

Early Victorian Novels and the Photographic

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I

It is difficult, Kamilla Elliott argues in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, to “find a review that does not speak of prose in terms of painting, of characterization as portraits, of the novel as a canvas, of prose style in terms of painting techniques, or of writers by analogy to well-known painters” from the 1830s into the early twentieth century (32). The same can be said of authors’ writings. Like reviewers, authors, especially novelists, routinely described their own writings by analogy to painting. Take Charles Dickens for example. Dickens manifests his aspiration to be like William Hogarth in the preface to *Oliver Twist*: “I had read of thieves by scores But I had never met (except in HOGARTH) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to *draw* a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist; to *paint* them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives . . . would be a service to society” (xiv; my emphases). The titles for his works such as *Sketches by Boz* and *Pictures from Italy* are steeped in similar rhetoric.

When literary critics linked novelistic and pictorial representation, they often talked about minute descriptions of visible objects. Edward Bulwer Lytton’s “On Art in Fiction”¹ (1838), which, according to Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth, is generally regarded as “the most thoroughgoing and important single English . . . [criticism of the novel] before Henry James” (22), provides an example. Bulwer Lytton identifies a passage from

Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* as displaying a "mastery over the Picturesque" (140), ascribing the achievement to Scott's minute verbal description of visible objects, or what Bulwer Lytton calls "external description" (143). Bulwer Lytton, though celebrating Scott's power to describe visible objects minutely, is highly critical of *Kenilworth*. One reason is that its descriptive passages *wear* the reader. Bulwer Lytton sees "minuteness in descriptions of dress and feasts, of pageants and processions" as the "usual fault of the historical novelist," and suggests that it could result in "wearisome tameness" (44).

In the year following the publication of Bulwer Lytton's essay, the world welcomed an astonishing invention—photography. In August 1839 François Arago, director of the Paris Observatory, presented the invention of the daguerreotype—the first commercially practical photographic process invented by Louis Daguerre—at the Academy of Sciences in Paris. As shown by Kenneth Finkel, who used Google's online phrase-usage graphing tool NGRAM, throughout the 1840s and into the 1850s, the word daguerreotype "appeared more and more frequently on a rising trajectory parallel to 'telegraph' and 'railroad'" (313). As photography became more and more popular, literary critics in the early Victorian period started to turn to it for a metaphor when they attempted to discuss literature, especially the novel. This paper aims to show how these literary critics used analogies with painting and how they incorporated the highly-acclaimed invention of the time, photography, into their critical texts, focusing on photography's medium-specific characteristics.

II

When Victorian literary critics were engaged in discussions of the novel's descriptive aspect, they frequently referred to Dutch painting, which had been marked by, in Leslie Stephen's words, its "extraordinary

minuteness” (qtd. in Yeazell 3). The descriptive aspect of the novel was thus linked to minuteness in painting. Certainly minuteness was not the sole characteristic critics related to Dutch painting. Some critics saw the distinctive feature of Dutch painting in its choice of subject matter rather than in its brushwork. One of these critics was John Ruskin, who, in *Modern Painters*, vindicates his aversion to Dutch painting by saying: “It is not by the mode of representing and saying, but by what is represented and said, that the respective greatness either of the painter or the writer is to be finally determined” (88). What was represented as subject matter in Dutch painting was, to borrow from George Eliot who, in *Adam Bede*, famously expressed an aspiration to create something akin to it, “a monotonous homely existence,” “commonplace things,” or “people more or less commonplace and vulgar” (223, 224, 229). However, when Dutch painting was referred to, critics highlighted its minuteness more frequently than its subject matter. Furthermore, when comparing Dutch painting to the novel, critics regularly spoke of the novel’s minute descriptions, as represented by Anna Barbauld’s comparison of Samuel Richardson’s writing to Dutch painting, which coincides with her association of it with “the patient labour of minuteness” (qtd. in Yeazell 2-3).

It is worth noting here that Bulwer Lytton criticizes Scott for failing to subjugate his passion for painting-like descriptive passages or “sketch[es] of the outward man” (140) to the achievement of a harmonious and unified whole. As he refers to description as “[o]ne of the greatest and most peculiar arts of the Novelist” (142), Bulwer Lytton does not belittle description. He censures Scott for his failure to “combine with external description” more important components for stories—plot, “metaphysical analysis” (143), “the metaphysical operations of the inner man” (49), “the highest attributes of art, viz., its philosophy and its ethics” (139), and so on. For example, Bulwer Lytton suggests in a regretful way that Scott’s

“incidental descriptions” did not serve to “minister to the interest of the plot” (144). This type of argument abounded in the Victorian period. In 1845, Archibald Alison, labelling William Harrison Ainsworth’s excessive “[d]escriptions of external things” as “pictorial phantasmagoria,” criticized him for failing to seek the novel’s “principal interest,” that is, “human passion and feeling” (79-80).

Bulwer Lytton’s vigilance against “wearisome tameness” may need to be related to this critical model. Like Bulwer Lytton, Richard Hutton saw weariness as a problem. In his “A Novel or Two” (1855), Hutton criticizes what he calls “the chatty school of novelists,” whose representative is Jane Austen, for wearying the reader. By likening their novels to Dutch paintings, he says: “As Dutch paintings of the highest imitative perfection soon weary because the mind cannot rest so long on a mere lesson in accurate details . . . [,] so the chatty school of novelists soon weary us, because what we naturally seek after is wanting” (339-40). Hutton attacks Austen’s wearily detailed description because it deprives her novel of “what we naturally seek after,” which is “a plot of some rapid movement” or “the latent force and complex emotions which sleep beneath the cultivated self-possession of social life” (339). One may notice here that these critics’ arguments are based on the traditional distinction between descriptive and narrative aspects of fiction, which stems from the Aristotelian distinction between character and plot. Aristotle argued that character description can thwart the purpose of tragedy, which is to transform events into a work of art with a beginning, middle and end.² Painting was thus invoked by those arguing on the side of plot, who wanted to discuss novels in relation to this traditional critical model.

III

Victorian literary critics invoked photography in the same spirit.

When comparing the novel to photography, many critics, as did Bulwer Lytton, Alison, and Hutton, focused on its descriptive aspect. Also, many reviews, linking novelistic and photographic representation, critiqued writers for their failure to tame or form minute descriptions into a unified whole. George Eliot's famous account of Charles Dickens in "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) serves as an example: "We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population But while he can copy Mrs. Plornish's colloquial style [in *Little Dorrit*] with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture, while there is the same startling inspiration in his description of the gestures and phrases of the 'Boots,' . . . he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness" (Pinney 271). A characteristic Eliot associates with Dickens's style and "a sun-picture"—a photograph—is a minute attention to details. Eliot, though apparently celebrating Dickens's minute descriptions, accuses him of failing to combine his rendering of "the external traits" or "his description of the gestures and phrases" with "the emotional," or, in Bulwer Lytton's words, for failing to "combine . . . external description" with "the metaphysical operations of the inner man."³

Similarly, George Henry Lewes, associating what he calls "coat-and-waistcoat realism" with photography, laments: "There is, at the present day, a fashion in Literature, and in Art generally, which is very deplorable The fashion is that of coat-and-waistcoat realism, a creeping timidity of invention, moving almost exclusively amid scenes of drawing-room existence, with all the reticences and pettinesses of drawing-room conventions. Artists have become photographers, and have turned the camera upon the vulgarities of life, instead of representing the more impassioned movements of life" (14). A true artist, Lewes argues, "must exercise a power

of abstraction and selection. He cannot without confusion present all the details. And it is here that the fine selective instinct of the true artist shows itself, in knowing what details to present and what to omit" (26). Lewes translates the label "coat-and-waistcoat realism" into "detailism," which he denounces for posing as realism, and says: "it [detailism] confounds truth with . . . predominance of unessential details. There are other truths besides coats and waistcoats, pots and pans, drawing-rooms and suburban villas" (41).

Eliot's account of Dickens's style and Lewes's contempt for detailism suggest that what they identify as a photographic aesthetic—a minute attention to details—is in fact no different from what other critics like Bulwer Lytton, Alison, and Hutton identified as a pictorial one. Indeed, for many critics, photographic representation was tantamount to pictorial representation. This was due largely to the fact that the hallmark of photography was often thought to be minute delineation, which also marked Dutch painting. David Masson's *Pendennis and Copperfield: Thackeray and Dickens* (1851) is worth citing in this connection. Masson lauds Dickens's power to "be minute in his delineations" in "the landscape or background department" and in "the figure department" by likening him to "the Dutch artists, Rembrandt included," and to painters like David Wilkie, who was well-known for his genre scenes (259). Note the verbs Masson uses to elucidate Dickens's description:

The artistic faculty of Dickens is more comprehensive, goes over a wider range of the whole field of art, than that of Thackeray. Take Dickens, for example, in the landscape or background department. Here he is capable of great variety. He can give you a landscape proper—a piece of the rural English earth in its summer or in its winter dress, with a bit of water, and a

pretty village spire, in it [H]e can *describe* the crowded quarter of a city, or the main street of a country town, by night or by day; he can *paint* a garden, *sketch* the interior of a cathedral, or *daguerreotype* the interior of a hut or drawing-room with equal ease; he can even be minute in his delineations of single articles of dress or furniture. Take him, again, in the figure department. Here he can be an animal-painter with Landseer when he likes, as witness his dogs, ponies, and ravens (259; my emphases)

The four verbs employed to underscore Dickensian minute descriptions—describe, paint, sketch, and daguerreotype—are certainly interchangeable, which means that pictorial and photographic representations, for Masson, do not differ from each other.

Masson's equation of pictorial representation and photographic representation may appear somewhat alarming when we read early responses to the daguerreotype, where those who had seen Daguerre's images eagerly stressed medium-specific characteristics that would set photography apart from painting. From now on I shall focus my attention on early writings on the daguerreotype to identify what was felt to be distinctively photographic and how it was employed by literary critics for their discussions of novels.

IV

Photography was greeted with unprecedented accolades by those who had seen Daguerre's images. Many essays on the daguerreotype were written even before its invention was officially announced in August 1839. Early writings on the daguerreotype routinely referred to painting and created a representational rivalry between painting and Daguerre's images. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Daguerreotype" (1840), published about

five months after the public announcement of its invention, provides an example. This essay consists of Poe's exposition of the daguerreotype's image-making process and his enthusiastic praise for it, which he regards as "the most important, and perhaps the most extraordinary triumph of modern science" (37). Poe creates a representational rivalry between painting and photography, giving a clear-cut decision in favor of the latter:

Perhaps, if we imagine the distinctness with which an object is reflected in a positively perfect mirror, we come as near the reality as by any other means. For, in truth, the Daguerreotyped plate is infinitely (we use the term advisedly) is *infinitely* more accurate in its representation than any painting by human hands. If we examine a work of ordinary art, by means of a powerful microscope, all traces of resemblance to nature will disappear—but the closest scrutiny of the photogenic drawing discloses only a more absolute truth, a more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented. The variations of shade, and the gradations of both linear and aerial perspective are those of truth itself in the supremeness of its perfection. (38)

Poe ends the essay by expressing his interest in using photography as a tool of science: "Among the obvious advantages derivable from the Daguerreotype, we may mention that . . . the drawing of a correct lunar chart will be at once accomplished, since the rays of this luminary are found to be appreciated by the plate" (38).

Like Poe, Samuel F. B. Morse creates a rivalry between painting and photography, stressing the daguerreotype's representational superiority to painting. In an 1839 letter he writes: "[T]he exquisite minuteness of the delineation cannot be conceived. No painting . . . ever approached it" ("The

Daguerrotipe” 86). While Poe fails to specify any particular school or type of painting in his essay, Morse refers to painting as an art form in reviewing the daguerreotype’s representational power superior to that of painting. Like Poe, Morse emphasizes daguerreotypy’s scientific significance. But Morse, who was himself a recognized painter before his invention of the telegraph and of Morse code, describes Daguerre’s images as “Rembrandt perfected,” and predicts that “the gallery of portraits of distinguished men of all countries, drawn . . . with man’s feeble, false, and flattering pencil” might lose popularity to the exhibition of portraits drawn “with the power and truth of light from heaven” (“The Daguerrotipe” 86-87).

For both Poe and Morse, painting was the most adequate object of comparison for photography; however, they both situate photography, scientific or artistic, on a completely different plane from painting in terms of representation. This perception of photography as something completely different from painting seems to come from their characterization of photographic process as an automatic one devoid of human agency. For them, it is the absence of “human hands” (Poe 38) or “man’s feeble, false, and flattering pencil” (“The Daguerrotipe” 87) that made possible such a “perfect identity” between “the photogenic drawing . . . [and] the thing represented” (Poe 38) or such an unconceivably “exquisite minuteness of the delineation” as “[n]o painting” (“The Daguerrotipe” 86) can achieve.

Poe and Morse’s characterization of photography as dissociated from human agency concurs with their description of photography’s reliance upon the agency of Nature or light. In “The Daguerreotype” Poe wrote: “the lens of this instrument [is] directed to the object which it is required to paint. The action of the light does the rest” (38). Later in the same essay Poe translates the word “light” into “the source of vision,” and identifies it as “the designer” (38). In his 1840 speech Morse claimed in a similar vein:

By a simple and easily portable apparatus, he [the artist] can now furnish his studio with *fac-simile* sketches of nature, landscapes, buildings, groups of figures, &c., scenes selected in accordance with his own peculiarities of taste; but not, as heretofore, subjected to his imperfect, sketchy translations into crayon or Indian ink drawings, and occupying days, and even weeks, in their execution; but painted by Nature's self with a minuteness of detail, which the pencil of light in her hands alone can trace, and with a rapidity, too, which will enable him to enrich his collection with a superabundance of *materials* and not *copies*;—*they cannot be called copies of nature, but portions of nature herself.* (“Speech” 391)

For Morse, it is the agency of Nature or light that makes Daguerre's images true to the real world, preventing them from being subjected to human imperfection.

Poe and Morse's association of photography with Nature or light can also be witnessed in many other articles of the time. A short 1839 article in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, which was reprinted from Paris's *Journal des Débats*, remarks:

The new invention is a method of fixing the image permanently on the paper, or making a permanent drawing, by the agency of light alone; ten or fifteen minutes being amply sufficient for taking any view, though the time varies with the intensity of the light. By this machine M. Daguerre has made accurate drawings of the gallery of the Louvre and of Notre Dame; any object indeed, or any natural appearance may be copied by it—it reproduces the freshness of morning—the brilliancy of

noon—the dim twilight and the dullness of a rainy day. (qtd. in Dinius 12)

These critics' positioning of light as the designer or maker of an image reminds us of Ruskin's refusal to categorize photography as a discipline of art. In his lecture on paintings, Ruskin implies that it is photography's dissociation from human agency that deters him from categorizing it as art: "Let me assure you . . . that photographs supersede no single quality nor use of fine art . . . They supersede no good art, for the definition of art is 'human labour regulated by human design'" (*Lectures on Art* 165).

This association of photography with Nature, which is, according to Raymond Williams, "perhaps the most complex word in the language" (155), led to the proliferation of its definitions. For example, as Mary Warner Marien argues, "[p]hotography as natural vision easily transmuted into photography as neutral vision" (5). The notion of photography's neutrality was intensified not only by the fact that its maker is indiscriminating Nature, but by the fact that its images are produced, or rather reproduced, by a machine without a soul—the camera. An article in *The Athenaeum* (1859), reviewing the Sixth Annual Exhibition of the London Photographic Society, refers to the camera as "the sun-machine," and suggests that the machine allows Nature to record herself without any subjective intervention: "while the sun-machine has eyes keen as an angel's, a hand swift, sure and fluent, it has no soul, no heart and no intellect . . . [It is] a god-like machine of which light and sunshine is the animating Promethean fire" (qtd. in Marien 71). The word "sun-machine," it seems, neatly encapsulates the characteristic of photography as being, in Marcy J. Dinius's words, "simultaneously 'natural' and mechanical" (13).

What the mechanical or automatic character of the camera and the indiscriminating or neutral character of Nature bestowed upon

photography seems to be what Jennifer Green-Lewis refers to as a “democratic attention to detail” or “a sense that nothing signifies more or less than anything else” (*Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory* 105, 89), as photographic images capture *all* objects in the real world to which the camera is pointed without hierarchizing them. Related to this is that many early critics on photography enthusiastically listed details captured in photographs including apparently trivial ones which would be scarcely remarked today. In 1839, Philip Hone, who participated in François Gouraud’s private exhibition of daguerreotypes from Paris, wrote: “Every object, however minute, is a perfect transcript of the thing itself. The hair of the human head, the gravel on the roadside, the texture of a silk curtain, or the shadow of the smaller leaf reflected upon the wall, are all imprinted as carefully as nature or art has created them in the objects transferred” (390). In a similar vein, Lewis Gaylord Clark, who participated in the same exhibition, wrote of the views of Paris represented in Daguerre’s images. Not all the things he listed were in a single daguerreotype, but since he is talking about perspective (“in the distance”), some of them should have been included in a single daguerreotype:

This is the Daguerreotype! The views themselves are from the most interesting points of the French metropolis. . . . Take, first, the Vue du Pont Notre Dame, and Palais du Justice. Mark the minute light and shade; the *perfect* clearness of every object; the extreme softness of the distance. Observe the dim, hazy aspect of the picture representing the towers of Notre Dame, with Saint Jacques la Boucherie in the distance. It was taken in a violent storm of rain; and how admirably is even that feature of the view preserved in the *tout ensemble*! Look, again, at the view of the Statue of Henry the Fourth and the Tuilleries, the

Pont des Arts, Pont du Carousel, Pont Royal, and the Heights of Chailot in the distance. There is not a shadow in the whole, that is not *nature itself*; there is not an object, even the most minute, embraced in that wide scope, which was not in the original; and it is impossible that one should have been omitted. Think of that! So, too, of the Tuilleries, the Champs Elysées, the Quay de la Morgue—in short, of all and every view in the whole superb collection. The shade of a shadow is frequently reflected in the river, and the very trees are taken with the *shimmer* created by the breeze, imaged in the water! Look where you will, Paris itself is before you. (323)

With his occasional praises for the daguerreotype's representational power, Clark gives an apparently egalitarian treatment to things ranging from the landmark edifices to the trees or even to the shade of a shadow—things necessary to represent “Paris itself”—by scarcely putting any special emphasis on any of them as if refusing to hierarchize them. What characterizes photography is, for Clark, thus the absence of selectionism and hierarchization. Equally noteworthy is the sheer number of things Clark enumerates. To be democratic, one needs to list as many things as possible. Early writings on photography, which often filled their space with a plethora of visible things, were as democratic—and photographic—as photographs.

Clark's review, it seems, presents us with what later critics identified as the distinctively photographic. For example, his claim that “there is not an object, . . . which was not in the original” seems to signify not only photography's potential for including everything in its representation but its unique relation to reality. Photography's referent, as Roland Barthes put it, “is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation” (76)

such as painting and writing. The “photographic referent,” Barthes wrote, “is not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often ‘chimeras’” (76). Thus we see “a superimposition . . . of reality and of the past” (76) in a photograph, and this clearly differentiates photography from painting and writing.⁴

V

With these medium-specific characteristics in mind, we can now look at a review of Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* written by Thomas Cleghorn for the *North British Review* (1845). In the review Cleghorn attacks the novel’s style, citing its many passages of thick description. Here is an example:

It [The room] was a little below the pavement, and abutted close upon it; so that passengers grated against the window-panes with their buttons, and scraped it with their baskets; and fearful boys suddenly coming between a thoughtful guest and the light, derided him, or put out their tongues as if he were a physician, or made white knobs on the ends of their noses by flattening the same against the glass, and vanished awfully, like spectres. [Chapter 35] (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 518; qtd. in Cleghorn 196)

As John Forster, in his 1844 review in the *Examiner*, referred to Dickens’s description in the novel as “descriptive painting” (192), the reviewers often associated the novel’s style with painting. Cleghorn, on the other hand, reviews the novel by comparing Dickens’s style to “a photographic

landscape”:

The frequent recurrence of such ludicrous minuteness in the trivial descriptive details induces us to compare Mr Dickens’ style of delineation to a photographic landscape. There, everything within the field of view is copied with unflinching but mechanical fidelity. Not a leaf, or stone, or nail is wanting, or out of place; the very bird is arrested as it flits across the sky. But, then, the imitating agent takes exactly the same pains with the dunghill and the gutter, as with the palace and the forest tree; and it is as busy with the latchet of the shoe, and the pattern of the waistcoat, as with the noble features of the human face. . . . He lavishes as much attention on what is trivial or useless as on the more important part of the picture, as if he could not help painting everything with equal exactness. (196)

One must notice first that Cleghorn’s criticism is, by and large, based upon the traditional distinction between descriptive and narrative aspects of the novel. Cleghorn accuses Dickens of prioritizing “the trivial descriptive details” over “the more important part of the picture.” What Cleghorn sees as “the more important part of the picture” is “the effective outline, the charm of harmonious grouping,” “judicious perspective,” and “a wholesome moral tendency” (196-97)—things those arguing on the side of plot set great store by.

Citing this passage, Jennifer Green-Lewis points out perceptively in “Victorian Photography and the Novel” that the reviewer “slides without comment between the figurative languages of painting and photography,” as he “finds Dickens cannot help ‘painting’ something that looks like ‘a photographic landscape’” (321). Green-Lewis detects the same “slide” in an

1854 review of *Bleak House* in the *Spectator*. The reviewer wrote: “So crowded is the canvas which Mr. Dickens has stretched and so casual the connexion that gives to his composition whatever unity it has, that a daguerreotype of Fleet Street at noon-day would be the aptest symbol to be found for it; though the daguerreotype would have the advantage in accuracy of representation” (qtd. in “Victorian Photography and the Novel” 321). Green-Lewis argues: “‘canvas’ serves the *Spectator*’s reviewer as the initial metaphor, ultimately trumped by ‘daguerreotype’” (321). “Rather than making obsolete or superseding the writing-as-painting metaphor,” she remarks, “photography seems, initially at least, to have merely offered another version of it” (321).

It is important to note here that before this passage Cleghorn refrains from likening Dickens’s trivial descriptive details to painting. In his effort to register a “deterioration of style,” “observable” in Dickens’s descriptive passages (195), Cleghorn cites the novel’s detailed description of Mrs. Todgers’s room, which appears in Chapter 9:

The drawing-room at Todgers’s was out of the common style; so much so indeed, that you would hardly have taken it to be a drawing-room, unless you were told so by somebody who was in the secret. It was floor-clothed all over; and the ceiling, including a great beam in the middle, was papered. Besides the three little windows, with seats in them, commanding the opposite archway, there was another window looking point blank, without any compromise at all about it, into Jinkins’s bed-room; and high up all along one side of the wall was a strip of panes of glass, two-deep, giving light to the staircase. There were the oddest closets possible, with little casements in them like eight-day clocks, lurking in the wainscot and taking the shape of the

stairs; and the very door itself (which was painted black) had two great glass eyes in its forehead, with an inquisitive green pupil in the middle of each. (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 146; qtd. in Cleghorn 195)

Of this passage, Cleghorn says: “Mr Dickens was always famed for giving life to inanimate scenes, and catching the little characteristic traits of conduct and character; but he now carries minute description to an excess that sometimes, indeed, degenerates into mere extravagance, —his interiors are often *inventories rather than pictures*” (195; my emphases). Cleghorn suggests here that Dickens’s writing is laden with overdescriptiveness to the extent that the analogy to “pictures” or painting needs to be abandoned in favor of that to “inventories.” The analogy to “inventories”—verbal lists of things—is further replaced by that to “a photographic landscape.”

Although Cleghorn, as Green-Lewis observed, later trumps this writing-as-photography metaphor and then likens Dickens’s act of writing to that of “painting,” his comparison of Dickens’s descriptive passages to “inventories rather than pictures” is telling. This tells us that, at least at one point, Cleghorn felt that Dickens’s style is *not pictorial*, likening it to “inventories,” the word which reminds us of photography’s first reviewers’ enthusiastic attempts to list every visible object in their reviews. Moreover, what Cleghorn associates Dickens’s writing with here is very similar to the medium-specific characteristics that early critics of photography found in the daguerreotype. Dickens’s writing, for Cleghorn, is photographic, because Dickens, like a camera, attends to everything with “unfailing” and “mechanical” precision. Dickens’s writing is photographic because he indiscriminately copies all things—even “trivial or useless” things. Dickens’s writing is photographic because he attends to these things democratically, as he “takes exactly the same pains with the dunghill and the

gutter, as with the palace and the forest tree,” recording “everything with equal exactness.”⁵

VI

As Green-Lewis acutely points out that “much of what we might identify in literature as photographically inspired could refer equally to paintings” (*Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory* 16), it is, indeed, very difficult to differentiate between photographic and pictorial writings, as well as between photographic and pictorial aesthetics. Cleghorn suggests at one point that Dickens’s description is so excessive as to make him regard *Martin Chuzzlewit* as “inventories rather than pictures,” but how excessive does description need to be until it is identified as “photographically inspired”? For Cleghorn, it is a matter of degree that differentiates photographic and pictorial writings, but no one, of course, can provide an objective figure to demarcate the boundary between these two. Green-Lewis revisited Cleghorn’s passage where Dickens’s descriptive details are likened to “a photographic landscape” in her *Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory*. As in her earlier essay, she focuses on the reviewer’s slide between the figurative languages of painting and photography, describing it as a “tenuous grasp on his own metaphor” (96). She argues further: “Dickens writes like a camera, as if he ‘could not help *painting* everything.’ Photography thus viewed is incontinent painting, a documentary urge that can’t be turned off” (96).

As Green-Lewis’s comment on the “tenuous grasp” or “slide” suggests, many Victorian literary critics were, unlike Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who defined poetry as a temporal art and painting as a static and spatial art, not interested in identifying media-specific characteristics. They were, as I have observed, preoccupied more with shoehorning the novel into the

critical tradition focused on the character-versus-plot dichotomy, which draws attention to apparently inconsequential verbal descriptions as its target. This critical tradition was so influential as to extend itself into the twentieth century. Georg Lukács's famous denigration of naturalist writers such as Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola can be referred to as a version of the traditional critical approach. Employing the painting analogy, Lukács argues that in these writers' novels, "[d]escription debases characters to the level of inanimate objects" (133) and results in "a series of static pictures, of still lives connected only through the relations of objects arrayed one beside the other" (144). However, even in the sentence where the reviewer's careless recourse to the "painting" metaphor can be observed ("as if he could not help painting everything"), we may be able to find the photographic in what Green-Lewis describes as "incontinent painting." This incontinence may be related to photography's capacity to be so mindlessly mechanical as to be unstoppable by human hands. Cleghorn may truly have felt something akin to the photographic in Dickens's writing, but he expressed it by the painting analogy in accordance with the conventions of the time.

Conclusion

As I have observed, many nineteenth-century literary critics capitalized on analogies with painting; and, given that their aim was often to discuss the novel in relation to a critical tradition focused on the character-versus-plot dichotomy, the pictorial aesthetic they tended to associate with the novel was such minute attention to detail as had marked the work of the Dutch masters. With the invention of photography, literary critics in the early Victorian period began to draw on it for their analogies; but the photographic aesthetic they associated with the novel was, in many cases, no different from the pictorial aesthetic.⁶ However, Cleghorn's

1845 review of *Martin Chuzzlewit* makes clear that a change was in the air. Though at times he confounds photographic representation with pictorial representation, Cleghorn also relates Dickens's writing to medium-specific characteristics of a kind that early critics often found in the daguerreotype. In short, as do early descriptions of the daguerreotype, contemporary reviews of early Victorian novels—and, here, Cleghorn's work on Dickens is exemplary—offer important insights into what was then felt to be distinctively photographic.

Notes

1. "On Art in Fiction" first appeared in two instalments in *The Monthly Chronicle* of March and April, 1838.
2. For a discussion of this point, see, for example, Abbott, pp. 130-32. See also Stang, pp. 128-30.
3. Eliot's association of Dickens's style with "a sun-picture" reminds us of Charlotte Brontë's famous criticism of Jane Austen. In an 1848 letter to George Henry Lewes, Brontë suggests that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* resembles "[a]n accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a common-place face" (Smith 99). That the characteristic Brontë associates alike with Austen's style and "daguerreotyped portrait[s]" is minute attention to detail becomes evident when we read Brontë's diatribe against *Emma* in an 1850 letter to W. S. Williams: "She [Austen] does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well; there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting: she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her . . . Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet" (Smith 161).
4. In connection with Barthes's account of photography's unique relation to reality, Morse's identification of Daguerre's images as "*portions of nature herself*" is worthy of being noted. This can be described as an anticipation of Barthes's definition of photographs as "the luminous rays emitted by a variously

lighted object” (80) being recovered. Photographs are, for Barthes and Morse, portions of the variously lighted referent, or portions of the “real thing which has been placed before the lens.”

5. Green-Lewis argues that Dickens’s own interest in photography is “suggested by the publication of several articles on the subject during his tenure as editor of *Household Words*” (*Victorian Photography, Literature, and the Invention of Modern Memory* 92). Ronald R. Thomas directs our attention particularly to two articles on photography published in the weekly journal during the 1850s: “Photography” (19 March 1853) and “Photographees” (10 October 1857). Thomas offers as further evidence of Dickens’s interest in photography what he regards as certain medium-specific characteristics in *Bleak House* (145-46).
6. This identification of photographic representation and pictorial representation seems to have become more pronounced as people became more accustomed to photography. Related to this is that in the mid-Victorian period some critics started to draw on analogies with photography to describe painting. For example, Alfred H. Wall, an art critic, referred to the “paintings of the Dutch school” as “minutely and quite photographically truthful” (244) in an 1863 article in the *Photographic Journal*.

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