Looking Hard At Things: The Chronotope of the Photograph

Andrew Miller (2008)

You were the hero inherent in Eros—
“Builder of cities” all right
but saboteur as well—wherefore you despised

such indispensable prey
as readers who failed, despite your example,
to pluck themselves a garden

from the garbage of the past. If we look hard
at things they seem to look back;
out of a writhing great coat you stare at us

with that splendid impatience
which is the deepest French virtue, “taken”
by your lifelong friend between

hyperboles— at one extreme lilac gloves
and black curls to your collar,
at the other Jeanne’s insulted beauty and

bald paralysis— but here
implacable holding fast to a passion
for exactitude. Today

you published ten poems you wanted to call
Lesbiennes until advised
by Hypopolite Babou to name them Fleurs du Mal...

Why not? you are so busy
with your current Poe translations and puzzled
by favors to be curried

from George Sand, “poor dear dreadful little lady
always having a crow to pick
with Jean- Jacques!” You look at things, though, look until

You don’t know if they are you
or you they: it is the moment when what was
ruin becomes a model,

Paris a synonym for both. Arbiter
of ennui, you rummage on:
Mexican idols, a gilded Buddha, rag dolls
might as well be our true God, 
offensive concretion of the temporal 
process. We cannot erect 
the New Jerusalem until we destroy 
Babylon; what do we use 
in the building, you asked, but the same damned stones?

“Charles Baudelaire”— by Richard Howard¹

Richard Howard’s poem “Charles Baudelaire” is an ekphrasis. Describing the daguerreotype portrait of Charles Baudelaire, a portrait taken by Baudelaire “life long friend,” Nadar, Howard engages in the trope of ekphrasis in how he would speak out (the Greek meaning of the term ekphrasis) for the image and thus give it shape in language. This is the work of ekphrasis, or descriptio, as Quintilian called it.² The poet or orator employs a vivid description in order to produce before the mind’s eye a mental image of a static object, usually a work of visual art. Since the 1950's, literary criticism has taken renewed interest in ekphrasis. The trope has been the subject of a number of studies and theoretical treaties. The most recent and comprehensive of which is James Heffernan’s Museum of Words, in which Heffernan strives to place ekphrasis into a literary history, tracing its origins from the Iliad to John Ashberry’s “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” Through the course of his book, Heffernan defines ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of a visual representation,” and he describes it as entailing a narrative—a story of ekphrasis. “Ekphrasis,” says Heffernan, “is dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication.”³ Heffernan’s story recalls Lessing’s distinction between the media of image and the word, in how it converts the static image of art (a medium that Lessing described as

¹ Howard, Richard, Misgivings, Atheneum, New York, 1979. p. 40
placing object “side by side”) into the sequence of language (a medium that Lessing
described as placing objects one after another). The epicenter of this conversion is within the
image itself. It is a story of what the image implies but cannot say.

If we were to examine Howard’s “Charles Baudelaire” as an example of this ekphrastic story,
we might regard the “splendid impatience” Baudelaire expresses in his portrait, the fact that
he has just published *Fleurs du Mal* and his befuddlement over how to “curry favors from
George Sand” as the pregnant moments of this story. From Nadar’s image, Howard finds an
embryo (or embryos) of narrative. However, while there are narrative motions in the poem
(the story of George Sand, Hyppolite Babou’s naming of *Fleurs du Mal*, the movement of
Baudelaire’s life between the hyperboles of his dandyish youth and his syphilitic paralysis),
Howard’s ekphrasis of Nadar’s portrait does not describe a continuous flow of events within
the image, nor does Howard place the image of the French poet into succeeding parts of
action. The impatient leer of Baudelaire and the gossipy details of his life at the time Nadar
took the portrait–these do not figure in a plot inside the frame. Instead, a conversation is
taking place. And, even while this conversation seems at times one-sided, what we overhear
are Howard’s words *reaching into* the image and, quite possibly even, Baudelaire’s words
reaching *out of* it.

The effect of this reaching in and out of the photograph makes Howard’s poem a fantastic
(albeit somewhat chatty) meeting between the living poet and the dead one. Like Odysseus
before the shade of Tereus in the Odyssey or like King Saul before the ghost of prophet
Samuel in 1 Samuel 28, Howard’s speaker would seem to be raising a ghost.
Such necromancy does not fit well into Heffernan’s story of ekphrasis. Even while Howard’s poem does deliver “embryonically narrative impulses” within Nadar’s portrait, it does not place these into one after another. Rather, fixed and stationary in the moment of the image, Baudelaire remains posing with his “splendid impatience,” himself a perturbed gazer waiting perhaps to get in a word.

Of course, it can be argued that one reason why Howard’s poem does not fit into Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis is because Nadar’s photograph is a portrait—an image not well suited for an action-packed plot. In this respect, Howard’s poem may be said to perform what John Hollander has termed as the ekphrastic glossing of the portrait’s “sacrament.”\(^4\) Using details from the image, the poetic speaker summarizes the quintessence of the sitter. And, indeed, Howard would seem to be doing just such a gloss. Nadar’s portrait provides him with a number of details that allow him to comment upon Baudelaire’s character. However, as Hollander also states, such a gloss amounts to praising the sitter by way of praising the maker of the image. “A fictional story,” says Hollander, “about an occasion on which trope l’oeil actually fools a viewer is one thing. Another matter is that of a poem that praises the subject and painter together by showing how the artist gets to the character or essence of the subject by means of detail—how the psychological or moral notion is revealed “in” a bit of facial feature, co-existing perhaps with the glossing of emblematic details surrounding the face.”\(^5\)

Essentially, the gloss of the sacrament begins with a praising of the mimesis of the maker. The true hero here is the artist himself. But, in his poem, Howard does not praise Nadar for his details. He does not celebrate the photographer for his power to isolate his sitter’s morality or psychology. Rather, Howard’s reference to Nadar is little more than a contextual


\(^5\) Ibid.
aside. In short, Howard does not regard Nadar’s photograph as a photograph. The image is the man himself.

In our post-Freudian era, regarding an image as alive prompts a psychological reading. Such a reading invariably comes to describe the interaction between the gazer and the photograph as a matter of Scoptophilia, or, as Freud described it in his work on voyeurism, “the pleasure of looking.” This pleasure amounts to an exchange between the viewer and the viewed. It is literally the desire to see and be seen, a desire which Freud and later Otto Fenichel will assign a homoerotic impulse on the part of the psychological subject. The subject’s desire to see, observed Fenichel, amounts to a desire to eat or consume the image into the body, and this consumption of the image finally entails an autoerotic satisfaction and libidinal integration of the image. In Howard’s poem, there is room for such a reading, of course. “You look at things, though, look until // You don’t know if they are you / or you they” says Howard’s speaker, in a moment that begins to sound like the confession of a fetishist in how the speaker perceives of a breakdown between himself and the object of the photograph. Such a description denotes the pathology of displacement and how this displacement empowers the desire to see and be seen.

However, while there is room for such a reading of the poem, such readings are reductive in how they seek to fix our attention on the psychology of a fictional character. Howard’s poem does not ring of confessionalism nor does it relate a pathological event. Rather, Howard’s “Charles Baudelaire” would seem to describe the common occurrence of looking at a photograph, and recognizing in that indexical trace a flickering presence. “In photography....,” wrote Walter Benjamin, “one encounters something strange and new: in the fishwife from Newhaven who looks at the ground with such relaxed and seductive shame something
remains that does not testify merely to the art of the photographer Hill, something that is not to be silenced, something demanding the name of the person who had lived then, who even now is still real and will never entirely perish into art.”

No stranger to Freudian theories, Benjamin’s comment on photography from his essay, “A Brief History of Photography,” does not call his experience of Octavious Hill’s photograph of the fishwife a matter of fetishism. Rather, for Benjamin experiencing the down-case head, the relaxed-seductive shame of the fishwife amounts to an encounter between two “real” individuals, the fishwife and himself. Like Howard’s interaction with Baudelaire, Benjamin meets a presence that “will not entirely perish into art,” but that necessitates a response–an answer to the demand for a name. The matter places both Howard and Benjamin into the same school of thought as Roland Barthes and the realist critics of photography. “The realists, of whom I am one,” wrote Barthes, “and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code–even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it–the realists do not take the photograph for a “copy” of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art.”

If a photograph is a magical image, an emanation of the past cast into the present, what does that say about its ekphrasis? How does this ekphrasis corresponds with definitions such as Heffernan and Hollander’s? Obviously, if a photograph is not a copy of the world, it is not an object of mimesis, not truly a representation, but a ghost. The ghostly quality is what Jacques Derrida describes in his interview in the interview he gives in Ken McCullen’s Ghost Dance. Claiming to be a ghost himself, Derrida identifies the phantasmal aspects of film as the principal agents of the photographic media. “Contrary to what we might believe,” Derrida said, “the experience of ghosts is not tied to a bygone historical period, like the landscape of Scottish manors, etc., but ...is accentuated, accelerated by modern technologies like film,

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television, the telephone. These technologies inhabit, as it were, a phantom structure...When the very first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms.”

Derrida’s realm of phantoms may be what confounds Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis in terms of the photograph, and may also explain why, through the course of his literary history, Heffernan does not make one reference to the ekphrasis of camera work.

“As a verbal representation of a visual representation,” Heffernan’s version of ekphrasis calls attention to the mimetic in both the word and the image, and celebrates these mimeses in what Heffernan terms “representational friction.” Heffernan takes his principal example of this friction from the 18th Book of the *Iliad* in which Homer describes the Shield of Achilles. On the shield, a farmer is ploughing a field with a pair of oxen. “Describing the ploughman depicted on the shield,” observes Heffernan, Homer writes (in Lattimore’s translation), ‘The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed / though it was gold’ (18.548-49 emphasis Heffernan’s). By explicitly noting the difference between the medium of visual representation (gold) and its referent (earth),” Heffernan continues, “Homer implicitly draws our attention to the friction between the fixed forms of visual art and the narrative thrust of his words.”

In other words, ekphrastic story, according to Heffernan, is self conscious. It tells a tale of the image and it calls attention to the mimesis at work both in the image and the tale itself.

Howard’s poem does not do this. Rather, it does everything but this, for in seeking to meet with Baudelaire (the man), Howard’s speaker comes to disregard the photograph altogether.

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9 Heffernan, James, *Museum of Words*, p. 4
The image vanishes and the spirit or ghost of the French poet arrives. Thus, I would conclude that Howard’s ekphrasis differs from Heffernan’s definition in two ways. First, there would seem nothing in the photograph to provide the poet with frictional awareness. The subject of the photograph is real. Second, because of this lack of representational friction, the story that occurs is one between the viewer and the subject of the image. It is an encounter.

Of course, the story of this encounter does not account for all ekphrases of photographs, and yet, in 19th, 20th and 21st century poetry, the frequency of this story is enough to suggest that the photograph has provided modern poets with – what, in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 10 Ernest Robert Curtis might have termed – “a topic,” a rhetorical device or cliché (if you will) that allows the poet to *eulogiac address*. This address access allows a poet such as Howard to *speak the dead Baudelaire back to life*.

However, while I call this eulogiac address “a rhetorical trope,” I would also preface this by specifying that I do not use the word “rhetoric” in the pejorative sense. To suggest that Howard’s poem or poem like it are simply engaging in rhetoric would be more reductive reading than any psychological one. Rather, I would suggest that Howard’s eulogiac address returns us to the origins of such addresses. A Curtis as observed, this is an origin that can be found in the ancient Greek Hero cult in which the body of the hero was celebrated ekphrastically and was considered to have a powerful influence on the presence of its worshiper. In short, eulogy and ekphrasis were not matters of empty talk, but matters of worship. 11 Their words called for the spirit of a fallen demigod. Certainly, Howard’s description of how Baudelaire “rummages” on among the “Mexican idols, a gilded Buddha, rag dolls” that “might as well be our true Gods” suggests as much. Baudelaire’s

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“rummaging” is done in the present tense, and so his image stands beside the rest of the world’s junk as a resonating emanation of what the art historian Hans Belting would term “dynamis” or supernatural presence within the acheiropoietic relicts of Byzantium and the Roman Catholic Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{12} Howard’s poem may well be thought of as a modernized act of devotion, then,–one in which the means of bowing down to his poetic ancestor amounts to gossiping with him about George Sand’s scrap with Jean Jacques.

The matter suggests that what this trope entails is what Mikhail Bakhtin called a “Chronotope.” In his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope of the Novel,” Bakhtin defines the chronotope as a site within a narrative where time and space “thicken” and merge assuming each the qualities of the other.\textsuperscript{13} In the essay, Bakhtin goes to great lengths categorizing these various chronotopes. Some of these are “the chronotope of the road,” “the chronotope of the drawing room or salon” “the chronotope of the idyll”, etc. To this list, I would add the chronotope of the photograph, as a narrative site in which not one time and space are merged, but two times and spaces do. In such a chronotope, the magical emanation of the photograph comes into confluence with the presence of the poetic speaker. His time thickens with the time of the image.

We see this “thickening” occur in Howard’s poem in that moment when the “you” and the other are blurred– a “moment when what was / ruin becomes a model, / Paris a synonym for both.” After the hard looking on the part of both poets, Paris becomes a sublime linguistic space, achronotopic location in which man and image are on equal terms, and share perhaps each other’s words. Who speaks the lines about George Sand (line written inside of


quotations)? Who quips “Why not?” with such a haste it seems a sharp retort by Baudelaire himself? Such lines suggest that the thickening of space may be as well as thickening of speech and that in such lines Howard’s speaker engages in the work of a spiritual medium, sharing his words with a erupting un-dead presence that will not entirely perish into art.