

This paper is from a seminar at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation titled “The Fight in Women about Managing or Understanding--& the Beautiful Answer.” Ms. Bernstein discussed the life and art of important photographer, Marion Post Wolcott. The Aesthetic Realism Foundation, is a not-for-profit educational foundation, at 141 Greene St., NYC 10012, (212) 777-4490.

**The Fight in Women about Managing or Understanding—  
& the Beautiful Answer**

The Life & Work of Marion Post Wolcott

*by Harriet Bernstein*

A manager? That was the last word anyone would use to describe me. I considered myself agreeable and easy-to-please. But inwardly, and very early, there was a fight going on in me between wanting to know and have big feeling about people and things, and also seeing them as foolish and inept - that they didn't know how to manage themselves, and I knew better. This drama, I learned from Aesthetic Realism, is the fight between respect and contempt – the feeling we are superior to the world and can manage what we meet with no thought of what it deserves. Contempt, I have seen, makes us ashamed, lonely, and cruel.

Aesthetic Realism shows logically and beautifully how wanting to understand people and the world around us is equivalent to our deepest desire: to honestly like the world through knowing it. This explains why, for example, in grade school I was excited learning about the solar system and planets. I remember being enthralled by the beautiful rings of Saturn and in awe of the fact that they were made up of ice particles,

rocks, and poisonous gases!

But I didn't see the people closest to me with that same wonder and interest. My parents came home tired after working long hours sewing in clothing factories, and I had a sense it was better not to disturb them. While we often ate dinner in silence, there were times my father and older sister got into loud arguments – he objecting to the way she dressed and whom she dated, and she yelling back that she would do what she wanted. Having no desire to understand what they felt, I ran to my room. “Why can't they just behave?” I thought. I got a satisfaction sweepingly dismissing what they felt, seeing it as wiser to distance myself from people – a distance that grew and grew and ultimately had me despair of ever being close to anyone.

Years later, I was fortunate to begin studying Aesthetic Realism with the teaching trio There Are Wives, who explained in an early consultation:

Everybody feels that if they could tailor the world to their specifications it would be great. We set ourselves up as judge of the world, which means ‘If the world does not meet my standards of how it should be, how do you expect me to like it?’ In order to like and express yourself you have to like the way you see what's not you.

I am unboundedly grateful for the existence of Aesthetic Realism consultations where I met, for the first time in my life, deep comprehension and kindness. And I began learning that the reason I felt

despairing and so disliked myself was because I had gone against my largest desire – to use the people and things I met to like the way I saw the whole world.

I had been misusing the persons in my family to come to a way of seeing the world that hurt my life. I decided that showing what you felt made you look like a mess and, instead, would hide my feelings - managing the world by making a manicured, quiet place where I did not have to be disturbed by what went on inside other people. I even thought it clever to turn it into my advantage – having a victory when my father looked sweetly at me and called me his “Hasselah” (little Harriet). I could bring calm to him, knew how to “handle” him better than anyone else – simply by looking placid and staying quiet. I cultivated this attitude of contempt where I could be in the midst of people, particularly with men, while keeping my feelings hidden. But I often felt unsure of myself, feeling more and more lonely and cold.

In The Right Of #1300, Ellen Reiss so kindly explains:

[T]here is a cozy superiority seeing ourselves as too big a treasure for others to know. Meanwhile, we can have fun fooling people and managing them. If we let people see our feelings, be within us, we won't be able to manipulate them.

And she continues,

But this...seeming power that hiddenness provides, makes us feel deeply alone even as our lips touch another's, even as we are in the midst of the family. It makes us feel we are frauds.

It makes us dislike ourselves very much....We need to feel that the victory of knowing and being known is greater than the victory of managing reality while being unhad by it.

Meanwhile, I had based my sense of myself on being superior and unhad even as I quietly managed people. As a teenager, I discovered I could have power over young men, wearing mini-skirts and watching them get stirred up, while pretending I was unaware of the effect I was having. I daydreamed about having a meaningful relationship, but the idea of being with someone for an extended period of time was terrifying to me. I felt I had to be in control and made sure that my “relationships” never lasted more than one or two dates.

When I met Len Bernstein, something unexpected happened. I was drawn to his lively manner and liked him right away. He showed his excitement about things, including photography, which he had just begun to study. And he made it clear that he was interested in me. But I worried that if he knew what I was really like, what kind of thoughts I had about people, he would run the other way. Once, I got so angry with a friend that I cursed out loud, and when I realized Len had heard me, I ran out of the room. He followed, asked me if I was ok, and when I said “You heard me curse, you must hate me” Len wasn’t fazed; he just asked what I was angry about. This gave me hope – that it might be possible to be close to another person and not always hide. Three months later we

moved in together, and three months after that we were married.

But I couldn't understand why I could abruptly change from acting like I approved of Len unconditionally, to being annoyed and giving him the message that nothing he did or said could please me. In a consultation, *There Are Wives* asked me: "Why do you think a wife would make a husband better than he is and at other times worse than he is?" "I don't know," I answered. "Do you think," [they asked,] "it's because you're not interested enough in who he really is?" They gave me an assignment to write a soliloquy of Len, what he felt to himself at the age of 18, and my education began in understanding who Len Bernstein truly is. In these years I have had the pleasure of learning about Len, the world, and other people, which I never would have had and which my desire to manage had robbed me of.

I am fortunate to have a basis for criticizing the drive in me to act like I know better than others – without any evidence to back it up! For example, early in our marriage, I was surprised, and respected Len when he said he was going to try making a blueberry pie. As he carefully used a rolling pin to create a delicate crust, I offered advice for how he could do it better. "Oh," he asked, "is that how you do it?" Embarrassed, I admitted I never actually made a blueberry pie. He continued with his work, and the pie was delicious!

While this example has its humor, the lack of understanding and managing it exemplifies drains the feeling out of marriages every day. I am grateful for how my life has changed through studying Aesthetic Realism, and for my education continuing – including very much on the subject of managing and understanding. Almost daily, I have become aware of times when I’ve tried to manage Len and, regrettably, dampen his feeling while making myself the center of things. And it has made me a better critic of my desire to deflate another’s enthusiasm. For example, when Len said recently, “You know, I really like our living room curtains,” I responded caustically, “They need to be cleaned.”

I’m grateful to Aesthetic Realism for enabling me to look at my contempt and to change, for making it possible to truly get to know my husband more deeply each year of our marriage, for giving us the means to understand and strengthen each other, and for the daily romance this has made possible.

An important American photographer is stirred by reality

Aesthetic Realism shows it is through being affected by the outside world that we have a chance to express ourselves truly. In *Self and World*, Eli Siegel writes of the artist, “He has come to power through undergoing the might of things and giving them form through his personality.”

A person whose life and work is evidence for this is the American

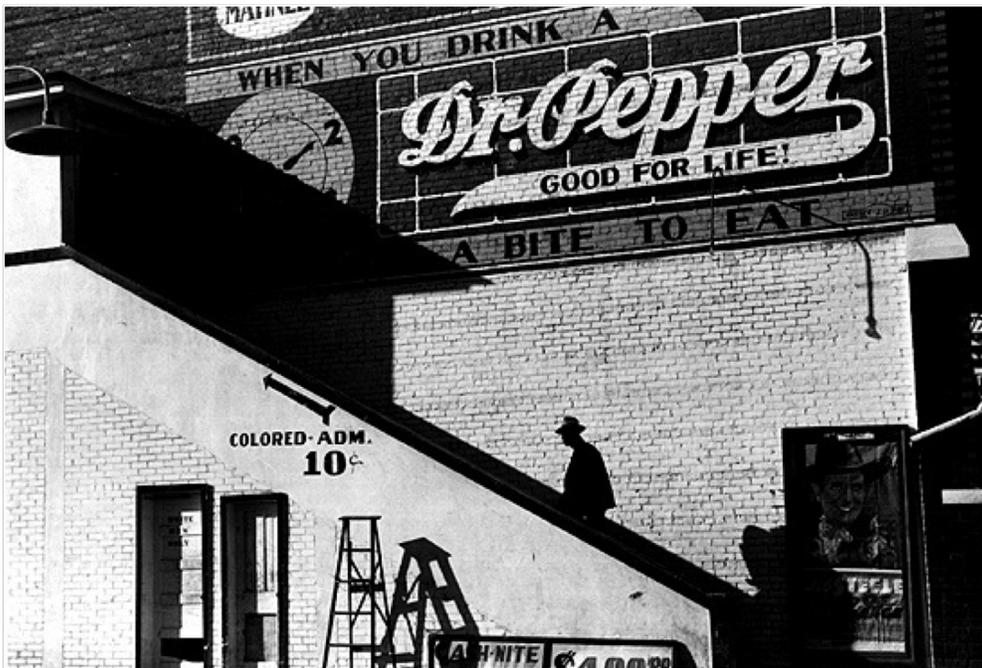
photographer Marion Post Wolcott, who lived from 1910 to 1990.



She worked for the Farm Security Administration or “FSA” under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression and took many powerful photographs. I believe her purpose was to understand and be stirred by the people and things she photographed, producing images that have an important place in the historical record of our country.







As I studied her life, I saw she was in a fight between wanting to undergo “the might of things” and making a smaller world for herself

where she didn't have to think about what other people and things deserved.

Marion was born in Montclair, New Jersey, the second child of Walter and Nan Post. Her father was a doctor, and her mother, a nurse. When Marion was 13, they went through a bitter divorce. Biographer Jack Hurley writes, Marion's "withdrawal into silence was a defense she learned during her parents' separation and one she would use again in later life." I believe Marion used the animosity between her parents to feel this was an unfriendly world she had a right to hide from and also conquer.

In *Looking for the Light: The Hidden Life and Art of Marion Post Wolcott*, the author Paul Hendrickson tells of a photograph of several children – Marion, age 6, standing front and center – on the back of which she had written when she was in her seventies: "What a silly spoiled looking phony brat.... The boy next to me was my sister's boyfriend. Till he became mine. Ha." While she clearly feels critical of herself, there is also the contempt victory - still fresh seven decades later – of having managed to capture her sister's boyfriend.

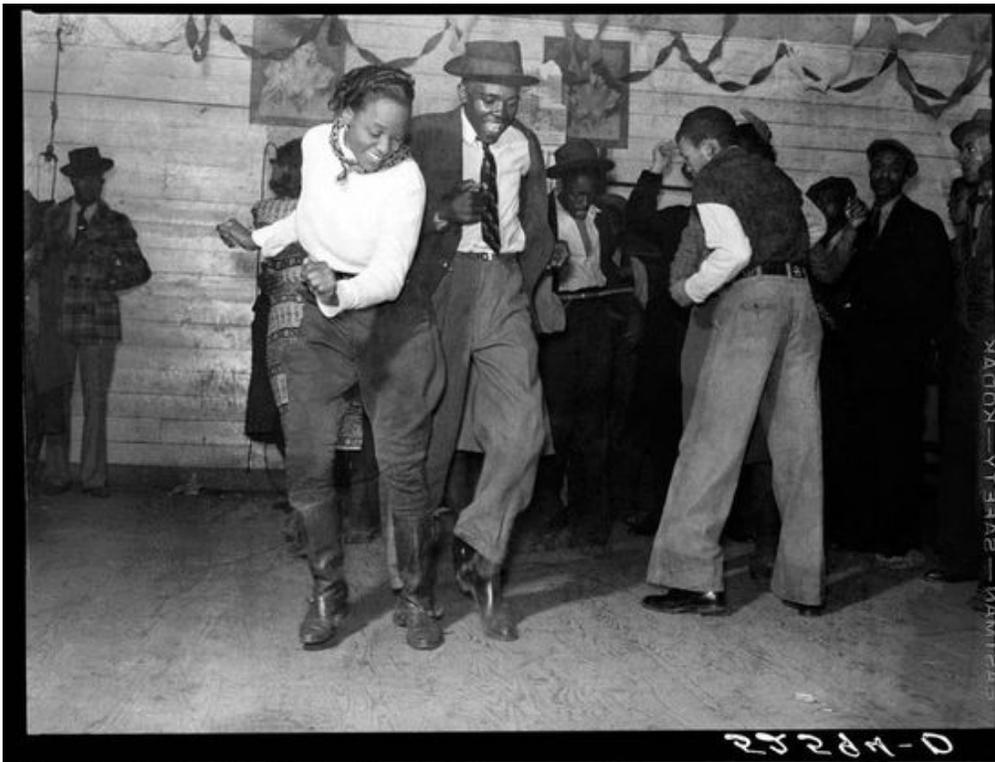
It was her experience at a progressive boarding school that led Marion to want to teach, and at 22, she traveled to Europe to continue her studies. There, within just several months, Marion was deeply

impacted by two great forces – the horror of fascism and the beauty of art. “Fascism,” Mr. Siegel importantly explained, “is the unwillingness to understand as power.” At a rally in Berlin in 1932, Marion heard Adolph Hitler speak, and recounts her horror seeing how people were manipulated by his “message of hate.” She joined anti-fascist organizations, but it was becoming increasingly dangerous to oppose Hitler openly and she was encouraged to return to the U.S. Before she did, she met noted photographer Trude Fleischman who gave her a gift that excited her very much--a camera. I think with all the painful uncertainty she met early in life and what she saw going on in the turbulent world around her, she felt photography could help her understand and give permanent form to her feelings.

Back in the States, she continued to photograph, freelancing and working for a time at the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Then she had the good fortune to be introduced to Roy Stryker, Director of the photography department of the FSA, who hired her after seeing her work. Marion was passionate about the mission of the FSA, created under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration to combat rural poverty during the economic devastation of the Depression – and photography provided the evidence for how needed and successful this government agency was.

Marion’s first assignment lasted six months, travelling alone

through the South. Stryker valued her as a troubleshooter, going into tough situations and getting just the right photos for the FSA files. He also welcomed her suggestions that included a series of photos showing people who endured so much having a good time dancing in what were called “Juke Joints”.



Her schedule was physically arduous. Yet she would ask Stryker for extra time to get more deeply into an assignment. In her work, Marion was “undergoing the might of things” as she tried to understand the feelings of people and give form to them in her photographs. But there’s evidence she also wanted to get away from the large feeling she had – make it smaller, more manageable and looked for ways to do this.

“In general,” she wrote, “I’m tired of the strain of continually adjusting to new people, making conversation, getting acquainted, being polite and diplomatic when necessary.”

While she prided herself on her independence, when she met Lee Wolcott she felt this was a man she could have a life with. He shared Marion’s feeling for social justice, working for the Department of Agriculture. She agreed with Lee to leave the FSA to devote herself to raising a family, thinking someday she would return to the work she loved. But she regretted she never did. In an interview when she was in her 70s, she said:

You see I didn’t want to give up my work. Not really. I loved learning how people lived. I was learning about the world....I was exhilarated by it....And, yes, I had fallen pretty passionately in love with a passionate man....[But] let’s face it, Lee and I really didn’t know each other when we got married.

Aesthetic Realism beautifully explains that the purpose of marriage is to use a person as a beginning point for knowing and liking the whole world. This photograph, “Shenandoah Valley” arose, I think, from a large desire to see meaning in the world, in a man, and understand their relation to each other.



The small figure of the farmer is both humble and proud as it stands out in the open space of the field. In the background are magnificent dark mountains and turbulent clouds of dark and light. As he stands behind a plow and the white horse that pulls it tilling the earth...



there is a white line, perhaps a narrow road, delicately touching them as it stretches on a slight diagonal across the entire image extending beyond the frame of the photograph – joining the man to all that is not himself.

Her Director at the FSA Roy Stryker had played a pivotal role in Marion's life, and represented, I think, the outside world for her in a large way. At their wedding he was their only guest. But Marion was looking for a way to justify her decision to leave the FSA, and that is why, I believe, shortly after her marriage she complained bitterly to Lee that Stryker didn't appreciate her work sufficiently, maneuvering her husband into being so angry that he threatened to get Stryker fired. While this did not come to pass, Marion had made a choice to be in a

team with her husband against that world photography and the FSA had brought her closer to.

Marion did not photograph on assignment again, but she never stopped caring for photography. Her daughter writes:

More often than not her Rollei [camera] dangled from its thin strap around her neck....[On] just about any type of outing, something in the passing landscape would often capture her attention. Anxiously she'd cry, "Lee, please stop. Could you back up? Hurry, the light's fading." Daddy would chafe, as, with...eager excitement she would climb on the car or cross the road, wade into a field, check the light.

The marriage of Marion and Lee Wolcott has become a subject of hot debate—her husband cast as a tyrant who squelched her creativity. But I think, like many marriages, there was an unspoken pact to create a separate world where they both agreed not to talk about what they really felt, and to act like the outside world was an intruder. A close friend of many years said in an interview that Marion and Lee never mentioned her work for the FSA, "It was just as if it had never happened."

Around the time Marion's work was being re-discovered in the 1980s Lee was asked in an interview, "Do you regret that you could not encourage her more?" "No," he said flatly. And I want Marion to hear this. Babe? The answer is no." Marion had her revenge. In an interview around the same time, she was asked about Lee, who wasn't feeling well. With "a delicious grin," she answered, "It's the poison I've been slipping

the old boy.” Wives have felt they’ve punished and weakened their husbands and can relish that contempt, even as it makes for deep shame.

To understand the world and see it with form

In this photograph Marion had courage and compassion and she wanted to make permanent for herself and others what she saw and felt.



She titled it, “Coal miner’s daughter carrying home can of kerosene to be used in oil lamps, West Virginia, 1938.” This little girl carries her heavy burden up a dirt road with scraggly weeds on either side, her body bent

to counter the weight. The curve of her body conveys pain and grace. She is the center of the composition, anchoring the scene as she gives it a lift through the brightness of her hair and dress. We feel the weight of not just her physical burden but also of a difficult life, and as Marion chose to photograph her from the back, she is also impersonal, representing what so many children then, and today endure under a brutal, failed economic system.

On the left is a coal train on an energetic diagonal, and dark buildings rise with geometric structure within this grimy scene. All this makes for weight and lightness at once. The photographer wanted to present ugliness, the painful, what should not have to be endured in this world at one with form; it is both criticism and love.

The exhilaration Marion felt learning about the world and people through the art of photography had everything to do with what she longed to find in life and love. It is the beautiful answer people everywhere are looking for, that I am so grateful to be studying.