

## Géraldine Chouard, *Eudora Welty et la photographie : Naissance d'une vision*

Paris : Michel Houdiard, 2012, 178 pages

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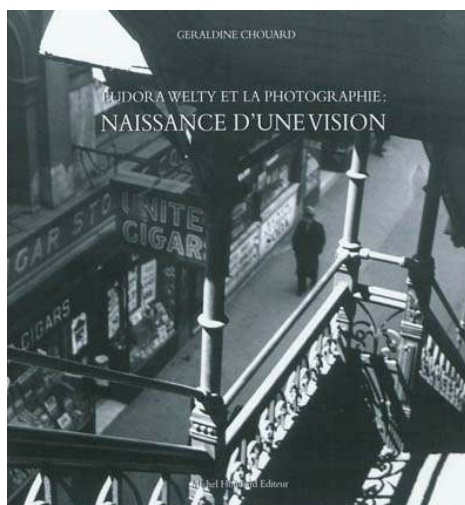
Hélène Valance

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## REFERENCES

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1 If Eudora Welty is a familiar figure for students of American literature, many might have overlooked her career as photographer. Géraldine Chouard, who has published literary studies on Welty, undertakes here to study this relatively hidden facet of the Southern author's life. Her book, entitled *Eudora Welty et la photographie: Naissance d'une vision*, provides a detailed narrative of Welty's lifelong engagement with photography and of the rich interplays between the photographic medium and her written work. Indeed, even though Welty published several photographic albums in



the later decades of her life, this dimension of her work seems to remain secondary, if not completely omitted, in critical analyses of her *œuvre*. Chouard's thorough knowledge of the culture and history of the American South, her fine capacity for literary analysis and her remarkable skill at reading photographs combine to create a refreshed vision of Welty's world, of which she demonstrates the essential coherence.

2 *Naissance d'une vision* includes, along a short but extremely dense and elegantly written text, 41 photographs, most of them taken by Welty herself. The two images framing the book's title page announce its ambition: the first, a portrait of Welty holding what appears to be a manuscript and smiling modestly yet confidently to the camera, highlights the identity of the woman as a writer. But Chouard is careful to note that this picture fits in the genre of occupational photography, which Welty herself illustrated with a series of portraits in the 1930s. The second photograph is that of a street in Fayette, Mississippi, captured through a cafe window. Against the sunny winter streetscape, the inverted letters of the word "CAFE" and the silhouette of a man appear in sharp contrast. This second picture summarizes the "vision" Chouard analyses through her book: that of the Southern landscape and of its inhabitants, emerging from the interior and seen through the screen of textuality. From the photograph of Welty the writer looking out at the camera to that which captures her own vision of the world, filtered through camera and text, emerges the coherence of Welty's universe, between text and image.

3 The introduction briefly situates *Naissance d'une vision* in the context of the critical reception of Welty's photographs, explaining that their moderate success derived from Welty's fame as a novelist, not the reverse. Chouard also notes the importance of Welty's choice of subjects – mostly African-American inhabitants of the South during the 1930s – to explain the attention her photographs received when they were published, just a few years after the end of the Civil Rights movement. In a yet wider perspective, Chouard links the increasing interest in Welty's photographs with the growing appreciation of the photographic medium in general.

4 Each chapter, though following a roughly chronological order, then concentrates on a specific theme. The first section ("*l'Oeil et la plume*" – "The Eye and the Pen") considers Welty's early experiences with images and photographs. Tellingly, the first example cited is that of Welty's fascination for the intermingling of letters and images in

illustrated books. Chouard reveals this continuous overlapping of mediums in the development of Welty's creativity, visible for instance in her creation of a photo-novel at age 11. Chouard shows that Welty's family connected her to photography, particularly her father, an enthusiastic amateur photographer, and her grand-father, who made photography his profession in the 1880s. The images commented by Chouard in this chapter reveal Welty's wonderful humour, expressed in a visual medium as efficiently as in her prose, through a series of parodies and subversions. But photography also appears to be, from the beginning of Welty's life, a medium loaded with affects linked to the writer's intimate and familiar landscape. The chapter ends on an anecdote that seemed to mark a turning point in Welty's life : at the moment she caught the opportunity to show her photographs at a New York Gallery, the magazine *Manuscript* accepted her short story "Death of a Travelling Salesman." This event allegedly cemented Welty's decision to opt for a literary career.

- 5 Yet what Chouard shows in the following chapters is a persisting engagement with photography. The second chapter deals with Welty's most productive period in terms of photography, beginning the very year she exhibited her pictures in New York. Hired by the Works Progress Administration as a journalist in 1936, Welty was sent back to her native Mississippi. Whereas she was expected to produce interviews and written accounts of local life, she decided to document it through photography as well. Yet while other WPA and Farm Security Administration photographers such as Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange adopted an activist stance, her own goal was more archival than reformist, her vision more intimate than ambitious – she called the photographs she made of Mississippi life in the Depression years a "family album." Here Chouard offers a series of detailed and inspired readings of photographs where, literally, letters structure the landscape, as for instance in "Saturday in Town, Grenada" where a line of store signs creates a rhythmical horizon across the streetscape, a poetic line-up whose harmonies were surely noticed by the writer ("Jno. T. Keeton Cotton/Jitney Jungle/Coca-Cola"). Chouard insists on the exceptional attention Welty devotes to Black subjects, both in terms of quantity – while only a tenth of the FSA photographs include Blacks, three quarters of Welty's do – and of quality. As Chouard demonstrates, Welty's outlook, which she describes Welty's approach as "slanted," avoids the frontal, condescendingly edifying attitudes of other photographers of her time, and allows for a complex vision of the local race relations. In many of Welty's photographs, indeed, Blacks and Whites coexist in a shared space. However, some of Chouard's interpretations may be a little too optimistic, attenuating the ambivalence and latent violence of images. Thus the threatening gesture of the black woman in "The bootlegger's house. Pretending the drive away customers with an icepick, 1930s" is eventually read as humorous, while in "Carrying ice for Sunday dinner, near Bolton" the perspective of the Sunday celebrations and pleasures supplants the children's painful work. In these cases Chouard may be pushing the generosity of Welty's vision beyond its limits.
- 6 The third chapter ("l'image au pied de la lettre") considers photography as a medium in Welty's writing. Photography as object, process and metaphor is here analysed in exceptionally fine readings borrowing from Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud or Marcel Proust. A magistral analysis of Welty's short story "Why I Live in the Post Office" explores the psychoanalytic meanings of photography's manipulations, staging the photograph as a model of seduction, perversion and transgression. Chouard's reading of "Kin" links and contrasts the story with Nathaniel Hawthorne's

*House of the Seven Gables*, examining the varied modes of reception of photography in her own time. Readings of *The Optimist's Daughter* and *Losing Battles* study the instrumentality of photographs in organizing temporality, underlining their dramatic and affective power. Here the "vision" is at once a revelation and a remembrance, where mourning and creating intertwine.

- 7 The fourth and fifth chapters take on this emphasis on memory by presenting what Chouard calls Welty's "autophotobiography," as well as her own memorialisation of other photographers. Chouard goes back to Welty's first encounters with photography to highlight her individual development between the two mediums of writing and photography. Thus Chouard shows how Welty's pictures reflect her lifelong attraction to narration by suggesting a variety of sounds and dialogues, and how, correspondingly, Welty "learned to see" through making photographs. Autobiography, photography and writing beautifully converge in the construction of "the eye/I of the story," (citing the title of a collection of Welty's critical essays), the narrative voice of the writer. Proust comes here as a relevant reference, as Chouard insists on time as an essential dimension of the development of the artist's personality. The fifth chapter focuses on Welty's memory of others through photography, very appropriately exploiting the double meaning of the French word "*tombeau*," which designates both the site of commemoration and the work of art created in memory of the deceased, often an artist. Chouard comments on Welty's articles on Imre Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Leni Riefenstahl written for the *New York Times*, noting that they participated in a popularization of photography as art in the 1970s. Another important photographer in Welty's work is William Eggleston, with whom Welty, as Chouard shows, shares more than a common Southern origin. Chouard sees, in particular, Eggleston's "eccentricity" of vision, his fragmented images and refusal of hierarchy reflected in Welty's own strategies of representation, which rely on indirection and fragmentation (what Welty herself called "halving"). The chapter ends on literal tombstones with photographs Welty made of local churchyards (published under the title *Country Churchyards* in 2000). Here again, memory, local and personal identity meet in the crossings between photography and text. The final analyses Chouard proposes beautifully emphasize the aging writer's fascination for effaced letters on weather-beaten monuments in landscapes blurred by Spanish moss and distance. Chouard suggests here one last function of photography : in Welty's work, it constitutes a site of memory as well as forgetting, it is also a monument in that it promises stillness and repose.
- 8 Chouard's book is an essential contribution to the understanding of Welty's work. Her inspired and refined analyses of Welty's writings and photographs not only demonstrate a remarkable understanding of Welty, but also provide a magnificent example of how text and image can be read together. If she manages to make visible the imbrications of photography and text in Welty's work, her own work, correspondingly, weaves together with admirable skill threads that are too often kept separate. Chouard's book combines a lively, pleasant writing with rigorous, sophisticated analyses. One could only regret that the book could not offer more illustrations to support Chouard's argumentation. Ironically, given the line defended by Chouard, her reader often finds himself or herself frustrated not to be able to see the pictures discussed in detail, or to have to go back and forth between the chapters and the central section devoted to illustrations. More images, more evenly distributed in the text, would have more truly reflected what Chouard so elegantly demonstrates. Despite

this limitation, probably due to financial restrictions on the publisher's part, the book remains a beautiful object, sure to bring textual as well as visual pleasure to its readers.

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