TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATIONS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: ROGER FENTON’S CRIMEA EXHIBITION AND “THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE”

By Helen Groth

At the Gallery of the Society of Painters in Water Colours in Pall Mall East in the autumn of 1855, Roger Fenton exhibited three hundred and twelve photographs taken in the Crimea. Undertaken with the patronage of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and the Duke of Newcastle, the then Secretary of State for War, Fenton’s photographic record was intended to inform the Victorian public of the “true” condition of the soldiers in what was fast becoming an unpopular war. In the catalogue, one photograph bore the title “The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” a title with both biblical and literary resonances for exhibition audiences in late 1855.1 Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” had been published in the Examiner on 9 December 1854, causing a sensation both at home and in the Crimea.2 Organized around variations on the refrain “Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred,” the poem assumed anthem-like status during the period when Fenton was in the Crimea. Filtered through the lens of Tennyson’s poem, Fenton’s photograph appears to record the traces of a charge or a battle scene that has just taken place. The war-scorched landscape is bereft of human presence. Only the residue of conflict remains: a line of cannon balls draws the observer’s eye along the tracks that stretch towards the horizon, disappearing into a blank white sky (Figure 24).

At first sight then, Fenton’s photograph could be described as an exemplary instance of literary tourism. The photographer, having read “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” visits the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ the poem commemorates, takes a photograph, and then gives it a title that inserts it into Tennyson’s narrative. However, two inconsistencies disrupt this speculative sequencing of events, the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” that Fenton’s photograph represents is not the same “valley of death” where the Light Brigade was massacred and further, the title was appended to the image by the authors of the exhibition catalogue, not by Fenton himself. Neither of these contradictions, however, detracts from the tenability of the connection between Fenton’s image and Tennyson’s poem. Fenton was very aware of Tennyson’s poem while he was in the Crimea and had previously drawn on the latter’s poetry as a thematic inspiration for his work. Although
no curatorial correspondence records the history behind the choice of the photograph’s
title, the choice itself exemplifies the highly articulated literary grid that early photogra-
phers superimposed onto the topography of imperial conflict.
Rather than establishing a fail-safe connection between poem and photograph then,
this essay will examine the impact new communication technologies — such as photogra-
phy and the mass media which appropriated its images — had on the production and
consumption of the narratives of nation and community that artists and writers such as
Fenton and Tennyson chose to tell. Fenton’s resolute amateurism and Tennyson’s intense
formalism, regardless of the different media they used, shared a nostalgia for traditional
modes of face to face communication rendered obsolete by the mass-mediated forms of
public life, such as photography or the popular media, that ironically provided an impor-
tant source of both men’s creative inspiration and financial income. The compromised
sense of melancholy Tennyson and Fenton felt, as well as the different “language of the
senses” they used to absorb the fragmentary experiences of modernity into an increasingly
uneasy vision of community and nation, also registers a more general transition to a
fractured conception of “the public” in mid-Victorian culture, a transition that, to use
Miriam Hansen’s terms, arose from an increasingly “technologically and industrially
mediated public sphere” which was eroding “the very conditions of discursive interaction,
participation and self-representation” that aesthetic practice had traditionally relied upon.
and celebrated (141). Both photograph and poem are therefore the products of a distinctly modern vision, no matter how nostalgically inclined, which was unthinkable prior to the rapid expansion of a mass culture that intense popular interest in the Crimean War only further accelerated.

“All the world wonder’d”

*These words capture the central role* vision plays in the act of reading or performing “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” The poem insists on itself as spectacle. Its pace drives home the distance between the six hundred and their audience, which goes along for the ride for a brief moment as they sit mouths agape, listening to the performance in the comfort of their drawing rooms. Every stanza narrows the track that the gaze of the audience and the six hundred are compelled to take. The only way is forward into the barrage of cannon fire that volleys and thunders from either side.

Short sharp bursts of detail register the physical effects of the war on the soldiers’ bodies as they sacrifice themselves to the blunders of those in charge. Yet this poem ultimately enacts corporeal transcendence. Through the grand circular sweep of the charge into and out of the valley, the six hundred ride into cultural myth. The charge scrolls around the audience as they marvel at the pyrotechnics of battle, but there is no blood on the ground here. The action takes place behind a smoke screen. All the audience hears are the sound effects that evoke the clean cut of blade through flesh rather than the grit and gore of battle:

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Cossack and Russian
Reel’d from the sabre-stroke
Shatter’d and sunder’d.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred. (Ricks 1034)
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Tennyson’s poem takes the catch phrase “the theatre of war” to an extreme. The assumption underlying the poem is that the fusion of patriotic rhetoric with abstract imagery can transform a contemporary event into an eternal moment of chivalry, resonant with classical associations and universally legible in its epic yet simple delineation.

“The Charge of the Light Brigade” served as both a memorial and a memento of war. Apparently composed in “a few minutes” in a rush of patriotic fervor, the poem was inspired by an account of the charge containing the phrase “someone had blundered.” A hybrid of reportage and high melodrama, the poem draws on phrases from two reports of the battle and an editorial that appeared respectively in the 13th and 14th November 1854 editions of the *Times*. Tennyson’s reliance on the *Times* reports also draws another new technology into the story of the poem’s production — the electric telegraph. The *Times* received most of its foreign news at this time via the Electric Telegraph Company’s offices in Liverpool. Ships were met and information was relayed to London in this fashion by as early as 1845. In fact, the *Times*’ monopoly over this new form of “electrical intelligence” was so extensive it became the subject of a court case instigated by two journalists from the *Morning Herald*. The journalists claimed that the interruption of their messages by prioritized messages to the *Times* constituted an improper use of information (Morus
339-78). According to the Ricks edition of the poem, Tennyson not only drew the famous phrase “someone had blundered” from the 13 November editorial in the *Times* that claimed the high death toll was the result “of some hideous blunder,” but also from eyewitness descriptions of the battle that appeared the next day containing the lines “Through the clouds of smoke we could see their sabres flashing” (Ricks 1034–35). Dovetailing the appeal of topicality and consoling abstractions of Christian typology into a consumable form, it is not surprising then that the poem became an instant hit adaptable to a variety of purposes and contexts. Hence, its likely appropriation as a title in the catalogue for Fenton’s exhibition of Crimea photographs and Tennyson’s initial choice to publish the poem in the *Examiner* on 9 December 1854.

A more recent example of the poem’s amenability to visual adaptation is its cinematic retelling in the twentieth century. In 1936 Michael Curtiz directed a film based on Tennyson’s poem starring Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland. A military swashbuckler, Curtiz’s film, to quote Pauline Kael, was a “bad joke” in “historical terms” (1996). But true to its source, the film’s melodramatic romance between Flynn and DeHavilland is ultimately overshadowed by the spectacularly rendered charge sequence directed by action specialist B. Reeves Eason under the supervision of assistant director Jack Sullivan, the latter winning an Academy Award for his efforts. British director Tony Richardson also directed a version of the poem in 1968. However, Richardson’s production is ultimately more interesting for its excoriating satire of British imperial decline than its confusing representation of the events surrounding the Charge. What the Curtiz and Richardson productions both illuminate, however, are the implosive uncertainties that press against the poem’s attempt to wrest order out of chaos in the face of a national and imperial crisis, a corrosion from within the imperial center with particular salience in the period of decolonization in which both Curtiz and Richardson’s films were made. The timing of Curtiz’s film seems particularly apt. Scripted by two British men, performed by a predominantly English cast, and set primarily in India, it appeared during one of the most dramatic periods of British Imperial decline. This humiliating phase of Britain’s colonial history, relatively unappeased by the allied triumphs in World War II, culminated in the Independence of India in 1947 — the imperial trophy that the Light Brigade had charged to their deaths to secure.

To return to Fenton’s more immediate version of the events, in a similarly panoramic style to Tennyson’s poem the exhibition catalogue attempts to inspire a sense of wonder in the consumer by providing the following guidelines for increasing the illusory effect of a central gaze sweeping across the landscape in viewing a group of the photographs: “THE ELEVEN SUBJECTS, from No. 152 to 162 inclusive, form a continuous Panoramic Picture of THE PLATEAU BEFORE SEBASTAPOL, commencing at Inkermann. The Spectator is supposed to move around to the right” (13). Ideally, if the spectator obeys the catalogue’s instructions, eleven single images merge into one. As Jennifer Green-Lewis notes: “Whatever Fenton’s intention may have been, by chopping the vast surround into eleven frameable parts, he simultaneously produced a whole but fractured earth, reflecting the wounding and chopping of the battlefield not directly by its representation but through its displacement into the narrative framework set up by the design of the whole” (113). Fenton’s panoramic view of Sebastopol precedes the photograph of “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” in the exhibition catalogue, suggesting that if the observer were suitably compliant the single photograph could be assimilated into the visual narrative the
exhibition presents as the inevitable moment of truth all soldiers must face. Its isolated presentation would have situated it as a contemplative site designed to arrest the observer’s gaze after the grand sweep of the preceding panorama and tableaux — its literary and biblical frame providing an even greater impetus for pause.

Using similar narrative strategies Tennyson’s poem and Fenton’s exhibition curators thus provided their consumers with heightened simulations of other worlds, offering the possibility of an apparently risk–free experience of the dangers of imperial conquest and the horrors of war: in the case of Tennyson’s poem, either in the *Examiner* or in a volume of verse, and in Fenton’s case, in the form of his exhibition, as well as in the stereoscopic views, single images purchasable at the exhibition or in the glossy compilations published after his exhibition had closed. Guided by a common inclination to stylize their subject material, they present a similarly aestheticised depiction of war that ultimately directs attention away from the events and onto the sensations of the consumer. This emphasis on technique and affect has led recent historians to read a revisionary propagandist intent into the sanitized panorama Fenton’s photographs presented. The strangely tranquil version of events Fenton’s images provide does appear to be completely at odds with William Howard Russell’s graphic reports published daily in the *Times*. However, although there is abundant evidence of Fenton’s political conservatism to be found in his Crimea correspondence, there is no evidence of a state-sanctioned intent to produce propaganda. A more accurate description of Fenton’s perspective on the events he witnessed and struggled against enormous technological odds to capture in his photographs is that of the excited amateur experimenting with the limitations of a new invention. The wet collodion developing technique which Fenton used was an elaborate process involving lengthy exposure times and developing the exposed glass negatives on site in a portable dark room, a ritual Fenton often performed while being shelled, thwarted by an alcoholic assistant, or distracted by excited soldiers wanting their photographs taken.4

These technical limitations are a source of constant reflection in both Fenton’s private correspondence and *Narrative of a Photographic Trip to the Seat of the War in the Crimea* — the latter delivered to a packed meeting of the Photographic Society on his return to London. The Photographic Society itself was made up of enthusiastic amateurs, many of whom resisted the professionalization of photography and like Fenton ceased to practice the “new art-science” by the 1860s when it seemed anyone could produce the images that the medium’s pioneers had struggled so hard to create. Like Tennyson, Fenton is far more preoccupied with the artistic status of his work and questions of formal experimentation than with the political implications of the historic events that happen to provide the narrative frame on which to hang his work. In a paper contributed to the *Chemist* in 1852, he celebrated the formation of the Photographic Society in the following grand terms: “It affords us great pleasure to be enabled to inform our readers that active measures are now being taken for the formation of a Society, the object of which is, the advancement of the beautiful art of photography” (Hannavy 19). Inspired by the enthusiastic response to the photographs exhibited at the Great Exhibition, the Society included luminaries such as Charles Wheatstone, Hugh Diamond, and Sir Charles Eastlake among its members. Fenton subsequently contributed images of Kiev and Moscow, taken on his visit to Russia, to Wheatstone’s experiments with stereoscopic vision in the nine-by-seven inch format suited to the latter’s new invention, the reflecting stereoscope, the more cumbersome and expensive forerunner of Brewster’s phenomenally successful lenticular stereoscope.
The affinity between Fenton’s reflections on the nature of photography and the experimental formalism of Tennyson’s verse would seem to exemplify Jonathan Crary’s interpretation of the discursive construction of new visual technologies like photography in the nineteenth century as more aligned with an increasing abstraction of the idea of vision than with the rise of realism with which they are more conventionally associated (1–69). On the basis of Crary’s theory, it could thus be argued that Tennyson’s distillation of a poetic line into a series of visually evocative sound effects designed to converge into a single synaesthesic experience performs acoustically what Fenton’s panorama produced visually. Carol Christ, while arguing a very different case in the context of her analysis of the transition from the microscopic gaze of “Mariana” to the panoramic gaze of the later “Mariana in the South,” also notes this correlation between a Tennysonian poetic sequence and a photographic sequence: “It is as if [in “Mariana”] he collapses the distance between each object he contemplates and the beholder. He creates no sense of surrounding context or natural perspective but represents each object in the same intensity and detail. Objects therefore appear isolated, much like a series of disjunct, close-up, still photographs” (19). Locating Christ’s analogy in the historical context of this essay, both Tennyson and Fenton, I would suggest, presented the events in the Crimea to their respective audiences in “close up” — whether in the form of dramatic visual imagery combined with a driving rhythm intended to impress its message on the memory of the reader or listener or, in the case of Fenton’s photographs, through visually creating the sense of “being there.”

The particular relevance of Tennyson’s and Fenton’s work for Crary’s thesis, however, lies in the emphasis both place on exploring the contingencies of an increasingly fractured and embodied conception of sensory mediation. Both men pressed the technical limits of their respective media in an attempt to exercise maximal control over the reception of their work. Like Crary, Lindsay Smith and Elizabeth Helsinger have also traced the departure from the privileged romantic spectator that was so central to accounts of the Romantic sublime to an account of an observer in need of institutional guidance and organization in Victorian aesthetics; a departure that both argue is manifested in the Ruskinian emphasis on spectatorial response and which Smith traces through the complex interactions between stereoscopy and Pre-Raphaelitism. As Helsinger notes, “Ruskin puts the beholder before the artist as his model for the reform of perception that he saw as essential to the nineteenth century” (Ruskin 71). In letters to the Times, lectures and essays written during the late 1840s and 1850s, Ruskin theorized a distinctively English way of viewing as, to quote Helsinger, “a form of disciplined freedom strongly marked as both Protestant and middle class” that necessitated “the construction, location and governance of museums as a means of institutionalising a broad but class differentiated access to art” (“Politics of Viewing” 126). As Helsinger rightly observes, catalogues, lectures, and other printed materials were pivotal supplements to Ruskin’s programme for the education of the public, providing a linguistic frame which reinforced class and gender distinctions.

In true Ruskinian style, then, the instructive tone of Fenton’s exhibition catalogue and the heavily symbolic title of “The Valley of The Shadow of Death” establish an implicit hierarchy of readers. At the top would have been the middle class reader of the Times, educated to make the appropriate associative link between Fenton’s photograph, Tennyson’s poem, and the twenty third psalm. This exclusive process inserts both poem and
photograph into a system of cultural value that atomizes as much as it manages the possibilities of audience response. Further underscoring this synthesis of inclusive and exclusive strategies was the location of Fenton’s photographs at the prestigious “Gallery of the Society of Painters in Water Colours in Pall Mall East” rather than at more popular and thus indiscriminate establishments like the Egyptian Hall, or one of the new galleries such as Charles Marshall’s Tourist Gallery, or the Gallery of Illustration on Regent Street, which catered to the new public taste for visual displays of the exploits of adventurous travellers. However, as Richard Altick has shown, regardless of Fenton and others’ zealous attempts to defend photography as an art, or Ruskin’s attempt to hierarchically organize exhibition spaces, both forms of entertainment drew on a very similar pool of consumers (Shows 480–81). Consumers may well have been educated to make distinctions between cultural artefacts, sites, and events, but the extent to which this gradual institutionalization of viewing practices constrained comparisons with more popular events or media accounts is more difficult to assess.\(^5\) Surely it would have been impossible to stem the tide of associations that even the most snobbish exhibition goers of this period would have made between Fenton’s photographs, Tennyson’s poem, and the vast array of popular spectacles such as dioramas, panoramas, and the picture models accompanied by firework displays re-enacting battle scenes from the Crimea on show at the Surrey Gardens. Victorian consumers were also inundated with mass-produced lithographs and other forms of cheap visual material, as well as a flurry of Orientalist images that flooded the market with information and misinformation about the war and the Turkish culture that English and French troops were ostensibly dying in their thousands to preserve.\(^6\)

Even the associative link the title makes with Tennyson’s poem peoples Fenton’s landscape with the dead soldiers whose absent presence it memorializes, providing the image with a more critical edge than the conservative photographer would have intended. For, although Fenton noted his opposition to the “constant frittering away of valuable lives,” his reasons for choosing not to photograph Balaclava Valley where the charge actually took place were aesthetically, not morally, motivated. In a letter dated 2 June 1855 he described the confronting and macabre scene he found there:

> On our way we went exactly in the line taken by our cavalry at Balaclava [25 October 1854], except that we met instead of following their line of advance. We came upon many skeletons half buried, one was lying as if he had raised himself upon his elbow, the bare skull sticking up with still enough flesh left in the muscles to prevent it falling from the shoulders; another man’s feet and hands were out of the ground, the shoes on his feet, and the flesh gone. (Gernsheim and Gernsheim 87)

Fenton portrays himself here as a gentleman tourist, a common figure in the Crimea at this time, visiting the war’s main attractions and re-enacting its most exciting moments.\(^7\) His verbal snapshot of the decaying corpses reveals a fascination with the macabre and gruesome details of war which his photographs fail to represent; an absence of documentary detail that was bemoaned by a critic in the *Athenaeum*: “As photographers grow stronger in nerve and cooler in head, we shall have not merely the bivouac and foraging party, but the battle itself painted . . . ” (“Photographs” 1117–18). In addition, the reviewer’s use of “painted” here, rather than photographed, exemplifies the inevitable rhetorical entanglements which occurred when critics refashioned their aesthetic vocabu-
lary to suit the new cultural forms they evaluated, a formal hybridization that also took
place at the level of aesthetic practice, as exemplified in the anomalous use of the
descriptive title “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” in a minimal exhibition catalogue
that relied primarily on numbers to identify photographs exemplifies.

In addition to the associative web I have constructed thus far, there are more substan-
tial connections between Tennyson’s and Fenton’s work. Fenton, as I have noted, had
previously used Tennyson’s poems as a thematic source. In 1849 he exhibited a painted
illustration of Tennyson’s “May Queen” at the Royal Academy. Another more compel-
ling link lies in the popularity of Tennyson’s poem with the soldiers in the Crimea during
the period Fenton was there. By the time Fenton left the Crimea in June 1855, “The
Charge of the Light Brigade” was already so popular that Tennyson received a request
from a military chaplain through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to send
printed copies of the poem “on slips for the army to sing.” Tennyson responded promptly
to this request. One thousand copies of the poem printed on quarto broadsheet were sent
out with the accompanying cover letter:

Having heard that the brave soldiers before Sebastopol, whom I am proud to call my
countrymen, have a liking for my Ballad on the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balac
I have ordered a thousand copies of it to be printed for them. No writing of mine can add to
the glory they have acquired in the Crimea; but if what I have heard be true, they will not be
displeased to receive these copies of the Ballad from me, and to know that those who sit at
home love and honour them. (qtd. in Ricks, Tennyson 333)

The venture was such a success with the men that Tennyson received a request on 14
October 1855 for a further one thousand copies from the Senior Chaplain to the Forces in
the Crimea. According to Emily Tennyson’s version of this letter the Chaplain wrote “that
half the men were singing it and all wished to possess what they so much admired.” Two
thousand, rather than the requested one thousand, were promptly dispatched. For, as
Tennyson wrote to the critic Gerald Massey, “Who could resist such an appeal?” (qtd. in
Ricks, Tennyson 335).

The popularity of the poem also proved to be a salutary warning of the exigencies of
literary celebrity for the relatively new Laureate. Its catchy rhythms made it particularly
suited to repeated readings and performances. In effect, like a photographic negative it
was designed to be reprinted and disseminated in a cheap format so that every soldier
could possess his own copy, memorize the words, possibly name a valley after its famous
sentiments, and sing of the glories of English masculinity as he died. Tennyson’s quick
disavowal of the poem as not “a poem on which I pique myself” and his intention to omit
it from the third edition of Maud and Other Poems is indicative of his frequently noted
unease with his role as a poet of empire; a role that threatened to stain his charismatic
status as an unworldly bard with the ink of “newspaper verse” (qtd. in Ricks, Poems 95).
In his correspondence, Tennyson describes the poem as the soldiers’ poem ceding all
critical authority to them and removing subsequent changes he had made in accordance
with their expectations.

This sensitivity to the soldiers’ responses exemplifies the constitutive role an ab-
stracted idea of the “public” comes to play in the production of texts, regardless of the
author’s refusal or submission to its supposed desires. Michael Warner has described the
gradual slide between “being in print” and publication — and the construction of an abstracted, public, and publicized self addressing an indefinite number of others — as a definitive characteristic of the liberal rhetoric of the bourgeois public sphere. Tennyson’s anxious response to the indeterminacy “going public” introduces into the creative process would then exemplify the increasingly ambiguous and fractured relationship between the disembodied public subject and the private person who both answer to the same name. Aply, only a few years after the publication of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” Tennyson would complain to Julia Margaret Cameron that, as a result of his agreeing quite enthusiastically to be a sitter for her on repeated occasions, “I can’t be anonymous by reason of your confounded photographs” (qtd. in Gernsheim, Cameron 35). The popularity and ubiquity of photographic portraits in the 1860s in general — particularly in the popular carte de visite format — was such that any public interest in Cameron’s portraits seemed only to exacerbate the tension between Tennyson’s desire to cling to a pre-industrial conception of literary production and the commercial necessities of writing for a living.

As Michael Warner argues, a principle of negativity is axiomatic in the bourgeois public sphere brought into being by the act of publication. The public self always bears a negative relation to the private self in the sense that the relative value of the published word is measured against the symbolic capital of the signature that follows and not the private life that public name conceals. But, as Warner notes,

the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination. For the ability to abstract oneself in public discourse has always been an unavailable resource . . . Public discourse from the beginning offered a utopian self-abstraction, but in ways that left a residue of unrecoverated particularity, both for its privileged subjects and for those it minoritized. (382–84)

The following two sections will draw out the implications of the tension between self-abstraction and self-realization that Warner describes here for an analysis of the idealizing civic rhetoric of aesthetic and journalistic discourse in the 1850s. This tension is most poignantly manifested in anecdotal accounts of the responses of soldiers in the Crimea to the public narrativization of events in texts such as “The Charge of the Light Brigade” that necessarily occluded the particularity of individual experience in the hegemonic drive towards national and imperial unity.

**Visualizing a New National Space**

Produced in a time of dramatic cultural, political, and technological transformation, both Tennyson’s poem and Fenton’s exhibition responded to a specific historical crisis, the Crimean War, which was the outcome of competing Russian and English imperial interests in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean. Russia had defended its expansion into the region as a necessary protection of the Greek Orthodox Church against the threat posed by the predominantly Islamic Ottoman Empire. England publicly opposed the extension of Russian influence in the region as an act of aggression against an old ally. However, the more pressing motive for their intervention was the protection of the invaluable overland route to the East; England’s economic and political influence over
its most valuable colony, India, would have been dramatically diminished if Russia had gained control of this territory. Intended as a quick military scuffle that would bring its opponents to their knees, it was instead a disastrous combination of military incompetence with a newly expanded media that led to the exposure of the ensuing chaos and horrific fatalities to the gaze of a curious domestic audience. As a consequence, a small foreign war quickly became a national political crisis.

During the late 1840s and 1850s the borders of civic and national spaces were being redrawn across Europe by the political and economic reforms of a newly emergent middle class. Located at a mid-point between the two reform bills, the Crimean War proved to be a decisive moment in the reconfiguration of the responsibilities of the state to its subjects, as well as a chastening reminder of the risks of an unsystematic approach to imperial expansion. The convergence of this political crisis with the rise of new print and visual technologies provided the middle class producers of the nation’s commercial and industrial wealth, and the newspapers they owned, with the ammunition to bring the Aberdeen coalition government to its knees and then force a wholesale reform of an army dedicated to the pursuit of aristocratic rituals and increasingly baroque military fashions. The *Manchester Courier* insisted that “the public offices of this country must be filled with practical and competent men, not . . . persons possessed of political influence, or related to families that have always lived upon the public” (qtd. in Lalumia 48). Similar calls for reform appeared in the *Liverpool Mercury*, the *Birmingham Journal*, the *Daily News* and the *Times* — the last having a circulation of 18,350,000 by 1855.9 This discursive network suggests that far from being anomalous, Fenton’s photographs and Tennyson’s poem participated in and were inspired by the barrage of information about the state of the nation at this time; an increase in public awareness which contributed to the modernization of the English nation-state, as well as highlighting the conflict between the interests of an increasingly xenophobic national culture and the commercial advantages of imperial expansion. Predictably, a strong xenophobic strain eliding individualism with Englishness often colors analyses of the cultural significance of the expansion of print media in this period. In a discussion of circulation between 1788 and 1855 that appeared in the *Westminster Review* in 1871, for example, the reviewer attributed the rapid increase of London and provincial weekly newspapers to “the strong Anglo-Saxon tendency to individualisation, as opposed to the Gallic love of centralisation” (516).

The location of Tennyson’s and Fenton’s work in this context however raises another question — if, as a column published at the time in *Lloyd’s Weekly* gushed erroneously: “The privilege of birth is doomed. The common mind of the nation, the common genius of the country, the common intellect of Englishmen . . . will assert itself,” then to what extent do either Fenton’s exhibition or Tennyson’s poem participate in this idealistic vision of the “national consciousness”? (qtd. in Lalumia 49). Fenton and Tennyson were inspired by a conservative impulse to protect English citizens and culture from both the Russian enemy and their untrustworthy French allies. Both also exemplify the ties aesthetic practice, and in particular military art, had with an aristocratic past, yet both were commercially bound to a bourgeois present and future. Fenton’s work was sponsored by the Duke of Newcastle, but was funded by the Manchester print maker Thomas Agnew. Unlike Fenton, Agnew was far more interested in the profits to be garnered from the post-exhibition sale of Fenton’s prints than in the aesthetic virtues of the photographs themselves.10 Similarly, as Laureate, a position many felt to be an out-dated aristocratic
sinecure at this time, Tennyson fulfilled his role as the poet of the people by penning patriotic ballads such as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, but these were then published in newspapers that catered to a predominantly middle class readership (Chorley 585).

Yet Tennyson’s poem also reveals a divergence of the interests of literary and national culture. For rather than providing a wholesale endorsement of the interests of the state, the poem hinges on the rejection of a “hideous blunder” made by an official military institution. This rejection implicitly endorsed the popular call for reform arising from the combined blunders of Lord Raglan and Lord Lucan that had sent the Light Brigade charging to their deaths. Lucan was ultimately recalled to England to defend his actions before the House of Lords. Therefore, as the divided interests of Fenton’s and Tennyson’s work also suggests, it would be a mistake to overstress the representative aspects of the fictions of national community they dramatize. The English state at this time counterbalanced a series of competing interests: aggressively Protestant monarchism vied with demands for an increasingly secularized representative government; xenophobic anxieties vied with the inevitable cultural diversity resulting from both political reform and imperial expansion; and traditional conceptions of the British subject as masculine, propertied, and metropolitan conflicted with demands for political and social reform by those subjected to and yet disenfranchised by an English nation state that claimed to represent them. The official histories told by both Tennyson’s poem and Fenton’s photographs reflect this political and cultural elitism. Both are predicated on a belief in art’s representative powers, and yet both rely on the abstracting and deeply hierarchic aesthetics of military art. Redolent with chivalric associations, they draw on an aristocratic tradition of ritualized imperial masculinity that necessarily excludes the vulgar presence of the wounded body of the common soldier. Thus, both ultimately represent the war as a static tableau, rhetorically harmonizing any discordant notes of class and cultural difference into a rousing celebration of the epic destiny of an English nation forever governed by arcane aristocratic traditions, no matter how flawed or corrupt.

Clarifying Mechanisms

Like many of the colonial crises that took place in so-called remote imperial outposts, such as the Indian Mutiny or the Morant Bay Rebellion, the rhetoric of anxiety surrounding the Crimea strategically transformed a colonial “problem” into what Simon Gikandi has called “a mechanism of clarification” through which English metropolitan culture could reflect on the condition of England and consolidate its global destiny (59). Even the most graphic of William Howard Russell’s descriptions of the daily carnage he witnessed fold back into reflections on the crisis of Englishness that the war represented to domestic audiences. In a report published in the *Times* four days after the reports that inspired Tennyson’s poem, Russell demands that his readers face the “hard truths”: “sooner or later . . . They must know that the wretched beggar who wanders about the streets of London in the rain leads the life of a prince compared with the British soldiers who are fighting out there for their country . . . . they have no shelter, no rest, and no defence against the weather” (8). Russell’s words assume his audience will be shocked into action, as they were, by any threat to the myth of Englishness as synonymous with Protestant civility. Fenton’s reflections on the character of the Croats, Montenegrins, Zouaves, Tartars, and Turks he photographed also reflect a lack of curiosity and indiffer-
ence to the cultures he encountered, other than in terms of how they reflected on the English military enterprise. In one letter, as Helmut and Alison Gernsheim note, he confuses Turkish with Croatian workers in a conventional tale opposing Asiatic lassitude with English fortitude (52). Fenton spends far more time in the same letter recounting the characteristic English ingenuity of four divers who in trying out their diving bell off the side of his ship happen to recover the knife he had dropped into the water the night before.

Another example of the use of the Crimea as a clarifying “mechanism” appeared in a review of a painting by the Brighton painter Jerry Barrett. Barrett, like Fenton, submitted his work to Academy exhibitions and was funded by Thomas Agnew. Entitled “The Mission of Mercy” the painting portraying Florence Nightingale tending the wounded at the Barrack Hospital in Scutari was the source of the following reflections on modernity and history from an Athenaeum critic reviewing art from the Crimea in 1858:

> Passing events have no perspective, if seen too near; they trip each other’s heels up so fast, that they are hardly worth more record than a series of little stereoscopes or a set of dissolving views . . . the great victory of today becomes in future history a line, or, at best, a paragraph. The future alone shuffles things into their right places, and assigns to each its true and permanent value. In this instance, however, there can be no doubt that the chapter in the history of the Crimea War which Mr Barrett has selected . . . redeemed English Protestant women from an old reproach; it showed us a Joan of Arc with the sword put away, and doing a nobler work. (693)

The reviewer draws here on an opposition between the transient contemporaneity of stereoscopic views — one of Fenton’s favored forms — and the permanence of traditional modes of representation produced slowly and retrospectively. This rhetorical sleight of hand compacts the Crimea into a fleeting interlude in England’s illustrious march towards her imperial destiny together with Protestant womanhood, embodied in the ideologically neutralized figure of Florence Nightingale, as its Britannia-like, yet disarmed, standard bearer. What ultimately underlies these patriotic reflections is the need to distinguish between modern and traditional visual technologies, a distinction that only amplifies, in its desire to negate, the profound epistemological impact new ways of seeing had on Victorian conceptions of both national spaces and cultural memory.

Despite the anxieties of this reviewer, the Victorian public embraced technologies such as telegraphy and photography. Telegraphed reports were published daily in newspapers often with accompanying wood engravings copied from photographs taken by Fenton and his contemporaries. The idea of instantaneous communication that the invention of the telegraph introduced only consolidated the illusion that England stood at the centre of a universal information network capable of transcending the material limits of space and time. In the words of one journalist, the telegraph showed how

> we have trained the electric agent as a dutiful child or obedient servant, to carry our messages through the air by the road we have made for it, and with equal velocity through the earth by a road it makes for itself. Again, traversing the mighty deep in the shape of an angel of peace, bearing the olive branch to countries formerly our most bitter and inveterate foes, it takes another step towards realizing the dream of the poet . . . to “Put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes.” (qtd. in Morus 341)
Increased newspaper circulation also ensured a wide and gradually more diverse consumption of these reports. In an attempt to capture the ever-expanding market, illustrated newspapers competed with one another to produce the most stirring visual accounts of the war by sending out their own artists out to record the event at first hand. This newly competitive atmosphere was the result of reduced production costs owing to the abolition of the newspaper tax. Well established papers such as the *Illustrated London News*, which dramatically increased its circulation during the course of the war, thus found themselves in competition with a range of regional syndicated journals and new papers such as the *Illustrated Times*. Regional syndicated journals were also set up to cater to the demands of an increasingly literate provincial working class audience. Run on tighter budgets to keep their prices down, these journals compensated for their lack of “authentic” visual accounts with sensational variations of the metropolitan illustrated papers’ wood engravings.

The dramatic escalation in newspaper and journal circulation was not only confined to England. For the first time, soldiers at the front were able to read highly critical versions of the battles in which they had fought, an unprecedented access to information hardly designed to increase morale. In a touching anecdote, Fenton described an encounter with a young colonel who made him “a very liberal offer of his commission, medals, and other advantages, if I would only get him safe back to Pall Mall” (qtd. in Gernsheim and Gernsheim 55). On being invited into the officer’s hut, Fenton observed that he had papered it with prints cut out of the *Illustrated London News*. To Fenton’s surprise, the colonel had constructed a humble exhibition space on the colonial periphery comprised of these images which reinvented and authenticated the space he inhabited, drawing him closer to the home to which he craved to return. He simply ignored the horror of the present by shutting the door of his hut and looking at the battle scene he has momentarily left behind from the perspective of the imperial center.

Another equally suggestive anecdote tells the story of a shell-shocked survivor whom the witness claimed could only “utter monosyllabic replies” prior to hearing a rendition of “The Charge of the Light Brigade”: “A copy of Tennyson’s poem having been lent to me that morning, I took it out and read it. The man, with kindling eye, at once entered upon a spirited description of the fatal gallop between the guns’ mouths to and from that cannon-crowded height” (Hallam Tennyson 2: 113). This anecdote, no matter how apocryphal, dramatizes the inevitable narrativization of testimony which Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have described, and yet there is an underlying deprivation of agency that differentiates the portrayal of the submergence of the soldier’s voice into the mother tongue of English patriotism from the more liberating possibilities Felman and Laub’s project suggests (2–3). If we take the anecdote at its word, the circling repetitions of Tennyson’s lines work to draw the soldier back from the comforts of pre-linguistic regression into an adult state of responsibility by mediating and thus ultimately excluding the chaotic materiality of his own experience. This re-initiation into a standardized linguistic domain abstracts his experience by remaking him in the image of a national hero and purveyor of English imperial history as manifest destiny. The poem, like the photographically derived engravings from the *Illustrated London News* that adorn the walls of the homesick colonel’s hut, distances the shell-shocked soldier from the immediacy of his experience while seeming to represent it more faithfully. Moreover, this anecdote’s source — Hallam Tennyson’s archive of his father’s papers — also suggests the constitutive role
that an abstracted idea of the intended audience played in the poem’s production. For as elitist as Tennyson’s personal politics were, an acute awareness of the soldiers’ possible responses haunts his correspondence and ultimately results — because it caters so carefully to his readers’ desire — in the transformation of the poem from a series of private domestic negotiations into a cultural event which so thoroughly overshadowed the actual events of the battle that it still stands, along with Florence Nightingale’s heroic endeavors, as a representative icon of nineteenth century British imperial culture.

With his readers in mind, Tennyson went to extraordinary lengths to ensure the historical accuracy of the poem, an attention to detail that resulted in a particularly voluminous anxiety-ridden correspondence. Of vital concern was the number of men in the charge. According to Emily Tennyson’s correspondence, the *Times* leader on 13 November 1854 claimed the charge was “about seven hundred strong” and then further on in the piece seven hundred, a figure subsequently contradicted in a special correspondent’s report that claimed to have seen six hundred and seven men (qtd. in Ricks, *Tennyson* 327). These contradictory reports sent Tennyson into a spiral of anxiety. Preferring the figure of six hundred for metrical reasons, he was prepared to sacrifice form for accuracy if the figure was closer to seven hundred. This seemingly absurd literalism attests to the necessity of distinguishing between contemporary and Victorian conceptions of empirical truth, a distinction that must seriously take the anecdote of the shell-shocked soldier’s recognition of Tennyson’s poem as more “real” than his own experience.

Ruskin grounded his well-known attack on the truth value of photography on a very similar sense of a fallible observer, listener, or reader in need of a cluster of compensatory technical and discursive structures to detect the “real” truth. Much to Roger Fenton’s frustration, Victorian critics such as Ruskin continued to describe the art of photography as enslaved to the limitations of the technology of the camera and the developing process. Although initially fascinated by photography’s representational potential, Ruskin’s ultimately sceptical interpretation of the technical limitations of the photographic process exemplifies the association of photography with the contingencies of subjective vision and the potential for visual aberration:

Photographs never look entirely clear and sharp; but because clearness is supposed a merit in them, they are usually taken from very clearly marked and un-Turnerian subjects; and such results as are misty and faint, though often precisely those which contain the most subtle renderings of nature, are thrown away, and the clear ones only are preserved. Those clear ones depend for much of their force on the faults of the process. Photography either exaggerates shadows, or loses details in the lights . . . But a delicately taken photograph of a truly Turnerian subject, is far more like Turner in the drawing than it is to the work of any other artist; though, in the system of chiaroscuro, being entirely and necessarily Rembrandtesque, the subtle mystery of the touch (Turnerism, carried to an infinitely wrought refinement) is not usually perceived (6: 81–82).

The desire for distinction driving this passage again reveals the dependent relationship between traditional aesthetic practices and modern visual technologies. Underlying Ruskin’s evaluation of photography’s aesthetic merits was an anxiety that traditional cultural hierarchies were under threat from the popularization of optical theory through new media, such as the photograph and the stereograph. His privileging of the veracity
of a Turner image over a photograph attempts to reinstitute a hierarchy which positions photography as the lesser art, while mining the optical discourse it manifests to frame his defence of Turner’s power to provide an exterior reflection of the moment of “pure perception” when a ray of light hits the retina and an image appears in the play of light and shadow. As Lindsay Smith has noted, that Ruskin should choose to construct an analogy between Turnerian execution and the contingency of the photographic medium is a sign of the ubiquitous deployment of photography in Victorian aesthetic discourse as a context for re-evaluating the “limits of optical fidelity” (Smith, *Victorian Photography* 203).

While they address different concerns, the complex interplay between new technologies and more established narrative techniques that shape Tennyson’s and Fenton’s work resonates strongly with Ruskin’s discursively entangled resistance to the threat photography posed to the creative integrity of the imagination. Like Ruskin, both Tennyson and Fenton resist the commodification of the aesthetic process, yet all three modify their work to cater to and guide the desires of their increasingly diverse and expanding audiences. Correspondingly commodified artefacts such as the cheaply printed book, the one shilling photographic image, or the stereograph opened up a new world to consumers, which they could now afford to take home and assimilate into their own private histories. Accompanying this illusion of immediacy however was a standardization of the ways in which the world could be viewed. Roger Fenton’s abstract photographs and Tennyson’s idealizing sentiments reflect this interest in shaping their consumer’s perception of their place in the world; but this mutual desire also reveals how acutely aware they both were of the complex symbolic economy in which their work had come to circulate.

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NOTES

1. “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” is advertised in the back of the exhibition catalogue for one shilling, one d. Attached to the same page is an ordering card in which the subscriber is invited to insert their name, address, and date of order — addressed to Thomas Agnew and Sons or to them at “The Exhibition of the Photographic Pictures,” 5 Pall Mall East, London. Inside the cover page there is also an excerpt from the *Times’* Paris correspondent dated 12 September 1855:

Mr. R. Fenton, on Wednesday evening, had audience of an hour with the Emperor, at St Cloud, to exhibit to His Majesty 350 Photographic Views, taken by him in the Crimea during the present year. . . . Yesterday Mr. Fenton and Mr. Agnew were commanded to be in attendance on the Emperor at half-past 10, when His Majesty again expressed his approval, and commanded these gentleman to prepare immediately a number of copies of the Views. The work will be published under the patronage of the Emperor, of the Queen of England, and of Prince Albert, to whom the views were submitted at Osborne some days ago. (8)

On page ten, authors of the catalogue state “nos. 152 to 162 inclusive is the Panorama Picture of THE PLATEAU BEFORE SEBASTAPOL, commencing at Inkermann. the Spectator is supposed to move round to the right.” “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” is numbered two hundred and eighteen and appears on page 13.
2. Gernsheim and Gernsheim (1–10) and Green-Lewis (97–144) also note the connection between Tennyson’s poem and Fenton’s exhibition.

3. Fenton’s photographs provide a stark contrast to Alexander Gardner’s confronting images of the American Civil War. For a recent analysis of Gardner’s work, see Trachtenberg.

4. Fenton was one of the pioneers in the refinement of the wet collodion developing process invented by Frederick Scott Archer in 1849. John Hannavy suggests that it was Fenton’s involvement in the development of collodion that resulted in his selection for the Crimea expedition. For details of Fenton’s solutions to the alkalinity of the nitrate bath, see Hannavy 45–47. Only thirty years later amateurs had access to far superior photographic technology. Fast bromide gelatine plates were on the market in Europe and America (Eastman) by the early 1880s. In the mid 1880s Scientific American published instructions for making a gelatine bromide emulsion for amateur photographers, and in the late 1880s the same journal published promotional pieces on the new Eastman Dry Plate and Film Co.’s new camera (with paper film) as well as the same company’s new Kodak Camera (“Instantaneous Photography” 25–30).

5. Altick establishes that there was a substantial crossover between audiences who attended both popular shows and more elite exhibitions, a crossover suggesting the likely cross-pollination of ways of viewing both types of events against the grain of attempts to manage and hierarchize audience response (Shows 480–81).

6. Fenton contributed to this new craze for Orientalist themes that pervaded London exhibitions in the 1850s, exhibiting his “Orientalist Suite” of photographs, to use Baldwin’s term, in Edinburgh and London from late 1858 to early 1859. Trading on the success and air of authenticity his Crimea photographs had created, these images were shot in Fenton’s London studio mocked up to resemble Oriental interiors and used European models dressed up as an unconvincing array of Pashas, Bayaderes and Odalisques. Fenton also had a taste, which he developed in the Crimea, for dressing up and photographing himself in Oriental costume; a predilection shared by contemporaries such as Francis Frith, Charles Negre, and William Morris Grundy; see Baldwin.

7. Fenton’s letters are filled with anecdotes comparing battles to fireworks displays as well as descriptions of lengthy dinners, consuming champagne, and entertaining and being entertained by officers’ wives, royalty and a range of eminent political figures.

8. Tennyson’s resistance to the exigencies of modernity are well documented and have been analyzed from a range of methodological perspectives; see Armstrong, Tucker, and Sinfield.

9. These circulation figures are cited in an unascribed review of the Times 1788–1855 and Frederick Knight Hunt’s The Fourth Estate in the Westminster Review. The reviewer notes that the Times monopolized three quarters of total newspaper circulation.

10. Unfortunately for Agnew, this proved to be a false hope.

11. The Illustrated Times began publication on 9 June 1855.

12. Crary describes the optical theory that optical instruments such as the stereoscope manifested. Beer’s recent work on Helmholtz, Tyndall, and Hopkins also demonstrates the pervasive presence of optical theory in Victorian popular science (242–72).

WORKS CITED


*Exhibition of the Photographic Pictures taken in The Crimea. by Roger Fenton, ESQ. During the Spring and Summer of the Present Year at the Gallery of the Water Colour Society, No. 5 Pall Mall East. Open from Ten Till dusk. admission, one shilling. - Catalogues, Sixpence*. Printed for Messrs. Thomas Agnew and Sons, Publishers and Printlers to Her Majesty, Exchange Street, Manchester, 1855. n.p. Gernsheim Collection. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.


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