

**WALKER EVANS AND ROBERT FRANK:
AN ESSAY ON INFLUENCE**

BY TOD PAPAGEORGE

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MONOGRAPH IS TO describe the influence of Walker Evans' *American Photographs* (1938) on *The Americans* (1959) of Robert Frank. To do this, the photographs in the two books have been edited and yoked together in a series of comparisons. What follows, then, is an exercise in speculation, one born of love and respect. It is offered as a working idea rather than an assured truth, a reasoned pretext for returning to the two great books it examines.

Frank's photographs are printed here according to the way they were cropped in the Grove Press edition (1959) of his book; my discussion of *The Americans* will be based on this version of it.¹ A small black book beautifully printed in gravure, this edition presented Frank's pictures as a sequence of charged, lyric poems. In the later editions of *The Americans* (New York, *Aperture*, 1969; 1978), this sense of intimacy has been lost, both because the printing of the book changed, and because many of the photographs which had been precisely framed in the Grove version have been shown by Frank in these editions in uncropped variations or some other form. This has had the affect of compromising the impression of controlled ferocity that marked the earlier book, where every picture, regardless of the complexity of its structure, was clear and realized. Since the Grove book also describes Frank's original response to present purposes, the definitive edition.

Many of the matched photographs

This essay was originally written in 1981 for a catalog produced in conjunction with an exhibition curated by Tod Papageorge at the Yale University Art Gallery. Copyright by Tod Papageorge. Papageorge has been the director of the Graduate Study in Photography at the Yale School of Art since 1979. A book of his work, Passing Through Eden: Photographs of Central Park, was published this year by Steidl. This essay is the first to appear in The Missing Criticism series, which republishes out-of-print writing on photography.

reproduced here obviously, and remarkably, echo one another; they demonstrate that, to a significant degree, Frank used Evans' work as an iconographical sourcebook for his own pictures. The photographs that make up the rest of the comparisons, however, more loosely resemble one another, since they have been paired to describe something less tangible than clear correspondences of subject-matter, and, because of this, have been formally matched on the basis of only minor visual similarities. In a general sense, these comparisons are meant to remind us that the true shape of influence is one composed of feeling as well as conscious recognition, and, more particularly, to suggest that Frank found in Evans' work not only a guide to what he might photograph in America, but a vision of how he might understand what he saw here. On pages 40 and 41, for example, the plate-like space that both pictures delineate is less relevant to the purposes of this book than the common sympathy the photographs express for the harrowing sorrow of being black in this country. And while a tin relic and a flag (20, 21) may be difficult to reconcile as a comparison, they are here because, apart from being stunning photographs, they speak of a mutual skepticism – the Ionic column is crushed, the flag immense and torn – and of both photographers' gift for symbol-making.

The problem of composing these less literal comparisons could have been approached by using pictures not found in *American Photographs*. Frank obviously knew the work that Evans had done from fixed camera positions in the streets of Detroit and Chicago in 1946-47; he also clearly knew the great series of subway portraits that Evans had completed by 1941, but did not release in book form for twenty-five years (*Many Are Called*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1966). Yet, while it is probable that Frank learned from all of Evans' work, his debt to *American Photographs* is so profound that, by considering this one book, we can observe not only the fact of influence, but the way in which a brilliant young photographer embraced and comprehended a masterpiece.

IN 1947, WHEN HE WAS 23, ROBERT FRANK emigrated from Switzerland to the United States, and for two years worked as a fashion photographer in New York City. In 1950, he returned to Europe and, until 1952, traveled and photographed in Paris, Spain, Wales, and London. The pictures he made then are suffused with the mists and somberness one would expect

to find in the work of any young follower of Bill Brandt, but the best of them were also intensely conceived, and openly described a sense of life that was serious and even tragic in its understanding.

Frank would probably be remembered for these photographs (as Walker Evans would be remembered for his work of the late twenties), even if he had done nothing else. But after returning to New York and a career as a freelance photographer, he applied for, and was granted, the first Guggenheim Fellowship in photography awarded to a non-American. In 1955-56, with the support of this fellowship, he traveled across the United States, his ambition “to produce an authentic contemporary document; the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation.”²

He prepared a book from the work he had done on this project, but could not find an American publisher for it. Then, in 1958, Robert Delpire published *Les Américains* in France and Italy, and, in the following year, Grove Press, apparently using additional sheets that had been printed in Europe, produced *The Americans* in this country.

The few critics who bothered to write about Frank’s book when it was first published detested it; words like “warped,” “sick,” “neurotic,” and “joyless” were used to characterize the work. Although, in retrospect, this response appears hysterical, it should be remembered that these critics – for the most part, writers in the photographic press – were reacting to a style of picture-making as much as they were condemning what they regarded as a captious attack on America. At a time when the dominant public sense of photography’s possibilities was identified with photojournalism and with the cherubic buoyancy of Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibition, *The Americans* presented harsh, difficult reading. By insisting that an iconography composed of common phenomena like a jukebox or gas station might compete with one that celebrated universal issues, and by articulating a style that embodied, as Jack Kerouac put it, “the strange secrecy of a shadow”³ rather than the public, choreographed grace of “the decisive moment,” Frank’s book contradicted assumptions that a significant part of the photographic community had adopted as law.

To Frank, however, photojournalism was a meretricious form of photography. It simplified the world and, in addition, contorted it into a shape that permitted, as he once said,

“those goddamned stories with a beginning and an end.”⁴ But its most subtle danger was that it allowed its greatest practitioners to subvert the very question of the truth by concentrating their skills on creating pictures that were beautiful, rather than directly responsive to experience. Since, as Frank understood it, the photojournalist’s implicit obligation was to approve of what he described, his intelligence and ability could then only be used to display not what he felt, but how gracefully he was able to make a picture.

It appears that Frank identified Henri Cartier-Bresson with what he thought was glib and insubstantial about photojournalism. *The Decisive Moment*, Cartier-Bresson’s first major book, had been published in 1952, and, among a small congregation of photographers, resulted in the fraternal canonization of the French artist. Grown men were reported to have seen him become invisible as he photographed, but even the skeptics who could not believe *that* regarded him and his work with awe. Frank, however, would have none of it, saying of the great French photographer that “you never felt he was moved by something that was happening other than the beauty of it, or just the composition.”⁵

Yet while it was clear that Frank had rejected the influence of Cartier-Bresson, it was not at all apparent that his work had been affected by that of any other photographer. Frank had produced *The Americans* in little more than two years. His earlier, European pictures had been radically different in form – they had, in fact, looked much more like Cartier-Bresson’s photographs of the thirties. Therefore, when other photographers began to recognize the brilliance of *The Americans*, Frank’s achievement was thought to be sudden, unprecedented, self-born; and when he then gave up photography for film-making only a few years after the publication of his book, the frame for a myth was established. Although *The Americans* deeply influenced the work of the following generation of photographers, it itself was assumed to have escaped the pressures and continuities of tradition.

During this period, Walker Evans was probably as secreted a presence in the small world of serious photography as a major artist could have been. In 1956, a group of his photographs was included in a show at the Museum of Modern Art,⁶ but his last significant exhibition had taken place eight years earlier at the Art Institute of Chicago, and his next did not occur until 1962, again at the Museum of

Modern Art, in conjunction with the publication of the second edition of *American Photographs*. Garry Winogrand, then a member of the American Society of Magazine Photographers and an associate of the Pix photo agency, has said that Evans' work was never mentioned in the discussions he had then with other photographers, most of whom were ambitious photojournalists. Only when Winogrand mentioned his plans for a cross-country trip did Dan Weiner, a friend of his – and, incidentally, a photographer about whose work Evans later wrote some appreciative words – advise him to look at *American Photographs*.

Despite Evans' relative anonymity, his respect for Frank was a matter of public record. He had helped him apply for the Guggenheim Fellowship which supported the production of *The Americans*, and, although this was less known, had had to insist that Frank make the application when the younger photographer wanted to return to Europe to work. He also wrote eloquently about the selection of Frank's work that was included in the 1958 *U.S. Camera Annual*. But, with all this, it appears that Evans was regarded as just a sponsor from whom Frank had received nothing more than the letters of recommendation an artist or scholar is expected to write for someone young and gifted.

There were reasons, however – apart from Evans' relationship to Frank, and even apart from the connections between their pictures – why *American Photographs* might have been remembered after Frank's book was published. Both books were bound in black (Evans' in bible cloth, the cover of hymnals), and were almost the same size – *American Photographs* a bit taller, *The Americans* slightly longer, to accommodate the different shapes of their pictures. Evans' book contained eighty-seven photographs, Frank's eighty-three. And, of course, the titles of the two books – as well as the block layout of their title pages – echoed one another. Even the spare design of *The Americans*, which was unusual at a time when most picture books were laid out like magazines, might have recalled *American Photographs*, since this design can be described almost exactly by quoting a critic's reservation about the first edition of Evans' book: "The pictures are printed on the right-hand page, the left unsullied except for a page numeral. Though the treatment is in keeping with the book, the reader would probably prefer to have a few of the aids to easy enlightenment such as captions, and possible footnotes with the

pictures."⁷ But no one, apparently, noticed these resemblances.

Although, since *The Americans* was published, Frank has consistently stated that Walker Evans (along with Bill Brandt) was the photographer who most influenced his work,⁸ the few writers who have discussed the two men in relation to one another generally have done so by setting them in a Manichaean opposition. In this equation, Evans, on the side of the angels, is seen as a moralist whose work unequivocally accepts and elevates the raw material of vernacular American culture, while Frank, in the devil's party, is seen as the photographic equivalent of Rimbaud – an anarchic poet who sings one brutal song, and then, in despair and exaltation, or whatever joy is found in conjunction with the creation of something incomparable, denies his gift by rejecting it.⁹ That the sorrowing world Frank's book describes has been set against Evans' lightstruck community, where, in at least a casual reading, everything possesses the clear gorgeousness of achieved fact, is unsurprising. But the suggestion that the two photographers are related only because they share the same general subject ignores the particular debt that *The Americans* owes to *American Photographs*, and, with that, disregards the most subtle triumphs of Frank's book, its transformation of Evans' vision.

THE FIRST CRITICS OF *THE AMERICANS* condemned its content; recent critics have attacked it by attempting to describe Frank's photographic style. Possibly reacting to the variations in cropping that appear in the later editions of the book, or, more probably, looking for the "snapshot aesthetic" under any available stone, they have assumed this style to be haphazard and contemptuously casual. One writer, for example, has said that Frank "produced pictures that look as if a kid had taken them while eating a Popsicle and then had them developed and printed at the corner drugstore."¹⁰ The things in Frank's pictures which have bothered these critics – occasional blur, obvious grain, the use of available light, the cutting off of objects by the frame – are all, however, characteristic of picture journalism, and, arguably, of the entire history of hand-camera photography: Erich Salomon's work, for example, done for the most part in the twenties, could be discussed in similar terms. The form of Frank's work, then, is not radical in the true sense of the word: it does not strike to the root of the tradition it serves. The stylistic exaggerations

which occur in his pictures serve only to retain that sense of resident wildness we recognize in great lyric poetry – they are present to call attention not to themselves, but to the emotional world of Frank’s subjects, and to his response to those subjects. When, in the statement he wrote shortly before *The Americans* was published, Frank said: “It is important to see what is invisible to others. Perhaps the look of hope or the look of sadness. Also it is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph,”¹¹ he was expressing his belief that both his perceptions (it is significant that he does not mention an intervening camera in these sentences) and the photographs which result from them are essentially unmediated and true.

This desire of Frank’s to hold the shape of his feelings in what he made is an ambition found in all Romantic art, one that his style brilliantly encompasses and describes. There is a wonderful illusion of speed trapped in his photographs, a sense of rapidity usually created not by the movement of Frank’s subjects, but by the gesture that he made as he framed his pictures. To photographers who have followed Frank, this autographic gesture incorporates a mystery, one that is distorted, and certainly not explained, by saying that he “shot on the run” or “from the hip.”¹² For the beauty of this gesture is that, caught by such speed, his subjects remain clear, fully recognized, as if the photographer had only glanced at what he wanted to show, but was able to seize it at the moment it unhesitatingly revealed itself.

Despite the grace of this notational style (or perhaps because of it), Frank seems to have felt that movement *within* the frames of his photographs would only disturb their sense, and, with a few exceptions, ignored the use of dramatic gesture and motion in *The Americans* (a fact which again suggests his feeling about Cartier-Bresson’s work). In two of his pictures of convention delegates, and in one of a woman in a gambling casino, he shows emphatic hand gestures. In another photograph, he looks down onto a man striding forward under a neon arrow, and, in yet another, describes two girls skipping away from his camera (21). Otherwise, his subjects move, if at all, toward, and, in a single memorable case (55), by him – studies in physiognomy, rather than disclosures of a gathering beauty.

The characteristic gestures in his pictures are the slight, telling motions of the head and upper body: a glance (19, 37), a stare (15, 41), a hand brought to the face (35, 51, 53),

an arched neck (17, 55), pursed lips (15, 31). They suggest that Frank, like Evans, believed significance in a photograph might be consonant with the repose of the things it described. His pictures, of course, are not acts of contemplation – they virtually catalogue the guises of anxiety – but they are stilled, and their meanings found not in broad rhythms of gesture and form, but in the constellations traced by the figures or objects they show, and the short, charged distances between them.

One of the unacknowledged achievements of *The Americans* is the series of group portraits – odd assemblages of heads, usually seen in profile, that gather in quick, serried cadences and push at the cutting edges of their frames. In the soft muted light that illuminates them, these heads are drawn with the sculptural brevity of those found on worn coins. But, even in this diminishment, as they cluster and fill the shallow space of Frank’s pictures, they assume the unfurling, cursive shapes of great Romantic art.

As this book shows (31, 35, 41, 51, 53, 55), these photographs beautifully elaborate Evans’ hand-camera pictures, pictures which are not as judgmental as Frank’s, but also not as formally complex and moving. Although Frank’s most literal recastings of *American Photographs* occur when he is remembering Evans’ view-camera pictures – for example, a gas station (46), a parked car (14), a statue (58) – these extravagant translations of the older photographer’s bluntest work eloquently reveal one aspect of Frank’s extraordinary gifts as a photographer.

THE EFFECT OF FRANK’S PICTURES IS inseparable from the direct, rapid voice that seems to inform them. Evans’ photographs, on the other hand, appear impersonal, and usually are presented as if they were just the inevitable result of a process in which someone (Evans) had found a subject (or let it find him), set up a camera (in noon light), framed the picture (centered it), and exposed his film (one sheet for each subject). This is a magician’s illusion, of course – such clarity is bought only at the cost of prodigious labor and concentration – but it is this illusion which takes us again and again to Evans’ pictures, as if by studying them we felt we could discover where, in all that sunlight, the photographer had left the clue that would reveal how such a radiant deceit had been carried out.

It might be thought that Evans’ use of the view camera demanded this plain style. The

employment of such a camera requires at least physical deliberation since a tripod must be put in place for the machine to be used; and, because its frame is relatively square, the camera could be assumed to have been designed to directly face a centered subject. As a comparison with the work of his contemporaries would show, however, Evans' insistence on this frontal, archer's stance constituted a remarkable conception of photographic style, one that, even for its time, probably appeared willfully spare and austere.

A result of this stance is that it forces attention to the surfaces rather than to the sculptural mass of Evans' subjects; at the same time, it is sufficiently distanced that his photographs deny us the embarrassing pleasures of pure texture. In Evans' early work of the twenties, space had been compressed and deployed in patterns that appeared as significant as the shadows, billboards, and signs that were the ostensible subjects of the pictures. But in many of his later photographs, Evans shows facades and objects that, while framed to mimic the planar severities of Cubism, are so precisely and lucidly described that their meanings, and not their pictorial structures, are what strike us about them first. A battered tin relic (20) is a symbolic fact and only incidentally a perfect Cubist construction; and a movie poster (18) details an emblematic horror before it asks questions about the nature of collage.

This stance also superficially suggests the specimen case, taxonomic passion, a desire to catalogue and, in some vaguely scientific way, to classify a time and place. Although it is clear that the shape of Evans' world is one that has been sensed rather than ordained by an idea or external structure, this impression of precise axiomatic demonstration is inseparable from the feeling of crystalline beauty his work presents.

It appears that Evans could find this beauty in anything – in the way a chair was made or a sign painted by hand – and that, with as much grace, he could map its deeper patterns – by showing, for example, how a town sprawled on a hill and had taken itself down to a factory or mill by a river. Our dominant sense of his work, however, is not that it is simply beautiful, but that, in the act of so precisely naming the world, the photographer has divested it of its usual, customary values, and granted it a new meaning – that of having-been-truly-seen.

Lincoln Kirstein has said that Evans could wait days for the correct light to reveal his subject, a patience implied in some of his

greatest work.¹³ For it is this obsession with light, as much as his employment of the view camera or the formal austerity of his style, that distinguishes Evans' photographs. By defining both his subjects and photography itself through the use of this irradiating, informing light, Evans makes an identification between the two which is simple, direct, and profound. As we have seen, an effect of this identification is that the presence of the photographer is suppressed in his pictures, but this, of course, is at the heart of his strategy: if the artist is hidden, his choices will appear unprejudiced, equal in their gravity, and photography will be honored as the vehicle of their revelation.

Yet, if it can be said that Evans' work is essentially denotative, and its ambition is to name irrefutably what it shows, it must be added that, almost paradoxically, through the concentrated descriptive power of photography, his pictures also claim those other trailing meanings that lie hidden in things. By being so vividly, immediately present – and so compassionately unmasked – these objects, facades, corners of towns and rooms, and human faces not only report *what* they are, but also suggest the improvised, heartfelt, and difficult histories that brought them to the moment Evans photographed them. When, for example, he frames two chairs in a black barber shop (42), the battered room they share is described not only as a dilapidated vanity, but also as a meeting place and, possibly, an improvised surgery (where a properly desperate man might go to have a tooth pulled or a bullet removed from a wound), meanings which reside in the detail of Evans' picture as an etymology resides in a word.

Robert Frank's photograph of a barber chair (43), on the other hand, owns no particular meaning at all: in its collapsed space, the chair glows with the insolent mystery of an object ruling a troubling dream (a dream inseparable from the photographer himself, whose reflection is outlined on the screen door). And when Frank photographs three crosses commemorating a highway accident (61) – a picture which, in the sequencing of *The Americans*, follows a photograph of a statue of St. Francis (59), and precedes one of an automobile assembly line – the compression of sky, shadow, and landscape which occurs in the picture again describes a world marked by the adjacency of dreams and death. Evans' photograph of a graveyard (60), however, places the cemetery within a town where people live, work, and go to church. It

suggests that the fact of death is simply one fact in life, not, as Frank's picture would have it, its controlling principle.

Today, the beauty of *American Photographs* is apparent to us, since we have had forty years to discover it and to forget the terrible reality of the time in which the book was made. For the most part, however, the first readers of Evans' book viewed it as an indictment of America as well as a dispassionate account of what was worthy in this culture: "Here are the records of the age before an imminent collapse. [Evans'] pictures exist to testify to the symptoms of waste and selfishness that caused the ruin and to salvage whatever was splendid for the future reference of the survivors," wrote Lincoln Kirstein in his afterword to *American Photographs*.¹⁴ And while it may offend our sense of *American Photographs* to hear it described in this way, a selective study of the book – which, in effect, is what this monograph presents – supports Kirstein's position, if not his rhetoric. Evans, after all, thought of Baudelaire as the dominant influence on his work, and found in Flaubert's exact, disinterested style a correlative to his own. This is not to say that his book is misinterpreted if it is seen as a "lyric document" (Evans' phrase) – it is only to suggest that its most passionate reader, Robert Frank, considered it with an understanding that encompassed its pitilessness as well as its grace.

IN FRANK'S TRANSFORMING VISION OF America, a car is a casket (45), a trolley a prison (41), a flag a shroud. As for us, we stand in odd groups and stare at some imposingly sad event beyond the frame of Frank's camera, while he captures us and the event itself is forgotten. All events, in fact – the rodeo, the Fourth of July picnic, Yom Kippur, the graduation, the charity ball, the highway death, the funeral – serve only as reasons to gather and for Frank to condense us into a symbol. Even the few signs which he allows in his photographs are denied their usual meanings and instead point to the pictures' new contents: a group of fans at a Hollywood premiere smile at a movie star under a sign that calls them "Squires;" some kids in a candy store, two of whom have their eyes strangely closed, crowd by a placard which says "Made Blinds;" a cowboy lounges in front of a "Dodge" truck. And, in this country where only newlyweds smile (*City Hall, Reno, Nevada*), the human face itself is drawn back as if it were a mask – severe, sad, and rapt.

Like most Romantic works of art, *The Americans* is marked by a lack of comprehensiveness: a continent is spanned, but its life compressed into a single grief. Yet, what is memorable about Frank's book is not that it is passionate, or its form defiant, or its vision bitter – these are attributes of the book, not its structuring force: what shapes *The Americans* and gives it resonance is the transfiguring power of Frank's eye. Although his feelings are inextricably wound into his perceptions, and threaten at every point to overwhelm them, Frank's astonishing ability to draw the emblem from the fact serves him – by limiting him – in the same way that Evans' rigorous acceptance of the prodigious descriptive energy of photography served the older artist. That Frank refused only to imply what he felt, but, instead, in a long series of exact symbols, precisely traced what he recognized, defines a genius as conscious and extraordinary as that which informs Evans' *American Photographs*; that he divined in Evans' work a vision cognate with his own furious sense of the truth, and – in a process embracing memory, intuition, guile, rapacity of sight, and love – transmuted it into the searing account of this country given by *The Americans* is, however, a creative miracle.

FRANK'S BOOK PRESENTS A STRIKING example of the kind of luck an artist can fall into, where, responding to a clue that the world, or a work of art, or someone else reveals to him, he suddenly discovers his authentic voice. This is profound luck, and, in a person of feeling, could produce uneasiness, particularly, as with Frank, when the good fortune is used to such a remarkable advantage, and used only once. As Harold Bloom asks in *The Anxiety of Influence*, "what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?"¹⁵

Bloom's question could be countered, if not answered, by T. S. Eliot's direct propositions: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."¹⁶ Eliot's position – according to which Frank may be called both a mature and a good poet – has the advantage of being closer than it seems Bloom's is to the daily joys and emergencies of artistic practice, since it does not exclude the possibility of pleasure – whether the minor excitement of stealing something without fear of arrest, the deeper enhancement of loving a thing well enough to serve it, or the profound delight of making an

object so free of previous authority that it can be called new.

But, if only by insisting on the importance of such a relationship, Bloom's question can help us understand Frank's connection to Evans and his work, a connection which remained important to Frank after he had prepared *The Americans* for publication. For even his last photographic project, a series of ten pictures taken in 1958 from the Fifth Avenue bus, resembles, in concept at least, a series of subway portraits started by Evans in 1938, presumably about the time that *American Photographs* was prepared and published.

The crucial, disconcerting fact about Frank's career is that he rejected photography, a decision that, as we now see, cannot be explained by suggesting that Frank simply had said all that he could as a photographer and wanted to try something new. For if Frank *did* have nothing left to say, it seems fair to speculate that it was because he had exhausted the structure provided for him by Evans' work, and was left, not with a continuing love of photography but only with a passionate need to describe himself (a self freed from Evans) and his sense of his personal world. The films he has made since then support this idea that he is a man with a self, and not a world, to describe. As he said in 1977, "a lot of my work deals with myself, especially my films. It's very hard [for me] to get away from myself. It seems, almost, that's all I have."¹⁷

One thing that the imperial self may possess over and over again, of course, is its past, something that Frank has done in relation to *The Americans*. He has not only revised the latest edition of the book in a way that suggests the rare example of a poet going back to his notebooks and finding the first, unfinished drafts of his poems more interesting than those in print, he has also published and exhibited edited contact sheets from it, and, in two of his films, directed sequences which show him or a surrogate flipping through piles of photographs that include pictures from *The Americans*. In one of these films, *Conversations in Vermont*, these pictures are mixed with family snapshots, and, in the second, *Me and My Brother*, shuffled with fashion photographs. Frank's point seems to be that, in memory, all things are equal, or equally provisional. Yet the common effect of every one of these references to *The Americans* is to diminish the book, to suggest that it is open to emendation as any report, and that its precisions are no more remarkable, and are to be no more

respected, than the precisions needed to make any clear photograph. It seems that Frank wants to dispel, both for himself and for his audience, the mystery that has been created by his great book, and that he feels that if he obscures its original clarity, and exposes what he can of the process by which it was made, he might yet possess it as a living idea, as something he is still creating, and, at the same time, hold it away from himself, as if it were no longer his.

This kind of speculation simplifies more than it explains. It disregards the fact that some of Frank's work as a film-maker, particularly *Me and My Brother*, is brilliant, and that his struggle with a difficult, new medium is admirable. It also appears querulous by insisting that the later editions of *The Americans* fail an expectation that is perhaps unreasonable. But tangled with all of this is the dominating fact that Frank's masterpiece was a book born of his love of another book, and that, with this – like Walker Evans – Frank has had to live with the memory of an overwhelming early triumph. Whether there is sorrow in this is something only he can say. As for us, we have his wonderful book, and, traced within it, the figure of a tradition.

¹ All but one, on page 35, reproduced from a print in which a figure has been cut off at the left edge of the frame. Also, a few of the Evans photographs reproduced here are slight variations of those found in his book, the most obvious one being his picture of a black barber shop (42).

² Robert Frank, "A Statement . . ." in 1958 *U.S. Camera Annual* (New York, U.S. Camera Publishing, 1958), p. 115.

³ Kerouac's introduction to *The Americans* – a long exhalation of prose that jumbled "visionary angels," "madroad driving men," and Kerouac's obvious respect for Frank into a woolly, beautiful chant – remains the warmest, most responsive description we have of the *spirit* of Frank's pictures.

⁴ Eugenia Parry Janis and Wendy MacNeil, eds., *Photography within the Humanities* (Danbury, N.H., Addison House, 1977), p.56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶ The wall label for his part of this exhibition was written by Evans himself: "Valid photography, like humor, seems to be too serious a matter to talk about seriously. If, in a note, it can't be defined weightily, what it is *not* can be stated with the utmost finality. It is not the image of Secretary Dulles descending from a plane. It is not cute cats, nor touchdowns, nor nudes; motherhood; arrangements of manufacturers' products. Under no circumstances is it anything ever anywhere near a beach. In short it is not a lie – a cliché – somebody else's idea. It is prime vision combined with quality of feeling, no less."

⁷ Unsigned review, “American Photographs,” *U.S. Camera*, vol. 1 (Autumn 1938), p. 47. Interestingly enough, when the second edition of *American Photographs* was published in 1962, four years after Frank’s book, the title of Evans’ pictures were moved from indices following the two parts of the book to the “unsullied” left-hand pages opposite the photographs. The result was a book that, except for the presence of the page numbers, precisely duplicated the design of *The Americans*.

⁸ Frank’s clearest acknowledgement of this occurs in the last paragraph of “A Statement . . .” (*op. cit.*, p. 115): “The work of two contemporary photographers, Bill Brandt of England and the American, Walker Evans, have influenced me. When I first looked at Walker Evans’ photographs I thought of something Malraux wrote: ‘To transform destiny into awareness.’ One is embarrassed to want so much for oneself. But, how else are you going to justify your failure and your effort.”

The distinction in emphasis that Frank makes here between Brandt and Evans describes the relative importance of their influence on his work. Although Brandt’s photographs shaped the sense of mood and feeling that informs Frank’s pictures, Evans’ work provided the younger artist with a paradigm, or structure, that allowed Frank to release and express his great gifts as a photographer.

⁹ This description compresses the evolution of Frank’s myth: it is only in the last few years that writers have thought to praise Frank for giving up something he practiced so wonderfully. For example, see William Stott, “Walker Evans, Robert Frank and the Landscape of Dissociation,” *artscanada*, vol. 31, nos. 3 & 4 (December 1974), pp. 83-85.

¹⁰ Janet Malcolm, “Two Roads, One Destination,” *Diana & Nikon* (Boston, David R. Godine, 1980), p. 114. Malcolm’s metaphorical “kid” may use a neighborhood pharmacy, but it appears that Frank, at least in matters relating to his work, avoided them: “If the photographer wants to be an artist, his thoughts cannot be developed overnight at the corner drugstore.” Frank, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹¹ Frank, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹² Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹³ From the diaries of Lincoln Kirstein, quoted by John Szarkowski in *Walker Evans* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 12.

¹⁴ Lincoln Kirstein, “Photographs of America: Walker Evans,” in *American Photographs* (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1938), p. 196. Kirstein’s essay is one of the jewels of photographic criticism. While, in the passage quoted above, he may seem extravagantly prophetic, he had, of course, extravagantly good reasons – apart from the Depression – for sensing an “imminent collapse” *somewhere*: in September 1939, twelve months after publication of *American Photographs*, Germany invaded Poland.

¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 5.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger,” in Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 153.

¹⁷ Janis and MacNeil, *op. cit.*, p. 64.