

Bruno, "Picture Pausings: Daguerreotypes," 15 May 1846

(keywords: Bruno, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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For the Christian Watchman.
PICTURE PAUSINGS.—NO. II

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DAGUERREOTYPES.

"God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another."—*Hamlet*.

Lord Bacon unquestionably saw as far into futurity as any other philosopher. When rapt in the contemplation of the wonderful results that were to follow the adoption of the great inductive system of reasoning, he doubtless beheld, dimly figured forth, a long train of brilliant discoveries and inventions. But we do not believe that he ever dreamed of daguerreotypes: nor do we think ourselves guilty of any reflection on the wisdom and sagacity of that illustrious sage, in asserting this incredulity. As for the bewildered schoolmen before his time—it is not worth while to conjecture what they did or did not dream.

The above we consider to be a sufficient introduction to a few remarks on daguerreotypes. It has, it is true, no particular connexion with the subject; but this, we flatter ourselves will not be deemed an objection, since it is notorious that your best orators and preachers write their introductions long before they have fixed upon a subject of discourse. The only rule which now obtains, (in practice at least,) with regard to this species of rhetorical ornament, is to place the introduction, whatever it may be, at the *beginning*. And this leads us to observe that daguerreotypes are not now what they once were. They have emerged from the rude into the polished State—from the chrysalis into the butterfly form. We can very well recollect the first specimens that we ever saw. We then supposed that *they* were finely, admirably done. But this was a delusion; they were merely rude, unfinished experiments. The lily white hand of a fair lady, in the old style daguerreotype, had exchanged its lily whiteness for a gloomy tinge of pale green, or an intense sky-blue. White bosoms that we positively know to have been of extraordinary whiteness, by the daguerrian process were villanously bronzed and smutched as by the over-heated iron of an unthrifty huswife. We judge everything by comparison, else we never could have tolerated such productions of art. Daguerreotypes now-a-days, thought still *light*, are by no means so trifling affairs. A pale or blooming cheek, a gentle or flashing eye, a smooth or wrinkled brow, are each fairly and faithfully imprinted. By enlarging the dimensions of the plate, great accuracy and beauty have been conferred. In a three by four inch likeness the projecting features are ridiculously out of proportion; thus a very modest, retiring nose, assumes the gigantic dimension of the nasal organ of the Duke of Wellington, or of ex-President Tyler; and a chin, the farthest possible form double, astonishes you with its more than alderman obesity. All these errors have been

corrected; and now, so perfect is the “counterfeit presentiment,” that you recognize your friends at a glance, and find yourself stretching out your hand to—their daguerreotypes.

For our own part we are unable to conceive any limits to the progress of this art. On the contrary it tasks the imagination to conjecture what it will not accomplish. Already the daguerreotypes of the most important public characters adorn the saloons of noted artists. You have only to enter and you find yourself in a miniature President’s levee.— We anticipate the establishment of a society for obtaining daguerreotypes. Said society will employ a number of experienced *professors*, (every art now has its professors,) who shall visit foreign parts, the courts of Europe, the palaces of the pashaws, the Red Sea and Holy Land, and the pyramids of Geza, and bring home exact representations of all the sublime and ridiculous objects which it now costs so much to see. Stationary professors may be maintained at each of the most passionate volcanoes—at favorable positions in the Arctic regions when the Aurora Borealis is most excited—and others, in substantial edifices in the West India Islands, will note the exact appearance and effects of a terrific hurricane or ravenous earthquake. Popular vocalists will be *taken* in the very act and attitude of vocalizing, wordy demagogues in the attempt to hood-wink the sovereignty, and government defaulters at the critical moment of absconding. Apparatus so extensive will doubtless be constructed that a whole assembly may be taken at once. By this improvement the tax-paying millions of this free and enlightened republic, may be furnished with an accurate picture of the appearance and occupation of their worthy official organs in the halls of the house and senate. (This anticipation, however, is rather fanciful, than real, as we are persuaded that such a project would be unanimously voted down at the first reading.) On the same plate may be represented the preacher and his hearers; and thus a curious spectator will obtain a bird’s-eye-view of a whole congregation as they appear in the various stages of listening, half-gone, sound asleep, and waking up. Indeed, it will be impossible for a tree to bud and blossom, a flower to go to seed, or a vegetable to sprout and come up, without executing at the same time an exact photograph of the wonderful process on the skilfully prepared plates of some agricultural, botanical, or horticultural photographic society. A man cannot make a proposal, or a lady decline one—a steam-boiler cannot explode, or an ambitious river overflow its banks—a gardener cannot elope with an heiress, or a reverend bishop commit an indiscretion, but straightway, an officious daguerreotype will proclaim the whole affair to the world. There will be no safety for rogues. Every apple-orchard, store-house, and coat-pocket, will contain a self-regulating photographic machine faithfully performing *its* functions, while the depredator is executing *his*.

But we turn from contemplating the anticipated achievements of the future, to dwell for a moment on the brilliant triumphs of the past. For we are of the opinion that the daguerrian art has not received the attention which it deserves; and that its principles, when fully analyzed and developed, will fill an important place in some never-to-be surpassed encyclopedia.

It is slowly accomplishing a great revolution in the morals of portrait painting. The flattery of countenance delineators, is notorious. No artists of eminence ever painted an ugly face, unless perchance, now and then a fancy sketch, or a copy of some antique, *so* antique that it is impossible ever to trace the original. Everybody who pays, must look handsome, intellectual, or interesting at least—on canvass. These abuses of the brush the photographic art is happily designed to correct. Your sun in no parasite. He pours his rays as freely and willingly into the cottage of the peasant, as into the palace of the peer; and he vouchsafes no brighter or purer light to the disdainful mistress than to her humble maid. Let it once become the *bon bon* for plain-looking, homely, and ugly people to sit for likenesses that *are* likenesses—let a few hideous men and women of distinction

consent to be daguerreotyped—in fine, let nature and art in their combined efforts be suffered to have fair play, and “it must follow as the night the day,” that this moral revolution will be achieved. There are gratifying proofs that the custom is rapidly advancing into general favor; as any one may convince himself by examining the numerous daguerreotypes exposed to public view.

But of the advantages resulting from this novel art, the aid which it affords to the successful study of human nature, is among the most important. Daguerreotypes properly regarded, are the indices of human character. Lavater judged of men by the physiognomies; and in voluminous treatise has developed the principles by which he was guided. The photograph, we consider to be the grand climacteric of the science. Lord Chesterfield assures his son that everybody has a weak point, which if you are fortunate enough to touch or irritate delivers him into your power at once. It has been said that the inhalation of exhilarating gas is a powerful artificial agent for disclosing these weaknesses of human nature. In reality, however, the sitting for a daguerreotype, far surpasses all other expedients. There is a peculiar and irresistible connection between one’s weaknesses and his daguerreotype; and the latter as naturally attracts the former as the magnet the needle, or toasted cheese, the rat. The ultimate causes of this relation lie deeply imbedded in the elementary principles of mental philosophy which we have not now sufficient space to explore. That such a relation exists is beyond question, to quote the very forcible, but very tautological expression of the Hon. Caleb Cushing, “a fixed fact.” Hence positions, attitudes, and expressions of countenance, are so many exponential signs of disposition, desire, character. The *genera* of these weaknesses are as numerous, and admit of as many subdivisions as the famous classification of plants, by the immortal Charles Von Linnaeus.

There is a *literary weakness*. Persons afflicted with this mania are usually taken with a pile of books around them—or with the fore-finger gracefully interposed between the leaves of a half-closed volume, as if they consented to the interruption of their studies solely to gratify posterity with a view of their scholarlike countenances—or in a student’s cap and morning robe, with the head resting on the hand, profoundly meditating on—nothing. Thus a young woman whose leisure hours are exclusively devoted to the restoration of dilapidated male habiliments, appears in her daguerreotype to intensely absorbed in the perusal of a large octavo. What renders the phenomenon the more remarkable is, that the book was upside down, which necessarily implies the possession of a peculiar mental power.—There is the *musical* weakness which forces a great variety of suffering, inoffensive flutes, guitars, pianos, to be brought forward in the company of their cruel and persecuting masters and mistresses. One young lady, whose ear had been pronounced utterly incapable of detecting discords, sat with a sheet of Beethoven’s most difficult compositions, in her delicate dexter hand. Some amusing caricatures are produced by those who attempt to assume a look which they have not. Timid men, at the critical juncture, summon up a look of stern fierceness, and savage natures borrow an expression of gently meekness. People appear dignified, haughty, mild, condescending, humorous, and grave, in their daguerreotypes, who manifestly never appeared so anywhere else. Jewelry is generally deemed indispensable to a good likeness. Extraordinarily broad rings—gold chains of ponderous weight and magnitude, sustaining dropsical headed gold pencils, or very yellow-faced gold watches, with a very small segment of their circumference concealed under the belt—bracelets, clasps, and brooches—all of these, in their respective places, attract attention, and impress the spectator with a dazzling conception of the immense and untold riches of those favored beings whose duplicate daguerreotypes he is permitted to behold.

But, having arrived at that point where an illimitable field of speculation and remark stretches out before us—having in a certain sense sharpened our appetite for the enjoyment of a number of tempting tit-bits for gossip, which render this department of our subject so attractive—we shall practise upon the advice of the Stoic to the Epicurean, and bring the whole matter to an easy and harmonious—conclusion.

BRUNO.

[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

This text also appears in *Littell's Living Age* (Boston) 9:110 (20 June 1846): 551–552. The article is one of three appearing under this title. See also "Picture Pausing," 27:8 (20 February 1846): 29; "Picture Pausing.—No. III, 'Souvenirs'" 27:27 (3 July 1846): 105.

Examples of portraits humorously described in this article as displaying "literary weakness" are found in Keith F. Davis, "Reading Daguerreotypes," *Daguerreian Annual 1998* (Pittsburgh: The Daguerreian Society 1999): 19–53.

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