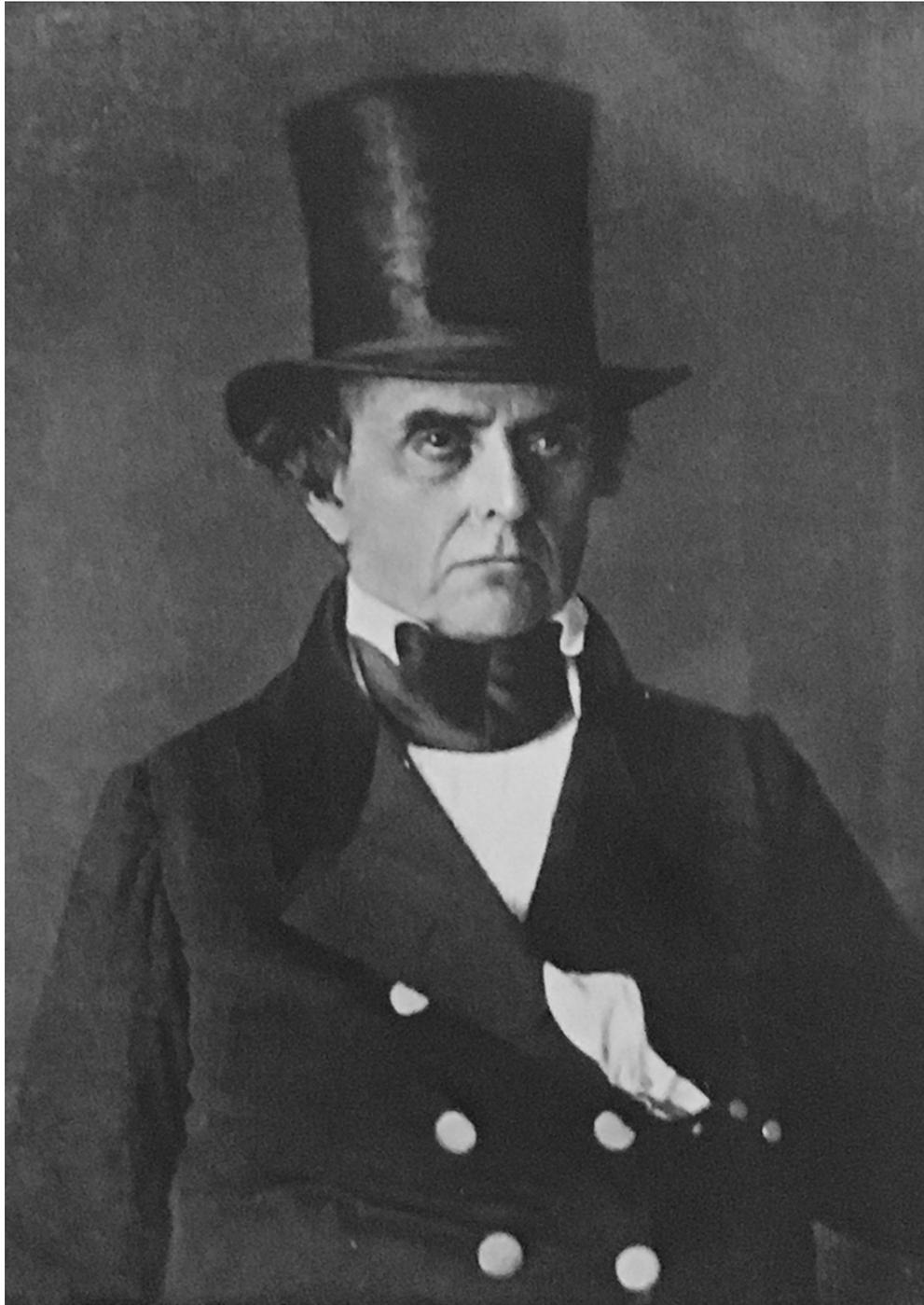


A Great Portrait in American History

By Len Bernstein

This daguerreotype of Daniel Webster was taken by F. De Berg Richards in 1846 and it moves me every time I look at it.



The portrait was taken in Richard's fourth floor Philadelphia gallery, and we learn some of what occurred between the photographer and his intimidating subject from an article by Stephen M. Allen, that appeared in *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, dated March 1885:

“Mr. Richards remembers hearing Webster's angry grumbling when he reached the top of the third flight at finding he must mount one more. When he entered the gallery Richards said: “Stand just as you are, Mr. Webster; we wish to take you first with your hat on.” “Your first will be your last,” roared the statesman. But when the artist announced that the sitting was ended in about four seconds, he said: “What, all done?” “Yes.” “Why, in Boston they will set your eyes out!” and he sat for two or three other pictures.”

But it was the first that has come down to us, in all its immortal grandeur.

Virtually unknown today, I am grateful to have learned of its existence from Eli Siegel, the great American poet, critic, and founder of Aesthetic Realism. In a 1951 lecture he stated:

I regard as one of the greatest pictures that was ever taken in America, a picture of Webster....The study in blackness and whiteness, the depth of the eyes, the nose, the attitude, and particularly that silk hat—it is a most fearfully effective thing....Those eyes can frighten you even now. They are very sad. What they are sad about, only a complete historian of America could tell.”

Mr. Siegel's description makes one very thoughtful about the life of Webster, and encourages compassion for one of the towering figures in American history, who longed to be understood in his lifetime and was not.

When we are sad we can sink and feel there is no light at the end of the tunnel. This image, a “study in blackness and whiteness,” says that darkness and luminosity are one, that heaviness and lightness while opposed, are also friendly, and we need to understand this in order to be proud of how we see sadness—in ourselves and others. “All beauty is a making one of opposites,” Eli Siegel stated, “and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” In this portrait the photographer saw and captured a terrible sadness in Webster that weighed him down; he also captured a fearful intensity that counters it. That intensity is in his gaze and in the energetic composition of dark and light elements.

Look at Webster’s face: it is mostly in light and subtly transitions into shadow. His eyes are deep-set, yet each has a single, clear catch-light as he looks out. The luminous buttons on his black coat rise up merrily; where his hand disappears beneath his jacket a sprightly white shape emerges from the dark. The expansive V shape of his white shirt-front interrupts the darkness and brings release to the somber dignity of his attire. And there is relation, not without humor, in the way the black, shiny cravat under Webster’s chin mirrors and counters the grim, downward curve of his mouth and the lines on either side of it.

An important aspect of how all these whites and blacks counter and complete each other is in how, together, they make for a strong, sweeping, upward motion: it begins with the bright buttons on his sleeve and coat; they are continued in that lively white shape coming out of his sleeve, which goes right into the rising V shape of his shirt, and the upward curve of the cravat. And the journey is completed in the rising curve of the hat. There’s a diagonal line that connects them, as well: follow that white cloth emerging from his sleeve into the diagonal of the shirt. This is related to the diagonal of his nose which is very strong, and also that softer vertical

highlight on the silk hat. So, you have this rising motion of light within dark, dark within light, that counters that weighty, sad feeling.

It affected me very much how that hat, with its muted, shiny surface rising up, is related to the background. The background is a soft, somewhat mottled grey. It's not flat gray; it has a quality of space. And that reflection on the hat is related to the space quality around him. A hat worn rightly on the head, photographed rightly, can accent the thought of a person, and here, it seems to take Webster's thought outward, into the world. I'm moved by the graceful curve of the hat brim – it curves out and up so while there's this deep sense of something within, there's a going out as well, an affirming of *relation*. All the forms of dark and light we have looked at, make for a oneness of a particular individual and a going out into something wider, mysterious. In life, when a person is sad there's usually a withdrawing, a feeling that one is painfully apart from the life of other things. But art tells us the truth about the world and ourselves, and how we are related. In this photograph, even a little bit of creased white collar on the right manages to escape the confines of Webster's dark clothing and the shaded side of his face. This vivid opposition and friendliness of light and dark, weight and lightness, narrowness and expansiveness, make for a great beauty in this photograph.

Mr. Siegel says that this daguerreotype “represents one phase of photography: the trying to get a neat, clear, definite impression...” How significant that an emotion, often felt as messy, vague, is presented in an orderly, sharp focus arrangement, and yet is so suggestive, rich with meaning.

For myself, I exploited my sadness to feel I was more sensitive and unrelated to anyone else. Mr. Siegel gave me crucial knowledge to understand and criticize this hurtful attitude, and I'd like to quote briefly from two different but related discussions where he spoke me about

sadness: In the first, he asked me, “Have you adopted sadness as a vocation? Would you like to give it up and be unemployed?” I hadn’t seen how I used sadness to make myself important and to feel I was deeper than other people. And as a photographer I felt that the sadness and suffering I saw as unique to myself, made me more sensitive than others and a deeper artist. In the second discussion Mr. Siegel said to me, “People want to make the reason they feel sad mysterious so they can hold on to it, But it isn’t mysterious; it comes from not liking the world enough.” The purpose of art, I learned, is to like the world; art shows that our emotions, even the most painful ones, can be seen beautifully, as having structure; they can be used to have more respect for reality; and this seeing is a source of self-respect, even happiness. The “fearfully effective thing” Mr. Siegel is referring to is, I believe, an honest, respectful awe at the size of emotion conveyed with such clarity in this photograph, and the opposition it presents to our ego.

Eli Siegel was that complete historian of America who understood Webster. He taught me to love history and so I mention two crucial matters that affected Webster deeply. There is the devastating personal tragedy of losing his first wife and four of his five children to illness. The second concerns the life of our nation: He detested slavery, saw it as a moral abomination and shame on our country. But later he felt it should be accommodated to avoid civil war, and historians also think he hoped to appeal to both north and south as a presidential candidate. These are known facts, but their deep ethical meaning is not known by historians: if we compromise with truth, we cannot like ourselves and will be the cause of our own sadness. I am grateful to the education that taught me this, and to Mr. Siegel and to Ellen Reiss, Aesthetic Realism Chair of Education for encouraging me not to be afraid of the depths of people, including my own. And I believe that the photographer here was courageous to look unflinchingly and, I believe, lovingly at Daniel Webster.