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The “Man Walks Outside Time Now”: Verbal Representations of Photographic Images in the Poems of Larry Levis

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THE “MAN WALKS OUTSIDE TIME NOW”: VERBAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES IN THE POEMS OF LARRY LEVIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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Major Director: David Wojahn, Professor, Department of English

The poet Larry Levis often employed ekphrasis as an elegiac device—particularly with his verbal descriptions of photographic images—to explore human suffering and reconcile feelings of loss. Through the ekphrastic mode, Levis could juxtapose otherwise disparate images, manipulating their temporal and spatial relationships, to achieve what he conceived an authentic portrait of the human experience. The poet, through his verbal descriptions of photographic images, does not try to evade the pain or joy of being human; instead, he confronts his grief directly and, in so doing, transcends that suffering to better understand himself and his own human position. This thesis analyzes the following poems by Larry Levis: “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees,” “García Lorca: A Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966,” “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” “Sensationalism,” and “Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967.”
Introduction

The poet Larry Levis, in an essay about Miroslav Holub’s poem “Meeting Ezra Pound,” writes:

Time is a violation, someone once remarked in a lecture hall, and then went on to say that the time in which one is born is a violation, that time itself is a violation committed against everyone alive. It makes us finite, and therefore the violation is always personal: its final form is both banal and intimate, for it is simply one’s death, but finally all of us get the idea, an idea which is actually the absence of any idea and, therefore, unimaginable. About as close as one can get to a statement of it is: “The meaning of life is that it stops.” (Levis “So That” 112)

“Time is a violation”; people are mortal and must, eventually, die. Or, to quote Robert Hass, a contemporary of Levis, “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking” (4). Levis took these issues to heart, and in his writing, the human experience is characterized and defined by loss.

Subsequently, Levis developed a reputation as a skilled elegist. Edward Byrne has said, “It appears as if Levis continually writes in an elegiac manner, mourning not just the dead or his own mortality, but also times or places that have passed, which exist only in our personal or collective memories, as well as analyzing the very passage of Time” (584). When asked if he considered himself to be an elegiac poet, Levis admitted, “I
often feel that that's what I am as a human... it seems to me, or has seemed to me for a long time, that the elegiac poem, the poem that is deeply meditative and narrative, simply touched me more deeply” (“An Interview by David Wojahn” 91). For Levis, the elegiac perspective is not an aesthetic choice but a worldview.

As Levis once said in an interview with the poet David Wojahn, “There’s something elegiac in the whole fabric of our time, about which I can do nothing; the time in which I’m born is something done to me; it creates a particular style of thought, and a particular violation of the self” (“An Interview with David Wojahn” 92–93). The problem with time, according to Levis, is that it imposes limits on a person without that person’s consent. Or, to borrow Levis’s words again, “The meaning of life is that it stops” ( “So That” 112). Mortality places limits on human life, but it is a tendency of human nature, especially evident in twentieth-century America, to challenge the limits imposed on oneself.

The arts, in the broadest sense of the term, often afford people the opportunity to express loss through mimesis (through visual and verbal representations), and language, by its own elegiac nature, is particularly well suited for such expressions. As Hass writes in “Meditation at Lagunitas,” “a word is elegy to what it signifies” (11). While language has an inherently prophetic nature, the lexicon derives from human experience, and as such it describes phenomena of the past. In a sense, all artistic expression is elegiac, as well as prophetic, because our human conception of time is that it’s moving forward; therefore, our representations of the world are relics of the past, depicting a moment in human history which has already happened and is over. In this way, all art objects, by nature of their form as material objects, both celebrate and lament the passage of time.
Such representations are conflicted: Though the elegiac work may celebrate the object of loss, it necessarily reminds one of the bereavement; it is not a substitute for that which is lost. Therefore, there is an inherent tension in any elegiac form: the sense of mourning for the lost, vs. the desire to see the memory of the thing endure. Or, as Levis once put it, “Although they are not tricks, elegies are tricky things. . . . Insofar as elegies are also this work of mourning and consolation, they serve two significantly opposed, contradictory functions. For if they commemorate and remember the dead, they also inter the dead, bury them” (“Mock Mockers after That” 122–123). Though the arts may help a person cope with loss, they can’t undo the events that instigated it.

Moreover, for all that the arts enable people to express, each form necessarily has its own limits. Many of the arguments that Lessing makes in Laocoön seem outdated to contemporary scholars—particularly, his argument that works of the plastic and language arts are fundamentally different in the way that people perceive them in space and in time. However, his basic premise, that verbal and visual expressions are necessarily governed by the limits imposed by the nature of their forms, still holds some weight. As Joseph Frank argues, “What Lessing offered [in Laocoön] was not a new set of norms but a new approach to aesthetic form” (7). He adds, “For Lessing . . . aesthetic form is not an external arrangement provided by a set of traditional rules. Rather, it is the relation between the sensuous nature of the art medium and the conditions of human perceptions” (Frank 8). Or, to put it another way, “Form issued spontaneously from the organization of the art work as it presented itself to perception. Time and space were the two extremes defining the limits of literature and the plastic arts in their relation to sensuous perception” (Frank 8). Early on, poets realized that ekphrasis—“a verbal description of, or meditation upon, a non-verbal work of art” (“Ekphrasis”)—
would allow them to explore and exploit the limits of the plastic arts, through verbal
descriptions of those visual representations.

Not only does the ekphrastic work describe a past event; it inters the art object as
a relic of that history, subject to the same violations that time imposes on people. As
Matt Donovan notes, “Levis often uses painting and photography in his poems not as an
avenue toward self-consciously diagnosing the insular workings of art, but rather as a
means of investigating emotional realities with vastly higher stakes . . . art serves as a
fundamental means of engaging with ‘real distress.’” While an ekphrastic poem may
preserve the image of the art object it describes, it also reinterprets that image and, in so
doing, distorts it. Because the visual work that an ekphrastic poem describes is already
elegiac by nature, the ekphrastic poem functions as a kind of double-elegy: an elegy for
another elegiac work.

When it comes to forms in the plastic arts, photography is perhaps the most
elegiac. The advent of photography in the nineteenth century brought about a new era in
the arts: technological advances in image-making processes enabled the creation of
images that were so realistic as to be nearly indistinguishable from the events they
depict. Because these photographic representations of people and objects so closely
resemble the subjects they depict, they may augment the sense of loss; though
photographs seem to restore a sense of presence of people that have been lost, those
photographs can’t actually bring anyone back to life.

The elegiac nature of photographs, and their correlation with grief, is connected
to the form of the photographic object itself. To borrow the words of Susan Sontag, “A
photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the
real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death
mask” (154). Likewise, as Roland Barthes has argued, “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent” (80). With many other mimetic forms in the plastic arts, such as painting, the representation of the subject has been filtered through the imagination of the artist and rendered in a medium by the artist’s hand. A photographic object, however, records the reflections of light from the subject itself, and while a photographer necessarily makes aesthetic decisions in the composition and framing of the image, the image itself, however mediated it may be, depicts an event that really happened in the physical world, on a quantum level.

The photographic object is, therefore, an elegiac representation of the relationship between a subject and the light that illuminates it in a moment of time. Or, in Barthes’s words, “The thing of the past, by its immediate radiations (its luminances), has really touched the surface which in its turn my gaze will touch” (Barthes 81). The event has passed, and yet, in the form of the photographic object, the representation of that event endures; the viewer, by looking at the photograph, can experience a semblance of that event, framed by the photographer’s compositional choices, despite the fact that it is over.

Of course, not all modes of photography are the same, and while analog and digital photography have a lot in common, their forms are fundamentally different. Both photographic methods record the interaction of light with matter in a moment of time and enable photographers to generate and reproduce representations of that moment, and both analog and digital photographs necessarily exist in a material form, whether that be glass, paper, plastic, or a magnetic disc. However, analog photographs are fundamentally different from digital ones, due to essential differences in the processing of their images. Analog photographs require a careful regimen of chemical and physical
processes for successful development and reproduction. Conversely, images captured in digital photographs are mediated by computers: computers are needed to create, reproduce, and (unless a photograph has been printed) view those images. Levis died in 1996, after the invention of digital photography but before it had advanced enough, technologically speaking, to compete with the image quality and affordability of analog photography. So, it is important to note that when Levis describes photographic images, he writes about analog photographs, not digital ones. Subsequently, throughout the remainder of this thesis, the word *photograph* will refer exclusively to analog photographs.

Because of the conventions of the elegy and the form of the photograph, ekphrastic works dealing with photographic images are especially well suited for confronting issues of loss. Levis seems to have recognized the rich potential of verbal representations of photographs early in his career, since they appear in every book of poetry he published during his lifetime, as well as in the posthumous *Elegy*. In most of these poems, the photographic descriptions themselves play a relatively minor role: the speakers are concerned with other issues and only mention the photographs as minor details in the poetic landscape. However, Levis concentrates on the photographic image as a principle subject in five poems, spread across two decades of his writing: “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees,” “García Lorca: A Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966,” “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” “Sensationalism,” and “Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967.” These photographic descriptions ultimately afford Levis the opportunity to reconcile feelings of loss, by manipulating the relationships between objects, time, and space, through the juxtaposition of otherwise disparate
images, and to achieve an authentic portrait of the human experience by juxtaposing images of suffering and joy.
Chapter 1: Historical Context

The term *ekphrasis* comes from ancient Greece, by way of Rome. As James Heffernan explains, “Composed from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), *ekphrasis* originally meant ‘telling in full’” (191). The term originated as a description for a rhetorical device, not a poetic one, and in its earliest usage was not limited to descriptions of art objects. As Murray Krieger notes, “The early meaning given ‘ekphrasis’ in Hellenistic rhetoric . . . was totally unrestricted: it referred, most broadly, to a verbal description of something, almost anything, in life or art” (7), and it wasn’t until the third century A.D. that the term was used to describe art objects (Heffernan 191).

In these early rhetorical applications, ekphrasis had two objectives: to mediate the pace of the argument’s delivery and to create a sense of proximity between the hearer and the image described. Ekphrasis, thus, afforded speakers a means of controlling time through their rhetoric. Because it “encouraged an extravagance in detail and vividness in representation,” ekphrasis could “interrupt the temporality of discourse” and “freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration” (Krieger 7). Therefore, even in its earliest applications, ekphrasis was a device that enabled one to mediate and manipulate the time-element of a verbal description by employing a spatial element.
Likewise, ekphrasis enabled speakers to create a sense of proximity between the hearer and the object of description. The goal of these rhetors, according to Krieger, was to achieve *enargeia*, which began as “a rhetorical device [used] to enable an advocate to reproduce before his hearers in court the scene or incident he needs them to picture in order to persuade them to judge favorably” (Krieger 14). Through his ekphrastic descriptions, the rhetor hoped to create *enargeia*, and thus a sense of proximity of the representation. Therefore, early in its history, ekphrasis developed a tendency towards extended and verbose descriptions, rich in detail and with great specificity.

As for its contemporary usage, scholars quibble over appropriate applications of the term. Murray Krieger operates with a loose definition of *ekphrasis*, because he believes,

> The ekphrastic principle may operate not only on those occasions on which the verbal seeks in its own more limited way to represent the visual but also when the verbal object would emulate the spatial character of the painting or sculpture by trying to force its words, despite their normal way of functioning as empty signs, to take on a substantive configuration. (9)

Or, in other words, “the ekphrastic dimension of literature reveals itself wherever the poem takes on the ‘still’ elements of plastic form which we normally attribute to the spatial arts” (Krieger 266); therefore, “Ekphrasis, no longer a narrow kind of poem defined by its objects of imitation, broadens to become a general principle of poetics, asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity” (Krieger 284).

While Krieger’s argument seems reasonable enough—that all poems, by virtue of their self-contained forms, are self-referential objects, as well as a conglomerate of signs that direct readers to a limitless number of signifiers—his application of the term to
include all of poetry is not especially helpful for my discussion. I prefer the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* definition—“a verbal description of, or meditation upon, a non-verbal work of art, real or imagined, usually a painting or sculpture” (“Ekphrasis”)—because it accounts for both real and imagined objects. The poems that I analyze in this thesis also fit James A. W. Heffernan’s definition of the term—“the verbal representation of visual representation” (3)—assuming that Heffernan’s definition does not exclude descriptions of art objects that the poet has invented but have never actually existed in a tangible form.

Most scholars recognize Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles, in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*, as the earliest example of an ekphrastic poem in the Western literary tradition. As Heffernan notes, “Since Homer’s epics are generally dated to the eighth century B.C., about the time that writing originates in Greece, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that ekphrasis is as old as writing itself in the western world” (Heffernan 9). Therefore, the earliest recognized ekphrastic work in Western literature predates the term that scholars would later use to describe it.

Though the narrative certainly slows with Hephaestus’s forging of the shield, it doesn’t stagnate there. As Lessing claims, “I find that Homer paints nothing but progressive actions. All bodies, all separate objects, are painted only as they take part in such actions. . . . By countless devices he presents this single object in a series of moments” (92–93). Homer demonstrates that description does not necessitate the stilling of time; his description of the shield of Achilles, instead, unspools through a description of Hephaestus’s forging of the object.
After the *Iliad*, literary scholars cite Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as perhaps the most famous example of ekphrasis in English-language poetry. The speaker characterizes the urn in terms of its fixity, in contrast to the speaker’s own sense of the passage of time. However, for the characters and scenes depicted on the urn, this fixity is restrictive. The “fair youth, beneath the trees, . . . canst not leave / [their] song, nor ever can those trees be bare” (lines 15–16). Likewise, the “bold lover” can “never, never . . . kiss, though winning near the goal” (17–18). The images depicted on the urn exist in a state of suspended animation, which traps them in their inability to move.

And yet, this fixity also affords the characters depicted on the urn a sense of freedom from the passage of time. The speaker tells the “Bold Lover,” “do not grieve; / She [the beloved] cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!” (17; 18–20). The visage of the beloved is preserved in the form of the urn, so she will never grow old, nor can she leave the lover’s gaze—a consolation for the fact that they can also never consummate their love. Similarly, because “the happy, happy boughs . . . cannot shed / [Their] leaves,” they never have to “bid the Spring adieu” (21–22), and because the “happy melodist” is “unwearièd,” he may continue “For ever piping songs for ever new” (23–24). In this way, the urn seems to depict a prelapsarian scene: the characters are free from death, bereavement, and exhaustion, and the music they make continues forever.

While the events depicted on the urn are not subject to the passage of time, the urn itself is. The speaker addresses the urn as the “foster-child of Silence and slow Time,” not of timelessness or immortality (2). The speaker compares the urn to eternity, insofar as both “doth tease us out of thought” (44), but they are not synonymous. However, the speaker does describe the urn as having an expected lifespan far beyond
that of its audience: he says to the urn, “When old age shall this generation waste,/Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man” (46–48). And why “a friend” (48)? Because the urn carries wisdom: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49). In the face of human mortality, aesthetic truth may endure and survive.

The speaker’s relationship to the urn is ultimately defined by his alienation from it, by the speaker’s otherness. In the opening stanza, he asks,

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (5–10)

In the fourth stanza, the speaker poses similar questions:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea-shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn? (31–37)

The speaker has no context for understanding the scenes depicted on the urn, just the scenes themselves, and the depictions are as enigmatic as they are captivating.

Subsequently, the urn is haunted by the story it depicts, in which mortals and deities
have become indistinguishable from one another, and the speaker poses questions that the urn cannot answer.

However, the speaker does not seem all too concerned about finding those answers. “Ode on a Grecian Urn illustrates the Romantic aesthetic well, because such inabilities to know, and the insufficiency of knowledge to make definitive judgments, are ultimately not terribly problematic for the poem’s speaker. The urn enables the speaker to dwell on imaginative possibilities, and rather than lament his lack of knowledge about the urn’s image, he celebrates the chance to entertain his imagination. Modernist poets, however, employed ekphrasis to achieve other ends.

Much of the modernist aesthetic hinges on a privileging of spatial relationships over temporal ones. Pound writes, “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (4). As Joseph Frank argues, according to Pound’s definition, “an image is defined not as a pictorial reproduction but as a unification of disparate ideas and emotions into a complex presented spatially in an instant of time” (9).

Along the same lines, Eliot conceives the poet’s role as finding connections between seemingly unrelated elements, ones that are separated by time and space. In his Selected Essays, Eliot writes,

When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (Eliot 247)
Frank has referred to this passage as “Eliot’s description of the psychology of the poetic process,” and he argues that, “for Eliot, the distinctive quality of a poetic sensibility is its capacity to form new wholes, to fuse seemingly disparate experiences into an organic unity” (Frank 10). Form and meaning in modern poetry come from the simultaneity of the image, such that the overall pattern of words and the collective image they create are privileged over logical, syntactical sense.

For Levis, Pound’s conception of the image directly correlates to human expressions of grief, because of the image’s relationship to time:

Although it must be living itself that leads anyone to *conditions of grief*, it may be a poet’s obsession with the Image that leads to grieving. . . . If an image is, as Pound said, “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time,” it is exactly that “instant of time” which passes; even though an image may reify itself many times in a reader’s experience, it will pass again as well. The image draws on, comes out of, the “world of the senses” and, therefore, originates in a world that passes, that is passing, every moment. (Levis “Some Notes on Grief and the Image” 117)

Because the image, by Pound’s definition, is still, Levis argues that it reminds us of the temporal world that created it, that humans are subject to. To confront the still image is to remember the violation that time imposes on the self.

Certainly, the rise of modernism brought about profound changes in Western aesthetics, which shaped the development of poetry in the twentieth century. Levis himself recognized and had great respect for Pound’s contributions to critical discourse. As, Levis writes, “Our century and our poetry didn’t simply happen. Pound happened to us” (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 68). And although it predates Pound’s definition
of the Image by four years, Rilke’s “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man,” published in 1907’s *New Poems*, anticipates the kind of spatial juxtaposition that later modernists would laud.

Fittingly, because descriptions of photographic images are so well suited for expressing modernist spatial aesthetics, Rilke’s “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man” is one of the earliest examples of an ekphrastic poem that describes a photographic image. In Edward Snow’s translation, the poem opens with a meditation on the father’s face: “In the eyes dream. The brow as if in touch / with something far away. About the lips / immense youth, unsmiling seductiveness” (lines 1–3). The speaker starts by characterizing the father’s eyes, which is significant, considering how little eyes tend to change over time, compared to other facial features. So, one may conclude that the speaker begins the meditation with the feature most recognizable to him. Then, the speaker moves to the feature most closely adjacent to the eyes: his eyebrow. In these opening lines, both the brow and the eyes are enigmatic; the portrait may have captured the father’s image, but the characterizations of these features insist that the portrait has not captured his thoughts—which remain alien to both the son and the reader.

The descriptions of the eyes and the brow are followed by the lips, which the speaker characterizes as young, serious, and alluring. In the same sentence, the speaker goes on to describe the father’s clothing—“across the full ornamental braids / of the slim aristocratic uniform / the saber’s basket-hilt” (4–5)—then his hands, which brings the first major turn in the poem. Up to this point, the speaker has been describing the content of the portrait and the images contained within its frame. Here, with the hands, the speaker begins a meditation on the physical state of the art object: he describes the hands as “now scarcely visible: as if they would be / first, grasping the distant, to
“disappear” (lines 8–9). This is an observation not about the father’s image but about that image’s subjectivity to the oblivion of time; the hands are merely the first feature to go, but the speaker presumes that, in time, the rest will follow.

The following lines continue the meditation on the mysterious nature of the image: “And all the rest self-shrouded / and erased as if we didn’t understand / and by something deep in its own depths dimmed” (10–12). The form of the photographic image excludes the speaker: he may possess the photograph, he may know the man pictured in it, but the image is not capable of communicating everything the speaker might want to know. Likewise, the speaker seems to characterize the form of the photographic object as self-destructive: the paper used to print such photographs often contained chemicals that, over time, would cause the image to degrade and eventually disappear. The speaker here recognizes that the image itself is inherently predisposed to decay, a fact that he does not seem to lament but rather seems genuinely astonished to discover.

The last couplet, offset from the rest of the poem in their own stanza, marks another important turn: “O you swiftly fading daguerreotype / in my more slowly fading hands” (13–14). Here, the speaker not only explicitly acknowledges the boundary of the photographic image; he identifies his physical relationship to the photographic object. This is the only moment in the poem that includes an image of the speaker’s body, and the poet’s choice to include only the speaker’s hands proves significant, as hands are the stilling point in each of the revelations in the poem. First, the image of the father’s hands in the photograph betray the mortality of the photograph. Then, the image of the son’s hands in the envoi implicates the speaker in that same vulnerability. The father
and son are united in the fading of their hands, and consequently in their shared mortality.

Here lies one source of tension in the poem: the speaker shares a deep, spiritual connection with the photograph, but the speaker is also excluded from intimate knowledge of that image. Unlike the speaker of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Rilke’s speaker in “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man” does not invent stories to explain the image, nor does he ask questions about those stories. Unlike Keats’s speaker, who laud’s the urn’s resilience to decay, Rilke’s speaker muses on its propensity for it. Unlike Keats’s speaker, Rilke’s speaker expects to outlive the art object that he describes.

Moreover, the spatializing of images in “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man” enables the speaker to confront this tension. The photograph, as a relic from another time and place, collapses the speaker’s natural conceptions of time: the photograph was taken many years before, but because the representation of that moment still exists in the form of the photographic object, because the image of the father from so many years before can be spatially juxtaposed with objects in the speaker’s present, both moments coexist.

But this spatial juxtaposition is further conflicted, because while the presence of the photographic object seems to defy the natural order of time, its form betrays its own vulnerability to it. The speaker takes note of the photograph’s slow decay: “O you swiftly fading daguerreotype” (line 13, Snow). While the photograph depicts a moment in time that has passed, the photograph itself is not impervious to the passage of time.

In Rilke’s following book, 1908’s New Poems: The Other Part, Rilke includes “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” another ekphrastic poem that seems to work in tandem with “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man.” “Archaic Torso of Apollo” opens with an
identification of absence. Edward Snow’s translation begins, “We never knew his head
and all the light / that ripened in his fabled eyes” (lines 1–2). Similarly, Stephen
Mitchell’s version states, “We cannot know his legendary head / with eyes like ripening
fruit” (1–2). In both versions, the meditation on the statue begins with a meditation on
what the “we” does not and cannot know: the experience of seeing the head and its
features.

As with many other ekphrastic poems, issues of mythology and reputation come
into play here, with Snow’s “fabled eyes” and Mitchell’s “legendary head” (2; 1); both of
these translations illustrate that, for this deteriorating statue of Apollo, the legend has
outlived the object—unlike Keats’s urn, which has outlived the story it depicts.

However, the speaker counteracts any feelings of loss with the lines that follow:

But

his torso still glows like a gas lamp dimmed

in which his gaze, lit long ago,

holds fast and shines. (2–5, Snow)

Any sense of loss over the absence of the head and eyes is mediated by the fact that the
remaining torso is “still suffused with [the] brilliance” that made the lost features of the
statue so famous in the first place (3, Mitchell).

The speaker then describes why this must be true, why the torso must still
embody the brilliance of the statue. According to the speaker, if the statue were
irrevocably destroyed by the loss of some of its parts,

the surge

of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile
run through the slight twist of the loins
toward that center where procreation thrived. (5–8, Snow)

Because the splendor of the statue is not confined to the lost head, that splendor can endure without the head. Perhaps the head was the most memorable or famous element of the statue, but in its absence the viewer may concentrate solely on the torso, which no longer has to compete with the “legendary head” or its “fabled eyes” (1, Mitchell; 2, Snow).

Likewise, if the remnants of the statue did not preserve the brilliance of Apollo’s gaze,

this stone would stand deformed and curt
under the shoulders’ transparent plunge
and not glisten just like wild beasts’ fur

and not burst forth from all its contours
like a star (9–14, Snow)

Or, as Mitchell has translated, “this stone would seem defaced” (9). Instead, the brokenness of the statue is relatively insignificant, the missing head a minor casualty, in light of the statue’s enduring and compelling beauty. Although the statue is not intact, the splendor of the statue is not contingent upon its being whole.

In the final stanza, after the star simile, the speaker takes a turn. Because the statue “is still suffused with brilliance” (3, Mitchell), the speaker concludes, “there is no place that does not see you” (13–14, Snow). Until now, the speaker has focused on describing the statue. The viewer has been present in the poem (the “we” of the first line, the “you” of the sixth) but passively so. This extended meditation on the statue’s
relationship with light yields a revelation for the speaker: the “you,” too, is visible. Suddenly, the speaker inverts the roles of the statue and the viewer: now, the viewer becomes the object of the gaze, and the speaker recognizes that the statue, which has contained the power of Apollo’s gaze all along, has the ability to see.

Then, the poem takes another turn, and the speaker makes an imperative statement: “You must change your life” (14, Snow). In the context of the poem, this is the speaker’s logical response to the revelation of lines 13–14; because of this new insight, because the “you,” the once-spectator, is now visible to all places, something must be done. Looking is not enough; the “you” must act.

If the speakers of Rilke’s poems experience a revelation or undergo some kind of enlightenment, the speaker’s tone in W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” is ironic, if not downright cynical, and Auden’s speaker is much more detached than Rilke’s speakers from the events he describes. In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” the speaker opens the poem with a claim: “About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters: how well they understood / Its human position” (lines 1–3). Here, the speaker argues that these master painters from the art world had a deep understanding of human suffering, then illustrates how such artists might render human suffering in their work. For example, the speaker argues, suffering “takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (4). In this way, suffering is personal; here, it strikes the individual, rather than the “someone else” who continues “dully along” in his or her daily life, unscathed (4).

Likewise, suffering can be polarizing, as in the speaker’s next example:

when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood (5–8)

Here, suffering proves polarizing, insofar as it draws sharp distinctions between those people who are experiencing it and those who aren’t. The speaker argues that, while the adults are anxiously awaiting a miracle to relieve them of their pain, there will inevitably be another party who simply don’t care about such miracles; here, it’s the children, who do not suffer and are thus content with their ice skating. The two parties are distinguished based on their desires: the adults want reprieve, and the children don’t.

Next, the speaker argues,

[The Old Masters] never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree. (9–13)

As with the last example, the speaker illustrates how the most intense moments of human suffering are often marginal to those not directly implicated in it. In this case, even the animals are ambivalent to the suffering they bear witness to.

In a new stanza, the speaker cites Pieter Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* as an example of such well-executed suffering. He notes “how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster” (14–15). Thus, Icarus’s fall is a private tragedy, where any onlookers have the luxury of being able to disassociate themselves from the event. He acknowledges that “the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure” (15–17). The ambiguity here—did the ploughman hear Icarus or not?—demonstrates how the event may not have attracted his
attention at all. Assuming he did hear, the ploughman does not necessarily deny the existence of the tragic, but, according to the speaker, the ploughman did not consider this case important enough to warrant a response. The implication may be that the ploughman is occupied with other failures that bear greater consequence to his own life, or perhaps he is not thinking of failures at all, just mundane concerns about daily life and survival.

Next, as the speaker tells us, “the sun shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / water” (17–19). The natural world, with no free will or empathy, simply continued on its course; the sun cannot act, but it does illuminate the scene, thereby enabling others to bear witness. The sun, in turn, affords these witnesses the opportunity to respond, by allowing them to see what’s happening, but, according to the speaker, none do.

Finally, the speaker explains, “the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on” (19–21). While the speaker expresses some doubt as to whether the ploughman heard the fall, the speaker is almost certain the crew of this ship must have seen it. Yet, the crew also chooses not to respond, in favor of pursuing the charted course.

Like the speaker of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Auden’s speaker in “Musée des Beaux Arts” imagines how the events of the painting took place and invents a story to contextualize the scene. Although this painting explicitly alludes to the Icarus myth, Auden makes no mention of Daedalus, the character who perhaps experiences the greatest suffering in the parent myth, and who also seems to be absent from the Brueghel painting. Daedalus’s omission from the retelling reinforces the notion of the
invisibility and isolation that often accompany human suffering; his son is dead, he is distraught, and yet he goes unmentioned here.

William Carlos Williams, in his ekphrastic poem on the same Brueghel painting, takes a much different approach. For one, Williams publishes “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” as one in a series of ekphrastic poems describing Brueghel paintings, in his 1962 book *Pictures from Brueghel*. And while Auden begins “Musée des Beaux Arts” with an argument about human suffering, supporting his argument with brief descriptions of various, unnamed examples from famous paintings and ending with a more in-depth meditation on Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Williams’s poem focuses exclusively on a description of the Brueghel painting.

The Williams poem, also titled “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” opens with a short orientating phrase: “According to Brueghel” (line 1). With a single line of three words, the speaker contextualizes the images that follow as products of Brueghel’s imagination. Like the speaker of Auden’s poem, Williams’s speaker is concerned with the juxtaposition of images of suffering and mundanity in the Brueghel painting. The speaker mentions Icarus in the first stanza—“when Icarus fell / it was spring” (lines 2–3)—but spends the majority of the poem describing other images in the painting—

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry
of the year was
awake tingling
near
the edge of the sea (4–10)
—before returning to Icarus in the final stanza:

off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning (17–21)

However, unlike Auden’s speaker, who cites examples from various works of art and, in his descriptions, unites those disparate works under the banner of his argument, Williams’s speaker focuses on one painting, choosing to describe images from that scene which illustrate the same tension that concerns Auden’s speaker. Auden’s speaker unites independent works, minimizing time and space barriers, in order to build his argument; Williams’s speaker limits his scope to images that Brueghel already chose to unite within the frame of his painting.

As in Rilke’s “Portrait of My Father As a Young Man” and “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” navigates the tension generated when the speaker of the poem confronts art objects of the past. In the opening stanza, Lowell’s speaker introduces the reader to an image of decay:

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.
Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish. (lines 1–8)

In the past, the aquarium was a place where the speaker could go to indulge his senses and engage in the acts of looking and touching, which stimulated his imagination. However, the aquarium has since fallen into a state of disrepair, and the speaker mourns the loss/decay of this beloved landmark: “I often sigh still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of the fish and reptile” (lines 9–11).

The decay of the aquarium becomes more pronounced when compared to the nearby Shaw memorial, which seems comparatively unscathed by the passage of time. Because the South Boston Aquarium and the Shaw memorial are situated so close to one another in the Boston landscape, the proximity of their spatial relationship in the poem does not seem strained. The tension, instead, lies in these objects’ relationships to time, which become evident when the objects are juxtaposed with one another in space.

Though the South Boston Aquarium is younger than the Shaw memorial, it has fallen apart; the monument, on the other hand, “sticks like a fishbone / in the city’s throat” (29–30). While, throughout the rest of New England, “frayed flags / quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic” and “the stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier / grow slimmer and younger each year— / wasp-waisted” (43–44; 45–47), Colonel Shaw stands over Boston Common “as lean / as a compass-needle” (31–32), with “an angry wrenlike vigilance” (33). Construction crews are tearing up the Common to install a new parking garage, so “a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders / braces the
tingling Statehouse, / shaking over the excavations” (19–21), and “Colonel Shaw / and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry / on St. Gauden’s shaking Civil War relief” are “propped up by a plank splint against the garage’s earthquake” (21–23; 24). No one has taken such measures with the aquarium.

In contrast, Lowell’s speaker notes, “There are no statues for the last war here” (54), by which he means World War II. Instead, he says,

on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the “Rock of Ages”
that survived the blast. (55–58)
The juxtaposition of images within the advertisement itself seems absurd: Mosler has reappropriated an infamous image of large-scale human suffering (not just any nuclear explosion, but Hiroshima specifically) in order to advertise a commercial product. The advertisement’s juxtaposition against the monument and the aquarium in the Boston landscape creates another layer of tension in the poem, reinforcing the sense that spiritual depravity in Boston is on the rise. At Boston Common, “yellow dinosaur steamshovels [are] grunting / as they [crop] up tons of mush and grass / to gorge their underworld garage” (lines 14–16); “giant finned cars nose forward like fish; / a savage servility slides by on grease” (66–68); “the Aquarium is gone” (65); and photographs of genocide promote the sale of luxury products.

These poems represent a mere fraction of the exemplary ekphrastic poetry that has been written in the English language since Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”; my list does not presume to be comprehensive. However, these poems pave the way, through
the manner in which they juxtapose images based on principles of time and space, for understanding the rich tradition in which Levis begins writing his own poems, and Levis, through his own ekphrastic descriptions, extends the tradition beyond what his predecessors had accomplished.
Chapter 2: Recollecting Vanished Poets with The Dollmaker’s Ghost

Early in his career, Levis began including descriptions of photographic images in his poems, though such references are often brief. In “The War,” from 1972’s Wrecking Crew, Levis writes,

He thought he could ignore the war,

and forget how

he paid for it daily—

with a silence, a sales tax.

He numbed himself to photographs

of farmers swatting flames off their faces.

He lived at least

as well as a cold rat,

waiting for his number to come up. (lines 1–9)

Though photography plays an important role in the poem, as testimony to the violence of a war that the man in the poem would like to imagine does not exist, the speaker is not interested in dwelling on a verbose description of the photographic images. The speaker’s interest in the photographic images is further minimized by the way that he lumps an indeterminate number of them together into his cursory description.
Therefore, the poem is not so much a meditation on the photographic images as it is a portrait of the man and his relationship to the war, of which the photographs are relics.

In “Rhododendrons,” from 1977’s The Afterlife, Levis’s speaker evokes the image of a photograph in order to make a comparison:

As I write this,

some blown rhododendrons are nodding

in the first breezes. I want

to resemble them, and remember nothing,

the way a photograph of an excavation
cannot remember the sun. (lines 24–29)

As in “The War,” the speaker of “Rhododendrons” is not especially interested in descriptions of the photographic image. Instead, he evokes the image of the photograph in order to illustrate his own desires: the speaker, like the rhododendrons and the photograph, wants to be able to inhabit the world, without sentience. Any description of the photographic image, in the context of “Rhododendrons,” is secondary to the state of the photograph’s form as an inanimate object.

Though Levis makes cursory references to photographs in earlier poems, it’s not until his third collection, The Dollmaker’s Ghost, that he begins to explore ekphrastic descriptions of photographic images. Several other ekphrastic poems appear in The Dollmaker’s Ghost, including “Edward Hopper, Hotel Room, 1931” and “Lost Fan, Hotel Californian, Fresno, 1923”; however, “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees” is one of only two ekphrastic poems in the book that deal specifically with photographic images.

In “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees,” the speaker of the poem describes William Heick’s 1955 photograph of Weldon Kees, mere months before Kees’s
disappearance, standing under the Golden Gate Bridge and staring out at the San Francisco Bay. This photograph appeared on the cover of the first two editions of Kees’s *Collected Poems* (first published in 1960), as well as in *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms* (Stephen Berg and Robert Menzey’s 1969 anthology) and though many of photographs of Kees have since become available to the public, for years many readers would have known Kees only by this iconic image.

However, without comparing the poem to the photograph in question, it’s difficult to determine where the descriptions of the photograph end and the poet’s own imagination takes over. In fact, the only lines that directly address the scene depicted in the photograph come in the final stanza. The poem ends:

You’d call that style—
To stand with an unlit cigarette
In one corner of your mouth,

Admiring the sun on Alcatraz. (lines 17–20)

In the first four stanzas, the speaker imagines moments from the night of Kees’s disappearance—“10 p.m., the river thinking / Of its last effects, / The bridges empty” (1–3)—and he describes a scene in Kees’s hometown—“The men in their suits, / Ill fitting, bought on sale” (10–11)—though neither of these moments appear in the photographic image.

The speaker makes no mention of a photograph in the body of the poem—not even in the last stanza, which describes the photographic image. Therefore, the inclusion of the word *photograph* in the title is essential for understanding the poem’s function as an ekphrastic poem; otherwise, it’s not clear that the speaker is referring to a photograph at all. Earlier versions of this poem don’t include *photograph* in the title; for
these versions, the ekphrastic dimension is subtler or absent. Levis released two other versions of the poem (with variant titles) before *The Dollmaker’s Ghost*, and neither of those make any explicit reference to a photograph, either in the title or in the body of the poem.

The poem first appeared in *Signs*, Levis’s 1974 Ph. D. dissertation from the University of Iowa, under the title “For Weldon Kees.” Barring a minor change of word order in line 11, the first four stanzas of the *Signs* version match those in *The Dollmaker’s Ghost*. However, the last stanza of the *Signs* version is much different:

I just wanted to say
It is winter now.
The street lights come on earlier.
Nothing has changed. (lines 17–20)

Instead of describing the photographic image, in this stanza the speaker addresses Kees, the vanished poet that this elegy remembers.

While this version of the poem does not reference the photograph, it does allude to Kees’s poems. This final stanza pays homage to Kees by responding to images from his poem “1926”:

The porchlight coming on again,
Early November, the dead leaves
Raked in piles, the wicker swing
Creaking. (Kees lines 1–4)

Levis’s speaker, then, seems to be responding to Kees’s speaker, years later, by reporting on what has happened in the intervening years.
Though “For Weldon Kees” does not describe a photograph, it does subvert the order of time and space through juxtaposition, a technique which may also allude to Kees’s “1926.” Despite the fact that the speaker of the Kees poem renders the action of 1926 in present tense, it is a recollection, which we know by the narrative movement, in the second stanza, to some later point in time:

An orange moon. I see the lives
Of neighbors, mapped and marred
Like all the wars ahead, and R.
Insane, B. with his throat cut,
Fifteen years from now, in Omaha.

I did not know them then. (Kees 6–11)

The memory of events that hadn’t yet happened in 1926 interrupts the 1926 memory. Yet, through the act of remembering, these seemingly incongruous scenes are juxtaposed in the speaker’s mind, demonstrating T. S. Eliot’s idea that the poet should find correlations between seemingly unrelated phenomena. Though these events—the speaker’s return home from the movies, one night, in November of 1926 and the fates of R. and B.—are separated by time, they come together in the mind of the speaker, which, on the page of the poem, constitute a spatial juxtaposition.

Levis’s speaker makes a similar move in “For Weldon Kees.” Beginning with the night of Kees’s disappearance, the speaker says,

I think
You would have left the party late,
Declining a ride home.
And no one notices, now,
The moist hat brims
Between the thumbs of farmers

In Beatrice, Nebraska.
The men in their suits,
Bought on sale, ill fitting.
The orange moon of foreclosures. (“For Weldon Kees” 3–12)

As in “1926,” the speaker of “For Weldon Kees” makes this move quickly, in less than eight lines, before returning to the night of Kees’s disappearance:

And abandoning the car!
How you soloed, finally,
Lending it the fabulous touch
Of your absence. (13–16)

Though the scene in Nebraska has no markers to identify it with a specific time, because Kees’s disappearance happened in San Francisco, these scenes are separated by space, and the absence of time markers for the Nebraska scene serves to emphasize the spatial relationship between the two scenes, since their temporal relationship cannot be determined. As in “1926,” the two disparate scenes are joined, this time in the mind of the elegist.

In the context of this 1974 version, without the ekphrastic dimension, the poem ends with another jump in time: to the speaker’s present. The speaker returns to a description of his environment—“It is winter now. / The street lights come on earlier.”
(18–19)—as a way of checking in with Kees, to let him know that “nothing has changed” in his absence (20).

In the *Dollmaker’s Ghost* version, however, the final stanza looks significantly different. Instead of jumping back to the speaker’s present, to report back to Kees about the state of the world, the speaker, still addressing Kees, moves to a description of the photograph:

You’d call that style—
To stand with an unlit cigarette
In one corner of your mouth,
Admiring the sun on Alcatraz.

(“My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees” lines 17–20)

The verb tense in this stanza is nebulous: if Kees were here and could speak, he would comment on his pose in the photograph. But the verbs in the description itself have not been conjugated, and therefore bear no temporal markers. The speaker could identify the photograph with the past, with the moment the photograph was captured, or he could identify it with the present, with the moment it is viewed, but he chooses to omit any identification with either time period, thus freeing the photograph to exist in both. Like the scene in Nebraska, the photographic scene seems to exist in a timeless state.

In 1977, three years after he finished *Signs*, the poem appeared in *New Letters*, with the title “Weldon Kees.” Even though this version of the poem also makes no clear mention of a photograph, the *New Letters* version does include the final ekphrastic stanza of the *Dollmaker’s Ghost* version, not the one from *Signs*. However, without the inclusion of *photograph* in the title, and without the reader’s prior knowledge of the photograph’s existence and familiarity with its image, it’s not clear where the image of
the final stanza comes from, and the poem misses that rich ekphrastic dimension that the later title affords it.

With or without mention of the photograph, the poem is certainly an elegy for Kees. As far as we know, no one has ever determined whether Kees actually jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge or went to Mexico, but, in the context of the Levis poem, such determinacy seems irrelevant; either way, Kees has removed himself from the living world that we (and Levis’s speaker) inhabit, and so, whether literally or figuratively speaking, Kees died that night in San Francisco.

The inclusion of the photograph in the poem, nonetheless, is an important decision, because the addition of the ekphrastic dimension significantly complicates the poem. Ending the poem with a meditation on the photograph is less expected than answering the images from “1926” with other images that would logically follow: autumn into winter, the street lights turning on when it gets dark, the modernist conceit that “Nothing has changed” (“For Weldon Kees” line 20). Instead, the poem’s sudden shift to the image of the photograph proves more enigmatic.

The moment of the photograph’s creation—when Kees posed under the Golden Gate Bridge and Heick snapped the shutter—predates Kees’s disappearance by several months, and yet the description of that photograph in the poem seems to foreshadow his disappearance. The speaker’s only photograph of Weldon Kees was taken, coincidentally, at the site of Kees’s last known whereabouts. Thus, the inclusion of the photographic description in the poem heightens the tension between what we can know about Kees and what we can’t. He left behind his poems, his car, and the belongings in his apartment, as well as this image of Kees staring out at the bay. What we don’t have is a body or a confirmation that he made it to Mexico, or anywhere else—just a handful of
unverified accounts from people who claim to have spotted him, but could never prove it. As the Levis poem evokes the memory of Kees, it also, necessarily, recalls the mystery surrounding his disappearance.

In “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees,” the description of the photographic image comes at the end of the poem, in the final stanza. The other ekphrastic poem that deals with a photographic image in *The Dollmaker’s Ghost*, “García Lorca: A Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966,” inverts this model and gives the description of the photograph in the first stanza. The photograph comes from Ian Gibson’s book *The Death of Lorca*—Gibson took the photograph in 1966—and, as the poem explains, it shows a large pile of human skeletons in the ossuary of Granada’s cemetery, as well as some plants growing behind the ossuary. While Lorca was not buried in the ossuary, and therefore could not be pictured in the photograph, he was buried nearby, in an unmarked grave with several other victims; therefore, in the speaker’s imagination, Lorca seems to haunt the picture by virtue his absence from it.

While the speaker of “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees” spends most of the poem imagining the night of Kees’s disappearance and the scene in Nebraska, ending with the description of the photograph, the speaker of “García Lorca” begins with the photograph and spends the rest of the poem exploring images from his own memory and imagination. The poem begins with two short introductory sentences—“The men who killed poetry / Hated silence . . . Now they have plenty” (lines 1–2)—before describing the photographic image:

In the ossuary at Granada
There are over four thousand calm skulls
Whitening; the shrubs are in leaf
Behind the bones. (lines 3–7)

Of the forty-three lines that constitute the poem, only these four actually describe the content of the photographic image. The three lines that follow them—“And if anyone tries to count spines / He can feel his own scalp start to crawl / Back to its birthplace” (7–9)—describe the speaker’s reaction to viewing the photograph, and therefore offer a description of the photograph’s possible psychological effects. But after this first stanza, the speaker seems to abandon any attempts to describe the photographic image altogether.

Instead, he turns to the beloved and says,

Once, I gave you a small stone I respected.

When I turned it over in the dawn,

After staying up all night,

Its pale depths

Resembled the tense face of Lorca

Spitting into an empty skull. (10–15)

The photograph from the Granada cemetery, which shows an enormous pile of human bones, reminds the speaker of a stone he once gave to his beloved because the stone reminded the speaker of Lorca. As in “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees,” these disparate images are juxtaposed, despite barriers of time and space, in the speaker’s memory, and in the expression of those memories, he may juxtapose them spatially on the page.

Though the speaker begins the poem by reflecting on images of death, he can’t help but also entertain thoughts on life. Even as he describes the pile of skeletons in the
photograph, he notes, “the shrubs are in leaf / Behind the bones” (5–6). He says to the beloved,

And though your long bones  
Have nothing to do with Lorca, or those deaths  
Forty years ago, in Spain,

The trees fill with questions, and summer. (20–24)

Though the poem is an elegy for Lorca, the speaker admits that Lorca “would not want, tonight, another elegy” (24). Rather, the speaker explains, “He would want me to examine the marriage of wings / Beneath your delicate collar bones” because “They breathe, / The ribs of your own poems breathe” (25–26; 27–28). The speaker, looking at the photograph of the ossuary, could become consumed by thoughts on death and loss; instead, he copes with such feelings by turning to images of a living body, by meditating on the bones of the beloved that, unlike the inert bones in the ossuary, move with the beloved’s breath—which, he believes, is what Lorca would have wanted him to do.

In this way, “García Lorca: A Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966” illustrates a key principle of Levis’s own aesthetic: that, in the context of a representation, grief and joy must necessarily coexist in order to provide an authentic portrait of human experience. Levis writes about this issue, at some length, in his essay “Some Notes on the Gazer Within.” Discussing the spiritual depravity he saw in the growth of modern (and sterile) suburban landscapes, Levis writes,

they are all part of a modern reality that I would prefer to forget, or ignore. To most people I suppose such landscapes are slight, and unmenacing. To me they are the death of the landscape, and the eye’s starvation. Therefore, the asylum, the steel mill, the cemetery, the ghost on the riverbank, the
dying resort beside the unfading Pacific are locations, for me, of a human fertility within time. (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 71)

For Levis, bearing witness to decay does not correlate with a morbid fascination for destruction, but with the need to see the full spectrum of life reflected in one’s environment. Without the possibility of death, Levis saw no hope of authentic life.

Moreover, Levis writes, “a wilderness of tract homes is a world without imagination, and a world without imagination is a lie. Such a world tries to assure its inhabitants that there is no death, no passion, no vision” (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 72). And he continues: “Such landscapes have proliferated and become obstinate in recent years. . . . my interest is personal: I don’t believe I can bear witness to such landscapes for long without feeling merely exhausted, drained, and spiritually beaten” (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 72–73). Levis connects the sense of spiritual death he feels when looking at a suburban landscape with what he sees as its apparent imperviousness to time. He writes:

Tract housing, most suburbs, malls, and shopping centers on the perimeter of any city or town seem to wish, in their designs, to be beyond time, outside time. To stare for three hours at a K-Mart is to feel myself rapidly aging, not K-Mart. And this is not an experience of my own mortality, either. It is only a way of feeling how that mortality can be insulted. . . . the authentic experience of any worthwhile landscape must be an experience of my own humanity.

(“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 73)

For Levis, any landscape that feigns impermeability to time is disingenuous. In the context of grief, mourning and celebration must go hand in hand; otherwise, the
representation is inauthentic. So, in the context of “García Lorca,” such a horrible portrait of death, in the form of the photograph of Granada’s cemetery, must necessarily be accompanied by images of vitality, which, for this speaker, include meditations on language and the body of the beloved.

The speaker then follows the image of the beloved’s breath with an image of the house that he shares with her, which segues into an image of Lorca roaming the neighborhood:

And here is our dark house at the end of the lane.

And here is the one light we have kept on all year

For no one, or Lorca,

And now he comes toward it (lines 29–32)

If he is a ghost, he seems to have regained his body: He has “the six bullet holes in his chest” (33); he is “Walking lightly, / So he will not disturb the sleeping neighbors, / Or the almonds withering in their frail arks” (34–36). As the victim of an assassination, Lorca might be angry or wrathful, but the speaker doesn’t characterize him as such. Instead, the reanimated Lorca is gentle: “He does not want to come in. / He stands embarrassed under the street lamp / In his rumpled suit” (lines 38–40).

The photograph appears in Ian Gibson’s book The Death of Lorca, but we learn from Gibson’s account that Lorca was not buried there in the ossuary. Gibson explains,

In the early days of the Granada repression the men at the Colonia did not despatch their victims in the barranco, but in the olive groves that clothe the slopes of this wide valley. Federico was one of these early victims and, contrary to what has often been said, is not buried in the pozos (as the sinister pits in the barranco are known to local inhabitants). (Gibson 122)
Likewise, Lorca’s body has never been found, though Gibson believes he has identified the location of Lorca’s burial, and there has been great debate in Granada about exhuming the body. Therefore, Lorca is not pictured in this photograph of the Granada cemetery, and while the poem describes a pile of “four thousand calm skulls / Whitening” (lines 4–5), Lorca’s is not among them. Instead, in the context of the poem, Lorca is practically alive: he can walk; he has empathy for others; he is embarrassed. For the speaker of the poem, Lorca is both dead and not dead, and while the photograph may testify to the death of many people, it does not testify to Lorca’s.

Both of the ekphrastic poems in *The Dollmaker’s Ghost* that describe photographic images also serve as elegies for lost poets: one for Weldon Kees, the other for Federico García Lorca. Like the elegiac poet, “All those young photographers who are at work in the world . . . are the agents of Death” (Barthes 92). As Barthes further argues, “with the Photograph, we enter into flat Death” (Barthes 92); photographers remember the living by relegating their images to the still form. And yet, as Barthes acknowledges, “Death must be somewhere in a society . . . perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life” (92). And so, on this matter, Levis and Barthes agree: authentic representations of human experience must recognize the coexistence of life and death.

The photograph of Weldon Kees, in its depiction of Kees under the Golden Gate Bridge, reminds the speaker of Kees’s disappearance; the photograph of the Granada cemetery reminds the speaker of Lorca’s death because Lorca is not buried there, and therefore is not depicted in the photographic image. These two elegies reanimate both of these men and give them new life within the poems, even as these poems reinforce the
fact that both Kees and Lorca are gone. For the speakers of Levis’s poems, these vanished poets are not dead or alive; they’re both.
Chapter 3: “Sensationalism” and the Gypsies

Four years later, Levis follows The Dollmaker’s Ghost with his next book of poems, Winter Stars. As Levis writes in the endnotes of Winter Stars, “The poems in this book are arranged in the approximate chronological order of their writing. The book was begun in Iowa City in 1980 and finished in Bucharest in 1983” (87). So, Levis began working on the poems that would appear in Winter Stars before The Dollmaker’s Ghost even made it to the shelves. Winter Stars contains its own share of ekphrastic poems, but the last two poems, “The Assimilation of the Gypsies” and “Sensationalism,” grouped together in a section also called “Sensationalism,” take ekphrastic meditation far beyond what Levis had ever done before.

The first of these poems, “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” is based on Joseph Koudelka’s photograph Jarabina, 1963, which was part of a series of photographs that Koudelka took of gypsies in eastern Europe during the 1960s and published in his 1975 book Gypsies. However, with “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” unlike “My Only Photograph of Weldon Kees” and “García Lorca: Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966,” the title does not indicate that the poem describes a photographic image. Likewise, the speaker does not immediately reveal that he’s describing a photograph; the first mention of a photographic frame comes in line 13: “the broad, curving tracks of a bus that / Passed earlier through the thawing mud . . . they seem to lead him out of the photograph” (lines 11–13).
In “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” the form and conventions of the photographic object inform the speaker’s descriptions of the photographic image. For one, the speaker’s method of description mimics the way the human eye perceives images. Throughout the poem, the speaker moves in cycles, through descriptions of the houses and other objects in the photograph’s background and of the people occupying the mid- and foreground. The poem begins, “In the background, a few shacks & overturned carts / And a gray sky holding the singular pallor of Lent” (1–2), then moves on to “the crowd of onlookers” before arriving at “the young man walking alone in handcuffs” (3; 6). Later, after entertaining recollections of the crime and the thoughts of the two executioners, the speaker moves back to the houses:

And in the background,

You can see that a few of the houses are entirely white,

Like a snowfall persisting into spring,

Or into oblivion (87–90)

before coming back to “the children in the crowd” and “the young man’s face” (93; 96).

Finally, the poem ends with an image of the two executioners walking through the village:

they pass the smells of cooking

Which rise in smoke from the poorest of houses

... 

Until it seems that all they are

Rises in smoke,

As it always has,

And as it will continue to do in this place
For a few more years. (139–148)

The narrative path of the poem follows the same trajectory that the human eye might take when looking at a print of Koudelka’s photograph. Similarly, this descriptive cycling evokes a sense of traveling in circles, of movement without progress. This sense of stagnation is reinforced with the image of the “overturned carts,” which function here as a symbol of the mobility restrictions imposed upon the gypsies living in Eastern Europe at that time (1).

Though the speaker does digress from descriptions of the scene depicted in the photographic object, his digressions fit within the narrative cycle. Beginning in line 45, the speaker widens the scope of the poem to include both Koudelka and himself:

This is

*Jarabina. 1963*. And if

Koudelka tells us nothing else about this scene,

I think he is right, if only because

The young man walks outside time now, & is not

So much a murderer as he is, simply, a man

about to be executed by his neighbors. (45–51)

The speaker pulls back, momentarily dwelling on the photographic object, its creator, and the photograph’s viewers, before returning to the scene in the photograph.

The speaker widens the scope again in line 96. He says,

I suppose that the young man’s face,

Without looking up, spoke silently to Koudelka as he passed,

Just as it speaks now, to me, from this photograph.

Now that there is nothing either of us can do for him.
His hair is clean & washed, & his coat is buttoned. (96–100)

Such digressions never last long, and the speaker is always quick to return to his descriptions of the scene.

In addition to these cyclical movements, the form of the photograph seems to inform the speaker's conceptions of time for his description of the photographic image. The speaker describes, with some liberties and divergences, the scene depicted in the photograph, and he renders such descriptions in the present tense. He says that the condemned man “wears / A brown tweed coat” and “His hair is clean & washed” (8–9; 100); “in the background, / . . . a few of the houses are entirely white” (88–89). The speaker also renders imagined elements of the scene in this present-tense voice. Two of the executioners “Are thinking of nothing except perhaps the first snowfall / Last year in the village” (20–21); “it is time now, the two executioners agree, / That all of this ended” (44–45). The speaker uses the photographic object as an anchor to ground the events depicted in the photograph—real and imagined—in the present tense.

Although the speaker recognizes that the imagined history of the scene happened in the past, he uses events of the present to frame most of his descriptions of the past. The reader knows that “a bus . . . / Passed earlier through the thawing mud” because it has left behind “broad, curving tracks” on the ground (11–12). The reader can know that last winter’s snow “covered & simplified / Everything—the ruts in the road & the distant / Stubble in the fields” because the speaker says that the two executioners might be thinking about it (21–23). The reader learns that “The man murdered the girl’s uncle with an axe” because the story is fresh in the executioners’ minds (26); according to the speaker, the executioners “understand well enough why” it happened (25),

Just as they know why his language,
Because it was not official & had to be translated
Into Czech at the trial, failed to convince
Anyone of its passion. (27–30)

Similarly, the speaker uses consciousness, in the present tense, as a means of introducing scenes of future events. The condemned man

knows, as [the executioners] do, too,

Not only that terror is a state
Of complete understanding, but also that
In a few years, this whole village, with its cockeyed Shacks, tea leaves, promiscuity between cousins,
Idle horse thieves, & pale lilacs used
To cure the insane,
Will be gone—bulldozed away so that the land
Will lie black & fallow & without history. (67–75)

The reader can see the deterioration of the community not because it happens in the photographic scene but because the speaker imagines that the characters in that scene know and are thinking about it.

The speaker uses this device again, later in the poem, to introduce future events. He starts with a short description of the present and mediation on the past, which quickly transition to thoughts about the future:

It is mid-afternoon & twenty years too late,
And even the language he used to explain it all
Is dying a little more, each moment, as I write this—
And as I begin to realize that
This ancient, still blossoming English
Will also begin to die, someday, to crack & collapse
Under its own weight— (107–113)

However, these thoughts about the future of the speaker’s own language is a
tangent, a short digression interrupting his meditation on the gypsies’ endangered way
of life. He notes that the gypsies’ language is disappearing,

Though that will not happen for years & years,
And long after the barber & the clerk
Have lowered their rifles & turned away to vom
For what seems like a long time, & then,
Because there is nothing else for them to do,
They will walk home together, talking softly in a language
That has never been written down. (114–120)

Thus, the speaker begins the scene that ends the poem—one in which such images of
decay are ubiquitous.

Indeed, their entire way of life is endangered, as the speaker of the poem
illustrates in the final scene of the poem. Not only are the gypsies losing their unique
way of speaking, as “the quick syllables of their / Language fly & darken into a few, last / Delicious phrases, arpeggios” (135–137). They’ve also lost their livelihood, and—
considering the prominence that horses hold throughout Levis’s work, as sacred
animals—perhaps even their spiritual core: “the lots [the executioners] pass are empty
because the horses / Were shipped off years ago to Warsaw / For the meat on their
backs” (130–133). Even their very houses are disappearing before their eyes:

[the executioners] pass the smells of cooking
Which rise in smoke from the poorest of houses
And even from stoves carried outdoors & burning,
As fuel, the cheap paneling of shacks
Which the government gave them.
Until it seems that all they are
Rises in smoke, as it always has,
And as it will continue to do in this place
For a few more years. (139–148)

The landscape itself reflects the spirit of decay that torments this population.

As with Rilke’s “Portrait of My Father as a Young Man,” both the Koudelka photograph and the poem that describes it have outlasted the people they depict. Unlike the speaker of the Rilke poem, the speaker of “The Assimilation of the Gypsies” does not give much consideration to the vulnerability of the photographic object. Instead, the speaker of the Levis poem acknowledges that his own language will not last forever: “This ancient, still blossoming English / Will also begin to die, someday, to crack & collapse / Under its own weight” (111–113). Subsequently, the speaker suggests that, over time, his own descriptions of the photograph would be lost to oblivion. The poem itself, like Rilke’s daguerreotype, will someday disappear.

“The Assimilation of the Gypsies” does more than describe a photograph; it describes a specific photograph, Josef Koudelka’s Jarabina, 1963, which has tremendous implications for the poem. For one, Koudelka has provided both the image and, in his title of the image, temporal and spatial markers that identify both the time and the place of the event, and the poet has chosen to include Koudelka’s title within the poem.
In addition, “The Assimilation of the Gypsies” is a poem that explores alienation—and the violence of alienation. The blocking in the photograph—the “young man walking alone” is set apart from the “crowd of onlookers” (6; 3)—is indicative of the alienation with which the speaker characterizes the man. The “crowd of onlookers” in the photograph “Have been advised to keep their distance,” even “though a few of them / Must be intimate with the victim” (3–5). Even though the man is, presumably, a member of this community, that community has ostracized him.

The alienation of the young man from his community may have begun with the murder—the speaker discloses nothing of the young man’s history before that event—but his alienation from the governing bodies may be responsible for his sentence. According to the speaker,

his language,

Because it was not official & had to be translated
Into Czech at the trial, failed to convince
Anyone of its passion. (27–30)

Because the man himself was not Czech, his testimony had to pass through an intermediary, which stripped that testimony of the tone. The process of translation at the trial created an emotional barrier between the accused and the party who determined his fate, eradicating any reasonable hope for an acquittal.

However, the condemned man is not the only alienated person in the poem. His entire village—a community with whom the man seems to have lived for most, if not all, of his life—lives as outsiders to the cultural majority. Moreover, the members of that community aren’t just alienated from the cultural majority; the violence of the pending execution—and, presumably, the cultural atmosphere that enables such an execution to
take place—has alienated them from themselves and from their own history. As the speaker describes,

Two of the men uneasily holding rifles, a barber
And an unemployed postal clerk,
Are thinking of nothing except perhaps the first snowfall
Last year in the village, how it covered & simplified
Everything—the ruts in the road & the distant
Stubble in the fields—& of how they cannot be,
Now, any part of that. (18–24)

While they don’t visibly stand apart from their community, as the condemned man does, the speaker depicts them as consciously disassociating themselves from their own memories.

“Sensationalism,” the companion poem to “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” immediately follows it in the last section of *Winter Stars*. “Sensationalism” is based on another Koudelka photograph, “Romania, 1968,” which was also taken in conjunction with Koudelka’s series of Romany gypsies, though “Romania, 1968” did not appear in his 1975 *Gypsies* book. In “Sensationalism,” the speaker of the poem follows a narrative pattern similar to that of “García Lorca: A Photograph of the Granada Cemetery, 1966,” in that both poems begin by describing the photographic image but soon move on to describe other images that the photographs themselves can’t and don’t contain. In “García Lorca,” the speaker begins with an image of the cemetery in Granada, of a photograph taken thirty years after Lorca was shot there, then goes on to describe the small stone that “resembled the tense face of Lorca” (“García Lorca” line 14); to “examine the marriage of wings / Beneath [the beloved’s] delicate collar bones” (25–
which, he explains, Lorca would have wanted him to do; and to imagine the ghost of
Lorca roaming the speaker’s neighborhood at night.

The speaker of “Sensationalism” likewise begins with a description of the scene
depicted in its corresponding photograph, but the poem soon descends into speculation
about the context of the photograph and memories of a failed love affair. In this way,
both “García Lorca” and “Sensationalism” digress far from strict descriptions of the
photographic images they evoke.

In “Sensationalism,” the speaker gives most of his descriptions about the
photographic image in the first ten lines of the poem:

In Josef Koudelka’s photograph, untitled & with no date
Given to help us with history, a man wearing
Dark clothes is squatting, his right hand raised slightly,
As if in explanation, & because he is talking,
Seriously now, to a horse that would be white except
For its markings—the darkness around its eyes, muzzle,
Legs & tail, by which it is, technically, a gray, or a dapple gray,
With a streak of pure white like heavy cream on its rump.
There is a wall behind them both, which, like most walls, has
No ideas, & nothing to make us feel comfortable. (lines 1–10)

After that, except for a brief description of the horse’s blinders, bit, and ears in lines 27
through 30, the speaker presents no new information about the photographic image.
Instead, the speaker offers his own interpretations of the photograph, imagining the
events that led to the scene in the photograph and suggesting a time and place in which
Koudelka took the photograph—one that, the speaker admits, would be improbable, considering that Koudelka would have been a toddler at the time.

The speaker makes a smooth transition from description to speculation. In line 11, following the description of the wall, he says:

After a while, because I know so little &
Because the muted sunlight on that wall will not change,
I begin to believe that the man’s wife & children
Were shot & thrown into a ditch a week before this picture
Was taken, that this is still Czechoslovakia, & that there is
The beginning of spring in the air. (11–16)

The speaker doesn’t claim to know what’s happened before the picture was taken—he himself admits, in line 32, “I have made all of this up”—but he justifies this imaginative leap by arguing that, because the photographic form renders the image static and because no one has given the speaker any information about the photograph’s context, his own imagination can’t help but try to fill in the gaps.

In the opening lines of “Sensationalism,” the speaker describes the event of the photograph in present tense: “a man wearing / Dark clothes is squatting” (2–3); “he is talking, /Seriously now, to a horse” (4–5); “There is a wall behind them both” (9). Other descriptions of events in the photograph, whether descriptive or imagined, are also rendered, in the first forty-five lines of the poem, in the present tense: “The man is talking, & as clearly as he can, to a horse” (17); “the horse, gray as those days at the end / Of winter, when days seem lost in thought, is, after all, / Only a horse” (19–21); the “man is trying to stay sane” (26). Though the speaker refers to Koudelka’s making of the image in the past tense—“Perhaps Koudelka arranged all of this / And then took the
picture as a way of saying / Good-bye to everyone who saw it” (34–36)—he describes the scene in the present tense. As in “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” by virtue of the photographic object’s existence in the speaker’s present, the speaker of “Sensationalism” treats the events depicted in the photograph as concomitant with his own time.

Likewise, the speaker renders his interactions with the photographic object in the present tense. He says, “I know so little” and “I begin to believe that the man’s wife & children / Were shot & thrown into a ditch a week before this picture was taken” (11; 13–15). The speaker also addresses the reader in the present tense: “I have to admit I have made all of this up” (32); “I do not wish to interfere, Reader, with your solitude” (38). Thus, in the first forty-five lines of “Sensationalism,” both the speaker’s present and the moment captured in the Koudelka photograph coexist in the present tense.

Therefore, because he describes the moment of the photograph as the present, the speaker renders his imagined history of the events leading to this moment in the past tense: “the man’s wife & children / Were shot & thrown into a ditch” (43–44); “he has chosen / To confide in this gelding, as he once did to his own small / Children, who could not, finally, understand him any better” (22–24). Other than these descriptions of the photograph’s imagined history and information about Koudelka’s own history, which the speaker puts in the past tense, the speaker spends most of the first forty-five lives in the present, whether that be the present of the photographic image or of his own conversation with the reader.

This is significant, because in line 46 the poem takes a sudden turn, with the speaker beginning to describe his recollection of the failed love affair, all of which is rendered in the past tense. He says, “Once, I was in love with a woman, & when I looked at her / My face altered & took on the shape of her face” (46–47). Then,
There was a kind of pain in her face, I felt no pain
When this happened to mine, when the bones
Of my own face seemed to change. (48–51)

He continues in this way, telling his story in the past tense, until he gets to the end of the story, at which point he gives two brief thoughts in the present tense, then returns to the photograph:

I never felt that way again, when I looked at anyone else;
I never felt my face change into any other face.
It is a difficult thing to do, & so maybe
It is just as well. That man, for instance. He was a *saboteur*. (66–69)

The speaker does not explain, in this version of the poem, why he feels compelled to introduce this personal memory to the conversation. (In an earlier draft, Levis included a line that introduced the anecdote as a way of fostering camaraderie with the reader and establishing both trust and the speaker’s authority to talk about human suffering, but he later omitted the line, though these ideas are still latent in the poem.) However, while the inclusion of this recollection proves somewhat enigmatic to the reader, it’s clear that something fundamental changes in the speaker’s mind with the evocation of the memory. This change is evident in the speaker’s descriptions of the photographic image, which he renders, through the end of the poem, in the past tense.

Unlike in “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” where the future haunts the events of the past and present, the speaker of “Sensationalism” spends little time speculating about future events. In describing the photograph, he stresses that “the muted sunlight on that wall will not change” (12), which is the only time the future tense appears in the
poem. Later, in reference to the failed love affair, he says, “Even that happiness became a lie, & even that was taken / From me, finally, as all lies are” (61–62). Although the speaker does not render this statement in the future tense, the implication is that lies will continue to be revoked in the future.

Although “Sensationalism” opens with a clear identification of the image as a Koudelka photograph, unlike in “The Assimilation of the Gypsies,” the speaker of “Sensationalism” does not identify the title of the photograph—presumably, because he doesn’t know it. Likewise, the speaker offers no time or date markers to ground the photograph in a particular historical moment, though he does describe an actual photographic image and not an imagined or fabricated one. While much of the tension in “The Assimilation of the Gypsies” comes from the relationship between the caption and the description of the image, the description of the photograph in “Sensationalism” has no caption, though Koudelka did assign one to the photographic object.

Moreover, a major source of tension in both of these poems is the liberty that Levis takes with historical facts. As Barthes argues in Camera Lucida, “The Photograph does not call up the past . . . The effect it produces on me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed. . . . what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution . . . but in reality a past state: at once the past and the real” (82). Certainly, the two Koudelka photographs testify that these two men have, in fact, existed, but in the context of the Levis poems, we know very little about the reality that the photographs depict. Levis himself, in the endnotes, admits, “Both ‘The Assimilation of the Gypsies’ and ‘Sensationalism’ are personal interpretations of Koudelka’s photographs. Although some incidents in both poems are corroborated by historical fact, neither poem is meant to suggest that such facts are
necessarily the facts of either photograph” (*Winter Stars* 87). While some information
in the poem may be true, Levis unapologetically admits to making most of it up—a
choice that proves inevitable than deliberate.

Photographs can bear witness to events of the world in a way that most other
forms in the plastic arts never could, but in these two poems Levis demonstrates how
even that alleged testimony can be suspect. As Sontag notes, “Despite the presumption
of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that
photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art
and truth” (6). Barthes argues that “Photography never lies” but then reconsiders and
modifies his claim: “rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature
tendentious, never as to its existence” (87). In this way, “every photograph is a
certificate of presence” (Barthes 87). However, without contextualizing information to
connect a photographic image to its time or place of origin, the significance of that
presence is unclear. This deprivation of context is what Levis’s speaker exploits in the
Koudelka poems; without a context for the photographs, the speaker can make up
whatever context he wants.

In “Sensationalism,” the speaker locates the photograph in Czechoslovakia during
the Nazi invasion of Prague, though he himself admits that would be improbable,
considering that Koudelka was a baby at the time. In fact, the picture in question was
taken in Romania, in 1968, thirty years after the Nazi invasion and several hundred
miles away. The story that Levis’s speaker tells can’t be true—the Nazis could not have
“shot [the man’s] wife & children” and “[thrown] them / Into the ditch” (73–74)—
because the Nazis weren’t in Romania in 1968.
By stripping the photographs of their historical context and situating them in new, imagined narratives, the speaker of “The Assimilation of the Gypsies” and “Sensationalism” emphasizes the apparent timelessness of the photographs, though he does not deny their own vulnerability to time, thereby ahistoricizing the images and transforming their subjects into myth. The men have existed in time, and yet in the form of the photographic image they also exist outside of time, because they do not belong to any specific point in time, as figures in a potentially infinite story.
Chapter 4: Elegy for “that fact”

After the Koudelka poems, Levis continues to include descriptions of photographs in his poems, but, as his poems become increasingly long and increasingly narrative, he begins to nest those descriptions in longer poems dealing with other, non-ekphrastic elements. Although several poems in *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* include descriptions of photographs—such as “Sleeping Lioness,” “Caravaggio: Swirl & Vortex,” and “The Widening Spell of the Leaves”—the primary concern of these poems is not a description of the photographic image, though Levis does include ekphrastic poems describing other non-photographic objects.

It isn’t until *Elegy*, published posthumously in 1997, that we see another ekphrastic poem that centers on describing a single photographic image. In “Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967,” the speaker describes a photograph of a hired man, on display in an art gallery. All of Levis’s earlier ekphrastic poems that describe photographic images deal with actual photographs, available to the general public. In the case of “Photograph: Migrant Worker,” however, the photograph is not accessible, and the poem is complicated by the question of whether the photograph actually exists. If it does, it’s likely to be in a private collection, but it’s equally plausible that Levis fabricated the image in his imagination, the way that Homer imagined Achilles’s shield, or that Levis saw a photograph of another migrant worker and pretended that man was Johnny Dominguez. Dominguez was, in fact, a real person.
who worked on the Levis family’s farm; the photograph of Johnny Dominguez in this poem, however, may never have existed at all.

This is not to say that the poem’s significance is contingent upon the existence of the photograph; none of these ekphrastic poems that Levis writes about photographs are dependent on their referents for meaning, though analyzing the poems alongside their corresponding photographs does create new opportunities for meanings. However, because the photograph that the speaker describes in “Photograph: Migrant Worker” is not available to the reader, that reader must determine how much he or she is willing to trust the speaker’s authority on the photographic image, more so than in the other poems, since the speaker of “Photograph: Migrant Worker” is the only available source for information about that image.

In the opening lines, the speaker assumes that authority, claiming that he wants to dispel misconceptions about the photograph and the man it depicts. The poem begins,

I’m going to put Johnny Dominguez right here
In front of you on this page so that
You won’t mistake him for something else,
An idea, for example, of how oppressed
He was, rising with his pan of Thompson Seedless
Grapes from a row of vines. (lines 1–6)

Already, the poem is wrought with tension: the speaker claims to put Johnny Dominguez in plain sight, but all he has is a representation of Dominguez in the form of the photographic image, assuming one reads the “you” of the poem as a patron of the art gallery. Alternatively, if one reads the “you” as being the reader of the poem, the speaker
still does not have Johnny Dominguez; instead, he has a verbal description of the photographic representation of Dominguez, coupled with explanations and interpretations of the image that are based on personal experience, all mediated by language. Either way, Dominguez is not actually present.

On the other hand, when he says, “I’m going to put Johnny Dominguez right here / In front of you” (lines 1–2), the speaker might actually mean the representation of Johnny Dominguez, whether visual or verbal, in which case he introduces another problem: the belief that, by experiencing the representation of Johnny Dominguez, the viewer or reader will see exactly what the speaker wants him or her to see.

Because Dominguez is not present to advocate for himself, and because the photographic image that depicts him can’t talk, the speaker of the poem speaks on behalf of Dominguez, relaying what he imagines Dominguez would say, if he were here to say it. We read:

The band

On his white straw hat darkened by sweat, is,

He would remind you, just a hatband.

His hatband. He would remind you of that. (6–9)

And, later: “he would remind you / That he was not put on this earth / To be an example of something else” (13–15). And while Dominguez might actually say these things if he were present, he’s not, and so all of these thoughts come mediated through the language and imagination of the speaker.

However, the poem takes a comic and self-conscious turn in line 16:

Johnny Dominguez, he would hasten to

Remind you, in his chaste way of saying things,
Is not to be used as an example of anything
At all, not even, he would add after
A second or so, that greatest of all
Impossibilities, that unfinished agenda
Of the stars, that fact, Johnny Dominguez. (16–22)

Both the speaker and Dominguez (colored by the speaker’s interpretation of him) seem
to recognize that the representation of Dominguez is just that: a representation.
Moreover, Dominguez resists being held accountable to any representation of himself,
making no distinction between accurate or inaccurate representations. Whether he
believes a photograph is able to accurately capture his likeness is irrelevant; he resists
being made an example of himself.

For Dominguez’s character, his problem comes down to an issue of juxtaposition:
his image, represented in the form of the photograph, has been placed on the wall of an
art gallery, where it will come into contact with people whom Dominguez would likely
never meet in his own life. His sense of violation, his apparent need to resist the patrons’
options of him, comes from the fact that Dominguez’s likeness, through the creation of
the photographic image, has been divorced from his presence, so while it may seem to
create enargeia, Dominguez realizes that he is separate from that representation of
himself by limits imposed by time and space. Because Dominguez is not present to bear
witness to himself, to set the record straight, the speaker of the poem must testify to us
on his behalf.
Conclusion

While Levis often incorporates biographical information into his poems, his poems are not all representative of his own personal history, nor does he treat his poems as a means of avoiding that history. Levis once said, “The moment of writing is not an escape . . . it is only an insistence, through the imagination, upon human ecstasy, and a reminder that such ecstasy remains as much a birthright in this world as misery remains a condition of it” (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 87).

Byrne notes that “Levis’s elegiac poetry celebrates life even as it reckons with the inevitability of death. It gives us the lives of those people or places that would otherwise be lost to Time” (594). And this is the crux of Levis’s aesthetic: like the “Old Masters” of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Levis understands that human suffering will always happen alongside someone else’s joy, and that artists who hope to produce authentic representations of the human experience must have the audacity, as cruel as it may sometimes seem, to recognize that human experience includes both life and death, not only one or the other.

Furthermore, as Levis once argued, “The elegist, if his art is to be authentic, must also die, imaginatively at least, with his subject” (“Mock Mockers after That” 129); “the authentic experience of any worthwhile landscape must be an experience of [one’s] own humanity” (“Some Notes on the Gazer Within” 73). The poet, through his verbal descriptions of photographic images, is not trying to evade the pain or joy of being
human; instead, he’s confronting his grief directly and, in so doing, he transcends that suffering—and the violation of time—to better understand himself and his own human position.
Works Cited


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Vita

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