

Scanning the Horizon: Photography in the Time of Almeida Garrett

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Halfway through *Travels in My Homeland*, Almeida Garrett comes to a grinding halt. His main character, Carlos, is in a state of turmoil. Images flit through his imagination. He whirls around the room in nervous torment; he dreams and is entangled in his thoughts, and his imagination gallops off and will not be reined in. Carlos is in deep trouble. From his pen flow fragments of poetic thoughts on Joantina's eyes, on Georgina's eyes, on Soledade's eyes, on the sky, the earth, day, night, and the stars. When he has completed these bizarrely rendered thoughts, he collapses in a heap and admits to what every writer fears. He is mute before the fascinating movement of his mind. "Unfortunately," he says, "these most sublime poetic thoughts did not express themselves in words. By a miraculous process of mental photography it was possible to obtain only the fragment I have transcribed" (132). Scant compensation for the lofty feelings of a romantic.

Mental photography? This is what sees him through that bleak moment in which he is momentarily rendered mute. Even then, he produces only a fragment, itself characteristic of what the photographer selects and frames of what he sees. What was this miraculous process?

Garrett was well acquainted with recent discoveries in photography that coincided with the publication in 1846 of *Travels*. By 1839, the photographic experiments of key figures were proclaimed in France and England as the beginning of photography and the production of a permanent image became

possible. In 1834, William Henry Fox Talbot invented the calotype process by which many prints could be made on paper from a negative, and in 1839 Louis Daguerre announced the one-of-a-kind image on a polished silver-plated sheet of copper, which he called the daguerreotype.¹ What was entirely new about photography was the absence of the hand's movement across page or canvas. Instead, the new technique would bring into being a "latent image" as if by magic. This was the miraculous process to which Garrett appealed.

It didn't take long for daguerreotypes to make their appearance in Lisbon. On 21 March 1841, *O Panorama* ran an illustration based on a daguerreotype of the east side of the Palácio da Ajuda, which the weekly journal reproduced as a woodcut (Fig. 1).² The accompanying text described the new process as a "type of drawing with a recently invented instrument known as the daguerreotype," and went on to explain that the figures in the picture were required to stand very still without blinking, and that the daguerreotype could reproduce objects with perfect detail. While the text is not signed, it has been suggested that the author was Alexandre Herculano, who had been keeper of the library of the Palácio since 1839. There is further reason to believe that Herculano wrote the text and that he was committed early on to the newly discovered visual medium, since he agreed to have his photograph taken by the best-known daguerreotypist in Portugal at the time. João Baptista Ribeiro made two portraits in 1854 when the writer was forty-four. One is the conventional headshot that is currently circulated as a likeness (Fig. 2). But the other, recently claimed as "one of the most beautiful photographic portraits in Portugal," was the one that Herculano rightly preferred (Fig. 3).³ Herculano sits at a table, his pen poised on the paper that he holds with his left hand. He looks to the side at the viewer, in an address that is direct, sober, and austere. "This," he wrote to Ribeiro, who was director of the Academia Portuense de Bellas-Artes, "is exactly the one that I prefer" (qtd. in Sena 40). Despite his enthusiastic letter and Ribeiro's promise, Herculano never took possession of the photograph.⁴

What begins to develop in Portugal is a culture in which photography has a place, activated by a group of writers and enthusiasts who desired to be memorialized by the meticulous detail that the daguerreotype offered. Herculano's letter to Ribeiro is a testimony to the gratification that the portrait offered. Each portrait was unique, and since copies were not possible, the sitter had to repeat the sitting in order to make a duplicate.⁵ With the further commercial development of studios and photographers willing to take photos there also developed a new gestural repertoire of poses and backdrops.

Herculano's portrait locates him among the attributes of a writer: pen, paper, table, the thoughtful turn of the head. The photograph testified to his interest in the boundaries between the private and public self, and the face could be scrutinized as a site that might divulge the inner self, revealing secrets that could not be hidden from the camera. Sight was now linked to insight, and the viewer to knowledge gleaned from the portrait and potential inner life of the writer.⁶ Photographs offered a sense of intimacy with an author, and even with the limitations of the medium, an inner look at the personality through the presence of the sitter.

Over the next five years, during the period in which Garrett was writing *Travels*, support for the new visual means of fixing images grew. *O Panorama* continued to run articles on technical details, and daguerreotypes were soon used for the scientific study of criminals. At the Escola Médico-Cirúrgica de Lisboa, phrenological studies were undertaken in the investigation of murderers (the assassin Francisco de Matos Lobo was among them), and the shape, size, lumps, and bumps of their skulls probed for evidence of deviance. Portugal, like other countries in Europe in the 1840s and 1850s, examined photographs of the body, and the face and head in particular, with the premise that signs and codes could be found that revealed inner character.⁷ There were articles claiming the importance of photography for the arts, science, and industry, announcements for the arrival of a photographer ready to do groups and vistas, and a project to photographically reproduce the paintings of the sixteenth-century artist Grão Vasco as an inventory. This project, unusual for the time, was announced in *Jornal das Bellas-Artes*, to which Garrett contributed as a writer.⁸ Given the widespread discussion, the publicity, and engagement of others in his circle, Garrett most certainly knew of these developments. Did he share the same enthusiasm as Herculano and other writers? Not according to a remark that he made in *Da Educação* in 1829, when he hastily dismissed the mechanical arts, saying that there was little that a good student could learn from them, and that merit was to be found only in the fine arts, some of which a good student should learn to practice.⁹

Garrett had dismissed the mechanical arts seventeen years earlier, but in the intervening years, the photographic image-makers had captivated a public with the means to employ them. In the meantime photography had been put to many uses: investigating criminal mentalities, memorializing the famous, recording Portugal's artistic patrimony. It is this patrimony that Garrett was ostensibly in search of in his imaginary travels, but for Carlos the monuments,

ruins, tombs, and Gothic churches are a disappointment, effaced by time, negligence, or the bayonets of rude soldiers. Where he had expected beauty, he found ugliness and decay. Yet there are two instances in which the writer's discourse is parallel to that of the Romantic photographer in search of the scenic site from which to survey the landscape already constructed in the imagination. Both of these collapse into themselves and can't bear the weight of the picturesque codes of lofty beauty that Garrett initially assigns to them. The first is the vale of Santarém, the second the thirteenth-century royal convent of St. Francis.

This interest in the scenic also appears in photographs of royal, religious, and national sites, the most exemplary among them the albumen photograph of the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, a masterpiece of Romantic nostalgia (Fig. 6).¹⁰ The Torre Belém, with the heavy symbolic weight of the Discoveries and Empire came in a close second (Fig. 7). We might analyze these scenic sites in two ways. The first is contemplative, and aims to present an image that activates a transcendental consciousness, or what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "the transparent eyeball," in which the present is experienced by an innocent eye. The second sees the landscape as a body of signs. Trees, stones, water, times of day, all can be decoded and linked to narrative typologies such as the sublime or picturesque (1–2). For both the Romantic writer and photographer, the selection of a site, not imagined but physical, is central to his success. But there is a difference in outcome. The recording mechanical apparatus, the camera, creates a detailed picture that contradicts the emphasis on written feeling and sentiment of the writer. In photographs, a detailed, precise image is recorded, with an astonishing fidelity of mimetic detail. By contrast, in Romantic novels and poetry, the edges are blurred; presence prevails over detail, feeling prevails over vision. For both, the place, the particular location—whether physical or imagined—is critical.¹¹

For Garrett, that place was the vale of Santarém, which he describes as follows:

The vale of Santarem is one of those places privileged by nature, pleasant, delightful spots where plants, air and situation are in the most gentle and perfect harmony: nothing there is grandiose or sublime, but there is a certain symmetry of colors [. . .]. From this *spot* one can imagine the Eden that the first man lived in with his innocence and the virgin purity of his heart. To the left of the vale, sheltered from the north by the mountain that rises almost sheer, there is a clump of greenery [. . .]. (64)

Setting aside the symbolic value of the vale and what it means as a figure of the Fall and the sins of the Father for Carlos, all the elements of the scenic view are in place and are to be seen from one spot. Here in Santarém is a virgin landscape, with a mountain and greenery where the observer is separated, distant from what he observes, but linked to it by pure feeling. The viewer looks on and surveys the scene and is subjective. But on a deeper level, as Scott Hess argues, the individual subjectivizing of the observer and the pictorial objectivity of the landscape depend on one another (287).¹² Each completes the other. Later in the text, Garrett refers to the empty solitude, the silence, and bare open valley in the light of the sparkling stars between the black figures that move within the landscape (119). This is language infused with a belated picturesque appeal to vastness, darkness, and irregularity, but one that the author can't sustain. Beauty, solitude, and the sublime are continually disrupted by the noise of everyday life, by soldiers, shouts, and the click of rifles, and Carlos's disgruntled thoughts (120).

Crumbling ruins—the never-ending, interminable, dilapidated, unsightly ruins with which Carlos is finally irritated—were other picturesque sites for the early camera: Jerónimos, the Torre Belém, Gothic ruins, silent convents, and ancient tombs, all feature in Carlos's trip around his room and in the growing portfolios of photographers. Like ruins, photographs are fragments, parts and pieces of something that once was, of the visual world, set apart by the lens, framed, and, like a souvenir, a leftover corpse of experience (Benjamin 54–55). That may be what Garrett had in mind when he referred to mental photography that enabled him to record partially the images that he was unable to write down. The language with which he describes his anxiety regarding his inability to express his best insights is that of photography. As Victor K. Mendes has pointed out in an analysis of *Travels*, the inability to express thoughts in words is a problem of translation (96–97). When words fail, mental photography and the recognition of its partial, synecdochal operations make translation possible. The logic of Garrett's failure to construct the whole is alleviated by the success that he makes of the fragment in which he dismembers Joaninha, leaving her only as a pair of green eyes.

This link between the mental process and the mechanistic process of photography recalls Freud's model and suggests the way in which Garrett's notion of mental photography might function. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, in the preliminary remarks on the structure of the psyche, Freud speculates "that we should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as

resembling a compound microscope or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind." This is close to Garrett's mental photography, where the workings of the imagination are realized in visual rather than in verbal terms (Freud 536). In other words, mental functioning enhances seeing, either in greater detail, or by framing and storing a mental image for further use. This mental function operates like a camera and saves Carlos from the dilemma of his fragmented stutterings. In Garrett's mental photography the workings of the imagination are realized in visual rather than verbal terms. His "mental apparatus" is built for visual storage, whether dreams, memories, or images. In optical terms, binoculars, camera lenses, and microscopes all function to technologically expand the possibilities of seeing beyond human capacity.

To return once again to Garrett's "mental photography" is to find there the workings of the unconscious, with all its fragmented complexity, its unspoken agendas, and its disguised desire. Garrett and Carlos are unable to realize Joaquina except through the trope of sight and its organs. The eyes of Joaquina are symmetrically matched by that miraculous process of mental photography that enables the writer to record only a fragment. Just as the fragment is the only record that the photograph, beginning with the daguerreotype, leaves us.



PORTE DA FREITE DO PAÇO D'AJUDA, COMPREHENDIDA ENTRE OS DOIS TORREÕES; LADO ORIENTAL.

Fig. 1: Francisco Moçenig, daguerreotype. José Maria Baptista Coelho, woodcut. Palácio da Ajuda, March 1841.

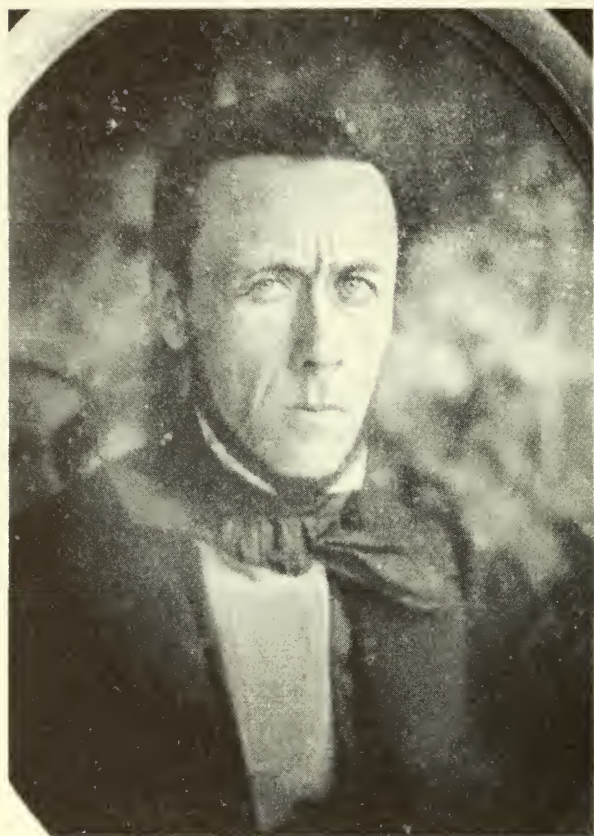


Fig. 2: João Baptista Ribeiro, *Alexandre Herculano*, daguerreotype, 1854.



Fig. 3: João Baptista Ribeiro, *Alexandre Herculano Seated at a Table*, daguerreotype, 1854.
(Reproduced by permission of the Biblioteca Publica Municipal do Porto.)

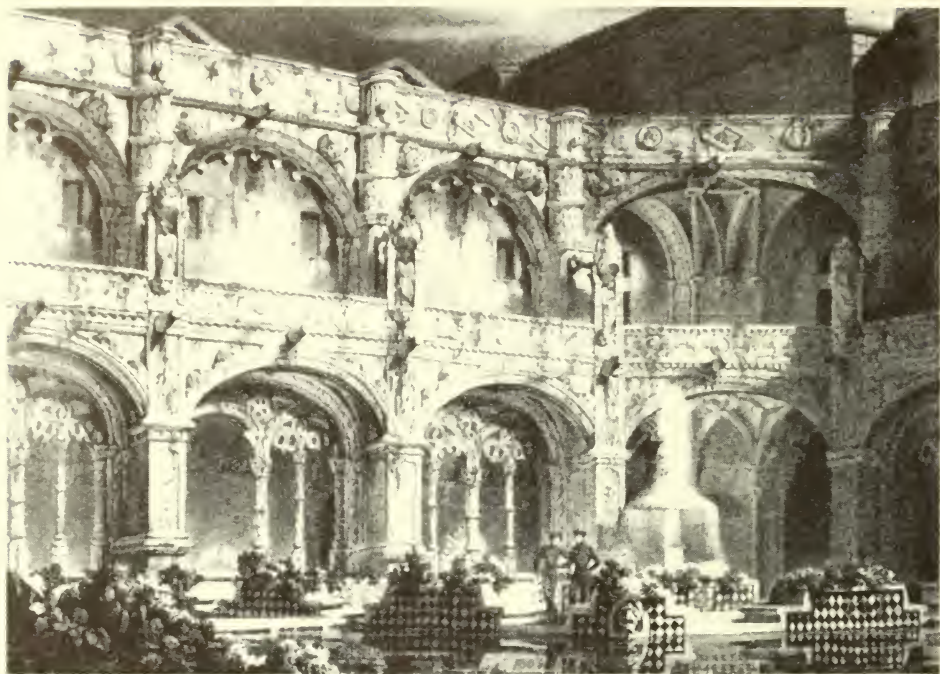


Fig. 4: João Pedro Monteiro, *Mosteiro dos Jerónimos*, lithograph of a daguerreotype, 1844.
(Private Collection.)



Fig. 5: J. Possidónio Narciso da Silva, *Church of the Jerónimos*, paper print, c.1862.
(Private Collection.)

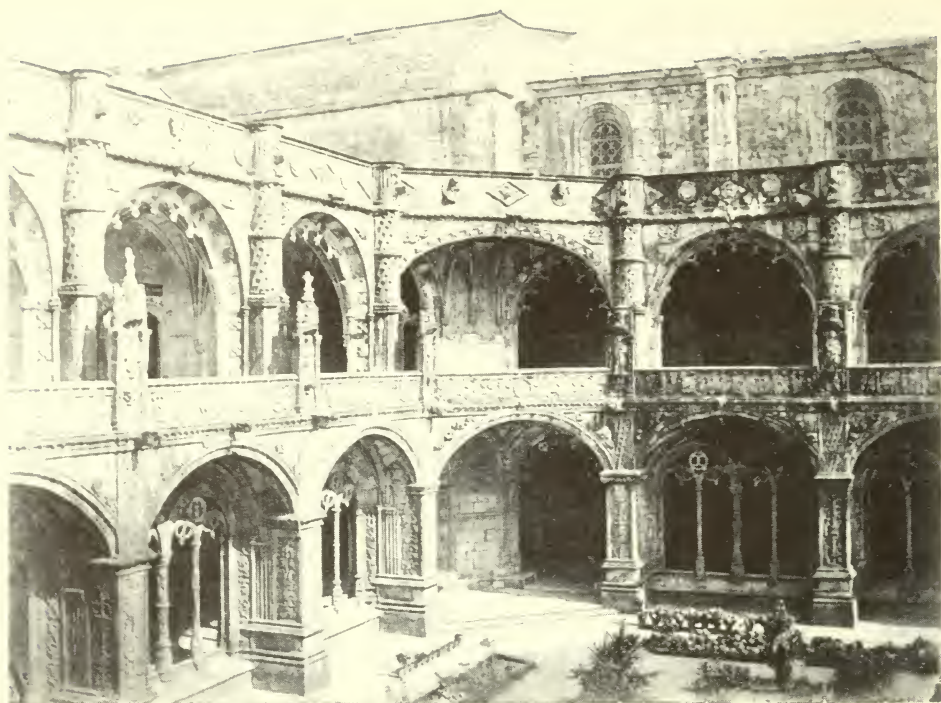


Fig. 6: Xavier Moreira, *Cloister of the Jerónimos*, albumen print, c.1865. (Private Collection.)



Fig. 7: José Nunes da Silveira, *Torre de Belém*, Lisbon, c.1850. (Private Collection.)

Notes

¹ These photographic discoveries are detailed in Talbot's *Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the Process by Which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist's Pencil*. See the Works Cited list for complete bibliographic information.

² The owner of the apparatus used to make the daguerreotype was Francisco Moçenig. The woodcut, which was a perfect facsimile, was executed by José Maria Baptista Coelho, who frequently collaborated with Manuel Maria Bordallo Pinheiro, painter and father of the illustrator and ceramic artist Rafael Bordallo Pinheiro.

³ This daguerreotype was unknown until 1997 (Sena 40).

⁴ António Feijó argues that Herculano's writing on historical monuments is the model for Garrett's archaeological studies. Since Herculano did not possess the daguerreotype, Garrett would not have known of it.

⁵ Liz Well claims that there is no common or trivial portrait in this vast gallery of daguerreotypes, and that eccentricities and expressive glances were suspended due to the time required to make an image (68).

⁶ For case studies on photographs of Victorian writers see Helen Groth's *Victorian Photography and Literary Nostalgia*.

⁷ Analysis of photographs of this period have centered on the use of photographs as an instrument of surveillance by the state, used to classify, discipline, and punish criminals. See Allan Sekula's article "The Body and the Archive" and John Tagg's monograph *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories*.

⁸ The photographer Giles requested permission to photograph groups and individuals from the Academia de Bellas Artes in May 1843, when he set up shop in the Largo da Biblioteca. The *Revista Universal* claimed the importance of photography for progress in the arts, science, and industry.

⁹ "Strictly speaking the arts are either mechanical or fine arts. From the first there is little for the serious student [*pupilo nobre*] to learn; of the second, all should more or less study some and practice others."

¹⁰ The Mosteiro dos Jerónimos was among the favored monuments for photographs of the mid-eighteenth century. See also figs. 4 and 5.

¹¹ For an analysis of the relationship between photography and the poetry of William Wordsworth, see Scott Hess's "William Wordsworth and Photographic Subjectivity."

¹² Denis E. Cosgrove also explores the single-stationed point of view in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*.

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