

# W A L K E R   E V A N S

R E A D I N G   H I M   B A C K W A R D   A N D   F O R W A R D



J E R R Y   L .   T H O M P S O N

A long time ago when I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas, I took a course on Shakespeare taught by an older man with strong opinions. Among his favorite targets were critics who drew on the work of Freud in explaining scenes from the plays – for example, Hamlet’s emotional encounter with his mother.

“Shakespeare never studied Freud,” he would thunder in a voice well-equipped to read Shakespeare’s plays aloud, which he liked to do, and did well.

Ten years later I was a young faculty member in another university. A professor there was Harold Bloom, reported by some of his students to have a photographic memory. According to them, Bloom remembered what he had read once, forty years ago, as if he had read it that morning. For him the history of literature was not a sequence: it was a display of simultaneous events, like a large painting. At the time (around 1976) he was particularly interested in how one great poet influences another; in the lectures I heard him deliver, he would skip back and forth among the decades and centuries, quoting and discussing passages from this great poet and then that one as if they were in conversation.

Some students who had worked with him joked about his lec-

tures on topics they described as, for example, the influence of Wallace Stevens on Wordsworth. (The English Romantic poet died, of course, thirty years before the American was born.) Bloom was able to see them all as simultaneously present in his prodigious consciousness.

Bloom's approach made a solid point: how we understand an older artist is conditioned by how we understand the art that has come after that older artist. What we see in a work, especially what we as younger practitioners see in the work *that we can use*, is conditioned in part by the problems we are wrestling with ourselves as artists. In this sense, Stevens *can* influence Wordsworth (at least our understanding of Wordsworth) by directing our attention to certain aspects of his achievement – aspects we might not notice if we limited our inquiry to Wordsworth's biography, his correspondence, contemporary sources, acknowledged influences, and so on.

When we take a work of art seriously – not when we breeze by it in a museum, a gallery, or an auction house, pausing to notice only its most outstanding features – we *engage* it. That is to say, we lock into a kind of struggle with it, *wrestle* with it in an attempt to wrench its rich content from within the outer shell that attracts our notice in the first place. During this struggle – if it is a serious one – we are challenged; we are driven to bring all our resources to bear on coming to terms with the work. One of our resources is what we know. In part, we rely on what we know in order to understand a thing new to us.

So if we are at home in conceptual art, we might work through that familiarity to help us find and name what attracts us to Evans. This gambit of understanding might well lead us to insights – insights we might not come to as quickly if we rely on only Evans's biography, his acknowledged influences, his writings at the time he was working, and so on.

But reading history backward is tricky business. We may indeed be led to insights – as Rosalind Krauss was led to rich insights about early-twentieth-century modernist art by reading it backward, through the discoveries and methodologies of postmodernism that came only later in the century. We might also – alas – be led onto paths that wander far out of the way toward dead ends.

Cleanth Brooks, one of the most rigorous proponents of what in

the mid-twentieth century was called the New Criticism, joined a host of influential colleagues to insist that the text – the words before the reader on the printed page – was the poem, that it was the tension among the words on the page that generated the life of the poem, which could not be adequately reached (or explained away) by relying on historical and biographical information alone rather than on close reading. But Brooks near the end of his scholarly career published a book on seventeenth-century English poetry, a book that relied on careful consideration not only of the words in the poems but also of what those words actually could have meant at the time the poems had been written. He attempted to square *reading backward* with *reading forward* by combining the most useful elements of each approach.

In “reading” Evans, it is appropriate to bring every energetic connection the reader can to the encounter. For working artists, perhaps the encounter can end at this point: find what is of use in something that excites you, and make use of it. Steal what you can glean from the past and make it your own.

But a more temperate stance will disclose another, larger possibility: one that combines the complex interconnections and references revealed in an energetic engagement (on one hand) with (on the other) a consideration of what it was possible for the artist to try to do, given what we can know of his temperament, his disposition, his interests, his range of interests and abilities – and his historical time.

Why is this approach better than merely mining the great resource left behind for what can be of use today, *right now*?<sup>2</sup> Because a more temperate stance might disclose an entirely new prospect. This more temperate approach might lead to the largest, richest picture we are likely to see of what a body of work is, of what it shows. What any of us knows is a keyhole; through it we might glimpse what is outside, beyond the door, but only narrowly. If what is outside is Evans – and through him the whole civilized world he knew and established a nonprescriptive visual relationship with – then that outside is very large indeed. Much of it may lie beyond the boundaries of what we, from the recent, more specialized art we know, are accustomed to think. We need to

make use of any resources we can to help us imagine a full, accurate picture of an outside which may lie beyond our ken.

In considering an artist such as Walker Evans – an artist whose work continues to attract interest long after the historical dates of his active career – it is helpful to keep a distinction in mind: a distinction between the artist's *horizon of articulate discourse*, on one hand, and on the other the artist's *horizon of perception*.

I must immediately pause to make clear that by *perception* I do not intend to limit my meaning to matters of physical psychology, to what Kant means by *understanding*: that is, the combining of physical stimuli into a recognizable, intelligible awareness. Perception (used this narrow way) is what allows us to recognize that a shape on a wall is not merely a spot of color but actually a door.

What I mean here by perception includes this, but goes on to embrace something more, a something we might call *insight*. Understood as I here intend, simple perception would disclose to us that we see a wall with a door. The sort of perception I am attributing to great artists might also understand that *door* can be a metaphor suggesting, for example, a way through an apparent barrier. The artist might see the door as more than just a working device useful as we go about our normal daily business. This is the kind of perception the American sculptor Chris Wilmarth would have had in mind when he titled one of his sculptures *Doors Give Reasons*.

So an artist has a range of perceptions (in this broader sense), but also a range of *articulate discourse*: that is, an ability to put these insights into articulate speech, or at least to say in a clear way what these insights might be.

Kant is helpful here. In section 46 of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* he tells us that genius is not able to understand (in an articulate way) what it does or produce what it produces at will. He likens genius to a force of nature, which simply *is*, there for us to figure out. (A few years later Coleridge will quote Plotinus as authority that Nature accomplishes her work in silence – not by answering foolish questions from mortals, but in *silence*.)

Later students, Kant goes on to say, may give an articulate account of what genius has done – but only after the fact. These

students are able to infer the *rules* explaining what genius has done, the rules genius itself gives (or, as Kant puts it, Nature gives through genius) but is incapable of explaining.

So a breakthrough artist will do more than he or she can explain. Later students will formulate an explanation of what the great artist has done. The history of art history (and criticism) demonstrates both that this explanation may come long after the actual artist has died, and also that other explanations may continue to appear for as long as that artist's work is looked at with interest.

What would Shakespeare make of Freud's discussion of passages in his plays? What would Homer make of Eva Brann's discussions of Homeric moments? Latter-day comments are not necessarily wrong simply because the makers of the works discussed would not understand the discussions. The artists' horizons of discourse were not as broad as their horizons of perception.

To return to Evans: when he died in April 1975, he had, so far as I know, no awareness of conceptual art or of what today is commonly called the postmodern critique of photography. In a 1973 essay Susan Sontag had pointedly questioned his criteria for what a good photograph should be – literate, authoritative, transcendent. Though I was spending a lot of time in conversation with Evans during that and the following year, I do not recall hearing any evidence that he ever took notice of her comment.

I do recall his attempts (that same year) at stimulating conversation with a young art student, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design and one of the two or three students in the Yale photography program most "advanced" in their thinking about art (the walls of her New Haven apartment were painted metallic silver, in imitation of Andy Warhol's taste in decoration). As a way of furthering some topic under discussion Evans introduced a comment from Henry James, asking her what she thought of James. "Walker, you know we don't read that stuff," she answered.

Evans continued to read that stuff until the end of his life. During his recuperation from a life-threatening stomach surgery in 1973 he was pleased, after a month or two, to find that he was well enough, and again able to concentrate sufficiently, to resume serious reading. Two of the first books he acquired were *Flaubert*

in *Egypt* by Francis Steegmuller and the final volume of the five-volume life of Henry James by Leon Edel.

Looking at Evans by looking back through the forty years which have passed since his death will lead to insights worth knowing about. Looking at the well-known *Studio* picture after considering postmodern “interrogations” of *portrait* will suggest aspects of that work of art we might not consider when we take it to be the straightforward documentation of a shop window display. Instead of understanding the picture to be a record of 225 small-town faces as they looked in the mid-1930s, the present-day sophisticated viewer, one aware of the interpretive strategies of postmodernism, might find in the picture a questioning of what a portrait itself is, and a meditation on the difference between the first photographer’s “human” contact with his sitters one by one, and the second photographer’s taking of their surface likenesses all at once, with no pretense of interaction, personal contact, or knowledge of them of any kind. Is there a difference between the two acts of taking? Where is “knowledge of them of any kind,” or, for that matter, meaning, to be found? The sophisticated viewer may be moved to ask questions such as these.

In the same way, *American Photographs* (1938) can be understood not as the oeuvre of an auteur but as part of a political strategy to establish an American art, an attempt orchestrated by forceful individuals involved with important institutions (and large vested interests), an attempt in which Evans figures not as sole author but as an actor – perhaps even as something of a pawn – whose pictures were useful but not determinative of the overall effect of the work (the exhibition and the book) presented to the American public by New York’s Museum of Modern Art. This line of analysis will highlight aspects of the work we would not otherwise notice, perhaps even make some of the work’s features more readily understandable.

Both these “revisionist” readings are supported by the work in question. Is either reading *demande*d by the work (in the sense that to attempt any other reading would be necessarily wrong, would be to turn the work on its head)? The only realistic answer to this question must be no. Both these suggested revisionist approaches take advantage of critical points of view, critical strategies, which have become familiar in recent decades – decades

that have passed *after* the person named Walker Evans left the scene. The works may support such readings, but they surely do not demand them. And Evans himself would not have articulated these approaches, *could* not have: they are beyond his horizon of articulate discourse – though not, perhaps, beyond the horizon of *perception* suggested by, and discoverable in, the richness of the work he left behind.

This richness of perception enables the line of thinking in play in the first example in particular. In the second example, it is more the case that the equivocal (read: *equi-vocal*, speaking with several equal voices) character of the combination of pictures in the book *American Photographs* – that is to say, the work’s reticence in committing to a clear “message” – leaves a kind of vacant space, one that makes room for suspecting other motives, and for looking toward historical forces larger than any single personal motive. And yet this vacancy might be a richness of another kind.

Revisionist readings, present-day readings, are thought-provoking and thus useful *so long as they enlarge the richness of the work rather than diminish it*. When such readings try to replace “older” readings altogether, they diminish the work. They make it narrower, more exclusive of possibilities, less rich. And to do this (I say with confidence) is to misunderstand Evans – perhaps all great art – from the ground up.

Near the beginning of this essay I wrote that though additions contributed by ways of looking developed since an artist’s death are welcome, ignoring the artist’s historical time altogether could lead to missing an entirely new prospect. In the example of Evans, what is this prospect? What of great importance is added by pointedly recalling Evans’s actual era, the years he was alive?

Evans’s extreme sophistication, and the large number of successful photographers coming after him who continue to invoke his example while practicing a wide variety of art- and picture-making strategies, combine to convince us of his continued relevance, of his *contemporaneity*, even. But Evans was born in 1903; he had just turned fifteen when the Great War came to an end. Dwelling on this simple fact forces us to confront another, far-reaching fact: as modern as his sensibility would come to seem, Evans had one foot firmly planted in the nineteenth century.

Lincoln Kirstein (who was born in 1907) liked to say he was

born in the 107th year of the nineteenth century. He maintained that the social, cultural, and technical changes we think of as the twentieth century did not begin until the Great War ended. By then, Evans was fifteen. He left home to go away to several schools; by 1918 his tastes were already well on the way to being formed. He would adopt the speech, the manners, the culture – and, significantly, the dress – of a gentleman, of a man of the better class. His Andover graduating class would include a wealthy South American (known to his classmates as the Peruvian Prince), as well as a future member of the diplomatic mission to the Court of St. James. The young Evans spent a few months in Paris, learned French, and read serious literature in that language as well as in English. He dressed as well as his finances allowed. His only handicap (other than poverty) was his origin in the Midwest: born in St. Louis and reared in a Chicago suburb. But this he overcame; like his fellow St. Louisan Thomas Stearns Eliot, he became cosmopolitan. In a note sent to accompany a display of his photographs in a 1930 group exhibition in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he identifies himself as living in “New York and Paris.”

He took up photography in the latter part of the 1920s, a time when the most advanced visual artists – the surrealists – were experimenting with it and lauding its possibilities. The surrealists embraced Eugène Atget, whom Evans would acknowledge as one of the few photographers he admired. In these respects, his interest in photography was forward-looking, a natural response to the artistic ferment of his times.

But photography for Evans had a backward-looking component as well. His first published writing on photography appeared in *Hound and Horn* in late 1931. This review and discussion of several recent books on photography was called “The Reappearance of Photography”; its opening sentence reads, “The real significance of photography was submerged soon after its discovery.”

*What?* Evans immediately directs his reader’s attention not to photography as it is today, but to photography’s beginnings – to the past. In that past Evans finds workers to praise for their faith in the value of factual record. He will mention “certain men of the past century” who “stood away from this utter confusion,” the confusion between photography and “art” surrounding the American photography practiced at the time of his writing.

In this vein, about the time his essay appeared he gave a collection of small studio portraits to his friend Lincoln Kirstein. According to Kirstein's recollection in later life, Evans told him that these simple, straightforward studio portraits showed "what photography could do." This *what photography could do* was not the coy irony or clever boulevard tricks of surrealism; this *what photography could do* was straightforward fact, fact not leavened with a dose of Gallic wit but delivered straight up, in a Protestant (even Puritan) manner.

This respect for photography's earliest achievement is part of Evans's rootedness in the nineteenth century. Much later (around 1970), when Evans was a professor (of graphic design) at Yale University, he was sometimes asked about photography's (then) growing popularity among the young. (During those years the bearded, long-haired young men seen in centers of youth culture, such as the campuses of progressive colleges, frequently had 35-mm cameras hanging from neck or shoulder; universities all over America were adding photography courses and programs to their art departments.) In answer, he consistently said he believed the young admired the camera's honesty, that they had faith in the camera's ability to record the truth. In this he echoed what he had written in a letter to the Ford Foundation in 1960, when he characterized his own work as having to do with "actuality in depth . . . with contemporary truth and reality."

Evans began his work in photography with small, hand-held cameras. His earliest pictures reflect the visual style in vogue at the time (1927–28): angle shots and active geometric patterns found in everyday surroundings, especially in the architecture of the modern city. But soon Evans took up a larger camera and adopted a different relation to his subject matter. He tended to face his subjects head on, and to photograph them so as to reveal a maximum amount of detail. His large negatives recorded the photographic detail that had fascinated nineteenth-century commentators Edgar Allan Poe and William Henry Fox Talbot, among many others.

The literary critic Alan Trachtenberg has compared Evans's camera to the quadrant, sextant, or compass in Hart Crane's poem "At Melville's Tomb," as if the camera for Evans was a sort of magic tool he carried as he walked the streets of New York. In fact

something of the magical attaches to the nineteenth-century understanding of photography. In his “Little History of Photography” (first published in German in 1931), Walter Benjamin quotes an early daguerreotypist who reports, “We didn’t trust ourselves at first to look long at the first pictures we developed. We . . . believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could look back at us, so baffling were the effects on everyone of the unusual clarity and the unusual fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes.”

As Evans veers away from the abstractions and toward the straightforward views made with his magic machine, he is veering away from photography’s *present* toward its *past*, its beginnings. He is veering from the glimpse to the stare, and in a sense from willful control to revelation. He sets up his “magic machine” – this takes time – and looks at the ground-glass viewing screen: this too takes time. Finally, he makes the exposure, which takes additional time: an interior view he made in a Saratoga Springs hotel lobby (a picture made in 1930 or 1931 with his first view camera, a 6½ x 8½) shows a clock with an hour hand, but no minute hand. The exposure was so long that movement of the minute hand prevented the recording of its clear image.

It is as if one were to think that a view camera is a magical thing, a thing which, if pointed at some other thing, could – over time – penetrate that thing, penetrate somehow beneath the surface to capture – what? An essence? A truth? Something not noticed by the human operator in the distracted midst of his everyday business? In the same essay Benjamin identifies the *something* as the “tiny spark of contingency, the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared through the image-character of the photograph [that is, seared through the photographer’s deliberate ‘pictorial composition’].”

This thinking is a relic, a residue of photography’s earliest days. But it was available, within the horizon of articulate discourse, for Benjamin in 1931. This thinking (or something like it) was also available to Evans – if not fully available within his horizon of articulate discourse, yet certainly available within his horizon of perception. As a man with one foot in the nineteenth century, as an admirer of Mathew Brady (Evans visited Brady’s studio to buy prints while in Washington in the mid-1930s), Evans understood something of the magic attaching to close seeing with a large

camera. It formed a part of his understanding of what photography was and what photography could do.

This understanding was by no means the whole of his understanding, nor did it crowd out other understandings, other ways of working. He continued to use a hand-held camera after taking up the view camera, sometimes even using both to photograph the same subject matter during a single session, at almost the same time. Other aspects, even of the view camera pictures, come to light when we look *back* at Evans through all the developments we have seen since his death. But if we concentrate on his roots in the nineteenth century we see most easily, most quickly, his connection to an understanding of photography – photography as magic revelation – which has today all but passed from the scene. If we miss this aspect of Evans – if we think of him as our contemporary, paying him what we take to be the great compliment of elevating him to our “advanced” level – we miss the purchase his work has on an altogether different way of looking at the world, a way of looking able to accept more than it needs to control, able to present more than it explains, and able to content itself with explanations not narrow, determinate, or final.

Up to this point, what I have been saying has had mainly to do with Evans’s historical situation as a certain kind of man born in a certain place at a certain time. These considerations are largely external to his work. The last point, perhaps the most important point to make, is *internal*, a point having to do with the content (or vision) of the work itself.

After looking over Evans’s pictures thoughtfully, again and again – after reading them backward and forward, if you will – and after considering all the surviving texts I know of, as well as replaying in memory all remembered conversations, pronouncements (these were few and mostly not about photography), and remarks to others I can recall – after doing all this over a period of forty-plus years, I have come to conclude that the work of Walker Evans establishes a visual relationship to the world we live in, one rare among artists of any kind, and almost unique among photographers.

Evans’s skill at finding and organizing subject matter of use to him is a skill not limited by narrow paradigms of articulate under-

standing. His skill allows him to seize pieces of the visible world – images of things and collections of things – in such a way that they present themselves as significant *without insisting on any particular interpretation that explains that significance*. In other writings, I have searched for parallels, or predecessors, for this kind of vision; I have come up with (from among the small group whose work I know well) artists like John Keats, who, in the letter that names and describes negative capability, cites Shakespeare as the preeminent exemplar in English of this quality.

By negative capability, Keats says he means a condition “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” For Keats this state is opposed to reliance on “consequitive reasoning,” the simple belief in logic, the belief that one thing must follow from another, as Newton’s laws had promised. (Keats wrote that “cold philosophy” such as Newton’s had managed to “unweave the rainbow.”)

On one hand this quality of negative capability is a kind of suspension of judgment, a withholding, hence the qualifier *negative*. But on the other, the stance is one that allows the poet – the artist – to see, and to poetize, hence the root *capable*.

This duality of impulse occupied Martin Heidegger almost to the point of obsession. His explorations – in a late note he calls these attempts finally “unsatisfactory” as explanations – go farther into what is actually involved in the conflicted stance Keats manages to name: “This ‘letting [happen]’ is nothing passive, but a doing in the highest degree,” Heidegger writes, in an attempt to describe what he elsewhere terms “essential knowing” or “thoughtful heedfulness.” This he defines as a kind of understanding that does not involve aggressively projecting what we already know, and does not involve a need to “attack” or “master” the matter under investigation. He is trying to describe an understanding receptive, yet at the same time active, in recognizing and incorporating what is received, a stance in which the active effort is spent in preparing a place for what comes from the outside, of its own.

Heidegger repeatedly voices concern that this kind of thoughtful understanding has passed from the modern world. In his bleakest assessment (“The Age of the World Picture,” 1938), he sees the kind of open understanding he has tried to describe as

being replaced increasingly by a narrower, harder way of “grasping” the world, which he terms *research*: the procedure of asking increasingly more specialized questions about smaller and smaller pieces of the world to learn ever more fragmentary (and disconnected) facts. “Thoughtful heedfulness” looks to the other extreme – looks *back* to the other extreme, as Heidegger reads history. Is it going too far to find a parallel between this vast difference and the difference between the wholeness of vision discoverable in Evans’s best work as compared to the fragmented concerns with aspects of representation and the history of image-making we find on display in much of the art photography in galleries and museums today? Is it possible that we as thinkers have lost faith in the possibility of wholeness, and in the possibility that art can still work magic?

In trying to describe the accomplishment of Evans, I have come to dwell on looking carefully. *Yes of course*: I imagine the words forming on the lips of any serious present-day photographer who happens to read this. *We know all this. This is what we all do, all of us who use a camera. That is where we start.* But many who think this will quickly add, *But that is not enough. Today the best of us go on beyond this modest goal to do other, more ambitious things with the images we capture.*

This reasoning parallels the stance of Marcel Duchamp, who dismissed the painting of his day as “merely retinal.” His brilliance could not be channeled into a goal so narrow and so modest as the merely retinal. He had to put his thinking – the index of his brilliance – on full display.

*Yes of course*: but maybe not. What Evans at his best does is not *what we all do*, nor is his goal a modest one.

What Evans does is not what we expect from photographers who have come to prominence during the past forty years. Like Duchamp, from these we expect something more, some obvious thoughtfulness that reflects on the work being done even as it accomplishes that work. We expect portraits that question what a portrait is, landscapes that call the genre into question as a legitimate undertaking even as the picture sets out (some) lay of (some) land for us to see, and reflect upon.

All pictures run the risk of staying on the surface of seeing,

whatever else they may aim to accomplish. *Item: landscape*, set before the viewer. This view is good enough to serve my purpose; now how can I tweak it so that *my reflections on what is being shown* are what the viewer will take away from the experience of looking at the picture?

Finding a view *good enough to serve my purpose* is not the same as being taken by/taking a view – both components, active and receptive, have to be in full play – with such energy and determination that the choosing/chosen view (again, two components at work) for the moment completely fills the being of the photographer, and that – again, for the moment – nothing else matters but getting every aspect of that view exactly right.

This is what Evans at his best does. Reflection comes later, if at all. Evans's own particular reflection – if he ever makes it; he said again and again that he did not – will have no privileged standing to set it above the reflection of any other serious looker who engages/is engaged by the picture. A deliberate reflection, a conscious motive, was not the cause of the picture, so it makes little sense to look to Evans for one.

Thus we continue to see, forty years after the living man breathed his last breath, serious, energetic observers attempting to tell us what Evans was doing – and continuing to find different things to tell. This is because what Evans was doing involved looking at his world in a thoughtful way. It is not his “intention” or his “message” that sets his work apart. Rather, it is the quality of the looking and the quality of his thoughtfulness. Further – and this is key – *this thoughtfulness derives directly and completely from the scene, from the collection of things in front of his camera/eye*: it is not a thoughtfulness imported, fully developed, from some external body of developed knowledge or some developed theoretical approach. As in the process Heidegger labored to explain, the awareness in Evans's best pictures derives from the things themselves. This explains why we can still puzzle over his work today.

“If I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world,” said James Joyce in conversation. “In the particular is contained the universal.” Even if not within the horizon of Evans's articulate discourse, this insight lies at the heart of Evans's perception of his world.