“THE RETURN OF THE DEAD”: REACTIONS AGAINST PHOTOGRAPHY IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ABSTRACT</strong></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter**

1. **THE DECEPTION OF VERISIMILITUDE:**
   Responses to Photography ........................................ 6
   - Early History of the Photograph
   - The *rigor mortis* of the Photographic Image

2. **“I MISUSE HEAVEN’S BLESSED SUNSHINE”:**
   Hawthorne and Photography ..................................... 20
   - Reactions to the Visual Image
   - Functional Contradiction and Inconsistency
   - The Power of Sunlight and the Narrative Lens

3. **MEMORY AND IMMORTALITY IN DICKINSON** .................... 36

4. **PHOTOGRAPHY AND WHITMAN’S (UN)SIGNIFYING SIGNIFIERS** . 49
   - Photography’s Influence on Whitman
   - Whitman’s Poetry as an (Un)Signifying Photograph
   - Whitman in the Eternal Present

**CONCLUSION** ............................................................ 61

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ............................................................ 64

**VITA** ................................................................. 67
This thesis is an examination of the relationship between photography and nineteenth-century American literature. I argue that upon its introduction to the public in 1839, the modern photograph created a paradigm shift in what people thought about memory. The American public configured photographs as physical manifestations of memories that could be preserved forever. Yet by relying so heavily on external stimuli, the veritable idolaters of photography implicitly denied the power of their own minds. This discussion shows that American writers during the nineteenth century, specifically Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman, reacted negatively to the new paradigm of memory created by photography and expressed disdain for it in their texts. Their texts repudiate memory qua memory and offer alternative strategies for thinking about the past, present, and future. These writers choose not to engage photography as an invention or a socio-economic phenomenon; instead, they attempt to disrupt their contemporaries’ collective obsession with clinging to the past, which was an obsession that was fueled by the proliferation and popularity of photography.
INTRODUCTION

In 2000, Philip F. Gura, a professor of American literature and culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, made a serendipitous discovery that captured the attention of scholars and admirers of Emily Dickinson: he found a long-forgotten photograph of the poet.\(^1\) In the case of Dickinson, this find was especially meaningful because until Gura’s discovery, there was only one known photographic image of the poet, which was made when she was sixteen. So for over a hundred years, Dickinson’s readers associated her powerful verses with the image of a girl only at the end of her adolescence. The photograph found by Gura shows Dickinson as she appeared in her late twenties, when she was a grown woman at the cusp of her most prolific years as a writer. The picture is a cultural artifact that shows that even Dickinson, famous for her agoraphobic tendencies, had at least some interest in the economic and aesthetic phenomenon that was photography in the mid-nineteenth century. At the same time, though, her curiosity was reserved. There are numbers of photographs of Dickinson’s friends and family members: her brother Austin and her sister-in-law Susan Gilbert sat for a camera many times throughout their lives. Dickinson’s reluctance to have her picture taken could be dismissed as a result of her personality, but, as I will show in chapter three, she explicitly expressed skepticism about photography. In a letter to Thomas W. Higginson, she says that she “noticed the Quick wore off those things, in a

\(^1\) Astoundingly, Gura found the photograph while browsing the popular internet auction site eBay. He recounts his astounding story in the online journal Common-Place, which is sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society and the Department of History at Florida State University. In his article, “How I Met and Dated Miss Emily Dickinson: An Adventure on eBay,” Gura talks about how the new photograph has been compared with the first photograph by physical anthropologists who say that they cannot disprove that the second image is of Dickinson.
few days” (Letters 175), indicating that there is something dead and stagnant about a photograph.

Dickinson was not alone in her estimation of the relatively new invention, but her perspective was certainly not the popular one. Perhaps not surprisingly, photography captured the imagination of the general public, and it also prompted a paradigm shift in the visual arts. H.H. Arnason, as well as other art historians, cite photography as the impetus for Impressionism as well as later art movements (15). As I will demonstrate in the first chapter, photography also created a paradigm shift in how people thought about memory. I will explore this issue at length, but suffice it to say that photography was generally received as a boon to human memory. It radically changed what people thought were the boundaries of memory, as it enabled them to have forever the images of youthful faces of the aged or the lively images of the dead. However, writers like Dickinson during this time understood the implications of this paradigm shift. They realized that by relying on external images to boost memory, people were effectively rejecting the power of their own minds. In the most famous texts of the age, photography is usually only mentioned in passing, if it is mentioned at all. Even a novel like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables, which features a character who is a photographer, does not excessively concern itself with the wildly popular invention. The lack of attention to photography in nineteenth-century American literature speaks as loudly as Dickinson’s reluctance to appear in front of a camera. This paper will show that, in fact, writers generally reacted negatively to photography, primarily because of the new paradigm of memory elicited by the technology. Their affirmations of creativity and their
rejections of static memories are indeed reactions to photography and the public’s fascination with it.

My first chapter will show the historical and theoretical causes of the new paradigm of memory brought about by photography. My intention in this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive history of photography; rather, I briefly survey its history to reveal how wildly and immediately popular the invention was among the masses, making it a true cultural spectacle. Furthermore, I talk about how the invention fueled and was in return fueled by the sentimentalist mindset that already existed in Britain and the United States. Finally, I survey some theory about photography, particularly theory from Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* I pay special attention to Barthes’s discussion of signifiers and how photographs, like words, refer to a particular subject but cannot encapsulate that subject. In fact, according to Barthes’s reasoning, there may be a complete disconnection between a photograph and its subject. Again, my goal is not to address every theorist who has ever written on photography—and there are plenty—but rather to promote an understanding of the invention as something that was psychologically revolutionary.

I then examine three different writers’ reactions to photography and to the paradigm shift it created. In the second chapter, I talk about *The House of the Seven Gables* and Hawthorne’s attitude about the invention. Perhaps more than any other text during the period, this book displays a reaction to photography that is quite palpable. Hawthorne begins the book by repudiating verisimilitude and praising the power of a writer’s creativity. He then tells the story of the Pyncheons, a family who cannot seem to escape the shadow of the past, as evidenced by the protagonist’s wallowing in memory
and her refusal to take down an old portrait of a Pyncheon forefather. At the same time, the narrator introduces a character who is a photographer, and he portrays him almost paradoxically. The character Holgrave is unconsciously deceptive: in one chapter, he talks about how photography is somehow morally unsound, but he praises its veracity in a later chapter. Holgrave’s two-facedness represents the illusion of permanent photographic memories. Ultimately, Holgrave and the third-person narrator battle for control over the narrative itself. The narrator wins the symbolic battle, signaling a victory for the creative power of writing over the stagnant verisimilitude of the photograph.

In the third chapter, I demonstrate how Emily Dickinson responds to the same themes. Like Hawthorne, she is especially concerned with memory in the wake of photography’s popularity in the American marketplace. I select some of her lesser-known poems and explore how they react to the new paradigm of memory. I do consider the poems as self-contained texts, but I also analyze how they function as separate parts in the Dickinson oeuvre. A memory is only valuable for Dickinson if it is produced by a mind that is active and that can change and alter the memory. I cite a letter that she wrote to her sister-in-law Susan after the death of Gilbert, Susan’s son and Emily’s nephew. In the letter, Dickinson imagines Gilbert as a wise sage who knows the answers to the most troubling questions about life and metaphysics. In other words, she refuses to accept a stagnant memory of her nephew as a child who will never grow, which is a memory that photography would yield. Dickinson, instead, believes that writing—especially poetry—is the best kind of tool for memory because it encourages intellectual fluidity as opposed to the mental stasis brought about by a photograph.
Finally, in the fourth chapter, I explain how Walt Whitman’s affinity for technology does not mean that he ignored the negative effects of photography. In fact, I cite a piece of writing by Whitman where he equates *Leaves of Grass* to a daguerreotype, which was an early type of photograph. Like Dickinson, he sees his own writing as an alternative to photography. After all, to use Barthes’s language, a photograph is a signifier that, despite its verisimilitude, is disconnected with the subject that it signifies. Whitman wants to make his text work like a photograph because he embraces the disconnection between signifiers and the signified: he believes that if he can take his writing to a nebulous state that is void of definite meaning, he can aver a kind of universality in everything. Also like Dickinson, he configures his poetry as a positive and productive tool for memory, particularly in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” where he reimagines and reconfigures himself and the landscape for generations of future readers.

My goal in this discussion is not to circumscribe the works I talk about in one particular theoretical apparatus. In other words, I am not suggesting that these works—or any works in nineteenth-century American literature—are only mere reactions to photography or the new paradigm of memory. Rather, I believe that this paper provides another way to think about and respond to these works. If anything, I hope that this discussion is an affirmation of literature’s fluidity. The texts that I discuss all show an unwillingness to be confined to one interpretation, which is precisely why their writers were skeptical about photography and its simple verisimilitude in the first place.
In 1995, The MIT Press published a book that features, among other things, photographs of dead infants. This book, Jay Ruby’s Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America, surveys the history of postmortem photography in the United States. Despite their age, the visuals in the book have a remarkable clarity that somehow removes some of the distance between the images and the twenty-first-century viewer. Ruby’s reproductions of nineteenth-century postmortem photographs are simultaneously disquieting and poignant: it is very difficult to consider these dead people—particularly the dead children—in abstract terms. One gazes upon the pictures of these small bodies and immediately recognizes that specific instances of emotional turmoil and trauma led to their creation. Mere days or hours before burying their children’s dead bodies forever out of sight, grieving parents in the mid-1800s often fought against the inevitable cloudiness of memory and used photography, a relatively new invention, to capture one last permanent image of a child. They conceptualized photography, then, as a crutch for imperfect human memory.

T. S. Arthur writes about two separate incidents where parents in the 1840s attempted to use photography as a means of coping with the deaths of their children. In the first incident, an older lady was in a photographer’s studio when she collapsed in mourning. According to Arthur, “[s]he then stated that news of the death of her only daughter, a resident in the west, had been received by her a few days before.”
Remembering that a likeness had been taken a short time previous to her going to the west, the faint hope had crossed her mind that there might be a duplicate in the rooms of the [photographer]. She had found it, and gazed once more into the almost speaking face of her child!” (301). Arthur contrasts this incident with another one where a mother went to a photographer’s studio in the hopes of finding a discarded image of a young son who recently died. Arthur writes, “But, alas! it was not so. Search was made among old and rejected plates […] but after looking for a day or two, the mother coming frequently during the time, the search was abandoned as hopeless. The shadow, fixed in a wonderful and mysterious manner by a ray of light, had faded also, and the only image of the child that remained for the mother was on the tablet of her memory (emphasis added)” (301).

This article was published in 1849, but Arthur writes as though the limitations of human memory have been conquered and anyone who must rely only on memory is sorely lacking. Arthur’s article hints at a new paradigm of memory that emerged after the introduction of photography.

As Arthur’s examples illustrate, photography created a kind of wall between memory and linear time. The new technology enabled people to have one final denial of death; however, this final denial could last as long as someone desired to fetishize a photograph. Of course, one could say the same thing about all kinds of photographs—they allow people to live in the past or in memory as long as they like. Richard Rudisill comments that people began to “[respond] more directly to the images than to the subjects themselves, as in the case of a portrait of a person not present or no longer living. In these instances the value attached to the subject of a picture was often transferred to the picture itself in a way that allowed the picture not only to reflect attitudes or feelings
but to affect them in terms of what people saw and how they saw it” (32). In other words, people started to expand the boundaries they put on their ideas of memory, but that expansion threatened to draw people away from the physical, empirical world and into individual cocoons of perpetually nostalgic mourning.

An 1843 letter to Mary Russell Mitford written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning supports Rudisill’s arguments. Browning writes to Mitford about seeing photographs and exclaims that

[I long] to have such a memorial of every Being dear to me in the world. It is not merely the likeness which is precious in such cases but the association, & the sense of nearness involved in the thing…the fact of the very shadow of the person lying there fixed for ever!—It is the very sanctification of portraits I think […] I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest Artist’s work ever produced. I do not say so in respect (or disrespect) to Art, but for Love’s sake. (358)

Helen Groth cites this letter in her book, Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia. Groth writes, “Viewed through the lens of Barrett Browning’s excitement, [these] marvelous images extended the possibilities of memory to include the literal preservation of an infinite number of isolated fragments of time” (2). Groth goes on to explain, “Barrett Browning may have succumbed to the magical lure of the photographic image like a willing subject surrendering to the power of a mesmerist’s gaze, but she did so in the interests of thickening the connective tissue of memory—her only armour against what she saw as modernity’s culture of forgetting” (10). Finally, she opines that “Barrett Browning began to mourn anew for those who had lived and died before the invention of
photography” (10-11). What Groth is attempting to do—and why I cite these passages from her book—is to view Barrett Browning’s reaction to photography as a microcosm of the nineteenth century’s reaction to the invention. After witnessing the power of photography, both Britons and Americans believed that ordinary photographs could be tools that would improve memory to lengths previously unimagined. However, by relying so heavily on external stimuli, these people implicitly and unconsciously began to doubt the inherent power of their own minds. This two-part reaction to the new technology sparked a paradigm shift in Western beliefs about memory, and, as I indicated in the introduction, texts written during this period reflect and respond to the new paradigm.

Of course, referring to all of this with the phrase *paradigm shift* might seem like a hyperbolic flourish, yet the masses immediately enjoyed and utilized photography. The rapid growth of the photography industry during the 1840s and -50s is remarkable, especially since the modern photographic process made its public debut in August 1839 (Arnason 15). Yet only twelve years later, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* was published, and it features a character described as a “Daguerreotypist” (43). This character, simply named Holgrave, produces an early form of the photograph called a daguerreotype. In *Seven Gables*, though, there is no expositional passage that explains or defines the daguerreotype. In fact, Hawthorne writes as though he expects that all of his readers are familiar with the terminology, which indicates that this was no esoteric technology. Indeed, Beaumont Newhall writes that “hundreds of thousands of Americans, rich and poor, famous and unknown, proud and meek, young and old, faced the mesmeric lens of the daguerreotypist’s camera” (11).

*Early History of the Photograph*
Eponymously named for its inventor, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the daguerreotype came about during the 1830s while Daguerre spent much of the decade working in his private studio. The daguerreotype was an international sensation only a few months after the Frenchman publicly revealed his process to the Academy of Sciences and the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris in August 1839 (Newhall 19). Daguerre did not invent the photograph; instead, he improved on ideas and technology that had already existed for some time. For instance, the *camera obscura*, an apparatus that inverts light and projects an upside-down mirror image, had existed for centuries (Clarke 12). Nevertheless, the permanence and stunning definition of the daguerreotype set it apart from earlier, rudimentary versions of photography. Many extant images made with Daguerre’s process still retain their clarity: Newhall reports that “thousands remain in pristine condition” (11). Perhaps one of Daguerre’s contemporaries, such as Joseph Niépce or William Henry Fox Talbot, might deserve as much or more credit for the birth of the modern photograph; however, it is virtually indisputable that Daguerre was most responsible for photography’s popularity.

Less than a week after Daguerre’s revelation, the daguerreotype process was outlined in both British and American newspapers. Newhall reprints one article from the *London Literary Gazette* that goes into very specific detail:

> A sheet of copper, plated with silver, is washed carefully in a solution of nitric acid, which removes from it all the extraneous matters on its surface, and especially any traces of copper from the silver surface. A slight degree of friction is requisite in this process, but it must not be applied always in the same direction. [...] When the sheet is thus prepared, it is placed in a
closed box and exposed to the vapour of iodine. […] A thin coating, of a yellow colour, is thus formed on the surface of the sheet, which is […] not more than a millionth part of a millimetre in thickness. The sheet, when covered with this substance, is of the most excessive sensibility to light; and is thus ready for the camera obscura. M. Daguerre, in the instrument which he uses, employs a piece of unpolished [i.e., ground] glass, which he brings first of all into the focus of the lens, in order to determine the exact point at which the sheet should be placed; and, as soon as this is determined, the sheet is placed accordingly. A few seconds, or minutes, according to the time of day, the state of the atmosphere, &c., suffice for forming the photogenic image[.] (19-20)

The writer of this article also details how to finalize the process, thus giving anyone with the time and resources the ability to make photographs. Daguerre himself soon complemented such articles with an instructional pamphlet titled *Historique et description des procedes du Daguerreotype et du Diorama*, which was translated into English, German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish editions (Rudisill 48). The combination of public interest with the readily available information created conditions for the perfect capitalist storm.

I cannot overstate how photography was immediately popular with the masses and how immediately profitable it was for entrepreneurs who mastered the daguerreotype process. Before the introduction of the relatively cheap photograph, a painting or a sketching could be made of a person, but such a process would be expensive, timely, and not nearly as accurate as a daguerreotype. In fact, T. S. Arthur states that “[i]n our great
cities, a Daguerreotypist is to be found in almost every square; and there is scarcely a county in any state that has not one or more of these industrious individuals busy at work […] A few years ago it was not every man who could afford a likeness of himself, his wife or his children” (298-299). Susan S. Williams also cites the daguerreotype’s “accessibility to the middle class that had not been able to commission painted portraits” and adds that photographs “became a common component of domestic space” (“Daguerreotype” 162). By the time Hawthorne introduced the photographer Holgrave to the world, there was a veritable daguerreotype industry in the United States (Newhall 34). Williams estimates that in 1853, two years after the publication of Seven Gables, the number of professional and amateur daguerreotypists in America numbered somewhere between 13,000 and 17,000 (“Daguerreotype” 162). A decade later, the United States Census listed 3,154 known professional photographers in America (Newhall 34). The photography boom in nineteenth-century America was stunning, no matter how one crunches the numbers.

*Why* photography was so immediately popular is an entirely different issue, of course. In her letter, Barrett Browning suggests that photographs are valuable for what they mean “for Love’s sake” (358). She implies that the verisimilitude of the daguerreotype might eliminate one of death’s harshest stings—that surviving friends and family members could never again gaze upon the face of a deceased person. This aspect of photography is something people in the twenty-first century surely take for granted, since the invention has been an ordinary fact of life for nearly 170 years. Yet Richard Rudisill writes about a culture of maudlin sentimentalism in the nineteenth century and argues that its “desire for a degree of immortality […] helped to guarantee a favorable
climate for the daguerreotype to exert a profound influence on the [United States]” (24).

In 1864, Marcus Aurelius Root, a writer and professional daguerreotypist, played to the sentimental tendencies of the nation:

> And the photographs of parents, brothers, and sisters, now within the universal reach, constitute the most effectual means of keeping freshly alive the memories of the dear absentees, long associated with us round the same fireside, and of those young days, when the world before us, under the golden rays of imagination and hope, seemed to us one vast realm of brightness and beauty and gladness. What, better than such memories, can preserve the freshness of feeling and tenderness of conscience proper to our opening existence? (414)

With a heavy-handed impersonation of Wordsworth, Root uses language that conflates photography and nostalgic memory. Jay Ruby points out that many other daguerreotypists during the nineteenth century also appealed to the mortal sensibilities of the public. Ruby says that early “professional photographers regularly advertised that they would take ‘likenesses of deceased persons.’” He also writes, “Advertisements that state that ‘We are prepared to take pictures of a deceased person on one hour’s notice’ were commonplace throughout the United States” (52). Ruby goes on to argue that the postmortem photograph is not unique to the 1800s; instead, the practice of photographing a dead body is now a far more private and even secretive affair for many families. However, Ruby never denies the peculiar ubiquity or openness of the practice in the nineteenth century. As I mentioned earlier, Ruby reproduces many postmortem images in his book, and—when considered in the proper historical context—these photographs are
not mere anomalies but rather physical manifestations of the society’s mindset. After all, photography’s immediate popularity is indubitably connected with the sentimentalist culture’s collective fixation on death.

The *rigor mortis* of the Photographic Image

In fact, Roland Barthes argues that photography always has a necessary association with death. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, he enigmatically speaks of a “rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). This is a tantalizingly loaded statement, but it ultimately gets at the heart of why many so-called American Romantic writers typically reacted either ambivalently or negatively to photography. On the simplest level of explication, the “dead” that Barthes refers to are people who are quite literally dead. If Barthes or anyone else looks at a photograph of a dead person, that person figuratively returns in the memories of the viewer. Also, as people in the mid-1800s knew all too well, any photograph of a living person will inevitably be a photograph of a dead person, so the “return of the dead” can also refer to the anxiety a viewer has about his or her own impending death. On another level of meaning, Barthes refers to the “dead” in a very universal sense. That is, photographs trigger reflections and thoughts about humanity in general. On the first page of his book, Barthes shares an anecdote: “One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon’s youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized that, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: ‘I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor’” (3). Barthes suggests that the photograph of Jerome made him feel some sort of connection with Napoleon. Implicitly, then, Barthes felt a connection with all of the historical—but human—events that shaped early-nineteenth-century Europe. So the
“return of the dead” can be read as a Whitmanian kind of phenomenon where a viewer suddenly feels a connection with not just the subject in the photograph but also everyone who interacted with that subject. However, Barthes says that the “return of the dead” takes place in every photograph, not just pictures of people.

He seems especially troubled by the idea that “[a] specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not immediately or generally distinguished from its referent” (5). He later adds, “It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish […] which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus” (5-6).

In other words, the relationship between the signified and the signifier—the subject and the image—is especially problematic in the case of photography. For most people, a word such as elephant is not as precise a signifier as a photograph of an elephant. Most people understand that a common noun is general and abstract, but Barthes believes that many of these same people find the photographic image to be more immediate and particular. He suggests that viewers of photographs are very often tempted to obliterate the boundary between the signifier and the signified. He writes,

\[
\textit{tat} \text{ means that in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lo! but says nothing else; a photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope. Show your photographs to someone—he will immediately show}
\]


you his: “Look, this is my brother; this is me as a child,” etc.; the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of “Look,” “See,” “Here it is”; it points a finger at certain vis-à-vis, and cannot escape this pure deictic language. (5)

Barthes is stressing the idea that most people do not have multi-layered understandings of photographs. He believes that the average person on the street is not particularly interested in the ontological aspects of photography; rather, the average person focuses on individual images and, moreover, on the signified subject and not the signifying photograph. This kind of attitude is precisely why photography was immediately popular in the nineteenth century: the culture reacted to the new images as though they were physical manifestations of pure memories. Barthes, however, does not judge such reactions and admits that he also has them. Instead, he simply acknowledges that, with most photographs, the verisimilitude of the signifier belies its own separation from that which is signified. This is actually the crux of his challenging “return of the dead” statement.

Barthes believes that a photograph’s verisimilitude juxtaposed with its perpetually petrified subject brings about “the return of the dead.” Photography stiffens a subject as well as rigor mortis could ever stiffen a dead body: even a photograph of a landscape is rigid and stagnant. The reproduced photographic subject, of course, is not the signified thing in itself, but Barthes’s hypothetical viewers unconsciously respond to it as though it is. Barthes believes that this is a curious reaction, since, even at the moment a photograph is taken, the subject has been artificially arranged, manipulated, or framed. The artificiality is exaggerated in portrait photography, when any human subject who knows
that he or she is being photographed will wear a kind of metaphorical veil. Barthes imagines a situation where he is sitting for a photograph:

Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. […] If only I could “come out” on paper as on a classical canvas, endowed with a noble expression—thoughtful, intelligent, etc.! […] I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. […] “myself” never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and “myself” which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, “myself” doesn’t hold still, giggling in my jar[.] (11-12)

So the great conundrum of portrait photography is that it does have a remarkable degree of verisimilitude, but it is knowledge of that verisimilitude that creates anxiety and artificiality in the human subject. Most people, according to Barthes’s implications, intuitively understand that a photograph is accepted by the culture not as something that signifies but rather as something that is. Therefore, human subjects are anxious about how they will be portrayed and change their appearances or demeanors when being photographed, thus producing pseudo-truths, photographs that are ostensibly clear and accurate but actually portray something that is stagnant and artificial.
So by Barthes’ reckoning, the nineteenth century’s immediate fascination with photography was truly an unconscious fascination with artificiality, rigidity, stagnation, and death. David E. Stannard agrees with this evaluation, preferring to refer to the nineteenth century’s sentimentalist culture as a “cult of death and dying” (85). Stannard discusses the history of funerary images and argues that postmortem photography was more than just a modern iteration in its long history. In particular, he cites the daguerreotype’s verisimilitude as the chief feature that set it apart from its painterly predecessors. However, postmortem photographs and paintings are similar in that both became fetishized objects for the families that had them made. In fact, the most significant difference between these photographs and paintings is that the photographs were more prolific in American society. Stannard stresses “that images of the deceased and other memorabilia were clung to with what later generations would regard as morbid tenacity, while ostentatious mourning might continue for a lifetime” (93). For some families, these images became veritable idols; for others, they were modern instances of *memento mori* (91-92). The scope of Stannard’s essay, however, does not cover photography in general. As I have already argued, postmortem photographs were not some unusual aberration but, instead, one of a number of particular responses to cultural currents during the nineteenth century. Postmortem photographs often elicited a kind of idolatry, but otherwise normal daguerreotypes also had the potential to become the centerpieces of object worship. Because they could not be reprinted, each daguerreotype was unique: if a photograph created with Daguerre’s process were destroyed, it could never be replaced. With this in mind, most people went to great lengths to protect their photographs, usually protecting them behind a class cover inside a case made of velvet,
wood, or leather, depending on the owner’s preference and pocketbook (Stannard 95). These photographs and their cases are analogous to precious relics cushioned by ecclesiastical adornments or, as Barthes thinks, a museum’s rare objects protected by glass cases. Indeed, Barthes believes that “[p]hotography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object: in order to take the first portraits (around 1840) the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight” (13). In other words, daguerreotypes of the living and the dead were perfectly suited to become fetishized objects, idols for entire families.

Writers during this period reacted quite negatively to these developments. Close reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables and a number of poems by Emily Dickinson reveals an undercurrent of anti-photography sentiment in nineteenth-century American literature. Even Walt Whitman, who seems to embrace photography, demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of signifiers and their disconnection with referents. These writers understood that photography produced a deceptive verisimilitude, obsessions with the past, and mental and creative stagnation. My argument will show that these writers, and by proxy most writers during the nineteenth century, believed that photography was a threat to the creative power of the human mind. Their writing is characterized by a repudiation of memory and affirmation of a perpetually present moment as dictated by the power of writing.
CHAPTER TWO

“I MISUSE HEAVEN’S BLESSED SUNSHINE”: HAWTHORNE AND DAGUERREOTYPY

In the first few pages of Seven Gables, before he introduces Holgrave, the Pyncheons, the Maules, or the House of the Seven Gables itself, Hawthorne makes sure to point out that what his readers have in their hands is not a mere novel but a Romance-with-a-capital-R. He talks about novels as though they were not much better than lengthy newspaper reports. A novel “aim[s] at a very minute fidelity,” Hawthorne writes, “not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience.” A Romance, on the other hand, is a work of art that presents “the truth of the human heart […] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation” (1). Hawthorne rejects pure verisimilitude and champions human imagination: he is responding to new social undercurrents created by photography, and, moreover, he is responding negatively to them. When he talks about the benefits of writing a Romance, he emphasizes the power and freedom it gives the writer, and he uses language that is unmistakably informed by the juxtaposition of light against shadow in photography. According to Hawthorne, the writer of a Romance “may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture (emphasis added)” (1). He wants a writer—not some mean camera—to have control over a subject’s depiction. Hawthorne is also quite wary of attaching the events in his Romance “into positive contact with the realities of the moment” and stresses that they have “a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead, than with any portion of the
actual soil of the County of Essex” (3). Again, Hawthorne rejects verisimilitude as well as any notion that Seven Gables is the specific memory of actual people or actual events. He wants his book to be understood as a creative text and not as a static object that preserves a solitary moment from the past.

As I stated in the previous chapter, the desire to preserve memories through photographs inevitably leads to mental lethargy. Not surprisingly, a number of critics have discussed photography’s role in Seven Gables, but none of them seem to think that Hawthorne portrays it as a force that causes stagnation. Susan S. Williams believes that the daguerreotypes of Judge Pyncheon—as well as the judge himself—are veritable reproductions of Colonel Pyncheon’s portrait. She writes, “The portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, which hangs in the parlor in which he died, both prolongs the scene of death and gives the dead man a continuing presence. It also has a reproductive power of its own: it has a walking replica in Judge Pyncheon” (“Portraiture” 225). She adds, “Thus, the daguerreotypes of Jaffrey seem to be copies of the portrait of the Colonel, rather than of Jaffrey himself” (225-226). Another critic, Ronald R. Thomas, also contemplates the role of images in the book and talks about “certain dangers which Holgrave may have come to understand” (106). He keenly points out that “[t]he silvered surface of the daguerreotype lent an almost hyperreal quality to a portrait and produced an image that seemed even more natural and true than what was visible to the naked eye viewing the living subject” (106). As I stated in the previous chapter, the earliest buyers and producers of photographs valued their images so much that they came to prefer depictions of subjects more than the subjects themselves. In the course of his discussion, though, Thomas
argues that Hawthorne nevertheless drew inspiration from the new invention of photography and models the idea of a Romance after it.

Thomas’s argument illustrates the chief failure of most critics who consider photography and Seven Gables: because of the revelatory power of Holgrave’s daguerreotype, critics like Thomas assume that the novel celebrates the photograph. According to their logic, the daguerreotype of Judge Pyncheon accurately reveals his sinister character, so Holgrave is closer to the truth than the other characters, and the text of Seven Gables must have a thread of pro-photography sentiment. Even Williams is not immune to what is ultimately a flawed analysis. While she is correct to talk about how the portrait “prolongs the scene of death” and gives the colonel a “continuing presence” (“Portraiture” 225), she incorrectly ascribes these phenomena to the agency of the visual image. Williams ignores the Pyncheon family’s own agency in keeping the portrait hanging on the wall for multiple generations. In her article, she argues that Hawthorne expresses wariness of photography, but only in the sense of how the invention’s popularity can hurt him and other writers in the marketplace. Hawthorne has a kind of respect for the active power of the photograph, Williams argues, and he symbolically uses his text to enclose and control that power. This reading and others, however, miss major points about Hepzibah, Phoebe, and Holgrave that reveal the book’s truly negative reaction to the new paradigm of memory created by photography.

Reactions to the Visual Image

One of the clearest examples of this negative reaction is the influence that the aforementioned portrait of Colonel Pyncheon has over the minds of the Pyncheon family. This likeness of the Pyncheon forefather is a painting rather than a photograph, but it is
nevertheless a fetishized visual object that keeps the family members’ minds focused on the past. It also keeps them both physically and intellectually docile. According to the narrator, the colonel’s will specifies that the portrait must remain forever suspended on the wall. The narrator goes on to say that “[t]hose stern, immitigable features seemed to symbolize an evil influence,” and he remarks that “the ghost of a dead progenitor […] is often doomed to become the Evil Genius of his family” (21). The influence of the portrait demonstrates how a fixation or obsession on the past can be deleterious. On the morning that Hepzibah is forced to open the long-neglected shop, she first finds herself drawn to the portrait. The narrator writes, “Face to face with this picture […] Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon came to a pause […] She, in fact, felt a reverence for the pictured visage, of which only a far-descended and time-stricken virgin could be susceptible” (33-34). Readers then immediately learn about the aging woman’s sad, lonely life and her worsening state of financial security. The narrator wants to make a clear connection between the portrait’s influence and her pathetic state of affairs. “I wish I were dead,” Hepzibah soon declares, “and in the old family-tomb, with all my forefathers! With my father, and my mother, and my sister! […] The world is too chill and hard” (44). Like the real-life sentimentalists who used portraits and photographs to repudiate the world and perpetuate a lifetime of mourning, Hepzibah constantly thinks about her memories of the past. Seven Gables, however, is not a fatalistic story, and it does not advocate a philosophy of determinism; that is, the stories of Maule’s curse and the colonel’s sin only affect characters because they choose to give those stories power. It is Hepzibah who chooses to dote on the portrait, and it is she who chooses to keep the portrait on the wall. Even Clifford asks, “Why do you keep that odious picture on the wall?” and adds, “Yes,
yes!—that is precisely your taste!” (111). Clifford never changes his opinion about the portrait, which indicates that the image does not inherently have the power to transform those who gaze upon it. In fact, Clifford’s stability demonstrates that the portrait lacks any inherent power at all. Rather, people like Hepzibah give it power by treating it like a holy relic from some Golden Age of Pyncheon.

Phoebe, on the other hand, is repelled by the portrait and constantly feels uncomfortable around it. Of course, she is the impetus for positive change in Hepzibah’s and Clifford’s lives: her sanguine disposition and her youth represent a new direction in the Pyncheon legacy and a turning away from the moribund influence of the House of the Seven Gables. By implication, then, anything that Phoebe rejects is part of that negative influence and also needs to be rejected by the rest of the Pyncheon clan before it can escape the cycle of family misfortune. Phoebe finds the colonel’s portrait to be especially unnerving because of its seemingly omnipresent influence over the house and its residents. She says that its “stern eye […] follow[s] me about, all day” (92). The daguerreotype that Holgrave later makes of Judge Pyncheon troubles Phoebe because of its resemblance to the colonel’s portrait. She dislikes the photograph for its similarly draining influence and finally says, “I don’t wish to see it any more […] It is certainly very like the old portrait” (92). She has similar feelings about daguerreotypes in general, since she believes them to be “hard and stern” (91). According to the young woman, daguerreotypes “hate to be seen” (91), so she obviously believes that there is a gulf between the photographic image and the viewer. Phoebe’s negative reaction is not based on any particular daguerreotype’s subject but rather what she believes to be the rough form’s inability to capture a subject’s fluidity. Like the colonel’s portrait, daguerreotypes
are unsettling and detrimental, at least in Phoebe’s judgment. In Barthes’s way of thinking, Phoebe is unusual because she successfully—and consciously—makes the distinction between the signifying photograph and the signified subject.

Holgrave takes the opposite position and argues that the daguerreotype reveals truths about a subject that go beyond even a superficial level. He tells Phoebe, “Most of my likenesses do look unamiable; but the very sufficient reason, I fancy, is, because the originals are so. There is a wonderful insight in heaven’s broad and simple sunshine […] it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it” (91). Supporting his claim, he then shows Phoebe the photograph of Judge Pyncheon that ultimately distresses her so much. In the public’s opinion, Holgrave declares, the judge has “an exceedingly pleasant countenance, indicative of benevolence, openness of heart, sunny good humor, and other praiseworthy qualities of that cast” (92). He adds that the daguerreotype, however, reveals the judge’s true character: “Look at that eye! Would you like to be at its mercy? At that mouth! Could it ever smile?” (92). This is the point where many critics decide that Hawthorne is championing photography: the invention has accurately revealed a hidden truth about the judge, so the reader is intended to trust both the daguerreotype and the daguerreotypist.

However, such a reading ignores Phoebe’s role in this chapter and in the rest of the book. While Holgrave correctly rejects the public’s opinion of the judge, he surmises the man’s character by turning to the daguerreotype rather than his own immediate experience. On the contrary, Phoebe backs away from the judge’s touch even before seeing his menacing daguerreotype. She rejects photography yet still recognizes the judge for what he is, but Holgrave needs the daguerreotype to see through the judge’s façade. This disparity
between Holgrave and Phoebe presents itself again towards the end of the book. After Judge Pyncheon dies, the daguerreotypist participates in what Stannard terms the nineteenth century’s “cult of death and dying” (85) and takes a postmortem photograph of the judge. Holgrave calls his morbid photograph “a memorial valuable to myself” and says, “I used the means at my disposal to preserve this pictorial record of Judge Pyncheon’s death” (303). Yet while he calmly explains all of this to Phoebe, the judge’s dead body is decaying in the next room. Holgrave chooses not to inform Phoebe about the judge’s death by first telling her about it or showing her the body; instead, he hands her the postmortem photograph.

The daguerreotypist simply cannot accept the exterior world as he sees it and receives its impressions. There is a potential epistemological crisis around every corner for Holgrave, who can only relate to the world through the intermediary of the photograph. Responding to Holgrave’s role in the book, Alan Trachtenberg talks about how photography presents “a new version of the old challenge of seeing to believing” (479). In this sense, Holgrave is very much the Doubting Thomas of Seven Gables: while Hepzibah, Clifford, and Phoebe are never fooled by the judge’s demeanor, Holgrave must confirm his suspicions through the daguerreotype. When the body of the judge sits before him, he is still not satisfied until he verifies the death through a photographic record of it.

About humanity in general, Holgrave declares, “Men and women, and children, too, are such strange creatures, that one never can be certain that he really knows them; nor ever guess what they have been, from what he sees them to be, now. […] A mere observer, like myself (who never have any intuitions, and am, at best, only subtle and acute,) is pretty certain to go astray” (178-179). Holgrave cannot even trust himself to be reliable,
so readers make a serious error if they accept him as a reliable character who is privy to unfiltered truth.

Functional Contradiction and Inconsistency

This is not to say that Holgrave is wholly unreliable; rather, Charles Swann points out that Hawthorne’s presentation of the photographer is characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. Swann considers the role of Holgrave’s political radicalism in the book, and according to his reading, Hawthorne “rebukes the daguerreotypist for his lack of realism […] and expresses scepticism about the value of radical political action” (3). On the other hand, Swann points out, Hawthorne’s attitude towards Holgrave is at other times genial and approving. Swann believes that “Hawthorne has trapped himself, and attempts to resolve this paralysing ambivalence by distancing himself in what is very close to a distasteful aestheticizing of his perspective” (3). Swann could say the same thing about how Holgrave’s daguerreotypy is presented in the book. While his daguerreotypes do have the power to reveal obscured truths, Holgrave also tells Hepzibah that he “misuse[s] Heaven’s blessed sunshine by tracing out human features, through its agency” (46). This is a curious statement for a professional daguerreotypist to make, especially one who is not given to moments of self-deprecation. Furthermore, Holgrave seems to go against his entire profession when he declares,

    Shall we never, never get rid of this Past! […] It lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. Just think, a moment; and it will startle you to see what
slaves we are to by-gone times—to Death, if we give the matter the right
word! (182-183)

Ostensibly, Holgrave decries the legacies of the Pyncheons and Maules, but he also
speaks with the fervor of someone who is tired of a sentimentalist culture’s fixation on
death and memories of the past. Why, then, does he earn money by producing
photographs, thus fueling the community’s obsession with the past? Does Hawthorne, as
Swann suggests, lose control over Holgrave as a character? What Swann fails to
recognize is that the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding Holgrave has a discernible
function in Seven Gables.

Holgrave is meant to represent photography as an invention and an industry: the
narrator constantly refers to him as “the daguerreotypist,” as though his profession were
an essential part of his identity. Chapter twelve is Holgrave-centric, and it is even titled
“The Daguerreotypist,” thus reinforcing the link between the man and his occupation. In
fact, the label “the Daguerreotypist” is so prolific in Seven Gables that it erases the
boundaries between the form or category of daguerreotypists and Holgrave as an
individual character. At times during the story, Holgrave loses his identity under the
weight of the label. For instance, readers learn about his transience, a specific trait that
colors him as a character. The narrator writes, “[Holgrave’s] present phase, as a
Daguerreotypist, was of no more importance in his own view, nor likely to be more
permanent, than any of [his] preceding [occupations]. It had been taken up with the
careless alacrity of an adventurer, who had his bread to earn; it would be thrown aside as
carelessly, whenever he should choose to earn his bread by some other equally digressive
means” (177). Yet that passage comes from the chapter titled “The Daguerreotypist.” If
daguerreotypy is a transient occupation for Holgrave, then why does the strong, textual association between the man and the occupation exist in the first place? Ultimately, Holgrave does stand for the industry of photography, and his inconsistencies and contradictions therefore represent the deception inherent in photography.

The daguerreotype is able to capture the negative aspect of Judge Pyncheon’s character, but Hawthorne states that he is not very interested in a “very minute fidelity” (1). The judge’s daguerreotype produces a very minute fidelity because it only presents one side of his character. In fact, the photograph actually deceives its viewers because it fails to show the judge’s hypocritical public persona. Judge Pyncheon’s ability to fool the public with a warm countenance is a significant part of his sinister demeanor: it is why he is able to gain so much power in the community. Yet the daguerreotype portrays the judge as a consistently intimidating person. While Phoebe appreciates both sides of the judge’s personality, someone relying only on his daguerreotype could not understand the nuances and inconsistencies of his character. The photograph, then, is inconsistent with the judge’s inconsistency. Similarly, as I pointed out in the first chapter, static photographs are inconsistent with their fluid subjects. Holgrave is as limited as a photograph because he only presents one aspect of his personality at a time. A few chapters after he says that he “misuse[s] Heaven’s blessed sunshine” (46), he calls daguerreotypy “my humble line of art” (91) and praises its veracity. He senses his inconsistency no more than real-life daguerreotypists sensed the duplicity inherent in their images. Furthermore, he cannot express ambivalence, so the narrator must do it for him. Ultimately, the inconsistency and ambivalence that Swann thinks is a failure in
Seven Gables is actually part of an intricate design: Holgrave is a contradictory character, but he contradicts himself no more than a photograph does its subject.

The Power of Sunlight and the Narrative Lens

Hawthorne’s treatment of sunlight in Seven Gables is similarly marked by a complicated role in the story. Indeed, there is a mention of the sun or sunlight on virtually every page of the book. Alfred H. Marks points out that “[t]hroughout the book the daguerreotype is mentioned in connection with sunlight and often interchangeably with it” (336). As I outlined in the previous chapter, the daguerreotype process entails reflecting light, and many daguerreotype studios had a series of mirrors that would reflect and direct sunbeams (Newhall 26). In fact, the process was not altogether different from how sunlight plays upon the House of the Seven Gables. In the second chapter, the narrator describes the morning that Hepzibah is forced to reopen the house’s little shop. The narrator says, “A few clouds, floating high upward, caught some of the earliest light, and threw down its golden gleam on the windows of all the houses in the street; not forgetting the House of the Seven Gables, which—many such sunrises as it had witnessed—looked cheerfully at the present one” (32). As I indicated, the lines about the sunlight bouncing off the clouds read very much like a description of how the daguerreotype process works with mirrors. Moreover, the narrator engages in the pathetic fallacy and describes how the house looks cheerfully as though it is conscious of being photographed. This passage reinforces the idea that writing supersedes photography as a creative art. The narrator takes the place of the camera and provides the depiction of the subject. He has, as Hawthorne directs in the preface, “manage[d] his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen the shadows of the picture” (1).
Whenever the narrator talks about sunshine, he is calling attention to his own power to create and arrange.

The fact that the house looks cheerfully at the sunrise indicates that it is posing, as it were, for the narrator’s proverbial lens. The house has anything but a cheerful history, as the next three hundred or so pages indicate. In fact, if the sunlight truly had “wonderful insight” (91) as Holgrave claims, the house would appear to be anything but cheerful. In a later chapter, the narrator again uses language associated with photography to describe how sunlight enters a room: “The morning-light […] soon stole into the aperture at the foot of the bed, betwixt those faded curtains (emphasis added)” (70). When the sunlight stands for the power of the camera lens, the house dissembles under its gaze. Barthes writes, “[O]nce I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image” (10). The anthropomorphized house does precisely the same thing, hiding a significant part of its identity, thus hinting at photography’s limitations and foreshadowing the inevitable failure of Judge Pyncheon’s daguerreotype. Matthew Maule says that “[t]he shadow creeps and creeps, and is always looking over the shoulder of the sunshine!” (191), hinting of the bleak reality hidden by the sun’s light. In this context, the sunlight that strikes the house is deceptive and misleading. It makes the house appear beautiful and cheerful, deceiving generations of characters and making them desire the property.

Perhaps it is then not surprising that when the narrator introduces Holgrave, he connects the photographer with sunlight. Describing Holgrave’s sudden appearance in Hepzibah’s shop, the narrator writes, “Coming freshly, as he did, out of the morning light,
he appeared to have brought some of its cheery influences into the shop along with him” (43). Yet again this cheerfulness belies the reality of Pyncheon misery, for the narrator says that “when [Hepzibah] saw the young man’s smile […] and heard his kindly tone, she broke first into an hysteric giggle, and then began to sob” (44). In fact, Holgrave himself recognizes that sunlight can be a deceptive force. He later tells Phoebe, “I make pictures out of sunshine; and, not to be too much dazzled with my own trade, I have prevailed with Miss Hepzibah to let me lodge in one of these dusky gables. It is like a bandage over one’s eyes, to come into it” (91). It is as though Holgrave knows that he cannot spend too much time in the sunlight: he says that he will be “dazzled,” as though he would be mesmerized by his own consciousness of the symbolic lens. In fact, the narrator never describes the interior of Holgrave’s room or his studio. Holgrave, when hidden away in his dusky room, not only isolates himself from the rest of the characters but also the narrator’s veritable lens. Furthermore, the narrator’s gaze never catches Holgrave in the act of taking a daguerreotype. Readers only see the products of his work and never the process itself. This suggests that the daguerreotypist’s gaze and the narrator’s gaze cannot simultaneously exist in the same textual space, which in turn suggests that they have the same function. In a sense, Holgrave and the narrator compete for control over potential subjects.

For instance, Holgrave often displays a level of narrative omniscience when he talks about stories of the past. In the first chapter, the narrator is the one who recounts the story of Colonel Pyncheon and Matthew Maule, but in the rest of the book, Holgrave provides the history of the Maules and the Pyncheons. In the twelfth chapter, he tells Phoebe that he has written an account of Alice Pyncheon’s fate, and in the thirteenth
chapter, he reads his ill-fated story, which is colored with the narrator’s omniscient and omnipresent authority. Later, Holgrave must reveal his identity as a Maule and provide the narrative that reveals the location of the missing deed. While the narrator acts like a daguerreotypist and casts sunlight over the House of the Seven Gables, Holgrave acts like an author and writes the stories of Alice Pyncheon and the missing deed. The narrator and the character both have some kind of authority over the world of *Seven Gables*. Their competition for control over the story represents the tension between the creative imagination of an author and the verisimilitude of a photograph.

Not surprisingly, the narrator finally wins this struggle, as he can use the tools of the daguerreotypist far better than any daguerreotypist ever could. Whereas Holgrave can only manipulate the sunlight, the narrator can symbolically control it. He decides when and where it shines, and he can permanently cast his subject in sunshine. Phoebe Pyncheon, forever glowing with the light of the sun, is a testament to the narrator’s creative power. She is a very flat character, but the narrator constantly associates her with sunlight, indicating that she is always under the gaze of his lens. At times, the narrator presents her as though she were the human manifestation of sunshine. In one passage, he writes that “[E]ven as a ray of sunshine, fall into what dismal place it may, instantaneously creates for itself a propriety in being there—so did it seem altogether fit that [Phoebe] should be standing at the threshold” (68-69). In another passage he writes, “Phoebe, whose fresh and maidenly figure was both sunshine and flowers, their essence, in a prettier and more agreeable mode of manifestation” (108-109). Under the gaze of the camera lens, Phoebe would have two different modes of existence—how she existed in a solitary moment and how she exists in every other moment. In fact, any subject of a
daguerreotype appears one way under the sunlight that captures its image but has an entirely different, more complex existence away from that moment in the light. Phoebe is never away from sunlight, so she has a very flat kind of existence: she lives her life as though she were constantly posing for a photograph. She is never a contradictory, inconsistent character like Holgrave, since the narrator never shows her apart from the influence of sunlight. The only time that there is a hint that Phoebe may have another dimension to her personality comes shortly before her departure in chapter fourteen. She says, “It seems as if I had looked at everything, hitherto, in broad daylight, or else in the ruddy light of a cheerful fire, glimmering and dancing through a room. […] I have given [Hepzibah and Clifford] my sunshine, and have been glad to give it; but, of course, I cannot both give and keep it” (214-215). Phoebe’s brief flirtation with a mature melancholy is cut short by her departure, and when she comes back onstage, as it were, she is still characterized by cheerfulness and demonstrates no sign of long-term development. In the meantime, the narrator applies his gaze to Clifford, who suddenly absconds from the house with Hepzibah and develops a new, fresh perspective on life. By the end of Seven Gables, Phoebe’s symbolic sunshine has spread to Hepzibah, Clifford, and Holgrave, who all decide to repudiate the House of the Seven Gables. Holgrave implicitly rejects his activism, daguerreoty, and his quest for narrative control when he leaves the house. He desires to marry Phoebe and, presumably, adopt her consistently flat but cheery perspective on life. The happy ending of the story affirms a writer’s command over his or her subjects.

In summary, Seven Gables has three different responses to paradigm shift created by photography. One, as evidenced by the influence of Colonel Pyncheon’s portrait, it
shows that fawning over the past and the dead effectively retards a person’s life in the present moment. Two, through Holgrave’s contradictions and inconsistencies, it shows that the verisimilitude of photography is inherently deceiving. Finally, the narrator’s role as pseudo-photographer demonstrates writers’ anxiety about photography. These three major responses are not unique to Hawthorne or *Seven Gables*; in fact, they are all present in a number of poems by Emily Dickinson.
Nearly a century-and-a-half ago, Emily Dickinson began a now-famous correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. This epistolary relationship has since caused critics to spill enough ink to fill a swimming pool; however, I am not particularly interested in swimming through the nuances and subtleties of the relationship between Dickinson and Higginson. Rather, I cite this relationship because of one implicit request the editor made of Dickinson. That is, after three letters from his new poet-friend, Higginson apparently asked her for a daguerreotype or some sort of photographic print of herself. One can infer this request from Dickinson’s July 1862 letter to Higginson. She writes, “Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur—and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves—Would this do just as well?” (175). Here, Dickinson demonstrates a belief in the ability of words to provide as powerful and lasting an image as the incipient technology of photography. Of course, readers in the twenty-first century have the advantage of knowing that Dickinson did sit for a daguerreotype when she was a teenager (Farr 16-20) and another one when she was an adult (Gura), but this knowledge only bolsters the idea that the poet felt apprehension towards photography since she did not disclose the existence of either portrait.

As I discussed in the first two chapters, photography created a new paradigm of memory that made the culture try to relieve its anxiety about death through photography.
This new culture of memory and death, then, must have weighed heavily on Dickinson’s mind as it did on the minds of most of her contemporaries. Of course, this is not a particularly provocative statement, but I want to stress that critics have heretofore underestimated the extent to which Dickinson concerned herself with the parameters of memory. This discussion will demonstrate that many of Dickinson’s poems can be read legitimately as reactions to the paradigm shift created by photography. In fact, the critic Adam Frank believes that “Dickinson’s writing […] competed with the uses of photography as a sentimental technology of preservation and revelation in mid-nineteenth-century United States” (1). Frank intelligently considers the effects that photography had on the nineteenth century and therefore Dickinson. He writes, “Emily Dickinson’s writing acutely register[s] the dissociation of consciousness from identity conditioned by photography” (2), and he talks at length about how photography introduced new ways of looking that affected Dickinson’s sense of interiority. Frank’s argument is sound, but it does not demonstrate how comprehensively Dickinson’s writing responded to photography. I will show that Dickinson’s speakers very often express a negative mindset towards the nineteenth-century attitudes about memory and respond to them by attempting to amplify and change the concept of immortality.

There are a number of Dickinson’s poems that indubitably deal with memory. Poem 939, according to Thomas Johnson’s numbering, begins as the speaker repudiates the power of sight. She declares, “What I see not, I better see— / Through Faith—” (1-2). The speaker does not mean some sort of dogmatic, religious faith but an intellectual belief that things can exist and be conceptualized without being seen. In other words, the power of her mind—through imagination, contemplation, and memory—produces
sharper and more vivid images than her sense of sight. The speaker adds, “[M]y Hazel Eye / Has periods of shutting— / But, No lid has Memory—” (2-4). These lines are obvious enough: the speaker’s eye, whether through sleep or injury, is sometimes closed and thus non-functional. However, the speaker’s mind can never be shut off, even in the midst of a dream. In fact, the speaker goes on to detail how she dreams of “Features so beloved” (8) only “Till jealous Daylight interrupt— / And mar thy perfectness—” (11-12). Clearly, this speaker rejects empiricism, which is to say that she rejects the powers of normal observation. In this sense, she is much like Holgrave from Seven Gables, who cannot trust his impressions of the external world. The speaker imagines that her mind can imbue its images with “perfectness” (12). Of course, perfection is an ideal concept that cannot exist in a flawed and chaotic empirical world. For this speaker, sight itself is a reminder that perfection is not attainable in the physical world. This poem certainly has more negative implications: if one applies its premise, then the actual appearance of a loved one would ultimately not be as perfect and joyous as the idealized, perfect mental recollection of a loved one. Similarly, a new sight of a beautiful sunset would not be as lovely as the idealized memory of one. The speaker ultimately believes that the object of memory is positively misrepresented in the mind. In other words, the memories of beloved things are more pleasing than those things actually were. Photographs, obviously, would be a boon for this speaker. For someone dissatisfied with the present moment, memory is an all-encompassing, all-powerful force. According to the philosophy of this poem, a person who grieves at the loss of a dead child is likely to configure memories of that child in such a way that life in the present moment becomes stagnant and almost
meaningless. Though never explicit, this tension in Poem 939 negates the poem’s overt celebration of memory and presents it as a negative force.

Another poem, Poem 1406, more ostensibly presents memory as a negative force.

This is a simple, short poem:

No Passenger was known to flee—
That lodged a night in memory—
That wily—subterranean Inn
Contrives that none go out again—  (1-4)

This is hardly one of Dickinson’s greatest poems, and I seriously doubt that it is often anthologized. However, I cannot ignore it in the context of this discussion. For instance, this poem echoes Poem 939’s dichotomy between the mind and the physical world. Here, the speaker imagines memory as an inn, a place of rest, along life’s normal path. The person who stops to rest in memory is a passenger, according to the poem. Among other things, the notion of a person-as-passenger indicates that the speaker questions free will: one can imagine that this speaker views people as mere bodies being driven by larger forces. Furthermore, the speaker describes memory quite ominously in the last two lines. That memory is a “wily” and “subterranean Inn” (3) demonstrates that the speaker might very well reject the remembrance of things past. By being both “wily” and “subterranean,” memory seems to have the scheming consciousness of someone like Judge Pyncheon. Memory, then, is more powerful a determining factor in a person’s life than are all the rest of the forces that make a person a mere “Passenger.” Though the description of memory in this poem is more troubling than the description in Poem 939,
one thing remains the same—in both cases, memory is more powerful than the physical body in which it resides.

Though Dickinson offers varying views of memory throughout her *oeuvre*, she consistently respects it as one of the mind’s greatest powers. The fact is that memory was on the minds of most people during this time, which was due in large part to the introduction of photography. For example, Dickinson’s father apparently wanted his daughter to sit for a photograph because, in Dickinson’s words, “Death might occur, and he has Molds of all the rest—but has no Mold of me” (Letters 175). For Edward Dickinson and others, it is as though a photograph improves memory so much that it somehow staves off death. I want to survey a few more commonly overlooked poems in order to establish just how frequently human memory was being considered during Dickinson’s time. For example, Poem 1578 is another short and otherwise unremarkable poem that also speaks of the power of memory. This poem states that

Blossoms will run away,

Cakes reign but a Day,

But Memory like Melody

Is pink Eternally. (1-4)  

The poem’s theme is closer to the overt theme of Poem 939—memory can produce fresh, perfect images that cannot be matched by the physical world. On the other hand, the tone of Poem 1753 is similar to Poem 1406 in its explicitly negative view of memory. In Poem 1753, Dickinson writes:

Through those old Grounds of memory,

The sauntering alone
Is a divine intemperance
A prudent man would shun.
Of liquors that are vended
’Tis easy to beware
But statutes do not meddle
With the internal bar. (1-8)

On the surface, this poem appears to be an uncompromising refutation against memory and nostalgia. After all, the speaker clearly states that a “prudent man would shun” (4) the intoxicating effects of memory. However, the tension in the poem echoes the tension about memory that Dickinson demonstrates throughout all of her work. First, the speaker compares memory to liquor, which suggests that it can be a force of pleasure and relaxation. Indeed, the speaker goes on to say that memory “Alloys our firmer moments / With that severest gold” (13-14). Despite her warnings, the speaker understands why dwelling in nostalgia can be appealing. It can be a liquor or a narcotic for someone who spends time recollecting pleasant times and imbuing those recollections with idealism. According to this poem, such a person can easily fall into a downward spiral of trying to relive past glories. The speaker warns that memory’s images are “Pernicious as the sunset / Permitting to pursue / But impotent to gather” (9-11). That is, a person chases the chance to relive idealized memories as a rabbit chases a carrot at the end of a stick. It is a fruitless—but addictive—effort. Ultimately, nostalgia is a temptation that must be avoided by anyone who wants to maintain mental acuity. Unlike those who would fetishize photographic images, Dickinson’s speaker rejects the sentimentalist culture.
From this poem, one can begin to identify a more consistent evaluation of memory throughout Dickinson’s work. Nowhere in this poem does the speaker deny the power of memory; in fact, this intoxicating power itself is the impetus for the poem. Moreover, the poem’s tension highlights the negative consequences of the seemingly positive poems. For instance, Poem 939 implies an irreparable division between mind and matter, but one must remember that the speaker of that poem fully embraces memory. She has, to use the language of Poem 1753, spent too much time at the internal bar. Her mind creates perfection, and she is so enamored with it that she resents waking up and having to face the external world. If one applies the metaphors of Poem 1406 to this speaker, then one can see that she has chosen not to flee from her subterranean inn. All of the poems that I have cited have a similar underlying tension. When Dickinson’s speakers praise memory, they do so at the cost of rejecting the physical, external world. When Dickinson’s speakers warn against the traps of memory, they do so all while admitting its allure, power, and inherent creativity. These ambivalent considerations of memory surely draw one’s mind to Dickinson’s claim that her “Business is Circumference” (Letters 176). It is indeed as though Dickinson circles around the idea of memory and considers it from all points of view.

Dickinson obviously had a great deal of apprehension regarding her society’s inclination to dwell in memories of the past; like the narrator of Seven Gables, however, she knew that positive potential for memory exists in words, and, through her letters, she stressed that potential to her friends and family. Dickinson believed that poetry could make memory a force of forward-thinking and generation. Cristanne Miller points out that “Dickinson is most apt to write in meter when she is responding to a crisis or is
particularly upset. […] The regular recurrence of stresses and sounds in poetry seems to have a calming effect on the poet” (11-12). Of course, one could extend this idea and imagine that Dickinson believed these same stresses and sounds would also have a calming effect on readers. For instance, when her nephew Gilbert died, she wrote his mother—her best friend Susan—a letter that reads far more like poetry than prose. Dickinson writes:

Dear Sue—

The Vision of Immortal Life has been fulfilled—

How simply at last the Fathom comes! The Passenger and not the Sea, we find surprises us—

Gilbert rejoiced in Secrets—

His Life was panting with them—With what menace of Light he cried “Dont [sic] tell, Aunt Emily”! Now my ascended Playmate must instruct me. Show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee! (Letters 293)

Simultaneously an apostrophe to the dead child and an elegy to no particular audience in mind, this letter is seemingly anything but a letter to the mother of a recently deceased child. About this particular letter, Dickinson biographer Alfred Habegger writes, “[T]he first of Dickinson’s consolatory letters to Sue insisted […] that tragedy was triumph. […] She [believed] that it was imperative to convert tragedy into victory—that all the resources of language must be harnessed to this end” (617).

Habegger picks up on an important theme, which is the notion that Dickinson wanted to create tribute to her nephew that would be a sort of living memory. In her letter, Dickinson focuses on a memory of Gilbert telling her to keep a secret. In the mind of
someone caught up in nostalgia, this memory would remain forever static; however, Dickinson takes it and retroactively configures it as an instance of foreshadowing. As Gilbert once loved childish secrets, he—as someone who has experienced whatever happens after death—now holds secrets that even the wisest of adults yearn to hold. So Dickinson takes what could be a stagnant memory and uses it to recognize and accept the reality of the present moment. Through words, Dickinson grants Gilbert a fluid, animate immortality that no photograph could ever confer. Family members who read Dickinson’s configuration of Gilbert as a wise sage of secrets surely could not help but imagine the little boy’s spirit somehow still extant, if only in their own minds.

Dickinson’s words of comfort are an attempt to reconcile memory with the physical world. As the memory of Gilbert and his secrets imbues his immediate postmortem stage with meaning, so does the idea of a dead-but-sentinel Gilbert imbue an old memory with new, fresh meaning. A perfect Dickinsonian memory, then, is not one that forces a person to think about nothing but the past, and it is not one that makes a person color the past with unrealistic nostalgic idealism. Rather, a perfect Dickinsonian memory encourages creativity, production, and recognition of the present moment. In this sense, one can perhaps regard the idea of immortality itself as Dickinson’s way to solve the memory/present time dichotomy

The concept of immortality for Dickinson is usually not associated with anything mystical or Christian. In fact, the theme of immortality in her poems is quite often associated with those people left behind in the wake of someone’s death. Dickinson herself calls the act of writing poetry “Immortality” (Letters 172), so she definitely stresses immortality as concept that is produced by living people. When Dickinson’s
speakers talk about immortality, they very often do so while associating it with memory. For instance, in Poem 675, the speaker talks about the process of extracting essential oils. She says, “The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns—alone— / It is the gift of Screws—” (2-4). More importantly, she adds:

   The General Rose—decay—

   But this—in Lady’s Drawer

   Make Summer—When the Lady lie

   In Ceaseless Rosemary— (5-8)

On the surface, this poem is simple enough to explicate. The difficult process of extracting an essential oil is a trope for the difficult process of writing poetry. Further, like the essential oil, a poem will last longer than its source. However, many readers might overlook a particularly interesting word in the poem—Summer. The speaker informs the reader that attar will “Make Summer” (7) after the rose’s decay. Of course, this word choice should be immediately intriguing because one normally associates flowers and their blooming with spring. It is as though, with this word choice, the speaker suggests that a stagnant memory of a rose will always place it in spring at the first moment of its blooming and yet unrealized potential. However, an active, positive memory—such as the one Dickinson outlined for remembering Gilbert—will place the rose in summer, the season after spring; that is, a positive memory of a rose is always connected to progression and possibility. Further, one must realize that the speaker does not explicitly focus on essential oil’s aroma; instead, she uses the word Summer, a time of year, to stress that the oil creates something non-material. In other words, the oil—the memory as I am calling it—has no real creative power of its own. Rather, it needs an
audience to interpret it and give it meaning much like a poem needs an audience to interpret its signs to give it meaning. According to the logic of Poem 675, dwelling on a memory rather than using a memory to interpret and create surely leads one to be trapped in nostalgic discord between past/present and mind/body.

In Poem 883, Dickinson continues merging the themes of memory, death, and immortality. Her speaker says, “The Poets light but Lamps— / Themselves—go out—” (1-2). Here, the lamps are analogous to the essential oil in Poem 675. A poet gains immortality only when people are willing to take his or her “memory,” a poem, and engage it intellectually. Indeed, the speaker goes to say about the poets, “The Wicks they stimulate— / If vital Light / Inhere as do the Suns—” (3-5). By saying “If vital,” the speaker refers to a poet’s work that is exceptional and reveals something about the human condition. In other words, if the poet produces something that stimulates the brain and imagination, it will inhere in minds like the light of suns. While this line could be infinitely confounding, one must keep in mind the rest of this discussion. Dickinson is very interested in the creative powers of a person’s mind, and the plural form of sun is indicative of her interest. If people use their own individual, unique experiences to interpret and arrange external signs, then there could be as many suns as there are people. For one person, the sun might represent wisdom. For a person in a desert, the sun might represent perpetual oppression. A challenging poem could have the same effect on its readers, and the speaker alludes to this when she says, “Each Age a Lens / Disseminating their / Circumference—” (6-8). The speaker qualifies Age with Each, implying different, changing ages that will bring different, changing interpretations to poems. More importantly, one should remember that the word Lens could refer to the lens of a
magnifying glass or the lens of a human eye. However, it could very well also
simultaneously refer to the lens of a camera. This reading most cohesively ties together
the threads of memory and immortality; that is, a daguerreotypist would use the lens of a
camera to make one static, unchanging image. On the other hand, the human eye is
symbolically more successful than this new, paradigm-shifting creation. After all, the eye
and its lens can send various images to the mind, which can produce metaphorical
photographs of the same thing from different perspectives.

Benjamin Lease cites an interesting letter that is not included in Thomas Johnson’s
Selected Letters collection. The letter is from Dickinson to Elizabeth Holland about the
recent death of Charles Wadsworth. Lease cites Dickinson claiming that “All other
Surprise is at last monotonous, but the Death of the Loved is all moments—now—Love
has but one Date—‘The first of April’ ‘Today, Yesterday, and Forever’—” (28). The
context of this discussion helps one understand this passage not as a declaration of eternal
lamentation but as an affirmation of bringing a memory to the present time. Dickinson
emphasizes the word now, thus rejecting the temptation of the past and nostalgic memory.
Rather than rejecting the reality of the present moment to incessantly dwell on an
idealized fragment of the past, Dickinson handles Wadsworth’s death like she dealt with
Gilbert’s death in emphasizing the now, the present day. For Dickinson, immortality has
little to do with the future and everything to do with the present. Further, as Dickinson
constructs immortality, she makes it necessarily connected with infinite possibly. When,
in Poem 657, she writes, “I dwell in Possibility—” (1), she might as well say, “I dwell in
Immortality.” In the Dickinsonian lexicon, those two words are virtually synonymous. In
fact, she closes Poem 657 with these three appropriate lines: “For Occupation—This— /
The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise—” (10-12). “Paradise,” of course, refers to the promised afterlife, but the speaker talks as though she dwells in or works with “Paradise” while alive. Of course, in the context that I have outlined, one can read these three lines to mean that by writing poetry, her “Occupation,” the speaker is bringing “Paradise”—immortality—to her poems, which can potentially be explicated by readers for years to come. The memory we have of Dickinson, her poetry is like “Summer” from a rose—it is somehow one step removed from the thing itself and produced by the audience rather than thing the audience attempts to remember. Therefore, a photograph improves memory only deceptively—it fools the mind to linger in one spot of time as though it were a siren trying to lure a sailor to his death. Indeed, much of the nineteenth-century society was deceived by photography, if one looks at the matter from Dickinson’s perspective. After all, in her response to Higginson’s request for a portrait she writes, “I noticed the Quick wore off those things, in a few days” (Letters 175). As Judith Farr explains, “That is, in the scriptural terms whereby the ‘quick and the dead’ were always discriminated, it did not represent her living spirit” (20). However, Dickinson realized that through the written word, her “living spirit” would live and change forever in the minds of everyone who read her poetry. Indeed, as chapter four will show, Walt Whitman’s poetic strategies parallel Dickinson’s in some surprising ways.
There are well over one hundred known photographs of Walt Whitman, all taken over a span of fifty years. There are photographs of Whitman with children, Whitman with friends, Whitman as a young man, Whitman as an old man, and, quite surprisingly, Whitman as a naked man.1 All of these photographs are available to the general public at The Walt Whitman Archive (hereafter WWA), a comprehensive online resource edited by two Whitman scholars, Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price. With only a few mouse clicks, visitors to the site are able to peruse through its various images and leave with a sense of the poet as a real, historical person rather than a name that is attached to a collection of different texts. In his poetry, of course, Whitman delights in technology of all sorts, particularly in works like “Passage to India,” where he “sing[s] the great achievements of the present” (2) and “sing[s] the strong light works of engineers, / Our modern wonders” (3-4). Yet photography seems to be of particular interest to him. As opposed to Dickinson and her aversion to the invention, Whitman embraces the photographic image, going so far as to reproduce a daguerreotype portrait of himself in the first edition of Leaves of Grass (1855). Its placement on the title page suggests a celebration of the new technology and its ability to show readers the author’s image, but its prominence also suggests a stronger kind of relationship between the initial image and the subsequent text. What does this kind of connection and general optimism about

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1 The supposed photographs of Whitman in the nude may, in fact, not be photographs of Whitman at all. Despite the subject’s striking resemblance to the poet, the images were produced by the photographer Thomas Eakins in the early to mid-1880s, and he provided no name for his subject. Ed Folsom, one of the editors of WWA, writes that a “plausible case” can be made that the subject is indeed Whitman (WWA).
photography mean for the rest of this discussion? How can Whitman’s reaction to photography be reconciled with Hawthorne’s and Dickinson’s reactions? As I will demonstrate, Whitman does reject the new cultural paradigm of memory elicited by the invention. At the same time, though, his poetic strategy for universalizing everything in the world is informed by photography. Whitman anticipates Barthes’s arguments in Camera Lucida and embraces photography because of what it ultimately reveals about the relationship between signifiers and signified subjects.

Photography’s Influence on Whitman

Ed Folsom, the co-editor of the WWA, says that Whitman expresses an “unwavering devotion to photography” (94) in his poetry, prose, and letters. According to Folsom, photography was the perfect invention for Whitman:

[n]o culture was more in love with science and technology than America in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the camera was the perfect emblem of the joining of the human senses to chemistry and physics via a machine. […] Whitman’s poetics, of course, were in large part built on his attempt to meld the mechanical and the spiritual[.] (91-92)

Indeed, Whitman demonstrates a philosophical reaction to photography that is far more sophisticated than reactions of most of his peers. Folsom talks about a passage in “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads” where Whitman says, “I look upon ‘Leaves of Grass,’ now finish’d to the end of its opportunities and powers, as my definitive carte visite to the coming generations of the New World, if I may assume to say so” (656).

Folsom defines the carte visite as “the first truly mass-produced photographic product, making self-images available cheaply and conveniently to the masses. So Whitman
conceives of *Leaves* as his photographic calling card” (97). Furthermore, the September 15, 1855 issue of the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, a newspaper that employed Whitman as an editor, features an early review of *Leaves of Grass* that also uses the language of photography. According to Folsom, Whitman himself wrote the review as an attempt at self-promotion (95). Whitman writes,

> Here we have a book which fairly staggers us. It sets all the ordinary rules of criticism at defiance. It is one of the strangest compounds of transcendentalism, bombast, philosophy, folly, wisdom, wit and dullness which it ever entered into the heart of man to conceive. Its author is Walter Whitman, and the book is a reproduction of the author. His name is not on the frontispiece, but his portrait, half length is. The contents of the book form a daguerreotype of his inner being, and the title page bears a representation of its physical tabernacle. (Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* Online!)

In this passage as well as the passage from “A Backward Glance,” Whitman reveals how truly indebted his writing is to photography. Like so many of his sentimentalist peers, he senses inevitable death in everything he sees, and so he wants to create some permanent token of the present moment. In this sense, a poem like “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” might be read as little more than a textual photograph for future generations. Yet in “Song of Myself,” Whitman declares that he is “[n]o sentimentalist” (499), and, indeed, his understanding of photography is not tinged with sentimentalism.

Rather, photography’s influence on the poet sparked his all-encompassing attention to otherwise unremarkable objects throughout *Leaves of Grass*. Folsom cites the fact that “the first photographs stunned people with their clutter—every detail of a scene
insisted on equal emphasis, and nothing was ignored” (97). Graham Clarke talks about how William Henry Fox Talbot, one of photography’s earliest innovators, created both photographs that were formal compositions and photographs of “specific objects [such as] bonnets, books, bottles, [and] a breakfast table” (42). Folsom argues that “Whitman quickly realized the implications of photography for his own art. Whitman believed the camera was teaching us to see beauty where we had not before sought it out, to see significance in the overlooked detail” (94). Folsom’s context is very helpful here, but he does not fully address the idea that photography was more than a source of emotional inspiration for the poet. In fact, Whitman’s poetic strategy is informed by the issues of signification that were introduced by photography. In the _Daily Eagle_ review, Whitman calls his text “a daguerreotype,” which is his attempt to dismantle the distinction between the word and the image. He also refers to his daguerreotype portrait as a “representation” of himself, indicating that he is conscious of the role that photographs play as signifiers. Whitman wants to be realistic and indiscriminating like a photograph, but he also wants to mimic its artificiality. There is a kind of proto-structuralism that colors the bulk of Whitman’s poems; for example, the text of “Song of Myself” is aware of its own status as a text, and it is aware of its words’ status as signifiers, all of which equips the speaker to universalize his disparate subjects.

**Whitman’s Poetry as an (Un)Signifying Photograph**

Throughout his entire _oeuvre_, Whitman employs repetition, especially when he catalogs multifarious subjects. Anaphora is prolific throughout “Song of Myself,” in which the omnipresent Whitman sees a number of random people in America and lists them:
The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches[.] (264-269)

This passage goes beyond the boundaries of the epic catalog, as the repetition of the definite article *The* at the beginning of each line forces the reader to assume that all the subjects share a common denominator. Later in the poem, when Whitman talks about animals, he uses the same technique. He writes that he walks “Where herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square miles far and near; / Where the humming-bird shimmers, where the neck of the long-lived swan is curving and winding, / Where the laughing-gull scoots by the shore, where she laughs her near-human laugh” (761-763). Even later, he talks about what happens after death and how

It cannot fail the young man who died and was buried,
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side,
Nor the little child that peep’d in at the door, and then drew back and was never seen again,
Nor the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with bitterness worse than gall,
Nor him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder[.]
Obviously, the prefatory words *Where* and *Nor* in these lines share the same function as the article *The* in the earlier passage. On the surface, the subjects in these lines are quite different from one another, but Whitman frames them all the same way. The repetition of the words *The*, *Where*, and *Nor* calls attention to the fact that the words of the poem constitute an intermediary between the reader and the imagined subjects. Linguistically, then, the different lines signify multiple ideas but are unified by the fact that their subjects must all be conveyed through words.

This is precisely the kind of dilemma that Barthes points out about photography’s role as a signifier. Much like the wandering eye of the poet in “Song of Myself,” photography is characterized by having “no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences” (6), according to Barthes. Furthermore, because of the photograph’s verisimilitude, Barthes writes that “a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see” (6). In other words, most people simply see the photograph’s subject and not the signifier that is the photograph itself. Yet Barthes realizes that all photographed subjects, through their means of signification, exist on the same conceptual plane: the images are primarily photographs and only secondarily photographs of things. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman argues passionately for the equality of everything in the world, but the signifying words of his poem are what ultimately tie everything together. Through anaphoric repetition, he is able to catalog a host of subjects while simultaneously pointing at the words that signify those subjects and bring them all under the same linguistic umbrella. Folsom says that the first viewers of photographs were stunned by the amount of mundane details in those early images. Yet a viewer like Barthes understands that the amount of detail is the
result of the indiscriminating photographic signifier that is incapable of emphasizing a beloved family member over something as ordinary as a piece of cloth. As Folsom’s argument implies, photography tempers Whitman’s keen understanding of signifiers, which is akin to Barthes’s arguments in *Camera Lucida*.

In this context, it makes sense that “Song of Myself” mimics the signifying qualities of a photograph. In a seemingly counterintuitive move, Whitman wants to call attention to the artificiality of the text: he wants to exaggerate the fact that the poem’s words are not the things in themselves. There is a disconnection between signifiers and their subjects, which Whitman acknowledges. As he considers dead men, women, and children in their graves, Whitman writes, “O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues, / And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing. / I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women” (119-121). Words—that is to say signifiers—fail the poet here, which exposes the entire poem’s artificiality. The omniscient Whitman of the poem sees and perhaps even understands what happens after death, but he is unable to signify the idea through words. Yet he does not hide this inability, which enables him to treat his signifiers as though they have no connection to any one thing, thus granting them a kind of universality. For instance, he refuses to attach the signifying eponymous leaves of grass to any one subject. About grass, he writes,

> I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

> Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,

> A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,

> Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and
remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,

Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same. (101-109)

Before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, of course, hieroglyphics were undecipherable signifiers that were unattached to the particular ideas they represented. If the signifying leaves of grass make up a “uniform hieroglyphic” that cannot be assigned a meaning, then this makes the title Leaves of Grass all the more telling. Like their namesake, the collection of poems makes up a uniform hieroglyphic that is characterized by its nebulousness. Whitman can no more explain the leaves of grass than he can explain what happens after death, since the common and the metaphysical have been conflated through the use of signifiers. About this process, John Irwin adds that it involves the paradoxical use of pictographic ideograms, the paradox involved in singing “the songs of the body.” And it is in light of the Romantic concept of song as the transcending of the mediation of spoken language through the mediation of spoken language that Whitman’s effort to transform the physical into the metaphysical must be understood” (870-871)

Irwin understands that the linguistic feats in Leaves of Grass stand out because Whitman wants them to stand out. He wants his text to have knowledge of its own artificiality,
which serves to aggrandize the metaphorical clutter as though it were stunningly clear
detail in a photograph.

Whitman in the Eternal Present

Of course, if Whitman truly does attempt to model his work after photographs,
one might wonder where and how he fits in with contemporary writers who clearly
express suspicion and skepticism regarding photography. Yet in his Brooklyn Daily
Eagle review, Whitman does call a daguerreotype a mere “representation,” whereas he
claims that his poetry is a real daguerreotype. Much like Dickinson, he wants poetry to be
a more fruitful and interesting substitute for photography: he clearly values the power of
the word over the power of the photographic image. Whitman, like Dickinson, values
tropes and creative reimaginings of subjects because they symbolically keep those
subjects alive in readers’ minds.

Whitman begins “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” with an apostrophe to natural,
inanimate objects: “Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face! / Clouds of the west—
sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face” (1-2). These are the first things
the speaker mentions, and he anthropomorphizes them as though he has no human to
address. In fact, the two lines comprise a single stanza, which simultaneously emphasizes
their importance and reveals a disconnection with the subsequent lines in the first section
of the poem. In those next lines, the speaker addresses people who surround him by
saying, “Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to
me!” (3). The speaker is on a ferry, surrounded by people, but he can only address
humanity as a single, abstract entity. For whatever reason, he cannot address these people
“face to face” (1) like he can address the tide and the clouds. In these lines and, indeed,
the rest of the poem, the speaker’s relationship with other humans is superseded by his connection with the natural world, and he must use the natural world as an intermediary between other people and himself. In the third section of the poem, he addresses future generations and says, “Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt” (22) and “I too many and many a time cross’d the river of old, / Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies” (27-28). Later, he adds, “I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine, / I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it” (57-58). Finally, he again addresses the river and clouds and commands them: “Flow on, river! flow with the flood tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide! / Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg’d waves! / Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the men and women generations after me!” (101-103). The poem’s speaker is unable to engage his fellow passengers on the ferry, and he can only address future generations through the tropes of anthropomorphized natural objects.

Of course, there is a tension between this disconnection and the ostensible theme of universal solidarity. For instance, in a span of eight lines where the speaker discusses the bond he shares with future generations, he uses the word others nine times:

The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others,
Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
Others will see the islands large and small;

Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high,

A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them[.]

This repetition of the word *others* only serves to distance the speaker from both future generations as well as the “[c]rowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes” (3) who surround him on the ferry. In one sense, the speaker is very much like Holgrave from *Seven Gables* because both men have troubled connections with the empirical world. While Holgrave must use photographs as an intermediary between himself and the world, the speaker in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” seems to use objects in nature to approach the rest of humanity.

Without the proper context, this tension in the poem remains unresolved; however, as I have already pointed out, Whitman declares that his poetry is both a daguerreotype and a *carte visite*. Again, he uses anaphoric repetition to conflate ideas in this poem, but he also employs pseudo-sentimentalist strategies in order to make the poem read like a textual photograph. When the speaker talks about objects in the natural world, he uses language that is ripe with maudlin longing. He talks about crossing “the river of old” (27), how he “[s]aw the reflection of the summer sky in the water, / Had [his] eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams” (31-32), and how “Brooklyn of ample hills was [his]” (57). Moreover, by talking to future generations as though he is actually in the future, the speaker is able to use the past tense to color everything in his present moment with a paradoxical sense of nostalgia. The speaker is clearly familiar with the nineteenth
century’s new paradigm of memory, since this poem wants to preserve a permanent record of something that no longer exists. Yet the subjects in the poem do exist both in the speaker’s present and his hypothetical future, so the sentimentalist past tense is a poetic device that ironically treats the natural world as the sentimentalist culture treated human beings. Whitman rejects the culture of sentimentalism, but his speaker uses its language and techniques to wrap nostalgia around a present moment. He wants his readers to think about and cherish the present moment as photography’s idolaters think about and cherish the past moment. By staying in the perpetual present, readers can avoid a stagnant mindset and affirm a Heraclitean view of the physical world: things do change, but they retain their essential qualities. This is why the speaker cannot engage individuals on any personal level—humanity remains constant, but individual people change. A person cannot dwell on an individual and remain in the perpetually present moment. In fact, it is certainly noteworthy that the speaker in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is truly an anonymous speaker and not “Walt Whitman” as is the case in so many other poems in Leaves of Grass.

Whitman’s texts are deceptively simple. His speakers declare things with authority and color their declarations with realism. Readers are tempted to take these declarations as undeniable aphorisms, but, like Hawthorne, Whitman is not interested a very minute fidelity. In this vein, perhaps it is worth reconsidering the number of Whitman photographs on the WWA. If the theme of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” revolves around the perpetually present moment, then Whitman’s many portraits surely reveal a man who was unsatisfied with a static image of a single moment from the past.
Eduardo Cadava writes that the “image already announces our absence. We need only know that we are mortal—the photograph tells us we will die, one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, as images. It announces the death of the photographed” (8). He goes on to say that “[p]hotography is a mode of bereavement. It speaks to us of mortification” (11). Like Barthes, Cadava necessarily associates photography with death and stasis. Cadava is an acolyte of Walter Benjamin, who wrote the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In that essay, Benjamin says that “[i]t is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture” (1173). Yet Benjamin warns that photography’s verisimilitude is indeed deceiving. He writes that “in photography, process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens, which is adjustable and chooses its angle at will” (1169). Without so many words, Benjamin seems to acknowledge that photography generated a new paradigm of memory and that the new paradigm had the potential to deceive the masses.

Furthermore, the “aura” that Benjamin famously talks about in the essay can be understood as that which cannot be signified. He uses the term to talk about pieces of art and, in particular, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1169), but one could apply Benjamin’s basic idea about an “aura” to any signified subject. In fact, one could go so far as to say that what “withers in the age of mechanical reproduction” is the subject itself. If I were going to expand on the issues in this paper, I would start with
Benjamin’s essay and think about how his notion of the “aura” is established and reestablished as individual photographs take on different meanings from different audiences. After all’s Benjamin’s ideas about mechanical progress complicate the role of the audience. In other points, at what point does the audience configure the mechanical representation of something as the aesthetic object itself? This issue and other issues are only made more thorny with newer kinds of technology.

Benjamin realizes that once the photography boom started, it never slowed its pace. Improvements were developed with every passing decade, and by the end of the nineteenth century, techniques were in place for color photography and film negatives that allow multiple prints of a single shot. In fact, as the photography industry grew, cameras were geared towards amateur photographers who could begin to take their own photographs and thus have some role in the creative process. All of these advancements caused the sentimentalist reception of photography to quell before the beginning of the twentieth century (Stannard 104). To the twenty-first-century gaze, postmortem photography seems somehow grotesque. While Jay Ruby argues that the postmortem genre is still alive and well, as it were, it is no longer the prolific and public entity it once was. Artists as well as writers like Hawthorne, Dickinson, and Whitman successfully challenged the public to reject stagnant mindsets and embrace a creativity that is never satisfied with one moment or one memory.

Daguerreotypes of all sorts are now collected by hobbyists who have no personal connection with these photographs’ subjects. The Dickinson daguerreotype found by Philip Gura on eBay was just one such long-forgotten photograph for sale on the auction site. For every old photograph in the hands a collector, there is an unknown story about
how that once-treasured image fell out of familial possession and into the public
marketplace. Many, if not most, of the images collected by hobbyists will never have a
name attached to them: no Hepzibah Pyncheon is there to idolize and fetishize these
photographs as physical memories of specific people. Instead, in a development that
would surely please Whitman, these old photographs have become something like
undecipherable hieroglyphics. The image is there, but the referent is ultimately beyond
the gaze of the viewer. A hundred and fifty years later, the same images that once
promoted mental stagnation now reveal themselves as the free signifiers they are: they
become Romantic in the sense that Hawthorne uses the word Romance; they become
aesthetic objects with their own auras. For the hobbyist, these nameless images lose their
specific identities and come to represent a bygone culture, an entire century, or even
humanity itself.


Root, Marcus Aurelius. The Camera and the Pencil; or the Heliographic Art, Its Theory and Practice in All Its Various Branches; e.g.—Daguerreotypy, Photography, &c. 1864. Pawlet, VT: Helios, 1971.


VITA

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