June 1989

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 25, no.2, June 1989, p.92-105

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The Romance of Platonic Forms: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams

by DAVID P. PEELER

EDWARD WESTON (1886–1958) and Ansel Adams (1902–1984) were two of the more influential American photographers of the twentieth century. These California artists launched their mature work during the years between the two world wars, and over the course of their lives became good friends who shared much the same esthetic outlook. These men made lasting contributions to fine art photography and earned their reputations as masters of American modernism. Following the lead of pioneers like Paul Strand, they advanced the genre of straight photography, a refreshing, modern antidote to the romantic pictorialism that prevailed in American photography up through the eve of World War I.

Pictorialists had been inclined towards fuzzy photographs, vehicles in which clarity was frequently sacrificed for the artist's moral lesson or uplifting allegory. But Weston and Adams produced clear, sharp images that seemed to stress the object before the lens rather than some idea that was on the photographer's mind. Images like Weston's "Shells" (1927) or Adams's "Picket Fence" (Sierra Nevada, California, c. 1936) are vivid departures from pictorialism, for rather than leading the mind into some tale or story, they invite the eye to rest, asking us to pause and examine the formal qualities of seemingly humble objects. Yet for all their dramatic visual contributions, Weston and Adams were neither as new nor as anti-romantic as they seemed. The thinking that lay behind their mature images was part of an intellectual tradition that included Romanticism, and for all the loving attention that they devoted to the world's objects, Weston and Adams still believed that a good photograph arose as much from within the artist's mind as from the external object that he chose to portray.

Weston and Adams were photographers, not philosophers. But they had their metaphysical moments, and both engaged in some heady speculation about the world they photographed. They believed that reality had two distinct dimensions, one that was merely physical and perceived by the senses, and a higher, transcendental one that the mind alone understood. This was hardly an original position, for Weston and Adams drew heavily from others who had traveled this road before them, notably those nineteenth-century New England visionaries who came to be known...
as the Transcendentalists. Weston, for example, kept a collection of quotations from those thinkers upon whom he relied, and Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson occupied a prominent place in this grab bag of notes that had been copied onto Triscuit box tops and other odd scraps of paper. Similarly, Adams proudly numbered Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and George Perkins Marsh as among his "intellectual progenitors."

Like those New England Romantics, Weston and Adams subscribed to something that was more of a general attitude rather than a carefully developed philosophy. They leaned towards pantheism and mysticism, had a high regard for nature, and drew upon a long, if loose, heritage of idealism in Western thought. In general, idealists have given a preeminent position to mind (or soul, or spirit) and rejected any materialistic claims that matter alone is real. Nineteenth-century Romanticism was an outgrowth of idealism in both Europe and the United States, and Weston’s quotation collection was peppered with lines from European Romantics like Blake and Goethe, as well as Americans like Emerson. Poets such as these had in turn drawn upon (and frequently mangled) a more philosophical idealism that stretched through Kant in the eighteenth century all the way back to the Greeks and Plato. Though later idealists and Romantics seldom shared Plato’s dismissal of art, they often accepted his ontological and perceptual hierarchy. In that scheme, any object has two natures, a transcendental one that contains its truest qualities and a lesser physical aspect that only imperfectly embodies those qualities. The analysis minimizes the senses, for they merely perceive the imperfect qualities, but the mind is awesomely empowered, for it alone experiences the highest realities.

Thinking of this sort lay at the very heart of Weston’s and Adams’s mature photography. Plato had been among those whom Adams listed as his intellectual forebears, and like Plato, he and Weston believed that humans are often similar to prisoners in a shadowy cave; most are limited to the dim and partial perception possible through the senses and unable to perceive the higher world of ideas. Plato used the label "forms" for those ideas, but Weston and Adams preferred a slightly more accessible term, “essences,” for their highest realities. These essences were the ultimate components of any given thing, the very basics from which it arose, and unlike the passing, transitory aspects of life, these essences were an elemental stuff which was well worth pursuing. Weston vowed

1. Edward Weston’s collection of quotations. Edward Weston Archive, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona (CCP). There are at least three selections from Emerson. One reads simply “Genius borrows nobly,” and another begins “So far as man thinks, he is free...”

2. Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, *This is the American Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1960), p. xvi.

that he for one was determined "to know things in their very essence." Adams also wanted to perceive things at such a primary level, and since Adams always envisioned himself as something of a mountain man, it was not just essences but "wild essences" that he pursued.

But wild or otherwise, Weston and Adams were confident that they were searching for much the same thing. They were equally certain that they were among the rare few who were blessed with the gift of essential vision. Since, as Weston noted, "the language of form cannot be read except by those with the key," the great masses of people remained fundamentally ignorant of life's highest qualities. Certainly everyone encounters these wonderful, essential shapes during the normal course of daily life, but most people perceive little more than "meaningless hieroglyphs" because they have limited powers of vision. Weston believed ordinary folks had a similarly limited sense of beauty which prohibited them from seeing the transcendent glory of such unconventional subjects as his rocks, smokestacks, or plumbing fixtures. But there were things more important than the conventionally pretty, and he was confident that real artists knew what they were. Adams likewise thought that there was "only a handful of souls" who understood or even cared about the work of this esthetic elite. Yet in that tiny audience were figures like Alfred Stieglitz, people of such consequence in the art world that their stature far outweighed their numbers.

But Weston and Adams believed that they and their discerning audience utilized photography to see beyond the hieroglyphs of life and into the essences beyond them. "It is that very quality," Weston wrote, "that makes the camera expressly fitted for examining deeply into the meaning of things." The hobbyist making snapshots hardly probed at all, but "the discriminating photographer" worked with the camera's "penetrating vision," training it upon first one physical thing and then another, eventually presenting "his subject—whatever it may be—in terms of its basic reality." Thus Weston's skilled photographer had more than the ability to make a simple likeness of his subject; unique among humans, a visionary equipped with a special machine, he could photograph a palm trunk (Edward Weston, "Palma," [Cuernavaca, 1924]) and "reveal the essence of what lies before his lens." Adams's ideal photographer was no less talented. As he put it, there was a common, superficial perception, and then there was the truly discerning perception possible through good photography. Accordingly, "to photograph well is to see beneath the sur-

5. Ansel Adams to Nancy and Beaumont Newhall, Fall 1942, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Archive, CCP.
7. Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz, October 23, 1933, Ansel Adams Archive, CCP.
Ansel Adams, “Thundercloud, North Palisade, King's Canyon National Park, California,” 1933, copyright © by the Trustees of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All rights reserved.
faces,” and in a well-executed photograph like his own “Thundercloud” (Lake Tahoe, California, 1937), one found those “qualities of nature and humanity which are living or latent in all things.”

Thus a definite hierarchy permeated their thinking. Their cosmos was divided into ordinary reality as well as what Adams deemed “super-reality,” and with their photography they were unequalled at reaching the realm of essences. Yet for Weston, even essences were sometimes not enough, and he occasionally escalated his superlatives to say that he was looking for quintessences. There is no evidence that Weston knew anything about this word’s roots, but he nonetheless employed it in a manner consistent with its original usage. Medieval thinkers had believed that the four elements or essences (earth, air, fire, and water) were augmented by a fifth and even more ethereal essence, the quintessence (quint-essence). Likewise Weston believed that not only were there those rarefied essences to be found in the world but that there was also something even higher to which he could aspire—the quintessence. As early as 1924 he used the expression when he praised photography as the best art form “for rendering the very substance and quintessence” of things. By the end of the 1920s, Weston felt justified in claiming this distinction not only for photography in general but also for his work in particular and boldly announced that his images now “registered the quintessential quality of the object in front of my lens.”

As words like “elements” and “essences” suggest, there was a metaphor of chemistry lurking within this thinking. Though Weston and Adams never explicitly said so, they clearly thought of photography as something akin to distilling or refining things in order to purify them. It was almost as though they envisioned their cameras as retorts, devices with which the mind isolated and then collected the noblest, most ethereal aspects of the world’s objects. Among the words that Adams used to describe his photographs, “extract” was a favorite, for it nicely conveyed his belief that his photos presented nature not in some diluted condition but in a pure and more intense state. Thus one of his Yosemite photographs, “Monolith, The Face of Half Dome” (Yosemite National Park, 1927), was more than a graphic rendition of a mountain; it was also something

9. Ansel Adams, Statement for Portfolio One (1948), manuscript in Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Archive, CCP.
Ansel Adams, "Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California," 1927, copyright © by the Trustees of the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust. All rights reserved.
in which the photographer rendered the mountain down to its essences. This was of course an extraordinarily empowering notion, for it conferred upon the photographer the ability to control and reduce even the largest of subjects. Weston felt much the same way and referred to his photography as a process of “sublimation.” Notoriously opposed to psychological interpretations of his work, he was not referring to the socially acceptable expression of one’s impulses. Instead, by “sublimation” Weston meant something much closer to the heating and condensing process that yields sublimated sulfur or sublimated lime. Thus he called his photography a process of “sublimating things seen into things known,” taking objects that were ordinarily experienced through the senses and then by means of his art crystallizing them into things experienced through the mind.14 Things as distant and immense as the Pacific coast were to become immediate and intimate when transformed into images such as “Coast View” (Point Lobos, 1938).

This photography was a monumental effort, Weston thought, and he was sure that it deserved all the credit given to any of the creative arts. But he shied away from calling his photographs “creations,” for he believed he had brought nothing into the world. In 1932 he went to considerable lengths to clarify his ideas in a letter to Adams. Weston said that his starting close-ups of bell peppers, such as “Pepper No. 30” (1930), had led some people to accuse him “of making a pepper something it is not.” Certainly the kind of close focusing that Weston used in such images can so isolate a thing from its ordinary context that it resembles any number of other objects. Yet Weston insisted he had never tried to make his pepper look like something else, such as a human torso. Yes, he allowed that he had inadvertently led some people to believe that this was his intention, for at times he had said that his goal was “to make a pepper more than a pepper.” Now, in writing Adams, he tried to be more careful in his phrasing and insisted that he did not mean to make an image that was different from a pepper, but instead to serve up “a pepper plus,—seeing it more definitely than does the casual observer.” For photography to achieve its highest potential, he insisted, it must have a component that surpasses the world of the senses, which is to say it “must be ‘seeing’ plus.”15 Weston did not want us to confuse “Pepper No. 30” with an actual pepper, or to mistake a portrait for a person, because we would then succumb to illusionism and remain stuck in Plato’s cave. Instead, he and Adams hoped we would follow their vision when we looked at a photograph, seeing through the image to the fundamental, highest qualities of pepper or person.16

15 Edward Weston to Ansel Adams, January 28, 1932, Ansel Adams Archive, CCP.
16 Here I part company with A. D. Coleman, who believes that Weston intended for his photographs to be identical with physical objects from the natural world. See A. D. Coleman, Light Readings: A
Now in these descriptions, Weston's and Adams's photography takes on some bizarre traits. With all the penetrating and peering, for instance, essential photography resembles something out of science fiction, almost as though the photographer possessed Superman's fabled X-ray vision. Moreover, there is a strong hint of prurience in their insistence upon peering behind reality's draperies, especially when Weston enthusiastically discussed the "naked beauty" of his subjects.\(^{17}\) In their voiced intentions, however, Weston and Adams said they were after clarity more than titilation. Since the camera possesses an "innate honesty," they argued that by using it well one could reveal "the actor behind the make-up," and thereby expose "the contrived, the trivial, the artificial, for what they really are."\(^{18}\) Accordingly, they described themselves as muckrakers of a sort, taking on dirty jobs not for their own perverse purposes but instead to enlighten the rest of us.

Such protestations had a hollow ring, though, and Weston and Adams often seemed as interested in power as in enlightenment. This was certainly the case when they moved beyond talk of exposing or distilling essences and arrived at a strangely predatory sense of possessing them. In a discussion of portraiture, for instance, Weston held that the photographer's primary purpose was to cast his penetrating eye upon the subject and then "transfer the living quality of that individual to his finished print."\(^{19}\) Since presumably any person has only so much "living quality," essential photography in this sense portends an appropriation of the subject's very life. Usually that life was supposed to wind up in their photographs, but at times Weston and Adams suggested that it became a part of the photographer himself in a process resembling ingestion. For example, Adams believed that photography supplied those essential nutrients that are "vitally related to our physical and emotional existence."\(^{20}\) In this way photography became something like a special dietary regime, what Adams called "a sort of elastic appropriation of the essence of things into the essence of yourself."\(^{21}\) Weston likewise believed that this was a process in which the photographer drew his subject's essences into himself, a procedure which he described as a "fusion of an inner and outer reality."\(^{22}\) Hence essential photography was doubly vital. On the one hand it provided the bases of life, stuff that was both essence in the medieval chemist's sense and essential in something like a nutri-
tional sense. On the other hand, photography was an active, vital, and lively pursuit of essentials from the natural world. Watching, seeing, looking—these often seem such quiescent occupations. But for Weston and Adams, these were always active, never passive, ventures. The photographer’s vision hunted in the natural world, melded his essence with its essences, and allowed him to feed his own essential needs.

Essential photography could thus be an exercise in domination and power, with the photograph engaging and commanding the world. But essential photography offered retreat as well as engagement, and perhaps its most potent quality was that it allowed one to think that life’s hubbub and confusion were merely illusory. Adams and Weston believed that the creative photographer’s astute vision allowed him to penetrate through the apparent confusion and disorderliness of the immediate world and escape to the comforting harmonic order that suffused the actual universe. Even when mired in the confusions of one’s own life, it was, as Adams said, “always wonderful to know that the pattern of perfection exists somewhere.”

Significantly, both men came to essential photography when their lives were far from harmonious, when photography offered not only a sense of power but also a stable retreat from turbulence. Weston’s mature vision flowered during the 1920s, after he had fled the turmoil of an unhappy marriage and the seemingly terrible restraints of a Babbitt-ridden America; he fled to Mexico, where he managed to keep himself distanced from the turmoil of the revolution and focused instead upon the formal simplicity that would be the hallmark of his mature images. Adams likewise set out during troubled times. Having wavered for some years in his choice of career, it was during the turmoil of the 1930s that he decided his life’s calling would be to photograph the natural scene he had grown to adore. Indeed, natural objects were fitting subjects for the photographic obsessions that he and Weston shared. Both men wanted to avoid seemingly ephemeral subjects like political struggle, and things like rocks and mountains are arguably some of the more enduring of earth’s physical objects. Adams cherished the “qualities of timeless, yet intimate grandeur” that seemed such a part of places like the Sierra, and he recommended them to his readers. Certainly, too, amidst the “whirl and social vortices” of the Great Depression or the Mexican Revolution, there was a compelling quality in nature, for when whole economic and social systems were faltering, it was reassuring to remember, Adams told Weston, that “a rock seems to last some little time!”

25. Ansel Adams, manuscript review of Merle Armitage’s The Art of Edward Weston. The published review (Creative Art, May 1933) is edited from this version. Ansel Adams Archive, CCP. Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, [postmarked] August 6, 1935, Ansel Adams Archive, CCP.
But during such confusing periods, Weston and Adams sought something even more enduring than granite, more timeless than a mountain. Ideas were what they turned to. In the strictest physical sense, ideas are eternal and indestructible. Unlike a rock, or a table, or any other such tangible object, a thought cannot be physically crushed or burned. Writing in the days before many Americans realized the full horror of fascism, and possessing exceptional political naivete, Adams and Weston believed that ideas could outlast even mountains. Weston managed the clearer expression of this belief, and tucked away in his quotation collection was a short note summarizing it. The unattributed lines—perhaps Weston’s own—begin with a familiar dualism: “an object is [a] physical fact[,] an idea is a metaphysical fact.” The note then continues, proclaiming that “an object can be destroyed [but] an idea cannot, except by negation.”

Here was idealism’s ancient notion that ideas are eternal while their physical counterparts are simply evanescent. Weston and Adams slipped quickly over the issue of negation (that an opposing idea can effectively destroy another) and were never too troubled by the fact that brutal suppression—the killing of thinkers—can also kill thought. Instead, they stressed the durability of ideas and that their essential photographs were similarly lasting. In this way they proposed something of a solution to the age-old problem of corruption by moth or rust. By revealing the higher, spiritual nature of things, Weston believed, the photographer moved beyond “the casual noting of transitory or superficial phase” of life and into a lasting dimension.

In 1935 Adams published an article in which he tried to demonstrate yet another side to photography’s timelessness. With a ringing phrase, he told his audience that “photography makes the moment enduring and eloquent.” “Eloquent” here flows naturally from the rest of essential photography, for any image of the higher forms could not help but be vivid, forceful, and persuasive. But the startling aspect of the phrase is Adams’s coupling of “moment” and “enduring,” a seemingly impossible combination of opposites—the instant and the eternal. Adams’s choice of words tells us a good deal about the hopes that he and Weston held for photography. They believed that the photographer not only perceived enduring essences but that he also produced durable images of those changeless things. Photography thus had awesome powers of arrest, the ability to take tiny slices out of the everlasting arena and bring them before us in this transitory one. Halted and held, all the textures, shapes, and shades came before the viewer in what Weston called an “unalterably

26. Edward Weston, his collection of quotations, Edward Weston Archive, CCP.
fixed" form, the ever-available image always conveying the eternal verities. Indeed, there is a sort of timeless, hovering quality in images such as Weston's rock from "Point Lobos" (1930) or in Adams's "Dawn, Mount Whitney" (California, 1932). With such images, they believed, photography became far superior to human vision, for the eye is forever burdened by associations, viewing a sliced onion, for instance, with tears, while the photograph appreciates its pure form. Moreover, the eye always sees things in motion, encountering them somewhere on their pathway from origin to demise. But Weston and Adams hoped for images that were never so transitory, images removed from both association and context. The organic human eye cannot help but see things within time, but the camera's peculiar images were beyond time.

Weston and Adams hoped to do still more with their photography. They wanted to portray the eternal dimensions of the world's objects and also to demonstrate that there were universal, shared connections between those various objects. At any given moment all things were joined not by some shared political or cultural context but by a seamless web of shared, essential forms.

Adams saw these connections most often in the mountains. Writing after a 1931 Sierra Club field trip, he described a "continuous beauty" that linked all aspects of the world, a beauty that was to be found in the smallest as well as the most monumental of objects. Each twig or tree, pebble or mountain, was to Adams a worthy portion of the larger glorious system, and to underscore his point he drew upon Walt Whitman, who had voiced much the same sense of wonder. In Whitman's words, the world's objects, "one and all, are to me miracles, / The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place." Adams gloried in such miraculous connections, and not too surprisingly the forms he liked best tended to appear repeatedly in his images. For example, he not only had an eye for mountains but also a way of seeing other objects as though they were mountains. "Mount Williamson, Sierra Nevada" (from Manzanar, California, 1944), contains several of his favorite devices, such as the use of form-echoing clouds and a foreground that draws one towards the mountain. Like many mountains in his other photos, Mount Williamson here has a characteristic pyramidal shape. He rendered a similar pyramid "In Joshua Tree National Monument" (California, 1942), where at first the central rock appears to be another mountain—until the tree in the left foreground establishes the scale. Similarly, when he photographed "Saint Francis Church" (Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico, c. 1929), he created still another pyramid-like image, this one of a church whose irregular shapes

help it to look more mountainous than architectural. Besides monumental bulk, Adams was also drawn to the finer lines that recur in the world, especially to one peculiar meandering line that recedes into the distance. He composed “The Tetons and Snake River” (Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, 1942) so that the river traces such a line as it proceeds from the near edge of the frame and then leads the eye back toward the rear. The same line reemerged not among mountains and water but the sands of Death Valley, where he made “Sand Dunes, Sunrise” (Death Valley National Park, California, 1948). Then, in yet another completely different environment, Adams again found his receding line, this time on the California coast: “Oyster Fence” (Tomales Bay, California, c. 1953).

Weston also managed to see striking similarities when working, for he, too, believed in the interconnectedness of things. That belief was a key component of his 1937 application for a Guggenheim fellowship. Although it took Weston two tries to bring together a satisfactory submission, the final effort summarized much of what he had come to believe during his preceding fifteen years of pursuing essences. With Guggenheim assistance, he now planned to carry that work beyond his studio close-ups and into landscape photography so that he might show “the interdependence, the relativity, of all things,—the universality of basic form.”

This belief in the recurrence of forms even carried over to his filing system. In the logbook where he kept track of his work from the early 1920s up through 1936, Weston chose not to enter his negatives by date or by location. Instead, he placed them under categories: rocks, trees, vegetables, nudes, and the like. The first rock listed in the logbook became rock number one, the second became number two, and so on. Over the years some of these notations, like “Pepper No. 30,” actually became titles, but they had no direct meaning other than this particular negative was filed between those peppers numbered 29 and 31. Yet in another, less obvious way there was meaning to the titles and the system. “Pepper No. 30” was the thirtieth manifestation of something one might call “Universal Pepper Form,” one example of the greater pepper essence, which is in turn a portion of the universal essences. Weston’s subjects were thus stripped of much of their individuality, for their separate peculiarities were minimized by the photographer’s universalizing vision. Perhaps this was most strikingly evident in his nudes—which are cataloged in the same manner as his peppers. With their faces obscured or cropped out of the frame, Weston’s women lose the dignity of their separate identities; each nude becomes yet another number in an endless procession of woman-form.


33. Edward Weston, Negative Log, Edward Weston Archive, CCP.

34. For a discussion of the depersonalization in Weston’s nudes, see Viki Goldberg, “Go Weston, Young Man,” American Photographer, 20 (January 1988), 40-42.
This emphasis upon universality emerges not just in Weston's female nudes but in his other images as well. Viewed together, the veins of his "Cabbage Leaf" (1931), the gills of his "Toadstool" (1931), and the rills in his "Dunes, Oceano" (1936) suggest nature has a predisposition towards a certain delicate lattice-like pattern that provides a delightful playground for the eye. Most of Weston's nudes were of women, but there were a few of his sons. Made in 1925, "Nude, Neil" is a striking study that focuses upon the navel and then traces the body's lines as they seem to emanate from it. Even more striking is the way that "Lake Tenaya" (1937) also manages to hold the eye upon a central dark spot from which another set of lines seems to radiate.

Weston and Adams took joy from such similarities. These visual echoes were manifestations of the continuities in the transcendent and timeless world they sought, a place of comforting perfections untroubled by the insistent demands of the interwar years. Yet if this essential vision offered the artist an escape, it also granted him enormous power. Believing themselves uniquely privileged in the perception of life's fundamental qualities, Weston and Adams hoped to wrest those qualities from their photographic subjects and then convey the distilled essences into their photographs. In their even more domineering moments, Weston and Adams spoke of the photographer not only as one who pirates away the living qualities of his subjects but also as one who appropriates those life essences into his own self.

Devised by artists living in a world of vast forces that were beyond their control, essential photography thus attempted to cast the photographer as a vastly empowered individual. As they operated within an idealistic tradition, Weston and Adams accentuated the power of the artist's mind while minimizing the autonomy of those subjects upon which that mind chose to focus. Perhaps this privilege and power can serve as a reminder of the darker dimensions of the Romanticism within which Weston and Adams worked. Certainly the Emersonian fascination with nature and glorification of inconsistency hardly seems dangerous. But Romanticism also has a notable inclination to celebrate will, or force, or power. Too often that celebration proceeds without sufficient regard for those things or individuals upon whom the will, or the force, or the power come to bear.

35. Emerson said that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, and Weston and Adams were likewise disinclined to worry much about self-contradiction. In material that I will develop for another forum, I will discuss their anti-intellectualism (which worked against their empowerment of the mind) and their respect for physical objects (which was at odds with the diminution of those very same objects).