called “Expressions of Pierrot: A Series of Heads,” this suite of

Nadar. Victor Hugo on His Deathbed. 1855.



images was entered into the photographic section of the 1855 Exposition Universelle where it won a gold medal. Depicting the face of Charles Debureau as he assumed the various facial gestures from his repertory of “expressions,” the series of photographs becomes the record, and the doubling, of the mime’s enactment of the physiological trace. Recent scholarship (I am referring to Judith Wechsler’s study *Physiognomy, Bearing and Gesture in 19th Century Paris*)<sup>19</sup> focuses attention on the relationship between the science of physiognomy and the art of pantomime that was being drawn toward the middle of the 19th century. This means, for example, that in the plays he was writing for Debureau, Champfleury assumed the possibility of a performance that would fuse the physiological specificity of the character-revealing trace with the highly conventionalized gesture of the traditional mime.<sup>20</sup>

19. To be published by Thames & Hudson, London.

20. In the same years both Gautier and Duranty were writing with a similar relationship in mind. Professor Wechsler has kindly called my attention to this material which is presented and analyzed in her study, referred to above.





Now clearly, to render the physiognomic trace by way of the mime is to pass this phenomenon through an aesthetic filter. For by the nature of his role as performer, the mime must transform the automatism of the trace, its feature as a kind of mechanical imprinting, into a set of willed and controlled gestures, into the language that Mallarmé would later designate as “writing.”<sup>21</sup>

The explicit relationship between the mime’s aestheticizing of the trace and photography’s own, similar, highly self-conscious performance is drawn in the images of Debureau. In one of these, signed Nadar Jeune (Adrien Tournachon), the mime appears with a camera, miming the recording of his own image. In this work light, photography’s own form of “writing,” plays an important part. For while the mime is enacting his role in the image, a set of shadows constellate across his body as a simultaneously perceived and read subtext.

First, in the area of the head, Debureau’s face, whitened by make-up, is further flattened by harsh lighting. This effect, added to the sharp shadow, which detaches the face visually from the underlying mass of the skull, intensifies the face’s character as mask. A surface which, then, both belongs to the head and can nevertheless operate independently of it, the face-as-mask is the ground on which the physiognomic trace is rendered as a sign. To perform the physiognomic trace, Debureau had not so much to act as to artificially recompose his face—to achieve the thin lips of avarice, for example, in an ephemeral gesture that embodies physiognomy by “speaking it.”

Second, the costume of Pierrot worn by the mime becomes the white field onto which cast shadows are thrown, creating a secondary set of traces that double two of the elements crucial to the image. One of these is the Pierrot’s hand as it points to the camera; the other is the camera itself, the apparatus that is both the subject of the mime’s gesture and the object of recording it. On the surface of the mime’s clothing, these shadows, which combine the conventional language of gesture (pointing) and the technical mechanism of recording (camera) into a single visual substance, have the character of merely ephemeral traces. But the ultimate surface on which the multiple traces are not simply registered, but fixed, is that of the photograph itself.

This idea of the photographic print as the ultimate locale of the trace is at work in this image in two different ways, and on two different levels of articulation. The first is on the level of the subject matter: the *mise-en-scène* of the image, so to speak. The second operates through a reflection of the role of the cast shadow: the operational fact of the image.

On the first level, we confront a performance of reflexiveness in which the mime doubles in the roles of photographer and photographed. Posed alongside the camera, he weaves that peculiar figure of consciousness in which the line that

21. In his analysis of Mallarmé’s essay “*Mimique*,” Jacques Derrida examines this notion of the mime’s gesture as a kind of writing, which becomes, in Mallarmé’s words, “. . . *soliloque muet que, tout du long à son âme tient et du visage et des gestes le fantôme blanc comme une page pas encore écrite*.” See, “La double séance,” in Derrida, *La dissémination*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1972, p. 222.

connects subject and object loops back on itself to begin and end in the same place. The mime enacts the awareness of watching himself being watched, of producing himself as the one who is watched. It is a doubleness that could not occur, of course, in the absence of this photograph of it. It is only because Debureau is the actual subject of the image for which he plays photographer, only by performing for the photographic mirror, that the issue of doubling arises. Obviously, were Debureau to perform his action on a simple stage, there would be no effect of doubling. He would merely be playing “photographer.” Only if he were to play his gesture in front of a mirror would he be able simultaneously to enact the capture of his own image. But even then he would be rendered as two separate players: the one in “life” and the one in the mirror. The photographic print, because it is itself a mirror, is thus the only place where an absolute simultaneity of subject and object—a doubling that involves a spatial collapse—can occur. The print is here defined, then, as a logically unique sort of mirror.

At the second, operational level, the theme of doubling and mirroring functions in relation to the shadows cast on Debureau’s clothing. I have said that those shadows thrown by two separate objects (camera and gesture) combine on a physically distinct surface to produce a specific relationship, a meaning that points to the double persona of the mime. But the cast shadow itself is a type of trace that is the operational double of the photographic one. For the photographic trace, like the cast shadow, is a function of light’s projection of an object onto another surface. In this image of Debureau, the idea of the mirror is carried into the semiological fabric of the work: the photograph is a mirror of the mime’s own body in that it is a surface that will receive the luminous trace as a set of displaced signs, and more importantly, will constitute itself as the place in which their relationship can constellate as meaning.

Thus the aspirations working in this photograph are to surpass the condition of being the merely passive vehicle of the mime’s performance. They are to depict the photograph itself as a complex sort of mirror. Echoing the theme of doubling through the agency of cast shadow, the photograph stages at one and the same time its own constitutive process as a luminous trace and its own condition as a field of physically displaced signs. Which is to say that doubling is not here simply recorded, but recreated through means internal to the photograph, through a set of signs that are purely the functions of light.

In Talbot’s brief speculation woven around the “Scene in the Library,” the camera obscura emerges as a double metaphor for both recording mechanism and mind. In the photograph of Debureau, the connection implied by this metaphor is projected through the image of the mirror, itself a metaphor for that reflexive seeing which is consciousness. If the trace (the shadow) can double as both the subject and object of its own recording, it can begin to function as an intelligible sign.

In using terms like “consciousness” or “reflexiveness” to speak of this photograph of mime and camera, I am of course invoking the language of

modernism. And this may seem unwarranted, given the direction that most photography was to take during the bulk of Nadar's lifetime. But in rehearsing the attitude towards the trace that was peculiar to an age that was simultaneously fascinated by science and spiritualism, I am trying to construct a very particular framework within which to set this image. The analytic attitude of which this photograph is a document has a very special genealogy, one that is relevant only to photography's own means of forming an image.

The kind of cultural frame that could have produced this photograph, that could have made the image of a mime next to a camera so extraordinarily resonant, is not only lost to us, but was, one feels, largely unavailable to Nadar as he wrote his memoir. Or at least it had become accessible to him only in memory. But Nadar's urgency in trying to recall that mood reminds us that aesthetic media have surprising histories just as they have uncertain futures: difficult to predict, impossible to foreclose.