Whittling Time: Photography and the Poetry of Memory

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My subject is, from one perspective, entirely traditional. The link between photography and poetry can be expressed in the most ancient terms: both are children of Zeus and Mnemosyne. The goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, as mother of the Muses, is naturally the source of all the arts and sciences, traditionally defined. Poetry’s kinship to memory requires little elaboration; the Greeks delegated authority for poetry to three of Mnemosyne’s nine daughters: Calliope, Erato, and Polyhymnia (representing epic, lyric, and sacred poetry, respectively). Photography, which aims to stop time and preserve the present into the future, is, if anything, even more closely allied to memory. The Muse of photography is most likely Clio, the Muse of history, for history is photography’s subject and medium.

From another perspective, however, the pairing of poetry and photography raises questions that are not easily dealt with in traditional terms. I want to focus on these issues by way of a close look at a single poem, Scottish poet Douglas Dunn’s remarkable dramatic monologue, “St. Kilda’s Parliament: 1879–1979.” But first, I want briefly to provide the poem and photography itself some historical context.

Photographer Paul Strand claimed in a 1917 essay that photography “is the first and only important contribution thus far, of science to the arts” (219). A hyperbolic assertion, perhaps, but it points in a useful direction. For science, in its oldest meaning, is simply knowledge; and the modern era is characterized by countless developments in science and technology which, in supplying new ways of viewing the world, have thus influenced the arts directly or indirectly. Though not always mentioned with science and technology, the invention of photography has arguably had as much influence on our ways of knowing the world as any other: it has led to developments as varied as cinema, television, electron microscopy, surveillance cameras, and modern techniques of propaganda, advertising, and book printing and illustration.

Indeed, some writers have gone further than Paul Strand, declaring that photography has effected an alteration in human consciousness comparable to the theories of Darwin and Freud. As just one instance of such large claims, consider Walter Benjamin’s famous essay of 1936, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he specifically details the way that photography, like Freud’s theories, fundamentally modified the way we perceive our reality; and in which he also firmly places photography at the center of the political upheavals in modern life predicted by Marx. Whether such radical claims for photography may hold up remains an open question and falls outside the scope of this essay. But, as I will argue later on, photography has important links to at least one crucial development of modern thought, quantum physics.
Since photography made it possible, as never before, for nearly everyone to record the features of loved ones, places visited, and public or private events, it has become a universal metaphor for remembering itself. It is this idea and its ramifications that I want to examine more closely. For if the ways in which photography has altered our views of reality are not yet fully charted, we may begin to understand them, at least, by looking closely at a single theme.

Photography’s importance to the poetry of memory is obvious. What is less obvious, at least to the general public, is the possibility that in crucial ways photography has made it difficult to trust what we do recall. We all want to believe that the camera never lies, but, as we all probably sense instinctively, it does lie, and with a maddening, pervasive persistence. Not only does the camera portray reality as what it is not—a series of static, two-dimensional slices of time—but even more critically, the photograph cannot, by definition, capture what we tend to value most: the imaginative or interpretive meaning of a scene, its full context. John Berger is correct in pointing out that “unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning. They offer appearances—with all the credibility and gravity we normally lend to appearances—prised away from their meaning. Meaning is the result of understanding functions” (51).

Meaning can in fact be fraudulently imposed on a scene. This happens not just when there is propagandistic intent, but whenever a photograph is taken, because any photographer must frame the shot, decide on angles and exposures, and ultimately select the “best” picture for display. Similarly, as many photographic historians and critics have demonstrated, the visual information provided in photographs is sometimes inherently ambiguous; we need the captions in order to understand numerous photos. Janet Malcolm writes,

One of the chief paradoxes of photography is that though it seems to be uniquely empowered to function as a medium of realism, it does so only rarely and under special circumstances, often behaving as if reality were something to be avoided at all costs. If “the camera can’t lie,” neither is it inclined to tell the truth, since it can reflect only the usually ambiguous, and sometimes outright deceitful, surface of reality. (77)

The photograph’s ability to distort reality is, or ought to be, a truism. Yet photography does indeed capture something; as Susan Sontag notes, we assume that each photo, even if visually enigmatic, nonetheless is “a piece of the world” (93). As such, it still possesses an uncanny persuasive power, even when we know better than to trust it fully. Here is what is perhaps photography’s richest paradox, between what Roland Barthes in his book Camera Lucida calls each photograph’s “certificate of presence” (87) and its inevitable warplings of reality.

With these tensions and paradoxes in mind, I want now to look in detail at Douglas Dunn’s poem, which appeared in 1981 as the title poem of his book St. Kilda’s Parliament. In it he conducts a focused meditation, with far-reaching implications, on a single photograph. This image may have been invented by the poet, or it might be a fictive composite of many similar photographs. It is nevertheless treated as real in the poem’s fiction. (Worth keeping in mind here is the likelihood that without the rich record of historical documentary photographs, Dunn, born in 1942, could not have written this poem.)

Since it is fairly long and not well known, I give the poem here in its entirety:
On either side of a rock-paved lane,
Two files of men are standing barefooted,
Bearded, waistcoated, each with a tam-o'-shanter
On his head, and most with a set half-smile
That comes from their companionship with rock,
With soft mist, with rain, with roaring gales,
And from a diet of solan goose and eggs,
A diet of dulse and sloke and sea-tangle,
And ignorance of what a pig, a bee, a rat,
Or rabbit look like, although they remember
The three apples brought here by a traveller
Five years ago, and have discussed them since.
And there are several dogs doing nothing
Who seem contemptuous of my camera,
And a woman who might not believe it
If she were told of the populous mainland.
A man sits on a bank by the door of his house,
Staring out to sea and at a small craft
Bobbing there, the little boat that brought me here,
Whose carpentry was slowly shaped by waves,
By a history of these northern waters.
Wise men or simpletons—it is hard to tell—
But in that way they almost look alike
You also see how each is individual,
Proud of his shyness and of his small life
On this outcast of the Hebrides
With his eyes full of weather and seabirds,
Fish, and whatever morsel he grows here.
Clear, too, is manhood, and how each man looks
Secure in the love of a woman who
Also knows the wisdom of the sun rising,
Of weather in the eyes like landmarks.
Fifty years before depopulation—
Before the boats came at their own request
To ease them from their dying babies—
It was easy, even then, to imagine
St. Kilda return to its naked self,
Its archaeology of hazelraw
And footprints stratified beneath the lichen.
See, how simple it all is, these toes
Playfully clutching the edge of a boulder.
It is a remote democracy, where men,
In manacles of place, outstare a sea
That rattles back its manacles of salt,
The moody jailer of the wild Atlantic.

Traveller, tourist with your mind set on
Romantic Staffas and materials for
Winter conversations, if you should go there,
Landing at sunrise on its difficult shores,
On St. Kilda you will surely hear Gaelic
Spoken softly like a poetry of ghosts
By those who never were contorted by
Hierarchies of cuisine and literacy.
You need only look at the faces of these men
Standing there like everybody's ancestors,
This flick of time I shuttered on a face.
Look at their sly, assuring mockery.
They are aware of what we are up to
With our internal explorations, our
Designs of affluence and education.
They know us so well, and are not jealous,
Whose be-all and end-all was an eternal
Casual husbandry upon a toehold
Of Europe, which, when failing, was not their fault.
You see how they have already prophesied
A day when survivors look across the stern
Of a departing vessel for the last time
At their gannet-shrouded cliffs, and the farewells
Of the St. Kilda mouse and St. Kilda wren
As they fall into the texts of specialists,
Ornithological visitors at the prow
Of a sullenly managed boat from the future.
They pose for ever outside their parliament,
Looking at me, as if they have grown from
Affection scattered across my own eyes.
And it is because of this that I, who took
This photograph in a year of many events—
The Zulu massacres, Tchaikovsky's opera—
Return to tell you this, and that after
My many photographs of distressed cities,
My portraits of successive elegants,
Of the emaciated dead, the lost empires,
Exploded fleets, and of the writhing flesh
Of dead civilians and commercial copulations,
That after so much of that larger franchise
It is to this island that I return.

Here I whittle time, like a dry stick,
From sunrise to sunset, among the groans
And sighings of a tongue I cannot speak,
Outside a parliament, looking at them,
As they, too, must always look at me
Looking through my apparatus at them
Looking. Benevolent, or malign? But who,
At this late stage, could tell, or think it worth it?
For I was there, and am, and I forget. (13–15)
Dunn’s beautifully comprehensive poem manages to touch on most of the issues I have mentioned while focusing on the idea of using photography as an aid to memory. Precisely this problem has interested many poets: when memory and photography are at odds, as they must often be, which shall we trust? Dunn’s subtitle, “the photographer revisits his picture,” reminds us from the start of the difficulty in evaluating the past through both memory and photographic record. Presumably a visit will never be the same as a revisiting. In this case he puts the closely allied questions of memory’s reliability and photography’s truthfulness at the heart of things in several related ways. First, the photographed scene took place in a village that no longer exists: as the poem relates, the island of St. Kilda (actually a group of four small islands), located at the outermost of the Outer Hebrides, was depopulated fifty years after the photo was taken. Victorian Britons had been charmed to discover an example of a relatively primitive, “untainted” culture so close to home. The islanders had lived for centuries in comfortable isolation from technological developments on the mainland. Naturally, with the influx of tourists to their island, their way of life began to be disrupted with epidemic diseases as well as the breakdown of their traditional economy. In 1879, the year of the photograph, this process would have been well underway, though the end may not yet have been in sight. To twentieth-century ears, of course, that end has a sadly familiar ring: by 1930, the few who had not already emigrated had to be evacuated by the British government from a home that was no longer hospitable. The island is now a nature preserve and, with restoration efforts, is once again a destination for tourists (Tindall 169–71).

Whether or not Dunn is referring to an actual photograph, he is describing a common social use of photography. As James Guimond notes, from the inception of photography, “whenever people believe[d] that something [was] going to be destroyed, they rush[ed] to photograph it” (788). Photographers have always been “obsessed with the desire to capture what are called ‘vanishing ways of life.’ ” Guimond continues, “photographers . . . have shared the . . . determination to record the images of aboriginal cultures which were on the brink of disappearing or being assimilated” (788). The nostalgic and sentimental impulse that, in America, produced stories, art, and photographic documentation of our “vanishing frontier,” sent British Victorian photographers across the world in search of quaint, primitive, and exotic cultures. Finding such a people so close to home was especially exhilarating. The inescapable irony here, and one of which Dunn’s narrator seems keenly aware, is that the curiosity for information about such endangered cultures helped contribute to their extinction.

Thus, the photographer in 1979 views a reality that is permanently ended. In addition, the photographer, unless he is well over a century old, must be speaking to us from the grave and so is himself doubly removed from the described scene. Therefore, he may also be intended as a sort of historical Everyman, looking back on the first century and a half of photography’s existence. In any event, he makes it plain in his monologue that he feels at home neither in St. Kilda, “among the groans and sighings of a tongue [he] cannot speak,” nor in the “larger franchise” of modern life. I will have more to say about this uneasiness shortly.

Furthermore, we readers are distanced from the scene by its very unfamiliarity. As Dunn notes, these remote islanders photographed in 1879 live without knowledge of . . . what a pig, a bee, a rat, Or rabbit look like, although they remember The three apples brought here by a traveller Five years ago, and have discussed them since.

Such details clearly are what attracted tourists in the first place. These islanders were inevitably seen in patronizing terms by the inhabitants of industrialized Britain, praised and condescended to simultaneously, as repre-
sentatives of the persistent myth of pastoral simplicity and innocence.

Obviously the barriers to comprehension here are formidable and many-layered. These islanders are inescapably other (different, strange) in habit, outlook, experience, and, of course, in time. The melancholy of such separation (even from someone, like the photographer, who has been there) is frequent in poems about photographs. Here, Dunn’s narrator sees such separation, understandably, as being slightly threatening to him. Most of the men in the photo, he notes, display “a set half-smile / That comes from their companionship with rock, / With soft mists, with rain, with roaring gales . . .” Even dogs “seem contemptuous of [his] camera,” he feels, commenting of the islanders generally:

Wise men or simpletons—it is hard to tell—
But in that way they almost look alike
You also see how each is individual,
Proud of his shyness and of his small life
On this outcast of the Hebrides . . .

This photographer is intelligent enough to know that however “alike” such people may look to the outsider’s eye and the camera’s lens, they maintain an ineffable individuality, one that he can only express, perhaps, by oxymoronic phrases like “proud of his shyness.” This recognition shows up in many small details throughout the poem, in the poet’s fussy or self-deprecating tone, in his cautious qualifiers, but most of all in his savoring of the visible details of the scene, tacitly recognizing that such appearances are the lion’s share of what he really knows. In a sense, he can be sure only of what is outwardly apparent, such as the “toes / Playfully clutching the edge of a boulder.”

We see more than a trace of envy, too, in the speaker’s noting that each St. Kilda man looks “secure in the love of a woman who / Also knows the wisdom of the sun rising, / Of weather in the eyes like landmarks.” These dead men and women, in other words, are secure in more than one sense: safe in each other’s love, they are also secured against doubt by their customs and remoteness, and, finally, protected utterly from intrusion by their eternal dwelling in that vanished year. Here we are not far in spirit, of course, from the happy lovers on Keats’s Grecian Urn, who, imprisoned in their artistic image, are thus preserved from the depredations of time and remain eternally young and lovely. As much as he leans on such romantic notions, however, Dunn never lets us forget that these St. Kildans were actual people in a real place.

The poem grows more explicit about the photographer’s melancholy envy as it continues, granting these doubly exiled islanders an ironic triumph over both the reader and the photographer himself. In turning to address the modern tourist, the “Traveller,” the narrator speaks across the double gulfs of time and poetic fiction, and explicitly implicates the contemporary reader in his themes:

. . . if you should go there,
Landing at sunrise on its difficult shores,
On St. Kilda you will surely hear Gaelic
Spoken softly like a poetry of ghosts
By those who never were contorted by
Hierarchies of cuisine and literacy.
You need only look at the faces of these men
Standing there like everybody’s ancestors,
This flick of time I shuttered on a face.
Look at their sly, assuring mockery.
They are aware of what we are up to
With our internal explorations, our
Designs of affluence and education.
They know us so well, and are not jealous,
Whose be-all and end-all was an eternal
Casual hardy upon a toehold
Of Europe, which, when failing, was not their

The sly mockery here is, of course, not so much read in the photo as read into it by the speaker, who believes that in many ways the more technologically advanced society which absorbed these people is inferior to their culture. No doubt he achieved this perception only as time passed. He may now regret his part, as a nineteenth-century tourist, in the corruption of the St. Kildans’ traditional ways, even though as a photographer he is also party to its preservation in images. The St.
Kildans had, or so he now believes, no need for "internal explorations" (such as this poem, for instance), and were not warped by the presumably spurious "hierarchies" of civilized life, including "literacy" itself as well as "designs of affluence and education."

Up to this point Dunn’s view of these islanders might seem sentimental, as if he saw them as somehow noble in their simple-minded farming of their "toehold" of an island. It is a familiar symbolic structure: ever since Virgil, poets have been lauding an Arcadian ideal, the rural life far from the corruptions of city and court. Yet if the language spoken by the St. Kildans, "a poetry of ghosts," is the idiom of lost innocence, it is of a special kind. There is indeed an implicit judgment in their "casual husbandry," an indictment of the mainland culture and its simplistic belief in progress. These islanders, after all, have survived since prehistoric times with an unchanging, self-sufficient economy, however primitive it might appear to outside eyes. However, the narrator is careful to declare that though the islanders may "know us so well," that is, well enough to mock our obsessive trust in progress, still they "are not jealous" and evidently do not regret the imminent passing away of their own way of life. The islanders are not seen as simple pastoral types; they embrace modern life pragmatically or fatalistically enough, for their own unstated reasons.

The poem’s photographer imagines that these people, fifty years in advance, have "already prophesied" their departure from St. Kilda, and still "pose for ever outside their parliament, / Looking at me, as if they have grown from / Affection scattered across my own eyes." Although they were indeed real enough, their representation in the photograph derives precisely from the "affection scattered" across the photographer’s eyes because the photographer has arranged the moment, posed them, and, most of all, preserved his photo for a century. Why did he do so? Why is he compelled (even from the grave) to revisit his own photograph? No doubt he needs to verify, with the photograph’s aid, his feelings for these people and their vanished way of life. All ways of life are vanishing, from such a perspective, and the photographer is one whose profession involves an attempt to halt such flux. This effort is doomed, of course, and the photographer must know it as well as anyone does. He sees these islanders as not being jealous of him, we may presume, precisely because he is jealous of them.

The poignancy of such a moment—looking back at the photographed past, knowing absolutely its eventual dissolution and yet remembering, with the photo’s aid, its vivid presence—is central to this poem and to others like it. In fact, as Roland Barthes has written, this paradox lies at the heart of historical photography’s ability to move us. Commenting on an 1865 photo of a soon-to-be-executed criminal, Barthes notes:

... he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake.... I shudder... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (96)

Similarly in Dunn’s poem: “looking at them,” the photographer notes that “they, too, must always look at me / Looking through my apparatus at them / Looking.” Richard Powers, in Three Farmers On Their Way To A Dance, his complex historical novel revolving about a similar re-viewing of an old photograph, has suggestive things to say about such self-conscious moments:

We scour over a photo, asking not “What world is preserved here?” but “How do I differ from the fellow who preserved this, the fellows here preserved?” Understanding another is indistinguishable from revising our own self-image. The two processes swallow one another. Photos interest us mostly because they look back. (332)

This unsettling feeling of being watched, even judged, that often comes to us while looking at old photographs, derives from the “catastrophe” Barthes describes, that shud-
nder of recognition coexisting with the inevitable feeling of separation. It is normal to feel pity for the inhabitants of the past in old photographs because we presumably know more than they do; we may even know the details of their own future catastrophes. Yet, as Barthes knew and Dunn implies, what really animates our pity is the sense that these disappeared people also knew much that we never will. Likewise, the one invisible but suggestive presence in any old photograph, of course, is the photographer himself, who is just as much a disappeared person as the nominal subjects. Looking at a photograph we have taken spurs us to ask questions of ourselves the answers to which are largely lost.

Dunn’s narrator concludes by asking, of the St. Kildans’ looking through time at him, “Benevolent, or malign?” And he answers himself unsparring: “But who, / At this late stage, could tell, or think it worth it? / For I was there, and am, and I forget.” What does it all matter, then, if forgetting is inevitable, as it surely is?

The answer, to the extent that a paradoxical compromise can be one, must lie in the interplay of viewer and viewed. For the poem recognizes that there is really no such thing as disinterested observation. Having been to St. Kilda before its culture vanished, having been indulged by the islanders, the photographer is forever marked by the exchange. He feels impelled by “affection” to return not just to St. Kilda, but to “a year of many events— / The Zulu massacres, Tchaikovsky’s opera . . .” —in other words, a year like any other, equally rich with human suffering and high achievement. His return both reflects and implicitly rejects “that larger franchise” of worldly pain, loss, dissolution, and tawdry display that this photographer confesses he spent many subsequent years recording, and from which these St. Kildans are forever protected:

... photographs of distressed cities,  
My portraits of successive elegant,  
Of the emaciated dead, the lost empires,  
Exploded fleets, and of the writhing flesh  
Of dead civilians and commercial copulations . . .

Listed thus, these familiar elements of the modern age, so often the impetus for sensational photographs, seem flat and pathetic. Dead and gone, the people of St. Kilda cannot write or suffer exploitation. The photographer, in returning to tell them this, is obviously telling himself and us, and seeking (without real hope) the impossible stasis of a prelapsarian world. He finds that world not in memory, precisely, but in the shaping of memory represented by photography, which both preserves and distances the past and its inhabitants. His solace depends upon convincing himself not just that St. Kilda did indeed exist as he remembers it, but also that its natives were in fact knowing in a way forever denied to him. He senses their knowledge as a tight-lipped judgment of him, which he can feel but never fully understand. And thus, paradoxically, the photographer and his subjects are united while being forever separated.

This paradox, lying at the heart of the photographic act, is relevant to modern notions of the ambiguity and relativity of all knowledge. Einstein’s central idea, like Freud’s, has spread beyond its original context, becoming part of the intellectual inheritance of modernity. As Jacob Bronowski summarized it, “relativity is the understanding of the world not as events but as relations” (38), a remark that could fairly stand as a description of one of Dunn’s themes here. The photographer revisiting his picture is not revisiting a thing or a place, but is involved in preceiving the relation between his various selves over time. Similarly, Werner Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty has infiltrated areas beyond quantum physics; many modern poets have been impressed by the fact that nothing can be measured without being in some way altered. If such a notion seems little more than common sense today, it is a mark of how deeply we have been influenced by such scientific ideas.

Photography, then, is like a scientific experiment: in recording reality, it also invariably changes it, however subtly. The subjects of any photograph always look back.
So if the photographer is to the people of St. Kilda like a “[visitor] at the prow / Of a sullenly managed boat from the future,” they are to him the never escapable fact of his own and the world’s past. The interplay of viewer and viewed is of the essence. Again, Richard Powers provides in his novel an eloquent gloss on this aspect of the poem:

To look at a thing is already to change it. Conversely, action must begin with the most prevalent looking. The sitter’s eyes look beyond the photographer’s shoulders, beyond the frame, and change, forever, any future looker who catches that gaze. The viewer, the new subject of that gaze, begins the long obligations of rewriting biography to conform to the inverted lens. Every jump cut or soft focus becomes a call to edit. Every cropping, pan, downstopping receives ratification, becomes one’s own. (334–5)

Thus have novelists and poets internalized, even if in oversimplified form, both relativity theory and Heisenberg’s Principle of Uncertainty.

Photography, the art that is both of time and beyond it, is uniquely able to render such tensions. It is of time in that each photograph records a particular, actual instant; it is timeless in the same way any work of art is. As Dunn’s speaker says earlier in the poem, “Here I whistle time, like a dry stick / From sunrise to sunset, among the groans / And sighings of a tongue I cannot speak . . . .” Any photographer does this, of course, marking out the implications of the still scene which we know is never really still. So, as Dunn’s speaker reminds us, a photo is not a record of time itself, or even of time’s passing, but simply of discrete instants, paralyzed and solitary, like notches on a stick. Eventually, following the metaphor’s implications, we must suppose that the stick will be whittled away; of course, there is one inevitable end to all memory, the grave.

Even before death, though, our efforts to remember and preserve the past are compromised. Indeed, the whole poem, in its anxious dependence on and swerving away from the consolations of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” suggests reflection on the limits of its own descriptive power. How well, after all, does Dunn’s narrator succeed in rendering for us the material world of St. Kilda? His description at first seems tangible enough, studded with details of barefooted peasants, boats bobbing in the swells, dogs lounging about, and all the “manacles of place.” And he is shrewd enough to lace his description with appealingly localized diction: “a diet of dulse and sloke and sea tangle,” and an “archaeology of hazelraw”—precisely the kind of exoticism that draws in an armchair traveller.

A closer look at the poem, however, soon reveals that it is not very descriptive at all. The details noted above occur in its first half only and do not really add up to a very full picture. We have only to think of the pages that Conrad or D.H. Lawrence might have devoted to the photographed scene to realize how spotty and selective Dunn’s description is. Furthermore, as the second half of the poem gives itself over entirely to reflection rather than description, Dunn continues to refer rather unconvincingly to what “you can see” in the photograph. Readers are informed, as I have noted, that they can see how the St. Kildans “have already prophesied” their departure; and that they are “aware of what we are up to” in our very different society. It is no mere literalism to point out that these are exactly the sorts of things that the readers cannot see; they are interpretive remarks not backed up by any tangible evidence from the scene. In fact, such judgments obviously cannot exist in any mute image.

Given the poem’s frequent emphasis on what cannot be known (all part of the “poetry of ghosts”), it seems reasonable to suggest that Dunn’s deepest concern here is to devise a language that is adequate not to the people of St. Kilda but to his own sighing, observing, and scattering of affection. To paraphrase Heisenberg, Dunn is not simply describing a memory but self-consciously examining his process of remembering. The
pathos of this poem and similar ones is that it inexorably becomes aware of its own inadequacy at capturing outward events and their attendant meanings.

The more we study our time-bound world, then, the stranger and more remote it seems. And naturally, the more we rely on photos as aids to memory, the more our powers of memory are bound to deteriorate, and the more, in turn, we will seek out photography: a vicious circle. Just as the spread of printed books dealt a never-rescinded blow to the oral tradition of memorization and recital, the proliferation of photography into all areas of life has probably rendered it increasingly more difficult for us to recall and interpret what has happened. “Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory,” according to Roland Barthes, “but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (91). To put it in less exaggerated terms, memory is a complex activity, rich with context and ripe with imagination, while a photograph’s meanings are inevitably limited, cut off from context.

There is one final, related problem as well, which has occurred to nearly every commentator on the history of photography. As Dunn’s fictive photographer is shrewd enough to notice, this age of the news photograph and documentary tends to conflate the values of all events, finding “Zulu massacres” precisely as interesting and photographically valuable as “commercial copulations.” As Sontag puts it: “Images transfix. Images anesthetize” (20). The result is another of the peculiar dualities of photography. Images anesthetize in that the very things we find touching in photographs, like the one of St. Kilda’s Parliament, tend to lose, through over-exposure, their ability to move us. Images of almost everything that was once remote, sensational, or fascinating are so widely accessible that each one carries less and less of a kick. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, images transfix in that, with time, all photographs come to look like works of art, regardless of their subjects. Photography, for all its fabled truthfulness, can easily glorify abstract form, thus beautifying the ugly or the evil. In Max Kozloff’s stern summary of the history of photography,

the genres of information were all leveled, made interchangeable with each other and of equal value. International conferences, swimming meets, strikes, and doggie pranks came to have the same, unstressed, drivelizing importance. (23–4)

It is a sad enough circumstance: the glut of historical photographs causes them to lose their original significance, whether we look to them for truth or for beauty. In Dunn’s poem, the casual juxtaposition of “the emaciated dead” and “successive elegant,” and of the “wretching flesh / Of dead civilians and commercial copulations” seem obvious instances of the leveling of value that Kozloff complains about. Less apparent, perhaps, is the way in which Dunn’s photographer has inevitably, though unwittingly, aestheticized the grim reality of these St. Kildans’ lives. Whatever hardships they have endured; whatever anger they feel; whatever pain or despair is to come—all tend to dissolve into the picturesque. Craggy, wind-marked faces are inescapably photogenic, and it is hard to avoid a sentimentalizing effect, however much the narrator wants to show contempt for tourists in search of “materials for / Winter conversations.”

Ultimately, then, the “sly, assuring mockery” of the villagers in Dunn’s poem is assuring us of one uncomfortable fact about our technological progress: that the more we have striven to grasp and record experience with our fine instruments of perception, the more impediments we have inadvertently placed between ourselves and reality—not just the reality of the past, but the present and the future as well. The “tongue [the photographer] cannot speak” is not just the Gaelic of the inhabitants of St. Kilda, but, more fundamentally, our failure to order and explain the mysteries of time and memory. It is an ancient theme after all, the chief novelty being our continuing naive belief in photography’s accuracy.
Works Cited


