

Hugh W. Diamond

*On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomena of Insanity (1856)**

It would never be expected, a priori, that a new science could arrive at any thing like maturity in the space of fifty years, yet with respect to Photography we witness the gratifying fact that the early labours of Wedgwood, Davy, and Young, at the commencement of the present century, have been so zealously followed up, that the fundamental difficulties in the theory of this new science have been overcome and its practical rules very generally established. That I have been a fellow worker with those who

have obtained these valuable results will always be a source of the highest pleasure, and I think I shall not be looked upon as presenting a premature offering if I venture to lay before the Royal Society a short account of the peculiar application of Photography which my position in the Surrey Asylum has enabled me to make.

The investigation of the phenomena of Insanity can never be looked upon as a subject of but little interest in a country which has provided so largely for the treatment of

Mental derangement. The Metaphysician and Moralist, the Physician and Physiologist will approach such an inquiry with their peculiar views, definitions and classifications. The Photographer, on the other hand, needs in many cases no aid from any language of his own, but prefers rather to listen, with the picture before him, to the silent but telling language of nature. It is unnecessary for him to use the vague terms which denote a difference in the degree of mental suffering, as for instance, distress, sorrow, deep sorrow, grief, melancholy, anguish, despair; the picture speaks for itself with the most marked precision and indicates the exact point which has been reached in the scale of unhappiness between the first sensation and its utmost height – similarly the modification of fear, and of the more painful passions, anger and rage, jealousy and envy, (the frequent concomitants of insanity) being shown from the life by the Photographer, arrest the attention of the thoughtful observer more powerfully than any

laboured description. What words can adequately describe either the peculiar character of the palsy which accompanies sudden terror when without hope, or the face glowing with heat under the excitement of burning anger, or the features shrunk and the skin constricted and ghastly under the influence of pale rage? Yet the Photographer secures with unerring accuracy the external phenomena of each passion, as the really certain indication of internal derangement, and exhibits to the eye the well known sympathy which exists between the diseased brain and the organs and features of the body. An Asylum on a large scale supplies instances of delirium with raving fury and spitefulness, or delirium accompanied with an appearance of gaiety and pleasure in some cases, and with constant dejection and despondency in others, or imbecility of all the faculties, with a stupid look and general weakness, and the Photographer catches in a moment the permanent cloud, or the passing storm or

sunshine of the soul, and thus enables the metaphysician to witness and trace out the connexion between the visible and the invisible in one important branch of his researches into the Philosophy of the human mind. M. Esquirol has described in a striking and accurate manner the aspect of the countenance peculiar to that stage of dementia which is characterized by confirmed incoherence, a chronic mania (of which I exhibit two illustrative portraits) but those who never witness this exhibition of human suffering, either in the original or in the copy drawn to the life, can hardly imagine this peculiar state of mental prostration.

Professor Heinroth gives a graphic description of the Phenomena of raving madness in cases which display the greatest intensity of the disease. In the first stage we witness the forehead contracted, the eyebrows drawn up, the hair bristled, and the eye-balls prominent as if pushed out of their orbits. In the second stage nothing can be com-

pared to the truly satanic expression of the countenance, and the phenomena of the loss of reason in their greatest intensity. And in the third stage, the violent paroxysms cease, the countenance is pallid and meagre, and the disease subsides into a permanent fatuity. Photography, as is evident from the portraits which illustrate this paper, confirms and extends this description, and that to such a degree as warrants the conclusion that the permanent records thus furnished are at once the most concise and the most comprehensive.

There is another point of view in which the value of portraits of the Insane is peculiarly marked. –viz. in the effect which they produce upon the patients themselves. I have had many opportunities of witnessing this effect. In very many cases they are examined with much pleasure and interest, but more particularly in those which mark the progress and cure of a severe attack of Mental Aberration. I may particularly refer to the four portraits (fig. 1) which



Fig. 1

represent different phases of the case of the same young person commencing with that stage of Mania which is marked by the bristled hair, the wrinkled brow, the fixed unquiet eye, and the lips apart as if from painful respiration, but passing, not to a state in which no man could tame her, but happily through less excited stages to the perfect cure. In the third portrait the expression is tranquil and accompanied with the smile of sadness instead of the hideous laugh of frenzy. The hair falls naturally and the forehead alone retains traces, tho' slight ones, of mental agitation. In the fourth there is a perfect calm. The poor maniac is cured. This patient could scarcely believe that her last portrait representing her as clothed and in her right mind, would even have been preceded by anything so fearful; and she will never cease, with these faithful monitors in her hand to express the most lively feelings of gratitude for a recovery so marked and unexpected. I feel that I shall be supported by the Chaplain to

our Asylum if I show a moral truth from these portraits, which, if I apprehend it rightly amounts to this – that religion can win its way to hearts barred against every other influence, that it can soften and conquer dispositions which would else remain intractable and savage; and that hereby in addition to all its other and higher merits, it establishes a title to be considered the great humanizer of Mankind.

It is of course beside my purpose to allude to the value of Photographic Physiognomy in marking the varied Phenomena of sane mental power as exhibited in the different cast of countenance in the Philosopher, the Mathematician, the Poet, etc. but I may observe that the study of Physiognomy is equally necessary when tracing the characteristic features of different mental diseases in their commencement, continuance, and cure. Nor in a sanitary point of view is it unimportant, for many a time the practised eye of the physician may see the storm approaching

and by remedial and preventive measures, can greatly subdue its force.

There are cases however in which the most anxious forethought and watchful care are of no avail; and this was the case with the unhappy patient whose small portrait is placed fifth in the frame. It cannot be examined without deep interest and it is thus described by M. Ernest Lacan of Paris:

One's eyes are captured by the portrait of a woman tormented by suicidal monomania. This woman, of a mature age, must have been quite attractive when in the bloom of youth. Misfortune came, and then illness, but they did not succeed in depriving her features of their beautiful composure. And yet, what sadness, how many complaints, how many disappointments are to be found in those eyes! What anxieties, morbid thoughts and ominous schemes are written on this wrinkled forehead. How many tears, scarcely dried, are on these shrivelled cheeks. How much bitterness

and restrained grief, how many swallowed sobs, are in this mouth, whose smile must have been so graceful in the past! Should not the expression of despair stamped upon this pallid face show a profound revulsion against life and the omnipresence of morbid thoughts, the wide scar this unfortunate person bears on her throat would reveal all. This photograph is a moving drama.

After this description, almost prophetic in its terms, it will scarcely excite surprise if I state that this patient, after many cunning but disappointed attempts, eventually carried out her fatal purpose and Photography has recorded the last page in the fearful drama -of this last picture M. Lacan says

This photograph provides much material for study and reflection. The woman's face, cramped while alive, has recovered its serenity in death. Calmness has come upon these features, so recently convulsively agitated; her half-opened

eyes, her almost smiling mouth, seem to express the satisfaction of satiated desire. Is this a final symptom of her illness, or did reason return at the hour of death, giving this unfortunate woman the feeling of finally being freed from a life of misery and grief. Only science can answer this...

As a contrast to this melancholy story I may refer with pleasure to a case in which Photography unquestionably led to the cure. A.D. aged 20 was admitted under my care in August 1854, having been recently discharged uncured from Bethlem Hospital after a year's residence there. Her delusions consisted in the supposed possession of great wealth, and of an exalted station as a queen. Any occupation was therefore looked upon by her as beneath her dignity. I wished to possess portraits of the several patients who imagined themselves to be Queens and Royal personages, and one of these in a dominant attitude and with a band or "diadem" round the head, stands first in the frame. It was however not without much persuasion that I

induced the Queen, A.D., to give me the honour of a sitting. I told her that it was my wish to take portraits of all the Queens under my care, and I will remember the contempt with which she observed "Queens indeed! I How did they obtain their titles?". I replied, as she did: *They imagined them*. "No!" she said sharply, "I never imagine such foolish delusions, they are to be pitied, but *I* was born a Queen. Her subsequent amusement in seeing the portraits and her frequent conversation about them was the first decided step in her gradual improvement, and about four months ago she was discharged perfectly cured, and laughed heartily at her former imaginations. The illustrative portraits to which I have not specially alluded – viz. the example of melancholy, in which even the hands speak the language of melancholy, the type of Epileptic Mania, and some of the smaller portraits, for the most part tell their own tale, with perhaps the exception of the remarkable illustration of catalepsy as exhibited in

the patient who is seated in an arm chair with her body erect, the hands raised to the height of the eyes, the arms rigid, and the whole face imprinted with the characters of death. In this position or in any other in which she might be placed she would remain motionless and insensible for hours. The portraits of the insane are valuable to Superintendents of Asylums for reference in cases of re-admission. It is well known that the portraits of those who are congregated in prisons for punishment have often time been of much value in recapturing some who have escaped, or improving with little expense, and with certainty a previous conviction and similarly the portraits of the Insane who are received into Asylums for protection, give to the eye so clear a representation of their case that on their re-admission after temporary absence and cure. I have found the previous portrait of more value in calling to my mind the case and treatment, than any verbal description I may have placed on record.

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In conclusion I may observe that Photography gives permanence to these remarkable cases, which are types of classes, and makes them observable not only now but for ever, and it presents also a perfect and faithful record. free altogether from the painful caricaturing which so disfigures almost all the published portraits of the Insane as to render them nearly valueless either for purposes of art or of science.

On The Application of Photography

** On the Application of Photography to the Physiognomic and Mental Phenomena of Insanity*, "Proceeding of the Royal Society", 117, 1856, and in S. L. Gilman, *The Face of Madness. Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, Brunner-Mazel, New York 1976

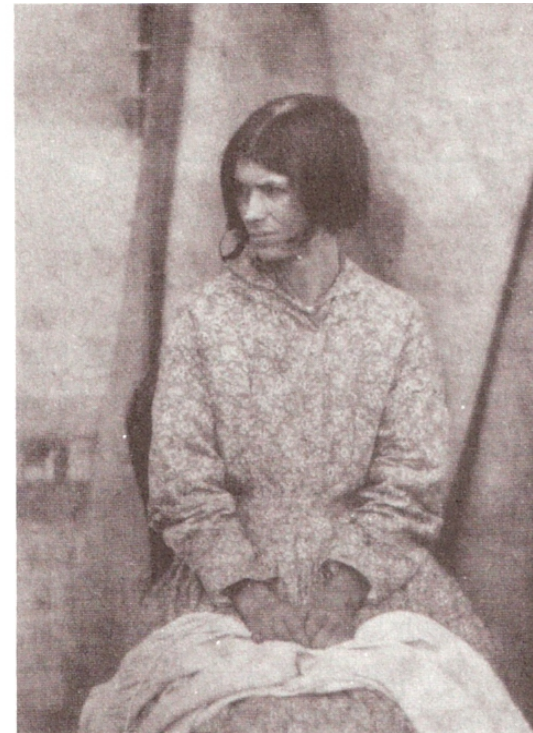
[This original version of the text is published without any introduction. If you are interested, see the "Nota introduttiva" in the italian version. *Ed.*]

Dr. Hugh W. Diamond (1809-1886), pioneer of psychiatric photography, was Resident Superintendent of the Female Department at the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum, a position he held from 1848 to 1858. His pictures were given wide attention in a series of essays on the physiognomy of insanity by John Conolly, a major figure in the reform of the British asylum. For further informations, see S.L. Gilman, *The Face of Madness*, cit.

PLATES



1. H.W. Diamond, Introductory picture.



2. H.W. Diamond, Plate 26.

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3. H.W. Diamond, Plate 27.

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4. H.W. Diamond, Plate 28.



5. H.W. Diamond, Plate 31.



6. H.W. Diamond, Plate 34.



7. H.W. Diamond, Plate 36.



8. H.W. Diamond, Plate 39.



9. H.W. Diamond, Plate 43.



10. H.W. Diamond, Plate 50.



11. H.W. Diamond, Plate 53.