

**CRIMEAN WAR ESSAY
(INTENTIONS OF
THE PHOTOGRAPHER)**



CHAPTER 1

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),

ILLUSTRATION #5
VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH "OFF"



OFF

the cannonballs are thick on the ground to the left of the road, but before taking the second picture—the one that is always reproduced—he oversaw the scattering of the cannonballs on the road itself.

To give a little background, in 1855 Roger Fenton, a well-regarded British photographer, was sent by the publisher Thomas Agnew & Sons to photograph the ongoing war in the Crimea between British, French, and Turkish forces on one side and Russian forces on the other. For four months, from March 8 to June 26, 1855, Fenton and his assistant, John Sparling, worked from a horse-drawn darkroom behind the British front lines. They produced 360 photographs, of which the pair entitled “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” are the best known.

Despite the iconic status of the photographs, they are not illustrated in Sontag’s book. Sontag provided *no* photographs in her book, only references to photographs.¹ I will make this a little easier for the reader. Here are the two Fenton photographs taken, according to Sontag, “from the same tripod position.” I have given them the names: OFF and ON. OFF for the photograph with cannonballs off the road and ON for the photograph with cannonballs on the road.

ILLUSTRATION #6
VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH "ON"



ON

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.

ILLUSTRATION #7
SPARLING, FENTON'S ASSISTANT



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.

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: 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.

But is it so implausible for Fenton to have removed the balls from the road? As Ann Petrone, my researcher, told me, “Of course the balls were taken off the road. Didn’t they need to use the road?” She calls it the commonsense solution.

There also could be artistic reasons. Fenton could have liked the aesthetic quality that the barren road would have given him. He could have left the balls on the road for the first picture (ON) and then taken them off the road for the second (OFF), because he preferred the simplicity of the latter. Maybe he saw the balls on the road and felt they looked fake, and removed them in the interest of creating a more honest picture.

In Keller’s book, there is a letter from Fenton to his wife dated April 24, 1855.² This is an excerpt:

Yesterday after finishing the last picture of the Panorama I got Sir John to lend me a couple of mules to take my caravan down to a ravine known by the name of the valley of the shadow of Death from the quantity of Russian balls which have fallen in it . . . We were detained in setting off & so got down just about 3PM yesterday. I took the van down nearly as far as I intended it to go & then went forward to find out the chosen spot. I had scarcely started when a dash up of dust behind the battery before us showed something was on the road to us, we could not see it but another flirt of earth nearer showed that it was coming straight & in a moment we saw it bounding up towards us. It turned off when near & where it went I did not see as a shell came over about the same spot, knocked it [sic] fuse out & joined the mass of its brethren without bursting. It was plain that the line of fire was upon the very spot I had chosen, so very reluctantly I put up with another reach of the valley about 100 yds short of the best point. I brought the van down & fixed the camera & while leveling it another ball came in a more slanting direction touching the rear of the battery as the others but instead of coming up the road bounded on to the hill on our left about 50 yards from us & came down right to us stopping at our feet. I picked it up put it into the van & hope to make you a present of it. After this no more