

St. Leger Landon Carter, "Pictures by the Sun," March 1840

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PICTURES BY THE SUN.

I've studied thee, bright Sun, in many a lecture,
And at thy power have been filled with wonder;
But never dreamt that thou could'st make a picture,
Without the least defect, or smallest blunder;
Oh for a sight of those soft pictured pages
Thou hast "*Daguerreotyped*" for countless ages!

Of these, thou must have, doubtless, many legions,
As well of *this* world as of those far hence;
"Of Planets, Suns, and Adamantine regions
Wheeling, unshaken, through the void immense."*
Where hang those pictures?—in what mighty Louvre?
And which, I pray thee, was thy great chef d'oeuvre?

When first thou look'dst upon the world, then void—
When all was dark and things about were bandied—
In taking sketches, wer't thou then employ'd,
As ev'ry object into form expanded?—
If so, and we could make thee, Sun, obey us,
We'd have that scene august, of Ancient Chaos.

We'd like to see our great first parent, Adam,
As when he stroll'd about his charming garden;
And as he gazed upon the first fair madam
Who came to soften, but, alas! did harden.
Give us old Noah and his sons and daughters,
Just as they sailed upon the world of waters.

We fain would see too, if we now were able,
The plain of Shinar, whence "men's sons" were driven
From that vast structure called the Tower of Babel,
Whose top should reach unto the height of Heaven;
We cannot for our lives and souls conjecture
How People raised such piles of architecture.

Shew us that picture—'twould be worth the shewing—
When miracles were wrought to save mankind;
When all dry-shod, the Israelites were going
Across the Red sea, wall'd up by the wind;
And Pharaoh's iron chariots, and arm'd host,
Were madly rushing in to be o'erwhelm'd and lost.

Display that scene, when for the son of Nun,
Thou stoodest still on Gibeon, and the Moon,
At God's command, stopped over Ajalon;—
For one whole day refused ye to go down,
While to Bethoron sped the flying Amorite,
And Heaven's hailstones crush'd him in his headlong flight.

How many famous scenes from ancient story,
Of Athens, Rome and Egypt, rise before
What monuments of art! what deeds of glory!
"Give back the lost"—restore ye them! restore ye!—
Thy pass, Thermopylae! and, Marathon, thy fight!
Oh Sun! bring such as these, with Salamis, to sight.

But if, bright orb! the past be now denied us,
The present time at least is in our power,
Since with thy secret, Genius hat supplied us;—
Ye pupils of Daguerre! improve the hour—
Make hast to paint the fragments which are left us,
Of what stern Time and Vandals have bereft us.

Bring us the city of great Alexander
Which once was so magnificent and vast;
Amid her ruins we would like to wander
And muse upon the glories of the past:
Four thousand baths and palaces did fill her,
All crumbled into dust round Pompey's Pillar.

From Cairo's walls go bring that scene sublime,
(And with out latest breath we'll bless the giver.)
Of Pyramids still battling with old Time—
The land of Goshen and th' Eternal River!
And tomb and monument, and obelisk that stands
In solitary grandeur, mid the Desert's sands.

Be quick, and let our eager eyes devour
Old Hecatorapylos, though not as when
Through every gate, she could at once outpour
Two hundred chariots and ten thousand men;
But of her mighty self, the granite skeleton
Whose giant bones for miles lie whitening*[2] in the sun.

Imagination flags and falters on the rack—
Description's beggar'd, and in vain would rise
Up to thy vastness, Luxor! and Carnac!
Naught but the eye that scene can realize—
Give us the temples! columns! gateway! propylon!—
None but thy master-hand can do it, glorious Sun!

Bring Edom's long lost Petra—she who made
Her dwellings in the "rocky clefts"—all brought
To desolation or in fragments laid,
A thousand years unheard of and forgot!—
High as the Eagle's nest her palaces she built,
But God did smite her, for her haughtiness and guilt.

Bring us each Grecian and each Roman wreck—
Th' Acropolis and Coliseum bring;
And Tadmor or Palmyra, and Balbec—
The costly cities reared by Israel's King:†
Collect the whole—all left by Turk, Goth, Vandal, Hun—
In one vast gallery of pictures by the Sun.

NUGATOR.

* Planets, Suns, and Adamantine spheres
Wheeling, unshaken, through the void immense."

Akenside.

*[2] They are neither gray nor blackened. They have no lichen nor moss, but like the bones of man, they seem to whiten under the sun of the Desert.--Stephens.

† The universal tradition of the country, according to Wood, is that Balbec, as well as Palmyra, was built by Solomon.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The author is St. Leger Landon Carter, who occasionally contributed to the periodical from 1835-1843. See David K. Jackson, *The Contributors and Contributions to The Southern Literary Messenger 1834-1864* (Charlottesville, The Historical Publishing Co., 1936): 41. This identification is also confirmed in William Cushing, *Initials and Pseudonyms: A Dictionary of Literary Disguises* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1885): 206.

This text may represent the first use of the daguerreotype as a metaphor in American prose.

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