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Between Pictures and Words: Sally Mann's *Hold Still*

Abstract: Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still* is a rare book which examines from the point of view of a photographer the way literature and photography complement each other in creating complex artistic visions. At the same time, it is not merely a famous artist's autobiography, but an artful literary creation in its own right. The paper examines the nature of relations between literature and Sally Mann's photography.

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Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still* is a rare book which examines from the point of view of a photographer interrelations between photography and literature. It is not only an account of Mann's artistic career, but also a study of the way literature and photography complement each other in creating complex artistic visions. At the same time, it is not merely an artist's autobiography, but an artful literary creation in its own right.

Mann is not the first author to write extensively on the connections between the visual and the verbal. In fact, those interrelations have been a subject of interest for many literary theorists, art critics, and artists themselves. Although for a long time writers—for obvious reasons—considered painting to be important for feeding their visions, in the second part of the nineteenth century the invention of photography made many of them turn to this revolutionary new medium and explore its artistic possibilities. A similar process was taking place in literary criticism. At first, even when photography was already treated as a legitimate art form, critics were predominantly interested in exploring the interaction between literature and painting. In the recent decades, however, they have changed their attitude and now, more and more often, explore the nature of relations between literature and photography. Perhaps the best study of those relations is Jane M. Rabb's monumental anthology, *Literature and Photography: Interactions, 1840-1990*, together with the follow up volume, *The Short Story and Photography, 1880's-1980's*. Both studies include passages from works by major international authors who in various ways deal with photography or draw directly from it.

In the introduction to the former volume, while explaining fiction writers' growing fascination with photography, Rabb notices that as soon as photography became recognized as a legitimate new art form, "many novelists... may have tried to emulate the camera with its personal, disciplined, detailed, and accurate mirroring of surface reality" (xxxviii). Indeed, she quotes Walt Whitman who—fascinated with the invention of photography—"boasted that 'in these *Leaves [of Grass]* everything is literally photographed, nothing is poeticized, not a stop, not an inch, nothing for

beauty's sake'" (xxxviii). This fascination and early enthusiasm for photography, shared by, among others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Jack London, obviously had its critics. The enthusiasm was, for example, toned down by the main advocate of realism, William Dean Howells, who—as Rabb notices—"often used the word 'photographic' pejoratively to suggest a limited imagination or ignoble purpose" (xxxviii-xxxix). Although such objections were not uncommon, the interest in the medium was steadily growing.

The attractiveness of photography to writers became apparent when some of them also chose to express themselves through photography. Jack London, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Jerzy Kosinski, and Allen Ginsberg were among those who recognized the artistic potential of photography and practiced it along with writing. Walker Evans, a failed writer but an accomplished photographer, whom Rabb quotes in her essay, noticed:

Photography seems to be the most literary of the graphic arts. It will have—on occasion and in effect—qualities of eloquence, wit, grace, and economy; style, of course; structure and coherence; paradox and play and oxymoron. If photography tends to be literary, conversely certain writers are noticeably photographic from time to time—for instance James, and Joyce, and particularly Nabokov. (qtd. in Rabb *Literature and Photography*, xlii)

The similarities between the two kinds of artistic expression are even more pronounced when we notice that their development patterns are similar. As Eugenia Parry attests, "[b]oth art forms have secured aesthetic respectability while treading roughly parallel paths from objective narrative to idiosyncratic statement" (ix).

The importance of interrelations between literature and photography has been recognized not only by literary critics but also by those whose perspective is largely photographic. An art critic, François Brunet, boldly asserts that "in the age of Barthes, Baudrillard, Sebald, and Sherman photography has become a new muse of literature—or perhaps one of the driving forces behind 'the eviction of literary speech'—and a principal weapon in the critique of the very reality it was once supposed to certify" (143). Those who trace the connections between the visual and the verbal from a literary perspective refer somewhat obviously to imagist poetry as the territory where those links are most visible. However, as Parry notices, writers themselves "compare photography to the short story as the extraction of a few simple truths 'worth the trouble to stay and watch,' as Cortázar puts it" (xvii). Obvious examples of photography with strong literary potential would be the art of Gregory Crewdson, William Eggleston, Diane Arbus and Cindi Sherman. Their photographs bring immediate associations with the short stories of Raymond Carver or Frederick Barthelme and might, in fact, be used in creative writing courses as offering inspiring starting points for storytelling and triggering creative impulses.

While critics pay much attention to the narrative potential of photography, they also tend to agree with Roland Barthes that "[t]he photograph is literally an

emanation of the referent" (80). This inherent referential quality of photography makes critics recognize the similarities between "light writing" and "life writing"—the most referential among literary genres. Those connections were carefully studied and documented by Timothy Dow Adams in his *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography*, where he describes different kinds of interrelations between the two. His focus is on "the way interrelations between photography and autobiography demonstrate the inherent tendency in both to conceal as much as they reveal, through their built-in ambiguity, their natural relationship to the worlds they depict, which always seems more direct than it really is" (xxi). Adams takes into consideration several different categories of life writing in which the role of graphic elements is of particular importance and discusses the many functions they serve. The final section of Adams's analysis is devoted to autobiographies written by photographers themselves. The critic discusses self-narratives of Eudora Welty, Wright Morris, and Edward Weston, and demonstrates different ways in which the visual and the verbal interact in their texts.

In his essay on Welty's autobiography *One Writer's Beginnings*, Adams notices that although "there are important connections between her photography and her *nonfiction*," there is "no specific, conscious connection between her early career as a photographer and her learning to write *fiction*" (175). The critic stresses the fact that despite her "photographic involvement, Welty has consistently resisted attempts to make too direct a connection between her photographs and her stories" (152). In a chapter devoted to Wright Morris's autobiographical writings, Adams focuses on what he finds characteristic of the writer's method, which he characterizes as a "complicated and original way of incorporating photography into and behind his writing, as well as within his actual life" (176). His analysis of the interrelations between photography and literature in Morris's writings shows that the photographer/writer was mostly interested in combining the two by creating "photo-texts," that is "books that include sophisticated combinations of his prose and his photographs" (177). In his intertextual works, Morris—who was obviously not the first one to do it—used images and words to create an original art form.

The way in which photography and writing interact is still different in Edward Weston's self-narratives. Adams sees the role of Weston's writing as providing "abundant autobiographical information which helps to see Weston's photographs more clearly and deeply" (205). The critic adds: "By combining his photographs with his daily writing, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* illustrates the interrelationship between what might otherwise be thought of as separate areas of artistic expression, for by reading his writing and his photographs together we can see how much they have in common" (224). Weston's diary helps his readers to understand how his photographs came into being and what thoughts and emotions stood behind them. This strategy, especially popular among artist photographers, was often an attempt—especially at the time when photography was not yet considered to be a legitimate art form—to defend photography's artistic potential and situate it in a larger artistic and cultural context.

For his analysis, Adams selected texts by three different photographers, apparently assuming that they illustrate the most representative strategies of photographers/writers. Although Adams was aware that there were other examples of photographers' life stories, he ignored them in his study, apparently convinced that they merely repeated the patterns of Welty, Morris, and Weston. Interestingly, fifteen years after the publication of *Light Writing and Life Writing* there appeared a text which adds much to the discussion of interrelations between photography and autobiography, or—actually—between photography and literature. This book is Sally Mann's autobiography *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs*, where the author meticulously explores connections between words and images at the same time skillfully demonstrating that she is as fluent and insightful in literature as she is in photography.

Mann, respected by photography enthusiasts as a particularly original artist who often employs in her work a nineteenth-century technique of wet collodion, became known to the general public with her exhibition (1990) and her third book (1992), both entitled *Immediate Family*. The album includes black and white photographs of her three prepubescent children, often nude, enjoying their life on the Manns' farm. A chronicle of growing up, *Immediate Family* documents the everyday chores and joys, but also the little problems that all children have. The photographs, published in what was considered to be a very conservative decade in American history, created a major controversy with the artist being accused of exploiting her children and actually coming dangerously close to child pornography. The debate became even more heated after Richard B. Woodward, an arts critic, published in *The New York Times Magazine* a cover story, "The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann," in which he described the nature of the controversy. The critic noticed that "probably no photographer in history has enjoyed such a burst of success in the art world" (29), but suggested that the reasons of this success were not necessarily of an artistic nature. Woodward's article started a fierce discussion, which—for obvious reasons—focused on moral and political issues rather than on the artistic ones thereby making Sally Mann a public figure.

Immediate Family was not the only project of Sally Mann that created controversy. In *What Remains* (2002) she included a section with photographs of decomposing bodies taken at the University of Tennessee's Anthropological Research Facility ("The Body Farm"), while in *Proud Flesh* (2009) she documented the painful process and effects of muscular dystrophy on her husband's body. In this, as in many of her photographic projects, Mann does not aim to stun the viewer with technical perfection or beauty. In an interview she explains: "[T]he work I'm doing is in service to an idea rather than just to see what something looks like photographed" (O'Grady). Here Mann alludes to the famous statement by Garry Winogrand: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed" (Diamonstein), suggesting that she is not merely interested in the visual aspect of photography, but that she wants to tell stories through it.

Sally Mann holds a very special place in American photography and yet her art is hard to ascribe to one particular category or genre. Woodward rightly

notices that Mann's work "embodies several antithetical trends in contemporary photography," and explains:

By locating her material in the lives of her own family, Mann belongs among the confessional documentarians, like Tina Barney and Larry Sultan. But the construction of her photographs as fiction rather than fact, with a moody narrative linking the images, puts her in a camp with Cindy Sherman and the post-modernists—the antique look of the prints—the vignetting, shallow depth of field, blurred edges and general languor—connects her to neo-pictorialists like Bruce Weber and the Starns. Like them, she depends as much on evocation as description. ("The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann")

The critic sees another tradition in Mann's photography as well: "Sally Mann is very much an anomaly. Her large-format camera and thorough exploitation of black-and-white printing techniques hark back to 19th-century ideals. She may have more in common with Victorian photographers, like Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll, than with anyone contemporary" ("The Disturbing Photography of Sally Mann").

Woodward, who stresses the "fictional" character of Mann's photographs, is not the only one to recognize the literary character of Mann's art. Commenting on Mann's series of photographs of black male bodies characterized by obvious anti-slavery overtones, John Stauffer, a professor of African American Studies, notices:

[T]hey become visual poems that connect the memories of slavery to the legacies of racism today, coupled with a desire for understanding, empathy and reform. There is a lyrical aspect to these portraits, achieved partly from Mann's use of a large format, 8-by-10-inch view camera and the nineteenth-century wet-plate collodion process, which captures unusually subtle tonal ranges. (89)

The literary quality of Mann's photography has also been noticed by James Christen Steward who writes that Mann's "works have combined factual observation and contrived fiction, nature and artifice, putting her in the camp of postmodernist photographers such as Cindy Sherman." Another critic, Sarah Boxer, notices that Mann's photographs of her children are not meant to be treated as a family chronicle and explains: "[C]apturing reality is not typically the aim; her children play roles, much as little girls played beggars, dreamers, and fairy tale characters for Lewis Carroll's camera." Boxer writes that Mann's photographs go beyond mere reporting. and that, for example, "[t]he dangers in them represent not the real dangers at hand, but dangers that might have been or could be." Mann's photographs then—like fiction—primarily tell stories. They also provide viewers with intriguing material to feed their minds and incite them to turn those images into their own stories.

Sally Mann herself acknowledges the literary character and literary inspirations behind her photographs. Talking about her slavery cycle, she clarifies: "What got me started was reading William Styron's book *The Confessions of Nat*

Turner, which led me to photographing the Great Dismal Swamp” (O’Grady). Elsewhere she admits:

Some of my pictures are poem-like in the sense that they are very condensed, haiku-like. There are others that, if they were poetry, would be more like Ezra Pound. There is a lot of information in most of my pictures, but not the kind of information you see in documentary photography. There is emotional information in my photographs. (Rong)

It is evident that Mann finds photography and literature closely interrelated. In “By the Book” section in *The New York Times* she writes: “Yes, the two sensibilities, the visual and the verbal, have always been linked for me—in fact, while reading a particularly evocative passage I will imagine what the photograph I’d take of that scene would look like.”

In her autobiography, Mann explores these issues much further, creating a volume in which the interrelations between photography and literature are particularly prominent. Her *Hold Still* reads like a traditional autobiography with the story told more or less chronologically and covering all stages of the artist’s life. The reader learns about Mann’s family background, her childhood, growing up, college days, love affairs, and her passion for photography. Since the author is a renowned photographer, her autobiography is of course heavily illustrated both with family snapshots and her artistic works. The reader will also find many pages devoted to the South, which Mann considers essential in shaping her artistic sensitivity, and to her immediate family, art, memory, and the question of truth in photography. Occasionally Mann will explain the meaning of her photographs to the readers or will argue with those who unjustly accused her of exploiting her children by making them pose for what they considered “provocative” photographs.

It is not surprising that photography features so prominently in a photographer’s autobiography, but what is also worth noticing is the strong, multilayered presence of literature in her self-narrative. The author quite appropriately opens her memoir with a line from a poem by W.H. Auden in which the poet refers to photography: “The steady eyes of the crow and the camera’s candid eye / See as honestly as they know how, but they lie.” The conviction that literature and poetry are interrelated and that photography should not be treated merely as a document reappear throughout Mann’s photographic memoir.

Even in the Preface Mann repeatedly refers to poets and fiction writers, mentioning William Carlos Williams, Eric Ormsby, Joan Didion, and Émile Zola. Quoting the latter, she disagrees with his conviction that photography “preserve[s] our past and make[s] it invulnerable to the distortions of repeated memorial superimpositions” and instead argues that “photographs supplant and corrupt the past, all the while creating their own memories” (xiii). Those reflections come to her after she decides to inspect the contents of old boxes—hidden in the attic and “untouched for decades”—which contain letters, documents and photographs illustrating her family history and her own childhood. Mann wants to learn more

about her formative years and about her parents' roots; she tries to find out how people, places and events have shaped her artistic sensitivity. She writes: "Cutting the strings on the first family carton, my mother's, I wondered what I would find, what layers of unknown family history. Would the wellsprings of my work as an artist—the fascination with family, with the Southern landscape, with death – be in these boxes?" (xiv). Mann hopes that what she finds in the dust covered cartons might provide her with enough material not only to understand her own growth as an artist, but also to tell a story of her life to others. She admits:

I will confess that in the interest of narrative I secretly hoped I'd find a payload of southern gothic: deceit and scandal, alcoholism, domestic abuse, car crashes, bogeymen, clandestine affairs, dearly loved and disputed family land, abandonments, blow jobs, suicides, hidden addictions, the tragically early death of a beautiful bride, racial complications, vast sums of money made and lost, the return of a prodigal son, and maybe even bloody murder. (xiv)

These lines are followed by what sounds like a blurb or an advertisement for the volume: "If any of this stuff lay hidden in my family history, I had the distinct sense I'd find it in those twine-bound boxes in the attic. And I did: all of it and more" (xiv). With these words, Mann promises the reader a story which will not only—through the inclusion of photographs and documents—be a truthful story of her life, but which will also have all the essential ingredients of a novel.

As early as the first chapter, Mann's self-narrative informs the reader of her love for words. She writes that until her early twenties she "kept handwritten journals" (3), and quotes the first paragraph from the earliest volume: "It has been a mild summer, with more rain than most. We work hard and grow tired. The evening is cool as we watch the night slide in and hear each sound in the still blue hour. The silver poplar shimmers and every so often the pond ripples with fish. The mountains grow deep. They are darker than the night" (3). Forty years later, analyzing this and some later passages from her journal, she recognizes the influence of her reading: "Judging by the unembellished declarative sentences in those first paragraphs, it's a safe bet I was reading Hemingway that summer, somewhere around my seventeenth. But read down a few more lines and I come over all Faulknerian, soaring into rhapsodic description" (3). Her writing style, sometimes drawing on Hemingway and sometimes on Faulkner, reveals her visual awareness, and it is no wonder that the title of the chapter in the autobiography dealing with her prose attempts and literary influences is "The Sight of My Eye." This combination of the visual and the verbal is evident throughout her book.

The first chapter establishes a kind of setting for Mann's autobiography. It is significant, however, that instead of concentrating on nature and the scenic beauty of Rockbridge County in Virginia, where she was born, she focuses on what might be called an "intellectual setting" and mentions as its important elements the names of artists and writers who used to live there. Among others, she mentions

Carson McCullers, Tom Wolfe, Edward Albee, Reynold Price, Eudora Welty, Mary McCarthy, and W.H. Auden.

Writers continued to be an important element of her formative years, especially since her mother managed a university bookstore, “bringing in writers as diverse as Truman Capote, Howard Nemerov, Betty Friedan, Tom Wolfe, and James Dickey” (200). Mann’s parents were liberal intellectuals who with their convictions and open-mindedness exerted a huge influence on their daughter. Mann’s father, a physician, was a liberal minded person who “had strongly held beliefs and was brave about asserting them.” Mann adds that he made his “kids be brave, too, facing the little-understood challenges of civil rights, integration, and separation of church and state” (103). She characterizes her family in the following way: “Our family had no wood-sided station wagon, no country club membership, no television, no church, and no colonial house in the new subdivision. We read the *New York Times* and used the sports pages to line the parakeet’s cage” (103-104). Mann’s father—“a renegade Texan with an excellent northern education, an atheist, and an intellectual” (100)—showed a special interest in art. He often created his own provocative and irreverent art pieces, usually in the form of floral or wood arrangements. One of his pieces was a segment of a tree trunk resembling a man with three penises. Mann’s father, Dr. Munger, called it facetiously *Portnoy’s Triple Complaint*. The writer, who had been sent a photograph of the piece, wrote back to the artist: “I react with wonder and awe. None of us should complain, of course; art reminds us of that. Dr. Munger is a brave man to have such a thing in his garden. I would be tarred and feathered and thrown out of my town if I dared. Luckily people forgive me my books” (103). Such anecdotes involving literary figures can be found often in *Hold Still*.

It is not surprising that being brought up in a family where art and literature are so prominent and respected, young Sally Mann—for whom “[w]riting came first”—starts writing poetry. She recalls: “Beginning in the first year at Putney, I could be found, way after lights-out, crouched in the closet earnestly composing long, verbally dense poetic meditations, almost always in some way relating to the South” (33). The South—unlike “unpoetic” Vermont where she attends college—is her main inspiration and will remain so, even after she replaces her love for literature with her fascination for photography.

Mann’s early gift for language and letters is quickly recognized by her writing instructor who writes in a report: “You are launched on a lifetime writer’s project. I feel privileged to have seen your work in progress. Your splendid critical intelligence qualifies you, as maker, to receive a high order of gift.... You are a person by whom language will live. I shall look forward to reading you” (37). And while photography begins to slowly replace literature as Mann’s major passion, literature maintains a very prominent place in her life. A good illustration of this is Mann’s description of her wedding:

We had some difficulty finding someone to marry us because there was no mention of ‘God the Father’ or ‘the Holy Spirit’ in our handwritten

vows. We solved it by reading aloud the E.E. Cummings poem 'i thank You God for most this amazing day,' that first line satisfying the God requirement, and, as for the Holy Spirit, we figured Cummings had it covered in 'the leaping greenly spirits of trees.' The almost childlike lack of punctuation and capitalization that characterizes Cumming's poetry and his affirmation of the natural 'which is infinite which is yes' somehow caught the innocent spirit of those barefoot nuptials, our green optimism, and the wingding gaiety of the day. (53)

Literature is present not only during the wedding ceremony, but it also accompanies Mann throughout her life. Describing her family and home, she often sees them through a literary lens. Learning about her mother's ancestor from the *Mayflower*, for example, she refers to William Bradford, writing:

That *Mayflower* ancestor was John Howland, a 'lustie yonge man' who, according to Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was swept overboard but managed to hang on to a dangling line long enough to be pulled to safety. Reading about him, I marvel at the contingency of my own existence, dependent here on the strength of a seventeenth-century piece of woven rope. (171)

Elsewhere, writing about her great grandmother, she informs the reader that "she had regularly been 'petted' by Charles Dickens" who "called her 'my little Nelly'." This makes her wonder if her great grandmother "possessed something of the pure and untainted innocence of his famous heroine in *The Old Curiosity Shop*" (176). Recalling her photo session at "The Body Farm," she describes one of the decomposing male bodies she saw there, again resorting to literature: "Several days of postmortem beard growth had roughened his cheeks, and his fingernails were dirty and long. He looked like a Dickensian down-and-out who had stumbled into Lewis Carroll's body-stretching fantasy by mistake" (422). Completing her visit at the research facility, she observes another body with a face seriously disfigured by a vulture. Mann does not react with repulsion, but instead recalls Robinson Jeffers's poem "The Vulture," in which the poet "anticipates the 'sublime end' of his body when it is eaten and becomes part of a carrion bird, a feathery, sharp-eyed life after death, 'an enskyment'" (424).

Looking closely, we find still other reflections on writers and literature. When Mann describes her friendship with the Cy Twombly, a famous painter, she admits how fascinated she was by the artist's story about how he met Ezra Pound, the poet she had written her Master's thesis about. With childlike enthusiasm, Mann writes:

Imagine that—on my peckerwood porch, late in the humid, cloyingly fragrant Virginia night, Cy, in a Pound-like whisper, tells a story I found marvelous in the many improbable threads it wove together: that he had seen, had *heard* Ezra Pound, the author of the lines written on my father's memorial stone, with whom I held a long fascination. (80)

On another occasion, she remembers going to the car races with her father. Mann does not like the experience, describing the races as “boring” and the motor court in which they were staying as a place “that Humbert Humbert would have found too squalid” (344).

References to Pound and Nabokov can be found often in Mann’s memoirs, but the writer who turned out to be the most instrumental in the shaping of her artistic sensitivity was William Faulkner. Reading *Absalom, Absalom* was her “moment of awakening, the one described by Graham Greene as the door to the future, after which the world is never seen in the same way” (263). Mann declares: “Faulkner threw wide the door of my ignorant childhood, and the future, the heartbroken future filled with the hitherto unasked questions, strolled easefully in. It wounded me, then and there, with the great sadness and tragedy for our American life, with the truth of all that I had not seen, had not known, and had not asked” (263). Significantly, in *Hold Still* Mann deals with those “unasked questions” and devotes much space to the question of slavery and to the complex race relations in the South. Her autobiography becomes more than a linear story of her life; it is rather a collection of meditations on various issues that were relevant in the life of the artist as she was growing up.

Besides including many literary references and stories, *Hold Still* is a densely documented autobiography that includes dozens of family photographs which are carefully explained, as well as a postscript with facsimiles of letters written to Mann by her father. And yet this is not a simple sort of documentation, as the author realizes that the objective truth in autobiography cannot be attained and—as early as the introduction to the volume—speaks of “betrayals” of memory and “beautiful lies” (xiii). Feeling freed from the duty of presenting the reader with “scientific, objective truth” (xiii) and yet not ignoring documentation, she produces a text which, while heavily factual, has a strong fictional quality. The following quote in which Mann explains why her parents decided to send her to a boarding school is typical of this tone:

It would suit this narrative if I were to tell you that my mean and insensitive parents sent me to boarding school in the snowy north to separate me from my true love, Khalifa. But the truth is this: my confused and concerned parents sent me to the snowy north (that part is still true) because my reckless behavior on horseback had morphed into reckless behavior in other areas. (15)

This desire to go beyond life’s reality and documentary obligations can be seen, for example, in Chapter 4, where—trying to solve some family history—she gives her autobiography features of a detective story, or in Chapter 6, where—describing her family farm—she adopts the kind of language associated with pastoral narratives. What is more, one of her chapters, Chapter 14, is essentially a short story and could be even published as fiction.

Sometimes, as if feeling that her autobiographical prose, even when combined with her evocative photographs, cannot fully express how she feels about

something, Mann resorts to her poetry. For example, she describes her favorite Virginia landscape in the following way:

[T]hat July morning in the upper pastures, where the vine-oppressed trees looked like stooped giants shambling along what had once been a fence line, and a plangent humidity filled the fields, exactly the way it did when I wrote in March 1969:

A heavy scent of honeysuckle hung
 In thick, sweet layers over the land
 And the ripples of heat echoed the rhythm
 Of vines twined around the trunks of trees,
 Dangling from their branches. (210)

Mann uses her poems on several other occasions as if convinced that poetry can express certain emotions more fully and truthfully than autobiographical prose. This can be seen in the following passage which shows her and her husband making love in the fields:

When I pushed the last slide into the last film holder, I felt my impatient husband pushing against me and my dress rising around my hips. And there we were again, just like the lovers of 1970 when I wrote of us in just such a moment, also here on the farm and in these same fields:

Our breath
 Caught like a needle
 On the skin of water

You said 'Will it be here?'
 'Here where the grass
 is so tall?
 And I thought
 Yes
 Yes here. (212)

It often seems that Mann feels it necessary to use a combination of images, prose and poetry to convey certain messages or to reveal her emotions. A photograph or a poem—she thinks—are basically different art forms and should be appreciated for what they are, but in a text that is meant to be primarily autobiographical such a combination of words and images might be more effective in presenting what exactly happened and how she felt about it.

Mann often resorts to a technique that some will associate with her photographic skills, while others will consider them a tribute to the literary neorealists, such as Raymond Carver. Like Carver, she often pays attention to minute details, which may not mean much to an average reader, but whose presence will be recognized and appreciated by those whose sensitivity is comparable to Mann's. This photographic attention to details has been noticed by Lucy Davies:

The stories in this book are the stuff of the novels, and Mann brings her photographer's eye to the striking visual vignettes. The pinky round of a peeled apple in her black nanny Gee-Gee's palm, a dead chicken dropping from the wrist 'like faded bouquet'; the lone, incongruously cheerful orange pill left in the bottle after her father commits suicide; her mother-in-law's soiled underwear, discarded on the floor, before she shot her sleeping husband and turned the gun on herself.

As it can be seen, Mann uses a variety of literary techniques, borrows from different genres and generally enjoys playing with language, which is emphasized—for example—in the titles of her chapters. One of them, in an obvious reference to Cormac McCarthy, is called "All the Pretty Horses," while another includes a reference to the famous 1955 photography exhibition and is called "The Family of Mann." There is little doubt that while writing about photography she pays tribute to her other passion—literature. In an interview she explains why she did not become a writer, but chose to express herself in images rather than words: "I wish I could be a better writer, but writing is so difficult. I get seduced by visual aesthetics" (Rong).

In fact, photography and literature are for Mann complementary. She writes about her fascination with the farm she was brought up on and about her love for the wonderful landscapes she could admire every day. Mann admits that she wrote poems about them obsessively, but sometimes could not find the right words to express her fascination. She explains:

And if I couldn't do justice with words... I tried with my camera, composing silver poems of tone and undertow, the imagery saturated still with the words of authors I read in my teenage years—Faulkner, Whitman, Merwin, and Rilke. Many of my (poem-)photographs would sing those words, heady with beauty, ponderous with loss, right back to them. (208)

Although photography can often show what literature cannot, Mann often feels that photography has its shortcomings, too. She explains: "At its most accomplished, photographic portraiture approaches the eloquence of oil painting in portraying human character, but when we allow snapshots or mediocre photographic portraits to represent us, we find they not only corrupt memory, they also have a troubling power to distort character and mislead posterity" (308). This conviction is evident in the section devoted to her grandfather. Writing about him, Mann refuses to speculate on what kind of person he was on the basis of the only image of him that she has. Mann writes:

But since we have just this one picture of Henry Munger, we have no way of knowing if it's a distortion or true to life. Studying it, I resist the impulse to make assumptions based on a fraction of a second snatched from time, perhaps, the same second that a slight gassy sensation troubled

his lower bowel. So despite his crabbed countenance... I must take into account evidence of his character derived from other sources. (308)

Only documents, letters and testimonies of those who knew him may help in presenting a fuller picture of Henry Munger.

For Mann, photography labeled as documentary is not to be trusted fully. She stresses repeatedly that her “controversial” family photographs from *Immediate Family* are artistic creations and not documents. Responding to the wave of accusations that she was taking pictures of her children in embarrassing situations and was exploiting them in this way, Mann writes:

How can a sentient person of the modern age mistake photography for reality? All perception is selection, and all photographs—no matter how objectively journalistic the photographer’s intent—exclude aspects of the moment’s complexity. Photographs economize the truth; they are always moments more or less illusorily abducted from time’s continuum. (151)

Angered by an opinion expressed by one of her detractors—“Mann has shown us children with ice in their veins; her kids give me the chills”—she responds:

The fact is that these are not my children; they are figures on a silvery paper slivered out of time. They represent my children at a fraction of a second on one particular afternoon with infinite variables of light, expression, posture, muscle tension, mood, wind, and shade. These are not my children at all; these are children *in a photograph*. (151)

The controversy started with Mann’s publication of *Immediate Family* must have astonished and hurt the author, as she often resorts to irony and speaks with a kind of artist’s superiority when responding to those who implied that she was a heartless, immoral manipulator rather than an artist. Angered by some unjust opinions, she writes:

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I actually *was*, as some *New York Times* letter writers suggested, ‘manipulative,’ ‘sick,’ ‘twisted,’ ‘vulgar.’ Even if I were all of those things, it should make no difference in the way the work is viewed, tempting as it is to make that moral connection. Do we deny the power of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* because its author was unspeakably cruel to his wives? Should we vilify Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* because its author’s nutty political views? Does Gauguin’s abandoned family come to mind when you look at those Tahitian canvases? If we only revere works made by those with whom we’d happily have our granny share a train compartment, we will have a paucity of art. (153)

Defending herself, Mann includes photographic documentation to prove that she did not take documentary family snapshots showing her kids in embarrassing situations, but that she consciously and meticulously worked on each photograph to create a

meaningful artistic image. For example, she demonstrates eleven takes of the same scene and explains why she was not happy enough with the images to include them in her album. Her method of working is similar to that of a poet who tries different words or different word placement to finally arrive at what he considers a successful poem.

Mann also describes another method of picture taking. It involves not so much painstakingly staging certain situations to be photographed, but rather observing a scene and when something interesting or aesthetically intriguing happens asking everyone to “hold still.” She explains:

You wait for your eye to sort of ‘turn on,’ for the elements to fall into place and that ineffable rush to occur, a feeling of exultation when you look through the ground glass, counting ever so slowly, clenching teeth and whispering to Jessie to *holdstillholdstillholdstill* and just knowing that it will be good, that it is true. Like the one true sentence that Hemingway writes about in *A Moveable Feast*, that incubating purity and grace that happens, sometimes, when all the parts come together. (129)

Here, again, Mann compares the satisfaction of capturing an ideally composed photograph with the joy of a writer who, after many tries, has finally found the right words to accurately express a certain concept or an idea, or a poet who after much effort has finally found the right kind of image.

But the inspiration for Mann’s photography does not come only from watching her children grow or from contemplating beautiful Virginia landscapes. She finds good literature as nourishing and inspiring as nature or people. Her famous slavery cycle, as she admits, was inspired by Walt Whitman’s poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” and she attributes different photographs from the cycle reprinted in her volume to individual lines from the poem and uses them “as a template for [her] own exploration” (286). Literature is also behind another famous photography project of Mann’s devoted to images of American battlefields. She explains that Wisława Szymborska’s poem “Reality Demand” is “a haunting, wildflower-at-ground-zero of a poem that gazes unblinkingly as life goes on at the world’s most blood-soaked battlefields” (412). One line from the poem—“There is so much Everything that Nothing is hidden quite nicely”—she finds particularly thought provoking and illuminating. She writes: “These lines, I decided posed an artistic challenge and needed answering” (413).

Hold Still, the autobiographical project of Sally Mann, an ambitious project of a famous photographer, shows how pictures and words affect, fuel and complement each other. Her volume explains better and more convincingly than any critical text devoted to this subject how photography and literature are interrelated.

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