

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1990)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Distance and desire : Wright Morris' The Home Place as "photo-text"
Autor: Halter, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870717>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 29.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

DISTANCE AND DESIRE: WRIGHT MORRIS'
THE HOME PLACE AS "PHOTO-TEXT"*

In the course of his long career the distinguished American novelist and photographer Wright Morris produced not only nineteen novels, five books of essays and three autobiographies but also four exceptionally interesting books with both texts and photographs, books that Morris himself called photo-texts. The first of these photo-texts, *The Inhabitants*, was published in 1946, the second, *The Home Place*, in 1948, and the third, *God's Country and My People*, in 1968. The fourth, which is a travel book and stands somewhat apart, is called *Love Story: A Venetian Journal*, and was published in 1971.

The first three photo-texts can be regarded in several ways as belonging together, as forming, in other words, a kind of trilogy. The first and the third are closely related, both in their layout and the manner in which they juxtapose text and photographs. In both of them a text is printed on one page and a photographic plate on the other. Usually the relationship between prose passage and photograph is at first sight indirect or downright obscure; often there seems to be no connection at all beyond the fact that both texts and photographs are all about the rural Midwest, the world of Wright Morris' childhood. The texts of *The Inhabitants*, Wright Morris recalled later, are impressions that amount to "little more than sketches, verbal pictures of places, of time-stopped moments" (*Time Pieces*, III). To establish the connection between texts and photographs is primarily the task of the reader who finds himself time and again in the role of a co-creator.

If the obvious similarities between *The Inhabitants* and *God's Country* tend to obscure the subtle but important differences between them, then the second of the three photo-texts clearly differs from the other two books in several respects. Morris him-

* Leçon inaugurale prononcée le 7 février 1991.

self begins a short retrospective account of it by stressing this difference:

The Home Place, published in 1948, proved to be a radical departure from *The Inhabitants*. The text would be a narration of one day's events, as told by the returning native, and each page would face a photograph. The relationship would sometimes be explicit—the object photographed would be mentioned—but in the main the photographs would provide the visible ambience for the story, as if we walked about the farm while listening to the narration. The format would be much smaller than *The Inhabitants*, roughly the size of a novel, and the photographs would be cropped. These mutilations removed them, as a group, from the context of artworks, as “images,” and presented them as “things” and artifacts.

[*Time Pieces*, 137]

This different concept of the book may have been the reason why most critics were hardly concerned with the function of the photographs. Thus Jefferson Hunter, among others, maintains that

the relatively modest role of photography in the book is clear. The text will provide the people. The pictures will show settings, familiar objects (a pair of boots, kitchen implements, sheet music on a piano, an empty barber's chair); they will furnish a world.

[59]

It seems that so far only a very few critics have seen that the relationship of text and photographs in *The Home Place* is more subtle and intriguing than it appears at first sight. Whereas Jefferson Hunter feels that “in its combination of fictional words and apparently non-fictional photographs *The Home Place* sometimes reads oddly” (59), David Nye asserts that through this combination Morris has created a “sophisticated modernist work” (163). Although the book has been related to the documentary tradition of the thirties, Nye maintains that

its prose does not detail social conditions in Nebraska, and its photographs are not presented as documents with objective meanings but as partial and subjective views. Taken together, these images are not a story-telling sequence but a series of discreet visions: close-ups of personal possessions emphasizing textures; depictions of restricted interior spaces, showing the harmonious pattern of a few architectural details and furnishings; or views of farm wagons, outhouses, rural schools, windmills and other unmistakably rustic objects.

[164]

As Nye also notes, the photographs have no captions and are only occasionally coordinated with the words facing them. Most of them fill the page to the edges, i.e. they have no white frame around them and thus do not draw attention to themselves as self-contained statements or works of art. Thus, he says, "by releasing these photographs from definition through language and from closure through framing, [Morris] makes them problematic, without a fixed meaning or stabilized relation to the text" (164). Nye quotes A.D. Coleman, who wrote that the initial result of these startling devices was "the gradual erasing of the thin, firm line between art and life" (244).

Now, if we leave behind the simplistic or reductive notion of the photographs as illustrations and if we take into consideration the various devices Morris employs to render the relationship between text and photographs ambiguous, a whole range of possible interpretations of the interaction of word and image offers itself. Some of them, I believe, are directly connected to the text itself, to the central problem of homecoming. The interpretation of the photographs, I would suggest, cannot be separated from the interpretation of the text, and the interpretation of the book as a whole emerges out of an appreciation of the ways in which text and images both support and undermine each other.

Let us, therefore, first have a closer look at the text. *The Home Place* is the first person narration of a writer, Clyde Muncy, who after thirty years returns to his rural home place in Nebraska. He has come back because he urgently needs a place to live for his own family. But *The Home Place* is also the story of a man who tries to find his roots, his identity. At the beginning of the story he is convinced that returning to his home place means returning to his own truest self. In one of the frequent attempts at defining this quest for his own identity, he says to his aunt Clara: "Something happened out here, in four or five summers, that thirty years of hell and high water, and twenty years of the city, has not changed in me. That's what I want for my kids. They're Muncys — ... "that's what they deserve" (37).

This quest for one's own truest self is, as it turns out, much more problematic than it seemed at first, and the story is basically about this quest and the manner in which the narrator, in the course of a hot summer day, tries to find out more about the spirit of the Home Place and the intricate ways in which it is related to himself.

Morris begins his novel with a motto taken from Henry James' *The American Scene*:

To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically, minded — over and beyond an inherent love of the general many-colored picture of things — is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter.

There are several things in this motto which are of crucial importance. It seems important, first, to stress that, like Henry James, Morris believes that a place has a “mystic meaning” which, if one approaches it in the right spirit, is revealed to the receptive observer. What is essential here is the attitude of the “participant” who must not force the issue, must not *impose* a meaning but dis-cover it.

One of the versions of imposing a meaning, we soon realize, is Clyde Muncy’s initial notion of a basic continuity in his life, a continuity between what he once was and now is, an identity that he shares with the people he grew up with and that “thirty years of hell and high water, and twenty years of the city, has not changed in [him].” The partly painful and partly comical educational process he undergoes toward a deeper understanding of the Home Place entails learning more and more about the differences between himself and his family — the city Muncys, as we might call them — on the one hand, and the country Muncys, the inhabitants of the rural plains of Nebraska, on the other hand.

These differences emerges on a number of levels. One of them is language. For uncle Harry and aunt Clara, the things you are surrounded with have a name, and if you don’t know that name you don’t belong to their place and might as well come from another planet. Thus uncle Harry, for instance, cannot believe that Clyde Muncy’s son does not know what croquet is. It is one of the many instances in which Clyde finds himself in the role of a go-between or interpreter:

“What’s cro-kay?” said the boy.

The old man took the small pail off the nozzle, hung on the milk pail.

“This boy pullin’ my leg?” he said, but without looking at him. He gazed across the yard at the hay rick, the break in the trees.

“You’ve got to remember,” I said, “this is the first time he’s been out in the country. In the city you don’t have yards like this. You don’t play croquet.”

"I didn't play it much," the old man said, "but I knew what it was."

"You had it right here in the yard," I said "The boy's never had a yard. If he had a yard like this he would play croquet."

"Seems to me somebody might've told him what it was."
[5-6]

The difference between the two worlds is often not relative but absolute, and communication, therefore, often breaks down. The exchange quoted ends with Muncy's comment "Was he listening? He had turned his back to me to spit."

Not knowing the words and the things that make up the rural world, Muncy realizes, is one thing, using the terms themselves in a different way is another. When Muncy insists that he does know a thing or two about farming because he was born on a farm, uncle Harry does not understand. "I thought," he protests, "that you was born in Lone Tree":

"Lone Tree is a small town," I said, "and I was born on the edge of Lone Tree. We had a horse and some chickens. We had a cow — for a while," I said.

"I didn't think you was born on a farm," the old man said. He picked up the smaller pail and started for the house.

[8]

In uncle Harry's world, a word has a fixed and definite meaning, and the relationship between signifier and signified is unequivocal: one word equals one thing. Words are not up for negotiation, nor for interpretation. For Muncy, the writer, on the other hand, the relationship between language and the world it refers to is much more complex. Words are used differently by different people, and, what's more, the same words may be appropriate in one place and inappropriate in another. Even Muncy's grammatically correct sentences are problematic in a world in which the local idiom is the only language available. And certain words are problematic, Muncy realizes, simply because they immediately define you as a "city slicker." One of those words is *frightful*, and Muncy is irritated when he notices that his wife Peg has "got into the habit of using the word... in practically every connection with the word *house*. I was proud of her [he says once] for not using it. It would have been another one of those subway smells in the yard" (55).

The reference to the subway smells takes the reader back to an incident earlier in the story when Clyde Muncy's boy picks up a

croquet ball, scratches off the layers of dirt, sniffs at it and says: "It smells like the subway." — "There you have it," Muncy comments, "There you have it in a nutshell. Two thousand miles from New York a city boy turns up something in a farmyard, it smells damp and earthy, like a storm cave, so he calls it the subway smell" (3-5).

A city person defines things by comparing, by noticing similarity and difference. In the country, things are what they are, a croquet ball smells like a croquet ball, a farm is a farm, and since Lone Tree is a town, somebody born in Lone Tree cannot say he was born on a farm.

This problem of the relationship between signifier and signified is directly related to the problem of name and identity. Clyde Muncy insists several times that the fact that his name is Muncy establishes an essential connection to the place he left thirty years ago. Now for once, it is for the natives that the relationship between signifier and signified is a more complex affair. Take, for instance, the following exchange which takes place when Muncy goes to the local barber to have his hair cut:

"Now you stand right there," he said, and he turned for a good look at me in the mirror. He tapped the comb on his sleeve, slipped it behind his ear, and said — "You're an Osborn. That's what you are. You're an Osborn."

"No —" I said, "I'm a Muncy."

"That's your name," he said, "but you're an Osborn. You got Will's hair — what's left of it," he said, "but you're Grace Osborn's boy."

[87]

A name, it appears, does not automatically define one's identity, one may be called Muncy and yet be an Osborn. But again there is no equivocation, no ambiguity. The fact that Clyde Muncy has got his father's hair is not good enough for the barber to regard him as a Muncy, for some reason he is Grace Osborn's boy. For his relatives, on the other hand, he is neither a Muncy nor an Osborn, he is a relative who has been away too long, with two children who are "nice enough youngsters," as aunt Clara admits, but who are not Muncys either.

Clyde Muncy, however, does not give up easily. More and more he picks up the local idiom, and when he discovers how important bantering is he easily beats the others at their own game. But, paradoxically, the very moment that he succeeds in communicating with the natives as never before, the notion of

self becomes more problematic than ever, and he asks himself "Was that me talking? It sounded quite a bit like somebody else" (87).

The more he insists on belonging to their world, the more he becomes estranged from himself. Later, during the trip to Lone Tree, in a highly comical episode, Clyde for the first time fully realizes the futility of his attempts to be accepted. When his children get their hands and their hair full of flypaper he takes them to the barber's because cutting their hair off seems the only remedy. "In no more time than it takes to shave a peach," Muncy says, "the kids were peeled." But Uncle Harry, it turns out, is not tickled at all. "When he looked at me his face was flushed," Muncy notes. " 'These your kids?' he said. I nodded. 'When kids as grown up as these never heard of flypaper,' he said, 'they ain't mine. They ain't Muncys' " (96).

That settles it, for the old man, at least. And at the end of the day, Muncy realizes that he and his family cannot stay; they will have to move on.

* * *

Turning from the text to the photographs, we realize that beyond the occasional *thematic* parallels that support the notion of illustration there are a number of direct and indirect links which connect the photographs to the basic theme of homecoming and the narrator's double quest of finding out more about the essence of the Home Place and his own identity in relation to it.

To begin with, there are several references to either taking photographs or being behind a camera. For instance, shortly after the scene in which uncle Harry disowns Clyde Muncy's children he is standing in a corner of the barber's shop while Eddie Cahow, the barber, is cropping the hair of Muncy's children. In Muncy's eyes the old man, who is proudly holding one of the children of a local farmer, turns into a kind of tableau or living picture:

The old man raised his head and gazed absently at the mirror, giving me time, all of us time, to appreciate him... It struck me that the old fool somehow fancied himself as a kind of Madonna, and that we had gathered, like so many wise men, to worship him. A manger tableau entitled Grandfather and Son. There we all were, the clean-cut local boy, the farmer's beauti-

ful unspoilt daughter, the town-character barber, and the old man with the horny hands of toil. And there I was, knee-deep in the alien corn. The prodigal son with his two bald-headed city-spoiled kids.

Where did I fit in the picture? I didn't, that's the point. I was on the outside — in the control-room, looking in. On the one hand I knew that what I saw was unbelievably corny, on the other hand I knew it was one of the finest things I had seen. That ought to tell you quite a bit about me.

[107]

Clyde Muncy is split into two selves; one self, in a spirit of identification or negative capability, to use Keats' famous phrase, feels that what he witnesses is "one of the finest things [he] had seen," while the other self, at a great distance, thinks that it is "unbelievably corny." And the act of gazing at the old man and the child is metaphorically defined as that of looking at a cinematic shot from the control room. The man with the camera, the passage implies, may appreciate what he is looking at, but he remains by definition the observer, on the outside, behind the viewfinder or the viewing screen. These two attitudes, inevitable on the one hand and necessary on the other, connect the writer and the photographer in the spirit of the Jamesian epigraph. Both are convinced that "objects and places... must have a sense of their own, a 'mystic meaning' to give out... to the participant at once so *interested* and *detached* as to be moved to a report of the matter" (*The Home Place*, n.p., my italics).

Both attitudes or stances have consequences. One of them — detachment — enables the observer to understand, to conceive, to create, but it implies acknowledging the fact that the gap between observer and observed can never be entirely closed. The other attitude — that of being, as James puts it, "so *interested*... as to be *moved* to a report of the matter" — entails becoming part of what one observes to the point of sharing, of being, as far as possible, what one is surrounded by. It is the spirit of negative capability, of empathy and identification. It is the spirit also that forbids standing back and urges the photographer to move in, to close the gap between self and other. This is why we find in the photographs of *The Home Place* a whole range of details, or even details of details, such as chairs, dressers, the stove, the barber's tools, corn cobs, etc. (figs. 1-3). Participation and identification is only possible when the distance between the observing, photographing self and the objects photographed is reduced to the



Fig. 1. — *The Home Place*, p. 10



Fig. 2. — *The Home Place*, p. 39



Fig. 3. — *The Home Place*, p. 133



Fig. 4. — *The Home Place*, p. 140

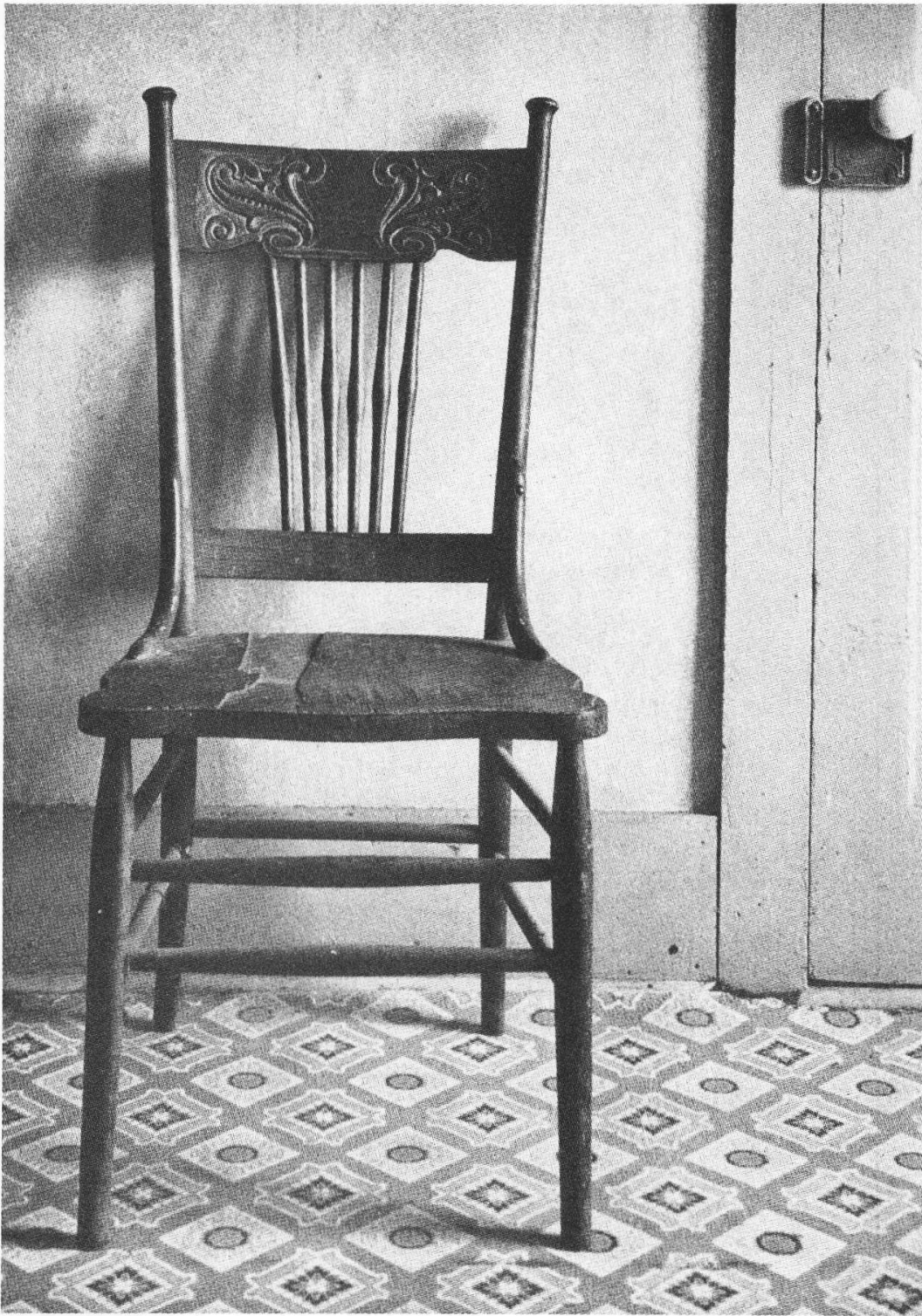


Fig. 5. — *The Home Place*, p. 40

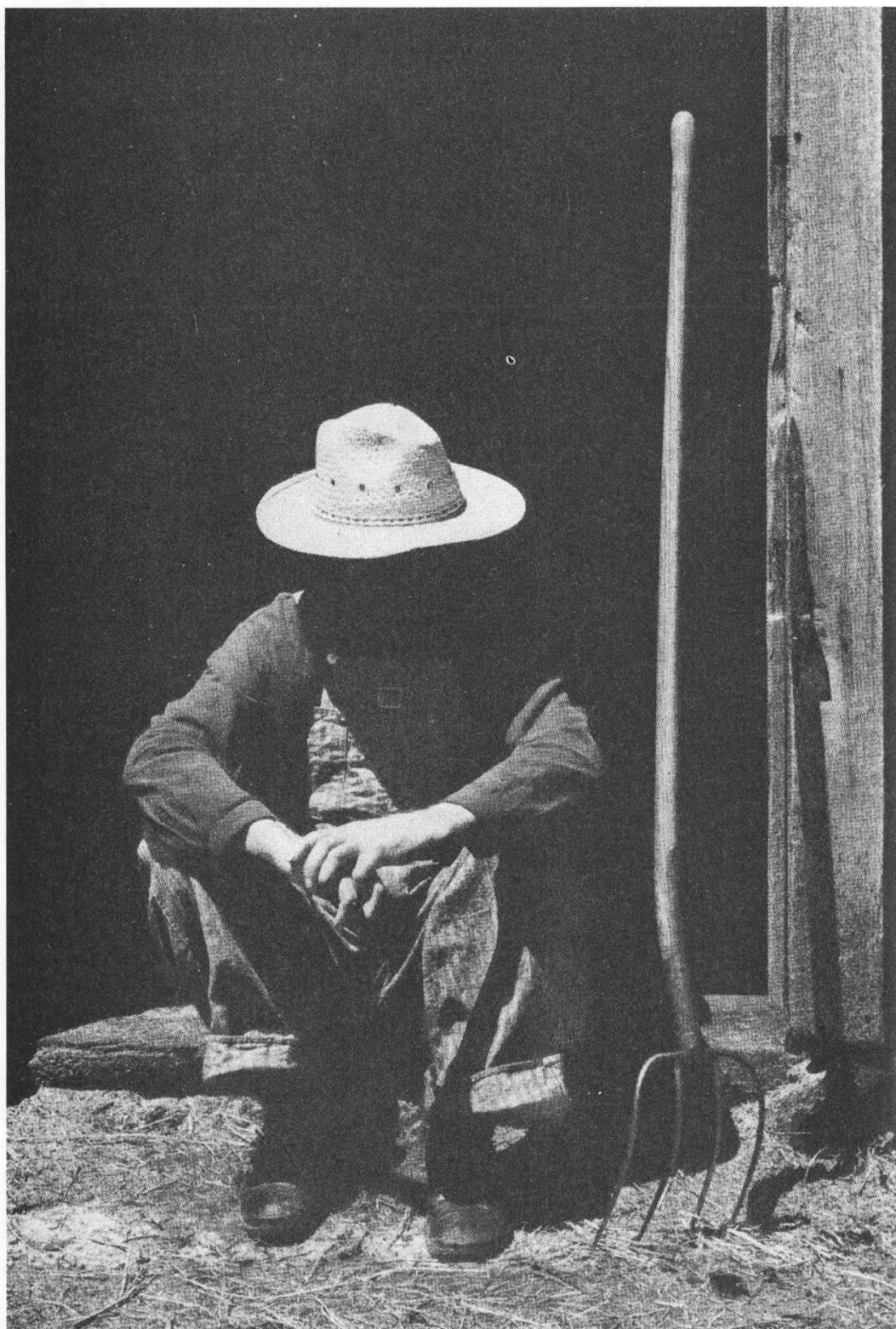


Fig. 6. — *The Home Place*, p. 126

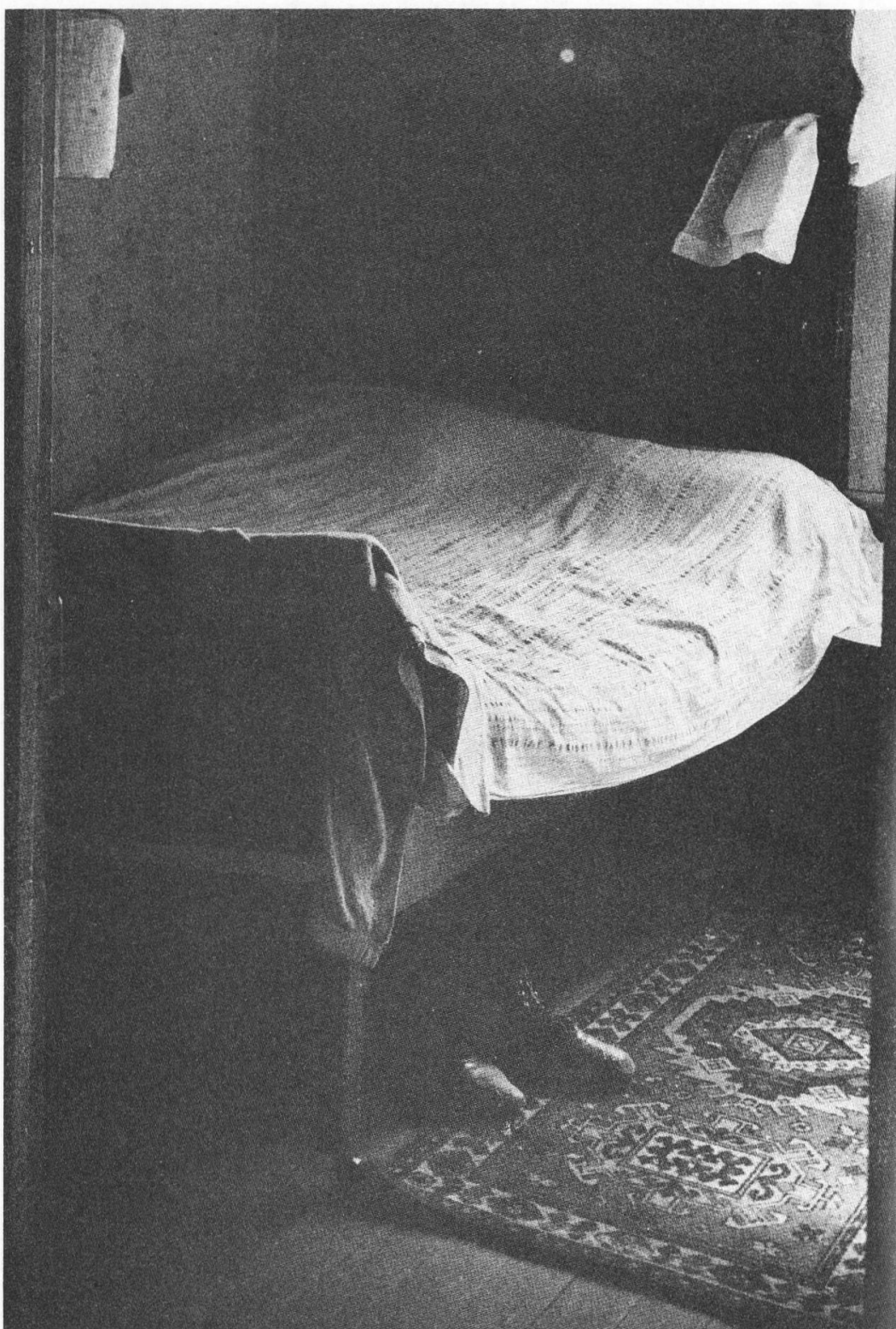


Fig. 7. — *The Home Place*, p. 134

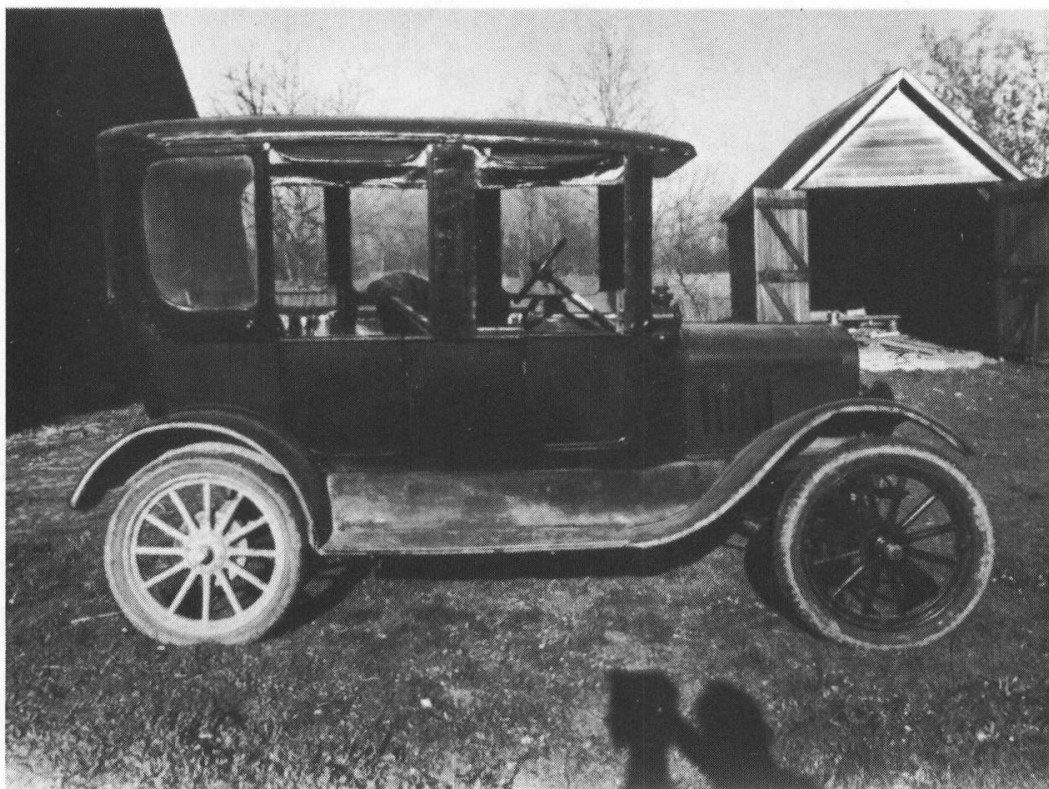


Fig. 8. — “Model T with California Top, Ed’s Place, 1947.”
In *Photographs & Words*, plate 20.

point where textures and surfaces become important, where space becomes intimate and where the sense of touch is activated.

Of great importance, in this context, is the photographic angle. In these photographs, it is hardly ever oblique; what dominates is the frontal approach, i.e. the objects are confronted directly, head-on, filling the frame, and most of the pictures are taken "from the stance and perspective of an adult of normal height walking through the world of the text," as David Nye has observed (164). There are no tricks, no clever manipulation of view-point, no extreme wide-angle shots distorting the perspective and drawing the attention to the skill of the photographer.

Looking at the photographs of *The Home Place* we thus never think "what a strange photograph", "what a clever picture". Ideally, for Morris, the objects photographed speak for themselves, or they eloquently speak as things before they are turned into works of art or "images", to use his own terminology. Their impact should be as much the result of the ding-an-sich as that of the mediated object, the object artistically transformed¹.

The essential spirit informing this kind of photograph is one of modesty, even humility. This, however, does not mean that the pictures themselves have no form and consist of subject matter pure and proper; Morris' attempt to emphasize the objects as far as possible leads to a series of close-ups and details that foregrounds the highly selective eye of the photographer. Moreover, his need to confront his objects head-on and to stay away from unusual angles induces him to stress symmetry, balance and order to the point where the ordering eye and hand of the photographer are noticeable throughout². Morris knows that each compelling

1. "In photography," writes Morris, "we can speak of the anonymous as a genre. It is the camera that takes the picture; the photographer is the collaborator. What we sense to be wondrous, on occasion awesome, as if in the presence of the supernatural, is the impression we have of seeing what we have turned our backs on. As much as we crave the personal, and insist upon it, it is the impersonal that moves us. [...] The photograph is paramount. The photographer subordinate" ("In Our Image", *Time Pieces*, 6-7).

2. Cf. Peter Bunnell, "The Photography of Wright Morris: A Portfolio", p. 124: "...the self-conscious frontality and framing of a Morris image exploits the fragmenting properties of photography. By calling attention not only to the arbitrariness of angle but to the edge of the picture, Morris refers to the world outside the limits of the picture. One is made forcefully aware that the rooms of the Home Place extend beyond the world of the image. It is not the naturalism of the image that provokes this awareness but the degree of stylization in the picture. Morris does not glimpse reality but he stares at it and, when at his best, lets it reveal itself."

photograph, in one way or other, is turned into an “image”, but ideally for him the objects photographed are still there to speak for themselves in and through their aura, their uniqueness, their inimitability³. In one of the few passages in *The Home Place* referring directly to specific details which are also the subject of a photograph (i.e. the few odd things he finds on the bureau in Ed’s house, fig. 4) — the narrator observes:

Was there, then, something holy about these things? If not, why had I used that word? For holy things, they were ugly enough. I looked at the odds and ends on the bureau, the pincushion lid on the cigar box, the faded Legion poppies, assorted pills, patent medicines. There was not a thing of beauty, a man-made loveliness, anywhere. A strange thing, for whatever it was I was feeling, at that moment, was what I expect a thing of beauty to make me feel. To take me out of my *self*, into the selves of other things.

[138, 141]

The spirit of empathy or negative capability evoked here is closely related to the spirit of love. In a recent interview Morris refers to one of the photographs in *The Home Place* — the picture of the straight-backed chair (fig. 5) — to point out the difference between his own approach and that of Walker Evans:

The thing-in-itself has my respect and admiration. To let it speak for itself is a maximum form of speech. I believe I felt this before I knew it, but the craft of fiction made me aware of it. So there are occasions when a “new” object will speak to me as forcibly as an old one. But that is not often. The world is full of chairs, many of them works of art, but few chairs speak to me like the veneer-seated straight-backed chairs of *The*

3. Cf. Morris’ essay “Photographs, Images, and Words”: “Puzzlement as to what a photograph actually is still handicaps both photographers and observers. No theory or aesthetic adequately comprehends the everwidening spectrum of photographic practice, but the discreet use of the word image makes essential distinctions possible. An image is what some photographers are after, and we experience their delight when they get it. Rather than another likeness, it has become a thing itself. It is appropriate that these new images take their place among the objects we value, since they both reveal and enhance our shared awareness of the visible world around us and the invisible world within us. Those photographs that combine the impersonality of the camera eye with the persona of the camera holder will usually commingle the best of these hard-to-reconcile elements” (*Time Pieces*, 65).

Home Place, saturated with the quality of life that I find both poignant and inexhaustible. I don't want to sit on them: I want to look at them. Through human contact they have achieved expressive form.

In a volume I recently stumbled upon... I found one of these chairs, one of my *Home Place* photographs, in a group selected by Walker Evans. I am flattered to have my photographs compared to those by Walker Evans, but this comparison is misleading. He would have been one of the first to say so... [H]is view is that of the... acute social historian. We each selected the same chair, but for palpably divergent reasons. For Evans, and he said so, it is expressive of the cruelty of rural environment, its stark shearing off to what is minimally human. I don't question the accuracy of that impression. But to my eye and my nature the poignancy of that deprivation is moving and appealing. I *love* the chair. Other and more expressive forms lacking, I would accept it as an icon.

[*Time Pieces*, 146]

Another crucial passage in *The Home Place* referring to the activity of photographing and the mental disposition behind it occurs at a moment when, in the presence of aunt Clara, Clyde Muncy and his wife quarrel in a manner that Muncy himself finds nothing short of vulgar. Aunt Clara, as Muncy observes, is completely baffled. No wonder, he says, since

Simple folk don't know how to deal with vulgarity. They're puzzled by it, as real vulgarity is pretty refined... If you get to be good at this sort of thing you can bring it out in the country... and fool the yokels with it. After all, I tell you, these crude looking people are delicate. They're soft when it comes to real vulgarity. I'd say the whole myth of the city-slicker is built around that softness, and the fear they have of this complicated kind of indecency. They take a man at his face value, as they figure it's his own face, a fairly private affair, and the only one he has. They don't roll the eyelids back to peer inside of it. They don't leer at you with the candid camera eye.

[37]

The camera is regarded as an instrument used to reveal the truth, and since the truth is almost by definition what is hidden, the camera is often used to expose it. Now according to Muncy this is typical for an urban culture; people in the country take a man at his face value, not because they are so simple-minded that they don't distinguish between the public and the private but because they do not automatically regard the public

face as a mask and the private face as the true, but hidden, self. For them, a person's face is by definition a fairly private affair, since "they figure it's his own face," and "the only one he has."

Morris identifies with this attitude, and he respects it to the point of including not a single photograph of a human face. The faces of the inhabitants do indeed remain their private affair. There are only four photographs in which a person is depicted, in each case the old man. Two show him from behind, and the other two depict him frontally, but even in these the face is hidden entirely by a strong shadow falling over it (fig. 6). Instead of the candid camera eye which tries to disclose the essence of a person's character in his or her face, we get photographs in which the quest for the essential is metonymically displaced. The essence is revealed indirectly, in the relationship between the person and his immediate environment, in his clothes, his body postures, in the rhythm created by the succession or juxtaposition of the images, in our case by the juxtaposition of moments of activity and moments of resting or contemplation. Once again, the esthetic dimension of the photograph is directly related to the ethic dimension; the form is expressive of the moral stance behind it.

"To photograph people", writes Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*, "is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). Morris would undoubtedly agree with this statement. In an essay written forty years ago, entitled "Privacy as a Subject for Photography," he wrote that in photography

there is either revelation — or there is invasion — there is no middle ground. The subject speaks for itself; or we are intruders, violating its privacy. The moral dilemma grows out of the esthetic failure; the esthetic problem is implicit in the material itself."

[Wydeven, 104]

The problem, Morris recognizes, is not only there in photographs of people, it is inherent in all photographs. We always find the same tension between "revelation" and "exposure." "Revelation" for Morris is a "hinting" at meaning, not obtrusively — perhaps not even fully — artistic in intent, whereas "exposure" is always a form of intrusion, a violation of the subject's integrity by the photographer's aggressive search for truth or for artistic achievement.

Morris is convinced that things will only reveal something of their essence if they are approached in the right spirit. In *The Home Place* this problem informs both the text and the photographs and is centrally related to the quest. The photographs in the book are throughout the product of the photographer's attempt to let things speak rather than to speak for them; and Clyde Muncy, by being open and receptive to the "mystic meaning" of the place, gradually becomes aware of the difference between himself and the world he has returned to. The crucial moment in the book, as far as this awareness is concerned, occurs when Muncy and his wife Peg visit Ed's Place, the house which might become available to them because Ed has fallen ill and is expected to die. The two of them rummage through some of Ed's things and look into his bedroom, which is shown in one of the photographs (fig. 7):

"That's Ed's room," I said, and my wife stepped up to look at it. Then she backed away, as if she saw someone in the bed. There are hotel beds that give you the feeling of a negative exposed several thousand times, with the blurred image of every human being that had slept in them. Then there are beds with a single image, over-exposed. There's an etched clarity about them, like a clean daguerrotype, and you know in your heart that was how the man really looked. There's a question in your mind if any other man, any other human being, could lie in that bed and belong in it. One might as well try and wear the old man's clothes. His shoes, for instance, that had become so much a part of his feet they were like those casts of babies' shoes in department stores. Without saying a word, or snapping her knuckles, my wife turned away.

[135]

Homecoming, which was intended as spiritual and physical repossession, turns more and more into a confrontation with the fundamental otherness of the rural world, and recognition of this otherness is tied to the insight that repossession is intrusion because all the objects in this world are impregnated with the people who made and used them. Their presence is felt everywhere, whether they are present or absent, living or dead:

I stood there... doing my best to ignore the fact that I felt more and more like some sly peeping Tom. I put my hand up to my face, as it occurred to me, suddenly, how people look in a *Daily News* photograph. A smiling face at the scene of a bloody accident. A quartet of gay waitresses near the body slumped over

the bar. God only knows why I thought of that... The camera eye knows no privacy, the really private is its business, and in our time business is good. But what, in God's name, did that have to do with me? At the moment, I guess, I was that camera.
[138]

Morris obviously feels that the problem of "exposure" and intrusion can be overcome by photographing in such a manner that the subject is allowed to "[speak] for itself" (*Time Pieces*, 146). This may also lead, as we have seen, to the rare moments of total identification in which, in Clyde Muncy's word, one is taken "out of [one's] *self*, into the selves of other things" (141). But ultimately such an identification can overcome only for moments the internal split or division which we find at the heart of the quest for repossession in *The Home Place*. Both writer and photographer are faced with the same difficulty as both try to appropriate a world that is other by definition. And both of them, as the Jamesian motto indicates, are always in the double role of participant *and* observer, at once identifying with it *and* "analytically minded," detached.

Another important aspect of this irreducible tension between distance and desire, separation and identification, is the dimension of time. Once again, it is directly related to the basic contrast between the rural and the urban world. The beauty of the objects photographed is revealed, as we have seen, to those who recognize that the objects have a life and special dignity of their own, bearing the imprint of those who created and used them. It is revealed, one could also say, to those who have a feeling for the beauty of the old because in their own culture they are surrounded by the new.

To come to terms with this tension is for Morris one of the main problems a photographer faces in our time. It leads to the question, as he said in an interview, how to "deal with the diminished value of the contemporary artifact" and "its poverty of significance." Each time he returned to rural Nebraska, he was again "startled by the relative richness of the old and the lack of it in the new." "We call it progress. We make it new, but we do not love what we make" (*Time Pieces*, 90). Such statements make it evident that Morris' appreciation of the Home Place is tinged by a strong element of nostalgia — he perceives and desires the specific beauty of a world about to disappear. His need to photograph it is at least partly the attempt to preserve or *salvage* (to use his own term) what no longer exists in his own urban culture.

In recent years, a number of critics have pointed out that the relationship to the past is a fundamental aspect of the photographic image. All photography, says Susan Sontag, is intimately related to transience and mortality. For her, this is particularly evident in America, the country "in which even the recent past is constantly being used up, swept away, torn down, thrown out, traded in" (*On Photography*, 68). "Behind the ritualized claims of American photographers to be looking around," she writes, "is a mournful vision of loss" (67). And she quotes Berenice Abbott, who once said that "the photographer is the contemporary being par excellence; through his eyes the now becomes past" (67).

This is exactly what for Roland Barthes constitutes the nature of photography as a distinct form of visual representation. Nostalgia in photography, says Barthes, is only a specific aspect of the much more fundamental relationship photography has to the past. "La photographie," he writes in *La chambre claire*,

ne dit pas (forcément) *ce qui n'est plus*, mais seulement et à coup sûr, *ce qui a été*. Cette subtilité est décisive. Devant une photo, la conscience ne prend pas nécessairement la voie nostalgique du souvenir..., mais pour toute photo existant au monde, la voie de la certitude: l'essence de la Photographie est de ratifier ce qu'elle représente.

[133]

Each photograph, for Barthes, documents the past, whether or not we invest it with feelings of longing or regret. This means, in the case of Morris, that by including photographs he implicitly defines the Home Place as a world of the past. The ineluctable gap between the present and the past that Clyde Munsy comes to acknowledge in the text is thus inherent in the photographs as well, since each of them shows something that by definition belongs to the past the very moment one looks at it for the first time.

One of the photographs that perfectly illustrates this tension is Morris' picture of the Model T Ford which in the foreground contains the shadow of the photographer with his camera (fig. 8). When selecting the photographs for *The Home Place*, Morris discarded the picture because he found the shadow image distracting. Only three years later he began to understand that the picture literally contained the confrontation of the writer-photographer with the world to which he returns, of the present with the past, and that it shows in an exemplary way how the photographer is both part of the scene and excluded from it.

It is important to realize that this split or internal division cannot be overcome, since it is a prerequisite or condition of writing the text and taking the photographs, a prerequisite, in fact, of all art. The beauty of the rural world, its “mystic meaning”, can only be revealed to those who are both insiders and outsiders, who can identify with it in the spirit of negative capability *and* approach it from the outside. In a wider sense *The Home Place* thus belongs to the pastoral tradition, the idealization of the rural life from the perspective of an urban civilization. Moreover, the very idea of the quest and the conviction that a place has a “mystic meaning” revealed to those who approach it in the right spirit is part of this basic tension, because it is a fundamental aspect of urban civilization in general and the artistic endeavor in particular.

In *The Home Place*, this search for a hidden essence underneath the surface, for the general in the particular, for the beautiful and even holy in the ordinary, finds its clearest form in the recurrent motif of the figure in the carpet. Muncy appropriately relates it to the way in which all things in the rural world are expressive of the people inhabiting it, so that any attempt to define its essence is tied to the recognition that one is not part of it but a visitor from another world — one can catch a glimpse of the figure in the carpet only because one empathizes with it and at the same time approaches it from the outside, keeps one’s distance:

What is it that strikes you about a vacant house? I suppose it has something to do with the fact that any house that’s been lived in, any room that’s been slept in, is not vacant any more. From that point on it’s forever occupied. [...] There’s something in the rooms, in the air, that raising the windows won’t let out, and something in the yard that you can’t rake out of the grass. There’s a pattern on the walls, where the calendar’s hung, and the tipped square of a missing picture is a lidded eye on something private, something better not seen. There’s a path worn into the carpet, between the bed and the door, the stove and the table, and where the heel drags, the carpet is gone, worn into the floor. The pattern doesn’t come with the house, nor the blueprints with the rug. The figure in the carpet is what you have when the people have lived there, died there, and when evicted, refused to leave the house.

[132]

At this moment in the story, Muncy begins to realize that he will leave, although he doesn’t say so yet. What is not clear to

him, but becomes increasingly clear to us, is that ultimately it is only the desired *other* which can hold a "mystic meaning" for him, and that it is only because he is, as he once says, "knee-deep in the alien corn" that this world speaks to him, and through him to us, so eloquently.

Peter HALTER

WORKS CITED:

- BARTHES, Roland, *La chambre claire*. Note sur la photographie, Paris, Gallimard, Seuil, 1980.
- BUNNELL, Peter C., "The Photography of Wright Morris: A Portfolio", in *Conversations with Wright Morris: Critical Views and Responses*. Ed. with an introduction by Robert E. Knoll, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1977, p. 121-39.
- COLEMAN, A. D., *Light Readings*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979.
- HUNTER, Jefferson, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP, 1987.
- NYE, David, "Negative Capability in Wright Morris' *The Home Place*", *Word and Image* 4 (Jan.-March 1988), p. 163-69.
- MORRIS, Wright, *God's Country and My People*, New York, Harper & Row, 1968.
- *The Inhabitants*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1972 (1946).
- *The Home Place*, New York and London, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948.
- *Photographs and Words*, Ed. James Alinder, Providence, R. I., The Friends of Photography in association with Matrix Publications, 1982.
- "Privacy as a Subject for Photography", *Magazine of Art* 44 (February 1951), p. 51-55.
- *Time Pieces. Photographs, Writing, and Memory*, New York, Aperture, 1990.
- SONTAG, Susan, *On Photography*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.
- WYDEVEN, Joseph J., "Photography and Privacy: The Protests of Wright Morris and James Agee", *The Midwest Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 1981), p. 103-15.

