

Curatorial Reading and Endless War

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It is a truism that all thinking about the past takes shape in dialogue with the present. But a corollary is that acts of historical thinking necessarily imply judgments on the present, and on the material conditions under which such historical work might transpire in the first place. As Edward Said explains, critics “embody in writing those processes and actual conditions in the present by means of which [past] art and writing bear significance” (53, emphasis original). Any discussion of historical method must therefore unfold with respect to the material situation in which criticism can be undertaken now.¹ The precarity of this situation is well known: increasing corporatization of university management; universal consensus on the preeminence of science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) fields; downward pressure on inquiry with net negative financial outlooks; and the consequent deprioritization of the interpretive humanities under now-permanent budgetary retrenchment. If, as Bruno Latour suggests in a telling industrial metaphor, critique has “run out of steam,” it has done so at least in part because of its dismissal from the factory floor of the modern university. While exceptions to this doomsday storyline can be cited, the long view suggests that critical activity in the American university system will face two choices: render itself compatible with established and still-emergent paradigms of instrumental value and scientific “knowledge work” or (eventually) be abandoned altogether.²

ABSTRACT: This article presumes that recent debates about the nature of reading take implicit positions on the corporate university’s project of replacing critical with instrumental reason. In response it argues for a “curatorial” approach to historical objects, one predicated on a relation of care that is intrinsic (aimed at cultural objects themselves) and extrinsic (aimed at critiquing the violence such objects necessarily mediate). Three photographs by Felice Beato stand as test cases: via the trope of prosopopoeia, or displacement, these images are held to perform the conceptual activity most often ascribed to (later) critics. Seen curatorially, Beato’s dynamic images enable us (in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms) to be reparative in reading them but properly paranoid about the ongoing work of empire.

The first section of this essay places recent debates about critical method in the context of the new academic downsizing. In response, it elaborates what I call a “curatorial” approach to reading Victorian cultural objects, one predicated not just on an ethics but on a politics of care. The aim of such a practice is to restore a positive affective relation toward our objects of study while preserving the project of critique—a formula that could help position literary criticism to make more persuasive arguments about its relevance to funding bodies and undergraduates who, for understandable reasons, prefer discourses of appreciation to stances of critique or attack. The second part brings together three photographs by Felice Beato to demonstrate how such a curatorial practice might proceed. As I work to show, these dynamic objects exceed the binaries of “depth” and “surface,” “paranoid” or “reparative” reading, that we might bring to bear on them and instead perform their own distinct acts of critical link-making.

In choosing to read objects as performing acts of conceptual connection and methodological self-analysis, I make a decision in the sense of a wager, the correctness of which cannot be calculated in advance, and which for that reason cannot take place except in relation to a framework of ends. To say this, however, is to say that those aims are beyond the cost-benefit calculus of instrumental reason and are “finally unjustifiable” insofar as they constitute first principles or extrarational commitments (Derrida, *Gift* 71): matters not of calculation but of belief.³ Under contemporary pressures, we might do well to embrace rather than avoid the challenge to articulate beliefs in this sense. Specifically, I suggest that we part ways with empiricist observation and instrumental calculation and articulate, instead, a statement of belief reflecting a doubled relation of care: on the one hand, a care for individual cultural objects in all their concrete specificity, and on the other, for the historical damage that all documents of Victorian modernity necessarily mediate.

In looking at the brutal photographs of Victorian “small wars”⁴ I focus on here, this means caring for the human bodies that have been abandoned, killed, or otherwise cast out from the Victorian era’s globalized system of belonging. Beato’s images organize an encounter between scenes of such violent exclusion and our own readerly practice: in framing for our judgment burned, hanged, and unburied bodies from Victorian endless war, these objects highlight with special urgency the importance of care in both of the senses I’ve described.

For this reason, Beato's images stand as test cases for a mode of engagement that might have tactical value in the effort to address the particular methodological, institutional, and therefore political challenges facing criticism now.

Other than Paranoid

Since the act of reading is where critic and object come together, it makes sense that this site of interface, scene of encounter, or moment of information exchange is where the new struggles over literary method have played out. (These metaphors themselves take positions on the nature of this act.) Given the centrality of nineteenth-century archives to developments in areas like quantitative textual analysis and cognitive neuroscience, Victorianists are perhaps especially aware of the potential for industrialized information sciences to reanimate a stalled literary studies. Yet such technical innovations also restage at the level of method a more general confusion over the institutional future of the humanities, as defunded critics reach for newer languages and fresher justifications under conditions of universalized austerity.

The pressure on a precariously positioned criticism to remain relevant to a world that no longer seems to need it perhaps helps explain the more or less extreme positivism shared by the new methods currently arrayed for our selection. Like brain scans that disclose "increase[s] in blood flow during close reading" of *Mansfield Park* (1814) (Goldman), distant reading, digital reading, and surface reading all arguably share a faith in the critic's ability to apprehend directly a world of objects that is out there, allegedly "independent of interpretation" (Moretti 30). Models that borrow their authority from the sciences—as I am arguing these do, even if they do not acknowledge as much—are increasingly technologically sophisticated and promise to restructure what we already know about the nineteenth century. Yet they can do no more than this, since they operate according to the common-sense, positivistic epistemology G. W. F. Hegel calls *Verstand*: the "reified, reifying thinking" (Jameson, *Valences* 81) whose "domain is that real world of Being, of physical objects" (81-82) as opposed to forms of understanding (*Vernunft*) that work speculatively: not bit-counting, but synthesis. The data miner's fidelity to the world's forms of appearance resonates with established modes of literary observation like book history, itself now reinvigorated under

the auspices of “media archaeology” and the so-called new materialism. Perhaps predictably, a complement to these and other nondialectical materialisms has emerged in returns to the preconceptual pleasures of aesthetic experience, what Rita Felski calls the “intense responses, inchoate emotions, [and] quasi-visceral passions” of literary encounters (“After” 31). Like positivistic data processing, this neuro-mantic supplement transfers priority to a sovereign object world; both tendencies place the reading or viewing subject in a more or less passive position of receptivity to phenomena outside herself. Such object-oriented methods have the secondary effect of abandoning critique itself, since the critical intellects from which dissent might originate are now rewritten as passive recorders exerting “minimal critical agency” (Best and Marcus 17).

As is now well known, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s introduction to *The Way We Read Now* (2009) packaged these and other critiques of critique under the brand name of “surface reading.” Where symptomatic strategies had trained politically motivated attention on the silenced, obscured, and absent, surface reading advertised a shift toward the tactile, the obvious, and the manifest—the idea being to “accep[t] texts, deferring to them instead of mastering or using them as objects” (Best and Marcus 10). Such a move broke explicitly with thinkers like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, who had translated into the postcolonial idiom the Marxian assumption that all cultural forms are inescapably worlded.⁵ Yet in trading away one set of empirical commitments for other, textual ones, surface reading also promised something more defensible, namely a reversal of the reader’s affective valences from negative to positive. (The appeal of this re-enchanting move to suspicion-weary literary scholars arguably accounts for surface reading’s traction despite its conceptual shortcomings.) This new affective stance in any case promised to replot the melodrama in which critics had cast themselves as heroes, waging sanctimonious holy wars not just on readerly naivete but also, it sometimes seemed, on literature itself—a storyline all too familiar from caricatures of the culture wars. In the words of Heather Love’s related argument, modes that prioritize the viewed object over the viewing subject could challenge “the ethical and political agency of the scholar-critic” (376). Such modesty toward objects had tactical institutional benefits insofar as it 1) sketched a domain of justified operation for literary studies and 2) regrounded literary pedagogies, since—as Felski, among others, observes

("After")—the model of teacher-as-Promethean-iconoclast fails in the classroom, where at least one task is to show why anyone might care about these books in the first place.⁶ But in scholarship and teaching both, deferring uncritically to objects also ensures a reiterative, even positivistic relationship to the items under observation, since any merely descriptive method must perforce narrate in other terms what already is, however rich or variegated that extant reality might be.⁷ Like other forms of anticritical observation, precritical appreciation, or extracritical visualization, readings following what Love calls the "descriptive turn" are anti-normative in the sense that they avow a concern not with what ought to be but with what is.⁸

The price of such methods' properly ethical stance within the reading encounter was therefore exacted in the form of an evacuation of the category of the (extrinsically) political, an outcome Best and Marcus seemed eager to embrace when they argued for depoliticization under the auspices of more modest critical postures.⁹ This principled de-worlding becomes explicit in statements like Felski's call to "amplify and replenish our sense of how things are" ("Suspicious" 34); what if "how things are" is not good enough? By sidestepping and even mocking the (extrinsic) political orientation of engaged criticism—the relic of a heroic criticism now superseded—the anticritical position silently embraced another politics, namely the common-sense faith in appearances that Marx at least, here following Hegel, viewed as obfuscatory. At issue in this refreshed debate over iconoclasm—between image-smashers and image-lovers, critics and fetishists—is the status of icons or appearances, but also of commitment as such.¹⁰ In contrast to oppositional practices such as feminism, Marxism, and postcolonial studies that have enabled work in Victorian studies since the 1980s, then, Best and Marcus find in "current work" (and seem to share) "a skepticism . . . about any kind of transcendent value we might use to justify intellectual work" (16).¹¹ This evacuation of the category of ends leaves only means, an "empty methodology" in which the very sophistication of technique masks an absence of purpose (Horkheimer 57). In this case, unwittingly or not, anti-normative positions passively accept or actively further the emergent positivism of the new university, thus belatedly fulfilling John Crow Ransom's hope, in "Criticism Inc." (1937), that literary criticism might someday conform to the "scientific, . . . precise, and systematic" protocols of a "business" (qtd. in Newfield 152).

I have surveyed these reading wars because in the experiment that follows I hope not to offer a new solution but to combine existing approaches to newly relevant effect. My aim is to stage a kind of rapprochement between the (intrinsically engaged) methods of Latourian critics like Love and the (extrinsically engaged) Marxist-inspired practices singled out for derision by Best and Marcus. Specifically, my effort is to remain “paranoid” (to adapt Eve Sedgwick’s terms) or critical about extrinsic matters of historical violence (politics) while adopting a “reparative” or positive dispensation toward the individual objects of its intrinsic acts of reading. (Note, however, that Sedgwick herself never strayed from conceiving reading as politicized engagement, even in her most reparative readings.¹² To do so, I work to displace conceptual activity from the critic to the object by means of a strategic rhetorical trope. My sense is that by displacing the work of thought onto our objects, we might dispense with poses of readerly transcendence while keeping faith with the project of critique. I use the term “curatorial” to describe this experiment in an effort to reactivate that word’s etymological roots in the Latin *curare*: to care, to take care of.

Curation would seem an unlikely candidate for critical revival. In literature, the curator finds his image in *Middlemarch*’s Edward Casaubon (1872-74), compiling dead knowledge in a modernizing world. In criticism the curator is the Foucauldian knowledge-worker of Thomas Richards’s *The Imperial Archive*, arranging extant information in ways more likely to do the work of empire than critique it (11-44). For his part, Theodor Adorno describes witheringly “the official curators of culture”: guardians of the status quo whose political interest in reproducing dominant regimes of value finds voice in a discourse of appreciation, a burnishing of the already-there in the form of pat clichés about, for example, classical aesthetics (qtd. in North 191). For Adorno, this cozy relation to the given results in a reading practice neutered of its ability to disrupt conceptually its source material, a helplessness in the face of the empirical that makes its function essentially ideological. In this form, curation would share the positivist’s bias toward what Felski called “the way things are” (“Suspicious” 8).¹³

Yet Adorno’s twist—one I follow here—is to suggest that the curator’s dream of perfect social reproduction is exceeded by objects themselves. What Adorno understands as involving an acknowledgment of “the preponderance of the object” (*Vorrang des Objekts*) (183-86) shares with Love’s descriptive method an interest in reversing the priorities of

post-Enlightenment thought to place objects, not their observers, in the position of “precedence” (184). But unlike other object-oriented methods, Adorno describes the refusal of theoretically dynamic objects to fit inside the static conceptual containers we bring to them. What J. M. Bernstein calls Adorno’s sense of “the normative authority of the factual” (316) thus reverses the relationship between descriptive and critical procedures—and the categories of “is” and “ought”—since here the object, not the subject, is held to perform the interruptive conceptual operations Adorno understands as critique—that is, thinking.

To ascribe theoretical activity to objects involves some of the oldest rhetorical moves in literature: not just *ekphrasis*, or the literary description of plastic objects, but also *prosopopoeia* (from the Greek *prósopon*, face, person, and *poiéin*, to make, to do): the device by which the poet offers her own ideas as the voice of something outside herself.¹³ This is the process of strategic dislocation John Keats models, for example, when he identifies in objects like urns the power to “tease us out of thought / As doth eternity” (lines 44–45). Keats’s modesty is knowingly false, since the object simultaneously cancels the poet’s thinking (teasing us out of it) and performs it for him (teasing *out of us* our thought); both senses are cemented together in the prosopopoetic trope.¹⁴

Paul de Man critiques this trope in William Wordsworth’s poetry (“Autobiography”), but my suggestion is that it could be useful for criticism now. By engaging knowingly in such a rhetorical displacement as Keats performs here, critics of historical texts might follow Love and others in ceding—or tactically appearing to cede—their heroic reader’s position, even while departing from observational approaches that are bound to reproduce the conceptual content of the works now granted the power to overawe us. To embrace the prosopopoetic logic of curatorial reading—as we enable objects to “express / . . . more sweetly than our rhyme” (Keats lines 3–4)—would be strategically to imagine Victorian objects as particular kinds of subjects: dynamic agents of thought, speakers from the grave, commenting on their own historical conditions of emergence and, in the cases of the photographs I turn to now, defusing in advance the metaphors of reading we might use, belatedly, to explicate them.

Internally dynamic processes rather than inertly stable things, such emancipated objects would become active agents of theoretical activity, endowed by us, their readers, with the power to express

conceptual activity that we, as later witnesses, merely record. That such a procedure would be rhetorical rather than ontological is plain: the critic has transferred her work to an object. But this displacement would preserve enchantment toward historical objects while enabling critics facing unexampled institutional pressures to continue the project of critique. We would preserve critical activity while keeping faith with our objects of study—remain paranoid about Victorian history while reading its objects with reparative care.

I have selected photographs from the frayed edges of the Victorian world system because they underscore with special force just what it is we assent to when we abandon critique. It bears recalling that, in addition to being an age of equipoise and improvement, the Victorian period was also an age of never-ending war. The period between 1837 and 1901 included no fewer than 228 separate armed conflicts; these included declared wars like the Crimean and the Boer Wars, but also asymmetrical conflicts, punitive campaigns, and rebellions put down by sword and musket and maxim gun. When I transcribed them from Byron Farwell's jingoistic *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* into Microsoft Excel, the list ran to seven full pages. The disconcerting abundance of this killing suggests that the icons we take to characterize the world's first liberal empire should include not just the middle-class hearth or the democratic ballot box but the boneyards of the global periphery. It was in these zones where Beato, camera in tow, trained attention on human bodies that found themselves excluded by force from what disciplinary conventions now direct us to call the global nineteenth century.

Unburial Grounds

The first of three spaces of death I examine depicts the bombardment of Shimonoseki, a tiny and to us forgotten 1864 operation on the southwest sea coast of Japan (fig. 1). Farwell's list groups it with similar episodes into a single entry (364-72). Merely a fraction of a "little war," this operation sought to open a route for international trade through the Japanese islands and "proved a turning point . . . in Japanese history" (Norman 64) since it defeated the Chōshū clan, a precapitalist social group that had until this point resisted incorporation into the progressively universalizing world market. Like all of Beato's documentary pictures, this one is obsessively constructed.



Fig. 1. Felice Beato, *Shimonoseki. La 2ème Batterie de Matamoura* (British Naval Landing Party at the Maedamura Battery, Shimonoseki), 1864, albumen silver print, courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Partial gift from the Wilson Centre for Photography.

Tilted upward to face the water, the five captured cannon create a diagonal structural line that links with the downward-sloping hill somewhere beyond the picture's left edge. The resulting triangular form embraces the presumed focal point, a half-limp Union Jack. The national emblem has been made ghostly by a long exposure, inscribing duration into this instant and marking the image as a process and not a thing. Like all skies photographed using the blue-sensitive wet collodion process, the one behind this dazed victory party is overexposed and thus vacant. Almost invisibly, a plume of smoke dissipates. As in the first stanza of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798), which describes "wreathes of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees" (lines 18-19) the smoke here offers what Wordsworth called "uncertain notice" (line 20): it is a signifier whose referent cannot be directly ascertained. But where Wordsworth drew from a storehouse of tropes for poetic autonomy to imagine "vagrant dwellers" (line 21) and "some Hermit" (line 22) as the referents for his vaporous sign, we know from the cannon, the soldiers, and the date in the caption that a village full of Japanese peasants has been burned.

Beato's trailing smoke has a methodological pedigree. In readings by Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson that epitomize the paradigmatically "suspicious" practices of the New Historicism, the wreaths of smoke in "Tintern Abbey" stood as key evidence in the case against the Romantic strategy of evasion. For Levinson and a generation of later symptomatic readers, Wordsworth's smoke emblemized not just how the poet turns impoverished refugees into figures for creativity (it was the campfires of the homeless that made the smoke), but also the ways in which all literary texts occlude their traumatic historical contexts—the "war, revolution, poverty, diaspora, terror, and so on" that Alan Liu describes in a reflection on his own former reading practice (*Local* 260). Like Best and Marcus, Liu indicates that the New Historicist's effort to counter the obscuring moves of heroic poets required its own heroism, namely the critic's own principled acts of decryption, aimed at unearthing the "significant truths" hidden under the text's surface (Best and Marcus 4). Conspicuous absences like the burning of villages in the name of progress would be illuminated through the critic's act of heroic digging.

Landing Party testifies to the inadequacy of these mixed metaphors. To begin, the physical affordances of this flat print push the now-ethically charged categories of background and foreground together, even while seeming to depend on their distance. The image's manifest surface—the patriotic "party" celebrating victory over an archaic tribe—and its latent depth—the violent, obscured underside of modernization—in fact exist on the same level, an arrangement that merely heightens the finally undecidable relationship between surface and depth that de Man among others suggests characterizes any text (*Allegories* 12).

The epistemological difficulties of this problematic— which structures iconoclastic critical approaches no less than it drives detective fiction, in the form of the clue—are as evident in Beato's image as in McGann's reading of "Tintern Abbey," which must claim that the allegedly absent poverty and terror are never "entirely displaced" from the text (85–86). The reading I am offering of *Landing Party* seeks neither to uncover an obscured historical violence nor to ascribe that act of unmasking to the image itself. I am suggesting instead that the photograph can and should be seen as transforming those very spatial (and ethical) figures of reading into its subject. What *Landing Party* shows, from this curatorial angle, is neither a victory party nor a brutal

act of asymmetrical war so much as the operation of transcoding by which brute violence might appear as something called victory: a landing party, as the caption has it. The only thing this object makes manifest or unmask, I mean, is the inadequacy of our readerly metaphors to understand the conceptual work the image itself performs.

Beato's work has only recently begun to receive critical attention, and a full account of his life has only in 2010 been definitively pieced together.¹⁵ Born in Venice in the year of the first Reform Bill, Beato became a subject of the British crown in Corfu, then a British protectorate. As a teenager he moved to Constantinople, where he learned the wet collodion albumen processes and the ins and outs of professional photography. Filling in for and later displacing his mentor James Robertson, who had been assigned to replace Roger Fenton in the Crimea (Lacoste 184), Beato made some 150 images there; created tourist albums of the Holy Land; took brutal documentary photographs of the Opium Wars in China; and in February 1858, just after the final British reoccupation of Lucknow, went to India, where, as Zahid Chaudhary has recently shown, he produced the most important and devastating images of the Mutiny we have. Amid these appointments Beato photographed battlefields and buildings and native peoples in India and China; traveled to Japan, where he made fortunes (and lost them) as a speculator; and documented England's 1885 counterinsurgency in Sudan. He did piecework for the American army too, photographing operations in Asia between excursions to, for example, Korea, where he took the first photographs of that nation for the West. He wound up in Burma, selling furniture and curios to tourists.

He was a technical innovator as well, a pioneer in what was then new media: Beato developed new modes of transporting chemicals, perfected formulas for mixing them, and claimed to have reduced exposure time by half, to four seconds. In 1880 he testified as an expert to the London Photographic Association. He was the first person in history to photograph enemy war dead during the Opium Wars, beating the American Matthew Brady by nearly a decade with photographic "scenes of abject, unredeemed victimization, bleached by light, [that] are reminiscent of Goya's *Disasters of War*" (Ritchin 121). Employed as an embedded photographer and working freelance, operating under, alongside, and outside the supervision of the British state throughout the Victorian era, Beato more than anyone helped mediate his era's never-ending war for a burgeoning British image culture. Yet

his provisional and instrumental relation to his work—he was a hustler above all, working between art and commerce, subject to an Empire in which he had no vote—means that any efforts to ground readings in authorial intention can only produce new questions. We simply cannot ascribe a definitive purpose to his work.¹⁶

In keeping with the ample silence of many of his war images—their capacity to speak without offering a thesis, or to signify while defying mere description—Beato’s photos of the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857–59 seem to mean both too much and not enough; they go further to build the problem of reading them into their own content. Beato arrived to the subcontinent in time to photograph the aftermath of the key episodes in Britain’s brutal counterinsurgency. Debates about the nature of the revolt continue; what is clear is that the amorphous anticolonial struggle that Marx, in his dispatches to the *New York Tribune*, called the “War for Indian Independence” was felt by many in England as a massive interruption to its global imperium: a “great crisis in our national history” and “our greatest and most fearful disaster,” as contemporaries observed (qtd. in Herbert 2).¹⁷ To Indians it was yet more disastrous, since in overcoming this temporary challenge to its paramountcy, “no quarter was given by the British. . . . Tens of thousands of soldiers and village guerillas were hanged, shot, or blown from guns” (Bayly 172, 194)—the last technique referring to the chaining of a live body over the mouth of a cannon and then firing.

Should we be paranoid or reparative when confronted with this history? One of the many images Beato made in India builds this question into its very form, as if to anticipate our belated relationship to its act of critical seeing (fig. 2). The albumen print shows two dead fighters dangling like wraiths against another evacuated sky. One is hooded. Alternating with disturbing beauty between dark and light values, hired soldiers and Sepoys gather around the central scene of lynching. Just one man’s face is visible; we can neither make out his expression nor know what he sees. The photograph in this way refuses to complete the circuit of interpretation built into its own design. Rather than showing a brutal act of sovereign killing or a triumphant scene of justified violence, this image shows implicated witnesses reading that (undecidable) thing. The caption calls it “The Hanging of Two Rebels,” but what the photo depicts is not a hanging so much as a hanging being watched.

Discussing a strikingly similar image—the now-iconic 1930 photo of Thomas Shipp and Abraham Smith dangling from a tree in

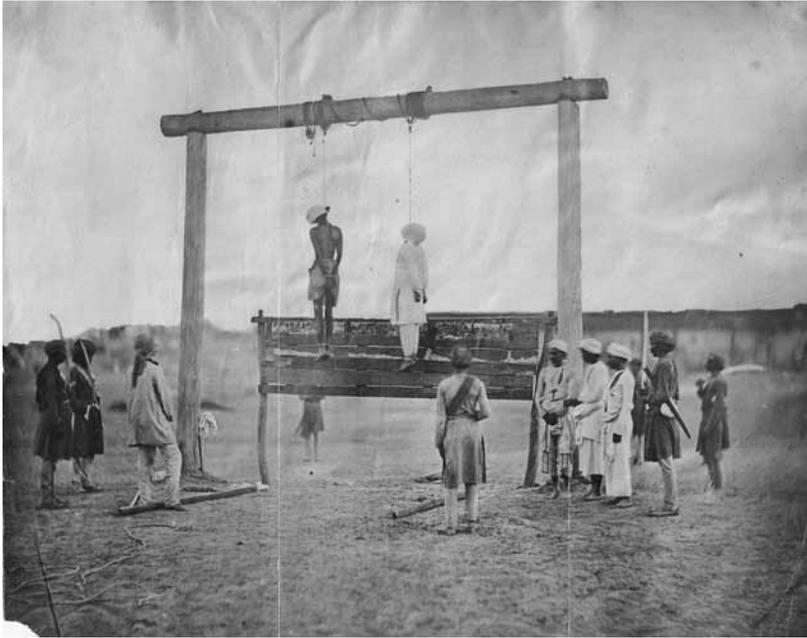


Fig. 2. Felice Beato, *The Hanging of Two Rebels*, 1858, albumen silver print, courtesy of the Alkazi Collection of Photography.

Marion, Indiana—Shawn Michelle Smith has noted that lynching photographs, like all photographic images, don't work as evidence in any straightforward way. Smith explains that the lynching photo of Shipp and Smith has been used as propaganda by both white supremacists and the NAACP; the “malleability of . . . photographs as evidence” (37) derives from the fact that the evidentiary content of photographs is not inside the object so much as it is called into being by the triangulated relationships among the creator, the depicted scene and/or people, and (most crucially) the reader of the image and her institutional situation.¹⁸ Given that Stanley Fish suggested as much of Milton's poetry in the 1970s, Smith's observation means that photos of historical violence like Beato's only make especially palpable the fact that, in Fish's words, “the objectivity of [any] text is an illusion . . . of self-sufficiency and completeness” (82); awareness of the shaping power of readerly decisions “forces you to be aware of ‘it’ as a changing object—and therefore no ‘object’ at all” (82–83).

Smith's re-outfitting of reader-response criticism at the scene of racialized killing discloses the political stakes for what can seem, in Fish, like a critical parlor game. For *Hanging*, this means that Beato's

“object” disables depth-based reading practices no less than surface-based ones, since no reading could hope to make manifest, expose, or even deconstruct this photograph’s meaning—let alone describe it. The object’s communicative content does not exist as an ontological facet of the object itself, whether “sediment[ed]” (Jameson, *Political* 20) or superficial. Nor yet can it ever become specifiable in terms of what Derrida calls a text’s “*voudrait dire*” or its “conscious, voluntary, intentional” meaning (*Of Grammatology* 158). What does this photo want to say?

We might say it wants to celebrate victory and is thus a problematic apology for state violence deserving (critical) condemnation. Alternatively, we could say that the image wants to critique the rhetoric of victory and thus warrants an (affirmative) fetishization. Or again we might say, via Derrida, that it wants to celebrate victory but in fact (and against its “will”) critiques that very thing. (Or vice versa: it wants to critique violence but actually reaffirms it.) Still another tactic would be to simply describe it: but how? To take any such route would be to hypostatize a dynamic set of relations into a stable thing, frozen into self-identity and made knowable (and therefore mastered) using any one of the methods just surveyed. I am suggesting that instead of crystallizing into this standstill, the photograph generates what Fish refers to as a “pressure for judgment,” a “responsibility of deciding . . . transferred from the words on the page to the reader” (166). The interrupted network of interpretation built into Beato’s image replicates our own predicament as later viewers as we, like these hired agents of a foreign state, gaze at a spectacle of military justice. Is that what we see?

The responsibility to decide outlined by Fish—what Derrida labels the “task of reading” (*Of Grammatology* 158)—is thus encoded into this picture’s own formal construction. From the curatorial perspective I am advancing here, this knowing dynamism can be considered the object’s defining problematic, what it is “about.”¹⁹ Beato’s *Hanging*, in other words, should be read as staging in advance a formal reconfiguration of exactly the challenge to interpret facing us as we, with Smith, Jameson, Derrida, and those mute executioners, watch it. The image calls us to decide what we see and refuses to provide a guarantee for that decision.

Beato’s most famous image (fig. 3), and the only to have received sustained critical attention, heightens still further the ethical and political stakes of these seemingly only methodological questions

of reading. The massacre it seeks to commemorate was a decisive one in the British counterinsurgency. Indian fighters had retreated to the fortress at Lucknow, the city at the center of the Awadh (Oudh) region which, thanks to Henry Havelock's relief of the residency complex there in September 1857 and Colin Campbell's second reoccupation of the city that November, had become ground zero for British mythologies of the revolt (Bayly 181). When the fortress walls were finally breached in that second liberation, Campbell sent in the Sikhs and Scots, who systematically executed some two thousand Indians. Like other episodes of British valor, the killing at Lucknow was instantly memorialized in ballads, lithographs, eyewitness accounts, and historical overviews both popular and scholarly, nearly all of them emphasizing how, for example, "gallant Highlanders" and "daring and invincible Sikhs . . . deal[t] death" to "the miscreants, the blood-stained monsters of Cawnpore" (*Sepoy's Daughter* 440). Eyewitness Frederick Roberts recalled it more vividly:

It was beautiful to see them going at it, regularly racing to see who should be first in. They went, and before half an hour was over, nearly 2,000 Pandies were on the ground dead or dying. I never saw such a sight. They were literally in heaps, and when I went in were a heaving mass, some dead, but most wounded and unable to get up from the crush. How so many got crowded together I can't understand. You had to *walk over them* to cross the court. They showed their hatred even while dying, cursed us and said: "if we could only stand, we would kill you." (103-04, emphasis original)

Four months had elapsed before Beato returned to recreate the already legendary moment. To do so, he exhumed the corpses of dead peasants and arranged their bones on the floor of the courtyard where the killing had taken place. The resulting image is captioned with clinical specificity and ambiguous jingoism, citing specific dates and proper names and referring to "rebels" but also to their "slaughter." It shows what Susan Sontag has called an "unburial ground" (*Regarding* 54).²⁰

Only apparently chaotic, the still-startling image of tattered rags and splayed bones is in fact fastidiously constructed (fig. 4). For scale, Beato positioned four living peasants in carefully arranged poses of desultory boredom amid the bleaching remains. The triangular composition they form at the picture's structural center is flanked on the left by a standing man and a horse, whose movement during the exposure has again inscribed temporal process into this



Fig. 3. Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundra Bagh after the Slaughter of 2,000 Rebels by the 93rd Highlanders and 4th Punjab Regiment. First Attack of Sir Colin Campbell in November 1857, Lucknow, 1858*, albumen silver print, courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

apparently frozen instant. Smashed wood, carefully arranged into compositional figures, works as a structural device, drawing our eye to the focal point of the photo.

In contrast to contemporary accounts that imagined the killing at Secundra Bagh as (in Roberts's word) "beautiful," criticism has treated Beato's image with revulsion, a moral indignation I want to suspend without refuting in my own speculations here. (Beato's image will not let us remain comfortable in either response.) As Tom Prasch notes, Sontag sees *Secundra Bagh* as a "depictio[n] of the horrific," while Fred Ritchin describes it as representing "the grotesqueries of war" (qtd. in Prasch). But horrific to whom? Grotesque to whom? In the most sophisticated reading of it to date, Chaudhary refers to Beato's scene as a "phantasmagor[ia]," citing the fastidious constructedness of the image as evidence that Beato aimed "to capture the immediacy of a historical event" (98). But this offhand nod to intention, like the other critics' assumption of thesis content available for our later moral



Fig. 4. Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundra Bagh*, detail, courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

judgment, is frustrated by the image itself. As Prasch notes, any attempt to fix a meaning to it “only guesses at intentions” (Prasch), while Chaudhary cites the photo’s “critical and reflexive engagement with itself” (99). Obsessively shaped and openly artificial, this actively reconfigured sign of an already-mediated event has been translated through any number of physical processes and formal vocabularies—the digging of the bones, the preparation of the plates, the formalist arrangement of broken wood. Each of these mediating processes remains visible in the photo itself; these steps of figuration can themselves be seen as the photo’s content, what it is about.

Rather than offering “immediacy,” *Secundra Bagh* should be read as calling attention to just the opposite. It speaks most of all to its historical referent’s “mediacy,” since direct historical communication—the inert transfer of information in a documentary mode—is here conspicuously frustrated. Surely what Jennifer Green-Lewis refers to as “the enormity of what [Victorian war] pictures do not show” (107–08) would seem misapplied here to this horrendous surplus of showing. But this showing produces no thesis, speaks no truths: “it is difficult to sustain a reading of the image as a triumphal representation,” Chaudhary notes, even while presuming our desire to do so (99). Is the photograph triumphal or critical? Is it, in W. J. T. Mitchell’s terms, a bad

object or a good one (188)? The decision rests with us, for the only meaning the image definitively contains is its reference to its own construction *as* an image. The “after” of Beato’s caption—“after the slaughter of 2,000 rebels”—is a temporal marker that is also akin to the painterly one, used for labeling imitations: the “after” Titian or “after” Poussin that signals a heavily mediated remake, the student-made mirror image that is inescapably not the original. Rather than waiting inertly for our belated act of historical reading, the hypermediated photo Beato made at Secundra Bagh should be read as depicting its own emergence as an actively reconfigured sign of an already-historical event: that is, as a trope.

Considered as an active process rather than an inert object awaiting our conceptual work, the boneyard Beato made at Secundra Bagh comments on just these metaphors of meaning-making, defeats “description,” and in so doing performs the dialectical activity Adorno conceives of as thinking. As the New Historicist exposure of Wordsworth’s smoke rings reminds us, symptomatic readings in a political key aim, in Jameson’s words, to “detec[t] the traces” of buried violence, “restoring to the surface” the “repressed and buried reality” of history (*Political* 20). The critic works historically only to the extent that he brings to light, unearths, and dis-covers this previously encrypted real.

Beato’s image shows just this process: here a literally buried historical violence has been disinterred, pulled from below, laid open to view, and arranged into striking pattern. In brutal detail, that is, the photograph can be read as uncomfortably literalizing just such a scene of historical unburial as Jameson imagines to constitute reading. Elsewhere disavowed or buried under layer after layer of jingoistic overwriting, the obscene violence of the British counterinsurgency is here discomfitingly manifest.²¹ Not “Pandies,” “monsters,” wretches, or devils, these are simply the remains of dead human bodies, laid open to view. By concretizing the metaphors that govern the hermeneutic method lately critiqued as heroic, the object called *Secundra Bagh* itself performs the very act of historical interpretation Jameson assigns to the critic.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson famously positions the reading subject as the one able, “like Tiresias,” to drink from the mysterious cup of the past (19). Yet in the earlier *Marxism and Form*, Jameson leaves room for the understanding that such historical work might be performed by objects themselves. Discussing Adorno, Jameson notes that the office of dialectical criticism is to create “historical tropes”

(3–60): figures for totality able to temporarily or provisionally freeze into the same frame of analysis what were, before that act of reading, disconnected “worlds.” Such tropes “se[t] into contact with each other . . . two incommensurable realities” (*Marxism* 189). Properly figured, such dialectical images would disclose the mutual involvement of apparently separate sociocultural “levels,” even as they expose their own artificiality as constructions aimed at doing just that. *Secundra Bagh* operates as a historical trope in just this still-vital dialectical sense. For a frozen instant that it marks as such (note the twitch of diachrony registered in the moving horse), this image puts into contact two apparently exclusive narratives—the stories of imperial victory and Indian genocide, of “Mutiny” and “Rebellion,” of “our” survival and “their” unredeemed death—without enabling the matter to be settled into any clear thesis or meaning.²² Documents of civilization are also documents of barbarism, but Beato’s document turns even this inert cliché back into a conceptual struggle and makes this dynamism its operational activity as an image.

Such a reading might seem to replace other critics’ moral revulsion with my own fetishistic attachment. But I also want to note that Beato’s image also exposes the violence of its own trope-making operation, what Sontag in “Against Interpretation” calls the “open aggressiveness” (6) and “impious” (7) tendency toward “ravishment” (8) characteristic of hermeneutic approaches. “The modern style of interpretation,” she continues, as if describing Beato’s *mise en scène*, “excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.” What Latour refers to in a related observation as “the cruel treatment objects undergo in the hands of . . . critical barbarity” (240) is here on full display, since the photographer’s relation to the bodies he has unearthed is nothing if not “cruel,” even “impious.” Insofar as *Secundra Bagh* can be read as turning the metaphors of decryption, penetration, violation, and unburial into its own content, it can also be seen to document the violence constituting any number of our own procedures for reading it.

My approach marks distance from the model of the hero-critic who performs feats of ethico-political unmasking, but also refuses to abandon the political project of care underwriting that model. My claim is that the critic’s act of historical reading—that impious but illuminating trope-making process—has been performed by the object itself. The object has gone further to draw attention to the ethical dangers of this very process, or I have posited as much, in an act of

retorical displacement by which I have chosen to locate critical activity in the object rather than in myself.

Pressure for Judgment

Each of the images I have arranged actively reconfigures a scene of historical violence and uses form to comment on its own act of critical seeing. In so doing, I have said, Beato's eloquent and unremitting images spotlight the problematic status of decision as it relates to any act of historically implicated reading; in other words, to all of them. As Derrida explains of all decisions properly so called, any choice to read this way instead of that—for example, to ascribe conceptual agency to objects prosopopoetically, as I have done here—cannot find authorization in any evidence beyond itself, since then it would not have been a decision but a mere application of instrumental reason: “the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process” (“Force” 24). Decisions in the sense of choices without guarantees can only ever be responses to the undecidable that take place in relation to commitments or ends. Whether Beato's photographs are bad objects or good ones can't be determined except by a choice of this kind on the part of the reader.

Faced with the undecidable objects Beato made at three sites of state-sponsored killing, I have decided to read them as demonstrating creative critical abilities. Beato's dialectical images bring history out of standstill and go further to reflect on and dynamically expose their own figural procedures in doing that thing. Responding curatorially to the pressure for judgment lets us view these photographs reparatively while maintaining a stance of critique toward the obscene violence of Victorian modernity they cannot but translate into form.

Positing the dialectical capacities of Beato's war images helps interrupt tired debates about photography's privileged relation to the real and reintroduces the category of form into often technocentric analyses of media. It also opens new dimensions to our debates about reading. Should we continue to indulge in the critical melodramas that have figured white-hatted critics empowered by chronological remove to expose, unearth, or otherwise disclose the blinkered naivete of Victorian objects? Alternatively, and in the name of re-enchanting our method, should we give in to the temptation to do away with critique altogether and put our faith with the empirical, anti-speculative rationality that

Christopher Newfield (for one) describes as characteristic of today's "managerial humanism" (219)? Or might we test genres of reading that would keep faith not just with nineteenth-century objects in all their textured specificity, but also with those remaindered human bodies on the outside and underside of the Victorian era's promise of inclusion? Situated as we are in corporate universities ready to pay for enchantment but calling out for critique, could we read this way now?

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NOTES

¹Lauren Berlant observes that a "circuit of anxiety around professional value" animates debates over academic method (174). My point is that, knowingly or not, such internecine microbattles embody claims about the nature of the very universities in which such squabbles might or might not transpire in the future.

²"Knowledge work" is Alan Liu's term, intended to highlight the corporate sector's "*conceptual* and not just practical influence" in the twenty-first-century university (*Laws* 36, emphasis original).

³That is, they are not *techné* but *credo*. Jeffrey Williams and Heather Steffen distinguish between the procedural rationality of mere method and those core values that constitute belief (1-2), a distinction I follow here while emphasizing the latter.

⁴Like the related euphemism *low-intensity conflict*, the term *small wars* refers to irregular, sometimes covert military operations like counterinsurgency or so-called peacekeeping; these are often undertaken under executive authority and do not typically involve massed armies on an open battlefield. I use it here to underscore the perversity of the idea that any war is small to those killed by it.

⁵In a spirited critique of the Best and Marcus essay, Crystal Bartolovich explains that, given the key role of psychoanalysis in establishing depth as analytical metaphor, the choice of Fredric Jameson, rather than any Freudian, as a prime target advertises the antipolitical thrust of the surface reading project (115-121).

⁶At least one commentator says that for a text like *Middlemarch*, a "skeptical reading that starts out by problematizing language . . . renders it almost impossible to enter the world of the novel and to realize it imaginatively" (Hochman 39-40).

⁷See Love 377.

⁸In language also deployed by Love, Latour asks whether we might "devise another powerful descriptive tool . . . whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care" ("Why Has Critique" 232). His suggestion is to "rene[w] empiricism" in the form of a "stubbornly realist attitude" (231); the approach I propose here sees things not as inert objects to be observed like scenery (however complex) but active agents of critical activity.

⁹In a performative contradiction, Best and Marcus admit that surface reading "might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are" (16), but this too-easy conclusion—reading surface reading at face value—is described as

a mistake. Should we look deeper? Love's case is more complex, since her essay avoids depoliticization by taking as a test case *Beloved*, which is held to voice its own vaguely oppositional stance, "draw[ing] attention to what is irrecuperable in the historical record" (387). But Love's essay does not thematize this question of political engagement.

¹⁰Describing the relationship of *Paradise Lost* to the problem of iconoclasm, Dan Shore refers to the "bizarre kind of curatorial labor, [the] unusual kind of care" Milton exhibited in composing that poem (35). The present essay acknowledges a debt to Shore's notion of exorbitant care and to conversations with him on this topic.

¹¹Bartolovich shows that surface readings "mark a pointed withdrawal from politics and theory"—surface readers admit as much—"but also—while humanities departments are contracting—internalize the economic imperative to scale back when we should be asserting the importance of humanistic inquiry to the most pressing problems facing our planet" (116).

¹²Sedgwick explains that "[F]or someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppression does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences. To be other than paranoid . . . to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression" (127–128). The present essay is an attempt to take up this challenge by elaborating one version of the "other, alternative . . . kind[s] of cognitive/affective theoretical practice" Sedgwick calls for (126). As Nancy Bentley writes: "It is possible to reimagine critique as enchantment" (149).

¹³Developments in "digital curation" would seem to embody just such noncritical operations. The work of preservation and securing access is, of course, important, even if efforts to further commodify knowledge by "enhanc[ing] the long-term value" of curated information call out for critical historical attention ("What is Digital Curation").

¹⁴See de Man, "Autobiography" 81.

¹⁵See Kelley. Prosopopoeia merely formalizes the complexity of the inevitable traffic between subjects and objects, since any object "can be known only when it entwines with subjectivity" (Adorno 186). Mitchell notes that the question "what do pictures want?" is simply another way of asking what we want from pictures (xv).

¹⁶Anne Lacoste was the first to establish Beato's birthplace. Her account remains the most and perhaps only authoritative source on Beato. I draw on it here and gratefully acknowledge my debt. I part ways with even Zahid Chaudhary's modified symptomatic approach to Beato, but my account is indebted to his superb treatment. I thank Tom Prasch for sharing his research on Beato.

¹⁷This does not mean critics haven't tried. Chaudhary recounts discovering a reference to a Beato diary entry explaining his motivation in making *Secundrah Bagh* (1858). When Chaudhary contacted the author of the 1980 article citing the entry, the writer confessed that he had forged it (220n).

¹⁸C. A. Bayly describes the sociopolitical basis for the uprisings that came to be known as "The Mutiny," merely the largest in a series of actions broadly resistant to British capital expansion (170). For short accounts of the events see Joshi 55–66 and Herbert 3–5. As those and other scholars have noted, the London press was all but unanimous in its calls for vengeance; W. H. Russell's dispatches were conspicuous in their dissent. In any case, the aim of the British counterinsurgency, as one late Victorian historian recalled,

was “to punish and to awe” (qtd. in Joshi 59), a policy applauded by even such otherwise sentimental onlookers as Dickens (c.f. Joshi 50n, 49).

¹⁹Ariella Azoulay also shows that any reading must account for “all the participants in photographic acts . . . approaching the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between these” (23).

²⁰In information and library sciences, “aboutness” is a key problem, since deciding what something is “about” constitutes an interpretive act in its own right; turned into metadata, this act instantly becomes invisible. See Hutchins.

²¹Also see Lacoste 123.

²²Given that “more was written about the revolt than about any other epoch of Indo-British connection” (Chaudhari 7), we might ask to what extent its violence could be considered buried. Critical projects like W. H. Russell’s seem to have exposed British violence, as, for example, when he recounts the casual execution of a child by pistol-whipping (347–48). But the fact that these reports “aroused a storm of indignation” (Chaudhari 12) confirms that violence unredeemed by national myth remained for a tiny minority of voices to document. Beato’s image brings this contradiction into visibility.

²³About another Beato image of disinterred bones, Chaudhary writes that it “render[s] visible the violence that preserves daily social relations” and offers “a glimpse on the other side of . . . production” (99). I agree, and add that these metaphors of disclosure and unburial are built into the image’s own form.

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