CRIMEAN WAR ESSAY
(INTENTIONS OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER)
Which Came First, the Chicken or the Egg?

Part 1

“Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow . . .

— T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

“You mean to tell me that you went all the way to the Crimea because of one sentence written by Susan Sontag?” My friend Ron Rosenbaum seemed incredulous. I told him, “No, it was actually two sentences.”

The sentences in question are from Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, her last published book.

Here are the two sentences:

Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with. After reaching the much-shelled valley approaching Sebastopol in his horse-drawn darkroom, [Roger] Fenton made two exposures from the same tripod position: in the first version of the celebrated photo he was to call “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (despite the title, it was not across this landscape, that the Light Brigade made its doomed charge),
I have spent a considerable amount of time looking at the two photographs and thinking about Sontag’s two sentences. Sontag, of course, does not claim that Fenton altered either photograph after taking them—only that he altered, or “staged,” the second photograph by altering the landscape that was photographed. But how did Sontag know that Fenton altered the landscape or, for that matter, “oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself”?

Surely, any evidence of this would have to be found independent of the photographs. We don’t see Fenton (or anyone else for that matter) in either of the photographs bending down as if to pick up or put down a cannonball. How does Sontag know what Fenton was doing or why he was doing it? To up the ante, Sontag’s sentence also suggests a certain laziness on Fenton’s part, as if he himself couldn’t be bothered picking up or putting down a cannonball but instead supervised or oversaw their placement. One can imagine the imperious Fenton: “Hey, you over there. Pick up that cannonball and move it on to the road. No, not there. A little more to the left.” Or maybe it wasn’t laziness. Maybe he had a bad back. The incapacitated Fenton: “Boy, my back is killing me. Would you mind picking up a few cannonballs and carrying them on to the road?”

While I was wrestling with these questions, it occurred to me that there was an even deeper question. How did Sontag know the sequence of the photographs? How...
did she know which photograph came first, OFF or ON? Presumably, there had to be some additional information that allowed the photographs to be ordered: before and after. If this is the basis for her claim that the second photograph was staged, shouldn’t she offer some evidence?

There are no footnotes in Sontag’s book, but fortunately there is an acknowledgment section at the end:

I owe the information that there were two versions of Fenton’s “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” to Mark Haworth-Booth of the Victoria and Albert Museum; both are reproduced in The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War, by Ulrich Keller (Routledge, 2001).

I bought a copy of Ulrich Keller’s book and turned immediately to the section in Chapter 4 on the two photographs. I found the following passage where Keller lays claim to a number of historical discoveries—namely that there are two photographs, that the photographs are slightly different, and that the cannonballs in the second photograph were placed there either by Fenton or under Fenton’s direction.

Here is the text (the italics are mine):

A slight but significant difference between Fenton’s two pictures of the site seems to have escaped the attention of photographic historians. The first variant obviously represents the road to the trenches in the state in which the photographer found it, with the cannonballs lining the side of the road. In a second version we discover a new feature. Some round-shot is now demonstratively distributed all over the road surface—as if the balls had just been hurled there, exposing the photographer to a hail of fire. Not content with the peaceful state of things recorded in the first picture, Fenton obviously rearranged the evidence in order to create a sense of drama and danger that had originally been absent from the scene.

In turn, this passage references a footnote where Keller further expands on his claims about Fenton’s personality:

That Fenton tended to exaggerate the dangers of his photographic campaign, too, can be gathered from “The Daily News” of September 20, 1855, which lists a series of his close calls, such as his operating van . . . being frequently an object of suspicion with the Russians; himself being wounded by a shell; his assistant shot in the hand by a ball from a Minié rifle.

But where is the exaggeration here? There is nothing in the Daily News article to support Keller’s claim. If anything, the article contradicts what Keller is saying. Is Keller arguing that Fenton made false claims to the journalist from the Daily News (with the possibility, of course, that it was the journalist, and not Fenton, who exaggerated what Fenton said)? Does Keller know that the van was not “an object of suspicion with the Russians” or that Fenton’s assistant, Sparling, was not “shot in the hand by a ball from a Minié rifle”? Where does Keller show that these claims are false? Fenton himself had written:

The picture was due to the precaution of the driver [Sparling] on that day, who suggested as there was a possibility of a stop being put in that valley to the further travels of both vehicle and driver, it would be showing a proper consideration for both to take a likeness of them before starting.

Again, a possible exaggeration or misstatement, but supposedly Sparling was concerned that he might be making a one-way trip to the front.
Keller says that the first photograph obviously “represents the road . . . in which the photographer found it” (OFF) and Fenton obviously “rearranged the evidence,” that is the cannonballs, in the second photograph (ON).

As I’ve said elsewhere: nothing is so obvious that it’s obvious. When someone says that something is obvious, it seems almost certain that it is anything but obvious—even to them. The use of the word “obvious” indicates the absence of a logical argument—an attempt to convince the reader by asserting the truth of a statement just by saying it a little louder.

Soon after I read his book, I called Keller to discuss his claims about Fenton, which were repeated by Sontag.

**ERROL MORRIS:** I became aware of your book on Fenton [The Ultimate Spectacle] from reading Susan Sontag. She talks about your analysis of the two photographs captioned “The Valley of the Shadow of Death.” And suggests that Fenton posed one of the photographs.

**ULRICH KELLER:** Yes.

**ERROL MORRIS:** She seems to have taken most of that material wholesale from you.

**ULRICH KELLER:** Yes, I guess one could say that. Yes.

**ERROL MORRIS:** What interests me is this idea that one of the photographs was posed. That one of the photographs is a fake.

**ULRICH KELLER:** It has been sort of retouched or interfered with to get some drama into it that wasn’t originally in it. I wouldn’t go so far as to say it’s a fake, but it’s deceptive. Certainly.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Deceptive in what way?

**ULRICH KELLER:** Well, deceptive in that it creates the impression that the picture was taken under great danger when that was not the case.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Both pictures?

**ULRICH KELLER:** The second one. It’s clear that the one with cannonballs on the surface of the road must be later, obviously.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Why?

**ULRICH KELLER:** Well, because of two pictures, one has the cannonballs resting in the ditch there to the side (OFF) and the other one has them on the surface of the road (ON). It’s much, much more likely to assume that Fenton would have taken these balls out of the ditch and onto the road rather than the other way round. What motivation would he have had to take cannonballs that were on the road and remove them? Why would he do that? So I think it’s pretty obvious. But you have doubts about that?

**ERROL MORRIS:** Yes. I have wondered how you came to the conclusion that the one with the cannonballs on the road (ON) has to be the second photograph. You suggest that Fenton was not in danger but wanted to ratchet up the drama of the scene by making it look as though he were under attack.

**ULRICH KELLER:** Well, I can see a motivation for him to take the balls out of the ditch and put them in the middle of the road. That makes sense to me. It’s something that I think is plausible for someone to do. The other way around, I don’t know why anyone would do that. I don’t think it’s likely.

**ERROL MORRIS:** Is it the absence of an explanation that makes “the other way around” unlikely or implausible?

**ULRICH KELLER:** Yes.

That Fenton wanted to convey a false impression of derring-do to the prospective viewer of the photograph. But why do you believe that? I may not be phrasing this very well. If not, my apology.

**ULRICH KELLER:** ...