Walker Evans and photography

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Walker Evans (1903-75), whose work is currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, was an American photographer who produced some remarkable images, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. He is perhaps best known, rightly or wrongly, for a series of photographs he took of tenant farm families in Hale County, Alabama in 1936. Of those probably the most famous are several 8 x 10 portraits of Allie Mae Burroughs, dark hair pulled back, tightlipped, against unpainted wooden clapboards. There are not many other photos one can think of that "stand" for a moment in history and are so widely assumed to have summed up the situation of a suffering population as these do.

Looking at Evans' work makes one think about documentary photography as an art form, a complex subject.

The invention of photography was made public in Paris in August 1839. A recent history of photography published in France defines the medium, somewhat pompously, as "an ensemble of highly disparate images which possess in common the fact that they were created by the action of light on a sensitive surface."[1]

In the decades following photography's invention a considerable debate took place as to whether the medium represented a new art form or a threat to art. The poet Charles Baudelaire, in 1859, for example, suggested that photography was one of those "purely material developments of progress ... [which] have contributed much to the impoverishment of the French artistic genius."[2]

In the 1930s Walter Benjamin described this earlier dispute as "devious and confused." He observed that the "primary question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art—was not raised" in the controversy.[3] And not only art. The impact of photography on society as a whole is a subject that ought to be studied. Just to take one side of the matter, the ability of masses of human beings to see, for the first time, likenesses of their leaders, of social conditions, of the horrors of war and so on, had to have a "leveling" and demystifying, i.e., a generally radicalizing, impact.

Naturally, photography, like any other act, takes place under definite historical circumstances. The radical art critic John Berger, in a 1978 essay inspired by Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), referred to the 1920s and 1930s as "the period when photography was thought of as being most transparent, offering direct access to the real: the period of the great witnessing masters of the medium like Paul Strand and Walker Evans. It was, in the capitalist countries, the freest moment of photography ..."[4]

Berger goes onto suggest, basing himself apparently on Sontag, that "The very 'truthfulness' of the new medium encouraged its deliberate use as a means of propaganda. The Nazis were among the first to use systematic photographic propaganda." It is one small step from there to an indictment of photography itself. Berger cites Sontag: "A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to simulate buying and anaesthetise the injuries of class, race and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information.... The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivise reality and to objectify it, *ideally serve these needs and strengthen them*" (emphasis added).[5]

While the radical critics of the late 1970s were made gloomy by the apparent ease with which the ruling elites absorbed and used image-making (Sontag, of course, has subsequently become a strong defender of "capitalist society"), no such mood was provoked among the postmodern philosophers of subsequent decades. Photography, because of its apparent impersonality, seemed ideally suited to analysis by these "playful" thinkers. In the words of one, "the photographic surface ... offers little reassurance of the founding presence of the human subject. The absence of the brushmark or dribble that constitutes the index and trace of the expressive body, and of the human essence to which it plays host, therefore makes the photograph particularly resistant to appropriation within the authorial discourse of history."[6]

Modern-day relativism has a field day with photography. Yves Michaud, professor of philosophy at Paris University and author of *The Crisis of Contemporary Art* (1997), writes: "A photographic image is manufactured, produced with the help of instruments. All we can say about it is that something has left a trace there—but the causes cannot be read in their effects; the former are limited to causing them [Wonderful!—DW]. A photograph is the imprint of something—of what is another matter. Something which realizes not its truth but simply its value as a trace or relic. A photograph is not a 'true image,' it is the trace of something which has disappeared."[7]

Michaud goes on: "Fundamentally, the whole problem of the photographic image is that it 'seems' to be transparent. It 'seems' to provide us with the actual things, while really giving us only a relic. Objects seem to push their way through the image, but we only see, to use [photographer] Gary Winogrand's words, 'what they look like when they are photographed.'"[8]

But is there *any* relationship between how things look at the instant they are photographed and how they actually, *objectively* look? This is the sort of "naïve" question Michaud and others can't be bothered with. Because photographs are produced by a machine, because the material world is constantly changing, because the camera sees things the eye cannot, because there is no *absolute* identity between the object and its photographic imprint, the *relative* identity, within which there are absolute grains of truth, is obliterated as well. This path leads nowhere.

What can we say, even if somewhat tentatively, about photography and art?

It would seem logical that the documentary artist-photographer, the only category of photographer considered here, must have the most highly developed *internal pictorial sense* of any artist. Or, to put it another way, only the photographer possessing such a sense might be considered an artist. The photographer, after all, is least aided directly by art in his or her work, or, one might say, he enters into artistic production having overcome the greatest obstacles. (By "art" in photography, I don't mean the self-consciously picturesque, but images highly charged with meaning.)

As soon as the novelist has typed a sentence, or the painter laid down a brush stroke, he has produced art, for better or worse, he has invented something in the form of an art object, that is new and separable from himself. The performer (dancer, actor) turns himself into something of an art object.

The camera, however, is not an artistic device per se; it more or less obediently, depending on the skill of its operator, reproduces what is visibly available to its mechanism. The history of photography cited above suggests that “the photographic process could also be defined as the utilization of an automatic machine for transmitting information, a recording apparatus along the same lines as the gramophone, invented a few decades later.”[9] (To borrow crudely a notion from economic life, the camera does not create new *artistic value*, but merely transfers it. The sole source of artistic value is the individual human subject.) Great numbers of people successfully take photos. There has to be some specialized, conscious effort on the part of the individual, the result of thoughts and feelings worked out quite independently of the camera, but *nonetheless entirely dependent on it*, to transform his photographing into artistic work.

We say that a painting is neither a means to an end, nor the "after-product" of a finished thought process, but the object *in which* thought and feeling are embodied, that a painter thinks and feels, no matter with what degree of difficulty and struggle, *with* his brush. As a rule, the individual who systematically applies paint to a canvas has undertaken some organized form of training, has entered into a particular relationship with art history and with materials, has assumed and accepted the role of “artist,” with all that implies. No such complex historical-intellectual relationship is involved in the elementary act of taking a photograph. To put it concretely: one assumes a person painting on canvas to be an artist; one makes no such assumption confronted by an individual taking a photo, even with expensive-looking equipment.

The art critic Meyer Schapiro noted: “All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents.”[10] This, I think, is critical, including the use of the word “somehow,” which suggests the nonlinear character of the process.

From this point of view, one would have to say that in documentary photography the critical aesthetic act takes place—bearing in mind that the artist is limited by the objective world he confronts—in the shaping of the image in the photographer's brain, which the camera then records and preserves. The artistic act and the opening and closing of the shutter, in other words, are distinct moments, although it will not seem that way to the individual taking the picture. Photo-taking is always an attempt to capture an image that has already been seen and perhaps disappeared. For a number of reasons perhaps, photography is more bound up with memory than any other art form.

The fact that the artistic and mechanical acts are discrete operations has a number of implications. The painter's brush is an extension of the hand. The viewfinder is likewise an extension of the eye; but the picture-taking mechanism is not. It is something harsh and unforgiving, estranged from the photographer. One might go so far as to say that the relationship between the artist and the camera is an *antagonistic* one, that the photographer does not capture the truth in images with his camera, but *despite* it.

The camera sees things, first of all, the eye does not see. “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.”[11] By its very nature the camera picks up unforeseen aspects of external reality. Because photography is an art form centrally involving a machine, it is the most accident-prone. The interesting question is: can the photographer *somehow* [that word again!] intuitively direct the camera's tendency to include elements that he can't possibly have foreseen in such a way that it works to the advantage of his artistic purpose and deepens his work?

Photographs can be fascinating for a variety of reasons. A book on the history of photography will inevitably include many works of purely socio-historical or scientific value. It's possible to linger over uninspired photos of exceptional subjects. Almost any yellowing photograph has its appeal. Likewise anyone who has raised a camera to his eye more than a few times has had the good fortune to take accidentally striking, even “artistic” photographs, with remarkable lighting effects and so on. There must be more “near-art” in photography, private and public, than in any other medium. Serious artistic photography must involve something more than happening upon a riveting subject or relying on chance. How do you, in fact, align aspects of external reality, or put yourself into the proper relationship to them, so they reveal the truth about themselves?

Millions of people take photographs at some point in their lives; only a relative handful write novels or paint pictures. It's far less time-consuming to take a photograph than to write a novel, even a bad one. Let's assume, however, that there are only a limited number of great photographs or series of photographs, as there are of great novels. This means, since the time required physically to take a photo (leaving aside the problem of the dark-room) is a matter of a split second, that years and years of preparation, including of course the taking of thousands of less satisfying pictures, must go into the creation of a great photograph. What does this preparation entail? One wants to know, for example, how it was that on an August afternoon in 1936 Walker Evans had put himself in position to photograph the Burroughs family.

Critics like to describe Walker Evans' photographic work as “particularly American.” By which they mean to refer to his apparently direct, succinct approach. There is a grain of truth in this. It would be difficult to imagine Evans or Edward Hopper or Howard Hawks or Ernest Hemingway having been born in any other country, but such characterizations have an extremely limited value. If his style is so indelibly “American,” then why didn't many Americans take pictures in that manner before Evans, and why, by and large, aren't they doing it now? The historical epoch must have played some role.

Evans was born in 1903. He grew up, in other words, with modern technology. In 1903 the Wright Brothers first successfully flew a powered airplane, Henry Ford founded the Ford Motor Company and the first coast-to-coast crossing of the US by automobile was completed, in 65 days. Bolshevism emerged as a distinct tendency in 1903 and Freud published *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

Evans was born in St. Louis, moved with his family to a suburb north of Chicago about 1907 and eight years after that to Toledo, Ohio. By that time T.S. Eliot, another St. Louis native (born in 1888), had permanently settled in England. For Evans' generation, as appealing as Paris was in particular, pursuing a career as an advanced artist in America no longer offered such nearly insurmountable difficulties. By the middle 1920s the US had a far less provincial atmosphere.

When he traveled to Paris in 1926 Evans wanted to be a writer. He admired Gautier, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Huysmans; among his contemporaries, Gide, Joyce, Hemingway, Cocteau. He studied and wrote in French. He tried writing short stories, unsatisfyingly. His serious interest in photography began after he'd returned to the US and was living in New York City. Evans took pictures of the parade in honor of flyer Charles Lindbergh in 1927.

James Mellow, in his 1999 biography, cited Evans' later comment about these early days: “I was a passionate photographer, and for a while somewhat guiltily, because I thought that this is a substitute for something else—well for writing, for one thing ...” Mellor noted that Evans once described his photography as “a semi-conscious reaction against right thinking and optimism. It was an attack on the establishment. Wanted to

disturb them. I could just hear my father [an advertising executive] saying, 'Why do you want to look at these scenes, they're depressing? Why don't you look at the nice things in life?'"[12]

One of the first photos that struck Evans, while going through magazines in the public library, was Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* (1916), although he had little use for Strand's work as a whole, and very ambivalent feelings about the latter's mentor, Alfred Stieglitz, whom he felt was too much of an aesthete. Evans set out, like so many American artists of the time, to do hardboiled work. It reminds one again of Meyer Schapiro's comment that "After 1913 we discover more often in this country a type of painter [or photographer or writer] who is both an inventive, scrupulous artist and a tough."[13]

1930 was Evans' first year as a professional photographer. It was also the year, through photographer Berenice Abbott, that he was introduced to the work of Eugène Atget (1857-1927), the great French photographer who had made it his business to document Paris in some 7,000 photos. (Atget also pursued political activities as a lecturer at workers' schools and a follower of the Socialist press.) During these years Evans befriended, among others, the poet Hart Crane, the painter Ben Shahn and art patron Lincoln Kirstein. He began to be exhibited and entered into New York's artistic circles. Ezra Pound commented favorably on his photos.

The grip of the Depression tightened. Evans recorded Victorian architecture at the suggestion of Kirstein in 1931 and sailed to Tahiti, taking photographs for a group of wealthy tourists, in 1932. He was regularly exhibiting at New York galleries by this time.

He had already taken such deservedly famous photos as *Couple at Coney Island, New York* (1928), *Girl in Fulton Street, New York* (1929), *Roadside Gas Sign* (1929), *Posed Portraits, New York* (1931), *Torn Movie Poster* (1931), *Main Street, Saratoga Springs* (1931) and *Parked Car, Small Town Main Street* (1932).

Evans liked to take pictures of buildings, objects, debris. In the first place there was a certain white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant coldness in him. To be provocative he could write in his journal, in 1931, "I am a Fascisti and I think the human race should be kicked around a great deal more than it is, and that I should do the kicking."[14] At the time he traveled in left-wing circles and one of his best friends was Ben Shahn, the painter and photographer who was close to the Communist Party.

The quasi-misanthropic streak had roots as well in certain social phenomena. Evans came from a relatively affluent, suburban Midwestern background. He subsequently attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts and (briefly) Williams College. A photograph of the Williams freshman class in 1922-23, which includes Evans, suggests an insular, privileged, largely homogeneous world, almost a prewar, turn-of-the-century world. Evans rejected all or most of that, but is it likely that his response to the growth of large-scale industry, the rise of the great cities with their ethnically diverse populations and the political and social conflicts of the 1930s would not have had some ambivalence to it?

Evans began collecting picture postcards in the late 1920s. He assembled a portfolio for *Fortune* magazine in 1948 entitled, "Main Street Looking North from Courthouse Square,' carrying 18 examples of postcards dating from 1890 to 1910. Douglas Eklund, in a catalogue essay, notes about one, *Bank Square, "Five Corners," Fishkill-on-Hudson, N.Y.*: "Everything in this golden-age image exists for him in an uncorrupted state ..."[15]

Evans furiously denied that there was an element of "nostalgia" in his own photographing of small and rural communities, and that's no doubt true in the narrow sense. However, the notion that late nineteenth century America was a more manageable and coherent, less corrupt and vulgar place and the longings attached to this notion have an objective basis for certain segments of the population that can't be dismissed so easily.

To a certain diffidence toward other people, women in particular (not to be equated with a lack of success), which might have encouraged a predisposition for photographing objects, one must add the fact that artists of Evans' type and generation saw many reasons to drive out of their work everything ornate, picturesque, sentimental. His rejection of Stieglitz and what he perceived to be pictorialism was quite firm and quite final. He once made a list of things and subjects not to be photographed, and they included nudes, "motherhood" and "anything ever anywhere near a beach."[16] In objects Evans saw human thought and activity materialized. Photographs of nature bored him, but "I am fascinated by man's work and the civilization he's built," he told a group of students late in life.[17]

There is something too to the idea that for Evans, like Cézanne, objects in a still life were the equivalent of human figures. He may have felt that he was less at the mercy of accident and could better determine or set out his ideals of art and human personality when he photographed things. He described the postcard mentioned above as the "epitome of Yankee utilitarianism, in subject, in execution, and in mood."[18] His sharply focused photographs are ceaselessly polemicizing for certain values: restraint, precision, detachment, the irreducible.

Evans liked to photograph signs, graffiti, posters. Sometimes this produces an irony that is a little heavy-handed, like his photo of workmen loading a giant sign reading "Damaged" onto a truck early in the Depression. Should we read his recurring interest in photographing words as an indication of frustrated literary ambitions, or its opposite, a way of making clear, in a playfully hostile manner, that he now had the upper hand over written language? Either tendency would indicate that literature remained an essential model.

For many of the photographs Evans made for the federal Department of Agriculture's Resettlement Authority (RA), renamed the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1937, in the mid-1930s, "he used the longest focal length, which both enlarged the size of the subjects within the frame and, by telescoping near and far, helped him establish a dialogue between foreground and background elements ..."[19] In addition to this deliberate "flattening" of the subject matter when he took long shots (of cities, neighborhoods), Evans often posed or otherwise captured people against walls and building fronts, or simply photographed walls, building fronts, billboards. Nearly everything is shot from the front, hardly any photos are taken from an oblique angle. These are the sorts of arrangements that suggest the "clean," orderly two-dimensionality of words on a page.

Girl in Fulton Street, New York and *Parked Car, Small Town Main Street* are remarkable photos. In the first, the "Girl" in a cloche hat (tight-fitting, bell-shaped), with only one lock of hair peeking out, stands in the center of the picture in profile, looking off to the left. Fulton Street is in downtown Manhattan, in the financial district or on the edge of it. Three men in fedoras, none of whose faces can be seen, are in the foreground behind her. Above their heads one sees a sign hung out on a flag pole across the street, "Fulton Billiard Parlor," other signs ("To Let," "Cafeteria" and parts of two more) and a crane. The girl, with the look of a "flapper," wears a fashionable coat with a fur collar. She has an intense expression on her somewhat hardened face. She's leaning, in the right of the photo, against a store's glass window that makes a right angle at the corner of the street. The glass forms a strip that reflects a jumble of images.

Mellor cites David Wolff in *New Masses* on the photo (which appeared in an exhibit at New York's Museum of Modern Art, "Walker Evans: American Photographs" and a book by the same name in 1938), proving that the publication was not entirely dominated by Stalinist blockheadedness. Wolff noted: "The face itself has a tragic and almost ferocious sensitivity, as if it were a kind of self-portrait of the artist." About Evans' work in general he wrote that it revealed "a certain hideous miscellaneousness of American life." Wolff noted the subject matter of Evans' photos: "the used cars abandoned on a field; a confused and helpless back room, revealed through an open door; the tires, tubes and

spare parts displayed on the front of a garage; and the magic advertising words, the names, the signs, ubiquitous, ugly, meaningless, and powerful."[20]s

In *Parked Car, Small Town Main Street* [http://www.masters-of-photography.com/E/evans/evans_parked_car.html] a young man and woman (brother and sister, husband and wife, lovers?) are seated in an open sedan, looking at the camera. Immediately above their heads in the photo a truck, a blur, drives by. She is closer to the camera and certainly seems to be at the center of the photographer's attention. Part of his face is hidden by the frame of the windshield. The pair seem to be economically comfortable. The hair is pulled back from both of their faces, which are entirely exposed to the photographer's gaze. The sweater she's wearing has been pulled off her shoulders down to the elbows to reveal a white blouse with some kind of ruffle in front. There is something old-fashioned about her clothing and the arrangement of her body; her hands are neatly folded in her lap. The most striking feature of the photo, to which one's eyes return again and again, is the look of anguish on the young woman's face. It's the only element, but an unmistakable one, that indicates crisis, personal and social.

There's little question that Evans thrived on the human and material manifestations of crisis. For all the ironic, somewhat defensive disdain he expressed throughout his life toward political activism and activists (the problem of Stalinism, as always, complicates the matter), the truth is that he came to life as a photographer in the Depression years, hibernated more or less from 1945 to 1964, and was revived somewhat in the radicalized milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It's probably true that for an artist like Evans life presents a more intriguing face at moments when people and social processes are unsettled. This is bound up with his sensuality too in the sense that he was most attracted, it seems, to women about whom there was something restless, "available."

In 1933 he did some important and interesting work documenting social life in Havana for *The Crime of Cuba* by left-wing writer (of Dewey Commission infamy) Carlton Beals. The photographs, of pimps, dock workers, the unemployed, are remarkable, but Evans, perhaps inevitably, remains too much of an interested tourist-observer; the distance here does not work to his advantage.

He began taking pictures for *Fortune* magazine in 1934, including a small assignment on a "Communist Party Summer Camp." In 1935 he took some 500 photos for "African Negro Art" at the Museum of Modern Art.

Evans first went to work for the Resettlement Administration—part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal—on a trial basis, in June and July 1935 taking photos in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. In October he was hired on a full-time basis by Roy Stryker, head of the agency's photographic unit, to record the social conditions of the Depression.

In the spring of 1935, when a job with the RA seemed possible, Evans wrote in the draft of a memorandum: "Mean never [to] make photographic statements for the government or do photographic chores for gov or anyone in gov, no matter how powerful—this is pure record not propaganda. The value, and, if you like even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done. NO POLITICS whatever."[21]

Stryker's unit produced some 270,000 photographs, by Evans, Shahn, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Carl Mydans and others. The photos had propaganda value as far as the Roosevelt administration was concerned. Stryker supplied free pictures to *Fortune*, *Life*, *Look*, *Time* and the *New York Times*. In line with the Stalinist policy of supporting Roosevelt, Shahn, a party sympathizer, designed an exhibit of RA photographs for the 1936 Democratic Party convention.

In late October Evans began his photo-taking expedition in Pennsylvania. He spent time in Bethlehem and Pittsburgh, as well as smaller towns. While in Johnstown he wrote the following note about working conditions, one of his few overt social comments: "The hotel chambermaids in the best hotel in Johnstown get $9 a week without lunch or carfare and contribute to community chest by threat of loss of jobs."[22] He traveled on to Ohio, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. He took remarkable photographs in the black districts of numerous Southern towns, including Vicksburg, Mississippi. Mellor notes: "His politics drew him to the Negro quarter [in New Orleans], and he made many photographs there. But he also savored the street life, photographing toughs (white) on a street corner, prostitutes at their profession."[23]

One of his more memorable Vicksburg photographs, involving one of his favorite devices, is of a black man, in working man's clothing, in front of a billboard bearing larger than life faces of smiling white movie stars (Maureen O'Sullivan most notably). On the last leg of this trip, in the spring of 1936, Evans returned to Alabama, then traveled on to Georgia and South Carolina.

In the summer of 1936, Evans was granted a leave from the RA to work on an assignment with 26-year-old writer James Agee for *Fortune* magazine—whose editorial policy had temporarily taken a leftward turn—on tenant farming in the South. The work the two men produced was ultimately rejected by *Fortune* and became the basis for the renowned *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Agee's overheated prose is too rich for my blood, but Evans' photos have stood the test of time.

Evans had scouted Hale County, Alabama the year before. He and Agee were looking for "a single sharecropper family that would serve as model for the whole condition of the tenant farmer in the Depression South."[24]

In late July in Greensboro, Alabama, Evans met farmer Frank Tingle and two of his kinsmen, Bud Fields and Floyd Burroughs, who worked on adjacent leased farms. Evans took the majority of his photographs in Hale County in and around the four-room home of Floyd and Allie Mae Burroughs. [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/gallery.html]

Evans and Agee spent several weeks with the Burroughs family. "The family owned nothing—not their home, land, mule, or farm tools, all of which they leased from their landlord. Burroughs was a 'sharecropper' or 'halver'; at harvest time he had to give his landlord half his cotton and corn crop and pay off any other debts incurred during the year for food, seed, fertilizer, and medicine. In 1935 he had ended the year only twelve dollars in debt, which was almost a miracle because at the end of 1934 he had owed his landlord eighty dollars."[25]

For the portraits he took against the cabin walls, "Evans placed his camera extremely close to his subjects, so close that it recorded their crow's-feet as well as the grainy patterns in the unpainted pine clapboards behind them." He made four photographs of Allie Mae Burroughs, recording different facial expressions "ranging from bemused cooperation to brooding anger and resentment."[26]

Evans had clearly served his artistic apprenticeship. He had translated his aesthetic sense, first developed in literature, into photographic language. He later observed about the other RA-FSA photographers, with the possible exception of Shahn: "I look at those other photographers and I see that they haven't got what I've got. I'm rather egotistical and conceited about that. I knew at the time who I was, in terms of the eye and that I had a real eye, and other people were occasionally phony about it, or they really didn't see."[27]

As for his social views, this comment, also made in later years, probably sums them up relatively accurately: "The problem is one of staying out of Left politics and still avoiding Establishment patterns. I would not politicize my mind or work.... The apostles can't have me. I don't think an artist is directly able to alleviate the human condition. He's very interested in *revealing* it."[28]

By the time he photographed the Burroughs family, Evans had created for himself the proper intellectual and aesthetic frame of mind. The artist's

attitude toward the family members is one of the decisive elements or themes of the series of pictures, and it is an exemplary one. Evans had shed enough of his diffidence to work his way much closer to his human subjects, without losing his own independent and critical stance.

The photos of Allie Mae Burroughs in particular are sympathetically taken, but their aim is not to elicit the sympathy of the spectator; they have a certain sensuality, without seeking to evoke sensuality in the spectator. Evans had traveled some distance from *Girl on Fulton Street* and *Parked Car*, as remarkable as those photos are, and not simply in terms of subject matter. There is something self-serving about the anxiety in the faces of the two women in those earlier photographs, as if the artist were really saying, "They're anguished without me. I could save them from their unhappiness."

His emotional maturing intersected no doubt with the political and social crisis. In the situation of the Burroughs family he had found a far greater tragedy, although the expressions of Floyd and Allie Mae betray neither anguish nor self-pity. In Alabama Evans had discovered something larger than himself and his career or emotional needs. Of course precisely at the moment the artist puts aside his pettiness and self-absorption, ironically, he plays the most indispensable role. Despite Professor Michaud, the most conscious and worked-through photographs do demonstrate a certain transparency. Or, to paraphrase the Soviet critic Aleksandr Voronsky, the most transparent manner is at the same time the most intellectual.

Evans was able to create such a "marriage of his own mind with the object before him" that he gave something essential to his subjects.[29] The Burroughs family members are not, in these photographs, objects of social consciousness. What is most *revolutionary*, if one may use this word, about the photos is that the family members are clearly presented as the subjects or potential subjects of history. There is nothing about their oppressed state, Evans' photos suggest, intentionally or otherwise, that prevents these people from understanding who or what they are.

Apparently the Burroughses understood or guessed a good deal about the radical social purpose of the literary and photographic work. Years later Allie Mae Burroughs told interviewers that the "big people" in the area told her and her husband that Agee and Evans were "spies from Russia, and that they was trying to get all they could out of the United States. I don't know what spies does, dear, but anyway we knowed that they wasn't going to hurt us, and they didn't. I don't know why they'd say such things about them. They just didn't know them was all... Afraid they might tell us some way to get by, tell us some way to make a better living, so we wouldn't have to dig it out with them, you see. It was the landlords mostly."[30]

When Evans returned from Alabama in September 1936 he went back to work for the RA. In December he set to work researching some 6,000 glass plate negatives of the Civil War that had been acquired by the US government from the great Civil War photographer Matthew Brady in 1875. In January Evans went south again to photograph flood victims in Arkansas and Tennessee. He was cut loose from the federal agency in March 1937. The official explanation: "Services no longer needed."

After *Fortune* turned down the tenant farming essay and photos, Agee spent four years turning the manuscript into a book. The authors also struggled to find a publisher. Houghton Mifflin finally came out with the work in 1941, but the World War had broken out by this time and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* hardly made a dent in public consciousness. The book was reissued to considerable success in 1960, five years after Agee's premature death.

Evans continued to take remarkable photographs (the New York subway series, "Labor Anonymous" in Detroit), but the onset of postwar prosperity and stagnation took its toll. In 1945 he became a full-time staff photographer for *Fortune*, in 1948 the magazine's Special Photographic Editor. He worked for *Fortune* for 20 years. This sounds like a prison sentence to me. He took to drinking heavily, got divorced and remarried during this period. In 1955 he took a series of photographs of pristine tools (crate opener, tin snips, pointing trowel, wrench) against white backgrounds. In 1962 he photographed street debris. He collected road and advertising signs.

After Evans went to work teaching at Yale University in 1964 he seemed to revive somewhat. He believed that art couldn't be taught, "but that it can be stimulated and a few barriers can be kicked down by a talented teacher, and an atmosphere can be created which is an opening into artistic action." Mia Fineman, in her catalogue essay, discusses his teaching methods: "Evans diligently noted his students' interests and projects in small looseleaf notebooks, but he gave no assignments, rarely talked about photography directly, and almost never discussed technique. Instead, as [then graduate student Alston] Purvis recalled, 'he seemed to hover about the subject like a circling hawk.' He engaged his students in freewheeling conversations that touched on music, films, travel, printed ephemera and signs, mutual acquaintances, shyness, French literature, history, and golf..."[31]

In 1971 a major retrospective of his work was held at the Museum of Modern Art. In December a smaller version of the same show was held at the Yale University Art Gallery. In the text accompanying a group of road signs Evans made the following point: "The photographer, the artist, 'takes' a picture: symbolically he lifts an object or a combination of objects, and in so doing he makes a claim for that object or that composition, and a claim for his act of seeing in the first place. The claim is that he has rendered his object in some way transcendent, and that in each instance his vision has penetrating validity."[32]

During the last few years of his life Evans took photographs with the Polaroid SX-70, including a series of traffic arrows on the asphalt of an intersection in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. He died April 10, 1975. The current exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum is the first complete retrospective of his work.

Photographs available at The Walker Evans Project: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/fsa/welcome.html

Notes:

1. *A New History of Photography*, edited by Michel Frizot, 1998, p. 11.
2. *Art in Theory, 1815-1900*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, 1998, p. 667.
3. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, 1977, pp. 226-7.
4. John Berger, "Uses of Photography," *About Looking*, 1980, p. 48.
5. Berger, pp. 48-49, 55.
6. Neville Wakefield, *Postmodernism: The Twilight of the Real*, 1980, p. 25.
7. *A New History of Photography*, p. 736.
8. *A New History of Photography*, p. 737.
9. *A New History of Photography*, p. 16.
10. Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Modern Art*, 1982, p.1 96.
11. Benjamin, pp. 236-7.
12. James R. Mellor, *Walker Evans*, 1999, p. 76.
13. Schapiro, "The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show," *Modern Art*, p. 173.
14. Mellor, p. 143.
15. Douglas Eklund, "'The Harassed Man's Haven of Detachment': Walker Evans and the *Fortune* Portfolio," *Walker Evans*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, p. 124.
16. Mellor, p. 553.
17. Mia Fineman, "'The Eye Is an Inveterate Collector': The Late Work," *Walker Evans*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, p. 132.
18. Eklund, p. 124.
19. Jeff L. Rosenheim, "'The Cruel Radiance of What Is': Walker Evans and the South," *Walker Evans*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000, p. 76.

20. Mellor, pp. 379-80.
21. Mellor, p. 256.
22. Mellor, p. 282.
23. Mellor, pp. 288-9.
24. Mellor, p. 309
25. Rosenheim, pp. 88-89.
26. Rosenheim, p. 89.
27. Mellor, p. 281
28. Mellor, p. 308
29. Wood and Harrison, p. 661.
30. Mellor, p. 326.
31. Fineman, pp. 132-3.
32. Fineman, p. 134.s