The Mountain and the Mole-hill: Julia Margaret Cameron's Allegories

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Fig. 1. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Goodness* from the series *Fruits of the Spirit*, 1864, albumen print, 25.4 × 20 cm. Gernsheim Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
The nineteenth-century British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron did not acquire during her lifetime anything close to the fame and financial success she felt she deserved. In 1864, having entered the world of Victorian art photography as a “lady amateur” late in life and a decade later than the men who founded the field, she plunged into her endeavor head first. But her path was littered with financial disappointments and mixed reception, including disparagement from the photographic establishment and its voices in the professional press. Violet Hamilton puts Cameron’s predicament in rather stark terms when she writes, “During her lifetime the photographic press condemned almost all her work.” Hamilton adds that even among the well-received works, “the art critics preferred her portraits to the ‘fancy subjects’” (Hamilton 1996, 59). In the hundred-odd years since the photographer’s death, however, critical opinion has shifted rather significantly, so that it is with issues raised by some of the “fancy pictures” that this essay is concerned.

The distinction between the generally better-received portraits and other works is an important one. Cameron also used it herself, though the work that lies outside the bounds of explicit portraiture can present a challenge to classification. In the album she gave as a gift to Lord Overstone, she saw the categories as “Portraits,” “Madonna Groups,” and “Fancy Subjects for Pictorial Effect” (Hamilton 1996, 19). Pam Roberts, in looking at Cameron’s “portraits” of women, subdivides them into “three categories: allegorical (of quality, trait or emotion); historical or mythical; and straight, identified portraits of real women as themselves.” In explaining her divisions, Roberts writes,

In the first category, women are immortalized as a celebration of feminine truths such as Innocence, Love or Goodness. These portraits, on the whole, tend to be the least successful. . . . When Cameron matched aspects of her sitters’ personalities to those of historical or mythical personages, the results are far more impressive . . . because the qualities Cameron imagined existed in the named subject-matter are amplified by her sitters’ own peculiar characteristics. (Roberts 1992, 66)

Yet the neatness of this division is problematic for at least two reasons. For one, Cameron executed few works that contained abstract concepts as their titles, and most of them are confined to one series, *The Fruits of the Spirit* of 1864 (fig. 1). More importantly, the hallmark of her best-known “historical and mythical” images, the large-format close-ups of heads, is the almost complete evacuation of any specific (e.g. iconographic) references to the stories in question. Only the titles guide the viewer, and even those Cameron famously changed around, assigning multiple ones to almost identical images (as in the case of *The Mountain Nymph, Sweet Liberty* and *Cassiopeia*).
from 1866 [figs. 2 and 3]) or using the same model as multiple characters (as in the case of Alice Liddell, photographed as both Pomona and Alethea [figs. 4 and 5]). Thus, the claim that one can separate this group out based either on the specificity of reference (which is hardly greater than in the “pure” allegories) or on a traceable correlation between the “nature” of the title subject and the character of the sitter is somewhat shaky.¹

Rather, one can see Cameron’s oeuvre as a spectrum. On one of its ends, we find the “straight” portraits of famous contemporaries and family members; on the other, bookending her artistic career, the 1874 series of illustrations she created for Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Spread between these poles is a diverse group of images that range from attempts at the sublimely symbolic to wildly hammed-up genre scenes from Victorian domestic theatricals. What I wish to suggest is that some of them—perhaps the most compelling ones—are, indeed, allegorical. They functioned as such at the time of their production and do so now, inciting the greatest contention when the allegory succeeded best. Yet great care should be taken to define this term.

¹ Cameron also describes, in “Annals of My Glass House,” her uncompleted autobiography, how Sir Henry Taylor “consented to be in turn Friar Laurence with Juliet, Prospero with Miranda, Ahasuerus with Queen Esther, to hold my poker as his scepter, and do whatever I desired of him.” Cameron 1996, 13.
The Oxford English Dictionary defines “allegory” as “A figurative sentence, discourse, or narrative, in which properties and circumstances attributed to the apparent subject really refer to the subject they are meant to suggest; an extended or continued metaphor” (“Allegory” 1989). The Grove Dictionary of Art provides further specifics on allegory as a

[term used to describe a method of expressing complex abstract ideas or a work of art composed according to this. An allegory is principally constructed from personifications and symbols, and, though overlapping in function, it is thus more sophisticated in both meaning and operation than either of these. . . . [It is] a means of making the “invisible” visible . . . [and functions] on the basis of a conventionally agreed relation between concept and representation, refer[ring] to an idea outside the work of art. (“Allegory” 2008)

In the Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Angus Fletcher notes that for centuries, “Allegory . . . had tried to be the image of permanence in a world of flux” but contends that, in its modern form, this is no longer an end it can serve (Fletcher 1973, 47). This is very much the case with Cameron. The allegorical content of her images should not be decided based solely on the presence of women and children called upon to pose as embodiments of abstract ideas with biblical, literary, or artistic allusions. As I will show, the connection so crucial in traditional allegory of the literal images to specific external frames of layered metaphoric references here is tenuous, indeed. Rather,
we should take allegory to be a quality present precisely to the same degree to which an image highlights, in striving to overcome it, a significant internal logical rupture. It is by making disjunctions between intention and effect into a constitutive element of meaning and by incorporating the aporias of incongruous desires that allegory, at least in its modern iterations, fulfills its function as "other speech."

Celebrating the internal paradoxes of her images was not, as I will argue, Cameron’s goal. Retroactively, the politics of the project she did attempt may strike us as flawed at best and contemptible at worst. Thus, Steve Edwards, in what must be the definitive book on early British photography, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories*, states bluntly, “Pace the critical attention devoted to her work, I believe that the politics of snobbery made Cameron’s inventive gambit possible” (Edwards 2006, 230).

Edwards’s analysis sums up the main points of the “gambit” in which Cameron’s work, called into question the emerging category of photographic art. . . . She did not need the compromise of pictures that were “sharp” and “soft” because she had no interest in balancing commercial studio work with the prevailing standards of artistic taste. . . . In the interest of her own transcendence, she disputed their space of compromise and drew their fire. But her account left the deeper figurations in place while working them to her advantage. She did not want to have anything to do with . . . mechanics any more than the trade press did. (Edwards 2006, 229)

She was no Marxist, and one cannot accuse her of rocking the boat of economic hierarchies. But not so, I would argue, with ideology. It was not only the professional press that Cameron made uncomfortable when she undermined their efforts despite following their own logic. Even those who wanted to like her work inadvertently paid it compliments best described as backhanded. The unease Cameron’s practice caused went beyond simple misogynistic disparagement, although there was enough of that, too.2 As her critics understood intuitively, however, it also stood as the most compelling and vivid allegory of the untenability both of her own project and of the logic of Victorian art photography whose limits she tested.

What was it about Cameron’s work in general and the “fancy pictures” in particular that galled her critics? A paradigmatic example of the opposition Cameron consistently faced can be found in the writings of Henry Peach Robinson. In the

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2 I do not discuss in what follows the related issue of the artist’s gender and the kind of criticism and dismissal she faced due to it. Texts that examine these issues more fully include Lukitsch 1992 and Oliphant 1996.
compact body of *The Pictorial Effect in Photography* (1868), the book that remained art photography’s theoretical Bible into the 1890s, he dedicated more than a page to disparaging Cameron as a foil to his own practice. While her name is not given, the detailed description points squarely at Cameron, the only person treated at such length.

Some years ago a number of photographs by a lady—many of them failures from every point of view, but some of them very remarkable for their daring chiaro-oscuro, artistic arrangement, and, in some instances, delightful expression—were brought prominently before the public. These pictures . . . received the most enthusiastic praise from artists and critics ignorant of the capabilities of the art, and who . . . attributed the excellences which these photographs undoubtedly . . . possessed, to their defects. These defects were, so little definition that it is difficult to make out parts even in the lights; in the shadows it often happens that nothing exists but black paper; so little care whether the sitter moved or not during the enormous exposure . . . that prints were exhibited containing so many images that the most careless operator would have effaced the negative as soon as visible under developer; and, apparently, so much contempt for . . . the proprieties of photography, that impressions from negatives scratched and stained . . . were exhibited as triumphs of art. The arguments of the admirers . . . were, that the excellences existed because of the faults. . . . This is not true; and if it were, I should certainly say, Let the merits go; it is not the mission of photography to produce smudges. . . . [P]hotography is pre-eminently the art of definition, and when an art departs from its function, it is lost. (Robinson 1881, 151)

Another critic similarly noted, “She [Cameron] should not let herself be misled by the indiscriminating praise bestowed upon her by the non-photographic press and she would do much better when she has learnt the proper use of her apparatus” (Roberts 1992, 52).4

What her fellow photographers objected to was Cameron’s photographic “diction,” which highlighted the arbitrariness of the premium placed on the skills of an “efficient operator.”5

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3 Very similar comments can be found in reviews from both *The Photographic Journal* and *The British Journal of Photography* in January and February of 1865. The BJP thought it charitable to concede that “[They] should be pleased to see similar attempts by better photographers.” The former is cited in Metropolitan Museum of Art 1999, 34–35, the latter in Simpson 2004, 86.

4 For original source, see “Report of the Jurors of the Exhibition,” *The Photographic Journal* 9 (1864) note 5.

Not being one, Cameron celebrated and retained evidence of the material experience of image-making: the application onto a glass plate of wet collodion, which dripped and trapped specks of dust; the act of choosing the degree and specific center of focus; the trace of the time necessary to take the picture. The resulting image revealed its indexicality, what Roland Barthes called “the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency” (Barthes 1981, 4). The intrinsically photographic ability to provide detail and definition was thus wasted on visual “nonsense” one should have eliminated, while its creator claimed that it occupied a higher rung in the hierarchy of photographic production.

The second cause for disparagement was Cameron’s choice of subject matter; here too reading Robinson is instructive. It’s not that he objected to transposing the language of Art into photography. Quite the contrary. As Steve Edwards demonstrates, “[T]he first viewers of photographs approached them through the established language of art” (Edwards 2006, 120–121), while the “photographers drew on the established categories of Academic art theory.” But if photography were, in a sense, to “pass” for art, it had to understand its limitations. Robinson wrote, “The art of photography has arrived at a sufficient state of perfection . . . [to acknowledge] that the sublime cannot be reached by it; and that its power is greatest when it attempts simple things. But if it is not the mountain that it can represent best, what art can equal it in its representation of the mole-hill?” (Robinson 1881, 49).

And yet Julia Margaret Cameron strained for the mountains. Consider her 1869 photograph The Kiss of Peace (fig. 6), which she described in an 1878 letter as “[t]he most beautiful of all my photographs” (Cox and Ford 2003, 459). Its title refers to the early Christian tradition wherein a kiss was both a part of liturgy and a greeting (Wolf 1998, 66). Yet the photograph

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6 Steve Edwards also traces the intricacies of the class rhetoric and economic incentive associated with the question of producing a “document” vs. an artistic “picture.” See Edwards 2006, chap. 3.

7 An early response by the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning to the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 is also exemplary here. She wrote of the new medium, “It is the very sanctification of portraits I think—and it is not at all monstrous in me to say what my brothers cry out against so vehemently . . . that I would rather have such a memorial of one I dearly loved, than the noblest Artist’s work ever produced.” Quoted in Heron and Williams 1996, 2. The earliest qualms as to what exactly a photographic representation could reveal were already intertwined with considerations of its relationship to the ontological category of Art. With time, the need to price, classify, and interpret the growing corpus of images only exacerbated this tension. For other important considerations of the function of early daguerreotype portraits, see Trachtenberg 1992, 181, 187.
Fig. 6. Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Kiss of Peace*, 1869, albumen print, 23.2 × 18.1 cm. University of Michigan Museum of Art purchase, 1975/1.63.
readily suggests that it is neither anthropological interest, nor historic accuracy, nor even the particular moment of action that Cameron is after. The faces of the two women float against a dark background that reads as both utterly flat, thus pushing the close-up out toward the viewer, and infinitely deep, creating a cocoon of darkness that cuts its inhabitants off from any recognizable time or space, be they physical or historical. The “prop” of the women’s garb does take its wearers out of Victorian England, but it relocates them to such a vaguely classicized past that it refuses to be pinned down to so much as an era. The loose hair catches the light but in its proliferation serves to confuse, merging ambiguously with the folds of Mary Hillier’s (the older woman) wrap, making one wonder where the locks end and shadows begin. This sense of physical indistinctness of objects combines with a diffuse timelessness, both accomplished through the hallmark soft focus, a technical parameter of central import to both Cameron’s supporters and detractors. Even the women’s positioning suggests that these are not bodies that just encountered each other—the torsos are far too close and worked snuggly into each other for that. Nor are the older woman’s lips actually planting a kiss in a usual sense; they touch the forehead but show no tension that would suggest an action. This is not an event; it is a languid state of mind, one that exists outside of geography, time, action, or individuality (though the frozenness might also simply be explained by the difficulty of holding poses for the very long exposure). Much is suggested by the spot in the photograph that serves as both literal and metaphorical center of focus—the highlighted brow, which emphasizes the body’s relationship to the absolute darkness behind it and throws into greater contour-softening shadow the blunt fleshliness of the faces. On the one hand, the faces are a physical presence that is the only absolute fact at our disposal. On the other, they are not quite there and not too “here.” It is on this last point that an ambivalent Oscar Rejlander commented, “Without arguing in favour of wooliness and the effect of imperfect vision, much may be said in favour of the idea of having relation of flesh without an exaggerated idea of the bark of the skin” (Jones 1973, 32).

As far as Cameron was concerned, her task was “to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real & Ideal & sacrificing nothing of Truth by all possible devotion to Poetry & beauty” (Hamilton 1996, 29). She was unwilling to give up the “real”—the ultimate in verisimilitude—which was provided by the most literalist technology available to date. But neither could she disavow the Ideal and its necessarily absolute form. In describing her practice, then, she implicitly sought reconciliation in the symbol—the rhetorical figure and pattern of thought that literary critics identify as fundamental to Romanticism.
Pitted against allegory’s contrived connection between the particular and the general, the symbol presupposed “an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests” (De Man 1983, 189). Such an “intimate unity”—a complete coincidence and correlation of external material form with transcendent content—produced Beauty, Cameron’s primary aesthetic category. As Walter Benjamin theorized it, “As a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole. The idea of the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty is derived from the theological aesthetics of the romantics” (Benjamin 2003, 160). In this framework, Cameron could quite justifiably desire almost religious transcendence and access to moral truths from her imagery. Thus, in her uncompleted autobiography, “Annals of My Glass House,” she wrote, “When I have had such men [as Carlyle] before my camera my whole soul has endeavoured to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man. The photograph thus taken has been almost an embodiment of a prayer” (Cameron 1996, 15). Nor could she be indifferent to the inner character of other sitters, even if not as great as Carlyle. She noted of Mary Hillier, her maid and most photographed (if never publicly named) model, “The very unusual attributes of her character and complexion of her mind, if I may so call it, deserves mention in due time” (Cameron 1996, 14).

Cameron’s desire for the unity of image and truth found in the symbolic echoed the writings of John Ruskin, who applied to the visual arts the high Romantic paradigms so prevalent in poetry. In volume 1 of Modern Painters, Ruskin wrote, “If there be in painting anything which operates, as words do, not by resembling anything, but by being taken as a symbol and substitute for it, and thus inducing the effect of it, then this channel of communication can convey uncorrupted truth, though it do not in any degree resemble the facts whose conception it induces. But ideas of imitation, of course, require the likeness of the object” (Ruskin 1888, 20). Ruskin never came to regard photography as a viable artistic medium precisely because it could never do more than record obtrusive facts too faithfully (Harvey 1984). But his injunction, to which Cameron’s own stated goals are very close, suggests what a huge challenge she was setting for herself.

8 It is also worth noting that, along with S. T. Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle was one of the most important English theorists of Symbolism as a literary philosophy.

9 H. P. Robinson also felt the need both to address the obvious difficulties Ruskin’s ideas posed and to try to coopt them. Robinson positioned that which he pioneered as the enhancement of the
To add yet another paradoxical twist, Ruskin coexisted with Sir Joshua Reynolds as Victorian England’s greatest authority on artistic theory. The recourse at once to Ruskin and Reynolds (whom Robinson, for instance, invokes as the ultimate authority) only deepened the potential for internal disjuncture. In discussing the strangeness of basing the discourse of artistic photography on eighteenth-century painting theory, Steve Edwards concludes that “Reynoldsian photography is an oxymoron. The copy, particularity, detail: these are all the categories in which photography excels” (Edwards 2006, 154). Of William Lake Price he writes, “in operating within the antinomies of Academic theory, he set in place the key characteristics of an allotropic photography. From this point on, photography would be at war with itself” (Edwards 2006, 153).

In this state of internal hostilities, the preserved evidence of the mechanics of Cameron’s productions was distracting when not eliminated. And yet for Cameron, these traces—preserved for all the world to see—were, perhaps, the greatest sign of her consistent commitment to creating images that could function as true symbols and could hence be Art. Cameron’s insistence over and over that the images were “from life” (Hamilton 2996, 27) and her seemingly paradoxical refusal to retouch them are a leap of faith—and she was a deeply religious woman. Her description of her own work as “successes in her mortal, but yet divine! art of photography” (Lukitch 2001, 11) is more than so much florid, oversentimental verbiage from a woman who was, indeed, prone to hyperbole. The elimination of minor technical flaws would have allowed Cameron to bring her images visually closer to the appearance of ideality in painting, the medium to which she was always looking. And yet it was on the advice of G. F. Watts, the painter who served as her “artistic guru” and encouraged her move toward working with the “grand designs” in the “grand manner,” that Cameron forswore alteration (Lukitch 2001, 29, 54). For to alter the appearance of an image on the plate would have been to admit the possibility of separation between innate essence, over which Cameron did not have control, and its representation, over which she did. To create the best possible environment for the “taking” of the “greatness of the inner man” was her calling; to retouch the image afterwards would mean that she had merely literal by an artistic vision based on recourse to traditional forms. This too would have been problematic from Ruskin’s point of view, but the attempt is significant. “In Modern Painters [Ruskin] calls the pleasure resulting from imitation the most contemptible that can be derived from art.” However, “This is only one of several arguments [Ruskin] brings to bear against the mere literal, photographic rendering of nature, without the addition of that soul or feeling which the mind of man can throw into his work, be it painting or photograph.” Robinson 1881, 54–55.
failed in that first instance. “I could have [the spots] touched out,” she wrote in a letter, “but I am the only photographer who always issues untouched photographs and artists for this reason amongst others value my photographs.” Instead, she “followed Watts’ advice, which was, ‘What is, is, and one should not desire to make it seem to be other.’” (Melville 2003, 85).

But a Realist she was not, and her greatest critical successes were accomplished by literally softening the blow of intrusions into her cohesive schema of “the necessarily real which has been placed before the lens” (Barthes 1981, 76). It was in this that she differed from Oscar Rejlander, who famously created an allegory in the most classical and academic sense of the word with his 1857 The Two Ways of Life (fig. 7), a composite print made from more than thirty negatives. Despite his earlier successes with tableaux vivants (Jones 1973, 11–14), Rejlander’s attempt at photographically depicting transcendent universal truths was mocked. Truth to nature could be too much of a good thing and stood to discredit an allegory. A frustrated Rejlander wrote, “I cannot understand how a painting on the same

10 Victoria Olsen notes, citing Wilfrid Blunt’s ‘England’s Michelangelo’: A Biography of G. F. Watts, “Watts felt ambivalent about the term ‘allegory’ and preferred to think of his paintings as expressing abstract universal truths. . . . Cameron’s best allegorical work also avoids the trap of looking like a rebus: in most of them one or two figures pose together with only the vaguest of narrative to give flesh to their grand titles.” Olsen 2003, 174.

11 In the image, the figure of Penitence, with her head covered up, is naked as an outward sign of abjection. Some of the critics scoffed at suggestions of “indelicacy”; Queen Victoria purchased a print. But in Edinburgh in 1857, the photograph was first denied admission into the Scottish Photographic Society show and was later displayed with the “dissolute part” curtained off. The debate was rekindled in 1863 when Thomas Sutton, the editor of Photographic Notes, proclaimed that “pictures which are the result of . . . observation and powers of imagination, are more noble than, and belong to a different class—than the images in a camera obscura. When the Council of this Society . . . banished . . . a photograph entitled The Two Ways of Life, in which degraded females were exhibited in a state of nudity, with all the uncompromising truthfulness of photography, they did quite right, for there was neither art nor decency in such a photograph; . . . There is no impropriety in exhibiting such works of art as Etty’s Bathers Surprised by a Swan,—but there is impropriety in publicly exhibiting photographs of nude prostitutes, in flesh and blood truthfulness and minuteness of detail.” Jones 1973, 23–24. Even more interestingly, Alfred Wall, Rejlander’s career-long advocate, writing in 1860, used the same language, simply inverting the values attached to the terms. He spoke of “critics, whose prejudices had been delicately and carefully nurtured among the dainty shams of conventional art, starting horror-struck from truths so whole, so literal, and so forcible.” Spencer 1985, 102.
subject can, except in its colouring, be more real or truthful than a photograph, both being but representative” (Jones 1973, 18–19).

A modern answer to Rejlander’s question can be found in Carol Armstrong’s analysis. She writes in reference to the alleged “whores,” “The boundary between image and life could not be trusted, could not even be seen. . . . Their existence in a photograph, no matter how convoluted its achievement in the studio, confirmed their double existence in real and allegorical time, confirmed the double truth, both indexical and iconic, of their ‘flesh-and-blood’” (Armstrong 1996, 122). A period answer to the rhetorical question can, perhaps, be found in one of the more positive reviews afforded Cameron early on. Following her first one-woman show in 1865–1866, the poet Coventry Patmore spoke admiringly of her portraits. Patmore at one point gave Cameron the highest praise possible, writing, “It will not do, as far at least as the human head is concerned, to speak any longer of ideality as the peculiar character of art.” But he also dismissed out of hand her attempts to attach specific content to pleasing form by visualizing history, myth, and pure concepts:

She has, in many cases, endeavoured to make pictures out of [her productions]. She is not content with putting . . . noble heads of figures on her paper; but she must group them into tableaux vivants, and call them ‘Faith, Hope, and Charity,’ ‘St. Agnes,’ ‘The Infant Samuel,’ . . . The effect of this is often strange, and sometimes grotesque; and must do much more to diminish the general popularity of the pieces. . . . We are not sure . . . that the singular art with which Mrs. Cameron has often arranged

Fig. 7. Oscar Gustav Rejlander, *Two Ways of Life*, 1857, composite albumen print, 41.0 × 79.0 cm. Royal Photographic Society/Science & Society Picture Library, UK.
the draperies . . . does not increase the effect of the “realistic” air which most of her groups persist in maintaining for themselves, after all has been done to bring them into the pure region of ideality. (Cameron 1990, 12)

In the end, “the place of photography” was still as “that of a guide and corrector of the artist’s eye,” most valuable as a preparatory stage for portraiture (Cameron 1990, 13–14). And this was one of the kinder reviews. In 1864–1865, a different critic had written, “There is a weird suggestiveness about Mrs. Cameron’s pictures, and a skilful massing of lights and shadows . . . scarcely well applied, however, in securing photographs in which almost all that constitutes the charm of a photograph, faultlessly minute detail and truth, are carefully eliminated” (Roberts 1992, 52). Yet another commented presciently on “extraordinary specimens of portraiture . . . treading on the debatable ground which may lead to grand results or issue in complete failure” (Roberts 1992, 52).

Where “weird suggestiveness” is concerned, few images are more evocative than the symbolic studies of women’s heads that Cameron made in and after the spring of 1866.  

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12 For original source, see “Exhibition of the Photographic Society of Scotland,” The Photographic News 9, 6 January 1865, p. 4, note 7.

13 For original source, see “The Photographic Exhibition,” The Photographic News 8, 3 June 1864, pp. 265–266, note 6.

14 Cameron had switched to a camera that allowed for larger plates and produced life-size images. Melville 2003, 84.
Beatrice (fig. 8) is one such work, and it shows Cameron in her habit of making allusions to the Old Masters—the subject matter and pose of the figure are direct borrowings from a Guido Reni painting. Treading the fine line between success and failure, just as in The Kiss of Peace, she gets her massing of darks and lights just so, makes “the bark of the skin” glow with an inner light of the “grand style” (à la Rembrandt), and comes closest to eliminating any references to particularities that might interfere with the perfect expression of a noble interiority. Very little links us to the story of Beatrice Cenci—no violent encounter here, no unjust execution. Only the imprint of tragic suffering seems within reach, suffused with the otherworldly airiness of the picture’s space. Plausibility is on Cameron’s side. And yet it is not only the modern-day viewer who might feel “an inappropriate curiosity about Cameron’s models” (Rose 1998, 13). H. P. Robinson too felt this curiosity when he caustically wrote, “The effect is peculiarly ridiculous when the feathers are too fine for the bird, and the ‘artist’ endeavours to make a maid-servant look like a duchess” (Robinson 1881, 116). Likewise unable to reconcile attempt with result, George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1889, “While the portraits of Herschel, Tennyson and Carlyle beat hollow anything I have ever seen, . . . virtually in the same frame, there are photographs of children with no clothes on . . . with palpably paper wings, most inartistically grouped and artlessly labelled as angels, saints or fairies” (Cox and Ford 2003, 433).

Despite the near perfect balance of the blur, the viewer’s misgivings abide. The model’s body still betrays the slight tension of holding a pose, with her head at what one would imagine to be an uncomfortable angle. The drapery threatens to reveal itself as a precariously piled rag, so that the greatest precision of representation would be disappointing rather than dazzling. And the fact that this is, after all, May Prinsep is still intrusive, worrying the question of incongruity between the “real” person and the cast type. Thus, Philip Gilbert Hamerton, “the finest nineteenth century critic” in the field of graphic art, agreed that “there had never been anything like [Cameron’s] photographs before,” but they could still not remove as such “an objection [against photography] which far outweighs all the others, and that is the necessity for an actually existing

15 In Beatrice, it is May Prinsep, Cameron’s niece, who is posing, but Mary Hillier, her favorite model, was, indeed, her maid.

16 Hamerton also wrote, “The nearest approach to fine art yet made by photography has been in the remarkable photographs by Mrs. Cameron . . . [who] deflated the obtrusiveness of photographic detail by putting her subjects out of focus . . .” (emphasis added). Quoted in Weaver 1984, 139.
model. You cannot photograph an intention, whilst you can draw an intention” (Weaver 1984, 140).

The symbolic photographs’ indexicality, at least to some eyes, staunchly and noticeably defied intention, as well as ownership and control. Even in the question of the terms through which they might be described, confusion persists to this day. Unlike the better-received work, they were not portraits. The success of a portrait, as Richard Brilliant points out, “depends on the artist’s... ability to manifest the peculiarities of appearance and character [of the person] in a manner that is both accessible and satisfactory to other viewers” (Brilliant 1991, 14). And yet in Cameron’s case, effectiveness and reliability in capturing all the peculiarities the camera could unselectively preserve would almost undoubtedly place the goal of the enterprise in jeopardy.18

Cameron herself wrote of her wish “not only to be faithful as to portraiture but to revive & reproduce the old Masters by making pictures in which the Ideal prevails without any sacrifice of the Real” (quoted in Simpson 2004, 85). Yet as a genre, portraiture “challenges the transiency or irrelevancy of human existence” (Brilliant 1991, 14). Cameron’s reference to the symbolic heads as “portraits” makes them into paradoxic attempts to stave off irrelevancy through the removal of the context relevant to a person’s life, from the name on. In the end, even the wildest fancies contained a quality of “innate” but stubbornly unmanageable portraiture, a quality that inadvertently defied the full mastery, both physical and spiritual, that Emily Tennyson attributed to Cameron when she wrote, “Mrs. Cameron is making endless Madonnas and May Queens and Foolish Virgins and Wise Virgins and I know not what besides. It really is wonderful how she puts her spirit into people” (quoted in Rose 1998, 13).

In what way, then, might we call Cameron’s works allegorical? Their relationship to the dictionary definition cited earlier would seem uneasy. Traditional mechanisms do not quite apply...

17 The quest for a way to exert control over contingencies is evident in Cameron’s particularity in her choice of sitters. She wrote with pride, “great beauty—great celebrity—and great friendship so I have kept my Portfolio choice.” Cameron’s “amateur” status allowed her to work for “loftier” reasons than mere financial gain. But just as importantly, her refusal to take on paying customers reveals an unwillingness to give up the power relations she enjoyed with her models when she, by all accounts a willful and imperious woman, was photographing children, servants, and younger relatives, the latter two usually being female and nameless for purposes of the end result. On the gendered “erotics of power,” see Olsen 2003, 170–171, 222, 152.

18 Even Charles Cameron, Julia Margaret’s husband, addressed the issue in a brief treatise on aesthetics. See Weaver 1984, 137.
if one thinks of allegory as “highly ornamental, using elaborate symbolism and personification” (Fletcher 1973, 1:43). Symbolism, as I have been arguing, is attempted—a general idea to be embodied is certainly being referred to, though often with such vagueness as to defy certain articulation. But there is no personification, devoid as the figures are of distinct, unequivocal attributes and properties that by convention might signify their embodiment of an idea. What we are dealing with are vague intimations in a state of frozen if precarious visual stasis. As such, they provide few narrative elements needed to demonstrate the “conventionally agreed relation between concept and representation.” An explanatory narrative may be hinted at, but the external frames of reference necessary to make an allegory reflect a cosmic order are quite flimsy and inconsistent.

Allegory, however, has also been discussed in the twentieth century not as a prescriptive procedure with visually predictable form but as a more general mode of conceiving the relation between concept and representation. Fundamental to this relation, as I have suggested earlier, is an awareness of the gaps between the two, a productive disjuncture between concept and representation. The allegory, moreover, is premised on the acknowledgment of the gaps that hold the disparate elements together as if pulling them in by force of gravity. Gail Day notes that both of the theorists who have defined allegory in its modern sense, Walter Benjamin and Paul De Man, “emphasize allegory’s qualities of nonidentity, rupture, disjunction, distance, and fragmentation” (Day 1999, 106).

The photography historian Carol Armstrong has written about allegory in Julia Margaret Cameron’s work, describing it “as involving disguises . . . and taboos, as polysemic and ambivalent, as having to do with repetition, and with structure more than with content or meaning, and as inherently thematic, self-thematizing and therefore self-reflexive” (Armstrong 1996, 133). Taking a psychoanalytic approach, she argues that Cameron’s pictures of women and children (“fancy” ones prominent among them) suggest self-reflexivity that is “often as much about photography per se as it is about anything else.”

19 Thus Benjamin laments, “Even great artists and exceptional theoreticians, such as Yeats, still assume that allegory is a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning.” “Allegory,” he goes on, “is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is.” Benjamin 2003, 162.

Through this self-reflexivity, Cameron “sought to allegorize her own photographic practice and to define it alternatively by allegorical means—as domestic, the incestuously familial and the feminine; as something like hysteria—the hysteria of the mother—instead” (Armstrong 1996, 119). She argues that “Cameron’s feminization of photographic production was not so much a refusal of, or rebellion against, the standards of technique, truth, and theatricality obeyed by Rejlander and other pictorialists [who operated on the basis of positivist faith in the indexical]. . . . Rather, it was in excess of those standards: a more-than-usual fascination with the indexical, chemical means of the magic of photography, . . . too much belief in the verity . . . of the assumed role,” which led Cameron to display how her photographs do so “self-reflexively, automatically, and without reason, in and on the photographs themselves” (Armstrong 1996, 131, 126).

It is with this idea of an allegory created by the profusion without reason and stemming from self-reflexivity about the photographic medium as such that I quibble. Cameron’s own writings, as well as discursive and formal choices such as titles, models, compositions, lighting, backgrounds, and, ironically, soft focus, demonstrate attempts at maximum control of the outcome. Her views and those of her contemporaries suggest that the too-muchness of Cameron’s technique was dictated by logical necessity, even if the work became internally rent when it took the logic of conflicting demands to a new visibility. It became an unwitting allegory of the untenability of its own project. But in doing this, it owed little to a self-conscious recognition of the radical difference of photography, much as we might wish to find such a “progressive” response to the “‘bourgeois realism’ that continues to preside over modern photographic fantasies” (Armstrong 1996, 126). Rather, Cameron’s was a glance cast hopefully backward in an attempt at reconciliation, performed as much in the male public sphere of exhibitions, competitions, and commercial ventures as it was in the sphere of the self-consciously domestic and feminine (Weaver 1989, 154). If Cameron allowed the “flaws” to stay, it was because she herself could insist that she saw through the medium, as well as looking at it. The allegorical disjunction began only when “the dark background against which the bright world of symbol might stand out” unavoidably attracted and distracted the eyes both of those who could see too clearly and those who could not see clearly enough (Benjamin 2003, 161).

The ambivalence of the period assessment of what one reviewer called “willfully imperfect photography” can begin to account for the elusiveness of commercial success and fame (Melville 2003, 93). If these images still seem profoundly strange to us, how can one not wonder at the disruptive
potential of work that could not but speak in a mode that, as literary critic Theresa Kelley points out, “is alien; its ancient rhetorical status as ‘other speech’ survives all other adjustments. There is always an irreducible difference between allegorical representation and its referent” (Kelley 1997, 5). If allegory is “a process or dynamic in which tensions are exacerbated, in which antinomies cross, interact, and even degenerate” (Day 1999, 113), then it is to the allegory of intense coexistence of different kinds of doubt that the critics responded when they found in Cameron’s “fancy pictures” a “weird suggestiveness” that “tread[ed] on debatable ground,” balancing precariously between the sublime and the ridiculous. Of her contemporaries, Cameron was the most reckless and heedless in attacking those doubts, and the growing critical interest in her work that has taken place in the last three decades would suggest that the currency of the venture is yet to fade.


