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Something in the Air: On the Atmosphere of a Lee Miller Photograph — Mark Dorrian

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I first encountered Lee Miller's portrait of Humphrey Jennings in *Pandaemonium 1660–1886: the Coming of the Machine Age as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, where it appears as a kind of frontispiece to the book (Fig.1). The black and white photograph, a gelatin silver print, shows a young man, rather formally dressed. Strong light falls across him from an unseen source to the left of the image, casting his shadow on what seems to be a narrow table-top upon which he leans, his posture drawing his shoulders down towards the shadows. His head is tilted slightly upwards, and we would probably say that he was staring into space were it not for the strange, illuminated cloud suspended before his eyes like an apparition in the darkness. It is a cloud of tobacco smoke, I suppose, but the construction of the photograph leaves us uncertain of that: it is made mysterious by the fact that there is no clear source (the sitter is not obviously smoking), but also by the way the frame of the image contains the nebular effusion. Independent of any obvious cause, the cloud gains a complex, liminal quality that, it seems to me, positions this photograph at the intersection of a cultural politics and poetics of air.

As far as I am aware, little has been written about this haunting image, which might also be thought an image of haunting. According to the National Portrait Gallery's description 'the cloud resembles a human head, like a ghostly figure looking back' at Jennings, implicitly locating the portrait in a tradition of *vanitas* imagery in which emblems of mortality are contemplated.[1] My aim in this article is not so much to argue with this as to extend it, by expanding our sense of what this photograph might be understood to do. If one way we could talk about Miller's photograph is in terms of its giving us an image of the contemplation of latency – an image of awaiting appearance – then I want to absorb that mode of looking into my own approach in order to ask what takes shape within the hallucinatory clarity of Miller's print. But I need to be clear about what is meant by 'within' here, which is not something purely 'internal' to the image, whatever that might mean, but rather to do with its capacity to establish relations with other texts and images beyond itself, this in turn orientating our response to it even while it forestalls any singular determination. The enigmatic character of the photograph resides, I argue, not in its strangeness but in the tension that arises from the ways in which we recognise it without, at the same time, being able to place it conclusively. Like the interior cloud – which the photograph enjoins us to look at with, or even *through*, Jennings (in that sense, the sitter is, in Louis Marin's term, a delegate figure who enacts a mode of contemplation for the viewer of the photograph, this in turn complicating the usual designation of the image as

Larger illustrations and captions on pp. 11–18

a ‘portrait’)[2] – the image floats, suspended between meanings, into none of which it fully resolves. These are summoned via a cultural iconography of airy things, in which the photograph participates. In what follows, I will try to articulate and explore aspects of this that I think are gathered by this image, with the aim of condensing something of what might be described as the hermeneutic or interpretative atmosphere around it.

Miller’s photograph is a particularly intriguing artwork with which to think about atmospheres because of the way it both conveys the contemplation of a material atmospheric phenomenon and is itself carefully attuned to produce an effect that we can rightly call ‘atmospheric’. What is striking is the way that this apparently austere image gives rise to an effusion – even a billowing – of connotation that cannot be particularised. As a description of experience, ‘atmosphere’ is a term of recourse when we feel subject to the affect or influence of a presence that we are unable to otherwise determine or locate. And in that sense – no matter how it might be subsequently qualified (as Gernot Böhme points out, we typically characterise atmospheres using words like serene, or ominous, or homely[3]) – its use is at root the declaration of an inability to specify and delimit. The introduction of a thing or an event to a given situation might alter or even ‘produce’ an atmosphere, but the latter is not identical to, or coterminous with, the former.

The understanding of atmosphere as immersive, distributed, and occulted because constitutively vague, recurs in modern theorisations of the concept (connecting them to a long cultural history of astro- and meteorological thought on the influence of climate and celestial bodies on disposition and mood) and is convergent with the idea that the perception of atmospheres concerns a general affectivity of bodies; atmospheres are not purely or primarily visual or auditory phenomena, for example, but have to be thought in relation to the receptivity, or productivity, of the sensorium more widely. The English literary critic William Empson observed that when commentators spoke of the ‘atmosphere’ of a poem they implied ‘something mysteriously intimate, something which it is strange a poet could convey, something like a sensation which is not attached to any of the senses’.[4] The difficulty of grasping atmosphere is reflected in its vaporous and nebular characterisations. We recall that Walter Benjamin described his idea of ‘aura’ – which Böhme calls ‘atmosphere in general’[5] – in terms of breath, and also of the experience of a distance that extends beyond a thing’s physical proximity.[6] This led Theodor Adorno to see Benjamin’s aura, insofar as it is the effect of a surpassing of raw facticity, as a claim made against the instrumental reduction of natural things.[7] This same understanding underpins Tonino Griffero’s more recent characterisation of atmosphere as ‘[a] something-more that, finally, escapes “analytical” and therefore “immobilising” perception’.[8]

What follows, then, is an experiment in writing about Miller’s photograph in a way that entertains this. I think of it as less an analysis than as a kind of storytelling around and with the image – one that forgoes strong claims about the photograph’s meaning in order to elaborate different ways of thinking about it, taking these to be so many provisional, shifting and contingent ‘resolutions’, none of which assumes priority over the others.

We will begin by suggesting that this is a photograph located within a tradition of imagery in which the air is a medium of otherworldly appearances, an interface or contact zone between everyday reality and forces that, while exceeding it, may provisionally ‘materialise’ in the air for the instruction or ruin – and these may turn out to be the same – of those to whom they appear. Such visions are typically given to isolated

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figures – a prophet, a seer, a fated individual, a lone man in a study. The strong *chiaroscuro* of Miller's photograph, its 'velvety textures',[9] evokes Rembrandt, but so too does the whole set-up of the image, which recalls his *c.*1652 etching, usually titled *A Scholar in His Study* (Fig.2). The figure in question is sometimes identified with the German magician, alchemist and astrologer Johann Faust, and Goethe was to use a copper engraving after it by Johann Heinrich Lips as the frontispiece to the 1790 *Faust* fragment. While the meaning of the radiant disc, pointing hand and mirror has been much debated, my intention in holding it alongside the luminous cloud at which Jennings gazes is primarily to assert the peculiar status of air as the characteristic location of visions or portents whose otherness is registered by their contingency of appearance. This might mean that they contain a truth that transcends the profane world in which they have taken shape; but it might equally mean that they are illusory, spectral and unreal. Thus, St Paul called Satan 'the prince of powers of this air', which was widely held in early modern Europe to be the substance of demonic illusion and dissimulation.[10] Miller's photograph has one foot in this tradition of aerial manifestations, and we are led to wonder what might be gathering or dissipating within the cloud at which the sitter stares – and also if we are looking at someone who discerns a meaning in it that we cannot.

Spirit Photography

Lee Miller and Humphrey Jennings knew one another well. Both had long-standing surrealist affiliations. Miller had moved to Paris in 1929 to work with Man Ray, with whom she collaborated closely until her return to New York in 1932. The artist responded to her departure by adding a photograph of her eye to the swinging armature of his metronomic readymade, *Object to be Destroyed*. He claimed it used to watch him, counting time, while he painted and that, one day, he planned to smash it in front of witnesses.[11] In the end it was stolen by a group of self-proclaimed 'reactionary nihilist intellectuals' from a late Dada exhibition in Paris, and executed by pistol on the banks of the Seine. 'Isn't it wonderful?' Tristan Tzara is reported to have exclaimed.[12] For his part, Jennings – painter, theatre designer, film-maker, and co-initiator of the national-ethnographic Mass Observation project – had co-founded the Surrealist Group in London with the artist and collector Roland Penrose, when the latter returned to England from France in 1936. With Penrose, Herbert Read and others, he was part of the English organising committee (the French included André Breton and Man Ray) of the International Surrealist Exhibition that opened in the New Burlington Galleries in June the same year. The following year, Miller was introduced to Penrose at a surrealist costume ball in Paris. She joined him in London in 1939, and in 1947 they married.

Practices of mediumship were central to the emergence of surrealism, whereby conscious control over actions was disavowed in favour of an automatism animated by the obscure forces of the unconscious. And although André Breton was at pains to distinguish these from the kind of spiritualist mediumship that had developed through the 19th century, reaching heightened points of intensity in the wake of the cataclysms of the American Civil War and World War I, at the same time they could appear to re-enact the spiritualist séance. Notable is the so-called 'period of sleeps', meetings held in Breton's apartment in the early 1920s and in part recounted in his 1922 text 'The Mediums Enter'.[13] It seems that René Crevell, who had previously been initiated in spiritualist gatherings, introduced the group around Breton to the form of the séance, which they sought to re-perform as occasions of self-induced trance. There were varying degrees of success – Robert Desnos, for one, proved particularly adept, with Breton eulogising the seemingly effortless fecundity of the productions that flowed from his 'psychic automatism', which he described in *Nadja* (1928) as assuming an 'absolutely oracular value'.[14] In 1933, three

years before the London exhibition, Breton would publish 'The Automatic Message', in which he reproduced artworks by spiritualist mediums, including a work by the one he considered 'richest of all', the Geneva-based Hélène Smith, active at the end of the 19th century, whose astral voyages across time and space (including to Mars) and glossolalic pronouncements had been the subject of a study by the psychologist Théodore Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars* (1900).[15]

If spiritualist mediumship was conceived as the liminal thing that opened a channel between the living and the dead and allowed some kind of communication between the two, then with the rise of photography it found a sympathetic partner. Tom Gunning has characterised photography's reception in the 19th century as split between two tendencies: on one hand, as providing 'material support for a new positivism'; and on the other, as something uncanny, pervaded by the aroma of the occult.[16] In his novel *Cousin Pons*, Honoré de Balzac had written that the invention of the Daguerreotype had proven that entities are 'incessantly and continuously represented by a picture in the atmosphere, that all existing objects project into it a kind of *spectre* which can be captured and perceived'.[17] Nadar's recollection of Balzac's theory at the outset of his memoir *Quand j'étais photographe* makes clear that the author believed that photography's stripping away of these spectral layers – a kind of transfer of an image-skin from the living being to the photograph – resulted in a diminishment of vitality, a technologically induced atavistic belief in the affective power of the image over its referent.[18]

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On 5 October 1862, during the American Civil War, the Boston engraver William H. Mumler, inaugurated spirit photography, when he took a self-portrait on which, alongside the photographer, dimly appeared the presence of his cousin, 12 years dead. In these images, evanescent figures, allegedly indiscernible to the human eye but registered by the photographic apparatus, mysteriously appeared alongside living people (Fig.3). In a Balzacian echo, Mumler claimed to experience 'a loss of strength in the process' limiting him to 'three or four sittings per day'.[19] With his formally posed (and seemingly oblivious) sitters, Gunning observes that Mumler's work appears to have set 'a basic iconography of spirit photography as an extension of portraiture', while the ethnographer Christine Bergé, locating spirit photography within what she calls 'the eternal problem of the inscription of the invisible', writes: 'The photographer of the spirits, new thaumaturge, captures cloudy forms, semi-materialised limbs, and sometimes very recognisable dead'.[20] Although Mumler credited his medical-clairvoyant wife's 'wonderful *magnetic powers*' with enabling his photographs, in these images, as has often been pointed out, the presence of the human medium has been displaced by the camera upon whose sensitive surface the spirits record their presence.[21] Bergé describes them as acheiropoetic, insofar as the apparatus of image production is lent to a spirit who makes use of it, 'as in the past sleeping painters let angels paint on the canvas the real portraits of saints, of the Virgin, or of Christ'.[22] Indeed, Mumler established his business under the title of 'Spirit Photographic Medium'.[23]

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The physical presence of the human medium would be reasserted and amplified, however, with the emergence of materialisations in séances, which became common from the 1870s (Fig.4).[24] Of these, the most spectacular was the phenomenon of ectoplasm, a substance that emerged from the orifices of the – usually female – medium and that might locally coalesce into recognisable and even physiognomic forms. In the photographic documentation of such events, the medium birthing this uncertain matter – Marina Warner has aptly described it as 'larval' – is often in convulsive posture, leading some to characterise the theatre of

ectoplasm as a ‘violent parable of image production’, in which the medium has now absorbed the prior agency of the camera.[25]

Shift to post-war Paris, 1947, and the appearance in some bookshops of what purported to be a fragment of an obscure publication, the *Encyclopaedia Da Costa*. Issuing from surrealist circles, with the close involvement of Marcel Duchamp, the fascicle (it was apparently Fascicle VII, vol.II of the *Encyclopaedia*) contained an entry on ectoplasm, which began: ‘Part of the human body, external to it, unstable, sometimes soft, occasionally hard, from time to time vaporous, variable in volume, visible only in semi-darkness, making an impression on photographic emulsion, presents to the sense of touch a humid and slippery sensation … without odour or definite taste, in other respects fleeting and transient, whether projected or otherwise, of uncertain temperature, fond of music.’ [26]
The author appears to have been the multi-pseudonymous Jacques Brunius, surrealist, translator, film-maker and resident of London since 1940, where he was director of French programming for BBC radio and closely involved with the London Surrealist Group, in which the Da Costa encyclopaedia may have had its origins.[27] Some have seen ectoplasmic materialisations coming to the fore in surrealist-affiliated works, such the 1937–38 *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* by Leonora Carrington, whom Lee Miller had photographed with Max Ernst and others at Lamb Creek in Cornwall in 1937, and in France in 1939.[28] In the painting, a pale hobbyhorse floats above the artist, its rocker ambiguously appearing to pass through her head. A picture in Carrington’s photo-album shows what is presumably the horse, similarly viewed from the side, with Ernst, face on to the viewer, astride.

Looking once again at Miller’s photograph of Jennings, against this background we might start to see it in terms of a conjoining of the iconography of the spirit photograph with that of the document of ectoplasmic materialisation. The formality of Jennings’s pose seems to re-enact that of the sitters of early spirit photography, adjacent to whom – and usually above, to the right or left, as is the case here – something ‘in the air’ comes vaguely into appearance. This is a construction that invites us to scrutinise the cloud, to seek its resolution into image, as Jennings himself may be doing, although the ambiguity of his engagement with it allows the picture to simultaneously both move toward and retreat from the spirit photograph precedent. At the same time, the cloud might suggest an ectoplasmic effusion that emanates from the body of the medium. And now, examining the image more closely, we can discern a faint trail of smoke registered in the photograph that seems to issue from the sitter’s mouth, even though it appears closed, which consequently raises the possibility of understanding the cloud as a kind of speech, one that has taken material form and may even have oracular value, such as Breton claimed for the automatic productions of his séances. Much of the peculiar charge of this image depends on the way this relation between mouth and cloud – or, better, the thing that establishes a relation between them – is on the threshold of detectability, introducing an equivocality that is redoubled in the serenity of Jennings’s posture (so different from the convulsive aspect of early ectoplasmic materialisations) and that animates a complex triangulation of mediumship flickering between sitter, apparatus and photographer.

Thought Clouds

Gunning characterises the progress of spiritualist manifestations across the 19th and into the 20th centuries as a movement from the auditory (trance speakers, etc.) to the physical,[29] and this brings us to other, certainly not unconnected, forms of airy thing that Miller’s photograph seems to invoke – namely, speech bubbles and thought clouds. In this case,

the cloud would be positioned as some kind of externalisation of Jennings's thinking, and perhaps of its process of taking form.

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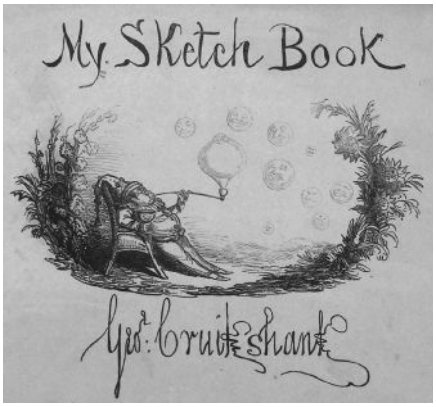
The modern 'seeing' of speech textually has clearer historical antecedents than that of thought. Discussions typically invoke Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican depictions of figures with curling forms adjacent to their mouths or examples of Greek vase painting, such as the *c.*400–390 BCE mixing bowl held in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, in which letters spill across the dark background from the open mouths of figures.[30] There are medieval manuscripts in which spoken words appear freely 'in the air', above or around figures, sometimes tethered to their mouths with a single drawn line. The sequence and movement of such floating speech, such as the sinuous aerial 'itineraries of the spoken words' in the work of the Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden, can hold great significance.[31] In the central panel of his *Altarpiece of the Last Judgement* (*c.*1450), for example, Christ's words of blessing and condemnation respectively rise and fall around his central figure, the curving lines of text, one white, one red, in turn drawing up and casting down. Alternatively, and more commonly, enunciated words might appear on speech scrolls or banderoles ('little banners'), in which the text is disposed across an unfurled – or unfurling – material support, which can convey a highly dynamic sense of the temporal development of speech (Fig.5). These could be identified or associated with depicted figures by the way they are pointed to or grasped, but equally they might be connected directly to the mouths of speakers. They perhaps gain a particular charge in representations of the Annunciation that involve what has been described as a poetics of incarnation, to do with the materialisation of the Word. Writing on the motif of Mary's body as a book, Elina Gertsman has described two blank banderoles associated with annunciating angels, which appear in scenes on the interior of an early-14th-century Shrine Madonna casket, as prompts for worshippers to perform the missing texts during their devotions.[32]

The banishment of textualised speech from painting to an afterlife in popular printed materials is usually understood in relation to an increased 'realism' or coherence of pictorial space, within which it could not be tolerated. If this is true, we encounter a remarkable articulation in Ruskin's fulmination against the scroll, which fully conveys the phobic, disruptive and spectral character it can take on. 'It is a vile thing,' he writes, 'it spoils all that is near its wretched film of an existence.'[33]

While the genealogy of the thought cloud seems less immediately evident, it is likely that it descends from modes of depiction of visionary experience. In the course of his reflections on air, appearance and what he describes as 'the demonic arts', Michael Cole discusses the early modern belief that dreams were of airy substance, suggesting that this 'helps explain a representational convention of the time, that of showing thoughts, dreams and visions taking place within a cloud'.[34] Hubert Damisch makes a similar point, albeit to different ends, when he writes that cloud 'shows how profane space may open onto *another* space, which imbues the former with its truth … [Cloud] is regularly associated with an irruption of *otherness* or of the *sacred*'.[35] Divine realities, he continues, 'can only manifest themselves through rents in screens that conceal them from common awareness'.[36]

Although thought clouds in their familiar comic-book form seem not to have appeared until the early 20th century and to have developed out of notations of dream imagery, there are earlier examples that engage both bubbles and clouds to convey formations of the imagination that look very much like thoughts.[37] Simon Schaffer has shown how during the 19th century the soap bubble could triangulate between 'the domestic and



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commercial system of hygiene and purity', 'the artistic and moral system of innocence and transience', and 'the scientific and demonstrative system of short-range forces and luminous colors'.[38] In 1827 the physician John Paris published his *Philosophy in Sport Made Science in Earnest*, which used children's toys and amusements to illustrate scientific principles. Incorporating drawings by the illustrator and satirist George Cruikshank, this included a chapter on soap bubbles.[39] Some years later, in 1833, on the cover of the first part of his publication *My Sketch Book*, Cruikshank would portray himself as a diminutive jester who, as he reclines, amuses himself by blowing soap bubbles though a pipe (Fig.6).[40] Here the pen, which might be an instrument of work, is transformed into one of play, with the thoughts and daydreams of the artist taking soapy form in humorous physiognomic bubbles that float around their progenitor like a constellation of tiny planets.

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A decade later, Cruikshank would produce a furious translation of this motif, again picturing thought as exhalation, in the frontispiece to his *Table Book* (1845), although here the mood has shifted from distracted amusement to reverie, with the self-presentation of the artist altered accordingly (Fig.7). Compared to the idle play of the earlier image, this is a veritable industrial revolution of the imagination fuelled by the combustion of tobacco in which the pipe plays the role of a kind of machinery. As Cruikshank explained: 'If my brain is ever illuminated by an electric spark, the bowl of my meerschaum is the place in which it is deposited, the pipe acting as conductor, along which flashes of inspiration are conveyed with every whiff, while the smoke curls itself into a variety of objects.'[41] We thus see intimations in the smoke and what the mind makes of them, but Cruikshank also gives us something of the idea that the involutions of the rising smoke are themselves responsive to thought. The image's epigram 'Ex Fumo dare Lucem' ('To give light from smoke') is drawn from Horace's *The Art of Poetry*, but it had also been adopted as the motto of the Liverpool Gas Company. We have a development of the image from the sketchbook cover, one now displaying an almost impossible productivity and profusion, within which metatextual elements proliferate, everything being born out of or giving rise to something else, the whole arrangement itself seemingly the outflow of fumes emitted by some nebulous demons that float at the bottom of the page. At the centre of the image Cruikshank gazes at a blazing fire, while a tiny caricature-like avatar draws his profile. On his arm perches a jester, perhaps an after-image of the earlier figure.

War in the Air

Cruikshank's imagining of thought as nebular exhalation brings us back to the Miller photograph, which appears thematically aligned even as it withdraws the 'content' of the thought that the Cruikshank illustration pushes to such an extreme degree of intensity and legibility. Now returning to the photograph, it seems to me that there is a third reading it invites, namely that the spectre clouding the air in front of Jennings is to do with war. Miller's photograph of Jennings was taken during a 1944 assignment for *Vogue* magazine, although this particular image in fact wasn't used (the contact sheet from the session shows just how distinct it is from the other photographs taken). The context was a lengthy article on the film Jennings was making at the time for the Crown Film Unit, which told the story of 'Lili Marlene', a song, originating in 1920s Hamburg, that had been recorded by the singer Lale Andersen and popularised in radio broadcasts to German troops.[42] Later, with altered words, it was transmitted by the BBC back to Germany.

War at this time was literally in the air. The previous year, in 1943, Jennings had filmed what is usually considered his masterpiece, *Fires Were Started*, his study of the work of fire crew during the London Blitz. Roland Penrose

had himself served as an air-raid warden, and Lee Miller's photographs had motivated the 1941 photobook *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire*, a documentation intended to appeal to a US readership. In this, press agency photographs intermingle with Miller's images, which often present surreal juxtapositions or transformations of objects wrought by violence – a torrent of bricks spilling out of a doorway, a Remington typewriter warped into softened form. An undertow of aesthetic wonder flows through these images of ruination – the bombing of the Burlington Arcade endows it with a 'Piranesian grandeur',[43] the morcellating effects of ordnance transform the baroque into the rococo.[44]

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The *Vogue* article for which Miller photographed Jennings ran in April 1944. In July she flew to Normandy, attached to US Forces. Her ensuing photographs, especially those of the liberation of the camps, are rightly celebrated. I want here, however, to highlight one taken shortly after her arrival – an image of the bombing of the fortress of Saint-Malo by allied aircraft, a photograph of a cloud seen through a window that has been described as '[o]ne of the most singular photographs perhaps ever taken in World War II' (Fig.8).[45] It is an image that, in a certain way, recalls the portrait of Jennings taken months earlier. In 'neo-atmospheric' technological warfare the environment is, Paul Virilio writes, volatilised, conscripted as a weapon: 'The very conditions of the human habitat become the primary objectives of this destruction/destructuration … natural landscape is replaced by a more original one in which everything is volatile, indeed, flammable.'[46] The air becomes thick, mineralised, unendurable, heavy with particulates animated by explosive and incendiary forces – in short, the material ambience recorded in Jennings's *Fires Were Started*, conveyed in the terrestrial convulsion of Miller's Saint-Malo image, and contemplated in analogous form in the portrait.

This brings us back to Jennings's *Pandaemonium*, the book with which we began and which is fronted by the Miller photograph. Although published only in 1985, this was a project concerning the emergence of industrialisation in Britain, and thus its world-historical emergence, which Jennings worked on from around 1938 until his death in 1950. It brings together extracts of writing by contemporary observers with the aim of assembling what Jennings described as 'the imaginative history of the Industrial Revolution'. He called these fragments 'images' chosen for their illuminative quality – 'moments at which the situation of humanity is clear', he wrote, 'even for the flash time of the photographer or the lightning'.[47] And consequently he thought of the whole book as a kind of film, each image/extract gaining its consequence through its positional relation with others.

The book opens with the passage from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, written around 1660, when the demons cast out of heaven construct their palace, called Pandaemonium – the 'Palace of all the Devils'. Led by the devil Mammon – 'least erected Spirit that fell' – the episode reads as an allegory of the birth of industrial capitalism. The earth is opened up by mining, ore is extracted from it and smelted. Milton gives a panoramic view of the devils' foundry, whose fires are drawn from Hell's burning lake:

> Nigh on the Plain in many cells prepar'd,
> That underneath had veins of liquid fire
> Sluc'd from the Lake, a second multitude
> With wondrous Art founded the massie Ore,
> Severing each kinde, and scum'd the Bullion dross

When it comes to the erection of the edifice, it is curiously airy, and sounds almost inflated rather than tectonically built, piece upon piece. The purified

metal is poured into moulds out of which it rises and grows. Milton likens it to the way that air – or, as he says, breath – rises within the tiered column-like pipes of organs:

> As in an Organ from one blast of wind
> To many a row of Pipes the sound-board breaths.
> Anon out of the earth a Fabrick huge
> Rose like an Exhalation …[48]

'Like an exhalation' – and also, in Jennings's thought-world, with his idea of text-as-image, a photograph of an exhalation. The motif of a technology (Milton's 'wondrous Art') that prises open the earth and gives issue to it as mineralised breath sits in a continuum with the industrialised warfare that enveloped photographer and sitter, together with much of the planet, at the time the image was taken. Milton's exhalatory idea was not entirely new – it had a long classical lineage. In his *Meteorology*, Aristotle had described how the air is formed by the combination of two earthly exhalations, one moist and arising from the surface of water and the other hot and dry and emitted from the surface of the land. And yet Milton's is of a new kind, one that is to do with geological depths rather than surfaces, and is anthropogenic, although Mammon-directed:

> Men also, and by his suggestion taught,
> Ransack'd the Center …

This is the breath we have come to describe through the word 'anthropocene'.

1 Malcolm Rogers, *Camera Portraits: Photographs from the National Portrait Gallery, 1839–1989* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1989), 241; *National Portrait Gallery: 100 Photographs* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2018), 161; https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw07541/Humphrey-Jennings?LinkID=mp05452&search=sas&sText=humphrey+jennings&role=sit&rNo=0 [Accessed 1 August 2022].

2 Louis Marin, 'Figures of Reception', in *On Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 320–36.

3 Gernot Böhme, 'Atmosphere, a Basic Concept of a New Aesthetic', in A.-Chr, Engels-Schwarzpaul, ed. and trans., *Atmospheric Architectures: the Aesthetics of Felt Places* (London, etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 13–35 (13–14).

4 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 16.

5 '… the empty characterless envelope of its presence'; Böhme, *op.cit*., 17.

6 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (Second Version), in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–38* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press, 2002), 102–33 (104–105).

7 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 275.

8 Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Farnham, UK, and Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2014), 6.

9 Rogers, *op.cit*., 240.

10 Commenting on Francesco Cattani da Diacceto's *On the Art of Magic's Superstition* (1567), Michael Cole comments: 'The idea that demons *condensed* … was consistent with [the early moderns'] understanding of the other spiritual beings that visited their worlds – angels – which materialized out of air and into paintings in churches all around them'. Michael Cole, 'The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium', *The Art Bulletin*, vol.84, no.4, Dec (2002), 621–40 (623).

11 Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (London: Penguin, 2012), 389.

12 'Battle of the Nihilists', *TIME Magazine* 69 (14), 8 April (1957), 77.

13 Katharine Conley, 'The Surrealist Collection: Ghosts in the Laboratory', in David Hopkins (ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (Chichester, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 304–18.

14 André Breton, *Nadja* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), 32. Claudie Massicotte, 'Spiritual Surrealists: Séances, Automatism, and the Creative Unconscious', in Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani (eds), *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 23–38 (30).

15 On Smith see Massicotte, *op. cit*., and Daniel Rosenberg, 'Speaking Martian: Hélène Smith's Extraterrestrial Séances', *Cabinet* 1, Winter (2000–2001). https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/1/rosenberg.php [Accessed 1 August 2022].

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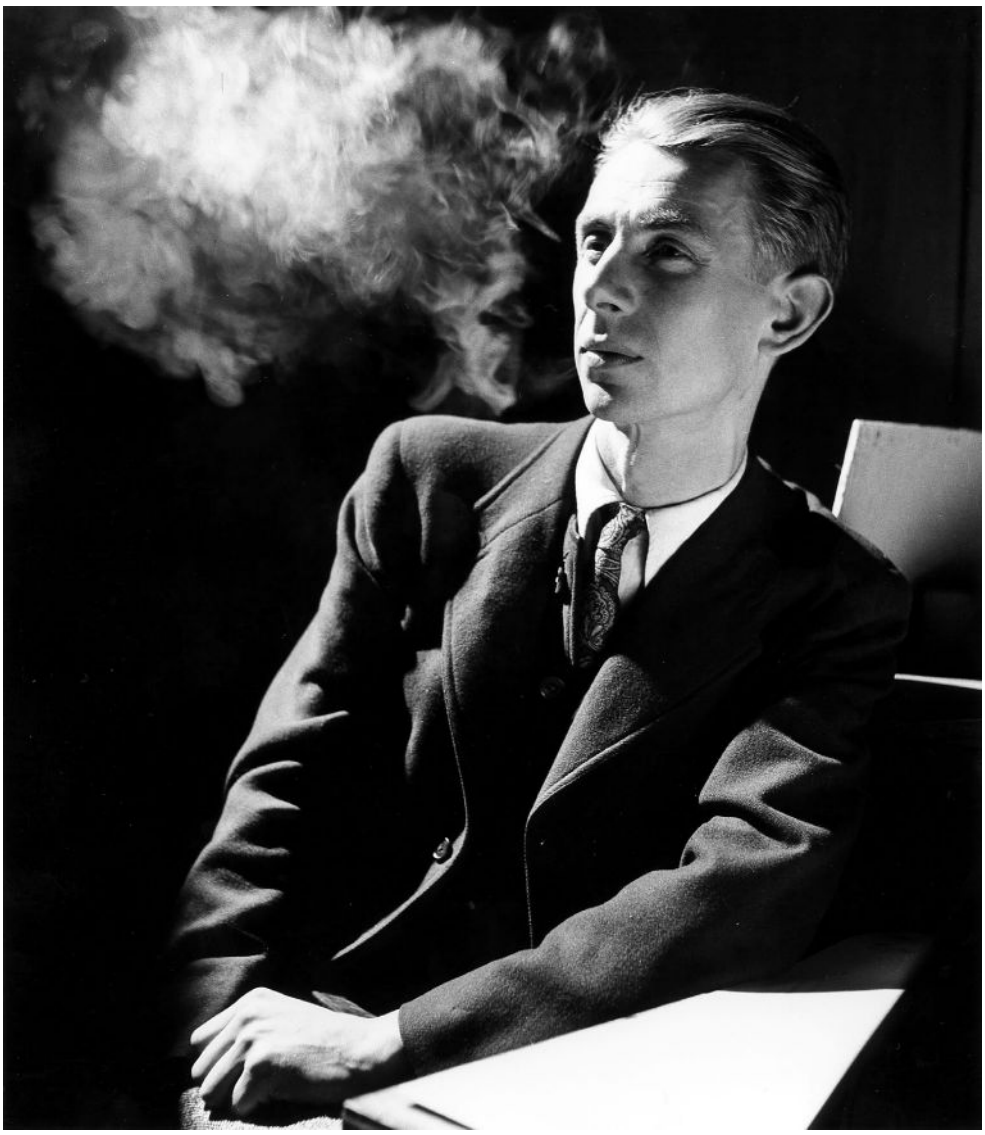
1—

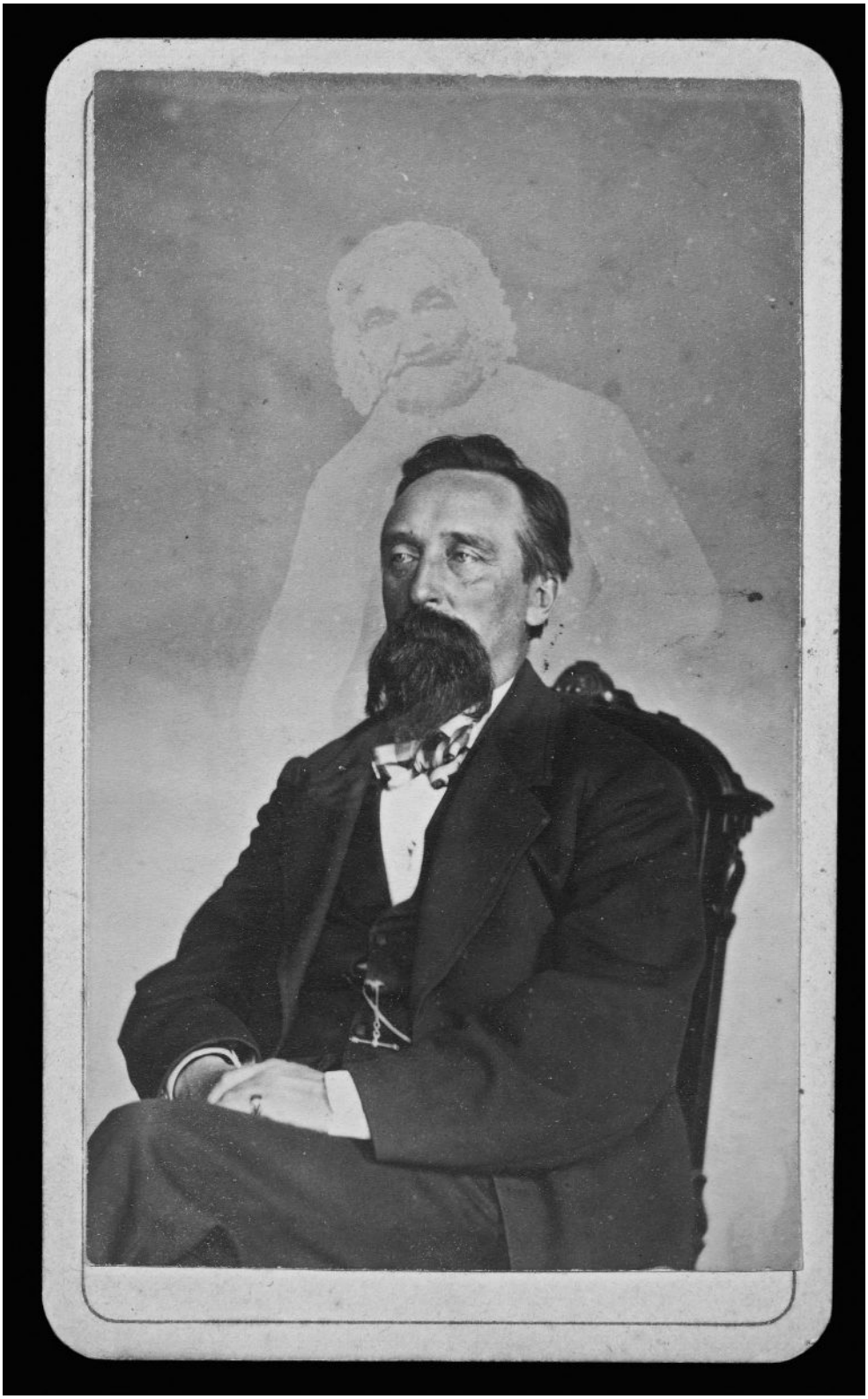


Lee Miller, *Humphrey Jennings* (1944). © Lee Miller Archives, England 2025. All rights reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

2—

Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Scholar in His Study ('Faust')*, *c.*1652. Etching, drypoint and burin, fifth of seven states, 21.7cm x 16.7cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Acc.17.37.197

3—



William H.. Mumler, *John J. Glover* (1862–1875). Albumen silver print, 9.5cm x 5.7cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. No.84.XD.760.1.6

4—

Oral ectoplasmic materialisation by the Polish medium Stanislava P., 1 July 1913. Flashlight photograph by Baron von Schrenck Notzing, in *Phenomena of Materialisation: a Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumistic Teleplastics* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd, and New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1923)

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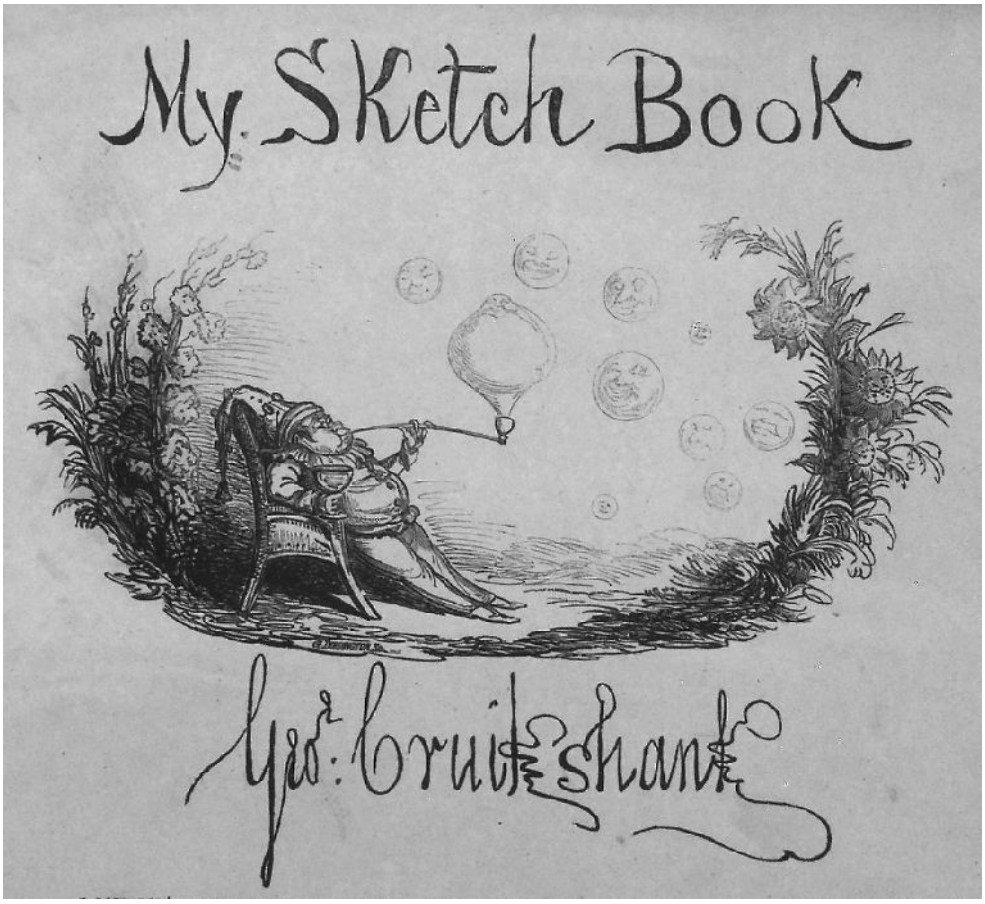
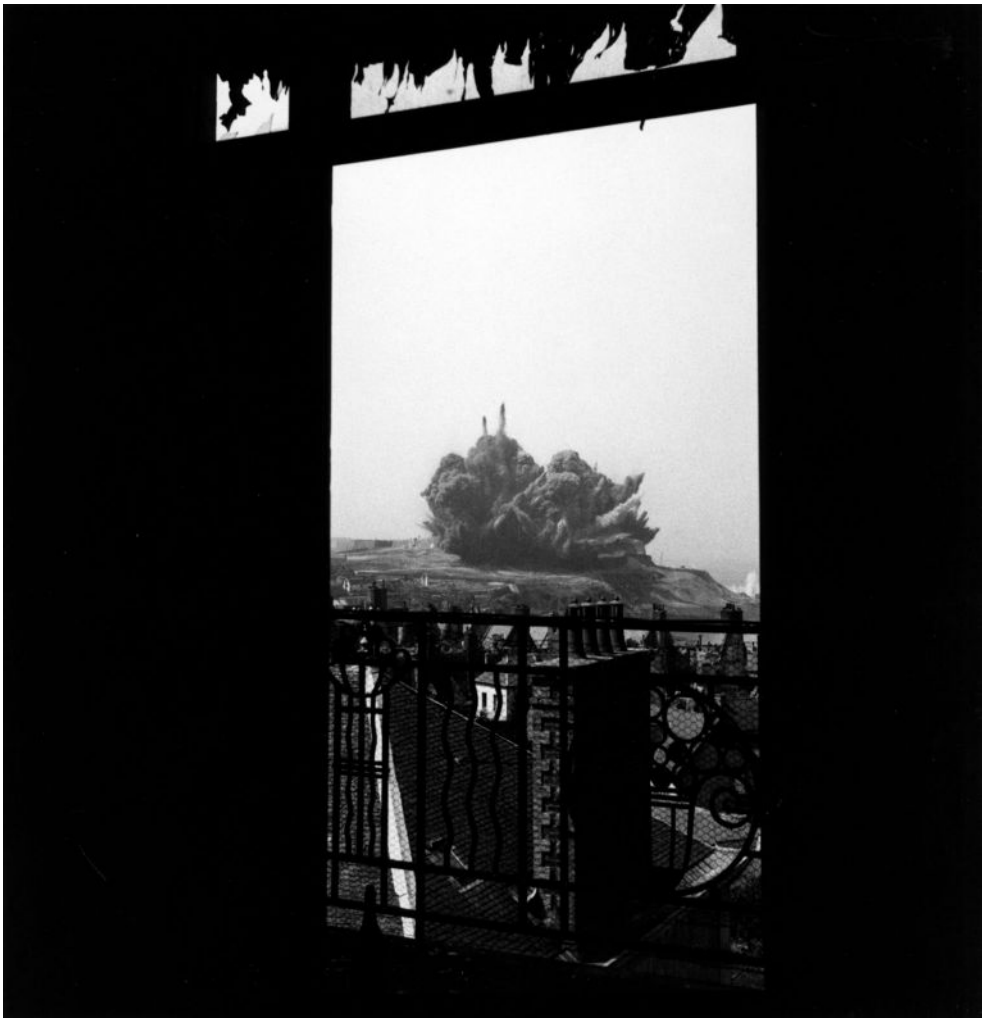
Hans Springinklee, *Maximilian Presented by his Patron Saints to the Almighty* (1519). Woodcut, 54.3cm x 38.7cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Acc.22.78.1



George Cruikshank, *My Sketch Book*, Volume I (London: Charles Tilt, 1833–36)

George Cruikshank, *The Triumph of Cupid: A Reverie*, frontispiece to *George Cruikshank's Table Book* (London: Punch Office, 1845)

8—



Lee Miller, *Fall of the Citadel, Aerial bombardment, Saint-Malo* (1944). © Lee Miller Archives, England 2025. All rights reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk