three

The Tradition

Fact and Fiction

General Citation: Coles, Robert. Doing Documentary Work. New York, Oxford Universoty Press, 1997.

The heart of the matter for someone doing documentary work is the pursuit of what James Agee called "human actuality"—rendering and representing for others what has been witnessed, heard, overheard, or sensed. Fact is "the quality of being actual," hence Agee's concern with actuality. All documentation, however, is put together by a particular mind whose capacities, interests, values, conjectures, suppositions and presuppositions, whose memories, and, not least, whose talents will come to bear directly or indirectly on what is, finally a presented to the world in the form of words, pictures, or even music or artifacts of one kind or another. In shaping an article or a book, the writer can add factors and variables in two directions: social and cultural and historical on the one hand, individual or idiosyncratic on the other. As Agee reminds us in his long "country letter," his aria: "All that each person

is, and experiences, and shall ever experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and of one root, and are identical: and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe."

Such an emphasis on human particularity would include the ups and downs of a life, even events (both internal and external) in that life that would seem to have nothing to do with the objectivity of, say, the world of central Alabama, but everything to do with the world of the writer or the photographer who will notice, ignore, take seriously, or find irrelevant Alabama's various moments, happenings, acts and deeds and comments, scenes. Events are filtered through a person's awareness, itself not uninfluenced by a history of private experience, by all sorts of aspirations, frustrations, and yearnings, by those elusive, significant "moods" as they can affect and even sway what we deem of interest or importance, not to mention how we assemble what we have learned into something to present to others—to editors, museum curators first of all, whose personal attitudes, not to mention the nature of their jobs or the values and desires of *their* bosses, all help shape their editorial or curatorial judgment. The web of one kind of human complexity (that of life in Hale County, Alabama) connects with, is influenced by, the web of another kind of human complexity (Agee and Evans and all that informs not only their lives but those of their magazine and book editors).

So often in our discussion of documentary work my students echo Agee, emphasize the "actuality" of the work—its responsibility to fact. They commonly pose for themselves the familiar alternative of fiction, as though we were dealing in clear-cut opposites: if not

the true as against the false, at least the real as against the imaginary. But such opposites or alternatives don't quite do justice either conceptually or pragmatically to the aspect of "human actuality" that has to do with the vocational life of writers, photographers, folklorists, musicologists, and filmmakers, those who are trying to engage with people's words, their music, gestures, movements, and overall appearance and then let others know what they have learned. No one going anywhere, on a journalistic trip, on a documentary assignment, for social-science research, or to soak up the atmosphere of a place to aid in the writing of a story or a novel, will claim to be able to see and hear everything, or even claim to be able to notice all that truly matters. Who we are, to some variable extent, determines what we notice and, at another level of intellectual activity, what we regard as worthy of notice, what we find significant. Nor will technology help us all that decisively. I can arrive in America's Alabama or England's Yorkshire, I can find my way to a South Seas island or to central Africa, I can go visit a nearby suburban mall with the best tape recorder in the world, with cameras that take superb pictures, and even with a clear idea of what I am to do, and still I face the matter of looking *and* overlooking, paying instant heed *and* letting something slip by; and I face the matter of sotting out what I *have* noticed, of arranging it for emphasis—the matter, really, of *composition*, be it verbal or visual, the matter of re-presenting; and here that all-important word *narrative* enters. Stories heard or seen now have to turn into stories put together with some guiding intelligence and discrimination: I must select *what* ought to be present; decide on the *tone* of that presentation, its *atmosphere* or *mood*. These words can be as elusive as they are compelling to an essay, an exhibition of pictures, or a film.

Even if the strict limits of oral history are never suspended (*only* the taped interviews with informants are used in a given article or book, or any comments from the practitioner of oral history are

confined to an introduction or to explanatory footnotes) there still remains that challenge of selection, with its implications for the narrative: which portions of which tapes are to be used, and with what assertive or clarifying or instructional agenda in mind (in the hope, for instance, of what popular or academic nod of comprehension or applause). How does one organize one's "material," with what topics in mind, what broader themes? How does one deal with the mix of factuality and emotionality that any taped interview presents, never mind a stock of them, and how does one arrange and unfold the events, the incidents: a story's pace, its plot, its coherence, its character development and portrayal, its suggestiveness, its degree of inwardness, its degree of connection to external action, and, all in all, its dramatic power, not to mention its moral authority?

The above words and phrases are summoned all the time by writers and teachers of fiction. Fictional devices, that is, inform the construction of nonfiction, and of course, fiction, conversely, draws upon the actual, the "real-life." A novelist uses his or her lived experience and the observations he or she has made and is making in the course of living a life as elements of a writing life. I remember William Carlos Williams pausing, after a home visit, to write down not only medical notes but a writer's notes: words heard; a revealing moment remembered; the appearance of a room on a particular day, or of a face brimming with surprise or happiness, a head lowered in dismay, a look of anticipation or alarm or dread, fear on a child's face, those details of life, of language, of appearance, of occurrence for which novelists are known, but which the rest of us also crave or require, as readers, of course, but also in our working lives: we all survive and prevail through a mastery of certain details, or fail by letting them slip through our fingers.

A novelist has to have those details at constant hand. He or she has had occasion in so-called real life to become aware of them but now has to fit this personal learning into a story, a narrative that

requires both imagination and an idea of what will reach and touch readers persuasively. Nonfiction involves the same process, though we have to be careful of how we use words such as *experience*, *observation*, and, certainly, *imagination* when discussing nonfiction. A documentarian's report will be strengthened by what has been witnessed, but will be fueled, surely, by what those observations come to mean in his or her head: we absorb sights and sounds, and they become *our* experience, unique to us, in that we, their recipients, are unique. What we offer others in the way of our documentary reports, then, is *our* mix of what we have observed and experienced, as we have assembled it, that assembly having to do, again, with our imaginative capability, our gifts as writers, as editors, as storytellers, as artisrs. Oscar Lewis and Studs Terkel, working with taped interviews, pages and pages of transcripts, put all of that together in such a way that makes us readers marvel, not only at what we're told but at how it gets told,—and, before that, at how it was elicited from the various individuals these two met and ftom anyone who worked with them (Lewis trained a team of colleagues to help him out). Others of us might have met the same people but obtained from them different stories, maybe fewer in number or less interesting, less revealing.

I remember well what one of my psychoanalytic supervisors, Elizabeth Zetzel, who was a rathet solidly conventional physician with a mind George Eliot would have called "theoretic," told me as she contemplated my protocols (my daily notes of what I had heard from a particular patient). Psychoanalysis, she said, is not only the uncovering of psychological material; it is two people doing so. Therefore, anyone's analysis, undertaken with a particular analyst, is only one of a possible series of hypothetical analyses, depending on who *else* might be the analyst, and what might be looked at and concluded on the basis of that other person's presence as the analyst, rather than the one now being consulted. I had been zealously on

the prowl for certain memories that would, frankly, confirm my clinical notion of what had happened earlier in a certain patient's life, and to what effect. Dr. Zetzel had realized (I would later realize) that this was not only *an* inquiry, or the "correct" inquiry, but *my* inquiry—that someone else might have had other clinical interests, other kinds of memories to pursue, other clinical destinations in mind and, very important, would no doubt have engaged with this patient in a different way. (Nietzsche's aphorism holds here: "It takes two to make a truth.")

Moreover, what I make of what I hear from any patient has to do with what I've learned, and with what I have brought from my life to what has been taught me. Psychoanalysis, then, is a person's continuing narrative, however "meandering" rather than formally structured, as it is prompted by and shaped by his or her life, of course, but also as it responds to a particular listener or observer who has his or her own narrative interests and capacities and intentions (his or her observations, experiences, and, as with artists, talent and imagination—ways of sensing and of phrasing what is sensed, skill at putting him- or herself in another's shoes). A profession also has its narrative as well as its intellectual and emotional demands, and it, too, affects a particular practitioner, here a psychoanalyst, in influential ways: an agreed-upon language; an agreed-upon story called a diagnosis or a clinical interpretation or summary, namely, how we (are trained to) tell ourselves what we're hearing before we get around to letting our patients know what we think. Put differently, we develop, as psychiatric or psychoanalytic listeners, a professional narrative, which is offered in response to the narratives we hear in that unusual room where matters of utter intimacy and privacy become a shared documentary experience limited to two people. Others may be brought into the "act," however, since patients talk to people they know, and so do we, in our professional lives (at meetings) and in our writing lives: we share case histories with our

colleagues and stories with readers, and surely we tailor our stories to elicit readers' interest—a tradition that goes back to Freud's first books and accounts for those of the many who have followed throughout this profession's now hundred-year history.

All of the above is as intricate and knotty, but also as evident and ordinary, as what happens every day when any two people talk to each other. The words and the pictorial sense vary on both sides, depending upon who the people are; and if one or both of the two talks to a third or a fourth person, that "report" will also vary depending on the person then doing the listening. We have words for the gross distortions of this process: rumor, gossip. We are less likely to account for the almost infinite possible variations on an encounter that constitute a human exchange, or a human response to the non-human world of the landscape or the multi-human world of a social scene. Naturally, a novelist does go one significant step further—reserves the right to use his or her imagination more freely than a documentarian, and to call upon the imaginary as a matter of course,: personal fantasies, made-up voices given to made-up characters with made-up names, and scenes described out of the mind's visual reveries, even as its verbal ones supply words. All of the above has to be done with judgment as well as provocative ingenuity and boldness. The imaginary life, like the real one, requires a teller's thoughtfulness, canniness, sensitivity, and talent for dealing with language, or with the visual. What emerges, if it is done successfully, is a kind of truth, sometimes (as in Tolstoy, George Eliot, Dickens; we each make our choices from among these storytellers) an enveloping and unforgettable wisdom that strikes the reader as realer than real, a truth that penetrates deep within one, that leaps beyond verisimilitude or incisive portrayal, appealing and recognizable characterization, and lands on a terrain where the cognitive, the emotional, the reflective, and the moral live side-by-side. "I make up stories all day," I hear a wonderfully able novelist say at a seminar on "doc-

umentary studies." "Some people would say I tell lies—my 'business' is to write them down and sell them, with the help of a publisher." We all demur, but he rejects what he hears as an evasive politeness on our part. "All right," he provokes us further, "I do a good job, so I get published, and you like what you read. But there are talented storytellers out there, let's call them that, who spend their lives telling stories, persuading people to get wrapped up in them, just like they talk of getting wrapped up in a good novel . . . and they are telling what you and I would call lies, a string of them, or falsehoods, or *un*truths. Some of them do enough of it that they become known chiefly, essentially, for what they tell *as*—they are 'con artists.' Am I a version of such a person, a successful, socially sanctioned, 'sublimated' version? Is that a useful way of thinking about stories and novels—cleverly or entertainingly put together lies?"

This writer, this novelist who was also a teacher and an effective conversationalist, was forcefully putting a big subject before us. He had, after a fashion, constructed a small story about the matter of storytelling in which he highlighted the matter of fiction as something made up—though often quite full of facts, observations, accurately recalled happenings, and also made up, potentially, of truth, even the highest kind of truth, as many of us would insist. Others in the seminar, of course, spoke of journalism and social science, their claims to another kind of truth, one that pertains to an observed world unconnected to an imagined one; though, again, the journalist's, the photographer's, the social scientist's imagination can all the time influence how a news story or a research project is done, what is obtained in the way of information, remarks, photographs, and how all of that is relayed to others.

I tried, in that seminar, to make sense of my own work, to figure out its nature, and so did we all: this was the purpose of the seminar. During the early 1960s, as I mentioned earlier, I was trying hard to

learn how Southern schoolchildren, both black and white, were managing under the stresses of court-ordered desegregation in the South, and how civil-rights activists were dealing with their special, often dangerous, even fatally dangerous lives of constant protest. I was doing psychiatric research and beginning to write up my findings for presentation to professional audiences and journals. By then, I'd also been interviewed by newspaper reporters, because I was immersed in a serious educational, social, and racial crisis. I was privileged (I only gradually realized) to be watching a moment of history. Soon I was not only taking what I heard from children, teachers, parents, and young activists and fitting it all into a language, a way of thinking, a theoretical or conceptual appatatus of sorts (lists of defense mechanisms, signs of various symptoms, evidence of successful adaptation); I was developing a general thesis on what makes for collapse in children under duress and what makes for "resiliency." I had developed a list of "variables," aspects of a life that tended to make a child worthy of being described as such by me: a resilient child. Eventually, with enough knowledge of enough children, I had in mind a broader claim, a more ambitious one, a statement on "*the* resilient child."

I was also seeing, in some newspapers, quotations correctly attributed to me that weren't always my words, and that seemed a bit foreign to me because they had been hurriedly scribbled as I talked. Even my exactly transcribed words, *taped* words, sometimes seemed strange to me, because they appeared out of context; they were deprived of the explanatory remarks, the narrative sequence, that had preceded and followed them. My wife would say, "You said *that*?" I would say yes, and then the refrain: "but the reporter used what I said for his purposes"—and I wasn't necessarily being critical. I had tried to explain something, had tried to speak with some qualifications or even with skepticism, second thoughts, or outright misgiv-

ings about my own thoughts, themselves being constantly modified by interviews, by conversations with colleagues, by *consideration* of this or that matter, the reflective aspect of what gets called experience.

The reporters, needless to say, had their own purposes to consider, their own experiences; they had gradually accumulated manners of hearing and remembering, of listening to tapes, based on notions of what they were meant to do professionally. I was meant to move from hearing children talk about what was on their minds to thinking about the *projections* these children summoned, the *denials* or *reaction-formations* to which they resorted; a journalist is used to hearing me, and soon enough, asking me pointed questions that aim for an opinion, an explanation, stated as plainly and unequivocally as possible. *Why* is this child doing so well, given the pressures she has to endure? Why is *that* child not doing so well? What is your explanation for the difference? If my explanation was too long-winded, evasive, abstract, or, finally, unconvincing, the reporter pressed, rephrased, got me to reconsider, to say things differently—until what I said helped him or her understand the subject at hand (and would presumably help his or her editor and readers, who inhabit his or her mind, understand.) Sometimes I was not only surprised, by the printed result, as my wife was, but grateful. Those reporters pushed me to think (and to put things) in ways not familiar to me, and when I remembered what I said, seeing it presented in the context of a story, a part of the reporter's own take on the subject, I found myself learning something, regarding matters with a different emphasis or point of view, responding, it can be said, to the "truth" of that particular interview. All interviews, one hopes, become jointly conducted!

The harder I struggled to make sense of my work, never mind make sense of what others might make of it, the more confused I became: what was I doing, what was I learning, what was I trying to say? I was a child psychiatrist and was learning to be a psychoanalyst, but I wasn't working with patients in an office or a clinic; I was visiting children and their parents in their homes, talking with teachers in schools, and, through SNCC, doing things regarded by cities and states of the South as illegal, a challenge both to laws and to long-standing customs. On the one hand, I had to answer to a certain kind of psychiatric voice in me: why *are* you doing all this? On the other hand, I had to answer to the collective voices of civil rights workers: why are you concentrating your energies on *us*, when there's a "sick" society out there; for example, look at your own profession, the utterly segregated universities, medical schools, residency training programs, psychoanalytic institutes—why don't you study all that! Then, I had to contend with my great teacher Dr. W. C. Williams, to whom (1961, 1962) I'd sent some drafts of my psychiatric reports. "For God's sake," he told me once, "try to find a cure for that passive voice you use, for the third person, for all that highfalutin technical language—it's a syndrome!" My apologies and chagrin and self-pity only elicited this: "Take your readers in hand, take them where you've been, tell them what you've seen, give them some stories you've heard. Most of all, write for *them*, the ordinary folks out there, not for yourself and your buddies in the profession of psychiatry." I can still recall my sense of futility and inadequacy as I thought about those admonishing remarks. I had always known that Dr. Williams could be irritable with people he knew and wanted to help (I'd seen him be so with patients), but now I felt critically judged, and unable to do anything in keeping with the advice given me—lest I lose my last link with my medical and psychiatric and psychoanalytic life: my capacity to write articles that would earn me (not to mention the work I was doing) a hearing, some acceptance.

What Dr. Williams urged, my wife, a high-school teacher of English and history, also urged. She began listening to the tapes we'd collected (she and I worked together, full-time, until our sons were

born in 1964, 1966, and 1970). She marked up certain moments in the transcripts which she found interesting, pulled them together, and wrote from memory some descriptions of the scenes in which those comments were made: times, places, details such as the weather, the casual talk exchanged, the food so generously served us, the neighborhood excursions we took—to churches, to markets, a world explored with the help of embattled people who knew that if we were really to understand them, we had to go beyond those clinical questions that I wanted so much to ask them. In time Jane had assembled "moments," she called them, for me to read: a mix of descriptive writing and edited versions of interviews, with suggestions for what she called "personal reflection" on my part. "You'll have some old-fashioned essays," she wrote. "Nothing to be afraid of!"

Plenty to be afraid of, I thought. It took me a couple of years to overcome that apprehension and worry. I was taught and rallied and reassured by Jane, badgered by Dr. Williams, until he died (March 4, 1963), challenged by some of the friends I'd made in SNCC, who kept telling me I should "tell their stories," not try to "shrink" them, and encouraged by Margaret Long, a novelist who worked for the Southern Regional Council, an interracial group long devoted to standing up in many ways to segregation. In 1963 the Council published my first nonprofessional piece (as I thought of it back then) on the work I was doing: "Separate But Equal Lives." The very title signified a break for me, a departure from the heavyweight jargon I'd learned to use as an expression of professional arrival. With this new kind of writing, I began to think differently about the very nature of the work I was doing. The point now was not only to analyze what children said, or the drawings they made, but to learn about their *lives*, in the hope of being able to describe them as knowingly and clearly as possible to anyone who cares to read of them rather than to my colleagues in child psychiatry.

In 1970, well along in such writing, I heard this from one of my

old supervisors at the Children's Hospital in Boston, George Gardner: "You're doing documentary work, documentary child psychiatry, I suppose you could call it." I was pleased, though also worried—haunted by the judgmental self, its appearance often a measure of careerist anxiety. When I told my wife what Dr. Gardner had said, she laughed and said, "When Dr. Gardner settles for 'documentary work' alone, you'll be there!" But where is her "there"? We never discussed that question at the time. I was almost afraid to think about what she had in mind, even as I know in retrospect what she was suggesting—that I try to respond more broadly (less clinically) to these children, give them their due as individuals, as human beings, rather than patients. After all, they weren't "sick," or coming to me in a hospital or a clinical setting for "help"; they were "out there," living their lives, and I had come to them in an effort to learn how they "got along." Those two words increasingly became my methodological description of intent, my rationale of sorts: to try to ascertain as best I could the character of particular lives, the way they are lived, the assumptions held, the hopes embraced, the fears and worries borne—in Flannery O'Connor's felicitous phrase, the particular "habit of being" that informs *this* person's existence, *that* one's. To render such lives requires that one take a stand with respect to them—that of the observer, first and foremost, so that they can be apprehended, but that of the *distanced* observer, the editor, the critic (not of them, but of them as the subject of a story). What of their lives to offer others, and in what manner of delivery? As I asked that question I could hear one of Dr. Williams's refrains: "the language, the language!" Williams was forever trying to do justice both to what he heard from others, and to what he heard in his own head: the narrative side of documentary work, the exposition of a particular effort at exploration.

Documentary work, then, ultimately becomes, for most of us, documentary writing, documentary photographs, a film, a taped se-

ries of folk songs, a collection of children's drawings and paintings: reports of what was encountered for the ears and eyes of others. Here we weed and choose from so very much accumulated. Here we connect ourselves critically with those we have come to know—we arrange and direct their debut on the stage, and we encourage and discourage by selecting some segments and eliminating others. Moreover, to repeat, some of us add our own two cents (or more); we work what others have become to *us* into *our* narrative—the titles we give to photographs, the introductions we write for exhibitions, the statements we make with films. Even if our work is presented as only about *them*, we have been at work for weeks, for months, discarding and thereby concentrating what we retain: its significance mightily enhanced because so much else has been taken away.

It is not unfair, therefore, for an Oscar Lewis or a Studs Terkel or a Fred Wiseman to be known as the one who is "responsible" for what are supposedly documentary reports about all those others who were interviewed or filmed. Those others, in a certain way, have become "creations" of Lewis, Terkel, Wiseman—even if we have no explanatory comments from any of them about what they have done, and how, and with what purpose in mind. The stories such documentarians tell us are, in a way, the surviving remnants of so very much that has been left aside. We who cut, weave, edit, splice, crop, sequence, interpolate, interject, connect, pan, come up with our captions and comments, have our say (whenever and wherever and however) have thereby linked our lives to those we have attempted to document, creating a joint presentation for an audience that may or may not have been asked to consider all that has gone into what they are reading, hearing, or viewing.

I remember, a wonderfully enlightening afternoon spent with labor economist Paul Taylor in 1972, while I was working on a biographical study of Dorothea Lange. Jane and I sat in Taylor's spacious, comfortable Berkeley home, the one he and Dorothea

Lange occupied together until her death of cancer in 1965. He took me, step by step, through their work together, the work that culminated in *American Exodus* (1939). We examined many of Lange's photographs, some of them prints that were never published or shown. We were looking at an artist's sensibility, as it informed the selections she had made—which picture really worked, really got across what the photographer intended for us to contemplate.

I studied her iconic "migrant mother," a picture known throughout the world, a visual rallying ground of sorts for those who want to be reminded and remind others of jeopardy's pensive life (Fig. 1). There she sits, her right hand touching her lower right cheek, the lady of Nipoma, caught gazing, in March of 1936, one of her children to her left, one to her right, head turned away from us, disinclined to look at the camera and, through it, the legions of viewers with whom it connects. The three figures seem so close, so "tight," it would be said in the South, yet each seems lost to the others: the children lost in the private world they secure by hiding their eyes, the mother lost in a look that is seemingly directed at no one and everyone, a look that is inward and yet that engages with us who look at her, and maybe with her, or through her, at the kind of life she has been living. But only minutes before Lange took that famous picture, she had taken others. At furthest remove (Fig. 2) we are shown the same mother and her children in the makeshift tent that is their home; two others, a bit closer, show her with another child who has just been suckling at her breast and now has settled into a sleep. In one picture (Fig. 3) the mother is alone with that child; in the next, (Fig. 4) another of her children has come to her side, its face on her left shoulder. I return to the picture Lange has selected: now the older children are alongside their mother, but her appearance commands our attention—her hair lightly combed, her strong nose and broad forehead and wide mouth giving her face authority, her informally layered plainclothes, her worker's arms and fingers

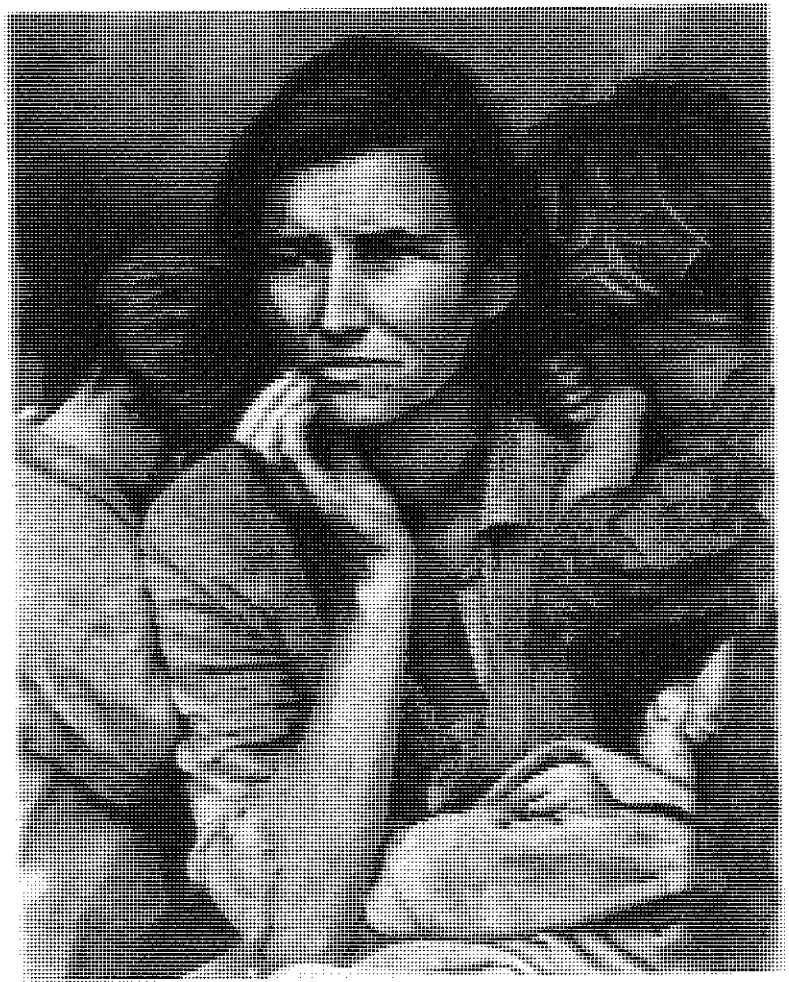

Figure 1

Figure 2

telling us that this is someone who every day has to take life on with no conviction of success around any corner.

Dorothea Lange has, in a sense, removed that woman from the very world she is meant, as a Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer, to document. The tent is gone, and the land on which it is pitched, and the utensils. The children, in a way, are gone, their backs turned to us, their backs a sort of screen upon which we may project our sense of what is happening to them, what they feel. But one child's head is slightly lowered, and the other has covered her face with her right arm—and so a feeling of their sadness, become the viewer's sadness, has surely seized so many of us who have stared

Figure 3

and stared at that woman, who is herself staring, and maybe, as in a Rodin sculpture, doing some serious thinking: struggling for a vision, dealing with an apprehension, experiencing a premonition or a nightmarish moment of foreboding. We are told by Lange that she is a "migrant mother," because otherwise she could be quite another kind of working (or nonworking) mother, yet she has been at least somewhat separated from sociological clues, and so she becomes psychologically more available to us, kin to us. A photographer has edited and cropped her work in order to make it more accessible to her anticipated viewers. As a documentarian, Lange snapped away with her camera, came back with a series of pictures that narrate a kind of white migrant life in the mid-1930s—and then, looking for one picture that would make the particular universal,

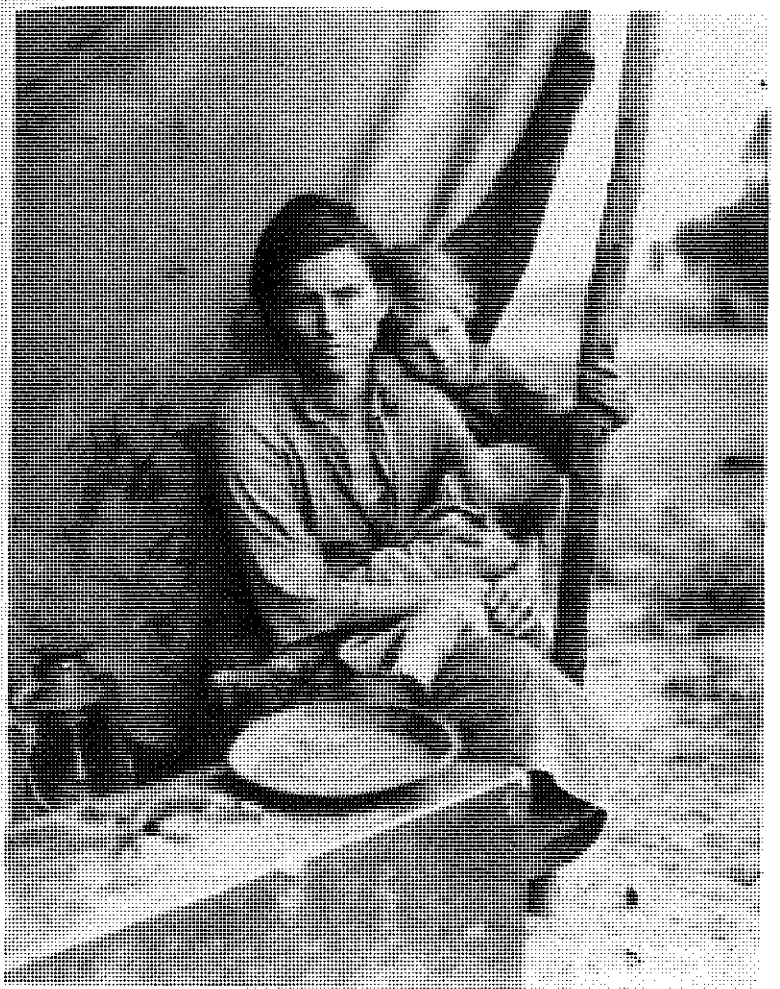

Figure 4

that would bring us within a person's world rather than keep us out (as pitying onlookers), she decided upon a photograph that allows us to move from well-meant compassion to a sense of respect, even awe: we see a stoic dignity, a thoughtfulness whose compelling survival under such circumstances is itself something to ponder, something to find arresting, even miraculous.

Another well-known Lange picture that Paul Taylor and I studied was "Ditched, Stalled, and Stranded," taken in California's San Joaquin Valley in 1935. Taylor first showed me the uncropped version of that picture (Fig. 5), with a man seated at the steering wheel of a car, his wife beside him. He has a wool cap on, of a kind today more commonly worn in Europe than here. He has a long face with a sturdy nose, and with wide eyes he stares past his wife (the right car door open) toward the viewer. The woman's right hand is in the pocket of her coat, which has a fur collar, and she is looking at an angle to the viewer. She has a round face, and seems to be of ample size. A bit of her dress and her right leg appear beyond the bottom limit of the coat. My dad, politically conservative, had seen that version of the picture years ago, and had pointed out to me that he was not impressed by Lange's title: here, after all, in the middle of the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, a worldwide phenomenon, were a couple who seemed well-clothed, well-fed—and who had a car. Did I realize, he wondered, how few people in the entire world, even in America, could be so described at that time? An automobile and a fur-collared coat to him meant something other than being "ditched, stalled, and stranded."

Lange chose to crop that photograph for presentation in various exhibitions and books (Fig. 6). She removed the woman, save a touch of her coat (the cloth part), so the driver looks directly at us. Like the migrant mother, his gaze connects with our gaze, and we wonder who this man is, and where he wants to go, or is headed, and why he is described by the photographer as so thoroughly at an impasse.

Figure 5

The photographer, in turn, tries to provide an answer. The man's left hand holds lightly onto the steering mechanism just below the wheel, and he seems almost an extension of that wheel, the two of them, along with the title given them, a metaphor for a troubled nation gone badly awry: whither his direction, and will he even be able to get going again, to arrive where he would like to be? Once

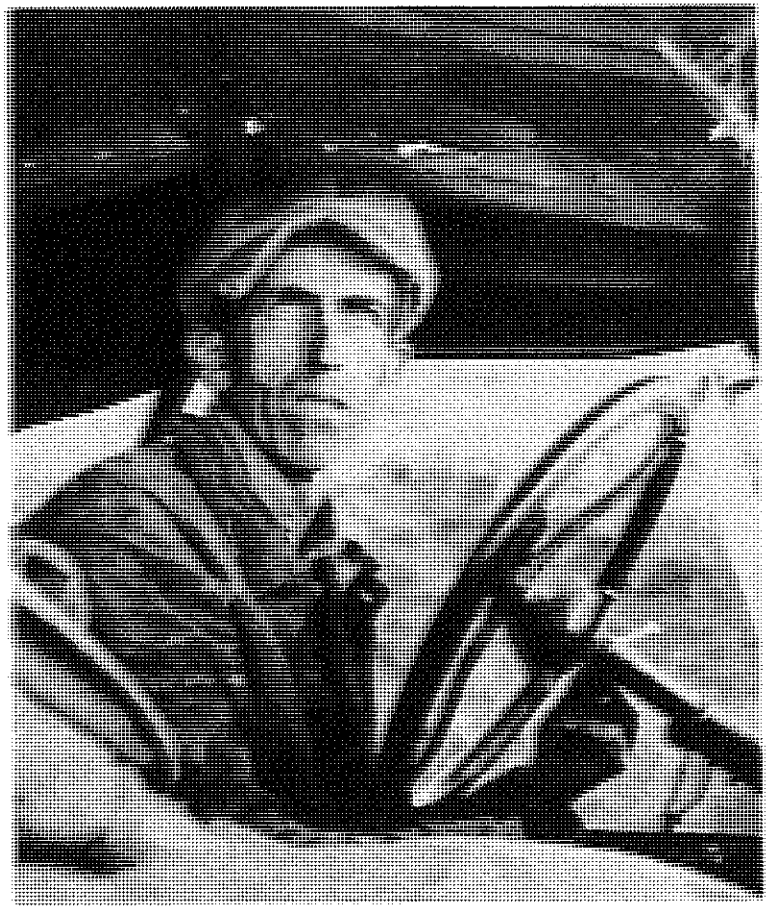

Figure 6

more, Lange turns a photograph into a melancholy statement that embraces more than the population of a California agricultural region. She does so by cropping (editing) her work, by denying us the possibility of a married couple in which one spouse seems reasonably contented, by reducing a scene to a driver who is readily seen as

forlorn, and also as deeply introspective, eager for us, his fellow citizens, to return the intensity of his (moral) introspection.

I remember Paul Taylor gazing intently at the migrant mother and the man who was "ditched, stalled, and stranded"—a return on his part to a 1930s world, but also a moment's opportunity to reflect upon an entire documentary tradition, in which *American Exodus* figures importantly. No question, Paul and Jane reminded me, social observers and journalists have been journeying into poor neighborhoods, rural and urban, for generations, and in so doing have connected their written reports to a visual effort of one kind or another. Henry Mayhew's sensitively rendered *London Labour and the London Poor*, which describes nineteenth-century London, was accompanied by the drawings of Cruikshank, the well-known English illustrator—an inquiry that included a pictorial response. When George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* was first published in 1937, its text was supplemented by photographs, poorly reproduced, their maker unacknowledged—yet surely some who read Orwell's provocative and suggestive text were grateful for a glimpse of the world this great essayist had visited.

By the 1930s, under the auspices of the Farm Security Administration, and especially Roy Stryker, who had a keen sense of the relationship between politics and public awareness, a number of photographers were roaming the American land eager to catch sight of, and then, through their cameras, catch hold of a country struggling mightily with the consequences of the Great Depression—in the words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1937) "one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." So it is that Russell Lee and Ben Shahn and Arthur Rothstein and Walker Evans and Marion Post Wolcott, and, not least, Dorothea Lange became part of a significant photographic and cultural moment—the camera as an instrument of social awareness, of political ferment.