As a gentleman of science, Talbot was a typical, if distinguished, example of his time. He had been to Trinity College, Cambridge, was a liberal Anglican in religion, and a Whig in politics. He had been a member of the Cambridge Philosophical Society, of the Philological Society, of the Royal Astronomical Society, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of London. He was, therefore, a fully paid-up member of the scientific clerisy, but in two respects he seems to have been less than typical: firstly, although he originally undertook natural philosophy as a pure avocation, he took a keen interest in a financial return on his inventions; and secondly, he made photographs, some of which (the ones we admire most today) produced a metaphorical rather than purely descriptive account of reality. Scientific knowledge and antiquarian scholarship were complemented by something of a more metaphysical nature, the imagery of art. He was probably one of the most visually literate members of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Talbot's most important connection with the fine arts came through his uncle, William Fox-Strangways, who guided him on a collecting tour of the Low Countries and Italy in the 1820s, and made donations of early Italian paintings to the Ashmolean Museum and Christ Church Picture Gallery in Oxford. Remodelling the south gallery at Lacock Abbey in 1827, Talbot would have made it into a picture gallery if he could have afforded it.

The invention of photography came at the end of a long search for a method for printing directly from nature. Talbot's book *The Pencil of Nature*, illustrated with salted-

paper prints, took its place in the history of the illustrated book with Charles Joseph Hullmandel's *The Art of Drawing on Stone* (1824). The word photography was coined by analogy with lithography, and Talbot's motivation towards a chemical kind of nature printing was much less radical than has been supposed. He did not expect to revolutionize ways of seeing so much as to satisfy contemporary taste in antiquarian and picturesque subjects by a more efficient process. The Scotsman David Octavius Hill, in his *Sketches of Scenery in Perthshire* (1821), had been one of the first artists in Britain to use lithography; with Talbot's process and help from the young Robert Adamson, he then turned to photography.

In the Georgian Gothic hall at Lacock Abbey there is a terracotta statuette in a niche of Diogenes with his lantern. Of all the little statues there Talbot chose to photograph this one as one of four images made in his new Calotype process on 29 September 1840 (fig. 1). The Stoic philosopher was emblematic to him of the mystical rather than sceptical chemist who delighted in revealing what lay hidden in darkness. Talbot admitted it was not easy, either for the chemist or the philologist: 'Like one who follows Ariadne's clue through a tortuous labyrinth, he may himself be convinced of its safe guidance, but unable to convince others – who have taken a different path'.[1] The figure of Diogenes was a cultural hero in the period of the European Enlightenment. Rousseau, who described himself as a 'second Diogenes', was characterized wickedly by Voltaire as 'Diogenes without a Lamp'. By the late eighteenth century Diogenes had become the hero of the French Revolution, with light as a metaphor for all kinds of truth – political, religious, and scientific – symbolized by his magic lantern.[2] His *dark lantern* was more than a mere tool; it was also the emblem of a spiritual search. Similarly, the *camera obscura*, the darkened room from which the camera as instrument is derived, also referred to the *Dunkelkammer* or *chambre à reflexion* of the hermetic tradition: the dark room was a place for reflection on the need for spiritual enlightenment. Just as Sir Humphry Davy as inventor of the miner's safety lamp expressed this idea at the operative level, so Talbot's lantern in *The Open Door* (fig. 2) evoked it speculatively. If the lantern illuminates (even at midday) all that lies in darkness, the bridle of Stoicism checks the passions that threaten pure reason, and the broom sweeps the threshold of the dark chamber clean.[3] It is an emblematic picture in which these

1. Bibl. 114, p. vii.
2. Klaus Herding, 'Diogenes als Bürgerheld', *Boreas* (Münster), vol. 5 (1982), p. 232–54.
3. See Talbot's etymology of *sweep*: 'To *sweep* is related to the Latin *scopa*, a broom'. Bibl. 114, p. 328.

Fig.

Fig. 1. *Diogenes*, salted-paper print, 29 September 1840. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock.

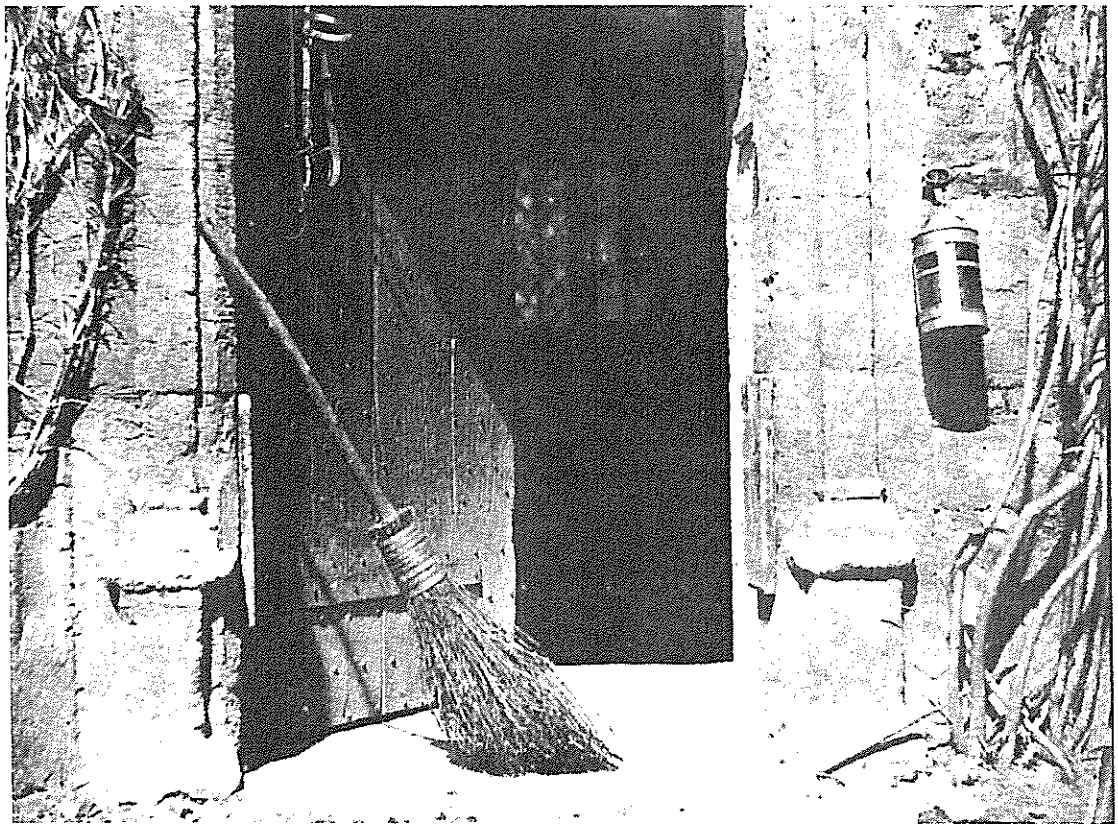

Fig. 2. *The Open Door*, salted-paper print, April 1844. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock.

Fig. 3. 'L. R.', *The Chemist*, oil on board, 1827. Museum of the History of Science, Oxford.

instruments of spiritual and scientific labour provide means for passage from one world into another. The same spirit may be present in a little painted portrait of a chemist (said to be Davy) and his youthful assistant (fig. 3), which features a similar broom in a contemporary version of a Dutch alchemist's workshop.

In the Augsburg edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1758–60), a handbook for painters, the image of Diogenes forms the frontispiece (fig. 4), and in Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618) the Diogenic figure is appropriated by the alchemical tradition, co-opted for spiritual chemistry.[4] The figure of Diogenes provides a clue to Talbot's interest in the pagan foreshadowing of Christianity, and his desire to harmonize the Bible with other sacred texts. At the beginning of a period of technological advance now regarded as largely positivist, in which science and culture had ceased to have any value which was not experimental, the tradition represented by Diogenes as patron of mythographers, poets and artists had been reawakened by the poets Shelley and Byron. The decay of orthodox Christian beliefs under the pressure of deism and what became Darwinism turned the attention towards the idea of a universal man. The philosopher with the lantern, trimming the flame of knowledge and passing the torch of truth to others, became a secular saint. For one short-lived moment, Talbot took part in a Reform parliament but, like Diogenes, soon realized that his intervention in public affairs was less useful to society than his pursuit of

Fig. 4. C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Augsburg, 1758–60.

4. See J. Fabricius, *Alchemy*, rev. edn., Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1989, p. 55.

knowledge. It is true that he had no intention of becoming a wandering beggar-scholar without home or possessions. On the contrary, his drive towards success in applied science suggests that he was very much concerned to stabilize the shaky family fortunes which had kept him out of Lacock Abbey until 1827. But this did not prevent him from aspiring, at least, to the sublime ideal of opening doors on all kinds of knowledge.

An early reviewer of Talbot's announcement of the art of photogenic drawing reminded his readers of the story *Schlemihl* by Adelbert von Chamisso, whom Talbot had met on a visit to Berlin in 1827. He compared 'the spells of our scientific enchanter, Mr Talbot' with Peter Schlemihl's power to sell his own shadow, 'the purchaser of which kneels down in the broad sunshine, detaches the shadow from its owner's heels, folds it up, and puts it in his pocket.'[5] Sir David Brewster, in an early review of photography, cited Lucretius in Creech's translation:

> . . . . my muse declares and sings
> What those are we call images of things,
> Which like thin films from bodies rise in streams,
> Play in the air and dance upon the beams.
> A stream of forms from every surface flows,
> Which may be called the film or shell of those,
> Because they bear the shape, they show the frame
> And figure of the bodies whence they came.[6]

These figures of things are shadows or hieroglyphs detachable from the bodies from which they originate. They are conceptual rather than literal representations of the things to which they refer; that is to say, they have a certain symbolic value. Talbot's life-long interest in philology was similarly determined by the widely held conviction that words represented latent things as well as expressible ideas, and his study of mythology assumed that meaning lay dormant in hieroglyphics and cuneiform script.

The combination of chemical studies with Egyptology and Assyriology was unexceptional in Talbot's circle. Thomas Young (1773–1829), whose Bakerian lecture 'On the Theory of Light and Colours' (1801) was a prime source of photographic experiment for Talbot's succeeding generation, was equally famous as a decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics. As Talbot was to Daguerre in rivalry for priority of the discovery of photography, Young was to Jean-François Champollion in priority arguments over the

5. Bibl. **248**, p. 139.
6. Bibl. **290**, p. 467.

decipherment of the Rosetta Stone. While editor of the *Journals of the Royal Institution* in which Sir Humphrey Davy presented Thomas Wedgwood's account of his photographic experiments, Young also studied Hebrew, Chaldean, and Syriac.

Enthusiasm for things Egyptian was widespread in Talbot's milieu (fig. 5). John Lee of Hartwell House, whose circle included the Reverend J.B. Reade, vicar of Stone and Talbot's challenger on the first use of gallic acid, was a gentleman of science and a collector of Egyptian antiquities, and William Whewell, the mathematician who coined the word scientist, was one of the referees for the translation from the Assyrian of the cuneiform inscription of King Tiglath-Pileser in 1857. According to Sir Wallis Budge, 'passages in Fox Talbot's translation were paraphrastic in character, and though there were many parts in which he agreed with the rendering of Edward Hicks and Rawlinson, there were others that showed he had missed the scribe's meaning.'[7] This Rawlinson was Sir Henry Rawlinson, who deciphered in 1837 the trilingual inscription of Darius on the Rock of Bihistûn, the Assyrian equivalent of the Rosetta Stone.

In his book, *The Antiquity of the Book of Genesis* (1839) Talbot remarked that the more he studied allusions to the

7. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Rise and Progress of Assyriology*, London: Hopkinson, 1925, p. 93.

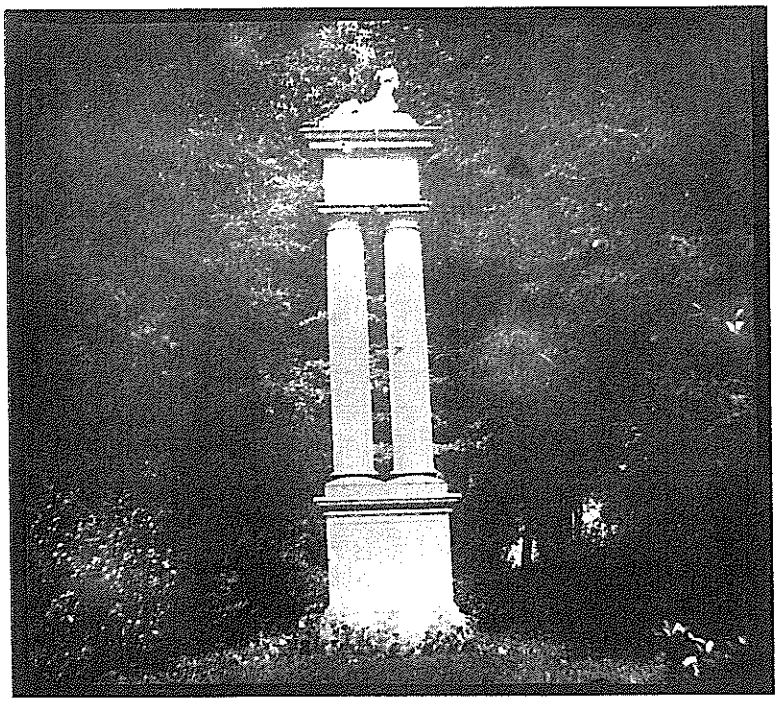

Fig. 5. *Sphinx Garden Ornament*, salted-paper print, 29 August 1840. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

stories of Moses in classical authors the more certain he became that 'Heathens' must have known the Bible:

> and when by a sufficient number of instances the judgment of the reader is satisfied that the Heathens must have possessed copies of the Scriptures in very ancient times – or at any rate extracts from them – then it becomes probable that those allusions to the sacred narratives, which are too faint in themselves to be capable of independent proof, are nevertheless real allusions, and ought not to be rejected.[8]

By this Talbot showed he belonged to the speculative school of eighteenth-century antiquarian authors like Jacob Bryant who were comparative mythologists. To sample his mythological studies in relation to his *English Etymologies*, through to his multitudinous writings on Assyrian cylinders and inscriptions, is to glimpse Talbot's mind at its full creative stretch, and shows him to have been capable of the most imaginative metaphorical thought. Whether the Hermes of Talbot's book by that name, published in 1838–39, was Hermes Logios, the Greek messenger of the gods, or Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian patron of science and the arts, matters less than that both were identified with the Egyptian god Thoth, originator of alchemy and inventor of hieroglyphics. A well-established connection between Hermes and Moses in Christian Hermeticism was consistent with the desire to produce a unified history of mankind in which pagan and biblical traditions were reconciled.

Consider, for example, Talbot's discussion of the representation of the mythical King Arcesilas of Etruria (fig. 6):

> A king is seated on a throne of dignity. Before him is placed an enormous balance. On the beam of the balance *a Cynocephalus* is seated, and over it hovers *an Ibis*. Attendant ministers are busily occupied in weighing in the balance certain objects, which I believe to be emblematic of *good works*.
>
> Over each of these attendants is written his name: but these names, through of Grecian sound, are one and all of them unknown to fame.
>
> Not so, the king himself. Over his head is most distinctly written the name Αρκεσιλας.
>
> We have then here, without any doubt, the monarch – or hero – Arcesilas. And in what character? In what employment? so unlike that of a Hellenic warrior!

8. Bibl. 74, p. 71.

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Fig. 6. G. Micali, *Storia degli Antichi Popoli Italiani*, 2nd edn., Milan, 1836, vol. 2, pl. 97. [illus. not in Talbot's text]

In a chapter in which no one, perhaps, could have expected to meet with him . . . As the Judge of the lower world . . . as the Osiris of Egypt . . . taking account of the good and evil deeds of men.

For, let us only compare this representation with the scene of Judgment, depicted in so many Egyptian MSS. There we have Osiris sitting in state, with an immense balance before him, in which Mercury with the *Ibis head* (Thoth), is weighing the good deeds of men against their evil ones; and *a Cynocephalus*, to complete the resemblance, is usually sitting on the beam. . . .

According to Micali, the objects weighed in the presence of Arcesilas are *sacks of grain*, which are being carried into a *subterranean granary*. I consider that in this *mythos* they are emblematic of good works. Such emblems are found in the corresponding Egyptian scene. For, since it was difficult to represent *good and evil works* by any material image, the Egyptians symbolised them by a *vase* and an *ostrich feather*, placed in the opposite scales: objects which, according to their ideas, bore some mysterious analogy to *good* and *evil*.

The nations of the East, while they employed the metaphor of the balance in the hand of the Deity, in which he weighed

> the merits of mankind (*Thou art weighed in the balance, and art found wanting* – Daniel, v. 27), yet adopted, as was natural, quite other objects as symbolical of vice and virtue. Among these types and images, one will immediately occur to the reader as being extremely apposite to the present question; I mean the parable in which good men and good works are represented by *wheat*: evil men and their works by *tares:* and at the time of harvest the final judgment passes (*Gather together the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn* – Matthew, xiii. 30).[9]

The Society of Biblical Archaeology, to whose journal Talbot contributed so heavily in his later years, appealed not only to philologists but to scientists and theologians of every persuasion. In 1842, Talbot was named as an original member of the Philological Society of London. The close connection between the development of empirical science and the practical construction of an etymological English dictionary in this period shows that Talbot's interests were characteristic of a man of his education, and explains why his publication of *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–46) was immediately followed by his *English Etymologies* (1847). He had been working on it for at least fifteen years under the influence of William Whewell's short-lived journal, *The Philological Museum* (1832–33), the precedent for his own philological researches. *The Philological Museum* presented an important little essay on the great Italian scholar Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), and his influence in England through William Warburton, author of *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (1737–41), with whose researches on hieroglyphics Talbot would have been familiar. Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (new science of mythology) showed that languages were the most reliable sources of the beliefs of a people, and that their comparative study would demonstrate that human history was determined by laws as regular in their operation as those of the rest of nature.

For Talbot, as for Whewell, there was no conflict involved in the simultaneous pursuit of mythological syncretism and of the inductive sciences. Linguistic ethnology was on the agenda of the British Association for the Advancement of Science from its beginnings in 1831, and the year of publication of Talbot's etymologies saw a rash of publications in its annual report, of which the most notable was one on language classification. Its author wrote that this work gave support 'to the hypothesis of the original unity of mankind and of a common original of all

9. Bibl. 47, p. 51–7 (abridged).

languages of the globe',[10] although he was equally sure that individual peoples underwent changes throughout their history which their languages were bound to reflect. Such scholars were concerned to weigh the perennial or original aspects of language against its developing usage. Talbot's conjectural turn of mind also accompanied an otherwise empirical approach to science. One part of his mind functioned in terms of ideal categories and sought metaphysical relief in the metaphorical properties of language, whereas another part worked on the basis of historical evidence and valued hard facts. As a transitional figure between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Talbot came to intellectual maturity before Victoria took the throne, and lived through the period which saw the change of the name of his avocation from *natural philosopher* to *scientist*.

A photographer, like a poet, does not deal in separable abstractions but engages in a process by which knowledge is constantly transformed by interests sustained simultaneously over long periods of time, forming eventually a single organism – the creative identity of the artist. Photographic thinking, like any kind of artistic thinking, is analogical, creating links between things and thoughts. By directing our attention to words we learn to look past present usage to the things in the minds of people who used the words previously. Dormant in words lie latent thoughts brought to light by the etymologist. This is Talbot's definition of *thing*:

> So very abstract a term as a *thing* must have caused some difficulty to our early ancestors to determine what they should call it. They made choice of a term derived from the verb 'to *think*'. Any*thing* is any*think* – whatever it is possible to think of. So in German, ein *ding*, comes from *denken*. This etymology is farther confirmed by the Latin *Res*, a thing – derived from *Reor*, I think.[11]

Rejected by linguists as unscientific but loved by poets and philosophers, etymology is a field notorious for imaginative combination of conjecture and evidence. In his pursuit of etymological truth Talbot was an average contemporary practitioner. He was perfectly happy to substitute consonants and to disregard vowels in his desire to discover a word's latent meaning, believing that words were related to things as indissolubly as shadows were to the objects that cast them, as long as the sun continued to shine. A word or

10. C.C.J. Bunsen, 'Recent Egyptian Reseaches . . . .' *BAAS Report for 1847*, p. 299.
11. Bibl. 114, p. 13.

a thing encoded a perennial meaning at the core of its being as well as served a practical use.

Consider, for instance, Talbot's etymology of *sublime*. He found it amusing that some scholars thought it was derived from *supra limum*, above the mud ('Verily, that is more than can be safely said of the intellect of some persons!'); others suggested *sublimen*, a threshold ('To which it may be replied that no such word appears to exist'):

> Let us proceed more philosophically, even if it should not be successfully, by inquiring first, what is the leading idea contained in the adjective *sublimis*? The leading idea seems to be, *anything which we look up to*, which implies the notion of its being *very high . . . . Su-blemmis, he that looks upward; or, that which we look up to*.[12]

The concept of a step towards enlightenment embodied in *The Open Door* is also present in *The Ladder* (fig. 7). Emblematically, the ladder represents the leading idea of a countenance looking upwards. It appears in the Bible as Jacob's ladder; in alchemy as a ladder of experimental ascent from which it is all too easy to fall; and in freemasonry as symbolic of the progress of the soul. As an emblem it signifies ascent towards the light. In the work of Ramon Lull (1232–*c*.1316), the ladder of ascent refers to the the philosophical rungs by which man climbs eventually to God,[13] as in Baccio Baldini's version (fig. 8), in which the hierophant aspires to join Christ on the Holy Mountain.

In both Talbot's and Baldini's pictures, the figure at the left, occupying the donor's position in the tradition of Christian art, is witness to a scene in which a humbler man at the foot of a ladder is connected with a younger man at the top by both of them grasping it. The youth will never descend this ladder because the pictorial tradition of this mystical motif predetermines movement in terms of ascent. This not an illustration just of farm work; or if it is, the carrying of grain to a granary is, as Talbot said of the picture of King Arcesilas, 'emblematic of good works'. The scene depicts what Talbot called a *mythos*.

Thus far in the history of photography such images have been stripped of their cultural frame of reference, and praised merely for their formal properties. *The Haystack* (fig. 9) is the most notable example to have suffered from this attitude: it is considered usually as simply a piece of abstract art ahead of its time. But, again, it is not an

12. Bibl. 47, p. 33–5.

13. F.A. Yates, 'The Art of Ramon Lull', *Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 17 (1954), pl. 14b.

illustration of agricultural ladder use: no farm worker would use a ladder at that angle. Perhaps it has been deliberately placed to echo Robert Fludd's image of a ladder without any means of support, which has inscribed on its ascending rungs words referring to the senses, imagination, reason, intellect, intelligence and the Word, and which is topped by what is called in hermetic circles a Glory (fig. 10). In Talbot's picture, the ladder leans, as it were, on its own shadow and makes a triangle signifying the penetration of darkness by divine light.[14] However, there is no Glory, only a shaped mass of hay. His etymology of *hay* derives the word from the German *hauen*, to hew: 'Hay means *cut grass*.'[15] The mower is the grim reaper identified by alchemists as Saturn and associated in Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut with the figure of Melancholy (fig. 11). Talbot's knowledge of Dürer certainly seems latent in *Man with a crutch* (fig. 12), a picturesque version of the celebrated *Melencolia*, in which Dürer's winged figure surrounded by the tools of the alchemist's art is replaced with a lame man in a tool-shed corner of the farmyard. Grindstones and ladders are found in both images, and the stone at the foot of the ladder in Talbot's image, while hardly Dürer's polyhedron in all its cut precision, may represent the lapis or philosopher's stone, just as the crossed branches in the foreground in Talbot's image echo the crossed saw-blade and piece of wood in Dürer's.

The carved beauty of the rick in *The Haystack* becomes an analogue for the utility and futility of man's aspirations compared with the promise of the ladder: no matter how well the rickman cuts the hay with his hay-knife, however well he shapes it into steps, all life, like hay itself, is ultimately of this world and perishable. This great tumulus is a pyramid of hay and a charnel-house of grass. But Talbot so naturalized the motif, rendering it with a particularity only possible to photography, that it was almost impossible for contemporary reviewers to see the image as other than as a descriptive study of a haystack. Yet the ladder is as important as the haystack itself: for Lull, it was an attribute of Philosophy; for Dürer, it was one of Melancholy.

If Talbot as scholar-photographer was tugged in one direction by his philological interest in the hermetic tradition, as a photographer-poet he was highly responsive to the melancholic strain in the mid-eighteenth century sensiblility epitomized by Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1753). Gray's friend, Thomas Warton

14. See J. Godwin, *Robert Fludd*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1979, p. 42–3.
15. Bibl. **114**, p. 445.

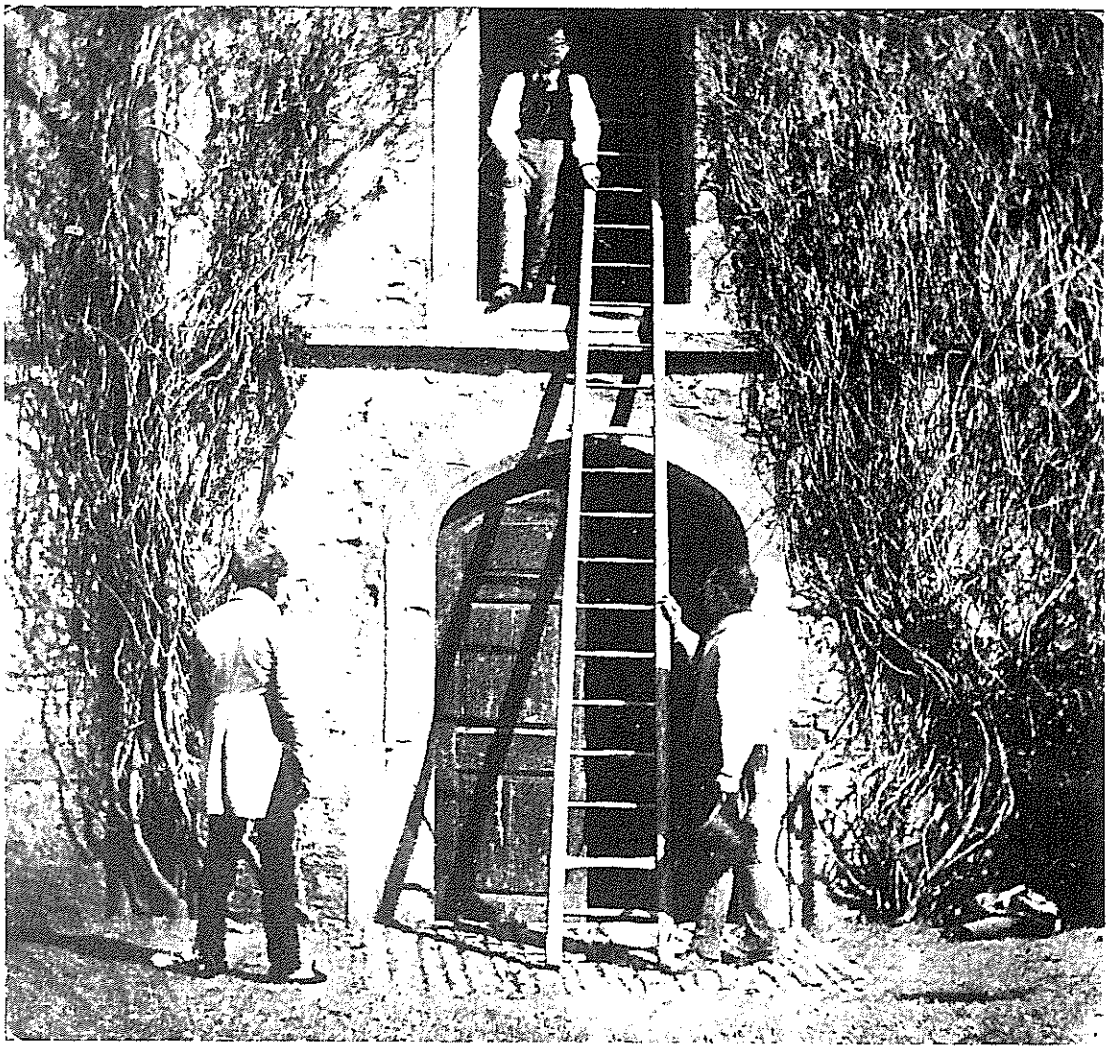

Fig. 7. *The Ladder*, salted-paper print, c. April 1845. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock.

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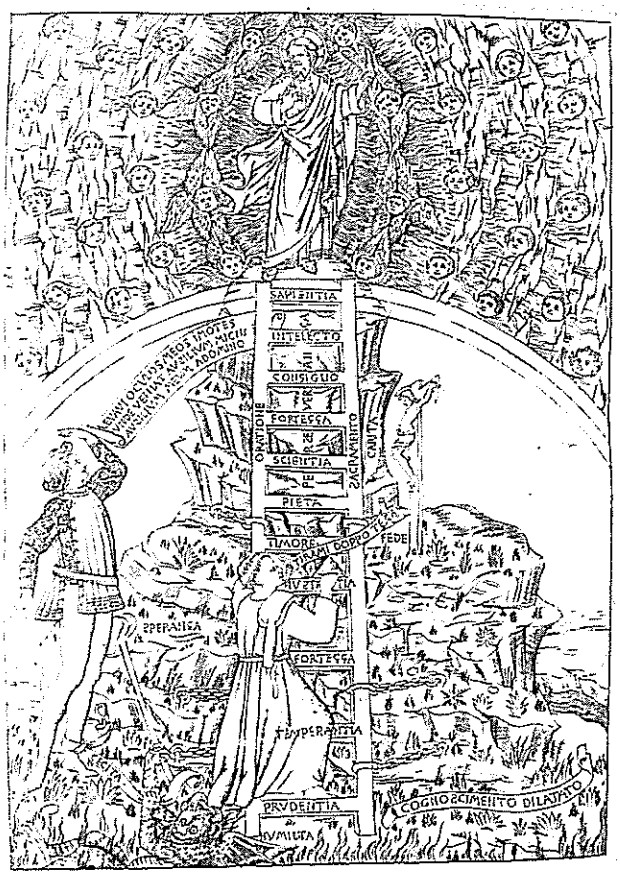

Fig. 8. B. Baldini, from *Il Monte Sancto di Dio*, Florence, 1477.

the Younger (1728–90), provided Talbot's epigraph for both *Hermes* and *English Etymologies* with the last two lines of his poem 'Written in a Blank Leaf of Dugdale's *Monasticon*' (1777):

Deem not devoid of elegance the sage
By Fancy's genuine feelings unbeguiled,
Of painful pendantry the poring child
Who turns of these proud domes th' historic page
Now sunk by Time and Henry's fiercer rage.
Think'st thou the warbling Muses never smiled
On his lone hours? Ingenious views engage
His thoughts, on themes unclassic falsely styled,
Intent. While cloister'd Piety displays
Her mouldering roll, the piercing eye explores
New manners and the pomp of elder days,
Whence culls the pensive bard his pictured stores.
Nor rough nor barren are the winding ways
Of hoar Antiquity but strewn with flowers.

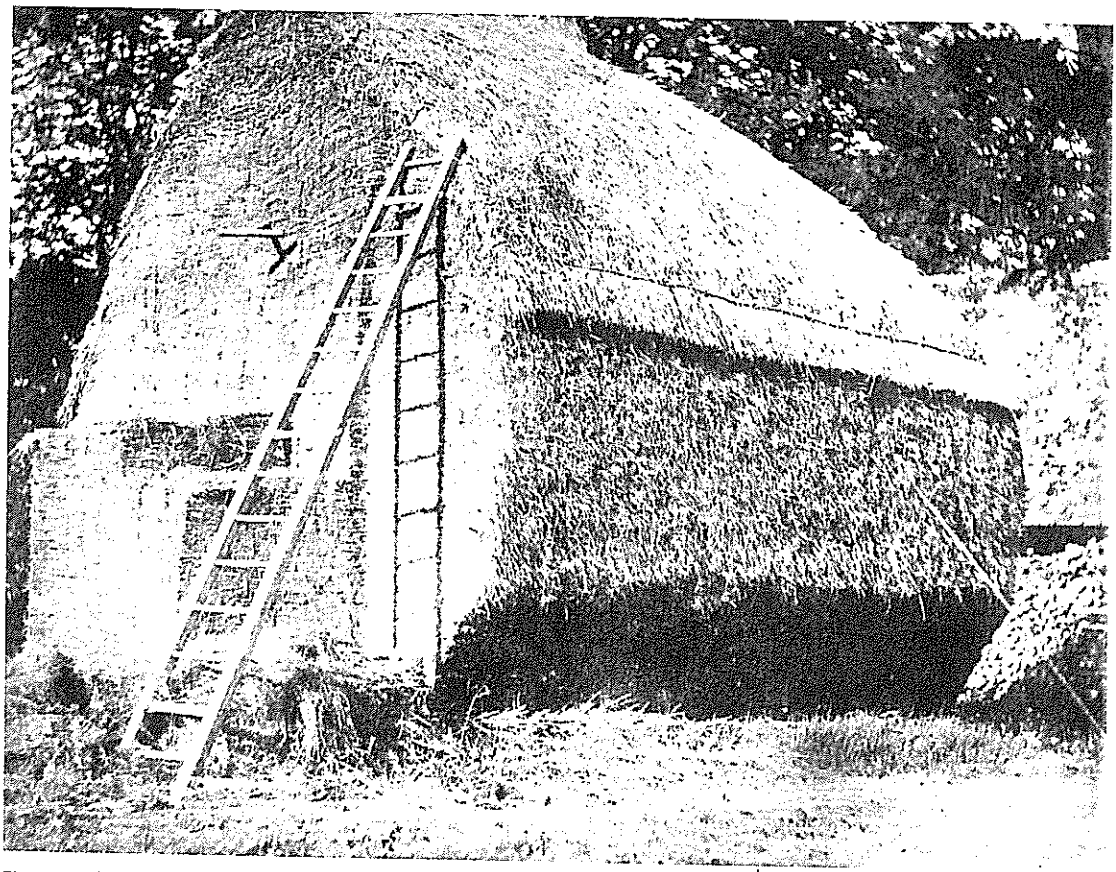

Fig. 9. *The Haystack*, salted-paper print, April 1844. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock.

What a portrait this conjures up of the younger Talbot dreaming over engravings of Lacock and other abbeys with their fretted pinnacles and ivied towers, and the older Talbot preoccupied with Romantic ideas! Warton's use of the word elegance raises the scholar to the elect also in his 'Pleasures of Melancholy' (1747):

> Few know that elegance of soul refined,
> Whose soft sensation feels a quicker joy
> From Melancholy's scenes than the dull pride
> Of tasteless splendour and magnificence
> Can e'er afford.

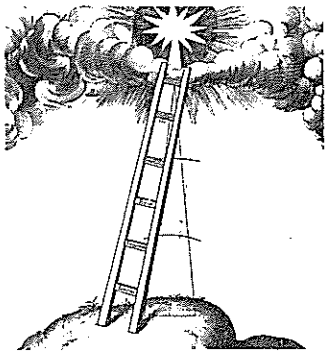

Fig. 10. R. Fludd, *Microcosmi Historia* (1619), vol. 2, tractate 1, p. 272.

Eighteenth-century taste thus assumed that the poet's attitude would be marked with the melancholy of pensive contemplation. Born in 1800, Talbot came out of that century, and was the contemporary of the great Romantic poets and the Gothic novelists, whose work provided the context of his *Legendary Tales in Verse and Prose* (1830).

To look at his photographic portrait (frontispiece) is to recognize at once that melancholy marked Talbot for her own. Scientific ambition drove him to achieve the prodigious promise of his infancy but left him doubting, perhaps, whether memory would ever raise a trophy over *his* tomb. As Gray wrote in his *Elegy*:

> Can storied urn or animated bust
> Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
> Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
> Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

With Talbot's photograph of the Hellenistic bust in the British Museum before us,[16] can we doubt that his motivation was not to breathe life back into this image of the most melancholic of Greek heroes?

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
> Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

The eighteenth-century practice of viewing such statuary by candlelight lies behind the glimmering, moonlight effects of chiaroscuro which Talbot used in his *Patroclus* (fig. 13).

Like Talbot's photographs, Gray's poem is notable for its shifts across social class – from nobleman to farm worker,

16. On the Patroclus series, see Bibl. **626**.

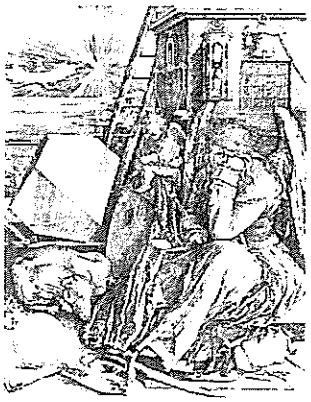

Fig. 11. A. Dürer, *Melencolia I*, woodcut, 1514.

from Roman senate to village England. The eighteenth-century ideal embodied in Queen's College, Oxford, appealed to Talbot's neo-classical impulse towards the Enlightenment, even as Lacock filled him with neo-Gothic fantasies and offered him the picturesque charms of its thatched ricks and stone-built sheds. Warton and Gray were responsible with their antiquarian tastes for the Gothic Revival, of which Lacock Abbey's eighteenth-century additions and alterations are a good example. But they were also an influence on the cult of the Picturesque. Richard Bentley (1708–82) was an artist who combined their tastes (as well as his own for the Rococo) in *Designs by Mr. R. Bentley for Six Poems by Mr. T. Gray*, published in 1753. The most famous of his drawings was the frontispiece for Gray's *Elegy* (fig. 14), and was described in the text as follows:

Fig. 12. *Man with a Crutch*, salted-paper print, c.1844. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

Fig. 13. *Patro*

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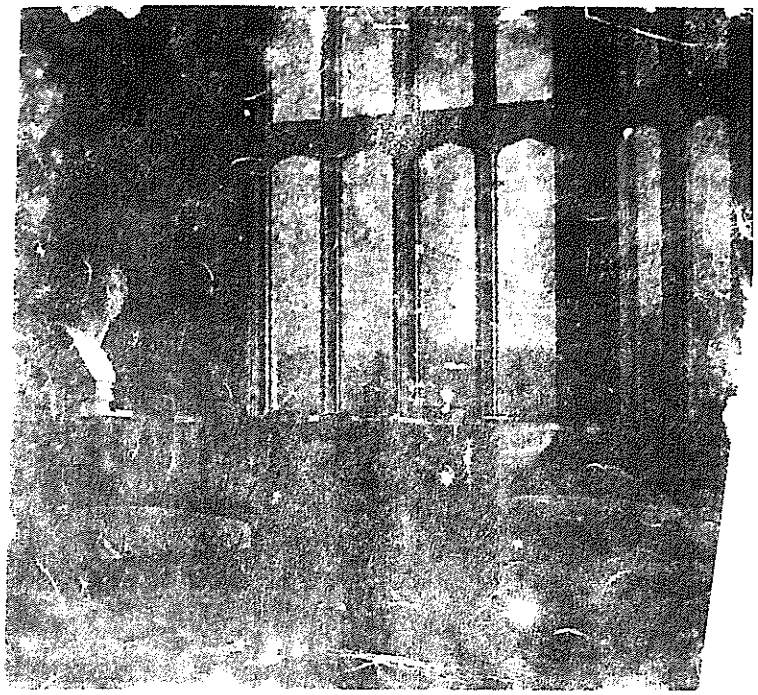

Fig. 13. *Patroclus*, salted-paper print, *c.* 1839–40. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock.

> A Gothic gateway in ruins with the emblems of nobility on one side; on the other, the implements and employments of the Poor. Thro' the arch appears a church-yard and village-church built out of the remains of an abbey. A countryman [is] showing an epitaph to a passenger.

The bundle of rake, pitchfork, spade, and axe is a picturesque but accurate emblem of implements of husbandry. Talbot takes up this side of the picture in several treatments of the subject, presenting the tools in a garden version of Bentley's lych-way arch (fig. 15). The connection between the garden door and Bentley's arch is subtly felt in the group portrait of Talbot's own husbanded harvest (fig. 16). If in Bentley's image the shadow of the young person falls upon the grave, here the shadow of the eldest daughter falls upon the door as headstone, with rusticated trellis as the crude decoration of a family vault:

> Yet ev'n these bones from insult to protect
> Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
> With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
> Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

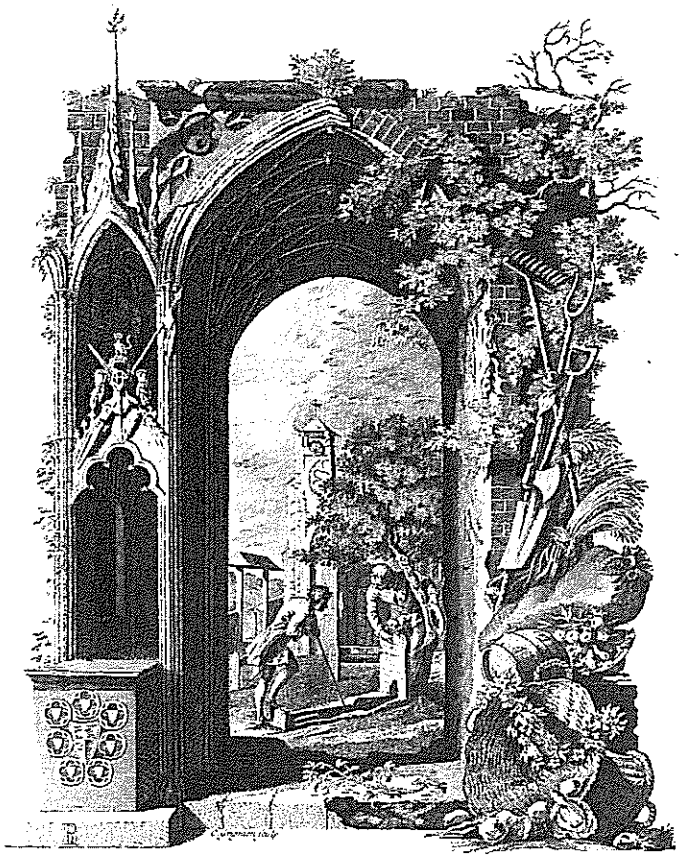

Fig. 14. R. Bentley, *Gothic Gateway*, engraving by Grignion, 1753.

The theme is that of *Et in Arcadia Ego*, which Nicholas Poussin had made famous in his *Shepherds in Arcady* in the Louvre Museum. But here, instead of three shepherds and one maternal shepherdess, are three daughters and their mother; and Poussin's tomb, upon which the shadow of one of the shepherds is projected, is replaced by Talbot's closed door. But whereas the tone of Poussin's picture and Bentley's drawing is classical and universal, that of Talbot's photograph is, perhaps, romantic and personal. If it is one thing to philosophize about shepherds and an anonymous passer-by, it is quite another to present one's own family in a *memento mori*. Here melancholy verges on morbidity: 'I, too, once lived in the bliss of ignorance but, beset by melancholy, I contemplate from my position as father the passing of my children and their mother, even as I think of my own':

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene
> The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

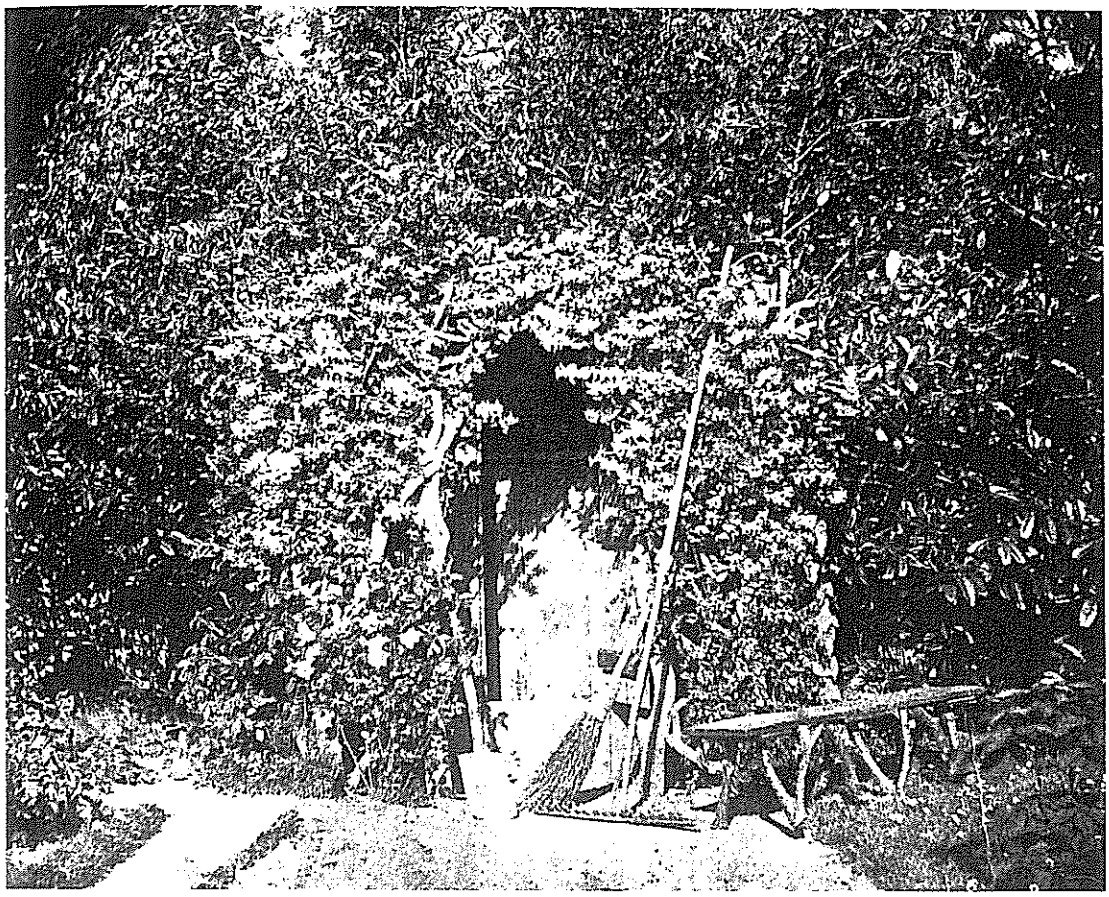

Fig. 15. *Garden Gateway*, salted-paper print, c.1842–43. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

Ela, Rosamond, and little Matilda, named after heroines in the writings of Sir Walter Scott, are flowers of the mother which will fade and wither away.

In Ripa's *Iconologia*, the personification which illustrates the *Distinction between Good and Evil* is a woman with a rake and sieve: she is the enemy of the Devil, who sows weeds while farmers sleep. In a conversation piece of two children with a small garden cart of rakings by John Zoffany (fig. 17) the theme is made more poignant by infant innocence: no matter how hard one might try, like the Dutch, we know all flesh is hay. Talbot made a version of it using two of his daughters, and his new-born son in a nurse's arms (fig. 18). Garden tools are binomial in their associations – they cut two ways: on the one hand, they represent the implements by which the garden is kept clear of weeds; on the other, they are gravedigger's tools. This is clearly indicated in a detail in another Bentley drawing (which specifically refers to Gray's *Elegy*) in which a spade

Fig. 16. *Constance and her Daughters*, salted-paper print, 19 April 1842. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

and skull are placed next to a funerary plinth (fig. 19). Talbot's photograph of a broom, basket, and spade next to a wall may be equally deliberate (fig. 20), providing one *feels* what Talbot *knows* – that the etymology of the word coffin is 'a great case of wicker, any kind of box or case'.[17] His etymologies lead yet further in this direction. In tracing the word casque (helmet) to the Spanish *casco* (skull), he concluded that skull and shell were originally the same word:[18] any protective covering, even a child's bonnet, could stand in for the skull beneath the skin, and any box or basket could represent a skeleton inside a coffin.

Much of the time Talbot's pictures offer little but a show, something to look at. But in his best-known pictures there is often a little silent drama taking place, something pretended. This is Talbot's etymology of *drama*:

17. Bibl. **114**, p. 96–7.
18. Bibl. **114**, p. 91.

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Fig. 17. J. Zoffany, *The Blunt Children*, oil on canvas, c.1768–70. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

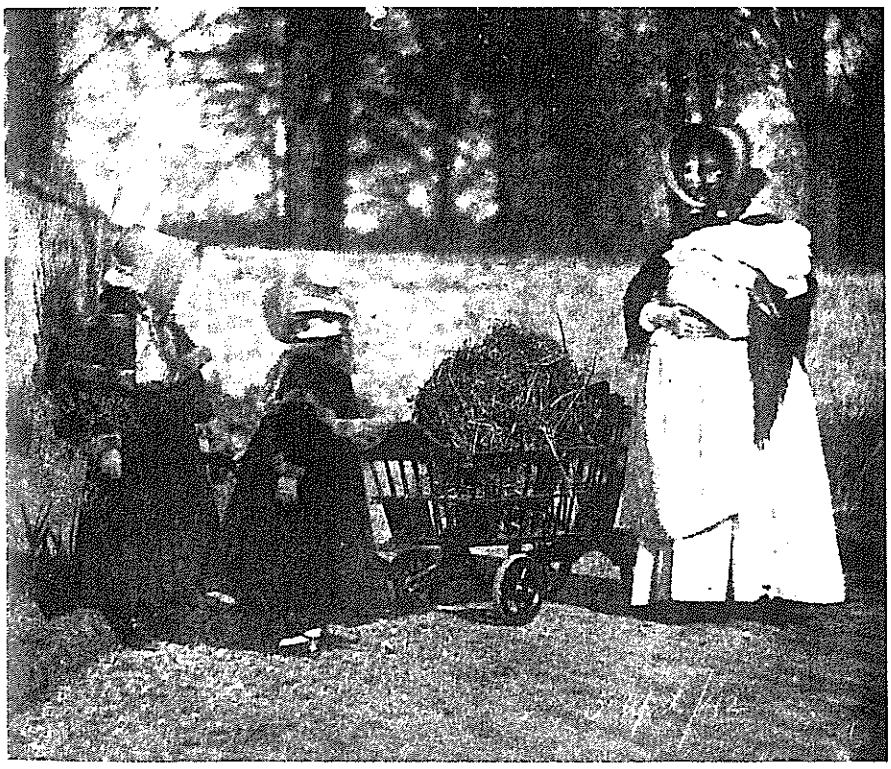


Fig. 18. *The Talbot Children and Nurse*, salted-paper print, 5 April 1842. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.

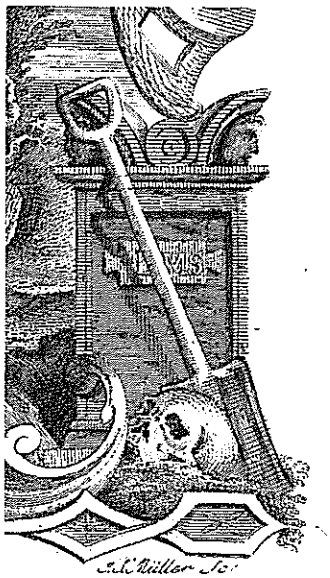


Fig. 19. R. Bentley, *Funerary Plinth*, detail from engraving by Müller, 1753.

> It is commonly supposed that the word drama, by which we denote a theatrical representation, meant originally *a thing done*: *an Action* . . . . This is plainly what a *dramatic* representation is *not*. It is not a thing done – it is a thing merely *simulated* or *pretended*. I think it strange, therefore, that the Greeks, who first invented the word, and had choice of so many terms in their copious language, should have chosen one which so ill expresses the character of the thing spoken of. The Latins use a much more aptly chosen word spectaculum, *a show*, a thing which we go *to see*.[19]

With this distinction in mind, perhaps we should consider the possibility that a few of his photographs, at least, contain a staged element, and transcend the documentary.

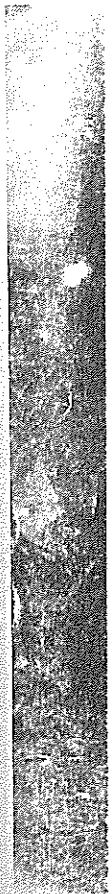
Talbot's cult of human transitoriness, implying a state of melancholy, constituted for him a kind of religious experience, which he expressed in his photographs sometimes hermetically, sometimes picturesquely, and often simply topographically. His little *oeuvre* is imbued both with gentlemanly sadness and scholarly aspiration, often both at once. In approaching Talbot as an artist rather than as an inventor, perhaps we should consider his own claim in a letter to a friend:

> You say that to encourage true genius each artist should put his name to his own images: that is all very well, but even without the signature one would soon learn to tell them apart, for I find that each Calotypist has a style peculiar to him alone. Even *here* this is already apparent; soon they will be as different as Raphael and Rubens! [20]

Talbot may have been comparing himself with other members of his circle like Calvert Richard Jones, the William Pyne of photography, who made microcosmic studies of naval deck furniture and rigging in a descriptive style. But the images by Talbot which have become most famous, such as *The Open Door*, *The Ladder*, and *The Haystack*, are both symbolic and personal in their ultimate expression. His was a short but glowing career about which can be said, as Gray wrote in his 'Stanzas to Mr Bentley':

> See in their course, each transitory thought
> Fixed by his touch a lasting essence take;
> Each dream, in Fancy's airy colouring wrought
> To local symmetry and life awake!

19. Bibl. 47, p. 15.
20. Letter to Amélina Petit de Billier, 8 Feb. 1843. Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock. See Bibl. 588, p. 38.



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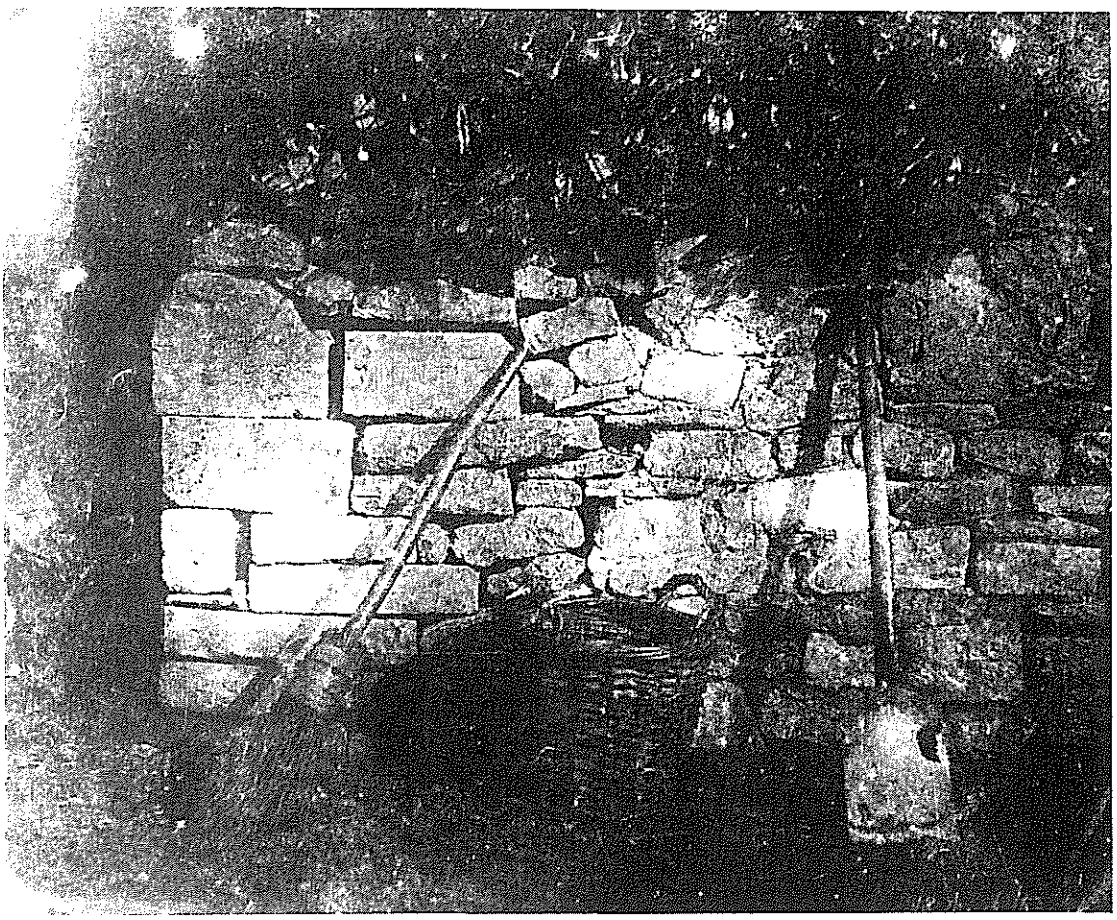

Fig. 20. *Broom, Basket and Spade*, salted-paper print, c.1841. National Museum of Photography, Film & Television, Bradford. By courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the Science Museum.