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An unsolved mystery

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A Scene in a Library

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Figure 1. William Henry Fox Talbot, *A Scene in a Library*. Plate VIII from *The Pencil of Nature*, 1844, salt paper print from a calotype negative. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.

This essay concerns one photograph: the eighth plate in *The Pencil of Nature*, called *A Scene in a Library*, which originally appeared in the second installment of Talbot's inaugural book on photography (figure 1). I have already written extensively about *A Scene in a Library* — and given its title to a book on illustrated books.¹ But it is a photograph that, together with the text that accompanies it, has never ceased to intrigue me. I continue to wonder what Talbot's intentions were when he chose this photograph for his book. Why did he choose it over similar photographs that he had made and could possibly just as well have used? Why did he title it the way he did — *A Scene in a Library* — when we know that it was not actually taken in his library? Why and when did it

occur to him to write the piece of text that accompanies the plate — which speaks of experimentation with the invisible end of the light spectrum? And what did he have in mind when he put the plate, the caption and the accompanying text together? For *A Scene in a Library* is remarkable — and exceptional — for the unaccountable way in which it puts text together with image. Almost all the other plates have text that bears on them fairly straightforwardly, either explaining how and where they were made or indicating possible uses for the photograph in question. Not so *A Scene in a Library*, which functions, rather, as a kind of *clef de roman*, and which has, as I hope to show, an emblematic status in *The Pencil of Nature* precisely because it is an exception.

In order to explore the possible answers to the questions raised above, I will treat the photograph as something of a mystery — or a clue to a mystery — or, in Talbot's own words at the end of the text next to *A Scene in a Library*, as a 'dénouement' to a 'romance'. My evidence will not be strictly empirical nor will it be archival, but rather imaginative and literary — for speculation and imagination are what Talbot himself called for, and the gesture to 'a modern novel or romance' that Talbot himself made points to a literary exegesis of the photograph, the text, the conjunction of the two and the book in which they are found. This will be an exercise in fantasy, therefore, a historical 'romance' or fiction rather than an attempt at a factual history.

It is risky, these days, to speak about intentions.² And it may seem even riskier to speak about intentions without recourse to the kinds of documents that are usually produced to support claims about intentions — letters or journals, for example, dates and times, physical possibility or impossibility, the reconstruction of when and where Talbot could have taken the photograph and then had it printed, an 'original' hand-inscribed manuscript for the text replete with markings, crossing-out and marginal notes. Others have had recourse to that kind of material. I have not, even where I know it exists.³ But in my view the search after intentions can only be speculative; it can only be literary — an *explication de texte*; it can only speak to the intensive evidence of text and photograph, ruling conclusions in and out according to what has been included and what has been excluded. And it can only imagine from the slimness of the evidence at hand — somewhat as, rather later on, Sherlock Holmes imagined reams from the bits and pieces available to him, deducing what was not immediately visible from the very little that was. This is precisely what Talbot urged, when, at the end of the text accompanying *A Scene in a Library*, he spoke of 'the testimony of the imprinted paper'. Thus I will proceed, a little perversely, to look for Talbot's intentions there, in that 'testimony', that 'imprinted paper'.

Collections of Things

I begin with what *A Scene in a Library* represents, a collection of books, Talbot's own. And it is a collection of books that he asks us to think of, not only as a library but as *in* a library. He does not say that it is in *his* library — but one is certainly led to infer that it is from the larger context of the ensemble of *The Pencil of Nature*. He also does not say that it is *A Scene in a Courtyard* — which would make no sense at all as a title for the photograph. Thus he does not point us to — in fact, he points us away from — the actual circumstances of the photograph's making. In any case, by calling the scene a 'library' he points to what we see in the photograph: two shelves of books which together make a collection organized along the lines of some sort of logic, we know

not what, brought together for some sort of purpose. And by calling it 'A Scene in a Library', he suggests that this is just a part of a library, that the library continues beyond the frame of the photograph, outside the limits of its visibility, that the rest of it is to be imagined, such as the room that houses the library and us as readers within it, and the experiment that Talbot describes as taking place there some time in the future. And like the scene of a crime, 'a scene in a library' suggests that something has occurred, or will occur in that chamber. Certainly, reading is something that occurs there, along with the imagining that reading entails in the dark room of the mind.

Let us now rule some possibilities in and some others out. To do that we need to look outside the photograph and its immediate context of *The Pencil of Nature* to other early photographs of collections of things, such as the famous one by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre of a collection of fossil shells. The opening text of *The Pencil of Nature* — the 'Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art' — recounts something of Talbot's rivalry with Daguerre, and, shortly after the anticlimax of that narrative, in which we are told that Daguerre won the race, the second plate in the book, called a *View of the Boulevards at Paris*, seems to enter into direct competition with what is perhaps Daguerre's most famous photograph, of the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. And so perhaps there were other daguerreotypes that Talbot had in mind as he worked on assembling *The Pencil of Nature*. Regardless of whether that is true, however, I am interested in the daguerreotype of the fossil shells as an analogous image of a collection.⁴

Each photograph, the daguerreotype and the Talbotype, suggests something related but distinct about how each 'inventor' of photography thought about his invention in relation to the collection. And each photograph makes related but somewhat different claims for itself. The Talbotype shows us a library, the daguerreotype a natural history collection. The Talbotype shows us two shelves of works-on-paper, reproduced and gathered in different thicknesses and bindings to form books such as the one that was then being issued in parts and that later would be gathered into the bound volume of *The Pencil of Nature*. The daguerreotype, by contrast, presents three shelves of fossilized remains of Nature, each a one-of-a-kind member of a species hardened and caught in amber, like the daguerreotype itself. So, what we might say is that each, the Talbotype and the daguerreotype, represents itself through its collection. Like *A Scene in a Library*, the *Arrangement of Fossil Shells* suggests that it is but part of a larger collection. But unlike *A Scene in a Library*, it suggests that what we see is what we get, that we are looking at the ordering and framing of the visible world — comparing the shape of one shell with another, for example — rather than the compilation of invisible, hidden knowledge that a library is. By contrast, we are led to imagine the contents of *A Scene in a Library*, but we cannot quite see them — most of the labels and inscriptions on the book bindings are illegible, some we

can just barely make out, and even those that we can read lead us to want to take the books down from the shelves, open them up, and read what is inside them, just as we do in a library.

Talbot was of course very much interested in natural history, in its specimens and its collections, though curiously, considering his and John Herschel's experimentation with botanical specimens, *The Pencil of Nature* includes only one such image, *A Leaf of a Plant*. This is given as a specimen of the art of making positives from negatives, of the Talbotype's general capacity for reproduction, rather than specifically of botanical singularity or variety.⁵ But we know from the narrative of *The Pencil of Nature* as well as from Talbot's 'photogenic drawings' of plants and his photomicrographs of 'diatoms' and butterfly wings and the like that Talbot was much more interested in natural history than Daguerre was.

An image that might seem an even better emblem of Daguerre's view of his art than the *Collection of Fossil Shells* is the equally well-known daguerreotype of a quite different collection: not a Lamarckian cabinet, but a *Still Life with Casts*, representing a corner of an artist's studio, replete with examples of other forms of art and reproduction that the daguerreotype rivalled, ranging from the two- to the three-dimensional, from low- to high-relief, from print to plaster cast.⁶ That is a collection as much as the *Arrangement of Fossil Shells*, and, like the fossil shells, its objects represent the calcified products of the mould, this time, the human arts of the press, the stamp, and the cast rather than Nature's setting itself in stone. But this collection is also an artist's still-life, and makes its claims

for the daguerreotype's status as an imprint through an artful arrangement that is discursively different from the inventorial shelves of the natural history collection or the library.⁷

If *The Pencil of Nature* is short on natural history specimens, it is long on images of man-made things — beginning with its third and fourth plates, which line up rows of 'articles' of china (figure 2) and glass, respectively, on shelves that suggest indoor display cabinets, with accompanying text that refers us to the photograph's ability to inventory a collection of possessions:

From the specimen here given it is sufficiently manifest, that the whole cabinet of a Virtuoso and collector of old China might be depicted on paper in little more time than it would take him to make a written inventory describing it in the usual way. ... And should a thief afterwards purloin the treasures — if the mute testimony of the picture were to be produced against him in court — it would certainly be evidence of a novel kind. ...

With its two neat shelves, and its relative lack of interest in artful arrangement, *A Scene in a Library* is surely attached to the category of the inventorial illustration, except that it serves somewhat inadequately its inventorial function as a result of all that is invisible in it. It may be that it is, like the *Articles of China*, 'evidence of a novel kind', but 'should a thief afterwards purloin [its] treasures', it is doubtful that this particular piece of 'mute testimony' would stand up in court, convict the criminal or get the bibliophile his books back.⁸

So, while novel forms of evidence were on Talbot's mind in the case of *A Scene in a Library*, by a process of



Figure 2. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Articles of China*, Plate III from *The Pencil of Nature*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, 1843-44. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.

elimination we may deduce that the function of inventory is not what it was meant primarily to serve or even signal. (Indeed, signalling that function is all that the *Articles of China* itself does.) Other plates in *The Pencil of Nature*, such as the *Bust of Patrocles*, serve that inventorial function rather better, even if that is not the function to which Talbot speaks in his text. Together with the second view of the same plaster cast of the same bust that arrives later in *The Pencil of Nature*, this plate describes its single object with enough detail to establish its singularity if it were to be stolen or go missing. The same is true also of some photographs that were not included in *The Pencil of Nature*. See, for example, the *Cherub and Urn*, a photograph that itemizes two objects rather than one, close-up and individuated, and outside the context of the collection to which they belong — a context that confuses rather than contributing to the evidence the individual objects provide.

Talbot made other pictures of collections of things belonging to him or his family that seem to hover somewhere between the inventorial and the artistic photograph, fulfilling neither discursive function fully. Neither *Sunlit Objects on a Window Ledge* (figure 3) nor the *Elegantly Set Table* (figure 4) made it into *The Pencil of Nature*, but they suggest something of what *A Scene in a Library* brackets out of its visible world: namely, the evocation of scene, mysterious interiority and the social space that objects inhabit. *Sunlit Objects on a Window Ledge* is a lovely, moody photograph containing some 'glass articles' — several

of them feminine-seeming and one perhaps a decanter that appears in the *Articles of Glass* in *The Pencil of Nature* — a snuffed-out candle, perhaps one of the same 'articles of china' from the photograph of that title, and a jewellery box with an artfully strung string of pearls. These items have a kind of drama in the unanswered questions they pose regarding their relation to one another and their reasons for being there. Moreover, the light and shadow that fall on them through the open window seem as much at issue, as much a part of the photograph's air of suspense, as the objects are in their incomplete visibility. It is not surprising that *Sunlit Objects on a Window Ledge* was not included in *The Pencil of Nature*, not only because of its dimness and limited visibility and its lesser print quality, but also because the question of its discursive function seems destined to remain open. It is ultimately unattached to the mission of the book, which was to show how the photograph can be useful.

As for the *Elegantly Set Table*, this picture displays many of the same objects found in the *Articles of China*, but set now in social relation to each other, evoking their use by their absent owners, in the context of a carefully laid out silver tea service, which can be at least partially inventoried from the photograph. However, the *Elegantly Set Table* also evokes what Roland Barthes calls the 'first photograph' — the *Set Table* that he attributes to Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. More importantly, it constitutes another open-ended document instinctively associating the photograph with personal space and the possessions

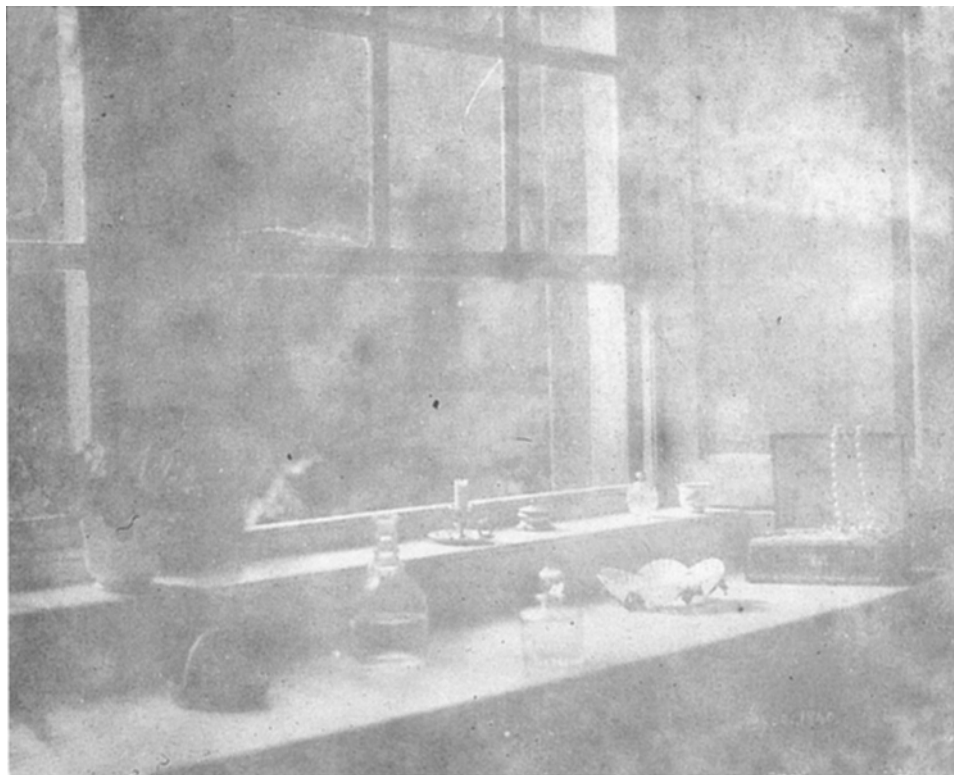


Figure 3. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Sunlit Objects on a Window Ledge*, salt paper print from a photogenic drawing negative, 30 May 1840. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.



Figure 4. William Henry Fox Talbot, *An Elegantly Set Table*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, 1841–42. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.

in it.⁹ So, because its social connotations outweigh its object-denotations, this too would not have served the use-illustrating purposes of *The Pencil of Nature*.¹⁰

What the *Elegantly Set Table* and the *Sunlit Objects* both do, however, is stray close to what one might assume to be the artistic function of a photograph like the last plate in *The Pencil of Nature*, the *Fruit Piece*. The text accompanying this image speaks directly to the arbitrariness of Talbot's choices in selecting images for the book, as well as to the photograph's fragility and its vulnerability — somewhat like the experiment — to the vagaries of time and happenstance.¹¹ But the *Fruit Piece* itself sets out to ape the conventions of the painted still-life, and thus proposes, perhaps somewhat hesitantly, another possible function and discursive space for the photograph — that of art.¹² It does so by arranging its objects with an artful air of casualness — piling and overlapping them in a form of composed disarray that signals the photograph's departure from the neatness, separation, one-by-one itemization and side-by-side display of the inventorial image.

There were other more inventorial photographs that Talbot left out of *The Pencil of Nature*. These are, however, very like *A Scene in a Library* both in their shelved listing and accounting of objects and in — what seems like a contrary characteristic — their fantasy-function. One such photograph is that of his mother's bonnets, which, following her suggestion, Talbot dubbed *The Milliner's Window* (figure 5), thereby using a title once more to shift attention away from how and where the photograph was taken to an imagining of what the image might represent. There are hints in *The Pencil of Nature* of something of what the *Milliner's Window* suggests — namely, a kind of feminine fancy. The text accompanying *A Scene in a Library*, for example, suggests some sort of meeting between the mostly masculine world of scientific experimentation and

the feminine domain of the 'romance'. In this regard, it is worth remarking the importance of the women in Talbot's household, particularly his mother, in the advancement of his scientific interests. One could also speculate that in *The Pencil of Nature* Talbot set out at once to fulfil his mother's ambitions for him, occasionally to disobey her advice, and in general to displace her role in the promotion of his 'invention'. *A Scene in a Library* is a good example of that, for its inclusion in *The Pencil of Nature* was not encouraged by Lady Elisabeth. Moreover, it shifts attention away from the feminine associations and scenic qualities of library photographs such as that depicting his sister Horatia's harp next to the library's real shelves (figure 6), which directly implies the intersection between feminine accomplishments and the masculine retreat of the library. Instead, it limits itself to a strict focus on the contents of the library and the gentlemanly learning that they index.¹³ In this regard, it is telling that the most feminine and fanciful photographs that Talbot made — the *Sunlit Objects on a Window Ledge*, the picture of Lady Elisabeth reclining in the pose of Canova's Pauline Borghese, for example — were excluded from *The Pencil of Nature*'s gentleman-scientist's purview, leaving the hint of romance to a bit of lace here and a verbal suggestion there, so that they become traces to follow, a trail of fragments to piece together, clues to pursue.¹⁴

Books in Disarray

This brings me to one last photograph that Talbot eliminated, an alternative view of shelved books 'in disarray' (figure 7). Though I like the simplicity of *A Scene in a Library* — perhaps Talbot did too — *Books in Disarray* is compositionally the more interesting image. Using some of the same books found in *A Scene in a Library*, Talbot expanded his 'library' to include four

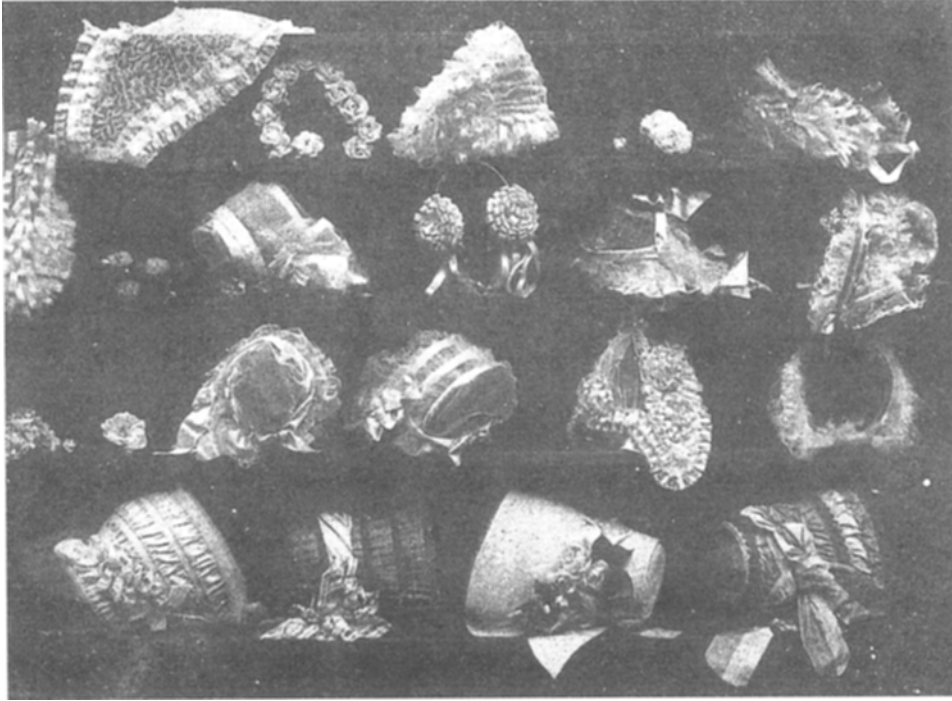


Figure 5. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Milliner's Window*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, 1843–44. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.



Figure 6. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Horatia's Harp*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, 6 October 1840. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.



Figure 7. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Books in Disarray*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, c. 1843. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.

rather than two shelves. He combined the one-thing-after-another look of the inventory with the disarray of the still-life composition, elaborating on the few gaps and tilted books of *A Scene in a Library* so that the latter's bookend diagonals, expressing both a pragmatic support function and the closing off and bracketing of the photograph's shelved space, are extended and amplified into a series of contrasts: order and disorder; upright and falling over; vertical, diagonal, and horizontal; matte and glossy; cardboard and leather, embossed and unembossed spines; book ends and book sides; bindings flush with shelf edges and book corners projecting off them like knife handles and lemon curls in Dutch still-lives; and, finally, single books and sets. Intervening in the ordered world of the library, collection-catalogue and inventory, then, is the fanciful principle of artistic composition.

Why did Talbot not choose this more complex photograph? Because, I imagine, just as the contextual atmosphere of pictures like the *Sunlit Objects* confuses the function of inventory, so the visual complexity of the more elaborate *Books in Disarray* detracts from the reader's concentration — on the fact that these are books, on the fancy that together they make a library into whose gaps *The Pencil of Nature* itself could be inserted, and on the fantasy of reading those books in that library. In short, looking inhibits reading in the photograph of *Books in Disarray*, whereas, in *A Scene in a Library*, looking leads to reading — the optical scanning of its visual contents causes that imperceptible cognitive switch to the linguistic

scrutiny of spines to see which are legible and what they index and then to the imagining of what lies between the covers, which we mostly cannot see, of the books whose bindings we can see.

In sum, I would argue that Talbot chose *A Scene in a Library* rather than all the other photographs that were available to him, because he wanted to emphasize the bookishness of the book in which he placed it: the fact that the *The Pencil of Nature* is itself a book; the fact of its entering into and altering the space of the library; the fact of Talbot's own attachment to books; the fact that *The Pencil of Nature* was a 'novel' kind of book, and so on; not to mention the fact that the Talbotype, unlike the daguerreotype, was a type of photograph fit to be entered into books — into a book like *The Pencil of Nature* itself. In short, *A Scene in a Library* — a photograph of books — emblemizes what *The Pencil of Nature* is — a book with photographs in it. In the words of nineteenth-century reviewers, it is an 'experiment of photographically illustrated books' with 'book pictures executed by nature herself'.¹⁵

There are many other clues to the bookishness of his book being on Talbot's mind. The status of *The Pencil of Nature* as a book and the photograph's occupation of the printed page are clearly signalled, for instance, in the special facsimile photograph that follows on the heels of *A Scene in a Library*. That 'fac-simile' is only one of a series of copy photographs, but it is special in its featuring of a 'printed page', as opposed to the facsimiles of plaster casts, lithographs or engravings after original drawings

that are found elsewhere in *The Pencil of Nature*: an *Old Printed Page*, reproduced by a new process which vies with a new printed page; a photograph of a page which is also a photograph next to a page.

Talbot himself remarks on the 'antiquarian' texts that were to be found in the library at Lacock Abbey — not only the 'black-letter volume in the Author's library, containing the statutes of Richard the Second, written in Norman French', from which the *Fac-simile of an Old Printed Page* was taken, but also the 'records to posterity' telling us of the thirteenth-century life and times of the Countess of Salisbury, the founder of Lacock Abbey, which Talbot tells us were destroyed by a fire in the cloisters library (plate XVI); an 1835 history of Lacock Abbey by the 'poet Bowles' which he also mentions and which was presumably included in the library at Lacock Abbey; 'an original copy of the Magna Carta' which he tells us was preserved in the tower of Lacock Abbey (plate XIX), and from which, he also tells us, Blackstone's modern printed version of the Great Charter was made; and perhaps also accounts of family legends, such as the one telling of the sixteenth-century Lacock heiress Olive Sherington jumping from that same tower into the arms of her lover John Talbot; and that of the spectre of the nun with the bleeding finger 'who long haunted the precincts of the abbey'. Talbot says these stories are 'unwritten tradition', but of course with *The Pencil of Nature* they are now written down and part of a printed document.¹⁶ They also introduce another kind of narrative, albeit fragmentary, into the larger plot of *The Pencil of Nature*, namely the ghost story and gothic tale, as much nineteenth-century forms as the scientific journal, and, soon, the detective novel and the science fiction fantasy. Thus, several times over in the text of *The Pencil of Nature*, Talbot stresses the confrontation between old and new documents, old and new methods of record-keeping, and old and new printed pages, as well as the importance of the relationship of *The Pencil of Nature* to the library at Lacock Abbey, and the intrusion of 'romance' and unsolved mysteries into the scientific pages of his book and the library that would hold it. And he does so in relation to plates that set the scene of the library at Lacock Abbey: namely, the scene that is actually missing from the dark space of the plate called *A Scene in a Library*.

The Testimony of the Imprinted Paper

But what of the mystery that remains unsolved? Why did Talbot see fit to put a little piece of sci-fi imagining next to *A Scene in a Library*, with its prosaic, unscenic shelves of books? This strange piece of text is worth quoting in full (emphasis added):

Among the many novel ideas which the discovery of Photography has suggested, is the following rather curious experiment or speculation. I have never tried it, indeed, nor am I aware that anyone else has ever tried or proposed it, yet I think it is one which, if properly managed, must inevitably succeed.

When a ray of solar light is refracted by a prism and thrown upon a screen, it forms there the very beautiful coloured band known by the name of the solar spectrum.

Experimenters have found that if this spectrum is thrown upon a sheet of sensitive paper, the violet end of it produces the principal effect: and, what is truly remarkable, a similar effect is produced by certain invisible rays which lie beyond the violet, and beyond the limits of the spectrum, and whose existence is only revealed to us by this action which they exert. Now, I would propose to separate these invisible rays from the rest, by suffering them to pass into an adjoining apartment through an aperture in a wall or screen of partition. This apartment would thus become filled (we must not call it illuminated) with invisible rays, which might be scattered in all directions by a convex lens placed behind the aperture. If there were a number of persons in the room, no one would see the other: and yet nevertheless if a camera were so placed as to point in the direction in which any one were standing, it would take his portrait, and reveal his actions. For, to use a metaphor we have already employed, the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness. *Alas! that this speculation is somewhat too refined to be introduced with effect into a modern novel or romance; for what a dénouement we should have, if we could suppose the secrets of the darkened chamber to be revealed by the testimony of the imprinted paper.*

One of the characteristics of these passages is the way in which they echo an earlier theme, a tactic employed elsewhere in the illustrations section of *The Pencil of Nature*. The metaphor of the 'eye of the camera' returns to the text accompanying the *Articles of China*, in which a passage on the camera obscura immediately follows the remarks cited above about inventorying, testimony, and thievery.¹⁷ It is as if Talbot had strewn clues throughout his discontinuous narrative to hint at how to connect it all up; and as if he wished, in this instance, to advance the experimental scenario of the camera obscura into the future. But still the question remains unanswered. Why this text next to that photograph? Other photographs conjure up, better than *A Scene in a Library* itself, the aura of light penetrating darkness, of a dark room serving as a camera obscura, of space invisibly peopled and of mysterious circumstances that are found in the text accompanying *A Scene in a Library*. Among these are *The Open Door*, with its ray of light penetrating an apertured chamber, the plate that opened the second fascicle of *The Pencil of Nature*. There are also similar photographs that were not included in the book, such as that of the terracotta statue of Diogenes in the Great Hall of Lacock Abbey (figure 8), an image suffused in a darkness barely penetrated by light, with who knows what lurking in its gothic shadows.

In most of the rest of *The Pencil of Nature* it is clear that the text for the plates came after the plates themselves, for most of the time the text points back to the plates, explicating their making, their locations or their possible functions.¹⁸ This is not the case with the text that accompanies *A Scene in a Library*. That points away from the making of the photograph, is misleading about its location, and says nothing about its possible function, leaving that to us to imagine — and that, to my mind, is exactly the point in this 'experiment' in photographic

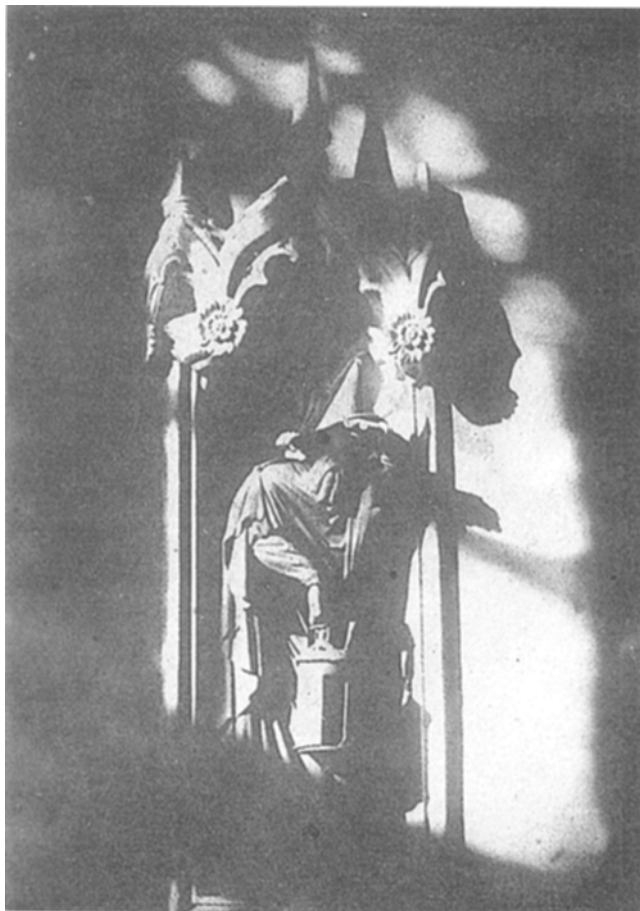


Figure 8. William Henry Fox Talbot, *Diogenes in Shadow*, salt paper print from a calotype negative, October 1840. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford.

illustration. It is particularly unlikely in this case that Talbot would have written the text first with the photograph in mind to illustrate it. But by the same token there is nothing to indicate that he selected the photograph first and that the text which now accompanies it suggested itself to him as the best way to address the photograph. That is to say, it is entirely possible that the selection of *A Scene in a Library* and the writing of the text occurred independently of each other. Indeed, the text feels like a postscript to the 'Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art', a passage left over from Talbot's narrative of the experimentation that led to the Talbotype and *The Pencil of Nature*, an idea for future experimentation that he could not bear to relinquish. If the 'Brief Historical Sketch' is remarkable in looking back to past mistakes, setbacks, dead-ends and hiatuses, as well as for the way it culminates in an anti-climax, the text to *A Scene in a Library* is striking for the way it looks forward towards an experiment not yet realized, one that is to take place at an undetermined point in the future.

It is conceivable that once the photograph and text were brought in conjunction with one another, the photograph stirred up an idea about the possible future uses of photographs in books and the stories that lie between their covers. As much as the text of *The Pencil*

of *Nature* references old books and past narratives, this particular piece points to 'novel' books and future narratives, books yet to come and narratives as yet unconcluded. And so, finally, it is imaginable that the photograph and the text came to point each to the other in a reciprocal relation, such that now each underlines the self-reflexivity and experimentality of the other — namely, that the book plate is an experimental photograph of books in an experimental book about photographs, while for its part the text that is found between the covers of that book offers a narrative hypothesis about possible experimental narratives and their hypothetical conclusions. Each signals how the other partners and makes up for what is lacking in it — how the one provides the visible library, and the other its invisible contents. And together they stress their collaboration — how photograph and text work together, in a new, speculative order of text-and-image, in which each works off the other.

A Scene in a Library remains a case unclosed, for the conjunction of plate and text that makes it up is precisely about a 'dénouement' that has not yet occurred in that library or in any of the books in it and that can therefore only be speculated about. It is about 'a scene of a crime' that can only be imagined, and the 'testimony of the imprinted paper' that will solve a mystery in the future, in a tale not yet told and a tome not yet to be found on the library's shelves, its books closed and their contents a secret. In the darkness that intrudes in the gaps between and on either side of those shelved books, one of which bears witness on its spine to Talbot's interest in the hieroglyphic world of Egyptology, some of the feeling for the unseen, for what could happen in the camera obscura of the imagination, and for an historiated world not visible to the human eye (or even to the camera eye of that time) is suggested, and attached to the problem of decipherment. *A Scene in a Library*, together with its text, points to the way *The Pencil of Nature*, dubbed a 'wonderful illustration of modern necromancy' by a contemporary writer, was not only a new form of book, but also a new genre of story, in which science and 'romance', experimental speculation and fictional irresolution, keep company, and whose solutions are left open to hypothesis, whose motives and conclusions are left to the reader to imagine.¹⁹ *A Scene in a Library* might even lead one to dream of the long-past mystery of Olive being solved once upon a time in the future, when infrared light penetrates the library's obscurity to show us her ghost hovering about, pulling one of those volumes off the shelves, and writing a new legend in it to replace the old, with a futuristic 'testimony of the imprinted paper' replacing the ancient oral history. And one can fantasize the Countess of Salisbury, her spectral form likewise revealed by 'invisible rays' in the dark chamber, stealing in to fit *The Pencil of Nature* next to the statutes of Richard the Second, and give it its rightful, heraldic place in the historic library at Lacock Abbey.

Notes

1. See my *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press: October Books 1998, in particular Chapter 2, 'A Scene in a Library: The First Photographically Illustrated Book', 107–78, in which some of the points made in this essay are made in a different way and at greater length.
2. Looking at what the 'author' might have had in his mind as the key to a work has been called into question: see Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill & Wang 1977, 142–48. On the weakness of intentionality in the photograph, see John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, New York, Pantheon Books 1983, 90. For a useful model of intentionality, see Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1985.
3. See H. J. P. Arnold, *William Henry Fox Talbot, Pioneer of Photography and Man of Science*, London: Hutchinson Bentham 1977; Gail Buckland, *Fox Talbot and the Invention of Photography*, Boston, MA: David Godine 1980; and Larry J. Schaaf, *Out of the Shadows: Herschel, Talbot, and the Invention of Photography*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992.
4. For an easily accessible reproduction of this plate, see *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1980, 19.
5. In the text adjoining plate VII, *Leaf of a Plant*, Talbot speaks in detail of the negative-positive process of his paper medium, and nowhere mentions his extensive experimentation with botanical specimens.
6. For a similar reading of this daguerreotype, which is in the collection of the Société française de photographie, see Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 1999, 128–33.
7. On the 'discursive spaces' of early photography, see Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 1985, 131–50.
8. Talbot himself testifies to some uncertainty as to the legal status or courtroom function of this new type of evidence. After speaking, in the text accompanying plate III of *The Pencil of Nature*, of the inventorial evidence that the photograph might provide in the case of theft, Talbot demurs: 'what a judge and jury might say to it, is a matter which I leave to the speculation of those who possess legal acumen'.
9. See Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*, Paris: Gallimard Seuil: Cahiers du Cinéma 1980, 137.
10. On denotation and connotation in the photograph, see Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message' and 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1985, 3–40.
11. The text accompanying plate XXIV, *A Fruit Piece*, speaks of the imperfect duplicability of the paper photograph, and of the 'mischance' and 'various accidents' that led to the destruction of the original photograph for this plate, and its subsequent replacement by a substitute, which is an inexact copy of the first. Nowhere does it speak of the still-life that the plate actually represents.
12. Here I would disagree with the view that sees Talbot's aims as primarily artistic or proto-modernist, and concur instead with Krauss's understanding, in 'Photography's Discursive Spaces', of the multiple, non-artistic uses of photography. There are too many demurrals on Talbot's part as to his artistic qualifications, and too many other functions suggested for the photograph in *The Pencil of Nature* for an overriding artistic purpose to be plausible. Moreover, Talbot's frequent use of the word 'art' does not necessarily designate an aesthetic purpose in nineteenth-century parlance; in his case, it usually refers to a skill, a scientific device, and/or a technical capacity. However, none of this precludes an aesthetic interest in the photographic image, on his part or ours.
13. The role of gender in the tale of the 'invention' and publication of the Talbotype begs to be pursued, not only in a biographical, sociocultural and/or psychoanalytic way, as in Talbot's relation to an ambitious, domineering mother, much more public minded than her shy, rather monastic son, but also in the more structural terms of what one might name 'drawing envy', in which the Talbotype was Talbot's gentleman-scientist answer to the draughtswomanly accomplishments of the distaff side of his family.
14. See plate XX, *Lace*, which might be understood as a 'feminine' variation on plate VII, *Leaf of a Plant*, to which its text ties it, as a negative to the latter's positive.
15. See *The Athenaeum*, no. 904, 22 February 1845, 202, and 'The Talbotype, Daguerreotype Engraving, &c.', *Morning Herald*, no. 19, 399, 6 November 1844, 5; cited in Schaaf, *Out of the Shadows*, 151, 147.
16. These citations all come from the text accompanying plates XVI and XIX, representing the *Cloisters of Lacock Abbey*, and *The Tower at Lacock Abbey*, respectively. Plate XV, which introduces the Lacock Abbey set with its more distant landscape-like representation of *Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire*, is set next to text which speaks of the pedigree of the 'Author's country seat in Wiltshire', and then applies that pedigree to Talbot's 'invention', by describing Lacock Abbey as the first building 'that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture'.
17. On the metaphor of the camera obscura as an epistemological model, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 1991.
18. See Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', 14, on the 'historical reversal' of the logic of illustration, in which 'the image no longer illustrates the words; it is the words which, structurally, are parasitical on the image'.
19. See *The Athenaeum*, no. 94, 2 February 1845, 202, cited in Schaaf, *Out of the Shadows*, 151.