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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Hugh Rollin Davis entitled "The Making of James Agee." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Allen R. Dunn, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
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Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

THE MAKING OF JAMES AGEE

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Hugh Rollin Davis
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DEDICATION

To Molly and Mandi

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ABSTRACT

When James Agee died in 1955, all of his major works were out of print or not yet published. The posthumous 1957 publication of *Death in the Family,* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958, began a twelve-year period that saw editions of Agee's collected film reviews, screenplays, letters, short prose, and poetry, as well as re-issues of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Morning Watch.* As these works came into or back into print, establishing a de facto Agee canon, an Agee myth also emerged. Agee came to be seen as the epitome of the tortured artist, a noble failure who had been crushed by a system to which he had refused to capitulate. Eventually, the myth came to predominate, and the work was judged not on its own merits but as a reflection of his various roles: rebel, poet, mystic, martyr.

While the people most responsible for creating Agee's legacy were long-time friends who wanted to ensure that his work would receive the attention it deserved, they did him a disservice by distorting or misrepresenting a large portion of his oeuvre. Built largely on manuscripts, journals, correspondence, and other archival material, "The Making of James Agee" offers a revised version of the Agee canon, revealing a writer much more complex than the caricature created by the Agee myth. Agee's engagement with the revolutionary avant-garde was more extensive than has previously been acknowledged, for instance, and is apparent not only in his long-suppressed proletarian poetry but also in his use of the ideas and techniques of surrealism in the late 1930s. Surrealist ideas are also important to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* which explores the limits of primitivist discourse before turning to an investigation of the individual unconscious. Having exhausted the possibilities of representation in *Let Us Now Praise*

Famous Men, Agee turned to simpler forms, drawing on the lessons of popular filmmakers such as John Huston to introduce an economy of form and directness of expression to *A Death in the Family* in order to engage the reader more fully. Throughout his career, Agee was concerned with the surrealist project of the reconciliation of art and life, and even though his works vary widely in style, they all constitute a complex commentary on the possibilities of the written word to affect the field of action.

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CHAPTER ONE

"Death of a Poet": The Agee Myth and the Agee Canon

Agee had convinced me that a man is not what he shows you he is, but what you perceive him to be. . . .
—Warren Eyster[1]

In November 1957, the newly chartered publishing firm McDowell, Obolensky, Inc. released *A Death in the Family,* a novel by the late James Agee, who had died eighteen months earlier of a heart attack in a taxi in New York City. Though Agee had had a distinguished and wide-ranging career as a writer, at the time of his death all of his works, save for a few poems scattered in anthologies, were out of print. During his life, Agee had inspired affection, even devotion, as his prodigious talent and undeniable charisma, his out-sized compassion and capacious appetite for living led those around him to see in him the embodiment of the Romantic ideal. "Writers and reporters who swarmed around him cherished his spoken words and wolfed down his writing," Richard Oulahan wrote of Agee's tenure at *Time* magazine; "Some imitated his mannerisms—the stern-wheel gestures he used with his hands when talking, his contempt for barbers, his method of working (he never used a typewriter, and his microscopic handwriting was the despair of copy desks), his binges" (69). For those who knew him, Agee was the prototype of the literary author. In 1940 Harper Brothers editor Edward Aswell called Agee "one of the most remarkable writers I have ever known and the only one now living who, I feel sure, is an authentic genius" (221);[2] Dwight Macdonald, speaking for his

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[1] "Conversations with James Agee" (353).
[2] Other writers Aswell had worked with by that time include Thomas Wolfe and Richard Wright.

contemporaries a few years later, remembered Agee as "the most broadly gifted writer of my generation, the one who, if anyone, might someday do major work" ("Death of a Poet" 204).

But the major work, it seemed in 1955, had never come. Agee published a book of poetry in 1934, a novella in 1951, and the unclassifiable *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) in between. He wrote hundreds of movie reviews and dozens of articles for mass-circulation magazines such as *Fortune, Time, Life,* and the *Nation,* and his poetry and fiction appeared in literary journals such as *transition, Botteghe Oscura,* and *Partisan Review*. His last few years were dedicated to writing screenplays for feature films, most notably in collaboration with John Huston and Charles Laughton, and for the new medium of television. While the sheer quantity of Agee's production in so many different genres was impressive, it was too unwieldy, too diffuse—his talent seemed to have been squandered on unworthy projects, and there was little besides *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (and even it was mostly forgotten) to prove it had existed at all. Agee had failed to write the Great American Novel, and this failure—of one so talented, so seemingly destined to do great things—represented a failure of the age.

Appropriately, in 1953, just twelve years after its publication, the printing plates for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* unknown outside of those who knew Agee himself, had been melted down as scrap metal during the Korean War.[3] Despite his failure to produce the major work expected of him—or, rather, because of it—Agee's personality became a rallying point for his admirers, who saw him as a rebel who had refused to bow

[3] In a letter to James F. Murray, the lawyer for the James Agee Trust, Edward N. Costikyan explained, "[D]uring the Korean War, a War Production Authority order required the disposal of plates in order to free the metal for war purposes if the plates had been in existence for a period of four years and had not been used during that period" (1).

to the system. To the editors of *i.e., The Cambridge Review,* who dedicated the March 1956 issue to him, Agee's works bore "the scars of an artist's courage, a willingness to live without armour" (8). If he had been crushed by middlebrow conformity, it was only because he had too much integrity, indeed, because he had been too pure. As William Dunlea noted in 1962, "no recent writer has been remembered so admiringly for what he did not write" (499). But no canon was required for him to be canonized; as T. S. Matthews asserted: "A wild yearning violence beat in his blood, certainly, and just as certainly the steadier pulse of a saint. He wanted to destroy with his own hands everything in the world, including himself, that was shoddy, false and despicable; and to worship God, who made all things" (26).

When he died, Agee left behind, in addition to hundreds of pages of handwritten manuscripts, a dedicated group of friends both devoted to his memory and in positions to preserve and perpetuate it. A version of Agee's novel *A Death in the Family* was assembled from manuscripts and published in 1957; it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958. Editions of Agee's reviews, screenplays, and correspondence followed within five years, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was reissued in 1960, as was *The Morning Watch* in 1966. By 1969, with the publication of editions of Agee's *Collected Short Prose* and *Collected Poems,* an Agee canon had emerged, along with an Agee myth to give it meaning.

As more of Agee's writing came into, or back into, print, the more his persona grew, and these two aspects of his literary rehabilitation reinforced one another, with the Romantic myth of Agee as an uncompromising and individualistic artist fighting the system influencing the selection of works considered representative, and the newly

collected works confirming his status as an writer alienated from his time and destined to receive his due posthumously. Eventually, the myth came to predominate, and the work was judged, not on its on merits, but as a reflection of the various roles prescribed for Agee by the Ageeans: rebel, poet, mystic, martyr. In one sense, Agee was the victim of having been loved not wisely but too well. The people most responsible for creating his legacy were long-time friends who wanted to ensure that his work would receive the attention it deserved. But Father Flye burned the originals after editing Agee's letters; David McDowell mangled the manuscripts of *A Death in the Family,* producing a novel quite different from what Agee had intended; Robert Fitzgerald suppressed his Marxist poetry in the service of aesthetic and political probity; and Dwight Macdonald used Agee's life and death to further his own ideas about cultural decline. All of these men promoted Agee enthusiastically, but each had his own agenda, as well as a preconceived notion of Agee through which to advance it. By emphasizing those aspects of Agee's life and career that validated his Romantic credentials, they distorted or misrepresented a large portion of his work, which is actually more complex and more interesting than the caricature allows.

Before turning to a reconstruction of Agee's career that highlights works and influences obscured by the Ageeans, it is necessary to examine the formation of the Agee canon and the Agee cult to underscore why an alternative reading of Agee's works is overdue.

In a letter to David McDowell dated June 5, 1955, less than three weeks after James Agee's death, Father James H. Flye wrote that he was glad to have seen McDowell at Agee's funeral and to have been able to officiate, but he soon turned to the subject of

"[h]ow deeply Jim affected everyone who knew him well" (1). If there is a seminal document in the reconstruction of Agee's legacy, this letter makes a singular claim to the designation. Father Flye had been teacher and mentor to both Agee and McDowell in their days as students at St. Andrew's, an Episcopal boarding school near Sewanee, Tennessee, and continued to correspond with both of them throughout their adult lives. Although he was nine years older than McDowell and had left St. Andrew's in 1924, Agee returned with his wife in 1936 near the end of the school year to visit Father Flye on the way to Anna Maria, Florida, during a leave on absence from *Fortune.* "I felt I already knew him," McDowell later wrote, "for he was the 'Rufus' I had heard so much about since I was thirteen" ("Turning Point" 89). McDowell loaned Agee a suit and tie for the commencement dance; Agee helped McDowell compose an introduction to his valedictory address (94-96). As the frequent references to the activities of "Jim" and "Rufus" in the correspondence between Flye and McDowell over two decades attest, the successful and charismatic New York magazine writer made quite an impression. Youthful hero worship apparently gave way to outright devotion; McDowell later told Victor A. Kramer that Agee was "the closest to a saint of any person he had ever known" (25). When Agee died, McDowell telephoned Flye with the news.

After graduating from St. Andrew's in 1936, McDowell attended Vanderbilt University for a year and then transferred to Kenyon College, where he later taught for two years and was secretary of the *Kenyon Review.* He served as an infantry officer in North Africa and Italy in World War II and after the war taught literature at the Army University affiliated with the University of Florence before attending graduate school at the Sorbonne. In Paris, he began an association with New Directions, the modernist

publishing house, before returning to America and moving to New York City, where he became reacquainted with Agee and then a close friend (2). In New York he worked as director of promotion, advertising, and sales for New Directions and later as an editor (most notably of William Carlos Williams's letters and Whittaker Chambers's *Witness*) and publicist for Random House. McDowell was therefore perfectly placed to play a key role in reconstructing Agee's literary persona.

Knowing that McDowell shared his deep respect for Agee as an artist and as a person, Flye quotes a passage from a letter he has received from journalist Brad Darrach, a mutual friend, which in retrospect, considering McDowell's hand in editing *A Death in the Family* and publishing the two volumes of *Agee on Film,* seems almost an anointing: "'I had awe of him, and yet I loved him, and I feared him for his terrible strength. I think it has made a tremendous difference that he has lived. It will be inexpressibly important that Jim's life shall be understood. I think that like Socrates he had a daimon, terribly dangerous to those who could not resist it, immensely vitalizing and transforming to those who like Plato could. Jim may yet have his Plato'" (1). The reference to Plato is apt. Not only was Plato's notion by way of the Romantics of the poet as madman and prophet who in a kind of trance channels the gods fundamental to the formation of the Agee cult, but just as Plato, by writing down the teachings of Socrates, made them his own, so the editors who preserved Agee's work transformed it according to their own conception of what was most important in it.

That Flye intends more than praise becomes even more apparent as the letter continues. In a remarkable passage that illustrates both his passion for Agee's work and

life and his desire that they not be forgotten, Flye implores McDowell to do justice to Agee's memory:

> I know you are carrying a load and are very busy, but I hope you can get time to look over any written material of Jim's that you can get to and collect any you could locate. In your capacity as close friend and as one in the publishing business, you are a natural person to help in this. And I shall be keenly interested in anything of this kind. I would like to have every bit of paper on which Jim had left any writing (i.e. above the level of a shopping list or other things on the non-important level) collected with the care and devotion with which the teachings of Mohammed which had been written down were collected after his death and treasured with reverence. David, those of us who were acquainted with Jim knew one of the great among human beings. He saw and apprehended with a depth and understanding that makes the observations of most of us seem superficial. A fine mind, a great heart and soul. He belongs with the very great. A sense of comedy of high quality with the overtones of tenderness and compassions that all great comedy has; and the deepest sense of the tragedy and sorrow and pathos in life. As Dante in Limbo found Homer and other great poets of antiquity and being welcomed took his place among them knowing that he belonged there so I could imagine Jim as at home with Shakespeare. When I think of what he had to give to the world in his writing and how little he was able to give out of his great potentiality, I feel sad and wistful. All that can be gathered of what he did say should be preserved. (1-2)

In this letter, Flye articulates several themes that resonated among Ageeans in the following years: the paradoxical lament that Agee was able to produce so little coupled with the implausibly high estimation of his literary status; the implication that Agee's life, his sensitivity and depth of feeling, may have constituted his greatest work of art; the unabashedly religious devotion with which his memory must be preserved. As far as Father Flye was concerned, Agee had already achieved the type of charismatic aura that would shape the reception of any posthumous works—and he was not alone. As Robert Fitzgerald had written to Flye in September 1955, in what may have served as the impetus for Flye's letter to McDowell: "And I particularly want to make sure that everything possible is being done to salvage and keep and honor all the writing that he had not destroyed. Nobody had written for or about the movies as he had; and there must be a great deal of that writing in draft form, or in some condition that would not have seemed to him fully worked out however interesting and beautiful in fact it was. I know that one should not fret too much about such things, but I am Jim's heir in a number of respects and I have a duty to do to my patrimony" (1).

Although resolutions made in the wake of a friend's unexpected passing often go unmet, Flye acted on his and Fitzgerald's desire to collect Agee's writings. In June 1956 he offered Agee's widow, Mia, one thousand dollars for "any and all writings he left" (1),[4] and by December 3 of that year, he was able to write to McDowell that he had acquired "all rights to published and unpublished writings of his, including A Mother's

[4] In an undated but signed note on a copy of this letter in the James Harold Flye Papers at Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Flye wrote, "I paid this, and then gave any rights I might have received to the James Agee Trust. There was mention of reimbursement to me from the Trust but I never asked for it or received anything—and as a step in getting publication rights taken care of and established in the Trust, that is all right."

Tale[,] Abraham Lincoln (Television script), Permit Me Voyage, The Morning Watch[,] Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,[5] A Death in the Family (manuscript of a projected book of which short extracts have been published in periodicals[6]), movie criticism, any unpublished poems or letters. . ." [ellipses in original] (1). Realizing he might not be able to see the project of rehabilitating Agee's work through, the seventy-two-year-old priest soon turned publication rights over to the newly established James Agee Trust Fund, headed by McDowell.

Agee had been paid well for some of his movie work, but his estate was worth less than five hundred dollars at the time of his death (Hersey 81), and Mia Agee had set up the James Agee Trust to help provide for their three children.[7] Except for pledges of one thousand dollars each from John Huston and Charlie Chaplin and assurances from Walker Evans that other donors would soon be forthcoming, the Trust initially raised less than two thousand dollars. Mia and McDowell recognized the potential worth of manuscripts Agee had left behind, however, as well as the inevitable increase in value that his published works would accrue by the mere fact of his death. Mia wrote to editor Paul Brooks in January 1956 to ask "if Houghton, Mifflin would be willing to release its contract rights to the work of my husband. Two publishers are interested in some of his writings, most specifically in a collection of his writings on movies" (1). Other parties were interested as well. In a March 26, 1957, letter, James F. Murray, the Trust's lawyer, claims "four other major publishing houses" (1) had made offers on *A Death in the*

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[5] The claim to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was apparently based on a misreading of Agee's 1940 contract with Houghton Mifflin; correspondence between the Agee Trust and the publisher demonstrates that this situation took some time to resolve.

[6] An excerpt from what became *A Death in the Family* was published in *Harper's* in July 1956.

[7] Alma Neumann Agee's son, Joel, was living with his mother in East Germany at the time of Agee's death and was not originally designated a beneficiary of the Trust.

Family and notes that they were all higher than Houghton Mifflin's. In fact, Murray continues, "it seems clear from evidence presented to me by those concerned that other major publishers disagree with your sales predictions with respect to A DEATH IN THE FAMILY. In all honesty I must also make it clear that I have encountered a considerable body of professional opinion which inclines to the view that the weak sales record of James Agee's books is due in very large measure to the weak effort of the Houghton Mifflin Company" (284). In 1957 McDowell blocked (probably illegally) an attempt by the Reader's Subscription, a book club administered by W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling, to reprint four to five thousand copies of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and list it as a monthly selection, and Houghton Mifflin contemplated suing him.[8] William Morris, editor-in-chief of Grosset and Dunlap, also expressed interest in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and argued for reissuing it as part of the company's Universal Library series. As Morris explained, however, "Our editors unanimously favored the project; our sales people unanimously opposed it. I am sure you will have no difficulty in guessing who won" (1). As tribute to the reputation the book had acquired in elite literary circles, both the Reader's Subscription and Grosset and Dunlap considered a major investment in the sixteen-year-old flop without having a copy in hand.

McDowell was the natural choice to direct the Trust, but his aggressive proprietary stance towards Agee's work ruffled feathers. In a 1960 letter regarding royalties for the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* for instance, Walker Evans asks that the check be made out to him so that he can pass it on "to Mia Agee, not the

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[8] See letters by Gilman Kraft to Jack Leggett (June 27, 1957) and Jeptha H. Wade to Lovell Thompson (November 1, 1957) in the Houghton Mifflin Correspondence at Harvard's Houghton Library.

Agee Fund, because David McDowell made himself director of latter while no one was looking, and I wanted particularly to slight him for his presumption" (1). Regardless of tactics, there is no doubt that McDowell consistently acted to uphold Agee's legacy and to provide for Agee's children, the two responsibilities with which the Trust was charged.

McDowell approached Random House and Farrar Straus with the manuscript of *A Death in the Family,* but neither offered more than two thousand dollars for Agee's unfinished novel. Houghton Mifflin, citing the poor sales of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Morning Watch,* offered a scant five hundred (Newton 122-23). In a February 1957 letter to editor Paul Brooks, attorney James F. Murray made it clear that the Trust would accept nothing less than "$2,500 minimum advance. / Fifteen per cent flat royalty. / No option arrangements on future works" (1). When no offers were forthcoming, McDowell recruited novelist and ex-aviator Ivan Obolensky, the son of Ava Alice Muriel Astor and Czarist Prince Serge Obolensky, and formed the publishing company McDowell, Obolensky, Inc. on February 25, 1957 ("Book Publisher Organized" 44). Obolensky, who had inherited a sizeable fortune after his mother's death in the summer of 1956, was named chairman and treasurer, and McDowell became president and editor-in-chief (44).

In addition to transcribing (with help from Mia Agee and a typist from *Time* who could read Agee's miniscule handwriting), arranging, and editing the manuscript, McDowell put his considerable experience in the publishing business into promoting *A Death in the Family.* With a budget of five thousand dollars for advertising—the same amount he had paid the Trust for the rights to the book—he placed excerpts in *Harper's* and the *New Yorker* and delayed the release of the novel until a month after more

established houses had brought out their major titles, securing prestigious front-page reviews in the book sections of the *Chicago Tribune, New York Times,* and *New York Herald Tribune* (122-23).

In August 1957, McDowell wrote to Father Flye that Clifton Fadiman, Yale professor and chief judge for the Book-of-the-Month Club, had read *A Death in the Family* and was recommending it as a club selection, which "will, of course, be of a great deal of use to us" because the recommendation "automatically means that it becomes an 'A' book" (1). Flye responded with ambivalence: "What you wrote about A DEATH IN THE FAMILY is fine. There is no doubt about the quality of that book. But consider what Jim would have thought about anything of his being designated as a Book of the Month. I would have as much contempt as he for the low taste of many best-sellers and those who make them such, but am delighted to have excellence acclaimed as widely as possible" (1). For McDowell, however, the Book-of-the-Month Club's imprimatur, even after the novel was listed only as an alternate, was unalloyed good news. As he reported to Flye in February 1958,

> A Death in the Family is moving extremely well and we are even still getting reviews from all over the country. . . . Sales have now gone well over 15,000 copies, and I do firmly believe that we will ultimately sell between 30,000 and 50,000 copies. By ultimately I mean before the end of this year. Among other things, it has now been taken as an alternate selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club for May. This, of course, does not bring in nearly the amount of money that a regular selection does, but it does have a guarantee of something under $5,000. (10)

Despite Flye's concerns that Agee's art would be sullied by commerce, McDowell recognized the importance of institutional and critical recognition to the bottom line, and *A Death in the Family* achieved a level of commercial success, critical approbation, and institutional acknowledgment far greater than anything else Agee had written. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1958, garnering even more attention. Although critics have often faulted Agee for not living up to his promise, McDowell, Obolensky, the company founded largely on Agee's potential, is the only press to have published a Pulitzer Prize–winning novel in its first year of operation. *A Death in the Family* went through five printings in hardcover, reaching sales of about 40,000 copies, and more than 450,000 paperbacks had been purchased by 1961 (Esterow 40). A decade later the cover of the Bantam paperback celebrated "Over a million copies sold" (Broughton 101).

After the success of *A Death in the Family,* McDowell, Obolensky continued its legacy-building project, publishing in 1958 the first volume of *Agee of Film,* which contains an extensive selection of Agee's movie reviews for the *Nation* and *Time,* as well as several longer essays related to movies and popular culture. The second volume, consisting of five screenplays and a foreword by John Huston, followed in 1960. That same year Houghton Mifflin reissued *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Doubling the number of Walker Evans photographs, this edition, which was also prefaced by an essay by Evans entitled "James Agee in 1936," was immediately hailed as "An American Classic" and found in the early days of the Civil Rights movement the audience that had

eluded it in 1941.[9] *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* edited by the recipient, appeared in 1962. In just five years, Agee's body of published work had gone from nonexistent to consisting of a popular and critically acclaimed novel, a well-regarded collection of film criticism, and a book that defied classification but came to be considered a defining social document of two decades thirty years apart. Agee's letters to Flye, with their emotional honesty and window into the mind of a sensitive writer struggling with the demands of art, seemed an ideal culmination to this reconstruction process. As Edmund Fuller pointed out in a review of *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* "James Agee was not a famous writer when he died, May 16, 1955. He is now" (1).[10] Noting that "an Agee legend has sprung up," Fuller claims that the edition of letters "will help to give it permanence" (1). Only the screenplays failed to garner significant attention and praise. In the meantime, Tad Mosel won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *All the Way Home,* his stage adaptation of *A Death in the Family,* which would in turn be adapted for the screen in 1963. In 1966 Houghton Mifflin reissued *The Morning Watch* as a Bantam paperback, and in 1968 and 1969, *The Collected Poems of James Agee* and *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee,* both edited by Robert Fitzgerald, were published, the latter prefaced by a lengthy memoir.[11] From manuscripts, personal papers, and mostly forgotten published pieces and primarily through the efforts

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[9] "An American Classic" was the title of reviews by *Newsweek* (September 5, 1960) and Lionel Trilling (*Mid-Century,* September 1960). The phrase "The American Classic" also appears on the front cover of the latest edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Mariner, 2001).

[10] That the publication of *Letters to Father Flye* represents a watershed in the academic legitimation of Agee is borne out by the fact that while there were only two theses or dissertations written on Agee before it appeared, there were eight completed in 1963 alone.

[11] An omnibus volume containing both poetry and prose that would have been roughly the same length as either of the later volumes had been prepared by 1964, but then it was decided to expand the number of selections and publish separate editions. In other words, the Agee canon was well on its way to being established even more rapidly than the publication dates indicate.

of Agee's widow, Mia, and three men—Father Flye, David McDowell, and Robert Fitzgerald—the Agee canon had been assembled in just over a decade, surely one of the swiftest and most thorough resurrections in literary history.[12]

The achievement of *A Death in the Family* and the resurgence of interest in Agee that it generated came at a price, however, in that the novel that was published, while undeniably suited to critical and popular taste, is not the novel Agee wrote, and the works that followed in its wake presented an incomplete and misleading portrait of Agee's career.

In a prefatory note to *A Death in the Family,* McDowell asserts that Agee's novel "is presented here exactly as he wrote it. There has been no re-writing, and nothing has been eliminated except for a few cases of first-draft material which he later re-worked at greater length, and one section of seven-odd pages which the editors were unable satisfactorily to fit into the body of the novel" (vii). This assertion is simply not true. As Michael A. Lofaro has shown, the novel as published diverges significantly from the manuscripts from which it was constructed. Lofaro notes, for instance, that "the editors deleted or did not use eight and one-half chapters, deliberately divided and interspersed others, and substantially altered the time sequence of the novel by creating the two 'italicized' sections from eight separate chapters which were deliberately fused together

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[12] Although Agee left a much larger body of work, both published and in manuscript, this standard list has been remarkably durable. Paul Ashdown extended it with his 1985 edition *James Agee: Selected Journalism,* and Victor A. Kramer has mined the Agee collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas and other sources for years, bringing to light, for instance, material omitted from McDowell's edition of *A Death in the Family.* For the most part, however, the critical literature focuses overwhelmingly on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and works edited by McDowell, Flye, or Fitzgerald. In a 1980 essay based on an interview with McDowell, Scott Newton dismissed Kramer, who had published nearly twenty pieces on Agee by that time, many of them editions of non-canonical manuscript material, as someone "who has apparently adopted Agee as a hobby" (123).

in random, non-chronological order" (1).[13] In fact, when missing chapters are restored and the book is arranged sequentially, the first chapter of McDowell's edition becomes chapter 16 (2). In a move he later called "probably the most reckless piece of editorial judgment I ever made" (Newton 124), McDowell also reprinted the nostalgic "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1938, as an prologue to the novel replacing the much darker "Dream Sequence," a nightmare in which Agee confronts the death and dismemberment of his father, thereby substantially altering the book's tone. Other alterations include the changing of characters' names and standardizing of dialect spelling and Agee's eccentric use of punctuation. That the chronological displacement of the novel as originally published contradicts Agee's intention is evident from his working notes, which include a number of outlines of scenes, all of which are arranged sequentially, and the fact that the book was part of a vast autobiographical project, of which Agee identified nineteen major sections, beginning with "The Ancestors. (Culminate in my mother's and father's meeting in the dancing school)" and ending with "Mia. (Everything since.)" and including "This book. (Begins with my first remembrance; ends the evening of his burial.)" (*Literary Notebooks* 321-22). In a letter to his mother, Agee again explicitly refers to the sequence: "I am trying to write a short book, a novel, beginning with the first things I can remember, and ending with my father's burial. The whole closing section is to be as clear an account as I can make, of everything I can remember, from the morning I woke up and learned that he had died the night before, through to the end of the afternoon of the funeral" (326).

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[13] References are to a draft of Lofaro's as yet unpublished introduction to the restored edition of *A Death in the Family*.

That the father's death and funeral were to come at the end of the novel is further confirmed by another note from the papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas: "Until death sequence virtually nothing is told except what I see, hear, experience & suppose" ("Notes" n.p.).

McDowell justifies the chronological displacement in "A Note on This Book" by claiming both that it would have been "presumptuous to try to guess" where Agee would have placed the scenes dealing with Rufus's early childhood and that such a rearrangement "obviated the necessity of the editors having to compose any transitional material" (vii). He also later claimed that Agee was "well aware of the two levels of time" that he used to shape the novel (Newton 123). Rather than merely a practical solution to a minor problem, however, McDowell's structuring of *A Death in the Family* actually serves a purpose closely related to his other major alteration to the text, the omission of key chapters developing the relationship between Rufus and his father. Agee's working notes emphasize that the linear progression of the plot is inextricably connected to the father-son relationship: "Straight through. Theme: I worship him: I fail him: I need his approval: he is killed: everything is changed. [2nd theme: he is at an uneasy time of his life. My failure hurts him.]" ("Notes" n.p.) reads one excerpt; "Maximum simple: Just the story of my relation with my father and, through that, as thorough as possible an image of him: winding into other things on the way but never dwelling on them" ("Notes" n.p.) reads another. While Agee intended Rufus's reaction to his father's death to be an important part of the novel, the bonding that takes place between father and son beforehand is what imbues the family tragedy with its meaning and poignancy. In retrospect, McDowell's subordinating of this relationship, both

structurally and thematically, to the father's death and funeral can be seen to have weakened Agee's intent for *A Death in the Family;* however, given its multiple printings and Pulitzer Prize, McDowell can also be said to have adapted the novel perfectly to its time.

Even though McDowell did not produce an edition of *A Death in the Family* faithful to Agee's manuscript, he did assemble a highly successful literary product, both in terms of sales and prestige. By making a sudden, unforeseen death and its ramifications central, McDowell's edition emphasizes the universal aspects of the story, reducing the father, who in the manuscript is a complex and flawed character whose death is foreshadowed in scenes highlighting his recklessness, to a much less developed figure. Even Agee's mother, Laura, recognized this aspect of the novel; after reading it, she wrote the following to Agee's sister, Emma:

> So much of it drew me straight into it—and yet mingled with it a great deal else that is a writer's privilege: to use his medium to mould and to drive thru abstract things, which were not in reality, true. It is a marvellous mixture of these elements, and I recognize it as a great and really universal elegy—since all of it is the essence of all deaths—among mankind—also I know it as wonderful writing—both poetry and prose—and the complex nature of my son, which always led him to probe the deepest depths, as well as the highest heights his very sensitive soul and mind could take him. (2)

This universal theme is reinforced by the book's structure. By the mid-1950s, high modernism had become the conventional literary standard, as the type of ahistorical and apolitical formalism advanced by the New Critics and particularly suited to difficult

modern poetry grew ascendant in the academy. Also, outside the academy, influential public intellectuals promoted European modernism and its American imitators in journals such as *Partisan Review*. McDowell, through his association with the *Kenyon Review* (editorial home of John Crowe Ransom), New Directions (the publisher of Ezra Pound and Henry Miller), and Random House (where he worked with writers such as William Carlos Williams), was intimately familiar with both the aesthetic and economic value of modernist texts in the literary marketplace and used this knowledge in editing *A Death in the Family* according to modernist standards.[14] As Joseph Frank had explained in 1945, the "spatialization of form" (17) was a hallmark of the modernist novel, having emerged from the poetry of Pound and T. S. Eliot, which forced the reader "to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (12). The effect of this "space-logic" is not only a reorientation of the reader's attitude toward language, requiring that he "suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity" (15), but also, especially through the ironic allusion to the structures and figures of myth, "the abolition of time" (64). As Dwight Macdonald remarks of *A Death in the Family* in what—it should be emphasized—is a positive review, the effect of the structure and language is that of a poem: "there is no plot, no suspense, no development, and thus no novel" (206). Though the "two levels of time" in *A Death in the Family* do not approach the historical intricacy or mythological resonance of *The Wasteland* or the *Cantos* or, for that matter,

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[14] An interesting intersection of modernism, the academy, and the marketplace can be seen in McDowell's later work as editorial advisor for the Kraus Reprint Corporation, which published facsimiles of little magazines such as the *Dial* and *transition* in the 1960s. McDowell solicited and received blurbs to be used for "advertising and publicity" from such major scholars as Alfred Kazin, Richard Ellmann, Yvor Winters, Lionel Trilling, and Mark Van Doren. Van Doren's response is representative: "An inspired enterprise, and for all students of twentieth-century literature the result will be priceless" (1).

the complexity of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* which makes use of both chronological displacement and the relationships among set pieces (including footnotes) composed at different times as part of its narrative strategy, the superimposition of the father as symbol rather than individual over a spatially rather than temporally ordered text does, in fact, result in a "great and really universal elegy"—Laura Agee's word unintentionally evoking the structural genesis of the modernist novel in the period's poetry. McDowell's real achievement, irrespective of the violence it does to Agee's intentions, however, is in the creation of a novel formally complex enough to meet the high modernist criteria for literariness and thematically conventional enough to become a best-seller.

While McDowell clearly edited *A Death in the Family* to conform to high modernist assumptions about literary value but with an eye toward sales, he also found it expedient to deny having done so. This subtle deception points to a contradiction at the heart of modernism: the artist must remain alienated from commerce in order to maintain the illusion that art exists in a separate sphere from the merely mundane, even though in many cases it is exactly this aura of alienation that gives him his symbolic and real value. McDowell's deception also anticipates the single most important critical work on Agee's novel and Agee himself, Dwight Macdonald's "Death of a Poet," which appeared in the *New Yorker* almost simultaneously with the publication of *A Death in the Family* in 1957.[15] Though Agee's works had been reviewed sporadically during his life, Macdonald's "Death of a Poet"—part review of the novel, part overview of Agee's

[15] The novel was officially released on November 15, 1957; "Death of a Poet" appeared in the November 16 issue of the *New Yorker.*

career, and part eulogy—is the cornerstone in the foundation of his posthumous reputation. For one thing, it begins with what is perhaps the one indispensable line in all Agee criticism: "The late James Agee's 'A Death in the Family' . . . is an odd book to be written by a serious writer in this country and century, for it is about death (not violence) and love (not sex)" (204). More important, it solidly establishes the template for those writing about the author and the man for years to come. Macdonald's characterization of Agee as "poet," however, though far-reaching, has less to do with Agee's actual artistic output than its applicability to Macdonald's larger critique of collapsing aesthetic standards in the wake of the commercialization of culture.

Like Father Flye and McDowell, Macdonald had a close relationship with Agee, and his role in the propagation of Agee's legacy, like theirs, was motivated by a desire to see his friend's genius attain the recognition it deserved. Agee and Macdonald had known each other since the summer of 1927, when Agee, then a student at Phillips Exeter, had written to Macdonald, an Exeter alumnus attending Yale, hoping to engage him in a conversion about movies. The two soon became friends and then coworkers, when Macdonald recommended Agee for a job at *Fortune* in 1932, thus beginning Agee's long association with Henry Luce. Four years later, Macdonald left *Fortune* and in 1937 became one of the founding editors of the second incarnation of *Partisan Review,* which, while retaining the name of its predecessor, had broken with the Communist Party, declaring "independence in politics as well as in art" ("Editorical Statement" 4).

Although Agee's tenure at Luce publications *Fortune* and *Time* has received more attention, from the mid-1930s to the 1950s he was also associated to varying degrees with the group of writers and critics associated with *Partisan Review* who later became known

as the New York Intellectuals. The origin of this group as a cultural force dates to 1933, when Philip Rahv and William Phillips launched the first *Partisan Review* as the literary complement to the Communist organ *New Masses*. Rahv and Phillips soon tired of promoting proletarian realism along strict party lines, however, and the journal folded after three years. In 1937 Rahv and Phillips, along with Macdonald, F. W. Dupee, George Morris, and Mary McCarthy, founded the second *Partisan Review,* which, unlike its predecessor, was oriented politically to a left-wing anti-Stalinism and culturally to a primarily European modernism. Although not all of the New York Intellectuals wrote for *Partisan Review,* proximity to the journal can serve as a type of index of cultural capital, as over the next twenty years it became the most powerful arbiter of high culture in America, both through the writers and critics it published and through the influence it exerted through its several off-shoots, imitators, and competitors. Ironically, by the mid-1950s *Partisan Review* was so prominent that it had become the leading instrument in the institutionalization of the avant-garde it had so long championed, as Allen Ginsburg and the other Beats—radicals of the wrong stripe—discovered when their attempts to ingratiate themselves with the editors met with a "critical, if not downright hostile" response (Wilford 126).

In addition to his friendship with Macdonald, which continued after Macdonald resigned from *Partisan Review* and founded the rival journal *Politics* in 1944, Agee had a long personal and professional relationship with *Partisan Review*. In fact, his series of "Lyrics" appeared in the first issue of the second iteration, and the prose poem "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" first appeared there in 1938, as did the essay "Pseudo-Art" in 1944. Despite his aggressively dismissive response to the *Partisan Review*

questionnaire "The Situation in American Writing" in 1939, which was rejected by the journal but printed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee was invited to participate in the journal's "Religion and the Intellectuals" seminar in 1950. Agee's inclusion in a group that boasted such New York Intellectuals and favorites as Hannah Arendt, W. H. Auden, James T. Farrell, Robert Graves, Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Reinhold Neibuhr indicates his standing within the group, as does the publication of his novella *The Morning Watch* in its entirety in *Partisan Review* a year later. Though Agee's disgust with the literary establishment—whether represented by little magazines or *Reader's Digest*—is manifest in his earlier questionnaire response, eleven years later, for "Religion and the Intellectuals" he replies respectfully, if not completely coherently, to each question in turn.

Members of the New York Intellectuals who wrote criticism, reviews, or appreciations of Agee's works and life both before and after his death in *Partisan Review* and other publications include Macdonald, Dupee, Howe, Kazin, Richard Chase, Paul Goodman, C. Wright Mills, and Lionel Trilling. Agee may not have produced the body of work these critics were expecting of him, but it is obvious that they considered him one of their own. Daniel Bell lists Agee as an "influential" of the New York group in "The 'Intelligentsia' in American Society," but if he had stayed in New York in the early 1950s rather than going to Hollywood, he would probably be remembered as a "Gentile cousin" (129).[16] After all, by including him in "Religion and the Intellectuals," the editors of *Partisan Review* had unquestionably welcomed him into the fold.

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[16] See also Jumonville 239-40 for a definition and roster of the group.

Although the New York Intellectuals were involved in many ideological disputes, there is one area of contention that has particular relevance to Agee, both in his work and in its posthumous reception: the defense of highbrow literary standards against contamination from below—not only from the masses, but also from the even more insidious middlebrow. Virtually all of the members of the New York group wrote on mass culture, and nearly all of those attacked it, none more vigorously than Macdonald. For instance, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America,* the comprehensive 1957 collection edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David H. White, numbers among its forty-nine essays pieces by Rosenberg, Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, Edmund Wilson, Robert Warshow, David Reisman, Irving Howe, and Leslie Fiedler, all of whom express deep reservations about the effects of mass culture both on artistic standards and American culture as a whole.

Greenberg's contribution to *Mass Culture,* a reprint of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which first appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1939, is in many ways the group's manifesto on popular culture. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" evolved from a letter to the editor by Greenberg reacting to a *Partisan Review* piece by Macdonald on Soviet cinema; Macdonald encouraged Greenberg to expand his ideas into an article, which, through its reformulation of the opposition between high and popular culture as a political struggle, set the terms of debate for a generation. In the essay, Greenberg identifies the avant-garde as the "only living culture we now have" (101) and defends its turn to abstraction as the historically motivated rejection of Western bourgeois society, on which it paradoxically remains economically dependent. Since every avant-garde has a rear-guard, though, kitsch—"popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes,

magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." (102)—is also a product of the industrial revolution. But where the avant-garde stresses individuality and originality, kitsch is "mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations" (102). Exemplifying industrial production, kitsch uses "for raw material the debased and academized simulacra of genuine culture" (102), displacing handicrafts and tempting ambitious writers and artists to modify their work to appeal to popular taste. Although Greenberg does not use the term "middlebrow," he points to "dangerous" (103) cases such as the *New Yorker,* "which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade" (103), and John Steinbeck, whose popularity works "to the detriment of true culture" (103). Ultimately, the avant-garde, which "imitates the processes of art," and kitsch, which "imitates its effect," are separated by an unbridgeable gulf, which "corresponds in turn to a social interval" between "the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated" and "the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore the ignorant" (106). In a stable society, the "axioms of the few are shared by the many; the latter believe superstitiously what the former believe soberly" (106). However, when the masses become dissatisfied with the social order, they begin to attack the culture of the ruling class:

> Every man, from the Tammany alderman to the Austrian house-painter, finds that he is entitled to his opinion. Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the

> name of godliness or the blood's health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences. (107)

Mass culture, then, is a potential breeding ground of fascism, and the avant-garde, having alienated its patron class, from which it pretends to be independent "but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold" (101), may not be strong enough to resist when the conflagration comes. Significantly, the version of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" reprinted in *Mass Culture* omits the final section of the essay as originally published; in it, Greenberg had insisted that socialism was necessary "for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now" (49). By the mid-1950s, though, socialism was no longer so obvious a solution, and Greenberg leaves the question open, reiterating only that both the rise of mass culture and disconnection between culture and the ruling class represent a grave threat to the preservation and perpetuation of "the values only to be found in art" (104).

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" exerted a strong influence on Macdonald, who shared Greenberg's distaste for mass culture but who saw an even greater menace in what he identified as the middlebrow dilution of culture. Macdonald developed Greenberg's ideas over two decades, particularly through the 1944 *Politics* essay "A Theory of Popular Culture" (1944), which he revised as "A Theory of Mass Culture" in 1953 (and which was reprinted in the *Mass Culture* anthology in 1957) and revised again as "Masscult and Midcult" for *Partisan Review* in 1960. As Macdonald explains in the preface to his *Against the American Grain* (1962), a collection devoted to "the influence of mass culture on high culture" (ix) and consisting of "Masscult and Midcult" and fourteen other essays, "Up to about 1750, art and thought were pretty much the exclusive

province of an educated minority. Now that the masses—that is, everybody—are getting into the act and making the scene, the problem of vulgarization has become acute. I see only two logical solutions: (a) an attempt to integrate the masses into high culture; or (b) a contrary attempt to define two cultures, one for the masses and the other for the classes. I am for the latter" (ix-x). In 1944, Macdonald writes, "I favored (a); by the 1953 version, published in *Diogenes,* I had lost confidence in (a) and was edging toward (b); today, for reasons given in this book *passim,* I have come to think (b) is the only practical solution" (x.n). For Macdonald, there finally can be no compromise: high culture must be reserved for the elite; the attempt to make it palatable to the masses is nothing less than treason.

Though Macdonald claimed that his position had evolved, a hard line on the enervation of high culture by its middlebrow simulation is evident throughout *Against the American Grain.* In the essays collected in the volume, Macdonald attacks James Gould Cozzens, the fifty-volume Great Books of the Western World, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, "Howtoism," and many other representatives "not only from the Masscult depths but also from the agreeable ooze of the Midcult swamp" ("Masscult" 74). Midcult, the result of Masscult's "unnatural intercourse" (37) with high culture, "has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf. In Masscult the trick is plain—to please the crowd by any means. But Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them" (37). In "Masscult and Midcult," Macdonald emphasizes that the "special threat of Midcult is that it exploits the discoveries of the avant-garde" (50)

and offers Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.,* Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea,* Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* and Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* as dangerous and typical "products of lapsed avant-gardists who know how to use the modern idiom in the service of the banal" (51). The old avant-garde, "from Rimbaud to Picasso," had been a snobbish elite, but its "significance was that it simply refused to compete in the established cultural marketplaces" (56); that is, it made "a desperate effort to fence off some area within which the serious artist could still function, to erect again the barriers between the *cognoscenti* and the *ignoscenti* that had been breached by the rise of Masscult," even though such an attempt "was against the whole movement of history" (56). The intellectual class circa 1960 has "become skilled at consuming High Culture when it has been stamped PRIME QUALITY by the proper authorities, but we lack the kind of sophisticated audience that supported the achievements of the classic avant-garde, an audience that can appreciate and discriminate on its own" (61). In America, as a result, "a book tends to be either a best seller or nothing, as a writer is either a Success or a Failure; there is no middle ground because there is no intellectual class" (64). Macdonald insists on the necessity "to revive the spirit of the old avant-garde, that is to re-create a cultural—as against a social, political or economic—elite as a countermovement to both Masscult and Midcult" (70). "Let the majority eavesdrop if they like," he avers, "but their tastes should be firmly ignored" (73).

Published in 1957, at the height of his crusade to drain the "the middlebrow swamp," Macdonald's "Death of a Poet" is, in many ways, an insightful appreciation of Agee's life and work, but the essay also serves a larger purpose in that Macdonald uses Agee's supposed failures to indict an amorphous American culture that offered "no

tradition to corset his sprawling talents, no cultural community to moderate his eccentricities" (217). To underscore this point, when Macdonald reprinted "Death of a Poet" in *Against the American Grain,* he retitled it "James Agee" and placed it under the subhead "Heroes/Victims" along with essays on Mark Twain, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway. Despite the plural, there is only one hero: Joyce, "because he was courageous about the one great thing in his life" ("James Joyce"132) and produced great works "uninfluenced by either academic tradition or avant-garde fashion" (142). While Joyce was able to resist outside pressures and fulfill his destiny through single-minded pursuit of his individual vision, in Macdonald's formulation Twain, Hemingway, and Agee were all victims of the commercialization of culture. Macdonald identifies Twain's "tragedy" as his "peculiar inability to speak in his own voice," explaining that "as the industrial revolution, democracy, and popular education brought ever larger masses of people into the cultural market, expanding and adulterating it, the writer was forced to choose between addressing this vast new public and speaking in his own voice" ("Mark Twain" 99). Despite great achievements such as the "folk epic" (105) *Huckleberry Finn,* Twain "appeared never to know when he was being himself and when he was manufacturing for the market" (100), and work directed to the popular audience came to dominate the latter part of his career; as a result, "The bulk of Mark Twain's work is no longer readable" (88). Similarly, Hemingway "believed his own propaganda" ("Ernest Hemingway" 172), and since "Mr. Hemingway the celebrity was such good copy," no one noticed when "Mr. Hemingway the writer was running out of gas" (168-69).

Agee, however, was not ruined by popularity, but rather by an inability to conform to an artistic culture that demanded specialization within a prescribed set of

generic categories; a "serious writer" ("Death of a Poet" 204) and "an intellectual" (218), he "was spectacularly born in the wrong time and place" (217). Macdonald casts Agee as a victim—an innocent, an amateur—but he is heroic at least in that his failure to produce what he would have been capable of under different circumstances serves as an indictment of the middlebrow culture that has attenuated the standards once enforced by the intellectual elite. Ironically, "American culture was not structured *enough* for Agee's special needs," Macdonald argues; "it was overspecialized as to function but amorphous as to values. He needed definition, limitation, discipline, but he found no firm tradition, no community of artists and intellectuals that would canalize his energies" (217).

By staking his argument on Agee's incompatibility with middlebrow culture, however, Macdonald finds it necessary to ignore the fact that Agee, in many ways, was actually quite well suited to a system that allowed him to produce reviews for both *Time* and the *Nation,* write popular screenplays for John Huston and film avant-garde movies with Helen Levitt, and publish Hollywood profiles in *Life* and serious fiction in *Partisan Review.* Macdonald, for instance, identifies *Omnibus,* the unapologetically middlebrow television series created by Robert Saudek, Agee's roommate at Harvard, and produced by the Ford Foundation's Radio-TV Workshop, as a particularly trenchant example of the harmful effects of cultural miscegenation:

> Midcult is, or was, "Omnibus," subsidized by a great foundation to raise the level of television, which began its labors by announcing it would "be aimed at the average American audience, neither highbrow nor lowbrow, . . . which is the solid backbone of any business as it is of America itself" and which then proved its good faith by programming Gertrude Stein and Jack Benny, Chekhov and football

> strategy, Beethoven and champion ice skaters. "Omnibus" failed. The level of television, however, was not raised, for some reason. ("Masscult" 39-40)

Agee would have disagreed. Rather than considering it a waste of his talent, he was proud of the work he had done for *Omnibus,* an adaptation of Carl Sandburg's biography of the young Abraham Lincoln that originally aired in five parts from November 1952 to February 1953. Until very recently, "Mr. Lincoln," which was not included in *Agee on Film,* has been ignored by Agee critics, who, following Macdonald, have deemed it insufficiently literary.[17] But the early miniseries received popular and critical acclaim: one reviewer called it "the most original and most important work so far created for video" (Levin 31), and abridged, one-episode versions of various lengths aired on *Omnibus* several times after its initial showing (Hughes 105). After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 24, 1963, ABC rebroadcast "Mr. Lincoln" in its entirety on November 25, and the long opening sequence of Lincoln's funeral train rolling past solemn mourners was shown repeatedly in the following days (Hughes 111).

There was some controversy over Agee's treatment of history, however, and *Omnibus* arranged a debate in the form of a mock trial moderated by series host Alistair Cooke between Agee and Columbia University history professor Allan Nevins, which was televised on March 29, 1953. Nevins pressed him on his abuses of the historical record, but Agee defended the literary license of his portrayal of Lincoln's apocryphal romance with Ann Rutledge by simply saying, "Well, it has been definitively proved that there is no Santa Claus, but of course there is a Santa Claus. There are two kinds of

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[17] The long-overdue exception is William Hughes's *James Agee, Omnibus, and "Mr. Lincoln"* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), which examines the series in the context of Cold War liberalism.

truths."[18] When a seventy-minute abridgement of "Mr. Lincoln" was broadcast on February 5, 1955, Agee introduced the program himself, again defending the Ann Rutledge material on the grounds that it was "a kind of folk poetry" (Hughes 105).

On February 6, Agee wrote to Saudek, reasserting his confidence in the aesthetic quality of "Mr. Lincoln" and reiterating points he had made the night before, as well as arguing for its cultural value, both in the United States and abroad. The letter reads, in part, as follows:

> There is no need to say how glad I was to see the Lincoln films shown again,—or how excellent I think the condensation job has been.
>
> What I want to write of now, is the question, whether they can be made available to schools, and if so, how.
>
> As I tried to say yesterday, on the air, they are meant most essentially for children—or anyhow, by another phrasing on what I said, for "young people."[19] I have run into quite a few "young people," from very young to late teens, who liked them; also quite a few teachers, who wished they might be shown in schools.
>
> My feeling is that they might be useful for schools in both forms—condensed, and episodic—above all, or sine qua non, if the teacher would use them simply as some means; a kind of base of operations; and would, beyond that, make clear the difference—as exemplified in the film—between recorded fact,

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[18] From my own transcription.

[19] Agee concluded his introduction to the February 5 broadcast as follows: "One main thing—the person we all wanted most to tell this story to was a child. If we could tell it honestly and simply enough that a child could care for it, then we felt that we might be true enough to the man we were telling of it" (qtd. in Hughes 129n).

tradition, legend, fiction, and "interpretation" in general, as all different, and as all true and valid in different ways.

As I understand it, a serious problem, with the Foundation, is in being a non-profit organization. This must further involve problems of what is tax-free, and what is not. It must also still further be complicated by the fact, if I understand it correctly, that it is a part of the Omnibus experiment to prove that superior television,—if subsidized to begin with—can pay its own way, and find its sponsors.

Along these lines of assumption, several ideas occur to me.

1) If some one Omnibus venture, such as this, develops potentialities of helping you pay your way, through distribution to schools at a moderate charge, doesn't that come within the decent possibilities envisioned in the original intention? I-E: if commercial T-V saw such a possibility, it would certainly—and rightly—use it. . . .

We seem to have developed something here, for which there is a demand, and which could be useful within the best aspirations of the Foundation; so, somehow, it should be made generally available. (I would add here that, quite aside from our own schools, there are adults, many here, probably still more in foreign countries, who could also care to see it because Lincoln, and history, mean a great deal to them.) If the work can be made available at such a charge that I, and the others who are under similar contract, may profit, residually, that certainly is preferred; and I think is also, fair and right. (It seems to me fair as it would be, if by chance I, and my colleagues, had developed a text-book which

> proved generally popular and useful.) But if it can only be done, within the motives of the Foundation, without charge, and without profit to people in my situation, then I still think it best to do, and would cheerfully waive all possibility of further profit, in that interest. (1-3)

Not only does Agee argue for the value of his own work, but he also firmly supports *Omnibus* in its mission "to prove that superior television,—if subsidized to begin with—can pay its own way." Rather than eschewing any contact with the economics of production and distribution, he takes the financial and legal limitations of the foundation's nonprofit status into account and signals that he is completely willing to work within them, just so long as the series reaches as wide an audience as possible. Furthermore, the foundation apparently agreed with Agee's assessment of the educational value of "Mr. Lincoln," editing it down into five twenty-eight-minute episodes to be distributed by McGraw-Hill for use in schools (Hughes 111). Agee is hardly a victim in this situation, and he certainly does not require the validation of a self-appointed intellectual elite that erects barriers against the direct endorsement of schoolchildren and their teachers. For Macdonald, had he been compelled to admit it, Agee's capitulation to the Ford Foundation would probably have served as evidence of just how widely the middlebrow ooze had spread. Agee cannot be concerned with distribution rights; Agee must be a martyr. This is not a matter of fact but of style. Agee must be a "poet."

Of course, Agee was a poet: he wrote lyrics for journals such as *transition* and *Partisan Review,* his first book was *Permit Me Voyage,* a slim volume in the Yale Series of Younger Poets published in 1934, and contemporary reviewers of his other works had sporadically noted his lyrical prose style. But he published only one poem after 1939; in

fact, by the time he returned to New York from Alabama in the summer of 1936, he had virtually given up writing poetry entirely. Furthermore, the reviews and articles written during Agee's life that did mention his poetic prose more often than not did so in order to disparage it. In a review of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* for instance, John C. Cort identifies Agee as "a very 'modern' poet (heavy quotes) with a musical, turgid, endless prose-poetry style that can, and frequently does, go on for two pages, but only one sentence" (500), and Richard Chase notes "a great surplus of poetical consciousness as compared with what the persons and situations of the story appear to necessitate" (688) in *The Morning Watch.* Despite the occasional dismissal of parts of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as "the ravings of a lunatic" (Etzkorn 667) or of their author revealing himself to be in "a much more tragic condition than any exploited sharecropper" (Cort 500), the critical consensus was that Agee's work was brilliant at times but flawed, and no one made any claims beyond the assertion that he was a very good writer who could be even better with a little discipline. With "Death of a Poet," however, Agee becomes something else altogether.

Agreeing with the book jacket blurb (almost certainly written by McDowell) that Agee is "essentially a poet," Macdonald explains in "Death of a Poet" that *A Death in the Family* "is really not a novel but a long poem on themes from childhood and family life" (204). Agee's prose recalls to some extent that of Dickens, Gogol, Thomas Wolfe, D. H. Lawrence, and Melville, but a "better comparison is with Whitman, who also runs on and on, hypnotizing himself with his material, losing all sense of proportion, losing all sense of anyone else reading him, and simply chanting, in bardic simplicity, to himself" (212). With "the poet's eye for detail, the poet's ear for phrasing" (206) and "piercingly delicate

acute sensuousness" (209), Agee has written "a work that is static, sometimes lyrical and sometimes meditative but always drawn from sensibility rather than from intellection" (204). Macdonald's criteria for designating Agee a poet, then, has nothing to do with poetry, at least not with poetry as a genre of writing distinguished from prose by meter and form; Macdonald claims, in fact, that "his best poetry is written in prose and is buried in his three books" (217). He does not count *Permit Me Voyage,* Agee's only volume of verse, as one of the three.

Throughout the essay, Macdonald makes the case for Agee as "poet," stressing his profligacy, his alienation, his individualism, his innocence. "Although he achieved much, it was a wasted, and wasteful life," (216), Macdonald writes, even though this was not completely Agee's fault: "He seemed to have almost no sense of self-preservation, allowing his versatility and creative energy to be exploited in a way that shrewder, cooler men of talent don't permit. His getting stuck for so long in the Luce organization is an instance; like Jacob, he drudged fourteen years in another man's fields, but there was no Rachel in view" (216). Like the old avant-garde, Agee refused to adapt to contemporary tastes: "He was always unfashionable, not at all the thing for the post-Eliot thirties. . . . In an age that was enthusiastic about social issues, Agee's whole style of being was individualistic and anti-scientific" (217-18). And in the best Romantic tradition, he never grew up: "Like Keats, Agee died just when he was beginning to mature as an artist. That Keats was twenty-five and Agee forty-five doesn't alter the point. Agee was an American, of a race that matures slowly, if ever" (221).

Having identified Agee as "essentially a poet," defined Agee's poetry as his more lyrical, sensuous, static prose, and shown that in both life and art he was alienated from

the prevailing trends of both high and low culture, Macdonald ends "Death of a Poet" by quoting Agee on D. W. Griffith in an article for the *Nation,* insisting that Agee "was certainly describing himself":

> [Griffith] was at his best just short of his excesses, and he tended in general to work out toward the dangerous edge. He was capable of realism . . . but essentially he was a poet. . . . He had an exorbitant appetite for violence, for cruelty, and for the Siamese twin of cruelty, a kind of obsessive tenderness which at its worst was all but nauseating. . . . In his no longer fashionable way, he remained capable, and inspired. He was merely unadaptable and unemployable, like an old, sore, ardent individualist among contemporary progressives. . . . He didn't have it in him to be amenable, even if he tried" [ellipses in original] (221).

By co-opting Agee's description of Griffith, Macdonald wants to establish that both artists are poets; by selectively quoting, however, he obscures some major distinctions. For one thing, the almost subliminal repetition of "essentially he was a poet" erases Macdonald's statement earlier in the essay that Agee writes like a "frustrated director" (217). Also, taken out of context, the whole of the quoted material (instead of only the last third) can easily be read, the one reference to realism aside, as referring to Griffith's personality rather than his work. This is not Agee's intent. In the *Nation* article, he identifies "the clearest and deepest aspect of Griffith's genius" as the fact that "he was a great primitive poet, a man capable, as only great and primitive artists can be, of intuitively perceiving and perfecting the tremendous magical images that underlie the memory and imagination of entire peoples" (314). For Agee, Griffith's poetry is principally epic poetry, *The Birth of a Nation* "the one great epic, tragic film" (314). He

was "a primitive tribal poet, combining something of the bard and the seer" (316) who worked at "the one time in movie history that a man of great ability worked freely, in an unspoiled medium, for an unspoiled audience, on a majestic theme which involved all that he was" (314). Misrepresenting Agee's emphasis on the epic qualities of Griffith's work to draw a parallel between the two artists' poetic personae, Macdonald conceals other obvious differences as well. Though they shared an intense engagement with their respective forms, Agee was at best an innovator rather than a creator ex nihilo, writing all too consciously in a fallen age. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* for instance, extends and subverts both avant-garde and ethnographic forms, but it works within and against these traditions rather than establishing a new one. And while possessed of a certain "bardic" intuition, Agee's scope is much more limited than the "memory and imagination of entire peoples," as the diametrically opposed titles and subject matter of *The Birth of a Nation* and *A Death in the Family* unambiguously attest.

Agee and Griffith are poets, then, though not of the same type—but this is really not Macdonald's point, for poets need not write poetry, he makes clear, nor write anything at all. Agee and Griffith are poets because they adopt an antagonistic stance vis-à-vis existing cultural, political, and aesthetic standards; they are "ardent individual[s] among contemporary progressives." This reinforces Macdonald's earlier characterization, even further removed from the realm of actual poetry, of Agee as a literary James Dean whose life and personality "were at once a symbolic expression of our time and a tragic protest against it" ("Death of a Poet" 214).[20]

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[20] Dean died a few months after Agee, on September 30, 1955.

Especially considering the dearth of such references during his life, the persistence of the designation of Agee as "poet" is nothing less than astonishing. Whether or not critics referred explicitly to Macdonald's essay, the idea soon became completely conventional in references to Agee as a writer of more than ordinary significance. A month after "Death of a Poet," Leslie Fiedler echoes the essay, using the same language to identify Agee's achievement—which, because of the novel's temporal displacement and universal theme, is really McDowell's—but employing New Critical terminology to give his pronouncement a veneer of technical precision that Macdonald's lacks: "To attempt to translate the book's meaning out of its expression is to realize that, whatever its failure to achieve novel form, it is, in the full sense, poetry: an unanalysable fusion of theme and image, significance and language" (26). The re-release of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1960 included an essay by Walker Evans, who asserts, towards the beginning, that "He didn't look much like a poet, an intellectual, an artist, or a Christian, each of which he was" (v) and ends with "Agee's rebellion was unquenchable, self-damaging, deeply principled, infinitely costly, and ultimately priceless" (vii). Emphasizing, just as Macdonald had, his intractability, Evans asserts Agee's identity as first and foremost that of a poet, the term's primacy in the list of possible descriptors implying that it transcends and encapsulates the intellectual, technical, and spiritual qualities of the other three. In a review of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for *Saturday Review,* Granville Hicks seems to combine elements cited by Macdonald and Evans, adding to the list of possible poses but maintaining the key by which to decipher their meaning: "Agee went to Alabama as a radical and as a journalist but also as a poet, as the intense and complicated young man he was" (19). Like

Macdonald, Hicks evokes Whitman, Wolfe, and Melville, asserting, "This is no mere documentation; even the tiniest item has been processed by the imagination of the poet" (20), by which (echoing Fiedler's fusion of unlike elements) "the distinction between subjective and objective ultimately vanishes" (20). Agee's description of the cotton harvest "could serve in any textbook as an example of direct, conscientious exposition, and yet it has the emotional power of a poem" (20).

Returning to the notion of poet as personality, John Huston dispenses with Agee's writing with a parenthetical aside within the first two sentences of his 1960 foreword to the second volume of *Agee on Film*—"(In a sense it was all poetry.)" (ix)—and moves on to a description of the hard-living, hard-drinking man to prove it. In his 1962 introduction to *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* Robert Phelps mourns the fact that when Agee died, he left "committals as a man and a poet on every side" (1). In the first book-length study of Agee's work, published in 1966, Peter Ohlin extends the image of Agee as generational symbol, declaring that the posthumous surge in interest in the author resulted, first, from the fact that his death, like that of Keats, "evoked the image of the young genius cruelly brought to an end before his prime"; second, that "his spectacular waste of talent . . . seemed to denounce in certain ways the American way of life"; and, finally, that his integrity—even his mere survival—had become "a testimony to the possibility of being a nonconformist in a conformist age and society" (2-3). Ohlin agrees with Macdonald that Agee's "role as outcast and rebel was identical to that of the artist" (7-8). Not content with the indefinite article, Ohlin, like Hicks, identifies the author of *A Death in the Family* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as "the poet" (10),

who "is faced with the recognition that his desire to recapture the original experience in its totality . . . can never be satisfied" (10).

In an essay entitled "Our Unacknowledged Poetry," also from 1966, Wallace Kaufman argues that Agee is the "most original mind in modern American poetry since the thirties" (68) and bases his assessment not on *Permit Me Voyage* or any of Agee's other poems but *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* in which Agee "picks up the abandoned materials of American poetry and shapes them into a new kind of vision" (68). Agee's book, he claims, "fulfills our need for mystery by revealing the unusual and mysterious nature in the ordinary experience and substance of that life we try to escape because we cannot understand it" (74). Kaufman hopes "to once again free poetry from the restrictions of arbitrary definitions" (74), just as he has with the term at hand: "By poets we mean those who might have become poets" (69).

Admitting that "prose was the medium of Agee's maturity," Arthur Cooper, in turn, nonetheless contends that he "possessed the tormented soul of a poet" (86). Something of this sort may be what Kenneth Seib means by "He was always a poet, but he wrote relatively little poetry" (ix), a sentiment repeated by David McDowell in 1980: "Although he wrote less and less poetry after 1936, he remained, in sensibility, a poet throughout his life. Had he lived, though, he would never have gone back to actually writing poetry. He was using up his store of poetic talent in other ways" (Newton 130). Although McDowell does not explain how poetic talent is diverted into other channels, by this point it can be assumed that he is probably referring to some combination of charisma, sensibility, and nonconformity. Or to the fact, perhaps, as McDowell insists, that "Agee was basically an anarchist" (Newton 120). It is clear that all of these

references to Agee as a poet are complimentary, but even to a hostile reviewer the theme was apparent. About the best thing Turner Cassity can write about Agee's *Collected Poems* is that the "volume is discreetly edited, handsomely produced, and there is a very poetic photograph of Mr. Agee on the dust jacket" (411). As for the poet himself, Cassity is less generous: "The talent was great; it came to nothing" (411).

In one sense, Cassity has a point: Agee's poetry is the least significant component of his oeuvre; his literary reputation, which is based even for those who consider him a "poet" on *A Death in the Family* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* would be the same had he not written a single verse. The designation makes sense, however, as a specific claim about Agee's status as a certain type of writer within the literary marketplace.

As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, different subsections of society (or "fields") have different standards for conferring legitimacy. On Wall Street, for instance, success is judged by the accumulation of economic capital. But in other fields, such as that of literary production, prestige comes through recognition by peers with the necessary competence within the field to bestow rewards. These rewards may have a material component but need not; in fact, literary genres are arranged in a hierarchy of consecration or legitimacy "according to specific criteria of peer judgement . . . almost exactly the inverse of the hierarchy according to commercial success" (*RA* 114). Bourdieu ranks the theater, novels, and poetry along a continuum that has economic profit on one end and peer recognition on the other. In the simplest formulation these two criteria are engaged in a zero-sum dance: the more material success a genre attains, the less social prestige it commands, and vice versa.

Within each genre, there is also a hierarchy "according to the degree to which authors and works conform to the specific demands of the genre" that corresponds to "the social hierarchy of the audiences" (*FCP* 48). While the playwright and the novelist have a direct relationship to the marketplace—plays have to be performed for audiences, and novels, even those that aspire to artistic purity, have to be published and achieve at least minimal sales—the poet is judged by a very small and economically inconsequential group of fellow poets and literati. As Bourdieu states:

> Thus we find three competing principles of legitimacy. First there is the specific principle of legitimacy, i.e., the recognition granted by the set of producers who produce for other producers, their competitors, i.e. by the autonomous self-sufficient world of 'art for art's sake', meaning art for artists. Secondly, there is the principle of legitimacy corresponding to 'bourgeois' taste and to the consecration bestowed by the dominant fractions of the dominant class and by private tribunals, such as *salons,* or public, state-guaranteed ones, such as academies, which sanction the inseparably ethical and aesthetic (and therefore political) taste of the dominant. Finally, there is the principle of legitimacy which its advocates call 'popular', i.e. the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the 'mass audience'. (*FCP* 50-51)

By virtue of its public and collaborative form, the theater is well positioned to derive legitimacy from bourgeois institutions and mass audiences but is therefore least likely to achieve the highest form of prestige. As an intermediate genre, the novel can draw on all three sources of legitimacy, which can lead to confusion in individual cases, but its internal hierarchies also tend to be rigid. However, though poetry can sometimes

penetrate bourgeois and popular institutions, it does so fairly infrequently, and poetry that becomes too popular or too commercial is immediately suspect. Poetry, in fact, "by virtue of its restricted audience (often only a few hundred readers), the consequent low profits, which make it the disinterested activity *par excellence,* and also its prestige, linked to the historical tradition initiated by the Romantics, is destined to charismatic legitimation which is given to only a few individuals, sometimes only one per generation" (*FCP* 51). This notion explains the decision to release separate editions of Agee's poetry and short prose rather than the previously assembled omnibus edition; as Fitzgerald notes, "The merit of the original plan was to document the special case of a writer who began as an artist in verse and who then found himself most memorably in prose; but this merit, I am now persuaded, is outweighed by the greater distinctness gained for each kind of work in separate presentation" (*CSP* v).

By claiming Agee as a "poet," Macdonald and the various Ageeans who followed were clearly according him the most prestigious position in the literary field, and the fact that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was a commercial failure not only enhances Agee's status but also that of his admirers, who display their competence in appreciating value unrecognized by the horde. Macdonald in particular persisted in a lonely appreciation of Agee's genius; in 1948, after *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* had been mostly forgotten and before Agee's death caused it to be remembered, Macdonald disinterred the book in an essay for his journal *Politics*. Noting that it "was, in a word, as bad a publishing failure as could be imagined: neither a commercial success nor a *succés d'estime*" ("A Way of Death" 262), Macdonald nevertheless finds "all this very curious because *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* seems to me one of the most interesting and important

American books of the last fifteen years" (263). Macdonald discusses the book's stylistic strengths and weaknesses—which, he admits, are inseparable—and concludes that Agee and Evans "have given us a *Works and Days* of our times, a chronicle of decay instead of growth, where the land does not nourish those who labor on it but destroys them. Perhaps the highest compliment one can pay their book is to say that it can be read, without too much of a wrench, after reading Rousset or Gliksman on the extreme expression of the modern entrapment: the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps" (266).[21] Whether or not this is a convincing comparison, it is clear that Macdonald is attempting to make the case for Agee's unacknowledged greatness by citing its contemporary relevance and doing so in a way—by highlighting its anti-totalitarianism, a chief concern of *Politics*—that also emphasizes his own distinctness in recognizing it in the first place. Wide appreciation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* would have to wait for its 1960 reissue, however, and Macdonald would have to wait for his second chance to rehabilitate Agee, through "Death of a Poet."

Although Macdonald's *Politics* essay was not particularly influential, it does contain the first articulation of a frequently repeated, though technically inaccurate, bit of trivia that was thoroughly incorporated into the Agee myth. "In its first year of publication," Macdonald writes of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* "it sold less than 600 copies; its total sale to date has been—as near as I can fix it—something less than 4,000, the bulk of which was sold at remainder prices" (262). In "Death of a Poet," he offers a slightly different version: "The critics disliked it—Selden Rodman, Lionel Trilling, and

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[21] In books such as *The Other Kingdom* (1947), David Rousset detailed the surreal horrors of Nazi concentration camps; Jerzy Gliksman did the same for the Soviet gulag in *Tell the West* (1948).

George Marion O'Donnell were honorable exceptions—and it sold less than six hundred copies the first year. . . . The publishers remaindered it as soon as they decently could, and they have not brought it back into print, although its reputation has grown, by word of mouth, until copies fetch as much as twenty dollars. There are plans to reissue 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,' but the author is now dead, and much too soon" (220). In this later iteration three thousand or so copies of the book have disappeared, and literary value and economic value—both the province of those with specialized knowledge—have been conflated. And Agee is dead—the victim, it is implied, at least in part of those not "honorable" enough to acknowledge his achievement—a group that emphatically does not include Macdonald.

This passage brought a response in the form of a letter to the editors of the *New Yorker* from Lovell Thompson, a vice-president at Houghton Mifflin. "We did publish Mr. Agee's book in 1941," Thompson writes, "and though our records show a sale of slightly more than six hundred copies in that year, you are accurate in effect, if not in fact" (108). He considers this a minor point but wants to clarify the details surrounding the book's remaindering: "What really happened was this: We waited until 1943, and then remaindered *part* of the stock. We listed and actively sought sales for the book for seven years, until 1948. Thereafter, we continued to list the book until 1953, so that we might keep track of the demand for it" (108). When Macdonald revised "Death of Poet" for *Against the American Grain* in 1962, he amended the passage to reflect the fact that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* had been reissued—but retained the erroneous figure: "The critics disliked it . . . and it sold less than six hundred copies the first year" (158). "Less than six hundred copies" gives the book a whiff of legitimation that "something

less than 4,000" (or even, apparently, "less than seven hundred") cannot; the magnitude of the failure of the work is in direct proportion to the perspicacity of the critic who recognizes its artistic value. As he remarks in "Death of a Poet," "everyone likes to think he is on to a good thing the general public has not caught up with" (214).

In all three versions, Macdonald connects the six hundred copies of Agee's book to the five hundred copies of *Moby Dick* sold in its first year, "which was six times as good a showing, taking into account the increase in population" (158). In the *Politics* essay Macdonald uses this fact to critique literary institutions, including the organs of the contemporary avant-garde, which he blasts for having developed its own "aversion to anything that breaks the familiar categories" (263). As manipulated by Macdonald, the small matters of whether *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* sold more or fewer than six hundred copies its first year and how quickly it was remaindered take on broad significance as they relate to the Bourdieuan notions of the ways commercial failure and delayed recognition contribute to the consecration of an artist, the importance of the critic as cultural mediator, and the institutionalization of the avant-garde.

That Macdonald's promotion of Agee was also self-promotion is evident not only in his establishing of one myth but also in his debunking of another. In *Against the American Grain,* Macdonald appends a brief article to the revised version of "Death of a Poet"' entitled "Jim Agee, a Memoir," in which he discusses his friendship with Agee and quotes liberally from Agee's letters. He concludes by mentioning the well-worn tale that Henry Luce had offered Agee a job at *Fortune* based on the *Harvard Advocate* parody of *Time* magazine produced under his editorship. "I wish this were the whole story," Macdonald sighs. Actually, Macdonald himself had recommended Agee for the

position, and he quotes a thank-you note from Agee to prove it. Agee was excited to have a job—1932, after all, was a tough year, even for Harvard graduates. Macdonald is less sanguine: "But I didn't do him a favor, really" (166).

Agee is Macdonald's creation, then: both "poet" and "victim" and in either role exemplifies, in Bourdieu's words, "the charismatic image of artistic activity as pure, disinterested creation by an isolated artist" (*FCP* 34). On the one hand, this case is an easy one to make, as Agee had cultivated a bohemian, outsider image, especially early in his career. When he wrote to Father Flye in 1930 that "I'd do anything on earth to become a really great writer" (*LFF* 47), he was making a statement loaded with implications not so much about the act of writing itself but the cultural and symbolic capital associated with literary production—and one in which "great" writing and magazine writing are incompatible. Macdonald admits his relationship with commercial publishing, then, but only as it serves as a critique of the system and a validation of Agee's Romantic credentials.

Macdonald's enlistment of Agee in his war against Midcult exposes the fact that he was operating with a fairly acute case of cognitive dissonance, however. Though Macdonald insists that Agee was out of touch with his time, he was actually well attuned to it. Of "Epithalamium" from *Permit Me Voyage* he wrote, in an unpublished introduction, "You read poetry at Harvard and that's what you get" (*Literary Notebooks* 389), but when social issues became a predominant concern of the intelligentsia in the mid-1930s, Agee fell into line, producing a number of conventionally radical poems in plainspoken ballad stanzas and couplets with revolutionary themes. That these poems were long suppressed is more an indication of the political climate in which Agee's

works were resurrected than a sign of his individualism. He was also influenced by the avant-garde movements of the late 1930s but had gravitated to simpler forms of expression by the end of the next decade, when *The Morning Watch* appeared along with many other works of the post-World War II religious revival. Agee worked for Time, Inc. for two-thirds of his professional life. He wrote screenplays for Hollywood studios and a television script for the Ford Foundation and was nominated for an undeniably bourgeois Academy Award for the decidedly middlebrow *African Queen* and won (posthumously), even worse, a Pulitzer. Macdonald could not have missed McDowell's obvious manipulation of the text of *A Death in the Family* to give it a modernist patina—the exact sort of exploitation of avant-garde techniques he had decried in exemplary middlebrow writers such as Thornton Wilder—yet he lets this damning bit of evidence pass unremarked in "Death of a Poet." Furthermore, though he had singled out Clifton Fadiman (whose Book-of-the-Month Club endorsement McDowell was all too pleased to accept) as an example of the middlebrow undermining of elite conceptions of art in "A Theory of Popular Culture" and explicitly states in "Masscult and Midcult" that "Midcult is the Book-of-the-Month Club" (39), Macdonald fails to mention the club's 1958 listing of *A Death in the Family,* even though he did make other changes to "Death of a Poet" before reprinting it, two years later, in *Against the American Grain.* Agee was too perfect a test case to amend. Perhaps most ironically, Macdonald's piece for the *New Yorker* is exactly the type of hagiographic magazine piece that he points to as having destroyed Hemingway; in this case, Macdonald himself created a version of the writer as personality that ultimately overwhelmed objective consideration of his work.

By editing *A Death in the Family* to maximize its appeal to an institutional elite whose standard of excellence was high modernism, David McDowell established the criterion by which Agee's other works would be judged as they were reintroduced posthumously. By casting Agee's long association with commercial publishing as a sign of collapsing aesthetic standards, Dwight Macdonald excused what he considered Agee's failings, transforming them into an indictment of the system. On one level, McDowell and Macdonald were working at cross purposes. When McDowell writes that Agee is "essentially a poet" on the inside jacket of *A Death in the Family,* he is signaling to the potential buyer that the book is not a typical best-seller but one that carries with it the residual prestige of modernism; it is not a commodity, but art. When Macdonald repeats the phrase in "Death of a Poet," he is emphasizing Agee's alienation from the literary marketplace, which, having destroyed the avant-garde by co-opting it, destroyed Agee, too. On the other hand, both McDowell and Macdonald thought they were helping Agee by increasing his symbolic capital, with the additional benefit, for McDowell, of book sales, and, for Macdonald, of prestige in having appreciated his true worth before anyone else. While this is a somewhat schizophrenic foundation on which to build a legacy, McDowell and Macdonald managed to do just that, setting the terms in which Agee would be presented and discussed for a generation. As recently as 1994, James Lowe stated explicitly the assumption at the heart of virtually all analyses of Agee's writing since November 1957: "Neither would any critic deny that Agee was essentially a poet or that poetry was at the bottom of his best prose" (47).

Despite Lowe's confident tone, however, the one person who would dispute this verdict is Agee himself. According to Robert Fitzgerald, Helen Levitt told him that "only

a year or so before his death in 1955 Jim seriously said to her that poetry had been his true vocation, the thing that he was born to do, but that it was too difficult; on the other hand, work in films was pure pleasure for him" (54). It is also notable that, in an unpublished piece written for the *New York Times* in 1953 on his position as critic turned artist that is supposed to answer the question "How does it feel, to face the kind of music you used to play?," Agee makes no attempt to defend himself by mentioning earlier works such as *Permit Me Voyage* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to establish his artistic credentials or to assert that he had been a poet long before he had been a critic. In other words, in Agee's own estimation and contrary to the critics who constructed his legacy, his one great failing was precisely that he was *not* what they so desperately have wanted him to be. As William Frohock, also a long-time friend, wrote in 1957, "Whenever Agee had to state his occupation, he simply put down 'writer'—not journalist or novelist or poet" (230). To stress Agee's "poetic" persona is to denigrate his substantial accomplishment in other genres, not as a wild-eyed visionary, but as a professional devoted to his craft. That the word can so easily conjure up such a ready-made set of associations and serve as shorthand for a type of writer defined by conformity to a noncomformist position in the literary field, thereby losing any power it may have had to describe anything real, is precisely why Agee included "poet" in a 1937 list of words that he had "Contempt or hatred for" (75).

While it is not surprising that Agee's admirers would represent him in what they considered the best possible light according to contemporary standards, they did him a great disservice by distilling his life and work into an idealized version of the alienated poet operating under the dictates of an already calcified academic high modernism. Agee

certainly aspired to a type of Romantic vision of himself as tortured artist, but he also could see the hollowness of such a self-indulgent pose. In fact, his ambivalence toward art in the modern world—which derives its power from the rejection of the bourgeois but cannot exist without its patronage, which claims to want to dissolve the boundaries between life and art but can do so only by relinquishing its special provenance as the agent of change—is part of a much larger dynamic that defines modernism not as a settled style but as an active conflict among competing value systems and modes of representation. Privileging an elite readership of formally complex works, the academic high modernism of the late 1950s and 1960s ignored or undervalued explicitly political writing, popular modes of expression, and texts that resisted ahistorical close readings according to the New Critical model. While some of Agee's works, notably *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, are amenable to such an approach, the greater part of his oeuvre is not. In the years between 1934, when Agee published his first book, and 1955, when he wrote his last screenplay, America underwent an incredible cultural and political transformation, and Agee's aesthetic response to these changes was complex and even contradictory, encompassing a myriad of styles, genres, and poses, that of "poet" among them.

But that of "poet" was only one of Agee's roles and one of the least important in understanding his work, as this dissertation makes clear. Drawing on archival materials, some only recently made available and others long ignored, and correspondence in addition to published works, "The Making of James Agee" offers an expanded version of the Agee canon that challenges the assumptions of literary value held by arbiters such as McDowell and Macdonald. It includes an examination of Agee's long-suppressed

proletarian poetry, which serves both as a commentary on the editorial practices that have shaped the reception and understanding of his work and an introduction to the role of Marxist thought in his work of the mid to late 1930s. Agee's previously overlooked political commitments are also important to his experimentation, along with Walker Evans, with ideas and techniques of the avant-garde, particularly surrealism, an exercise which culminates in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* a work of surrealist ethnography that sublimates the struggle to represent the primitive Other in an exploration of the individual unconscious. Finally, the restored edition of *A Death in the Family,* which emerges from a surrealist nightmare and ends with a rejection of aestheticism, is Agee's acknowledgment of the moral ineffectualness of high modernist complexity as an end in itself, reflecting his turn towards popular art as a form of action. From the mid-1930s through the end of his life, Agee was engaged in the surrealist project of reconciling art and life, an aesthetic goal that operates alongside a personal need to come to terms with his father's death. Though his work took many different forms—proletarian poetry, experimental screenplays and journalism, realistic fiction—it always evinces an unfulfilled desire for closure, to take that which is separate and make it whole.

CHAPTER TWO

"The Love of Jesus and the Mind of Marx": Agee's Proletarian Poetry of the 1930s

Despite the fact that Agee wrote virtually no poetry after 1936, those who did the most to establish his posthumous reputation consistently portrayed him as a "poet," even as they readily admitted "he would never have gone back to actually writing poetry" (Newton 130). This is a strange formulation, implying that any works that are not poetry—in other words, the great preponderance of his production as a writer—are inferior. But the Ageeans were less interested in literal truth than in constructing a myth that did justice to the artist and friend they admired. They were making a specific claim about Agee's position in the aesthetic hierarchy; by portraying him as a "poet," that is, a nonconformist defined by an anti-commercial stance vis-à-vis the literary marketplace, they bestowed upon him his rightful share of symbolic capital, taking their own as specialists qualified to judge in the process. Dwight Macdonald's emphasis on his role as an "ardent individualist among contemporary progressives" ("Death of a Poet" 221), David McDowell's editing of *A Death in the Family* to conform to high modernist standards in direct opposition to Agee's intentions, and Father Flye's insistence on Agee's tragic sensibility above all else contributed to a larger pattern of image-making through which Agee came to embody the Romantic artist—as martyr, as prophet, as "poet"—to the detriment of a more objective evaluation of his work.

Ironically, nowhere is this distortion more evident than in Robert Fitzgerald's edition of *The Collected Poems of James Agee*. As an editor of individual poems, Fitzgerald often took undue liberties with language and form, sometimes significantly

altering their impact. More important, his selection of poems determined Agee's poetic canon, marginalizing those works that failed to meet his standards. Fitzgerald researched Agee's published poetry and also consulted manuscripts, opting for those poems that best corresponded to his conception of Agee as a primarily religious poet. He also pointedly chose not to include a substantial number of political poems written by Agee in the 1930s, even going so far as to purge three of them from earlier versions of the manuscript of the *Collected Poems*. The absence of these poems from the final edition is evidence of Fitzgerald's conscious suppression of poetry—in this case, explicitly revolutionary verse in the proletarian style of the 1930s—that did not conform to the Agee persona that had become standard by 1968.

At the same time, unlike most of those who celebrated Agee as "poet," Fitzgerald had a deep knowledge and appreciation of Agee's poetry. Like Macdonald and McDowell, Fitzgerald had been close friends with Agee; furthermore, he considered Agee a major inspiration for his own poetic development. He had also gotten Agee a job at a Luce publication, just as Macdonald had, this time as a book reviewer for *Time*. Although they were not in contact after the mid-1940s, Fitzgerald was moved by Agee's death and immediately wrote to Mia Agee, McDowell, and Walker Evans offering his services in preserving and editing Agee's writing. Following the success of *Agee on Film* and *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* the Agee Trust decided to publish an edition of Agee's poetry and uncollected prose, and Fitzgerald assembled the collection in consultation with Mia Agee and Flye. By November 1963, as he wrote to Robert Lescher, he was almost ready to submit the omnibus volume, which also included a long memoir, to Houghton Mifflin for publication. Within a few months, though, he had

become aware of "a few more poems" as well as the bibliographic work of Geneviève Moreau, who was completing her dissertation on Agee while at Cambridge for the Sorbonne. After making additions and corrections throughout the spring of that year, he was expecting page proofs by July 1964.[22]

The proofs failed to materialize, however; Mia Agee had begun to insist that the poems be published separately from the prose. Fitzgerald resisted. In his view, only a volume that presented "the special case of a writer who began as an artist in verse and who then found himself most memorably in prose" (*CSP* v) would be true to Agee's development. In a letter to McDowell dated April 29, 1967, Fitzgerald offers a passionate defense of his position:

> I continue of course to feel, as I told you, that the book I made is peculiarly appropriate to Jim Agee as poet—to that phase and that aspect of him, showing how this phase ran its course and how the aspect was qualified. Perhaps a simple statement precisely to this effect would enlighten and disarm prospective readers. It seems to me that I, as a poet myself, as a friend of Jim in poetry first of all, and as the man who in 1962 undertook this labor and study, do have a kind of claim (here I see what this means) to make my presentation and to substantiate it. I believe the portrait to be true as Jim and I understood the truth in such matters, though it fall short of being complete as your own work in due course will be.[23] But its truth depends on a balance of part against part, and you were quite right in saying that to remove any of these would disturb that balance as I see it. (1)

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[22] See Fitzgerald's letters to Robert Lescher dated November 29, 1963, and February 29, 1964, and to Paul Brooks, dated July 22, 1964.

[23] Fitzgerald is referring to editions of Agee's short prose and complete letters that were being discussed as ways to round out Agee's oeuvre.

While others had used the designation "poet" to express the totality of Agee's persona, Fitzgerald is here adamant—and alone—in his assertion that the word be taken literally. Agee was a poet, but this was a "phase" and an "aspect" of his total personality; an understanding of that personality must balance "part against part." Also, contrary to those for whom Agee's failure constitutes a larger indictment of mass commercialization, Fitzgerald would later claim, in a 1968 letter to Paul Brooks, "But he did win out, he accomplished essentially what he had it in him to do, and my notion was to make that clear in tribute to his vitality" (1). By July 30, 1967, a compromise had begun to take shape: Agee's poetry and uncollected prose would be published in two complementary volumes and issued a year apart. For Fitzgerald, this would mean an expansion of his original vision; for the Agee Trust, an assurance, as McDowell wrote Lovell Thompson, that the books "will get twice as much attention, and, done that way, each will get the attention of a specialist" (1).

As Fitzgerald acknowledged in his letter to McDowell, he understood that he was making a "claim" on and about "Jim Agee as a poet," one that could aspire to only approximate truth. On the other hand, Fitzgerald's friendship with Agee and status as a respected translator of Homer gave him a stronger purchase than anyone else to make it. The *Collected Poems* are not the complete poems, however, and Fitzgerald's selection and arrangement, while very much in line with the Agee myth, serve to distort his actual poetic output. In his introduction, Fitzgerald identifies Agee's "two principal gifts" (xi) as "a capacity for major musical form" (xi) and "a raging awareness of the sensory field in depth and in detail" (xii). But Agee only realized these gifts fully in prose, he asserts, because "the forms of verse as he understood them were inappropriate and the

possibilities of verse inadequate" (xi). The poetry, for Fitzgerald, particularly *Permit Me Voyage,* constitutes a "preparation of spirit" (xi, xii) that would later allow him to rise "into himself" (xii) in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, The Morning Watch,* and "its consummation" (xii), *A Death in the Family.* However, Fitzgerald's emphasis on musical form and sensual awareness, coupled with a narrative that leads inexorably from youthful "complication (this nettle)" to mature "simplicity (this flower)" (xii), establishes a framework for inclusion that emphasizes short lyrical poems that tend towards abstraction and eliminates from consideration a substantial number of explicitly political poems written by Agee mostly during the 1930s. These poems are not characterized by sensuousness or spirituality, nor are they even very poetic by Fitzgerald's musically informed criteria, consisting mostly of rather simple quatrains. Their exclusion, however, from the *Collected Poems* has broader implications for the construction of Agee's legacy.

Fitzgerald was more concerned with the aesthetic shape of Agee's career than its chronology, and his arrangement of the poems tends to obscure any historical orientation. Part I of the *Collected Poems* consists of the full text of *Permit Me Voyage,* published in 1934 and written within the previous six years. Part II contains poems covering the years 1933 to 1950 that, as Fitzgerald writes, "in my judgment might have qualified for a second book if Agee had ever wished to make one," though the second book would never have been "equal in force and distinction to the first" (ix). "John Carter," Agee's long, unfinished Byronic satire, written between 1932 and 1936, makes up Part III. Finally, poetry from all periods "that does not fall below a certain minimum standard of quality" (x) constitutes Part IV.

There are omissions and alterations; in keeping with his self-appointed mission to present the truth "as Jim and I understood the truth in such matters," Fitzgerald apparently felt quite free to changes titles, wording, and even the form of previously published poems. In the *Collected Poems,* "Two Sonnets from a Dream" becomes "Sonnets," and "Millions Are Learning How" becomes "Lyric"[24]—inexplicably, as there are four other poems entitled either "Lyrics" or "Lyric" in the volume and four more entitled either "Sonnet" or "Sonnets," unless Fitzgerald's purpose is to drain individual poems of their particularity, perhaps so that isolated lines will be allowed to shine unblemished by context. The poem originally titled "Epitaph, for the special attention of those who use dead soldiers against living civilians" is listed by its first line, "We Soldiers of All Nations Who Lie Killed," as is "When Eve First Saw the Glittering Day," originally published as "Song with Words." Even worse, Agee's word is "glistering," not "glittering." This is not so much an error, though, as an indication of Fitzgerald's editorial style, which is characterized not only by unwarranted alterations but also by a tendency toward dulling Agee's unique diction.

In "A Song" and "In Memory of My Father (Campbell County, Tenn.)," two poems published in *transition,* Fitzgerald changes the lines "White *flowers* the dew, the summer's work is over, / And your *kind* love" to "White *smiles* the dew, the summer's work is over, / And your *fond* love" and "Warmth: *slops* from the pigsty" to "Warmth: /

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[24] That Fitzgerald was well aware of the title of the poem is demonstrated in his letter to Robert Lescher dated April 3, 1964. Fitzgerald relates that he has been in contact with Geneviève Moreau and details some of her work in running down poems for an Agee bibliography. To her query "I <u>think</u> 'Millions are Learning How' was published [in *Common Sense*] some time in '38. Are there, to your knowledge, other poems there too?" he responds, "Well I can't remember others. I never went through the files of Common Sense and God forbid I ever shall" (2). In the same letter, Fitzgerald ironically avers, "One must have a love for details." (2)

Slopes from the pigsty" (emphases mine). It should be stressed that these poems were published during Agee's lifetime and that Fitzgerald is not working under the authority of or merely misreading manuscripts: he is "improving" the poetry by blunting Agee's idiosyncratic use of words and shaping it according to his personal notion of poetic propriety. On the unpublished typescript of "Theme with Variations" submitted to *transition* in 1936, Fitzgerald changes the wording of eighteen of sixty-eight lines, in addition to the title (from "Theme and Variations"), and omits the tag at the end, a quote by Agee's teacher, I. A. Richards: "I still go on liking your Variations" (1). That Fitzgerald saw himself as a sensitive reader of Agee is not in question, but it is editorially irresponsible to alter word choice silently, especially in a poem, and especially one by as meticulous a reviser as Agee. In fact, Agee made his position on editorial license clear on several occasions, most notably in his recalcitrance over "certain words . . . which are illegal in Massachusetts" (*FM* x), which, among other reasons, caused Harper and Brothers to rescind the contract for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1938. Twelve years later, in a letter to Houghton Mifflin editor Paul Brooks, Agee still insists on maintaining control of his prose, this time in regard to alterations and deletions in the page proofs of *The Morning Watch:*

> On the profanity & obscenity I probably didn't write you, I can't remember but by your letter judge not. I of course realize that by laws in your State and likely as not postal laws I don't even know, they can't be used outright; and, too, that the problem for you and for me is purely legal. If I had written you then it would have been as I'm doing now: something obviously must be done about the words. In this case I'm against paraphrase by euphemism or any trick of indirect

> discourse or by the "obscenity you, you obscenity" of The Bell or the use of the word deletion [*sic*] the Hemingway Cosmopolitan serial. I very much hope it can be managed just by the use of hyphens for vowels as in the old-fashioned "G-d d-m," or "c--f--nd -t", but I realize that "mothuhf-ckin" and "c-cks-ckuh" are a good deal riper and more blatant. If such is possible I'll be very glad to let it go at that; how about "mothuhf---in'" etc? That a few spurts of just this language, sufficiently undisguised to be recognizable, be in the story, is I think essential to Hobe's character and to the story; very little of the rest of the air of the school, of its general context and personnel, is given and what is there I think is needed, in the most razorish possible conflict with the religiosity both good bad and equivocal. I realize that if hyphens or my second kind of dash were used it gives these phrases a shading of prurience, and prominence, which I regret, and which would be absent if the words could be run outright and without comment; but the Law prevents that and is welcome to the blame for it. Any attempt at paraphrase or indirect discourse would I fear give a tinge of facetiousness or priggishness which wd be still worse. I think it must be unmistakably clear that he swears, and that he reaches for wild ones & is rather proud of his swearing. But this is as far as I can get without further consultation with you. (1)

Agee bows before the law, but only grudgingly and not without repeating that neither "paraphrase by euphemism or any trick of indirect discourse" nor "[a]ny attempt at paraphrase or indirect discourse" is acceptable. Of course, Fitzgerald's taking liberties with Agee's phrasing is not as serious or as potentially costly as a violation of state and federal obscenity laws, but Agee's defense of the integrity of his prose in this case,

though somewhat extreme, strongly suggests that he would have been equally averse to any attempt at changing his poetry.

Though it may be argued that the difference between "fond" and "kind" in the example cited above is negligible, the meaning of a poem may indeed turn on a single word. In the "Agrarian" section of the four dialect pieces collected under the title "Period Pieces from the Mid-Thirties"—a title that isolates and marginalizes these particular political satires while obscuring the fact that most of the poems omitted from the *Collected Poems* are also "period pieces" from the 1930s—Fitzgerald, apparently unaware that it had been published as "Dixie Doodle" in *Partisan Review,* cleans up a manuscript variant ("T V A" for "Tee Vee Aay," for instance, and "John" for "Jawn") for inclusion in the *Collected Poems.* In this poem, spoken in the voice, presumably, of one of the Nashville Agrarians, Fitzgerald's casting of the lines "We've discovered a solution / neither Hearstian nor Roosian" is more parallel but less accurate than the previously published verison: "Dixie Doodle" reads "neither hearstian nor rooshian." Fitzgerald's capitalization and spelling help situate the speaker more obviously between the pro-Nazi William Randolph Hearst and Democratic President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but Agee's "rooshian" adds another layer, conflating "Rooseveltian" and "Russian" and thereby characterizing the Agrarians, whose *I'll Take My Stand* was originally titled "Tracts against Communism," as considering the New Deal and Stalin's latest five-year plan to be more or less equivalent, morally and otherwise. That Agee, an advocate of post-revolutionary anarchism in 1938, would more or less have shared their distrust of government solutions of any stripe is a level of irony obscured by Fitzgerald's clarification. Furthermore, as Fitzgerald was positively disposed towards the "peaceful

Roosevelt revolution" ("Memoir" 27), this alteration indicates that, rather than attending to the poetry, he is shading Agee's politics to fall in line with his own.

There are also formal concerns in the *Collected Poems.* In *transition,* in keeping with that little magazine's experimental posture, "In Memory of My Father" is typeset as a tight block of print above a centered couplet; this form, combined with the time signature "*allegretto,*" gives the poem a centripetal force that collapses sky, smoke, night, love, "secret water," silence, whippoorwill, "smokesweet quilt," and child, father, mother into the flesh of "thou most tender earth," achieving a structural balance between the world's thick and infinite variety and the simple prayer that makes it one (see Appendix 1). In the *Collected Poems,* however, Fitzgerald breaks the form of the poem, rendering it instead in a more disjointed free verse and imposing his own rhythm by altering Agee's spacing and punctuation. That the form of the poem was important is evident from the letter with which he submitted it to *transition.* As Agee wrote to James Johnson Sweeney, the associate editor, when he submitted it in 1937: "I hope you will like the one set up as prose" (1). Again, the reading may be skilled, but as Agee, who studied under I. A. Richards, the philosophical father of New Criticism, and played duets (notwithstanding "Dixie Doodle") with Allen Tate, one of its more adept practitioners, would no doubt agree, the form of the poem is as inviolable as its syntax. Although he allowed the phrasing of "Lyric," Agee's other *transition* poem, to stand, Fitzgerald altered its spacing as well.

One clue to Fitzgerald's process of selection of the *Collected Poems* is a typescript that survives in the Father Flye Papers at Vanderbilt University. Titled "The Poems of James Agee," it was sent to Father Flye by Fitzgerald with handwritten

instructions on the title page to "Please indicate 1) those you'd omit 2) changes of order" (1). The poems comprising the *Permit Me Voyage* and "John Carter" sections are not included, and the rest are divided into "Early Poems" and "Later Poems." That the undated typescript represents a fairly late step in the selection process is indicated by the fact that of the fifty-four poems in "Later Poems" and "Verse" sections of the *Collected Poems* not part of larger works,[25] forty-two are in the typescript, most in the same order, and of the poems in the typescript, only three are missing from the final volume. Though the high degree of correspondence between typescript and the published volume would seem to suggest a certain continuity throughout the selection process, the three missing poems in fact point in another direction: to the construction by negation of a particular version of Agee's poetic persona. "Rapid Transit," "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," and "[He can't stand it forever]" had obviously initially met Fitzgerald's criteria for consideration, but they were ultimately discarded, perhaps at the suggestion of Flye or Mia Agee. What is notable about these three poems is that they are explicitly political, more in line with the proletarian literature espoused by cultural commissars such as Michael Gold than the essentially religious poetry promoted by Fitzgerald. Rather than being anomalous, however, they are actually quite representative of the final intense period of Agee's poetic production, and their omission points to a broader attempt to suppress a substantial portion of Agee's oeuvre.

As with some of Fitzgerald's other editorial decisions, the exclusion of "Rapid Transit" is baffling. First published in Louis Untermeyer's *Modern American Poets* anthology in 1936, with which Fitzgerald was definitely familiar ("Memoir" 35), the

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[25] I.e., *The Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* or Lillian Hellman's adaptation of *Candide.*

poem also appeared in *Forum* in 1937 and in Selden Rodman's *New Anthology of Modern Poetry* in 1938. In other words, at the time when Agee was arguably at the height of his prominence as a poet, "Rapid Transit" was probably his most widely known and certainly his most widely disseminated poem. This does not seem to matter to Fitzgerald, who, in his introductory memoir to Agee's *Collected Short Prose,* explains: "In the good poems of this period, the one to his father in *Transition,* the one called *Sunday: Outskirts of Knoxville,* and some of the lyrics in *The Partisan Review,* he did things unachieved in *Permit Me Voyage.* But most of the topical poems in quatrains, published or unpublished, are not so good" (35). These "not so good" quatrains presumably include "Rapid Transit." Walker Evans would have disagreed about the poem's value, however; in the March 1956 issue of *i.e., The Cambridge Review* dedicated to Agee's memory, "Rapid Transit" is the title he gave to a series of eight subway photographs accompanied by the short prose piece by Agee that would later serve as an introduction to *Many Are Called.* Given its obvious historical importance to Agee's career, "Rapid Transit" would seem to have merited inclusion in the *Collected Poems* on that basis alone. That it did not reveals a great deal about the poetry Fitzgerald considers "not so good."

It also reveals how little Fitzgerald considered historical context in making his selections. During a leave of absence from *Fortune* from November 1935 to May 1936, Agee and his first wife, Via, vacationed at Anna Maria, Florida, an island near St. Petersburg. As voluminous surviving manuscripts make clear, Agee wrote constantly, mostly poetry, and almost all of the poems published in the next few years date from this short period, as does "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," his most well-known work of lyric

prose. This burst of poetic activity, which he characterized in a 1936 letter to James Johnson Sweeney as "blind flying, throwing stuff into a corner & forgetting about it as fast as possible, with expectation of going through a clearance in 3 or 4 months more" (1), was to be Agee's last. When he returned to New York that summer, he landed the magazine assignment that, after multiple revisions over five years, would eventually become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* By the time he completed the book in 1941, he had published his last poem save one, and with a few exceptions devoted the rest of his career to prose: book and film criticism, articles for *Time* and *Life,* fiction, and screenplays for documentary and feature films. This outburst represents his final sustained effort in the genre; any consideration of Agee's poetry must take this six-month period into account. Among the poems Agee wrote during his time in Anna Maria are at least a dozen explicitly political satires of up to 120 lines, a significant percentage of his overall production.[26] Some of these poems are not very polished, and the repetition of themes and phrasing indicates that some may be variants of one another. As a whole, though, they provide great insight into Agee's attitudes towards the tumultuous political events of the late 1930s and, thus, the sort of context that Fitzgerald's essentially ahistorical compilation ignores. Serendipitously, the three poems from Father Flye's typescript that failed to make the *Collected Poems*—"Rapid Transit," "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," and "[He can't stand it forever]"—may serve as an index to Agee's other political poems through their introduction of his major themes of the period: the alienation of the individual under modern capitalism; the need for political education and solidarity; the corruption of institutions, namely the state and organized religion; the call

[26] See Appendix 2 for texts of these poems.

for revolution; and the dangers posed by the rise of populist demagogues such as Huey P. Long and Father Charles E. Coughlin through their manipulation of mass media.

In his foreword to *Permit Me Voyage,* Archibald MacLeish praises the volume for being apolitical—"It will not excite the new-generationers, left wing or right. Agee does not assume what is usefully known as a Position" (6)—and its author for a "technical apprenticeship successfully passed" (7). As Fitzgerald notes, however, MacLeish seems to have missed the overwhelmingly religious thrust of poems such as "Dedication" and "A Chorale," which are nothing less than "strenuous prayers" ("Memoir" 23) and "the work of a desperate Christian" (22). Fitzgerald agrees with MacLeish about Agee's technical precision, and writes that he and Agee, as college friends and budding poets, were "both inclined to the 'religion of art,' meaning that no other purpose, as we would have put it, seemed worth a damn in comparison with making good poems" (19). But Agee's best work has, he argues, a "sense of the breathing community immersed in mystery, exposed to a range of experience from what can only be called the divine to what can only be called the diabolical, most intelligent in awe and most needful of mercy—a religious sense of life, in short" (23). That MacLeish and other reviewers of *Permit Me Voyage* ignored this religious sense is lamentable but not surprising; as Fitzgerald opines: "It was as if the interests and pressures of the time made it inaudible" (23).

The same can be said of Fitzgerald's treatment of Agee's political poetry. He had early on identified—and identified with—Agee as a primarily religious poet whose archaic sonnets and rhymed lyrics were a phase to be passed through en route to greater work. When it came time for him to make selections for the *Collected Poems,* he may

have looked on pieces such as "Fight-Talk" and "Collective Letter to the Boss" as not only bad poetry but also irrelevant to Agee's development as an artist. As Cary Nelson has shown, most notably in *Repression and Recovery* (1989), by the 1960s the institutionalization of the modernist canon had thoroughly marginalized the proletarian poetry of the 1930s. Compared to his other poems—even the best of which were never particularly well known—Agee's topical satires must have seemed doubly obscure.

To Selden Rodman in 1938, however, Agee's political poems were thoroughly representative, both of the poet and of a type. In his introduction to *A New Anthology of Modern Poetry,* Rodman defends political poetry: "We acknowledge, to be sure, that religious fervor and 'correct' politics do not necessarily produce poetry. But we observe that the very greatest poetry, and certainly the most monumental, was written by men who paraded their extra-aesthetic intentions and who, if they were not actually out to instruct, were certainly anxious to expound" (41). The anthology contains four sections. The first is devoted to poets such as Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats, "the forerunners of contemporary poetry" (24). The second "embraces the poets who derive their inspiration from the people and the soil, in rebellion for the rights of both" (24); this section includes poems by Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay, the last speech of Bartolomeo Vanzetti rendered as verse, and "A Group of Negro Songs." The third advances poets decisively influenced by French symbolism: MacLeish, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and others. The fourth section combines Parts II and III: "Revolt against society will drive revolt against form into the background. And the new synthesis (social-symbolism, we might call it) will inevitably seem less sharply original, if more outspoken and robust" (25). As a "social-symbolist" poet, Agee joins W. H. Auden, Kenneth Fearing, Hugh

MacDiarmid, Muriel Rukeyser, Rodman himself, and others in beginning "to fuse the naturalistic and the symbolic in a new synthesis" that "may be broadened to include the integration of conscious and unconscious experience, of man and machine, but above all the creative individual life balanced with the constant effort to help shape the face of the world in which the poet, like everyone else, must live" (45). As with the group then coalescing around Auden in England, Rodman insists that young American poets, namely these social-symbolists, can come together to fulfill the "potentialities of a rich, vital national literature" (44-45).

Agee is represented by two poems in Rodman's volume, "Rapid Transit" and "Millions Are Learning How." The poems are complementary: "Rapid Transit" introduces the problem of individual alienation, and "Millions Are Learning How" resolves it by replacing the "tamed" mass man with the individual given meaning through collective purpose. "Rapid Transit" begins "Squealing under city stone / The millions on the millions run, / Every one a life alone, / Every one a soul undone." The city not only depersonalizes the individual by making him indistinguishable from the other millions of commuters rushing purposelessly through the dark, but it also dehumanizes him, transforming him into one of many squealing, soulless animals herded through subway chutes, hanging from straps like "spoiled meats." Mass transit, like other instruments of a routinized modern lifestyle, domesticates the individual, wrecking his mind, "That now is tamed, and once was wild." A perfect example of Rodman's synthesizing social-symbolism, Agee recasts Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" as Marxist critique.

If the masses are dehumanized in "Rapid Transit," they are a source of hope in "Millions Are Learning How," and Rodman's juxtaposition of the two poems constitutes

its own dialectic. While the urban commuters in "Rapid Transit" have no control over their lives, in "Millions Are Learning How" Agee offers "all the land" as an antidote to the "poisons" that in the first poem "Branch and abound like whirling brooks" but in the second "Like mists, like mists are lifting." The key to this transformation is education: "Thousands are breathing health in, here and there: / Millions are learning how." The way to wisdom is simple but requires a radical reorientation of political identity:

> From now on kill America out of your mind.
> America is dead these hundred years.
> You've better work to do, and things to find:
>
> Waste neither time nor tears.
>
> See, rather, all the millions and all the land
> Mutually shapen as a child of love.
> As individual as a hand
>
> And to be thought highly of.

Rather than an undifferentiated mass manipulated for its own ends by a poisonous capitalist system, the people reunited with the land become a respected, loving collective whose members maintain their individuality while working together to the greater good, fingers of a powerful hand. Though the time for full flowering of society has not yet arrived, thousands are becoming millions, and "A people as a creature in a dream / Not yet awakened, smiles." In contrast to this vision of pastoral happiness is the means

through which it is to be accomplished, though: the people must ruthlessly and without remorse "kill America" (which is already moribund anyway) as a way of thinking about self and society, substituting a utopian transnational collectivism for liberal democracy. Or, as Agee puts it in "[Hold on a second, please]," another poem suppressed by Fitzgerald: "Hold on a second, please: there's work to do / And it involves, one way or another, you. / The garbage stinks and it's high time to burn it. / Christ, if you lack the sense, get busy and learn it."

The need for political education is also the dominant message of "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," also included in Father Flye's typescript but excluded from the *Collected Poems*. Just as with "Millions Are Learning How," the lesson is revolution. Agee takes the poem's epigraph from the Nicean Creed: ". . . and I look to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." As in "[Now the steep and chiming coasts]," where Agee merges "The love of Jesus and the mind of Marx," this epigraph uses Christian imagery to point to a political transformation as total as the creation of the new heaven and new earth following the Second Coming. Revolutionary violence is a prerequisite to change, and Agee's playful couplets disguise an intractable brutality, as in this metaphorical call to eat the rich: "I look forward to that day / When human work is human play; / When all the Men with all the Hoes / Cut sirloins from the Morgan nose." Force is necessary because "The man who weaves the future's wreath / Socks the present in the teeth." While the injunction to "kill America" is only vaguely defined in "Millions Are Learning How," Agee elaborates in "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," calling on the common man to "learn / Discontent with what you earn," which

will lead to an understanding of the ways religious, legal, and governmental institutions conspire to keep him powerless and pacified:

> Learn to mistrust the sort of God
> Who promises a Land of Nod
> To those who ruin out their day
> Meekly in their own decay. . . .
>
> Learn the truth of present law:
> It is a snaggletoothed crosscut saw
> Swapped back and forth continually
> By greed and fear: and we're the tree. . . .
>
> Learn the bloody fact of State,
> The great fence with the narrow gate
> Through which the splintered brotherhood
> Is marched to meet itself in blood.

Only when the state is destroyed can the international brotherhood recognize itself and come together in peace. But despite the powerful forces arrayed against it, the cause is not hopeless; in fact, once the proletariat understands what it is up against, it can then draw upon its own strengths to create the same type of pastoral utopia evoked in "Millions Are Learning How":

And learn the happy size of truth:
The human race is in his youth:
New power of metal earth and light
Are huge around him and his right.

He is not split hand against hand
By accidents of flesh and land
But is one man, whose farm's the earth.
And he is learning what he's worth.

In "[Marx, I agree]," Agee expresses the same idea: "All things amaze me and the time seems great / With joy and wisdom scarcely yet descried, / The chains and emblems of the ghastly State / Rust off: the race, the earth, are groom and bride." In "A Chorale," from *Permit Me Voyage,* the conceit of the physical union of bride and groom, which takes place on the night "that hallows as it harms," expresses the paradox embodied in the word "consummation"—which means an end but denotes the beginning—and points to the resurrection of the spirit in the death of the flesh. But these later proletarian poems apply religious metaphors to a strictly materialistic plane, where people rather than their souls are saved through the abolition of private property. At the end of "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," the proletariat, as the new Adam, falls into grace:

The earth turns in a morning air:

Wake your lungs and drink your share. . . .

Learning, above all, how the right
Is only forged of those who fight . . .

And who, their foot inside the door
Must urge it open more and more,
Dreaming no pity, nor self-merit,
Nor of the great house they inherit.[27]

The meek will inherit the earth, but only after they have learned to fight for it—and then only to give it away. Agee envisions a world without government or repressive social structures, but he recognizes that the end of history can only be accomplished through revolutionary violence.

In "A Memoir," Fitzgerald discusses Agee's "strong" (27) attraction to Communism in the mid-1930s and contends that it was probably instigated by Malraux's novels, Auden's poetry, and the films of Eisenstein and Dovzhenko. As poems such as "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme" indicate, though, it was probably also an outgrowth of his religious sensibility, as well as reflecting broader cultural themes such as the New Deal's adoption of ideas and rhetoric associated with the Social Gospel movement. Fitzgerald downplays Agee's revolutionary tendencies, casting them as generalized

[27] At the top of page 29 above the title, Fitzgerald has typed "typescript with name and address: Anna Maria, Florida: so 1935-36?" Flye has circled the dates and written and signed in pencil, "yes that is the correct date J. H. Flye."

contempt for bourgeois attitudes and soon abandoned: "The idea of a dedicated brotherhood working together underground in the ghastly world held his imagination for several years—spies amid the enemy, as Auden had imagined them; at the same time he had no great difficulty in seeing through most of the actual candidates for such a brotherhood, including himself. The Party fished in vain for Agee, who by liking only what was noble in the Revolution liked too little of it" (27). Agee's revolutionary phase may very well have been short-lived—though Fitzgerald was apparently unaware that Agee's first impulse on receiving the sharecropper assignment at *Fortune* in 1936 was to get in touch with a Communist labor organizer who had contacts in Alabama (*JAR* J 1.6) or that he was advocating the formation of a transnational democratic socialist party as late as ten years later—but it was nonetheless intense. In a 1937 letter to Father Flye, Agee continues their debate over the right of unions to bargain collectively, to strike, and to fend off strikebreakers. Flye had apparently acknowledged these rights in the abstract but was less willing to support them in practice. Agee responds:

> Of course our basic difference on these points is this; and within your belief, if I believed it, I would agree with you. You think of the set-up as labor, capital, and government, making their adjustments as best they can, with the supremely important thing observance of and just administration of the law to the individual instance. I think of it as inevitable and literal war, in which, again inevitably, government and capital stand together against labor. Much as I may dislike the fact, there can be no sacred rules in war, and if strikers occupy the sacred property of their employers I rejoice as in the capture of an enemy fortress, only more so, for I have no enemies in any war but this kind. And if great sections of the law-

> abiding populace approve this rupture of law, I am glad again, for my side can in the long run never win without breaking the laws as they stand, the laws being against them; and this general approval shows a growth of insensitiveness toward my enemies, and of understanding of my friends, which is very encouraging in the very fact that it weakens the meaning and stature of government as it is. (*JAR* J 2.17)[28]

As with Agee's proletarian poems, the bulk of which were written within a year or so of this letter, government and capital are enemies that cannot be bargained with but must be destroyed, an attitude he apparently still held in 1939, when he responded to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire with "I consider myself to have been continuously at war for some years, and can imagine no form of armistice" (*FM* 316). As "Collective Letter to the Boss" informs its recipient: "Since, in a word, you force our hand: / Since, in a word, it must be war: / Line up your men and guns and be / Advised: you are the enemy: / All human race in every land / Rares up to wreck you from the floor."

Though many of the poems of this period endorse violence, they tend to do so through a combination of pointed satire, dark humor, and naive utopianism. "[Yet even slaves]," however, is an unstinting acknowledgment of the responsibilities of action. It begins with the speaker asserting that love can conquer hunger and hate but ends in grim resolve:

> Yet even slaves lie down and love.

[28] It is not known if Agee sent the letter for which this is a draft. It does not appear in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* but since Flye both deleted content from the correspondence and destroyed the originals, there is no way to tell how complete the volume is. It is not impossible that Flye suppressed this letter and perhaps others for the same reasons that Fitzgerald suppressed poems that express similar ideas.

A little while along this bed
Hunger is nothing and proud hate
Spills wholly from the lowered head.

Though soon we must stand up from love
And mercy and all love put by,
Belt our starved guts with wrath, and kill,
We are not sorry we have met.

The lovers can share a moment together, but their brief personal happiness is subsumed by the greater struggle, which is, as "Yet," the poem's first word, implies, ongoing. The understated "We are not sorry we have met" expresses the impossibility of joy in a system where everyone is a slave, and there can be no happiness for the individual until everyone is free. "Mercy and love" are luxuries, as are words of more than two syllables, giving the poem a tight-lipped hardness; the only meaningful act is to "Belt our starved guts with wrath, and kill."

Other poems from the mid-1930s are more specifically referential, and Fitzgerald is probably on firmer ground, at least aesthetically, in excluding from the *Collected Poems* those topical satires that require detailed explanations. "[He can't stand it forever]," for instance, appears in Father Flye's typescript and concerns the "Kingfish," Huey Long, who "seemed to like the hook" and "ate what tried to eat him," but not obviously until the last line, when he is "strapped against the wrong end of the gun." This poem is in fairly rough condition and may, in fact, be two poems on the same theme

or two drafts of the same poem. As such, it probably does not merit inclusion in the *Collected Poems*. However, Agee wrote a number of poems dealing with contemporary political and other public events and figures, and the omission of "[He can't stand it forever]" is evidence of their absence.

In "Fight-Talk," for example, an interlocutor begins a speech to the working class with "Pals, have bosses bled you so / There's no blood left nor place to go?" and recites a miserable litany of depression-induced calamities endured by a representative family head reduced by poverty to robbery and strikebreaking. With his father dead from drinking Sterno, the man of the house is trying to support a pregnant wife, a venereally diseased daughter turned to prostitution, and a houseful of crying children, all watched over by a complacent priest who symbolizes an ineffectual church. The speaker continues, "The lights are doused? the gas is dead? / You've hocked the chair and extra bed? / The landlord's issued a final warning / Against eight-thirty Monday morning?" Although this state of affairs might produce a call to arms in another of Agee's poems of the period, "Fight-Talk" ends with a bitterly ironic appeal to reelect Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 and to continue to trust New Deal policies, whether they have helped to ameliorate economic conditions or not: "*So pledge allegiance once again / To Franklin and his merry men.*" After all, "No matter how many lives are sperled / God's in his heaven to hell with the world." Agee tops the poem off with a wicked pun that underscores the difference between the economy in the abstract and its real-world effects: "(Cartoon: gas stove, man, head in oven, terribly bloated body: child lying on floor, bloated, dead, wife entering, child at skirt— / IS IT INFLATION? ARE WE TO HAVE INFLATION?)."

As part of the poem's rhetorical maneuvering, the speaker exhorts the working class: "Stand firm, my boy, resist the passes / Launched by the readers of New Masses / O plug against the Syren song / of the cuckling priest and hooey long. / Remember too that Hammy Fish / Is victim of a Freudian wish." Attempting to inoculate the electorate against solutions from both the right and the left of Roosevelt, the speaker acknowledges the temptation of Communism, signified by the party's organ, the *New Masses,* as well as hard-line Republicanism, embodied by U.S. Representative Hamilton Fish of New York, a vigorous opponent of the New Deal—which Fish considered even more insidious than Communism because it disguised its true intentions.[29] He also invokes economic populists Father Charles Coughlin, the Catholic priest whose radio program reached millions of listeners, and Huey Long, governor and then senator from Louisiana. Both attacked the New Deal for doing too little to redistribute wealth, and Agee paid close attention to their careers, considering them incipient fascists whose mastery of the mass medium of radio was potentially dangerous. As he writes in "[What fool would dare]": "Try not to care / How foul the air / Keeps the population choked. / Stick by the radio. / You have nothing to lose but your brains."

This is far from Agee's only reference to Coughlin and Long. Lines from "[He can't stand it forever]," for instance—"he seemed to like the hook. / He rode it like a hobby horse and he ate what tried to eat him, / He grew and grew"—refer to the controversy ignited by former National Recovery Administration director General Hugh

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[29] Agee's reference to Fish's "Freudian wish," that is, his desire to kill his father, is explained by his supposed envy of his illustrious forebears (and which also may clarify his obstreperous opposition to Roosevelt). His father, Hamilton Fish, also a U.S. congressman, was assistant secretary of the treasury under Theodore Roosevelt, and his grandfather, Ulysses S. Grant's secretary of state, was the subject of a 932-page Pulitzer Prize–winning biography by Allan Nevis entitled *Hamilton Fish: The Inside History of the Grant Administration* published in 1936.

S. Johnson on March 4, 1935. Johnson attacked Long and Coughlin, whom Roosevelt had preferred to ignore publicly, in a speech at the Waldorf Astoria broadcast over the NBC radio network, calling them preachers "not of reform but revolution" and claiming that "this country was never under a greater menace" (Brinkley 6). Rather than silencing them, the attack gave Long and Coughlin an enormous amount of free publicity—as well as a national forum by way of equal time on NBC—through which they each reached even larger audiences, significantly strengthening their respective movements (6-7).

Before Long's assassination in 1935, both he and Coughlin were positioning themselves as opponents to Roosevelt by advocating various redistribution schemes. In this, they were loosely aligned with Major C. Hugh Douglas, whose Social Credit theory blamed the interest charged by banks for depressions and war and called for a national dividend that would return the surplus usually sapped by interest to consumers. Agee explicitly refers to Douglas in "Dialog," "Collective Letter to the Boss," and "[Major Douglas]," in which he "is the Kind of man / That heaps up the fire in the frying pan . . . . / He says the world would escape its pickles / If only the world would take wooden nickels." Though Agee is critical of the Left in several poems of the period, it is clear that he feared that the economic populism promoted by Long, Coughlin, and Douglas might lead to fascism. On this count they were edged out by William Randolph Hearst, though, whose control of a mass-media empire that included twenty-eight newspapers and eighteen magazines portended an even greater threat to democracy. As Agee wrote to Father Flye in September 1935:

> Long's assassin was a brave man, but there were more deserving people to die killing. Hearst might head a purely local list but if you weren't being provincial

> about it I guess Hitler would nose him out. Hitler and several of his friends. I have thought how interesting and serviceable it would be to organize a group of terrorists: say 600 young men who don't care especially for their lives: to pair them off to trail the 300 key sonsofbitches of the earth (if they were that glibly easy to select): and exactly a year from then, at just the same hour all over the world, to ring up the assassinations. But I don't really qualify at all: I doubt it would do more good than harm: and you would certainly kill a good many innocent men, not all of them bystanders. (*LFF* 82-83)

More shocking, and more illuminating, than the call to violence is Agee's moral equivalence: what is justified as necessary murder at the beginning of the paragraph has devolved to moral paralysis by the end, as the thought that the innocent may die along with the guilty precludes action. The tendency to overanalyze coupled with an inability to act is a problem that Agee would recognize both in himself and as a symptom of the ineffectualness of the intelligentsia as a whole, and over the course of the 1940s he would move away from fiery rhetoric divorced from consequences to a popular art predicated on the responsibility of the audience to take a moral stake in its reception. In the mid-1930s, though, Agee was still cultivating a politics based on the rhetoric of antagonism regardless of real-world efficacy, as "Fight-Talk" makes clear.

In addition to the New Deal, *New Masses,* Hamilton Fish, Huey Long, and Father Coughlin—as well as to the economic positions represented by each—Agee alludes in "Fight-Talk" to the Veterans' Bonus Bill, passed over Roosevelt's veto, the New York City Home Relief Bureau, and various conflicts with labor unions embodied by the auto workers the president sells out and the miners with whom he refuses to meet, all within

the context of the 1936 presidential election. Contra MacLeish, Agee seems very much to be assuming "a Position." Furthermore, Agee cynically reveals the bottom line to all politics: power to govern brings power to tax, which brings "more to lubricate the game / That brings us more whence that much came." In other words, "Fight-Talk" constitutes a thick description of mid-1930s political and economic landscape in which sharp couplets underscore the ineffectiveness of both the New Deal and its alternatives to counter the problems of the Great Depression. There is only corruption, despair, or, alternately, anarchy—the sooner, the better.

Other poems written around the same time allude to topics as varied as the fascist build-up to war, manipulated not only by Hitler and Mussolini but also the House of Morgan, dime novels, Social Credit journals, and even the Communist Party's affinity for modern dance—an eclectic assortment of concerns to be sure but hardly indicative of a poet disinterested in political or economic matters. In fact, in this political poetry Agee resembles nothing so much as the "forthspeaking prophet" evoked by Paul Ashdown, who assumes a role "both satirical and visionary, to both attack and inspire [his] readers and to seek meaning in ostensibly trivial or grotesque events" (60). That Fitzgerald dismissed as irrelevant the very poems that best exemplify what Ashdown associates with the prophetic aura in Agee's journalism demonstrates how thorough the modernist mystification of the poet as apolitical and somehow existing apart from society had become.

A further example of the depth to which the myth of Agee had become inseparable from the reality is provided by the evolution of Fitzgerald's memoir. In a letter to Father Flye written six months after Agee's death, Fitzgerald included a

reminiscence about his recently departed friend that undoubtedly served as a rough draft for "A Memoir," first published in the *Kenyon Review*, which appears as the introduction to Fitzgerald's edition of Agee's *Collected Short Prose*. In the letter, Fitzgerald writes about their times together in Greenwich Village and discusses the composition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in terms of its roots in American culture. The penultimate paragraph contains the following description of Fitzgerald's reacquaintance with Agee after returning from serving in the navy in World War II:

> When I saw him again in 1946 I thought he had gathered himself in, become sure of himself, had a certain disabused and directed power he hadn't had before. He was, for one thing, in some measure, through that mystique of poverty and discomfort that he had held for years. He had been allowed more freedom on the magazine, had been finally appreciated there, had made a success as a movie writer or rather reviewer both for TIME and the NATION, and this was excellent. He was accepting a part in the world. It seemed to me that then, and specially after Teresa came, he was happy, as we say,—though no less aware than before that there were things he could do and should perhaps be doing as a writer. He talked to me about the novel, which he had much on his mind." (2)

What is remarkable about this passage is how restrained it is. Fitzgerald notes that by 1946 Agee had cast off the role of bohemian and its "mystique of poverty and discomfort"; he had matured and was enjoying some measure of financial stability. Far from being the wild-eyed poet or self-mortifying saint celebrated by the cultists, Agee seems to have become a rather mundanely happy father.

When Fitzgerald revisits this scene in the final section of his 1968 memoir, he begins in much the same way: "When I got back to New York in 1946 I found Jim in a corduroy jacket, a subtle novelty, and in a mood far more independent than before of Left of 'Liberal' attitudes. He had become a trace more worldly and better off (I'm sure Matthews[30] saw to it that he was decently paid) and more sure of himself; and high time, too" (52). The fact that Agee's revolutionary days were obviously behind him by the mid-1940s may have led Fitzgerald to dismiss his more inflammatory proletarian verse, especially in light of the literary establishment's move to the right during the 1950s. With the onset of the Cold War, any number of former radicals downplayed the extent of their leftist activities during the 1930s, and Fitzgerald, intentionally or not, seems to have done Agee the favor of allowing poems that may have contradicted the myth of the apolitical "poet" to remain unknown. While the information that Agee had become "more worldly and better off" had been sufficient to round out the portrait in 1955, however, Fitzgerald finishes the later memoir with a vigorous defense against the charges, by now a standard component of the myth, that Agee was an artistic failure. "[I]f it took him twenty years longer than it took Joyce," he asks, "who else arrived at all?" (55). Fitzgerald confirms that Agee had virtually stopped trying to write poems by that time and notes that the few exceptions were not particularly good. In fact, Fitzgerald specifically contrasts his own conversion to Catholicism and devotion to poetry with Agee's loss of faith and "the art of verse that [Agee] had likewise left behind" (53). He defends Agee's legacy on the strength of the originality of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* the insight of his film reviews for the *Nation,* his masterly conversion of film-

[30] T. S. Matthews, managing editor at *Time.*

writing techniques into fiction in *A Death in the Family,* and his influence on writers such as Walker Percy. Even so, the impression Fitzgerald chooses to leave the reader of the *Collected Short Prose* with is Agee as poet, closing the memoir with these lines from a sonnet from *Permit Me Voyage:* "'Tis mine to touch with deathlessness their clay, / And I shall fail, and join those I betray" (57). "In respect to that commission," Fitzgerald demands in the memoir's final sentence, "who thinks that there was any failure or betrayal?" (57).

Of course, Agee the actual poet was the Agee with whom Fitzgerald was friends during the 1930s, and this Agee is the subject of the bulk of the memoir. But Fitzgerald betrays himself when he asserts that "Jim may be a Figure for somebody else, he cannot be one for me" (57). The essay ends with a rhetorical question rebutting the notion of Agee's failure but nevertheless conceding it, as the quoted lines show Agee casting his self-appointed commission in terms of the impossibility of his ever transcending death and time. Fitzgerald knew the man Agee became, but he preferred the ideal. By the time his editions of Agee's short prose and poetry appeared in 1968 and 1969, Agee had become a "Figure" for Fitzgerald as well, determining even the shape of his memory.

CHAPTER THREE

"It Is Funny If I Am a Surrealist": Agee and the Avant-Garde

In January 1938, Agee jotted the following paragraph in his journal: "Margoshes was in the mail. Adam Zion. Liked my lyrics in transition & P Review[31] & did I have anything for Konkretion a Danish magazine of world culture, dominantly surrealist, an American #? Told him I hoped so and will look & see. K is a good consonant. It is funny if I am a surrealist" (*JAR* J 4.2).

While Agee is bemused by the thought, the idea that his correspondent would have mistaken him for a surrealist in 1938 is hardly inconceivable. Although there was never the type of organized surrealist movement in America as there was in France, by the mid-1930s surrealist ideas had begun to permeate the New York art scene, stimulating not only the avant-garde but spilling over into popular culture as well. Having emerged from dada—which had an important New York component through artists such as Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray—surrealism developed in Paris in the 1920s, first under the leadership of André Breton, and later spread throughout Europe and America through individuals such as *transition* editor Eugene Jolas and New York gallery owner Julien Levy, both of whom promoted their own idiosyncratic versions of trans-Atlantic surrealism, and through various splinter groups, including the *Documents* faction centered around Georges Bataille that was opposed to Breton's dogmatic insistence on controlling the movement. Attempting to unleash the power of the

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[31] The poems Agee had published in these journals as of January 1938 are as follows: "Lyric" and "A Song," *transition* 24 (June 1936): 7; "In Memory of My Father (Campbell County, Tennessee)," *transition* 26 (Spring 1937): 7; "Lyrics," *Partisan Review* 4 (December 1937): 40-43.

unconscious, the surrealists embraced chance and the anti-logic of dreams, arbitrary juxtapositions that reveal hidden correspondences, and the disintegration of aesthetic hierarchies. Whereas the anti-art of dada was essentially nihilistic, surrealism was fundamentally optimistic, even Romantic, equating personal liberation with political freedom and advocating the destruction of bourgeois society through the dismantling of its artistic and other institutions as a means of human emancipation. In a decade defined by competing ideologies, surrealism occupied the space wherein their boundaries were permeable, marrying—uncomfortably for both—the radical formal experimentation of high modernism and the revolutionary politics of worldwide communism. While many surrealist ideas live on under the name of postmodernism, the movement, like most idealisms, eventually ran its course, devolving into self-parody as it was tamed, first by art museums and then by Madison Avenue; today, once shocking juxtapositions and leaps of logic are staples of Photoshop contests, music videos, and mass advertising.

In the late 1930s, though, surrealism still had the power to shock and amaze, and it should come as no surprise that Agee was drawn to its promise of aesthetic, personal, and political release. In fact, Agee's interest in the avant-garde, particularly surrealism, went beyond literature to other media such as painting, film, and photography. In a letter to Father Flye dated January 20, 1937, for instance, Agee relates having been "very much moved by the big Fantasy and Surrealism Show"—Alfred Barr's groundbreaking *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art—"and the 2 Picasso shows" (*LFF* 95),[32] and though he more often refers in letters and journal entries

[32] In New York, an exhibition of Picasso's work produced between 1934 and 1935 opened at the Paul Rosenberg Gallery on March 3, 1936, and a Picasso retrospective was shown at the Valentine Gallery,

to concerts and movies, in other places he mentions having seen gallery shows of paintings by avant-garde artists Georges Helion, Georgia O'Keefe (though he cannot remember her name and in a July 1934 letter to Louise Saunders refers to her as a man), and Loren McIver (*JAR* J 4.15). Critics have tended to point to major literary figures such as Whitman, Joyce, Faulkner, Hart Crane, and Thomas Wolfe as influences on Agee's prose, and there is no doubt that he read and absorbed the high modernists who would later become the touchstones of the postwar literary canon. But just as Agee's radical proletarian poetry faded in the narrative created by those who emphasized Agee's role as apolitical poet-prophet, so has the influence of the avant-garde on Agee's development as an artist been diminished by the downplaying of works that do not advance the critical assumptions of postwar formalists. Although *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is usually considered in the context of and in opposition to other depression-era documentary projects, for example, both Agee and Walker Evans were heavily influenced by the surrealist movement as it developed in New York during the 1930s, and any consideration of the work must take their appropriation of avant-garde ideas and techniques into account. That Agee composed *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* during an intense period of engagement with surrealism is evident in his contemporaneous activities and relationships, as well as in published and unpublished works, including experiments with automatic writing, the essay "Art for What's Sake," and "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House."

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beginning October 26, 1936. Picasso was also represented in the Museum of Modern Art's *Cubism and Abstract Art*, opening March 2, 1936.

A perhaps trivial but nonetheless revealing detail is that both Robert Fitzgerald and Alma Neuman, Agee's second wife, recalled his fondness for the surrealist game "One into Another," or "Metaphors," the former in a letter written to Father Flye in November 1955, and the latter in a memoir published in 1993. As Fitzgerald describes it, the game "required each to develop a description of some inanimate thing in such evocative detail that the others would guess the name of the public figure for which it stood as a metaphor. Jim did a long description of a piece of Grand Rapids furniture until Via and I exclaimed 'Carl Sandburg' with one voice. The other one he did that I remember was a worn silver flute as Leslie Howard" (1). Neuman's account is similar: "Jim introduced a guessing game called Metaphors in which the character to be guessed is described according to what that person would be if he or she were an object—a musical instrument, a body of water, a room, a period of history, and so on. The game provided endless scope for flights of fancy, but I know I was particularly fascinated with Jim's imagination as he described an absent friend in terms of a bathroom cabinet, Thoreau as a musical instrument, or Mrs. Saunders in terms of a landscape" (18). Although the surrealists probably did not invent this game, as Breton claimed, they adopted it as a playful expression of their ideas. As Mel Gooding explains,

> This coupling of two terms of reality not normally associated with one another is an essential part of the Surrealist idea of beauty, and is intended to signify the possibility of relations existing in the world other than those usually perceived. A different sort of causality is asserted, or at least hinted at. The image also has an

> obvious relationship with Surrealism's consistent aim of abolishing, or reconciling, contradictory forces. (145)[33]

For Agee's keenness for this game to serve as a salient detail from the early 1930s for both Fitzgerald and Neuman so many years after the fact seems both a testament to the enthusiasm with which he must have played it, as well as an indication of the importance of what they thought it disclosed.

As Agee mentions in the extract at the beginning of this chapter, he had published experimental poetry both in *Partisan Review* and in *transition,* the little magazine known as the "American Surrealist Review" (Kramer and Rumold xix). In his autobiography, *Man from Babel,* Eugene Jolas, the editor and founder of *transition,* singles out Agee, along with Horace Gregory, Muriel Rukeyser, and Oliver Wells, as young poets of "America Fantastica" (144) who were working with "the new language that was developing with almost Elizabethan opulence, especially in New York" (143). Jolas had founded *transition* in Paris in 1927, but in 1935, seeking "escape from the threatening collapse of a world in the throes of primeval possession" (135), he returned to New York as a staff correspondent for the French Havas News Agency. There, along with associate editor James Johnson Sweeney, he printed three issues of *transition* from offices on Forty-second Street in 1936 and 1937. Agee was the first writer featured in the first and last of these. Jolas mentions in his autobiography the difficulty of finding poets in New York who were interested in capturing "phantasmatic reality" rather than "discovering social *misère* and nothing else," but he names Agee and the others as representatives of

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[33] The frontispiece of this book, entitled *Surrealist Games,* consists of "compensation portraits" of various surrealists; André Masson, for instance, is represented as an Eskimo. In a juxtaposition that is less an example of wit than bad taste, the putative portrait of Leonora Carrington is actually Walker Evans's famous portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

"the style *transition* had initiated and nurtured," noting that "Kafka was beginning to be known; Surrealism was fast becoming the fashion" (143).

Jolas also mentions that most of the New York *transition* contributors were guests at Sweeney's "skyscraper home on the East River" (143) during this time. Agee had met Sweeney in 1934,[34] and his familiar references to Sweeney's wife and children in a letter from spring 1936 regarding submissions to *transition* from Anna Maria indicate that he had continued the relationship, as does a journal entry from March 1938 in which Agee mentions having loaned Sweeney a copy of William Empson's *Poems* (*JAR* J 4.15). It may very well be through this network of writers linked to *transition* that Adam Margoshes,[35] Agee's correspondent in the extract that begins this chapter, had become familiar with his work, beyond having chanced to read it. *Konkretion,* the periodical for which Margoshes was soliciting poetry from Agee, was a Danish journal of culture edited by Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen that had had a run of six issues from 1934 to 1936, including a final double issue on surrealism in Paris. Margoshes's connection with the journal is unknown, but he was apparently associated with an attempt to resurrect it, perhaps, as Agee's comments imply, with an issue devoted to American surrealists, just as *transition* had issued an "American Number" in the summer of 1928. Agee may have resisted the label "surrealist"—in a letter to his mother-in-law from Anna Maria in April 1936 he wrote, "Had a letter from James Sweeny [*sic*] yesterday, that Ive had 3 poems accepted for Transition (pardon me, transition), which I don't quite follow (that is bound to sound

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[34] In a letter to Louise Saunders postmarked January 24, 1934, Agee writes: "At a party at [Dwight Macdonald's] last night we met James Sweeney, who was [Ted Spencer's] best friend in Cambridge, whose brother (and he) are very great admirers of I A R[ichards], and whose brother is one of Dick Eberhardt's best friends. And who is a very nice guy" (1).

[35] Adam Zion Margoshes (1917-1966), later a professor of psychology and a columnist for the *Village Voice.*

phony without the background, which is that Jolas through Sweeney asked for & I reluctantly sent them, quite certain they were not at all of the transition sort)" (1)[36]—but for Jolas and Margoshes, it seems to have been apt. That Jolas continued to associate Agee with the type of experimental writing championed by *transition* is demonstrated by his inclusion of Agee's poetry alongside that of both canonical modernists such as Hart Crane and Allen Tate and surrealists such as Breton, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, and Charles Henri Ford in his 1949 anthology *transition workshop* (1949). It is telling that "Lyric," the poem selected by Jolas as exemplary of Agee's experimental work, is considered by Fitzgerald, according to its position in the hierarchical arrangement of the *Collected Poems,* to be second-rate. It is also indicative of their assumptions about Agee's position in the literary ranks that Fitzgerald was not aware that Agee had appeared in Jolas's anthology and that neither he nor Agee's bibliographers thought to examine it.

Also worth noting is that by 1940 Agee was acting as an informal agent for Anna Kavan, the surrealist writer and painter known as "Kafka's sister." Kavan, born Helen Woods in France in 1901, had lived in England, Switzerland, California, and Burma and had published six novels before being institutionalized in 1938 following a suicide attempt after the dissolution of her second marriage. By that time, she had been a heroin addict for twelve years. Leaving England in 1940, ostensibly to visit her mother in South Africa, Kavan, who had changed her name to that of a character in two of her novels, traveled via Norway and California to Singapore, where she met Charles Fairchild Fuller,

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[36] Agee continues: "They were 3 of 10 sent and I cant make out which ones except for one fairly nasty one called A Vision of Fair Women about the great tribe of U.S. mothers in red toenails and garter belts" (1). "A Vision of Fair Women" was not published in *transition* and apparently does not survive.

an architect from New York. Although he was engaged to another woman, Fuller and Kavan began a brief but intense affair, returning to America in October 1940, where, as Kavan's biographer states, "she was admitted to New York for sixty days, and introduced to Charles Fuller's circle" (Callard 72). Fuller's friends "were Bohemian and artistic; she smoked marijuana with them, and was introduced to, and photographed by, Walker Evans" (72). It is undoubtedly through Evans that Agee met Kavan. Though he could not have known her more than a month or two, Agee forwarded some of her manuscripts to Robert Linscott, the editor at Houghton Mifflin then handling *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* and quickly followed up:

> Thanks a great deal for your speed with the Kavan mss. I'm glad you personally thought so well of them. Two things again somewhat urgent, one relating to Kavan, the other to the book.
>
> Kavan: She has had a piece of (temporary) luck with visas & The Authorities and didn't have to leave the country, & is here now at least for the next while. She is exceedingly interested in your suggestion of the possibility of publishing a cut and merged single volume, because she has thought rather seriously of doing that herself. That she hasn't written you herself is simply, that for the time being I'm amateur agent for her: she has been rather tired-out & seemed to need a rest from whatever she could be relieved of. But as I've said she very much is interested in discussing this with you—so if you are too it would save time to write her direct: Anna Kavan, 55 W53rd St., N.Y.C. I do hope it goes through. (1)

Nothing apparently came of his efforts to secure publication for her, but this relationship, along with his association with Sweeney, confirms that Agee moved in avant-garde circles outside of Greenwich Village and the more familiar connections with fellow writers such as Macdonald and Fitzgerald at *Fortune* and *Time*.

Kavan returned the favor in 1943, mentioning *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in a review in Cyril Connolly's influential literary journal *Horizon;* the notice may have helped lead to the book's being published in England (Callard 82). Calling *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "a unique and horrifying work," Kavan notes that the book is unavailable in England and that Agee's prose is "unfamiliar" and asks rhetorically in the place of the English reader, "Why should this interest me? Why should I, struggling through the morass of a total war, concern myself with the troubles of a group of peasants thousands of miles away on another continent?" (285). Her answer to these questions, by recontextualizing the volume to serve as a commentary on the current conflagration, anticipates both Macdonald's later invocation of it as a key to understanding concentration camps and Agee's own words on the atomic bomb. She writes:

> It is a terrifying fact that the post-war world will be full of damaged and helpless human beings with whose fate, if any values are to survive, the whole human race must realize itself involved. Any representation, any experiment whatsoever which will shock people into awareness of their responsibility to their undefeated ones is of supreme importance. The ethical value of this book can hardly be exaggerated in that it tends, by disturbing the reader's emotional norm, to force upon him acknowledgement of his own profound implication in the matter. (285)

While evidence of personal relationships Agee had with avant-garde writers and editors such as Jolas, Sweeney, and Kavan is of biographical interest, even more compelling is the extent to which surrealist concepts and techniques were central to his writing in the late 1930s. Though often overlooked, two of Agee's most important prose works of this period are a defense of surrealism and a surrealistic film scenario. Furthermore, by the spring of 1936 he was experimenting heavily with automatic writing as a means of stimulating ideas and poetic phrasing.

In his 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," André Breton offers this definition of the movement:

> SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.
>
> ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life. (26)

Although Breton would modify this basic definition, especially as surrealism became more politicized, the emphasis on accessing the unconscious directly as a means of breaking the "reign of logic" (9) remained fundamental to the project of resolving the contradictory states of dream and reality "into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (14). Breton and the other surrealists embraced Freud's discoveries concerning the

unconscious in that they allowed the imagination to reassert itself against reason, but they were not particularly interested in the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis, instead inverting the conscious/unconscious hierarchy to privilege the latter term (Nicholls 281). Dreams are as real as waking life, the surrealists asserted, and they sought a way to make the passage between the two conditions continuous. One of the primary techniques of the surrealists for capitalizing on immediacy and chance to tap into the liberating power of the unmediated workings of the unconscious was automatic writing.

In the 1924 "Manifesto," Breton gives specific instructions on "[w]ritten Surrealist composition" under the subheading "SECRETS OF THE MAGICAL SURREALIST ART" (29): "Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. . . . Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. . . . Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur" (29-30).

That Agee embraced automatic writing as a technique for producing poetry along the lines of Breton's "Manifesto" is evident from a number of surviving manuscripts dating from his leave of absence from *Fortune* in Anna Maria in 1935-36. Of this period Fitzgerald, referring to one of Agee's since lost notebooks, writes, "He was now steadily devouring Freud and recording his dreams. 'Read Freud until midnight' is an entry several times repeated. There are pages like Stephen's or Bloom's waking thoughts in Ulysses" ("A Memoir" 29). Though Fitzgerald, as with the poetry, is eager to associate him with the high modernist canon, Agee's method has much more in common with Breton's "psychic automatism" than literary stream of consciousness. In this example,

for instance, Agee emphasizes his own passivity and receptiveness to whatever bubbles up from the unconscious:

> Writing first thing comes into my mind. Point being nothing does when you watch for it. Whistle, ok. Heard that outside. Boat—Midnight boats. Never got much of a rise from. more noise. Window problem. Evil. Regnum Malorum. thought for that. Next? What the hell the use? Scavenger. Lone prairie. O bury me not, , , on the loan prayereee, , Get hands & body in for Gods sake. And natural speech. And the hell with this. When will I stop? When will I start again? Thou only hast my heart, Sister, believe. When Eve first saw the glittery day; she sat and cried, to break her heart. What time is coming, and what way, the sun moves up, and falls apart. Stink o. Miner. Pedantic wit. Phooey. spreaded day before her — . From her pillow's height. High. throne. Smiling from her pillows height. (*JAR* P 4)

Of course, automatic writing—as writing—is not "the actual functioning of thought" but, rather, its representation; as such, it serves as an attempt to integrate the rational and irrational, to allow reason to collaborate with the unconscious (Nicholls 282-83). While passivity had been primary in the 1924 "Manifesto," by the 1930s the surrealists had begun to subordinate the fruits of automatism to political ends. As Breton explained in 1935, "Surrealism's whole effort . . . has been to obtain from the poet the instantaneous revelation of these verbal traces whose psychic charges are capable of being communicated to the perception-consciousness system. . . . I shall never tire of repeating that *automatism* alone is the dispenser of the elements on which the secondary work of emotional amalgamation and passage from the unconscious to the preconscious can

operate effectively" ("Political Position" 230). In other words, automatic writing is the first step in releasing the power of the unconscious, but conscious manipulation of the material is required to bring it to full efficacy. Though Agee begins in a passive state in the excerpt above, by the end of the exercise he has started to shape an unconscious phrase into consciously poetic form. Agee continues the passage above, writing:

> I held her from her pillow's height reach down her smile about me, she watched and sweetly grieving said I'll spend this night without ye. I call that woman holy hell that of my heart bereaved me, and laughed my love to let me tell and never once believed me. She left me low for another guys [*sic*], he loved and left her high and dry, now both are dead, and only I, am remain to tell, the story. our story.
>
> She left me cold for another guy, He loved and left her high and dry, now both are cold and only I am left to tell the story.
>
> I met her young, in the young green woods, And the day was wild, in the warm green woods, as glory,
>
> And I laid her down, and I got the goods, and that begins, my story.
>
> I watched her from her easy bed
> Let loose her smile around me,
> And on the smile she sweetly said
> I'll spend the night without ye.
>
> I name that girl a holy hell
> That of my tears deceived me,
> And laughed my love to let me tell
> And never once believed me.
>
> (*JAR* P 4)

Agee develops the poem for a few more lines, but he apparently never finished it. What this extract reveals, though, is how insistent he was in the act of automatic writing,

maintaining discipline no matter how silly it begins to sound, and how determined to listen to the unconscious "murmur" for inspiration, which he then consciously shapes. That "Writing first thing comes into my mind" leads inexorably to ballad stanzas is a perfect illustration of the way automatic writing can function to produce surrealist art. Although he may have abandoned "I watched her from her easy bed," Agee did pick out another line from this exercise to work into a finished poem. "When Eve first saw the glittery day; she sat and cried, to break her heart" eventually became the first stanza of "Song with Words," published by Louis Untermeyer in *Modern American Poetry:*

"When Eve first saw the glistering day / Watch by the wan world side / She learned her worst and down she lay / In the streaming land and cried" (606). The seeds of other poems, including "Glimmer, glimmer, universe," are also apparent in Agee's automatic writings, as are passages that appeared much later in *A Death in the Family*. The meandering effusions of "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," composed during the same period, also hint at having been initiated through this method.

In fact, a comparison of "Lyric," one of Agee's best-known poems, published in *transition* in 1936, to an unrevised sample of automatic writing reveals striking similarities in execution and effect. "Lyric" reads as follows:

> Demure morning morning margin glows cold flows foaled:
> Fouled is flown float float easily earth before demurely:
>
> Chanced gems leaves their harbors
> Sparkle above leaves whom light lifted:

Drilling in their curly throats severally sweet ordinate phrases

Smooth ancestral phrases.

Teaching: touching: sinuous disunion.

Drinking: drafting: each of all serenest pleasure.

Bring floral earth your breast before her,

Afford your breast before the morning.

Demurely, the early margin:

Fouled is fallen flower flower fearless earth before: serenely: (7)

The hypnotic rhythm and unbridled flow of sounds and associations are undoubtedly what attracted the editors of *transition* to this poem, and the fact that Jolas anthologized it thirteen years after its initial publication implies that he continued to see its privileging of the individual experience over objective reality as an expression of the journal's revolutionary poetics. Although Jolas eventually fell out with Breton, *transition*'s promotion of the international avant-garde was decisively influenced by surrealism. The "Poetry Is Vertical" manifesto, for instance, published in *transition* in 1932 and signed by Jolas, Sweeney, Hans Arp, Carl Einstein, Samuel Beckett, and others, begins, "In a world

ruled by the hypnosis of positivism, we proclaim the autonomy of the poetic vision, the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life (148). Anticipating Agee's free-floating rapture in "Lyric," it continues, "Esthetic will is not the first law. It is in the immediacy of the ecstatic revelation, in the a-logical movement of the psyche, in the organic rhythm of the vision that the creative act occurs" (148).

That "Lyric" draws on automatic writing may be demonstrated through comparing the poem to the last few lines of the exercise that begins "small turns, tricky & silly. dope 'atmospheres' came into the world with hands over your eyes" (*JAR* P 7). After a passage that contains several phrases that may have made their way into "Lyric" ("drilled throat . . . sweet water . . . the complete breast . . . floral brain . . . fouled spring"), Agee concludes with a series of lines that, extracted from their original context, may serve as a self-contained, if somewhat unpolished, poem:

> The ceremonial phrase. One, seven, or not too many at a time,
>
> Crowd at the groin my doubts, my things much loved.
>
> The river, paved with nudging logs, and the key log, jamming the narrows.
>
> The black mountain river, paved with nudging logs.
>
> Filing from cloud, discharge. cheated. chartered. Glancing closures in the iron:
>
> meshed: Mesh, toothed iron: speak, vapors:
>
> Time whose wheels taste each other: years drift like unshaping snow.
>
> Snow makes shapenings on the earth. (P 7)

Though obviously not as consciously modified and refined as "Lyric," these lines exhibit the same type of repetition ("Teaching: touching"; "cheated. chartered") and reversals ("Fouled is flown. . . . / Fouled is fallen"; "years drift like unshaping snow. / Snow makes shapenings on the earth") of sounds, words ("float float"; "meshed: Mesh"), and phrases as the completed poem. Agee's juxtapositions of images allow for the full play of words' ambiguities: "Filing from cloud, discharge" moves the rows (files) of the logjam from the river to the sky, and the dark logs become iron "filing[s]," the teeth in the wheels of time. But time is like snow (discharged by clouds), which covers the past in formless drifts even as it creates new forms: "shapenings"—or sharpenings—as if by filing.

In "Lyric," the phrase "drilling in their curly throats" functions the same way, playing on the ambiguity of both the antecedent of "their"—either "chanced gems" (which may be either dewdrops or flowers) or leaves—and "drilling," an overdetermined symbol of fecundity that encompasses mechanical piercing or natural penetration (as of cavities: "harbors") as a sign of mechanical cultivation, as by a seed drill, or natural fertilization, as by bees or hummingbirds (in the "throat" of a flower). In archaic usage, drills are rills, small streams or rivulets, and drills are trills, small streams that flow or sounds that flutter: "severally sweet ordinate phrases." If the line descends from "drilled throat," the musical connection is even more pronounced, as the term refers to a modified mouthpiece (of a trumpet or trombone), the opening of which may be enlarged to alter its intonation. In the automatic writing extract, this echoes in the line "sweet horn commend us each to other, not despair," which invokes the spring (in both senses) and "Lyric," both in the intertwining of music and fertility and the tapping of unconscious depths: "Children are composed this season: there is hope among us yet: hope can thaw the roots

of reason." Both poems hope to derive from the collective unconscious "the ceremonial phrase" and "smooth ancestral phrases" because "mythologies are the leaves of our wooden houses" (*JAR* P 7). As the "Poetry Is Vertical" manifesto states, "The transcendental 'I' with its multiple stratifications reaching back millions of years is related to the entire history of mankind, past and present, and is brought to the surface with the hallucinatory irruption of images in the dream, the daydream, the mystic-gnostic trance, and even the psychiatric condition. . . . The synthesis of a true collectivism is made possible by a community of spirits who aim at the construction of a new mythological reality" (148-49). The poems are also concerned with opening the imagination to the free play of thoughts and impressions. "Lyric" takes place within the "morning margin," a liminal space where ideas can "float" and "flower" in "sinuous disunion." In the lines from "small turns," though, the "key log jam[s] the narrows"; it will have to be removed or circumvented in orders for ideas to flow.

The free play of the imagination is also the focus of a letter written at about the same time by Agee to jazz critic (and trombonist) Wilder Hobson. Again using the image of "jamming," Agee discusses his attempt to use automatic writing not merely to generate poetic phrasing but to break through the limits of language and representation, anticipating the struggle to which he would return in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In the letter to Hobson—which is itself a free-associative tour de force, covering everything from "brat psychology" to "fine Trappist fantasies of muffdiving with octoroons"—Agee springboards from a discussion of the wide but inconstant variety of musical programming he is able to pick up on the radio on the island of Anna Maria to a lament

over the limitations of the written word, reconceptualizing the ideas expressed by "margin" and "key log" as "swing" and "hymen":

> Hearing & recalling various items of swing (and Jesus how all the Smart magazines are swinging the word around) about it and more and more bothered that the rest of the world, more or less, lacks the freedom it has. That is, that there is practically no such thing as verbal, [picture?],[37] movie, sculpture, or for that matter in most parts musical, swing or any equivalent. By swing or equivalent in these fields I mean any equivalent to the free state of mind that produces swing, which has every surrounding circumstance (of audience and [motive?], for instance) to its advantage. Wd guess maybe some African sculpture and a little of surrealist painting may have small amounts of what I mean, and, verbally, that Perelman, Groucho & Durante have got it, and that the nearest you get to it in written words (or rather the nearest to the circumstances) is in the daily column, which is never used for it. But even when you get any verbal equivalent, it is damned limited: limited pretty much to involved parody, and the idea that it could by any chance or violence bust through into the whole lyrical field the [*sic*] music has, is just a laugh and a damned sour one at that. My conviction being that not only herr shakepere but a great mob of his contemporaries had the sort of advantages that are really completely limited to 1 piece of art now and that that explains why they were good in a way that words have never had a chance to be since. There are a few pieces of movie, very few, that have it on a wide-open

[37] Due to deterioration and Agee's bad handwriting, this letter is unreadable in places. Bracketed insertions approximate Agee's spelling as closely as possible and attempt to supply missing letters where there are holes in the paper.

> scale; and that's all. That is why I put some private [g?]lue on two or three otherwise pretty lousy poems of mine which I may or may not have showed you. Theyre bad in more ways than I need to name but appear to me very slightly to have cracked or strained a triple-chilled hymen that needs elimination bad. Suspect that a lot more jamming in same direction might in time begin to bring results, but that particular state of mind seems only to drop in on me about once every two years, stays about a day, and leaves again: and this appears to be a kind of writing you can't get far forcing, though I may find out different: Im trying to. (2)

What Agee refers to here as "swing" is rare, evident in the twentieth century only in African sculpture, some surrealist painting, a few movies, and the satirical riffs of S. J. Perelman, Groucho Marx, and Jimmy Durante. It requires and reflects a "free state of mind," but translating that freedom into language, especially written language, is nearly impossible. By invoking Shakespeare and his contemporaries, Agee implies that art is limited by the cultural conditions that produce it and that the flowering of the English language that occurred during the Renaissance, both through the introduction of new words and concepts through classical learning and global exploration, cannot be repeated in the modern world except in very limited circumstances. Ironically, given that this letter to a friend hundreds of miles away depends on shared references to widely dispersed media, Agee here fails to recognize that both his own and Shakespeare's eras were shaped by innovations in communications and transportation technologies. He instead emphasizes that only jazz (or "swing")—having developed outside of an established tradition and, unlike literature, not yet corrupted by academic, commercial,

and generic conventions—can approach the condition of freedom. Agee knows that it is extremely difficult to "by any chance or violence bust through into the whole lyrical field," but, as he says, "Im trying to." Even though "this appears to be a kind of writing you can't get far forcing," he nonetheless is working to attain "that particular state of mind" necessary to strain the "triple-chilled hymen"; as the context makes clear, his method is automatic writing.

While this letter is concerned with the aesthetics of "swing" as it relates to writing that can communicate with the immediacy of music, Agee was also aware of the political implications of automatism. As Breton states, "Psychic automatism . . . has never constituted an end in itself for Surrealism ("Political Position" 231); in fact, any "art that is worthy of this name" must necessarily participate "in the unconditional defense of a single cause, that of the *emancipation of man*" (231). In December 1936, Agee published a review essay, ostensibly of Gertrude Stein's *Geographical History of America* and *transition* 25, in the communist organ *New Masses* entitled "Art for What's Sake." Joining the debate then raging over the proper role of art in society, Agee defends experimental writing against the line promoted by Michael Gold, the editor of *New Masses,* and others that radical modernist texts, of which Stein's were notoriously exemplary in their obscurity and violations of aesthetic norms, were the products of a debased capitalist culture and should be abandoned in favor of easily accessible and politically edifying socialist realism. Gold, for instance, had attacked Stein (whose experiments with automatic writing dated to her work with William James in the 1890s, though she was not considered a surrealist) in 1936 in *Change the World!* as the embodiment of decadent bourgeois art. Though Gold condemned experimental

modernism in general, he held out concepts identified with surrealism for particular opprobrium, as this excerpt from "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" makes clear:

> The generation of artists of which Gertrude Stein is the most erratic figure arduously set out not to "make sense" in their literature. They believed that the instincts of man were superior to the reasonings of the rational mind. They believed in intuition as a higher form of learning and knowledge. Therefore, many of them wrote only about what they dreamed, dream literature. Others practised a kind of "automatic writing" where they would sit for hours scribbling the random, subconscious itchings of their souls. They abandoned themselves to the mystic irrationalities of their spirits in order to create works of art which would be expressions of the timeless soul of man, etc. The result unfortunately revealed their souls as astonishingly childish or imbecile.
>
> The literary insanity of Gertrude Stein is a deliberate insanity which arises out of a false conception of the nature of art and of the function of language. . . .
>
> But Marxists refuse to be impressed with [Stein's] own opinion of herself. They see in the work of Gertrude Stein extreme symptoms of the decay of capitalist culture. They view her work as the complete attempt to annihilate all relations between the artist and the society in which he lives. (76-77)

Agee was aware that Stein was both prominent and problematic as a representative of modernism; in an unpublished introduction to *Permit Me Voyage,* he reveals his ambivalence towards her: "I had a long job called a Preface (or at moments an Introit) which most of you would have laid to Gertrude Stein's doorstep—wrongly, of course—and which was both pitifully inferior and considerably superior to most of Miss Stein's

work" (*JAR* P 1). Nevertheless, he counters Gold's anti-modernist stance in "Art for What's Sake," following Breton in asserting the politically revolutionary potential of liberating the unconscious through experimental art. Although critics have largely ignored it, the essay is one of Agee's most direct statements of an aesthetic position. Given that he wrote the piece within four months of his return from Alabama and concurrently with his initial revisions of the *Fortune* piece he produced on his sojourn there, "Art for What's Sake" provides both a window into Agee's understanding of the role of the avant-garde in the 1930s and a framework for the composition of other works, especially "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House" and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

In the essay, Agee quickly dispenses with the works he is supposed to be reviewing as "peculiarly likely to be suspect among many readers of and writers for" *New Masses* "in favor of merely of the passing of a few remarks" (48). Finding common ground with his audience, he agrees with those such as Gold that there are "self-evident" reasons for the "suspicion and scorn of the more totally abandoned reaches of experimentalism in writing and in art," and he lists two: "(1) Plenty of the experimenting is lousy, quite some of it is desperately affected, the bulk of it is non-political; (2) it would now seem important that art have all possible force, and clarity, and length and breadth of reach" (48). On the other hand, blithely dismissing the avant-garde is "unfortunate and for that matter dangerous" because "art, and the art to come that is being shaped toward now, is thereby skimped of certain glandular secretions whose deficiency can impair force, clarity, and even size of reach: to say nothing of richness, subtlety,

variety, comprehensiveness, discovery, total accuracy, total courage, total honesty, and a few other qualities which art can use all it can get of" (48).

Agee asserts that "any new light on anything, if the light has integrity, is a revolution" and that the refusal to view the world through any other than a "strictly Marxian lens" is limiting: "The materials of dreams and of the fluid subconscious, irrationalism, the electrically intense perception and representation of 'real' 'materials': to the degree in which these are thought of as beneath the serious consideration of any self-respecting Communist artist, critic, or absorber, Nuts" (48). The avant-garde is not necessarily counterrevolutionary; neither is it necessarily political, but it may provide new tools for transformation for those who wish to use them. Offering Auden as an example of an artist who disproves "the idea that a subtle and protean, deeply inventive intellect must dilute itself through the acceptance of Marxism," Agee claims that "[s]uch work is important whether it frees the Scottsboro boys or not, and the sooner that fact becomes clear beyond any shred of doubt, the better for left-wing art in America" (48).

Further identifying technical innovation with political transformation, Agee invokes Mexican painters Jose Guadalupe Posada and Jose Clemente Orozco as artists who combine impeccable revolutionary credentials with the discovery of "dreamlike strengths of space and tension" in creating truly popular art—that is, "art intended among other things to teach and excite and to please and to inspire working people: the best communist art" (48). Along with Joyce, the great Russian filmmakers—Pudovkin, Pabst, Eisenstein, Dovschenko—make "constant and voracious use of and experiment in exactly those materials whose use in this country seems so generally decried" (48), rendering their art "capable of hitting its audience in the belly as well as between the eyes" (50):

"For the materials of so-called surrealism are the commonest of all human property. And a man who cannot by mischance grasp a problem intellectually is grasped by it if it is presented through the subtler, more forceful, and more primitive logic of movement, timing, space, and light" (50). While arguing for the efficacy of surrealistic methods, Agee also implies that reason should not be abandoned. The fact that "more primitive logic" may be necessary to drive home the lessons of the intellect does not necessarily invalidate ratiocination; in fact, as with Breton's move from emphasizing the fruits of automatism to emphasizing their political application, Agee stresses how the techniques of surrealism may serve the larger goal of social transformation.

Agee concludes by calling for reconciliation between the socialist realists and the avant-garde: "Certainly there are exceptions, but here so far in general the Left artist is in a self-depriving state of mistrust (so are his audience and his critics), and the 'surrealist' artist is ditto. Both insist they are revolutionists. Both are. They have a lot to gain from each other's company, and there are no valid reasons in the realms either of sense or nonsense why they should stay apart" (50).

Agee accepts, then, the need for political revolution as a given but asserts that socialist realism is inadequate to the task. A radical appropriation of all the tools available—whether the contents of dreams and the unconscious, "certain glandular secretions," the public art of the Mexican muralists, or film techniques such as montage from the Soviet cinema—is required for the dismantling of bourgeois culture. That Agee was able to promote this position in *New Masses* is remarkable in itself; however, "Art for What's Sake" also serves as a prelude to his next major work, "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House," first published in Horace Gregory's *New Letters in America* in

1937. In keeping with Agee's insistence that surrealist art and radical politics may be profitably wed, the plot of "The House" is bare, relying on the juxtaposition of fantastic images for its emotional impact rather than emphasizing the advancement of a coherent narrative. The camera eye, initially deceived, records a dreamscape, revising its logic as suppositions change. Agee warps religious and political iconography to set the stage for the entrance of a bourgeois family representative of its class through exaggerated grotesqueness. As in his poetry of the same period, the theme is revolution; instead of relying on simple quatrains and couplets addressed to the working class, however, Agee here follows his own prescription in "Art for What's Sake" by adopting a technique that is paradigmatically surreal.

"The House" begins with panoramic shots of "a middle-sized provincial industrial city" (*CSP* 152) such as Knoxville or Chattanooga, Tennessee; the camera then moves over industrial smokestacks and a railroad yard and into downtown, where it lights on two nuns advancing along the sidewalk. That things are not what they seem is quickly apparent: "In still closer, detached shots, one of each, with the elaboration of flowers unfolding, they lift their faces and look steadily into the lens. One: a doped and dangerous homosexualist: long vealy pumiced jaw, seed-pearl teeth, black slender lips, violet-vapor darkringed eye looking up and sidelong in icy murderous coyness. The other, long hairy meeting brows, thick lenses which round and enlarge the beryl of iris; a swinging penis nose which, as it swings, discovers a lipless and chinless mouth from which, laid flush against the throat, sprout two pale fangs" (153-54). A few seconds after the nuns pass out of camera range, "two or three troops of Boy Scouts" (154) come marching down the street, "surrounding a float upon which stands a crucifix" (154). The

camera remains stationary, but "then, first with flickerlike flashes and later with a more jabbing and steady rhythm, the basic position-one shot is crosslanced (not in double exposure) with swift intimate detail of childish feet grinding faces of Negroes, Jews; a heel twisting out the lenses of horn-rimmed spectacles; a little hand grabbing at an open book and ripping out leaves (blood springs after); hands (childish) belaboring drums, cymbals, hornkeys, gripping brass knuckles, blackjacks, hefting the butts of rifles; close-up, from low, of the advanced, pure sadistic jaw-head of the scoutmaster; of a second scoutmaster; of a swastikaed armband" (154). As with the nuns, initial impressions give way to a more grotesque "reality": "the crucifix is not a crucifix but a stripped woman, handless and footless, nailed by her wrists and shins to the cross, whose lowered head with its tresses of drenched weeping willow is a schoolboy globe of the earth" (154-55). Above the globe is tacked a crayoned sign reading "MOTHER" (155), and "the Boy Scouts are not boys but adult midgets, and their faces, now ranked advancing in the camera, are military, bloodthirsty, and aloof in the midget way" (155).

Although this initial scene is intended to disorient the viewer as seemingly stable entities give way to monstrous parodies of themselves in dizzying succession, Agee's approach is also a systematic deconstruction of bourgeois society. Religion is cast as bloodsucking perversion, and the Boy Scouts, representative of patriotic civic institutions, are stunted hooligans, the products of nationalistic education and no better than Hitler Youth. The woman on the cross—or woman as the cross, the cult of pure womanhood embodying itself as martyr—recapitulates the nuns (mother superior) and invokes Mary, but this is not Jesus dying for the sins of the world: the world itself is dying, unredeemed. Even the children—especially the children, issue of the fundamental

unit of the bourgeoisie, the family—are not innocent; in fact, in "grinding faces of Negroes, Jews," they have learned the lesson of the modern world too well that there is no outside authority, only power and those willing to master violence in order to seize it.

At this moment, a speeding funeral procession "of at least fifty identical black limousines" (155) roars into the shot behind an American flag, killing a "short plump Bloomlike man" (155) who takes off his derby to step into the street. Though Agee greatly admired Joyce, here Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of *Ulysses,* serves as a warning that an apolitical aesthetics is impossible; any art not explicitly opposed to the capitalist order will be obliterated by it. The cars' occupants are "middle-aged men and women with chalk white faces of male and female wax dummies, tophatted and tiaraed by sex, sitting erect at restless ease, certain of them hogfaced behind gasmasks" (155). After the funeral, a line of disembodied left-pointing hands, including that of the Bloomlike man along with his derby, now in a garbage can, directs the camera to "a large slate-roofed Victorian house" (156).

From this house emerge the members of a family, who cross to a black limousine parked in the semicircular driveway. Agee points out that, though meticulously detailed, the "door-to-car sequence in fact takes much further working out than can sensibly be given it short of the camera" (158). First comes a "strong, ironlike man of sixty-five, his face somewhat like that of the crueler photos of Harding late in life" who looks and moves "like a slick portrait of a hybrid big-business and society man" (157), complete with silk hat. He is followed by a "heavy, sickfaced man of fifty; upper half in executive, lower, in golfing costume" carrying "a mashie with formal fragility, like something between a scepter and a lily," and a heavy-set woman "wearing as ghastly a travesty of

the worst trick hat of this year as can be contrived" and pressing close to her heart "a discolored and exhausted phallus from whose glans, pulling a long hole in the flesh, droops a wide wedding ring" (157). Next is an intense, "scalpel-like, chalk-white young man" holding "a cocktail glass brimful of lightly fuming acid, and of this he must not spill a drop" (157). The sequence is completed by a "beautiful, petrified young woman in an extreme bathing suit and an evening wrap" whose "skull is closed in a pessary" and who carries "a clear globe in whose center, sustained in alcohol, hangs a miniature foetus in a baby bonnet" and an "over-developed girl of nine, in traditional white frilly party dress and sash and curls and big hair ribbon" with a "submergedly desperate nympholeptic face" and deformed left hand, leaving "the fingers clenched against the palm, excepting the middle finger which is out straight" (157).

Agee follows some of the action between house and car—the young man drinks the acid before getting in, for instance, then reaches under his shirt and "claws quietly, and after a little brings out the hand, fingers straightened and shaking stiffly, covered with black-rotted and bloody bowels" (160), which a servant cleans—but the camera soon moves into the seemingly empty house, lingering over every detail of its architecture and furnishings. Whereas the camera had transformed nuns and Boy Scouts, icons of religion and good citizenship, into diseased and dangerous harbingers of death merely by focusing in on them and had revealed the essence of the bourgeois family through its sexual and genetic degeneracy, when it moves through the house, objects are themselves, each as complete a manifestation of the world it inhabits as the house they collectively constitute. "The camera is taking record of silence, stasis, a vacuum," Agee directs, "every detail of this house in its amber and few moments of suspended

animation" (165). It finds "the fireplace closed with black-painted gag of fancily cast iron, the mantel uplifting several tiers of small shelves which sustain on doilies, vases, and figurines of shepherdesses and of fisher-girls: similar shot of a glass-faced cabinet containing eggshell, never-used china, a tray of dried butterflies, geological specimens; sets of Victorian books and miscellaneous popular novels of the early twentieth century in cases behind glass; such, and the generalized, surveying, swirling, crossflashed with glancing detail of china, bare chairs, woodcarving, statuettes, lace, pictures such as the engraving of 'The Lions of Persepolis,' various Victorian patterns of wallpaper, details of ornate picture frames" (166), and so on, through halls, up stairways, into bedrooms and bathrooms, and onto the roof, collecting objects, every one a physical manifestation of the fragility and obsolescence of the order it comprises. In 1925, José Ortega y Gasset had identified the destructive force of surrealism towards traditional society as its ability "to overcome realism by merely putting too fine a point on it and discovering, lens in hand, the microstructure of life" (24); Walter Benjamin, reaching a similar conclusion from the opposite end of the political spectrum, saw surrealism as having revealed "the ruins of the bourgeoisie" ("Paris" 162). Some surrealist objects, such as Salvador Dali's telephone with a lobster for a receiver, give material form to the illogic of the unconscious, but here Agee dwells on the material existence of everyday objects in order to expose their fantastic nature, transforming the family home into a museum of freakish oddities. To the eye attuned to the exotic fetishism of fire tools and fisher-girls and books behind glass (and books), nothing is more surreal than the real.

Among these objects are an old woman and a goldfish in a bowl, which Agee juxtaposes over a swift series of events that destroy the house and all it represents. At

first only the woman's hand is seen, but soon the camera moves to her face, which is "listening hard" (167). The sudden exploding of the smokestacks from the first scene is conflated with lightning and thunder and a violently ticking clock under which runs a burning fuse, presumably placed by the servants, who have furtively decamped; glass shatters as lightning strikes the house's cornice and floodwaters begin to rise; the goldfish gasps on the carpet as the woman screams an unintelligible name. She rushes through the house closing widows, but a wall of water knocks her down. Gargling groans are heard from the cellar as "Drenched rats swim in the hallway. Flat against a windowpane a growing vine swirls its eager frostlike designs; a blind, broken, is involved in vine-growth. A fern in its growth spurts upward enormous, a shabby fountain," recapitulating a toilet bowl, "shown fountainously overflowing" (171). Here Agee appropriates Breton's advancing of mimicry as an element of convulsive beauty—that the imitation by forms in nature of other objects constitutes a surrealistic production of signs (Krauss 28)—in order to bring the full weight of the crashing water down on the drenched woman and her crumbling house, as the hands of the clock spin into "two concentric diminishing films of time" and the "dry, cool purr of the camera" captures her "mad frozen horror" ("House" 171).

The next morning, after the deluge, the camera pans slowly over the devastation, lingering for a moment on the empty limousine beside a washed-out bridge and finally coming to rest on a group of "very poor children" laughing and playing in a deep gutter in "the cleanest brilliance of after-rain sunlight" (172): "Fragments of ferns swim around their shins, stick to their legs. A little girl finds a film of drowned lace curtain. She makes of it a bridal veil. A little boy comes up wearing a derby hat. Another little boy

finds a dead fancy goldfish. He is envied" (172). These children are joined by others, who, moving in solemn procession, carry objects, such as a broken statuette and the mantle clock, washed away from the house. They bury the goldfish and arrange the statuette and clock face around its grave. After a few minutes the children begin to drift away, until only "the bride in the lace curtain, the groom in the derby, remain" (173). With faces "serious, nuptial and uncomprehending" (173), they look into each other's eyes as the screen goes black.

Though the sentimentality of the ending undercuts the implications of what has come before—especially as the children seemed poised to reproduce a parody of the very culture that has been wiped out—Agee is clearly pointing to the regeneration of society through the destruction of the existing social order, whether by the "Rabble" (158), through its own inherent problems, symbolized by the exploding smokestacks, or as a result of the inexorable tide of history. For Agee, revolution, the internal contradictions of capitalism, and historical necessity are part of the same complex; regardless of which aspect is primary, the resulting collapse is inevitable. Adopting standard themes of socialist realism, Agee implicates the church and civic institutions in fascist violence and depicts the bourgeoisie as so physically and sexually degenerate that it cannot reproduce itself. Agee's midget Nazis, bonneted fetus, penis-nosed nun, and contraceptive skullcap demonstrate, however, that realism is inadequate to the task of representing the true grotesqueries of the age. For the surrealists, the liberation of the unconscious was a means of liberating humankind from an oppressive capitalist order. In "The House," Agee breaks the logic of realistic representation to capture a truth beyond reason. The

flood that rises to wash away both the house and its cultural foundation is the collective (and collectivist) unconscious overwhelming the social structures imposed upon it.

In the debate over whether socialist realism or experimental art better served the interests of the working class, Agee in effect took both sides, recognizing the need to educate the masses in their own language as well as bringing every weapon in the avant-garde aesthetic arsenal to bear upon his critique of society. However, while Agee's plainspoken proletarian poetry merely calls for revolution, the surrealist tenor of "The House" constitutes an antifascist act in itself. As early as 1924, Adolph Hitler had repudiated cubism and dada as "art Bolshevism" in *Mein Kampf* (Spotts 18), and immediately upon seizing power the Nazis had purged modern art and its champions from German museums, even created traveling shows with titles such as *Abomination Exhibitions* and *Images of Cultural Bolshevism* to provide citizens of the Third Reich with admonitory firsthand experience with examples of degenerate artwork (153). In "The House," Agee not only ridicules the vertically challenged Hitler by depicting fascists as physical, mental, and moral midgets, but he does so through a method, surrealism, anathema to the Nazi Party. Agee's contribution to the Popular Front, "The House" merges a previously proscribed form with an antifascist theme in order to cast revolution as a democratic imperative.

Although, as with the political poetry, critics have tended to ignore or overlook his personal and professional connections to the avant-garde, there is no doubt that Agee adopted the ideas and techniques of surrealism both to progress as an artist and to further what he saw as a necessary hard-left political agenda. Works such as "Art for What's Sake" and "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House" have been marginalized, primarily

because they do not fit the larger postwar narrative privileging high modernism. However, surrealism was central to Agee's artistic development and production in the late 1930s, precisely the period when he was composing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

CHAPTER FOUR

"An Art and a Way of Seeing": Walker Evans, Agee, and Anti-Graphic Photography

When Agee and Walker Evans were dispatched to Alabama in the summer of 1936, they had known each other for at least a year—the earliest record of their association is an entry in Evans's diary dated April 5, 1935 (Mellow 250), though they were already acquainted by that time. Agee would have known of Evans's work even before they met through his photographs for Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930) and would have known something of Evans's reputation through Lincoln Kirstein, a mutual friend and supporter of both men's art. In fact, in Agee's long prose poem "Dedication," published in 1934 in *Permit Me Voyage,* Evans is mentioned as one of "those living and soon to die who tell truth or tell of truth, or who honorably seek to tell, or who tell the truths of others" (9).[38] While Agee's expansive personality was the opposite of Evans's more reserved demeanor, they became close over the course of the late 1930s and, in addition to working together on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* continually looked for other opportunities for collaboration. Agee considered Evans "the best photographer alive" (J 2.10); Evans appreciated Agee's appreciation of his work. In a 1971 interview, Evans recalled that while Kirstein had, in effect, educated him about photography, "Agee of course was another matter altogether. He didn't teach, he perceived; and that in itself was a stimulation. We all need that kind of stimulation, wherever it comes from. In a

[38] Evans is in good company; other dedicatees who fall into this category include James Joyce, Charlie Chaplin, I. A. Richards, William Butler Yeats, Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, Frederick Skinner, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Fitzgerald.

sense you test your work through that and it bounces back strengthened. My work happened to be just the style and matter for his eye" (Katz 360).

April 5, 1935, is also a significant date in that it places Agee and Evans together around the time of an important avant-garde exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City: *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs by Cartier Bresson, Walker Evans, and Alvarez Bravo.* The content of this exhibit, which opened April 23, seems odd in retrospect, yoking Evans, who came to be considered the foremost documentary photographer of his generation, with two surrealists, Henri Cartier-Bresson, a Frenchman whom Levy had introduced to America in 1933, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo, a young Mexican who was largely unknown at the time but who later created the iconic *Good Reputation Sleeping* for a surrealist exhibition at André Breton's request in 1939. In fact, an anonymous reviewer for the *New York Sun* assumed that the title *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* referred to two different styles and, while admitting he is not quite sure what the latter term means, nevertheless distinguishes (while ignoring Alvarez Bravo) between Evans's "documents," many of which depicted the American South and would later appear in his *American Photographs,* and the "happy accidents" of Cartier-Bresson (33). What Julien Levy means by "documentary," however, is not as unambiguous as the reviewer implies. For Levy, "documentary" is a complement to "anti-graphic" rather than its opposite, and his juxtaposition of the terms underscores the ways in which the work of all three photographers subverts received categories through dissolving the boundaries between the real and its representation. Rather than reflecting the existence of a stable reality, Evans's images of the South are just as strange and wonderful as Cartier-Bresson's France or Africa, just as exotic as Alvarez Bravo's Mexico—even more so for

having been taken closer to home. As documents, they preserve a certain moment in time, but they challenge the notion that they can be received objectively or uncritically. Destabilizing the form they mimic, Evans's images are made alien by context; as both documentary and anti-graphic, they confirm the strangeness of the everyday.

In 1935, the boundaries between documentary and avant-garde photography were extremely fluid; both camps were reacting against the pictorialism of art photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, for instance, and both claimed figures such as Eugéne Atget as influences and predecessors. Because of the later dominance of social documentary—which came to be seen as more "authentic" largely as the result of the political role it played in legitimizing the American welfare state through propaganda produced for the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations—tendencies in Evans's work that do not conform to the larger narrative of social documentary and his place within it have been overshadowed. Placing Evans's work within the context of the development of the American avant-garde during the 1930s, however, especially through his association with figures such as Levy and Cartier-Bresson, provides insight into his collaboration with Agee on a series of experiments in surrealist-influenced projects culminating with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

On receiving a copy of Evans's *American Photographs* in September 1938, Agee wrote to him as follows:

> The book came yesterday morning—I am grateful both for it and for having got it so soon and for your note speaking of that: aside from the Pictorial Review Civil

War,[39] which did it as unconsciously as newspapers, and the Atget book,[40] which aside from the pictures themselves seemed decorated, or gallerylike, or official, or after the act, I guess it is the first serious and good putting at large of photographs in history. Simply by being published, bound, reproduced, etc., they have a strange thin illusion of part-death, which must or may be why you are partly disappointed—I think though that if I were seeing them not the first time there would be little if any of this. All that that means is, I guess, what you once said of Blake (and he in other words of himself)—what in hell is anyone doing publishing these things. As with museums, where the Art-Objects (I'm meaning the good ones) are like wedding presents stored in attics, the world has not the slightest idea what to do with these productions, can neither throw them away nor have them around, and so has invented a sort of high-honorable day-nursery or concentration camp for them, so that they will not be at large, staring the world in the face and making it uneasier than it can stand. Then all criticism and art-history would also be a rationalization of guilt.

Yet I am damned glad it is published, and not only in yours and its own Lifetime but early in same. Excuse if you can the words but it is one of the only 'great' and 'honest' or 'uncompromised' books of anywhere in this time, that I know of. It is also dangerous and I am very curious to see how far the dangerousness of so dangerous a thing can carry, therefore would be extremely

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[39] Francis T. Miller, *The Photographic History of the Civil War* (New York: Review of Reviews), 1911. Evans owned a copy of this ten-volume set, which apparently served as a kind of guide for him when he photographed Atlanta in 1936 (Tagg 51-52).

[40] Eugène Atget, *Atget: Photographe de Paris* (New York: Weyhe), 1930. Evans reviewed this book for *Hound and Horn* in 1931.

> interested, as I would have with the Kafka, to see all reviews and comments, perhaps even to collect and analyze them. I liked Lincoln's essay very much. I regretted more than I liked the italicizing, on the flap, of 'the physiognomy, etc.), [*sic*] it seemed the only thing in the whole book which would be mistaken as commercial. Your 'titles' or 'identifiers' are so much the way I would wish to write that again I wish you were writing this book. (1)

In this letter, while Agee reveals himself to be a sensitive critic of Evans's work, he also foreshadows concerns that will emerge in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* calling attention, for instance, to the "mortal and inevitably recurrent danger" (*FM* 12) for the anti-establishment artist of commercial or institutional acceptance. "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor" (12), Agee will later write, and here he consoles Evans for the "part-death" his photographs have undergone in the process of having been displayed for public consumption in "the high-honorable day-nursery or concentration camp" of the Museum of Modern Art and then published. Prefiguring his own direction to the readers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to turn up a recording of a Beethoven or Schubert symphony so loud that it will be "beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life as human life is" (13), Agee insists that Evans's photographs, despite their having been reproduced for mass consumption, are still "dangerous," possessing the power to make the world "uneasier than it can stand." Evans claimed that his grand theme, derived from Baudelaire, was "épater le bourgeois" (Katz 361); Agee seconds it: the hallmark of honest and uncompromised art is its disruptive force.

Perhaps Agee's most telling comment in the letter, though, is his statement to Evans in reference to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that "Your 'titles' or 'identifiers' are so much the way I would wish to write that again I wish you were writing this book." *American Photographs* is divided into two parts, the first consisting mostly of portraits and the second of architectural shots. At the end of each section is a list of numbered captions as direct as the photographs to which they correspond: "MAIN STREET FACES, 1935," "ARKANSAS FLOOD REFUGEE, 1937." Agee is responding to the simplicity of the captions; rather than interpreting the photographs, these merely identify the subjects in the starkest terms and only as an afterthought. This allows the viewer to see the photograph itself instead of filtering it through a predetermined set of meanings. Of course, Agee and Evans would go even further in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* dispensing with captions altogether in order to emphasize the tension between word and image as a critique of all forms of representation. But here Agee points to a fundamental truth about ostensibly "documentary" photography: its effectiveness derives not from the communication of factual information—that the flood refugee is in Arkansas rather than Mississippi is irrelevant to the emotional resonance of the portrait—but whether it makes the viewer "uneasier than [he] can stand." Far from capturing objective reality, the photograph instead reflects (literally, in that one cannot look through it to the place or time from which it was snatched but only at its present form) the intuition of the photographer as experienced subjectively by the viewer. Agee asserts that Francis T. Miller's *Photographic History of the Civil War* is a "serious and good putting together of photographs," but his comment that it was done as "unconsciously as newspapers" is both an acknowledgment of the fact that art can transcend the artist's intention or even the

awareness that he is creating art and a challenge—insofar as newspapers do not recognize that the photographs they print do not necessarily convey the information they think they do—to the notion that a photograph can be a document in the objective sense at all.

Although Evans downplayed the role of theory in art making, Agee considered him to have "the cleanest and strictest THEORY, meaning KNOWLEDGE, of what an eye and a camera is" (J 1.13) and in the letter can be seen engaging him, in what was certainly an ongoing conversation, on the question of how photographs construct meaning as well as how they are transformed by contact with the aesthetic field. While Agee only touches on these problems in the letter, he would continue to take an interest in photography. The most complete articulation of Agee's ideas on the medium appear in "A Way of Seeing," the introduction to Helen Levitt's book of photographs of the same title, which was written in 1946 and published in 1965. Levitt introduced herself to Evans in late 1937 or early 1938 and became his apprentice, working as his darkroom assistant and accompanying him on shoots for his subway series before emerging as a respected photographer and filmmaker in her own right (Mellow 382). She had seen Evans's work in Carleton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba* and in the *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* show, where she also first came into contact with Cartier-Bresson, whom she escorted on a shoot of the Brooklyn waterfront in 1936 (382). In addition to "A Way of Seeing," Agee wrote the commentary for her award-winning documentary film *The Quiet One* (1948) and, along with Janet Loeb, collaborated with her on the surrealist-influenced film *In the Street,* released in 1952. When Alma, Agee's second wife, took their son and left him in 1941, Levitt went with them to Mexico. Both Agee and Evans thought highly of her work. In "A Way of Seeing," as he had in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee

identifies her as "one of a handful" of photographers who are good artists, placing her in the select company of Evans, Atget, Cartier-Bresson, and Mathew Brady (337). Evans concurred: in an unpublished extract from an interview with *Time* in 1947, he stated that the "only photographers he felt had something original to say were Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt, and himself" (Mellow 513). Even though *A Way of Seeing* was completed in 1946, its publication was suspended by the publisher's death, and it did not appear until 1965, after the success of *A Death in the Family, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* and the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* had reignited interest in Agee's work (Roberts 16). In "A Way of Seeing," Agee offers an overview of the history of photography and elucidates Levitt's place within it by discussing her antecedents and influences as well as such persistent subjects as the definition and function of documentary photography and the role of chance in creating art. As a statement of Evans's theory filtered through his own aesthetic, the essay reveals the importance of the surrealist idea of the disruption of the boundaries between reality and representation to Agee's understanding of photography.

Agee begins "A Way of Seeing" by replicating the surrealist equation of the camera as "blind instrument" with the process of automatic writing, which Breton called "a veritable photography of thought" ("Max Ernst" 60), noting that "The Camera is just a machine, which records with impressive and as a rule very cruel faithfulness, precisely what is in the eye, mind, spirit, and skill of its operator to make it record" ("Way" 337). This does not mean that photographs are always truthful, though, as "it is doubtful whether most people realize how extraordinarily slippery a liar the camera is" (337). Here Agee disputes his own statement in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that the

camera "is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" (206). While he maintains that the camera is the epitome of scientific precision, he recognizes that the relationship between supposed scientific objectivity and truth is complicated. "It is," he continues, "in fact hard to get the camera to tell the truth; yet it can be made to, in many ways and on many levels. Some of the best photographs we are ever likely to see are innocent domestic snapshots, city postcards, and news and scientific photographs" ("Way" 337). Subordinate to the larger point, Agee's grouping of these different types of images appears casual, but it is in fact instructive. A snapshot, a postcard, and a news or scientific photograph operate quite differently from one another as signs: the first is usually the result of a spontaneous impulse and holds personal meaning for only a few people who know how to read its details as part of a larger context; the second is designed to anticipate a collective experience that will resonate with many different individuals (though it changes meaning as it moves from newsstand to purse to refrigerator door); the third strives to be completely impersonal and to present its meaning dispassionately. For Agee, though, generic standards are irrelevant, and all three types of photograph may be equally honest or dishonest, the photograph on the front page of the newspaper as impenetrable as a stranger's photo album, the textbook illustration as meaningless as "Wish you were here." The photograph is true only to the extent that its truth, regardless of its intent, is subjectively received.

A further connection to the snapshot as both document and surrealist object occurs in a line from the excerpt from Agee's journal quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter: "K is a good consonant" is an oblique reference to the etymology of

"Kodak," George Eastman's name for the portable camera with pre-loaded film that he developed in 1888, making photography accessible to amateurs. As Eastman explains, "I devised the name myself. A trade mark should be short, vigorous, incapable of being mis-spelled to an extent that will destroy its identity, and—in order to satisfy trade mark laws—it must mean nothing. . . . The letter 'K' had been a favorite with me—it seemed a strong, incisive sort of letter. Therefore, the word I wanted had to start with 'K'" (qtd. in Braye 548-49). The surrealists saw the snapshot, which was virtually synonymous with Kodak, as a form of creation that was immediate, random, and naive. Agee's comment in the later essay, then, echoing remarks concerning the avant-garde journal *Konkretion,* is a playful allusion to photography as the consummate surrealist art.

By invoking snapshots, postcards (of which Evans was a lifelong collector), and scientific photographs as examples of good photography, Agee signals from the beginning that his definition of the documentary will be inclusive; in fact, "we can enjoy and learn a great deal from essentially untrue photographs, such as studio portraits, movie romances, or the national and class types apotheosized in ads for life insurance and feminine hygiene" ("Way" 337). Agee refuses to recognize traditional artistic categories and hierarchies, preferring instead to find art where it happens, regardless of intention or context, confirming, as Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography,* surrealism's "contentious idea of blurring lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders" (51). Moreover, Agee recognizes that photography collapses art and life in a way that other forms of creation cannot:

> In every other art which draws directly on the actual world, the actual is transformed by the artist's creative intelligence, into a new and different kind of reality: aesthetic reality. In the kind of photography we are talking about here, the actual is not at all transformed; it is reflected and recorded, within the limits of the camera, with all possible accuracy. The artist's task is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of aesthetic reality, but to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its most expressive crystallization. ("Way" 337)

When Evans reviewed *Atget: Photographe de Paris* in 1931 for *Hound and Horn,* he wrote that the photographs were "the projection of Atget's person" (126); here Agee emphasizes that the "record" is a document of the artist's perception—not the portrait of a transfigured world but a record of the "aesthetic reality within the actual world," which is not contingent upon the artist but is his or her special provenance to reveal. Or, as Breton, alluding to Matthew Lewis's *The Monk,* writes in the 1924 "Manifesto": "What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real" (15n).

Throughout the essay Agee maintains that photography is "essentially the result of an intuitive process, drawing on all that the artist is rather than on anything he thinks, far less theorizes about" ("Way" 338); at their best, Levitt's photographs approach "the pure spontaneity of true folk art" (339). Agee also insists that it is "of absolute importance, of course, that all these photographs are 'real' records; that the photographer did not in any way prepare, meddle with, or try to improve on any one of them. But this

is not so important of itself as, in so many of them, unretouched reality is shown transcending itself" (339). As such, they prove "that the actual world constantly brings to the surface its own signals, and mysteries" (339). Further echoing the surrealists, Agee downplays the misplaced notion that contingency somehow invalidates photography as an art form, instead embracing the beauty of the unforeseen: "Many people, even some good photographers, talk of the 'luck' of photography, as if that were a disparagement. And it is true that luck is constantly at work. It is one of the cardinal creative forces in the universe, one which a photographer has unique equipment for collaborating with" (339).

Having brought together Atget and Cartier-Bresson, the family photo album and *Science Illustrated,* and intuition and chance to invoke "aesthetic reality within the actual world," Agee towards the end of the essay makes the obvious connection, though with a subtle distinction:

> [I]t is worth noticing that in much of her feeling for streets, strange details, and spaces, her vocabulary is often suggestive of and sometimes identical with that of the Surrealists. In other words, there seems to be much about modern cities which of itself arouses in artists a sensitiveness, in particular, to the tensions and desolations of creatures in named space. But I think that in Miss Levitt's photographs the general feeling is rather that the surrealism is that of the ordinary metropolitan soil which breeds these remarkable juxtapositions and moments, and that what we call 'fantasy' is, instead, reality in its unmasked vigor and grace. (340)

In other words, though Levitt is not a "Surrealist," her method is "surrealism." By the mid-1940s, the surrealists had become as institutionalized and stagnant as any other aesthetic movement tends to become over time, and the revolutionary energy of the 1920s and 1930s had largely dissipated into shock tactics and self-promotion. But for Agee, the power of Levitt's photography was documentary truth as "an undisturbed and faithful record" of her perception of the real as transcendence of the real, as the super-real. Furthermore, while the essay was written almost a decade after the *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* show, Agee closes in a way that recalls Levy's formulation of surrealism as "anti-graphic," that is, literally opposed to writing:

> So far, I have avoided any attempt to discuss the 'meanings' of the photographs, feeling that this is best left as an affair between the pictures themselves and the reader. . . . I am counting on the absolute reality of the pictures, and on the reader's rational use of eye and mind, to dress the boat; and I make this attempt chiefly because I feel that much of the enjoyment of the pictures depends on an appreciation of the tension which they create, and reveal, between the unimagined world, and the imaginable." (340-41)

In addition to expressing defiance of art photography, "anti-graphic" equally connotes resistance to interpretation. Levy's coinage affirms the authority of the document to speak for itself, without regard to critical approbation or generic assumptions. Agee makes the same assertion, alluding to his own effort in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense" (x). Having seen his own

book suffer from the attempt to discover its meaning rather than its "absolute reality," Agee appeals to the reader to look and to see.

By the time Agee completed "A Way of Seeing" in 1946, he had been deeply engaged with surrealism, as his experiments with automatic writing in the spring of 1936 prove, for at least ten years. During the same period, he paid close attention to photography, developing his ideas about the limits and possibilities of the art in relation to his writing in collaboration with Walker Evans, one of the most important photographers of the time. If Evans influenced Agee, though, he was in turn influenced by figures such as Eugene Atget and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Even more, Evans was influenced by the aesthetic field in which these artists were introduced to America. Though Evans would later become enshrined in American photography as the "premier documentarian of the Great Depression" ("Walker Evans" 148) by critics such as Jeff L. Rosenheim, at the time he and Agee left for Alabama in the summer of 1936, his work was being received as decidedly less documentary than avant-garde.

Surrealism officially debuted in America at *The Newer Super-Realism* exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in November 1931 and soon moved on to New York in the form of an exhibit entitled *The Super-Realists* at the Julien Levy Gallery at 602 Madison Avenue. Levy had been introduced by his mother-in-law, Mina Loy, into the salons of avant-garde Paris in 1927, and he became friendly with Breton and other surrealists, continuing the relationship after he returned to America. *The Super-Realists* opened at Levy's gallery on January 29, 1932, featuring works by Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and others (*Memoir* 296). Throughout the 1930s Levy was one of surrealism's most persistent

promoters, but he did not feel constrained by Breton's attempts to define and discipline the movement. Levy included drawings by Jean Cocteau in *The Super-Realists,* for instance, despite the fact that Cocteau was anathema to orthodox surrealists by that time (81). That Breton was unable to supervise the show was probably a blessing, though, as Levy was attempting to cultivate an American version of surrealism. As he later wrote, "If Breton had been here at that time there would no doubt have been a more orthodox representation. Manifesto-heavy, it might have collapsed of its own rigidity. I wished to present a paraphrase which would offer Surrealism in the language of the new world rather than a translation in the rhetoric of the old" (79-80).

Levy's *Super-Realists* show was notable for its inclusion of works by American artists: surrealist still-life photographs by George Platt Lynes, who would join Evans in a two-man exhibition at the gallery three days after *The Super-Realists* closed, and constructions of found objects by Joseph Cornell, whom Levy had discovered by chance lurking at his gallery in December 1931. Cornell's intricate constructions "were a new thing for this old world, perhaps the first series of Surrealist objects made in the U.S.A." (79). Levy's own contribution was a "frieze of negative photostats, a series of shocking cover-page seriocomic collages from the New York *Evening Graphic,* the yellowest of vulgar journalism and incredible Americana" (82) that depicted Peaches and Daddy Browning, a fifteen-year-old child bride and her millionaire husband, whose salacious divorce proceedings were a media-driven scandal in 1927. Levy's tastes were eclectic; he promoted all photography—from the pictorialism of Alfred Stieglitz to dadaist photomontage and newspaper clippings—as a serious modern art form and, in addition to prints and original artworks, sold "his own line of photo objects, *trompe-l'oeil*

wastebaskets and lampshades" (Tejada 15). Later Julien Levy Gallery exhibits included early American folk art, advertising illustrations, and the work of New York photographers. Three of these exhibits featured Evans.

Though Levy was well known and regarded among artists, Alfred Barr's *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art from December 7, 1936, through January 17, 1937, brought surrealism into American culture at large. Like Levy, Barr tended to be expansive in his selection of works. Going far beyond what Breton would have sanctioned, Barr introduced his subject—"the Dada-Surrealist movement of the past twenty years with certain of its pioneers" (7)—by placing it in the context of fantastic art from the fifteenth through the twentieth century, including contemporary works by artists not affiliated with the surrealists, as well as drawings made by children and the insane, advertisements, cartoons, examples of "fantastic architecture," and found objects. European works such as Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* and Meret Oppenheim's notorious fur-covered cup, plate, and spoon were the focus of the exhibit, but Barr followed Levy in identifying American artists who constituted a homegrown avant-garde, including Alexander Calder, Georgia O'Keefe, and Walt Disney. The virtues and vices of the show were vigorously debated in the mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Herald Tribune* ("Defenders of Democracy Get Madder and Madder over That Fur-Lined Cup") and received extensive coverage in magazines such as *Time, Harper's Bazaar,* and the *New Yorker* (Tashjian 42-50). As envisioned by Breton, surrealism was to have been the instrument of cultural revolution, but its popularization threatened to rob it of its subversive power, especially as Dali, suspected of being too commercially oriented by other surrealists and possibly a charlatan by

everyone else, became the public face of the movement in America (50). But even though surrealism had already begun to insinuate itself into the mass media through fashion photography by Dali, Man Ray, and their imitators in glossy magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's,* works drawing on the power of the subconscious continued to attract the attention of both popular and highbrow audiences and to stimulate debate among the intelligentsia.

Also included in Barr's exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art were three photographs by Walker Evans: *Outdoor Advertising, Florida* (1934), *Moving Truck and Bureau Mirror* (1929), and *Roadside Billboard, Cape Cod* (1931) (Barr 233). Although Evans had already established a reputation as a "documentary" photographer by 1937, he resisted the label throughout his career, insisting on the distinction between documents, which were useful, and his own form of "deliberately wrought visual poetry disguised as plain prosaic fact" (Jerry Thompson 12), more properly termed "documentary style" (Mellow 213-14). As late as 1971, Evans was still attempting to clarify his approach, though also noting that there are advantages to being misunderstood, thereby shedding light on Agee's reference in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Me*n to himself and Evans as "spies, moving delicately among the enemy" (4):

> Documentary? That's a very sophisticated and misleading word. And not really clear. You have to have a sophisticated ear to receive that word. The term should be *documentary style*. An example of a literal document would be a police photograph of a murder scene. You see, a document has use, whereas art is really useless. Therefore art is never a document, though it certainly can adopt that style. I'm sometimes called a 'documentary photographer,' but that supposes

> quite a subtle knowledge of the distinction I've just made, which is rather new. A man operating under that definition could take a certain sly pleasure in the disguise. (Katz 365)

Furthermore, Evans's style was far from exclusively "documentary." In 1926-27, he had lived in Paris, the "incandescent center" (qtd. in Mellow 38) of the arts, where he studied French, read Rimbaud and Baudelaire, translated Gide and Cocteau, and followed closely the revolutionary ferment of the European avant-garde. This experience continued to influence him throughout his career. As Jeff L. Rosenheim points out, for instance, Evans radically cropped *Outdoor Advertising* for the *Fantastic Art* show, "removing all the foreground and lateral ground, freeing the billboard from any visual connection to the roadside or to the land itself. In one stroke of a razor blade he performed a sly, quasi-Dada act and 'signed' the work with a borrowed name—'Bache Signs'" ("Cruel Radiance" 57). Much surrealist photography, Man Ray's rayographs, for example, or Evans's cropping of the billboard, relied on manipulation of negatives or other technical tricks, but the surrealists also claimed "documentary" photographers such as Eugène Atget, whose primitivism they celebrated as the antithesis of acquired technique, and Cartier-Bresson, whose almost magical random juxtapositions confirmed that automatism and chance could produce endlessly engaging images. As Christopher Phillips explains, the surrealists "sought to demonstrate that the unexpected details captured in a straightforward photograph could trigger a kind of psychic shock in the viewer that could ultimately lead to the discovery of new relations between imagination and reality" (34). Even the most straightforward photography, rather than capturing merely the surface of an objective reality, relies on, in Evans's phrase, "chance, disarray, wonder, and

experiment" ("Reappearance" 126); at the very least, the photographer selects a limited prospect at a particular moment in time. As Dali asserts, though, the "mere fact of transposing something seen to a photograph already implies a total invention: the recording of an UNPRECEDENTED REALITY" (35). The photograph is both true and not true, a representation that points to the existence of another reality while disguising the fact that it is actually a representation of only itself. In Dali's words, "Nothing has proved the rightness of surrealism more than photography" (35). For the surrealists, Atget's naiveté and Cartier-Bresson's knack for capturing the pregnant moment, both operating within the transformative medium of photography, exemplified the power of the unconscious to overturn existing social structures. In the mid-1930s, Evans was working along the exact same lines.

In addition to having been included in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show, Evans knew the work of both Atget and Cartier-Bresson intimately; Atget was a major influence, and Evans's career intersected with Cartier-Bresson's in intriguing ways. For thirty years, Atget, seemingly unaware of the "artistic" implications of his work, carried on a personal project of photographing Paris before the city he knew disappeared under the tide of modernity. Evans had come to know Atget's work through Berenice Abbott, whom he met around 1929 and with whom he had a lifelong relationship. Abbott had rescued thousands of glass negatives and prints after Atget's death in Paris in 1927 with the help of Julien Levy, whom she wired: "ATGET DEAD. MUST SAVE COLLECTION FROM GARBAGE. CONCIERGE WILL SELL FOR ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS. PLEASE SEND" (*Memoir* 93). Levy sent the money for the prints and would later feature Atget at his gallery on several occasions, including a one-man show immediately prior to *The Super-Realists*

(thereby making Atget and Evans bookends for the exhibit). He also arranged for Erhard Weyhe to send Abbott money to put together a book of Atget's photographs in 1930; the result was *Atget: Photographe de Paris,* which Evans reviewed in 1931 for *Hound and Horn.*

Evans was disappointed by the poor quality of the reproductions in the book—as was Levy—but in the review he attempts to account for the power of Atget's work: "Apparently he was oblivious to everything but the necessity of photographing Paris and its environs; but just what vision he carried in him of the monument he was leaving is not clear. It is possible to read into his photographs so many things he may never have formulated to himself. In some of his work he even places himself in a position to be pounced on by the most orthodox of surréalists. His general note is lyrical understanding of the street, trained observation of it, special feeling for patina, eye for revealing detail, over all of which is thrown a poetry which is not 'the poetry of the street' or 'the poetry of Paris,' but the projection of Atget's person" ("Reappearance" 126). For Evans, what is important about Atget's work is not that it captures objective truth; rather, the images derive from the artistic (un)consciousness, the intuitive shaping of an objective reality in order to transcend it. As Evans later said, Atget "was a kind of medium, really" (Katz 266). Man Ray, a neighbor of Atget's on the Rue Campagne-Première during the 1920s and an avid collector of his work, agreed, arranging for several of his photographs to be published in *La Révolution Surréaliste,* the group's first official review, in 1925 and 1926 (Fuller 130). The surrealists were drawn to Atget's work by "the strangeness of the images, the poetic enigma constructed in the course of thirty years of systematic cataloguing, the stripping bare of reality, the flagrant distancing of the subject and the

possible interplay of meanings between representation and perception" (Girardin 44). For Man Ray, in particular, "the photos were veritable treasure-houses of dreams and phantasies buried beyond reality and simple appearance" (44). As he had with virtually every other modern photographer, there is no doubt that Atget had a formative impact on Evans's development. As James Mellow asserts, though, Evans was also important in disseminating Atget's influence, as he and Abbott made "careers of documenting New York's architecture, street scenes, and shop fronts, introducing Atget's vital urban documentary style into American photography" (111-12).

Evans's connection with Cartier-Bresson, the "best and most mature of the Surrealist photographers" (Galassi 10), was even more direct. Cartier-Bresson achieved great fame after World War II as a photojournalist whose "notably warm and affirmative attitude towards the human condition" exemplified the tradition expressed most notably by Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibit for the Museum of Modern Art, in which he was prominently represented in 1955 (Ian Walker 169). More recently, though, attention has turned from Cartier-Bresson's traditionally humanist work of the postwar years to his surrealist images of the early 1930s, which, rather than subordinating the individuality of both photograph and photographer to the theme of the essential brotherhood of man, are instead, in Ian Walker's words, "difficult, troubling, somewhat unnerving" (169). While not an official member of the group, Cartier-Bresson knew Breton, Dali, Ernst, Aragon, and other surrealists and attended their salons in Paris, including one hosted by Harry Crosby where he met Levy, during the late 1920s (Girardin 43). He considered surrealist art too literary, but was very taken with surrealism "as a concept, as a way of life" (qtd. In Ian Walker 171) and especially with Breton's notion of "objective chance," which was

central to the movement in all its iterations. As Cartier-Bresson explains, "The only aspect of the phenomenon of photography that fascinates me, and will always interest me, is the intuitive capture through the camera of what is seen. That is exactly how Breton defined objective chance" (qtd. In Ian Walker 171).

Julien Levy introduced Cartier-Bresson to America in September 1933 through a show at his gallery entitled *Photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson and an Exhibition of Anti-Graphic Photography*. Explicitly defining Cartier-Bresson in opposition to the art photography of "the photo gods" (*Memoir* 48), Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Charles Sheeler, Levy used the exhibit as a forum to advance his own ideas about surrealist photography, both through his selection of images and through his coining of the term "anti-graphic," which was explained in a letter from an art dealer named "Peter Lloyd" printed in the exhibition catalog. The letter, actually written by Levy himself, is, in typically surrealist fashion, playful and over the top, but it is also a serious statement of a critical position. To emphasize its significance, Levy reproduced it opposite two previously unpublished photographs by Cartier-Bresson in his 1936 book *Surrealism* (60-61).

In the letter, Levy compares Cartier-Bresson favorably to Charlie Chaplin in that both artists were deliberately "crude" in protest against "banal excellencies" but worries that the "essential . . . idea" of his work is "such a rude and crude, such an unattractive presence, that I am afraid it must invariably condemn itself to the superficial observer" (qtd. in *Memoir* 49). "You have two exhibition rooms," instructs "Peter Lloyd": "Why don't you show the photographs of Cartier-Bresson in one, and the innumerable, incredible, discreditable, profane photographs that form a qualifying program for his idea

in the other room? Septic photographs as opposed to the mounting popularity of the antiseptic photograph? Call the exhibition amoral photography, equivocal, ambivalent, anti-plastic, accidental photography. Call it anti-graphic photography" (qtd. in *Memoir* 49).

While the exact contents of the "qualifying program" are unknown, the press release survives. In it, Levy gives a more straightforward definition of anti-graphic photography and provides examples of representative artists, including Walker Evans:

> What is an anti-graphic photograph? It is difficult to explain, because such a photograph represents the un-analyzable residuum after all the usually accepted criterions for good photography have been put aside. It is a photograph not necessarily possessing print quality, fine lighting, story or sentiment, tactile values or abstract aesthetics. . . . After discarding all the accepted virtues, there remains in the anti-graphic photograph "something" that is in many ways the more dynamic, startling, and inimitable.
>
> The successful anti-graphic photograph may be the result of accident, such as that one-out-of-a-thousand news photograph which suddenly strikes the eye in spite of . . . . and sometimes because of . . . . the crudities of photo-gravure reproduction. Or it may be a photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson who makes these pictures consciously, purposely, with all the vitality of a new direction, and whose alert eye and hand may achieve results which cannot be attained by methods of consideration and polish.
>
> Cartier-Bresson is a young French photographer who has stimulated a new school of photographic practice in Europe. As a qualifying program for his idea

> in this exhibition there is included a group of "accidental" photographs, both old and new, and selections from the work of American photographers who, on occasion, show similar tendencies: Berenice Abbot, Walker Evans, Lee Miller, Creighton Peet, Man Ray, Dorothy Rolph. (15)

As supposedly objective documents, these photographs "qualified" Cartier-Bresson's work in that they both characterized its artistic nature—i.e., it is not art at all—and validated it—and themselves—as such. In the catalog, "Peter Lloyd" reminds Levy that he has argued for recognition of photography as a "legitimate graphic art"; by equally supporting Cartier-Bresson's "anti-graphic photography," he will simultaneously invert the artistic hierarchy and destabilize both iterations by calling into question the notion of legitimacy itself. Or, as "Peter Lloyd" puts it, "There is no reason why your gallery should not fight for both sides of a worthy cause" (qtd. in *Memoir* 49). Anti-graphic photography is "septic," "discreditable," "profane," "accidental"—it is art only in the sense that the messy act of living is art. By displaying anti-graphic images, Levy elevates questionable content in an inappropriate medium to the level of art in a way that both invites critical condemnation and mocks it from a position outside of the categories of language and argument.

That Levy found "anti-graphic" to be an essential formulation is evident in that he resurrected the term two years later for the show featuring photographs by Evans, Cartier-Bresson, and Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. *Documentary and Anti-Graphic Photographs* opened on April 23, 1935, and ran until May 7. As Henry Devree describes it, the exhibit was set up to allow images within individual photographs to interact with each other in order to give the show a cumulative effect: "All three

[photographers] have succeeded in producing pictures which have 'shock value' in the sense that they present subject matter as still real and without distortion, yet contrive by the angle of vision or the capture of a fleeting instant of chance juxtaposition of objects, to give the objects startling unfamiliarity of expression or appeal" (X 7). In 1938, in the afterword to Evans's *American Photographs,* Lincoln Kirstein also emphasized his connection to Cartier-Bresson: "His eye can be called, with that of his young French colleague Cartier-Bresson, anti-graphic, or at least anti-art-photographic" (192). While Kirstein's use of "anti-graphic" implies that it is more or less synonymous with "anti-art-photographic," Levy's coinage actually has a deeper resonance, echoing Levy's definition in *Surrealism* (which anticipates Agee's essay on photography) of the movement as fundamentally indefinable:

> Surrealism is not a rational, dogmatic, and consequently static theory of art—hence for the surrealist point of view, there can be no accurate definition or explanation. The point of view is essentially anti-definitive and anti-explanatory. The surrealist object precedes definition, appears suddenly, alive and replete with suggestion for those who are predisposed to understand, as the solution of a complex problem suddenly reveals itself to those who have been concerned with that problem. (3-4)

In the 1933 show, anti-graphic photographs complemented Cartier-Bresson's work, extending it to emphasize the accidental "'something' that is in many ways the more dynamic, startling, and inimitable" than art photography; two years later, Levy reinforced the essential correspondence of "documentary" and "anti-graphic."

In America, the term "documentary" had already by the 1930s become virtually synonymous with "social documentary," a genre that, in William Stott's words, confronts the conscience of its audience "with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous" (14). From Jacob Riis in the 1880s to the photographers of the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s, American social documentarians used words and, especially, the unvarnished photographic image to attempt to bring about positive social change through the straightforward depiction of the squalid living conditions of first the urban and later the rural poor. So successful were photographers such as Evans, Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange, and Margaret Bourke-White in capturing the human face of poverty during the Great Depression that their images came to define not only the era but the documentary genre itself. In fact, in Evans's case, the dominance of social documentary as a photographic mode has tended to diminish his contributions to other styles, including surrealism.

In Levy's formulation, however, the word "documentary," while alluding by virtue of the exhibit's location to the American style, does not primarily connote social documentary. In France, the word *documentaire* had been used since the early twentieth century to refer to travel and exploration films (Ian Walker 22), and in the absence of the type of state-sponsored propaganda efforts that shaped the form in America, French documentary developed in the 1920s and 1930s more along the lines of what James Clifford would later term ethnographic surrealism. It is in this sense, for instance, that the title of Georges Bataille's dissident surrealist journal *Documents* is to be taken. Subtitled "Archéologie / Beaux-Arts / Ethnographie / Variétiés," the short-lived *Documents* (1929–30) mingled literature, high and popular art, including photography,

philosophy, sociology, archaeology, and ethnology in a surrealist mix of experimentation and investigation into the unconscious, whether revealed in the streets of Paris, the jungles of Africa, or the big toe. Juxtaposing material artifacts from a range of cultures in a "fortuitous or ironic collage" (Clifford 132), *Documents* not only set out to defamiliarize the West through a deconstruction of its cultural and social norms and assumptions but also to supply "exotic alternatives" (130) to them.

As early as 1932, Levy had associated himself with the *Documents* group by including works by Jacques-André Boiffard, the photographer who contributed the most shocking photographs to the journal and who was largely responsible for the intensity of the reaction to it by Breton and other orthodox surrealists, in *The Super-Realists.* Though Boiffard had contributed to surrealist journals throughout the 1920s and even supplied the photographs for Breton's *Nadja* in 1928, his work elicited particular scorn in the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" from Breton, whose intellectual dismissal of Bataille from the movement ("The only reason we are going on at such length about flies is that M. Bataille loves flies" [184]) involves an extended reference to Boiffard's photograph in *Documents* of dead flies on a strip of flypaper (183-84), a controversy to which Agee alludes in his description of the fly-paper-trapped residents of Centerboro in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (335). In 1935, an ironic reference by Levy to "documentary" would have constituted a knowing wink to this internecine surrealist battle for his clientele—as would the announcement for the *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* show, which was illustrated with the names of the photographers arranged in the form of two eyes (Tejada 16). This was both an allusion to Alvarez Bravo's Atget-inspired *Parabola óptica* (1931), the flipped negative of an optician's storefront in Mexico City that

contains in various positions a total of nine eyes (counting the two implied by empty spectacles), and to Bataille's seminal surrealist work *The Story of the Eye* (1928), thereby turning the gaze back to *Documents,* as well as to the opening scene of a razor slicing an eye in *Un Chien Andalou,* which had been screened for the first time in the United States at Levy's gallery in November 1932 (Shaffner and Jacobs 175). Daniel Girardin further associates the design of the announcement with the dada- and expressionist-influenced New Objectivist (Neue Sachlichkeit) school, which saw photography as "a form of 'prosthesis' improving the eye's capabilities through its speed, its precision and its particular framing and angles of view" (47).

The surrealist cooptation of the exotic and primitive—in the service of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange—in fact frames the entire *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* show, both in origin and execution. In early 1934 Cartier-Bresson traveled to Mexico as a member of an ethnographical expedition sponsored by the Mexican government, whose mission, in part, was to collect material for the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. A damp and disordered "jumble of exotica" before its reorganization in the 1930s, the Trocadéro was a source for artists such as Picasso who wanted to immerse themselves in *l'art negre;* the museum's lack of disciplinary coherence allowed its anthropological artifacts to be fetishized by enthusiasts of the primitive, for whom a "mask or statue or any shred of black culture could effectively summon a complete world of dreams and possibilities" (Clifford 135-36). During the early 1930s, the Trocadéro fed European interest in the primitive Other, mounting exhibits on African, Oceanian, and Eskimo art, and the 1931-33 Mission Dakar-Djibouti (covered comprehensively in the second issue of the surrealist journal

Minotaure) provided the museum with more than 3,500 "cultural objects" and 6,000 photographs, among many other collections of specimens and data (136-37).

In keeping with the avant-garde's fascination with the exotic, Cartier-Bresson's role in the Mexican expedition was to have been to document indigenous culture along the route of a proposed Pan-American Highway before it disappeared (Galassi 20). However, when the expedition arrived in Veracruz, it discovered that the funding for the project had collapsed, and its members scattered. Cartier-Bresson found himself in Mexico City, where he fell in with Alvarez Bravo, as well as Langston Hughes, who wrote the introduction to their two-man exhibit at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in March 1935 (Galassi 20-21). A month later, Levy replicated this Mexico City show in New York, adding photographs by Walker Evans.

While the photographs exhibited by Cartier-Bresson and Alvarez Bravo are known, no checklist survives of those by Evans. As Jeff L. Rosenheim states, though, it can be inferred from contemporary reviews and archival evidence that he was represented by prints from his recently completed two-month tour of the South, during which he had photographed examples of Greek Revival architecture from Charleston, South Carolina, to New Orleans, and he also probably included some street scenes and portraits of dockworkers from his stay in Cuba in 1933 ("Walker Evans" 147). There are common subjects in the works of all three photographers in the exhibit: ironic juxtapositions, Atget-influenced street scenes, public sleepers, mannequins, reflections in shop windows, disembodied limbs or heads, and signs. What is most pervasive in the photographs is the sense of the uncanny, however; as Daniel Girardin points out,

> The concept of the "decisive moment" which was to make Cartier-Bresson's critical fortune had not yet been formulated. Evans was in the process of elaborating the "documentary style" which he would develop after the exhibit, notably in working for the Farm Security Administration. And Alvarez Bravo had not yet met André Breton and was not yet the "Surrealist photographer" whom Breton would introduce in Europe.
>
> In 1930, however, they knew how to link the document to art and life. This was the lesson of Surrealism par excellence. (47)

Evans's photographs, in particular, are, in his own phrase, "experiments in time" ("Reappearance" 126) in that his photographs of decaying southern mansions recall those of Atget's Paris, which are almost completely devoid of people. Because his camera was too slow to stop motion, Atget would go out early in the morning to photograph scenes unsmudged by blurry passersby. "But in this immense loneliness," Levy writes, "there seemed nevertheless to be a population, ghosts that animated the empty street or empty room—or a concentrate of that spirit that was Atget's own" (94). The same can be said of Evans's photographs of the haunting facades of antebellum mansions, the stark shots of New England Victorian architecture from 1931, or the archival prints he made of African masks for the Museum of Modern Art contemporaneous with the *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* show. The austere documentary style purports to have eschewed art for reality, but the reality captured is that of the something deeper animating life beneath the surface. Like Walter Benjamin, whose archaeology of the recent past signaled the forces of change embedded in the present, Evans's fascination with fading vernacular forms constitutes an implicit critique, not of the ghost, but of the world that it haunts.

In 1947, Hungarian photographer Robert Capa warned Cartier-Bresson, "'Watch out for labels. They are reassuring. But people will attach one to you that you will not be able to remove. That of little Surrealist photographer. You will be lost, you will become precious and mannered.' Cartier-Bresson recalls, 'Capa was right, and he added, "Instead of Surrealist take the label of photojournalist, and keep the rest, in your heart of hearts.' And I followed his advice'" (qtd. in Galassi 26). Though Cartier-Bresson managed to transcend labels, largely, it seems, because he was able to manipulate them, Evans's name became synonymous with documentary defined as "an acutely lucid, disabused photographic style that placed its trust in an unembellished, highly concentrated look at given realities of American life" (Hilton Kramer 13). That this label obscured all others is evident in the fact that, although it is alluded to in other sources, neither Mellow's nor Belinda Rathbone's otherwise exhaustive biographies of Evans mention his participation in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show in December and January 1936–37. Considering the influence of Atget on Evans's earlier work, as well as his close association with Levy, Cartier-Bresson, Alvarez Bravo, and other surrealists, Alfred Barr must have considered him an obvious representative of the style Levy had dubbed anti-graphic. Given the *Fantastic Art* show's importance to the development of the American avant-garde, the omission of Evans's connection to it is a major oversight, but it is nevertheless understandable, given that one would not be expected to look there for examples of "straight style" documentary. This is also the reason that the rich ambiguity of the title *Documentary and Anti-Graphic* in relation to Evans has gone largely unremarked. Evans's affinity with the avant-garde did not escape Breton, however. After Breton and other surrealists fled Europe after the start of World War II, they were

quickly introduced to the salons of New York, where they constituted a movement in exile. Probably through Harry and Dorothy Harvey, who were well connected in avant-garde circles and lived two floors up from Evans at 441 East Ninety-second Street, Breton arranged to meet Evans at his darkroom. "After looking at Evans' photographs and seeing his penchant for torn posters, fragmented words, and junk," writes Rathbone, "Breton declared that he had a surrealist turn of mind" (Rathbone 180).

This is not to claim, of course, that Evans does not deserve his reputation as documentary photographer; rather, it is to claim that Evans's work of the 1930s was also thoroughly permeated with avant-garde influences. Like Cartier-Bresson, Evans traveled widely—to Cuba, to Tahiti, to New Orleans—for material, and the photographs that appeared in *The Bridge,* in the three exhibitions at Levy's gallery, including *Documentary and Anti-Graphic,* in the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show, and in the catalog for *African Negro Art* display a wide range of subject matter and technique. If Levy and Barr had had their say and if Evans had not begun working for the Resettlement Administration in 1936, he may very well have fallen into the trap of being known as a "little Surrealist photographer." Just as the pull of the international avant-garde that brought Evans, Alvarez Bravo, and Cartier-Bresson together in 1935 in Julien Levy's gallery was much larger than the individual artists, though, so would the universal claims of postwar democracy coat photojournalism with a patina of objectivity that would privilege the documentary as an incitement to social action—in fact, an act in itself. Ironically, the social context of the Civil Rights movement in which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was rediscovered in the 1960s was, to the extent that it was predicated on a confident response to an obvious wrong according to a stable value system, far removed

from the self-reflexive, value-negating avant-garde aesthetic context in which the book was produced.

As outlined in "A Way of Seeing," Agee's philosophy of photography has little space for social documentary. Highly suspicious of the claims to truth of any image, Agee instead emphasizes that the photographer's role is "to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world." This perception may be accidental, though, so the collection and examination of images from all sources become important activities. As fellow travelers in the realm of the avant-garde, Agee and Evans drew on each other's experiences and interests, and though *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is their only substantial collaboration to come to completion, they continued to look for other opportunities to work together, both during and after its composition. They both collected images from popular culture as a way to document the fantastic in American life; in this, they followed the surrealists, who treated the range of cultural products, from high to low, as an exotic landscape. In a review of the *Super-Realists* show, for instance, Matthew Josephson writes that Julien Levy's collage of doctored *New York Evening Graphic* photographs, particularly the cover for January 28, 1927, was, "[o]f the American works included in this show, the most impressive thing of all":

> Here is the synthetic photograph of the "Honeymoon Horror" of Peaches and Daddy Browning, and their famous bedroom scene. Peaches lies weeping on the floor, with Browning, the "big gander man" offering her a large baby-doll, while the African goose in the right background screams: "Honk, honk, it's the bonk!" Perfect superrealism. The lesson of The Evening Graphic is that we have long been producing superrealist art in the raw state. The European artists of the

> French capital have inspired themselves with our movies, our jazz comedians, our folk customs, have refined all this material and sent it back to us. Nevertheless, we recognize the home product with mingled approbation, amusement and embarrassment" (322).

Agee seems to have been pursuing much the same type of activity, assembling raw material for later use. As Robert Fitzgerald writes in the same 1955 letter in which he mentions Agee's delight in the surrealist game "One into Another": "I remember in Flemington[41] he had whole boxes of stuff he had clipped from papers or magazines—ads and so on—each one expressive of some special twist of grotesque or pitiful fancy governed by the mass mores of our people" (2).

Although these boxes have been lost, other collections of images, or at least Agee's descriptions of them, survive. The longest entry in Agee's journal from 1938, for instance, at some 3,500 words, is a detailed description of crime-scene photographs from a pulp detective magazine that he bought, as he writes, "for the picture on the cover" (J 4.4), which depicts three policemen standing over a dying criminal.[42] The attraction the photograph holds for Agee is twofold: he recognizes a sociological value in that the "pathological public" such magazines "feed & count on" may be estimated from their circulation, but he is more interested in what he can educe from "the various faces" (*JAR* J 4.4). As he explains, "Unposed faces looking at a camera have a special human expression nearly unprecedented. (Not quite; some paintings show these faces). Of this in its varieties & of its uses there must be investigation analysis and study. . . . These

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[41] Agee actually lived in Frenchtown, New Jersey, near Flemington.

[42] Agee gives the title of the magazine as *Picture Detective;* an extensive search has yet to discover any copies of this magazine or any hints of its existence.

faces are like words in good poetry. They mean and tell more than can at all be told about them. You get the whole more than double ambiguity of a living individual in each one and in each, recognize a whole human life and a strong shot of the whole of human life" (J 4.4). Agee continues:

> The cover picture, disembodied from any content, is one of the most frightening I know. The completely savage world. The hard flash does a great deal. 3 kinds of idiot cruel laughter. None of them look like cops. They look like special appointees of a Kafka but American second-world disguised as cops. The one at the left I have seen his kind several times, oversized, milk skinned, soft-jointed adolescent, usually a not well liked clown, who looks like his mother and masturbates a great deal. Always blond; always that kind of teeth. Smiles always and laughs very frequently. The middle one is close to one kind of stage cop: the kind a Flaming Youth[43] girl has to do with, Leatrice Joy[44] causes his death. He is very conscious of his looks. The third cop would look like that telling a sex joke or hearing one, or fucking a whore. His hand is vital with sadism like the balancing hand of a toddling baby. The man is a natty dresser. Foulard tie. The always new and light colored hat of every city criminal. That his tie is disarrayed and his hat battered is almost the cruellest thing in the picture. He could be badly wounded and in great pain but more likely it is only his pride that is outraged, and his futile hatred and defiance and his futile cursing. His guts to keep calling them sons-of-bitches is the last life he has and he is desperately trying to turn their

[43] *Flaming Youth,* a 1923 film starring Colleen Moore, was the first "flapper" movie and became synonymous with Jazz Age debauchery.
[44] American actress (1896-1985). Agee is referring to Cecil B. Demille's *Manslaughter* (1922), in which Joy plays a wild society girl whose carelessness results in the death of a motorcycle policeman.

> laughter into anger that would bring him back a little dignity. They are on to this, too. They may even have known his weakness from before. (J 4.4)

In the amount of information he is able to extrapolate from a few details in the photograph, Agee reveals not only his capacity for empathy—in recognizing that the assault on the wounded man's vanity is of greater consequence to him than the bullet lodged in his body, for instance—but also his assumptions about how a photograph constructs meaning. The photograph is ostensibly a "literal document," in Evans's phrase, a straightforward representation of a moment in time, but Agee ignores any objective facts pertinent to it, including those from a caption or the story it illustrates, leaving it "disembodied from content." In this, he is following the surrealists, for whom reading photographs removed from their context, as with Dali's paranoiac-critical reading of a photograph of an African hut as a portrait by Picasso, was an act of creative destruction. Instead of looking through the magazine cover to some objective reality, Agee projects his own meaning onto and even beyond it. There is no way for him to know whether or not the first cop "looks like his mother and masturbates a great deal" or how the third tells a dirty joke, but the photograph's meaning is identical with the associations it elicits from the observer. As Hughes writes in his introduction to the Mexico City show, "A picture, to be an interesting picture, must be more than a picture, otherwise it is only a reproduction of an object, and not an object of value in itself" (278).

The value in this true-crime photograph is in the aesthetic response that transforms it from a document into a surrealist object.[45]

In his review of the book of Atget's photographs, Evans calls them "the projection of Atget's person" (126); as his later comments make clear, the fundamental distinction between "documentary" and art in the "documentary style" is that the latter derives from the artist's intuitive subjectivity. Or, as Agee writes in the "Near a Church" chapter of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* the object's role is to be "trapped, possessed, fertilized" (37) by the consciousness first of the photographer and then of the observer. Agee's response to the cover of *Picture Detective* alters its content and even its form, detaching it from its previous frame of reference as mass-produced, if shocking, ephemera and bestowing upon it the status of a singular object worthy of contemplation (that is also a piece of shocking, mass-produced ephemera). That Agee interprets the photograph—which is "real"—through the lenses of Kafka and flapper movies underscores that the appeal to fiction represents for him a recourse to a truth beyond that of the merely factual.

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[45] It is also instructive to compare Agee's treatment of this photograph to Pierre Mac Orlan's statement concerning a photograph of a murder scene; for both, photography defamiliarizes its subject so as to make it almost hyper-real:

> If, to illustrate these few reflections on a subject dear to me, the social fantastic of our time, I choose an anonymous photograph, it is in order to leave its emotive value intact, without appending the afterthought of an anecdote already utilized by literature. Here we have a hotel room, in a hotel whose four dimensions would please Francis Carco. The actors in the drama are no longer here. What remains is only the blood, and the variations it inspires in our thoughts, from moral and physical revulsion to the detailed invention of appalling acts—ending up in this simple image, all but indescribable but heavy with fear, heavy with greasy, steamy smells, and, if one takes the trouble to think about it, heavy with anxiety.
>
> What we have here is not some artist's interpretation of a fact, not an image that offers the equivalent of reality. It is simply reality, as revealed by the provisional death of that same force that gave life to this scene of carnage. That death, that same momentary immobility, reveals and makes it possible to isolate the disquieting element that gives this unspeakable and vulgar image an emotional power—a power which acts on the imagination much more profoundly, and much more clearly, than the real sight of the room without the camera eye as intermediary. (32).

Agee reads many other photographs from the magazine in much the same way, not for their content but for the emotional charge they release. This description of Verna Garr Taylor, whose murder by a former Kentucky lieutenant governor was avenged by her brothers, elicits a particularly vicious response: "Dirty sex in this face. It is not congruent with fucking or even masturbating but with very vain, cockteasing flirtation. As if sex, her looks, and your desire (the latter assumed by her) was a joke between herself and you in which, of course, you were bound to be the loser, with a public standing by and catching on, and laughing at you. I hate women who are professional beauties and confident of their beauty" (J 4.4). Agee's reading of this photograph clearly has little to do with objective content; it is a powerful projection of his own feelings toward women, a transformation of an actual or perceived humiliation into a justification for a sadistic verbal sexual assault—an act in its own way just as savage as the scene depicted on the cover. Again Agee points beyond the documentary truth of the photograph, but rather than approaching the super-real, the idealistic higher reality invoked by Breton, Agee instead taps into darker and more violent subconscious passions. In this way he is more aligned with the dissident surrealist Bataille and the *Documents* group, whose base materialism, which Breton derided in the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" as a "wish only to consider in the world that which is vilest, most discouraging, and most corrupted . . . so as to avoid making himself useful for anything specific" (181), offered an anti-idealistic counter-program to the social revolution propounded by orthodox surrealism. Like Bataille—and as in his own "The House"—Agee exposes the savagery that underlies the institutions of civilization through

reading of "documentary" photographs to discover unutterable associations among fashion, sadism, and the police, vigilantism, the legal system, and rape.

Irrespective of sectarianism within the movement, Agee's interest in crime photography broadly parallels that of the French surrealists in their close attention to the true-crime magazine *Détective,* published by Gaston Gallimard beginning in 1928 (Davis H. Walker 71). Widely criticized for its lurid content and sensational cover photographs, which were considered so intense that advertising posters for the magazine were banned in Paris in 1932, *Détective* was extremely profitable, boasting a readership of more than 800,000 by 1938 (72). In fact, while Gallimard's prestigious *Nouvelle Revue Française* lost money, earnings from *Détective* ensured that the publishing house could continue to bring out works by highly esteemed writers such as Paul Valéry and André Gide without regard to potential losses (72). Though the surrealists—as Baudelaire and Atget before them—also looked to the seamier side of Paris life, they attacked *Détective* in the editorial pages of the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* for glorifying the police and promoting social order and parodied *Détective*-style illustrations in its successor, *La Surréalisme au Service de Révolution* (34-35). As David H. Walker suggests, the surrealists probably reacted so strongly to *Détective* precisely because it represented a form of competition (77): Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, and others sought to enlist the "fantasy of criminality" (Ian Walker 35) for their own subversive purposes and resented the obviously more popular if politically unconscious appropriation of potentially revolutionary content by the lowbrow pulp. In 1933, for instance, *La Surréalisme au Service de Révolution* reproduced two photographs from *Détective* of sisters Christine and Lea Papin, servants who had murdered their mistress and her

daughter. As employed by *Détective,* the photographs illustrate the narrative of "a horrific descent from normality into bestiality" (David H. Walker 76). The first, on the cover, shows the sisters as very neat and respectable in their domestic livery; in the second, accompanying the article a few pages later, they look confused and disheveled, and Christine, especially, with her eyes rolled back, appears quite insane. In *La Surréalisme au Service de Révolution,* however, the "avant" and "après" photographs are placed side by side on the same page with the caption "Sorties tout armées d'un chant de Maldoror" (76). Rather than providing a reminder of the need for society to reassert its norms of sanity and behavior both through a sensational example of their breaking down and a comforting narrative of their reinstitution by the police and judiciary, the Papin sisters here become "surrealist heroines" (76), representing the forces of the unconscious unleashed in an all-consuming, welcome conflagration. In much the same way, Agee appropriates the photographs of Verna Garr Taylor and others in the pages of *Picture Detective,* freeing them from the proscribed narrative of transgression and justice and claiming them for his own use as conduits for psycho-sexual release.

While Agee's approach toward photography was analogous to that of the French surrealists in the 1930s, he would not have had to depend solely on European sources; in fact, both he and Walker Evans were involved in a similar recontextualization of photographic images, even going so far as to seek institutional backing for their efforts. Around the beginning of 1938, for instance, Agee wrote to Archibald MacLeish at *Life* magazine proposing that he and Walker Evans "be set up to office space and to ease and choice in getting news pictures, COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT of the weekly production of the issue, and in our work COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT of detailed responsibility to any

editor, for two or, better, three months, as an experimental department" (*JAR* J 1.13). As Agee explains,

> Out of this Life might get ideas, and articles, they could well use, during the whole course of the experiment. (Again, they might not.) At the end of that time they might or might not find, that they had possibilities of better a perhaps rather different magazine. . . .
>
> I think such a scheme could at very least give out some useful ideas and very probably some forms of vitality they have not hit on and would find they'd be glad to have. I also somewhat respect that our ideas of what a picture magazine could and should be would essentially and as a whole differ sufficiently from their own, that they would be unlikely to accept it as a whole. That would be all right too. I feel definitely sure the experiment would be worth their while. . . .
>
> We should be able to do this for 75 dollars a week each. (1.13)

Astonishingly, although Agee appears to have been offering little more from a business standpoint than the opportunity for the Luce empire to indulge his fascination for photography, the editors were still interested six months later and dispatched "one Paine (whom I mildly know)" to follow up. Somewhat amused, Agee wrote to Evans on July 27, 1938:

> You remember backings and fillings, last winter, as of doing some work for Life? And that I finally told them could all discussion be postponed 6 months? Well it seems the 6 months is Up. . . . I'm not [interested] except under arrangements we worked out: which I so doubt we could get, that it seems hardly worth talking about them. Then another thing has occurred to me: this. I heard, I forget where,

> that Life is trying to Get Cartier-Bresson: and what occurs is, that three together should be able to gang up more powerfully by a great deal than two, to say nothing of one: and that in such a way we might manage to get for instance either such an Experimental thing started as was talked of, or a satisfactorily inviolate section of the magazine under our own direction. Another thing "occurs": that a fair way of indicating to them why neither you nor I would give a fuck to work in the Magazine Proper would be to present for their looking-over your Scrapbook as is, and my advertising and hate art similarly arranged. That's as far as I get now; it needs some talking about. Meanwhile I am writing Paine only, that I am for the next month to six weeks under too much pressure to do or think anything of it and might discussion be resumed in September: no mention of you, of conditions, of Bresson or of anything else. (As of C-B and the gang-fuck possibilities versus Luce, there is also Helen [Levitt] and I should think Peter Siecker [Sekaer].) (1)

The prospect of Agee, Evans, and Cartier-Bresson rummaging through the *Life* photo archive and then locking themselves away for three months to study their collection in an effort to define "what a picture magazine could and should be" is intriguing; that *Life* never gave them the opportunity is a great loss. But Agee's proposal is revealing, even if it never came to pass. For one thing, Agee is not proposing that he and Evans (and their potential collaborators) produce original work, only that they be allowed to select from those already in the magazine's possession photographs for their own intrinsic value without any regard for news or editorial content; in other words, the photographs will not illustrate or refer to anything other than themselves—except, of course, the quality of

their having been selected by Agee and Evans. The effect, Agee asserts, will be to introduce some new "forms of vitality" to the pages of *Life* through "a great freezing and cleansing of all 'art' and 'dramatic' and of the plethoric and flabby ends of Leica photography" (J 1.13). By defining vitality in opposition to art, Agee reveals the same bias against both artistic pretension and the business of the mass circulation of images that in part animates *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* which he was well into writing at the time of the proposal. By hoping to arrange a "gang-fuck" of Henry Luce, he also expresses the desire, reminiscent of his most sardonic Marxist poetry, to use Luce's resources and millions of readers to destroy what Time, Inc., embodies—the appeal to middlebrow mediocrity as the base and extremity of a successful capitalist enterprise.

Agee invokes Evans's "Scrapbook as is, and my advertising and hate art similarly arranged" as an example of what the experiment might produce as well as an indication of why *Life* would never agree to it. While Agee's collection of "advertising and hate art"—presumably identical with or related to the same collection of images "expressive of some special twist of grotesque or pitiful fancy governed by the mass mores or our people" cited by Fitzgerald—has not survived, Evans's scrapbook has. Reproduced in *Unclassified: A Walker Evans Anthology,* the scrapbook consists of thirty-three pages of images, mostly photographs clipped from newspapers and magazines and a few line drawings from advertisements. On most of the pages two or more images are ironically juxtaposed without commentary (though a few images retain their original captions): a Victorian matron is made to look disdainfully on a beautiful woman with exposed breasts; the laughing head of Franklin Roosevelt and that of another white man are placed above two Africans in ceremonial masks; a montage of the Duke of Windsor in an

assortment of elegant clothing is offset by a portrait of three skid row bums; an aged golfer caught at the end of a stiff backswing faces a natural museum model of Cro-Magnon man; a photograph of a hanged and still smoldering black man clipped from a French magazine stands alone under the title "LA LOI DE LYNCH," while a note under the caption notes that the picture comes "par notre excellent confrère 'Vu'" (237).

Jeff L. Rosenheim and Douglas Eklund note that several of the images come from the dada-influenced German art magazine *Der Querschnitt* (214), but this type of ironic juxtaposition had long been a staple of the avant-garde, including publications such as *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Documents,* not to mention any number of exhibits at Julien Levy's gallery. The scrapbook was also an extension of Evans's politics; as he explained in a later interview, "I was really anti-American at the time. America was big business and I wanted to escape. It nauseated me. My photography was a semi-conscious reaction against right-thinking and optimism; it was an attack on the establishment" (Katz 361). By offering the scrapbook as a counterexample to *Life,* Agee underscores that "what a picture magazine could and should be" is not one that uses "documents" as transparent representations of objective truth, but instead uses images as weapons to destabilize the assumptions underlying the social order.

Though Rosenheim and Eklund also remark that image collecting was "part of a craze for news photographs that swept Evans's circle during the 1930s" (213), it is clear that Agee and Evans considered the collection and interpretation of media artifacts much more than a hobby. In late 1940 or early 1941, Agee began working on another proposal, this time for a series of periodicals "edited by W. E. and J. A." (J 6.7) and composed almost entirely of thematically related documents. Although "the firm" to which it is

addressed is unknown, Agee assures the recipient that there is "a small but, I believe, quite certain audience, at present mainly national, in peace times international," which will be augmented by "Various subscribers to literary and art magazines, buyers of modern-library and Penguin books, etc etc: the lower rungs of the 'intelligentsia'. Ethically, their accretion would be unfortunate or irrelevant. Financially, it would be profitable" (J 6.7). Agee, fully aware that symbolic capital can be just as important to publishers—and often more important to authors—than profit, acknowledges that it had best be regarded as "an inexpensive project whose chief value to the firm is prestige" (J 6.7). In fact, "a hardness of standard, and lack of concession, nowhere else to be found in American publishing . . . , though the fact is censorable, would, with its content, be its selling point" (J.6.7). The series would consist of one-hundred-page volumes (with no advertising) issued two to six times per year and would be defined by "absolute absence of ingratiation; excellence of reproductions; plainness; the utmost cheapness wherever possible: a steady correction of every fashion. Government and scientific pamphlets suggest it: this is a library for specialists" (J 6.7). Agee continues:

> General content: some text, some pictures. Records, symbols, science, analysis, discussion & criticism.
>
> Examples: W. E.'s subway photographs: 100, with or without introduction. H. L.'s wall-drawings;[46] same. 100 precious objects irrelevant to art (photographs & comment). An exposition of methods by which corruption betrays itself. A sampling of letters. A sampling of news magazine clips. Series:

[46] In the 1930s Helen Levitt took a number of photographs of children's chalk drawings on walls and sidewalks. An expanded collection, *In the Street: Chalk Drawings and Messages, New York City, 1938-1948,* was published in 1987.

poems: composed of advertisements, news photographs, and photographs, and photographs personally made. A book using advertisements alone for this. Personal science: a form of mythology. (Reprints) Grosz's drawings.[47]

Translations of Bert Brecht. Unpublishable mss. A book of letters from 50 writers, artists, on whatever subject they please. Inventories of hatreds, pleasures, indifferences. Uncredited quotations (Blake, Whitman, New Testament, Thoreau, &c, mixed with newly invented ones.) An analysis of aphorisms as scientific statements. A record & analysis of one week's work on Time [magazine]. A book of found-objects. A book of sensations & things uncapturable by any techniques of art or record. A book of non-fiction short stories. A collection of dreams. . . .

An attack on the M[useum] of M[odern] Art.

On motion pictures as caught midway in becoming respectable.

A book of games, pleasures and invectives.

Handbooks of useful knowledge. What anyone should know about leases, civil liberties, venereal diseases, the normal ailments, electricity (radio), sexual ethics and their prospects, the situation of the wife, of the artist, of the faithful husband.

An analysis of misinterpretation (a worse) of crime and of excellence, as found in newspapers, magazines, courts & speeches.

A handbook of ethics: questions and answers.

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[47] George Grosz (1893-1959), German expressionist and dadaist artist and writer, came to America in 1932.

> Traveling in America: text and photographs. 60 days traveling: as exactly as possible recorded and analyzed. (J 6.7)

As with many of Agee's other plans and projects, this one quickly becomes unwieldy—it can be a "library for specialists" only if the specialist, like Agee, specializes in everything. But this list also serves as an index to Agee's interests as they developed over the course of the late 1930s and, as such, reveals the decisive influence of surrealist ideas. The journal will explicitly attack institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and undermine disciplinary boundaries by claiming both the right and authority to treat games and venereal diseases, crime and excellence as subjects of equal interest. It will include found objects and collections of dreams. Discounting established hierarchies and categories, it will consider aphorisms and myths as statements of scientific fact, nonfiction essays as short stories, snapshots as news photographs, and advertisements as poetry. Each issue will be essentially an assemblage of documents, both personal and public; the series itself will constitute a collage of almost infinitely variable juxtapositions of text, photographs, and "precious objects irrelevant to art."

Having earlier made use of avant-garde techniques for literary purposes, Agee here adopts one of the surrealists' most exemplary methods in insisting that the series have the tenor of "Government and scientific pamphlets." From its inception, the movement had appropriated the rhetoric of science in order to subvert the "reign of logic," calling its headquarters, established in 1924 at 15 Rue de Grenelle in Paris, the Central Office of Surrealist Research (Bureau Central de Recherches Surréalistes), for instance, and specifically modeling the first surrealist journal, *La Révolution Surréaliste,* after the popular science journal *La Nature* (Highmore 47). Breton, who trained as a

physician, and the other surrealists constantly represented their experiments in the language of scientific investigation, generating dozens of inventories and questionnaires as ways to amass data for their inquiries into the irrational, and they participated in activities such as the Recherches sur la Sexualité seminars, transcriptions of which were published in *La Révolution Surréaliste,* and the Collège de Sociologie (Mundy 46). Not surprisingly, Agee provides one of the most explicit examples of this type of scientific rhetoric. In the "On the Porch: 2" section of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* in which he recounts his struggle to find an adequate form of representation for what he has seen in Alabama, Agee writes:

> I think there is at the middle of this sense of the importance and dignity of actuality and the attempt to reproduce and analyze the actual, and at the middle of this antagonism toward art, something of real importance which is by no means my discovery, far less my private discovery, but which is a sense of 'reality' and of 'values' held by more and more people, and the beginnings of somewhat new forms of, call it art if you must, of which the still and moving cameras are the strongest instruments and symbols. It would be an art and a way of seeing existence based, let us say, on an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms. Nothing that springs from this intersection can conceivably be insignificant: everything is most significant in proportion as it approaches in our perception, simultaneously, its own singular terms and its ramified kinship and probable hidden identification with everything else. (217)

That Agee took the title of his later essay on photography from this passage is apt, considering he also begins "A Way of Seeing" with a definition of the camera as "a machine, which records with impressive and as a rule very cruel faithfulness," in turn echoing his own attempt in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to capture "the cruel radiance of what is" (9). Even as he was completing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee was proposing a series of journals devoted to "Records, symbols, science, analysis, discussion & criticism"—in both projects he is extending the surrealist practice of conflating and contesting science and aesthetics in order to undermine the authority of both and instead reinscribe them "in human terms." In a later, more developed draft of the proposal, he makes the connection even more specifically: "I suggest that this magazine could work a pincer-movement on experience or 'reality,' with journalism functioning very importantly as a part of the opposite arm of the pincers. We would use the findings of journalists, in other words, as they in turn use the findings of researchers; we can also supplement or extend their reporting by direct investigations of our own and by using a technique, developed in England, known as Mass-Observation (*Literary Notebooks* 375).

Launched in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, a self-trained anthropologist recently returned to England from New Hebrides, and surrealists Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, Mass Observation was an anthropological project designed to assemble a comprehensive collection of data on everyday life; it would treat the "wilds of Lancashire" as an exotic locale, using observers and volunteer diarists to document the activities of ordinary English citizens as minutely and dispassionately as if they were cataloging rituals of the cannibals of Borneo (Highmore 79). "Day-surveys" recorded

respondents' activities and conversations, as well as their thoughts and dreams and reactions to local events, as thoroughly as possible on the twelfth of each month, and observers trekked to local pubs, for instance, stopwatch in hand, in order to time the period between individuals' sips of beer (88). Madge and Jennings had both played a key role in promoting surrealism in England, Madge by publishing "Surrealism for the English" and "The Meaning of Surrealism" in *New Verse* in 1933 and 1934, respectively, when the movement was little known or understood in that country, and Jennings by co-curating and contributing paintings to the first surrealist exhibition in London in 1936 (82). Both resisted the aestheticizing tendency of critics such as Herbert Read, however, emphasizing that surrealism, rather than a literary movement, was, in Madge's words, "a laboratory of studies, of experimentation, that rejects all inclinations of individualism" (qtd. in Highmore 82). Instead of merely collecting data on material culture, though, Mass Observation wanted to document England's collective unconscious, even though to do so would require "a project so vast that, rather than commenting on the everyday, it would become coterminous with it" (Highmore 83).

The fact that Agee invokes Mass Observation, with its surrealist roots and impossible parameters, over other participant-observer models is noteworthy in itself, confirming, along with his relationships with people such as Eugene Jolas and Anna Kavan, that his influences were more international and avant-garde than previously acknowledged. That he wanted to appropriate its methods demonstrates that he understood the anthropological implications of surrealism, which are evident even in the earlier proposal in his references to Evans's surreptitious subway photographs (which Agee later identified as having been taken under "laboratory conditions" [*JAR* N 1]), "A

record & analysis of one week's work on Time," and "Traveling in America: text and photographs. 60 days traveling: as exactly as possible recorded and analyzed." The later draft is even more precise, calling particular attention to the ways that popular culture, for example, is just as rife with significance as the most serious topics of study:

> A bestseller, for instance, should be reviewed not only on its "entertainment value"; we should investigate the causes of that particular "value"; and we should trust it, chiefly, as the valuably suggestive anthropological exhibit which it essentially is. We should, furthermore, review the reviewers, as well as the books they review. We should study the several strange inflections which have been developed on the radio and try to name what they signify (the commercial plugs for housewives, for instance, resemble only one other human inflection: that which is used by a housewife towards a not very bright child who has to be persuaded to eat, brush its teeth, take its laxative, etc.). Our technique might most briefly be described as scientific (anthropological, psychological, chiefly) and as ethical. (*Literary Notebooks* 376)

Since "this magazine must continuously leave ample space open for self-attack and self-analysis," it is (also) in danger of collapsing into a *mise en abyme,* as reviewers will not only have to review the reviewers but themselves as well. For Agee, though, the massive accumulation of artifacts accompanied by a running commentary that is also an object of investigation is valuable in itself. As a project without end, it dissolves generic, temporal, and cultural boundaries; merging objective content and interpretation, it will find truth at the limit of representation.

Agee's experiments with automatic writing, his essay "Art for What's Sake" in *New Masses,* and his film scenario "The House" all demonstrate a deep familiarity with and appreciation for surrealism as a literary style, but it is clear that by the end of the 1930s he had also begun to explore surrealism's potential as a method of scientific and ethical criticism. Along with Evans, whose fascination with the absurdity of everyday life he shared, Agee sought a way to inventory and interpret the cultural field outside of prescribed categories, to document it in a way that would do justice to its weird and wonderful accidents and essence through self-critical collection and observation. Using juxtaposition and other techniques to defamiliarize received categories, surrealist ethnography does not recognize distinctions between or among conscious creation and unconscious existence, high and low cultural forms, aesthetic genres or disciplines, participant and observer, the familiar and the exotic, the primitive and the civilized. Instead, it attempts to exploit the inherent contradictions within received systems, turning their assumptions back on themselves. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is both documentary and anti-documentary in that it records the lives of three families of sharecroppers in Alabama during the Great Depression while declaring the impossibility of making such a record. More than a meditation on the difficulty of representing the Other, though, it ultimately resolves the tension between modes of signification in surrealist fashion, transforming the crisis of outside objectivity into an investigation of the individual unconscious.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Syncopations of Chance": Surrealist Ethnography in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

To the extent that any of Agee's works are considered by scholars, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has received by far the most attention, especially over the last two decades or so, as critics have turned away from the sort of mystification of art and the artist of which Agee's apotheosis as "poet" is exemplary and moved toward, first, analyses informed by deconstruction, in which the author is irrelevant, and, then, to critiques framed by issues of race, class, and gender, to which the bulk of the Agee canon has appeared uninterestingly white, bourgeois, and male. In the last ten years (1994-2004), while there have been no journal articles published on *A Death in the Family* and only one on *The Morning Watch,* at least twenty articles have appeared in which *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the primary work considered, and it occupies a large portion of several dissertations. If Agee criticism of the 1960s and 1970s depended too heavily on his individual mystique, the current focus on primarily one work has diminished Agee's other achievements. By detaching Agee's most complex work from the rest of his corpus, most critics are content to examine it within the context of larger aesthetic or social trends without regard to how it relates to the arc of his development as a writer.

Over the course of the late 1930s, including during the time when he was composing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee was also experimenting with automatic writing and other surrealist techniques and cultivating an interest in the subversive possibilities of a self-referential ethnography. In many ways, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the culmination of the turbulent 1930s: spawned by the collisions

among and between the realities of economic necessity, the promises of revolutionary politics, the savage joy of the destruction of art through avant-garde appeals to the unconscious, and the stumbling technocracy of the New Deal, Agee's book riots in all directions, unconstrained but ultimately exhausted by its excesses, the consummate document of a decade that could find peace only through destroying itself in a worldwide conflagration. Critics looking to find expressions of the period have had no trouble doing so. But the book is also the working out of Agee's own 1930s, an exploration of the demands and limitations and responsibilities of art that did not end in 1941. Though he spent the bulk of the 1940s writing film reviews, Agee's imaginative works of the latter part of the decade—the aleatory *In the Street,* with its masked children and urban ritual; the Jungian *Morning Watch* and its ambivalent symbols (baptism, locust shell, and sacrificial snake); and "Dream Sequence," the McDowell-suppressed nightmare that initiates *A Death in the Family*—demonstrate that he continued to struggle with the same problem of how to integrate art and the unconscious that animates *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In this sense, the book is a transitional work between the overtly political shaping of the materials of the unconscious in "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House" and the rejection of formal complexity as a way of intensifying the sacredness of the everyday in *A Death in the Family.* As an intermediate work—Agee considered it a mere prologue to a much vaster project—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is deeply ambivalent. Initially hoping to embody the lives of others in language, Agee becomes trapped in an inverted discourse that drives him deeper into himself. Failing as a documentary expression of objective reality, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* instead

encodes ethnography as an investigation not of the Other but of the individual unconscious.

Conscious and Unconscious, Motion in Repose

On September 16, 1938, Agee wrote to Father Flye, "I'm very much more drawn toward innocence, and the relaxed or abandoned brain, and simplicity and childhood, and the so-called 'sub'-human for that matter and 'sub'-organic, than I've appeared by the ways I've written" (*LFF* 107). While this statement is an obvious reference to Agee's experiments with automatic writing (of which Flye was apparently unaware), it also conflates several ideas about the unconscious, all of which are important to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. For the surrealists, following Freud, the unconscious was an unpredictable, uncanny, terrifying repository of sex and violence; unleashing its power had revolutionary potential, both personally and politically. As works such as "The House" indicate, Agee was drawn to the destabilizing possibilities of the unconscious, and his dark, paranoid-critical readings of photographs and subversive collaborations with Walker Evans demonstrate a pleasure in the destruction of existing forms. In the early twentieth century, though, the unconscious was not the exclusive property of Freud and the surrealists, and figures such as Henri Bergson, who posited an unconscious that was the source of creative energy, and Carl Jung, who identified the collective unconscious as the fundamental structure of human meaning, were also influential (if politically reactionary, from a surrealist point of view), contributing decisively to modernist ideas about time and myth. For instance, in the phrase "so-called 'sub'-human . . . and 'sub'-organic," Agee is alluding to the idea expressed by Bergson's *élan vital,* the

force that animates all life and that is the font of human creativity, and extends it, as in Eastern religions, to the universe itself. Extending the Romantic equation of innocence, simplicity, and childhood by way of psychoanalysis, he also points to the redemptive power of the unconscious, the belief that modern rationalism represents a fall from grace that only a reconciliation with pre-rational, primitive modes of being can correct, as in Jung's individuation. Though the Jungian unconscious, which makes whole, and the surrealist unconscious, which makes revolutions, are incompatible, even irreconcilable, Agee draws on both in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* creating a contradiction that contributes to the book's creation of meaning through a series of juxtapositions, even to the extent that surrealist form comes to embody Jungian ideas. As the political implications of surrealism give way to Agee's desire for psychological wholeness, though, the ethical dimension of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is dissolved by the limitations of its primitivist discourse.

In the "Preface" to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee warns the reader that "Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense," even though the book's "nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry" (x). Also "an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity," as a "record and analysis," it will be "exhaustive" (x), he claims. By using scientific rhetoric in the same way as the surrealists, Agee is asserting that the project will reveal certain truths, but the way it will do so is by challenging the idea that science—or art or politics or any other conceptual framework—can provide a discourse and set of assumptions adequate to these truths' representation. Since *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee

writes, "is intended, among other things, as a swindle, an insult and a corrective, the reader will be wise to bear the nominal subject, and his expectation of its proper treatment, steadily in mind. For that is the subject with which the authors are dealing, throughout. If complications arise, that is because they are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously" (xi). If Agee can "contrive techniques appropriate" to the communication of the existence of the sharecroppers as well as his experience with them, then these techniques will also be "capable of planting it cleanly in others" (10). By communicating his own experience truthfully and intensely enough, Agee hopes to trigger a response from the reader that will be nothing less than full participation in his own process of self-realization. As important as the book's "nominal subject," the intentional violation of readers' expectations is part of this "planting," or transplanting, of experience; participation in Agee's experience will require the dismantling of familiar categories. As Walter Benjamin wrote of the surrealists, anticipating Agee's definition of his own work as "a swindle, an insult and a corrective," in 1929, "But anyone who has perceived that the writings of this circle are not literature but something else—demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries if you will, but at any rate not literature—will also know, for the same reason, that the writings are concerned literally with experiences, not with theories and still less with phantasms" (179). Denying his readers the comforts of theory, Agee will fully implicate them in what he experiences as intensely real.

As part of this strategy of defamiliarization, Agee employs avant-garde formal techniques, some of which, such as juxtaposition and collage, are not exclusive to surrealism but may become more definitively linked with it in the context, for instance, of

the treatment of surrealist objects, convulsive beauty, or objective chance. The book's most obvious use of juxtaposition (or, in its cinematic form, montage) is in its presentation of an initial section of uncaptioned photographs followed by text as "co-equal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative" (*FM* xi). While other books had contained uncaptioned photographs—Paul Eluard's *Facile* (1935), for instance, juxtaposes poetry with photographs by Man Ray that are complementary but not illustrative, and Walker Evans's *American Photographs* holds the captions until the end of each of the book's two sections—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* goes beyond either, eliminating captions altogether and placing the photographs before the front matter. This arrangement allows the photographs to generate multiple resonances within the text since their meanings are not prescribed in relation to it. It also sets the pattern for other juxtapositions, such as Evans's positioning of the sunny photograph of a freckled, straw-hat-haloed Louise Gudger across from a much darker image of the fly-specked bed in which she was conceived in a diptych representing Eros and Thanatos or Agee's placement of "Work 2: Cotton" next to "Intermission: Conversation in the Lobby," through which he highlights the brutalizing physical labor involved in sharecropping in contrast to the obscene navel-gazing of the intelligentsia, in which he recognizes he is playing all too conspicuous a part.

Agee's juxtaposition of epigraphs from *King Lear* and the *Communist Manifesto* creates a similar dialectic between art and politics. In fact, he specifically identifies this pairing as emblematic of "the pattern of the work as a whole," comparing the quotations to the two themes of the "sonata form" (xiii). As John Louis Lucaites notes, sonata form "consists of the development and recapitulation of two distinct themes whereby the

second theme always begins in a different key from that of the first, but is eventually transposed in the recapitulation" (276). Lucaites argues that Agee's reference to the sonata suggests that this is "*not* the traditional dialectic whereby the interaction of thesis and antithesis produces an entirely new synthesis that transcends the original position" but instead creates "a dialectical structure whereby the meaning of one theme or thesis is modified by taking on the tonality of another, distinct, theme or thesis, and thus enriches our understanding of the potential range of meanings or truths implicit in the second theme" (276). While transient, however, there are moments of transcendent union—when "you" becomes "we" in the "On the Porch" sections, for instance, or when the call and response of the foxes at the end of the book produces a state analogous to the stage of love in which "the body, brain and spirit of each one of you is all one perfectly focused lens and in which these two lenses devour, feed, enrich and honor each other" (*FM* 414). These moments of rapturous apprehension of "nothing except anything in existence or dream" (13) are ultimately what gives the book its meaning, as various opposed ideas and images intersect with one another, fuse, and then separate, establishing understanding as a constant process of insight, confusion, and revision. That Agee saw the potential of using the interplay of opposites to give the book an organic form is evident in his notes for the fox passage in "On the Porch: 3," in which he presents the episode as actually having occurred but advises himself, "Set up as musically, or artificially, as you like" (*JAR* J 2.7).

Agee's use of collage has a self-referential quality as well. "If I could do it," he claims, "I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and

iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement" (*FM* 10). His reproductions of the texts of fragments of newspapers and the Gudger family Bible, as well as the inclusion of poems, other newspaper articles, the beatitudes, lists of words, and Blake's proverbs, for instance, approximate dada and surrealist collages such as that produced by Julien Levy for *The Super-Realists* (to mention only one example). Agee's appeal to objects is a comment on the inability of writing to embody. However, it also calls attention to the problem inherent in all forms of representation, since these fragments of cloth, cotton, dirt, and excrement, even if they replaced the book, would no longer be themselves but representations of themselves within a larger framework. He continues, "Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game. A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point" (10). Though a collection of objects would be more tangible than words, removed from their original context and made art, they would be just as deceptive and just as likely to be misunderstood as language, which at least is self-evidently not the thing itself. The problem is that "Art, as all of you would understand if you had had my advantages, has nothing to do with Life, or no more to do with it than is thoroughly convenient at a given time, a sort of fair-weather friendship, or gentleman's agreement, or practical idealism, well understood by both parties and by all readers" (323-24). When Agee pleads "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art" (12), he is asking the reader not to approach with any preconceptions, regardless of the book's form.

While Agee insists that art is incapable of reproducing experience, he does not give up on aesthetics altogether. Like the surrealists, he seeks to integrate the conscious

and unconscious and to collapse boundaries between aesthetic categories not so much that art will cease to exist but that art and life will become one. As Agee explains, "Calling for the moment everything except art Nature, I would insist that everything in Nature, every most casual thing, has an inevitability and perfection which art as such can only approach, and shares in fact, not as art, but as the part of Nature that it is; so that, for instance, a contour map is at least as considerably an image of absolute 'beauty' as the counterpoints of Bach which it happens to resemble" (206). As part of nature, art cannot be separate from it; that a contour map resembles the counterpoints of Bach implies that both are images of the shape and motions of the earth. Furthermore, that one "happens" to resemble the others points to the role of chance in the creation of beauty, a theme that Agee emphasizes throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In the "Notes" section following his description of the Gudger house, for instance, he asks, "[A]re things 'beautiful' which are not intended as such, but which are created in convergences of chance, need, innocence or ignorance, and for entirely irrelevant purposes?" and offers this reply:

> I can only answer flatly here: first, that intended beauty is far more a matter of chance and need than the power of intention, and that 'chance' beauty of 'irrelevances' is deeply formed by instincts and needs popularly held to be the property of 'art' alone: second, that matters of 'chance' and 'nonintention' can be and are 'beautiful' and are a whole universe to themselves. Or: the Beethoven piano concerto #4 *IS* importantly, among other things, a 'blind' work of 'nature,' of the world and of the human race; and the partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom *IS* importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem. (178-79)

Agee would return to the idea that chance is "one of the cardinal creative forces in the universe" (339) in "A Way of Seeing," but in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* he anticipates the essay, positing chance as both a source of beauty and a manifestation of desire. By collapsing high and low, art and accident, Agee also demonstrates how chance is integral to the surrealist concept of convulsive beauty.

Building on an idea introduced in *Nadja,* Breton declares in *Mad Love* that "Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be" (19). As is often typical of the surrealists (and Agee), Breton develops the concept through images rather than a precise definition. Breton supplies clues in *Mad Love* to what he means by convulsive beauty through examples of natural mimicry, including a limestone deposit that looks like "an egg in an eggcup" and a coral reef that looks like a garden (10-14). What these examples have in common is that they are both animate and inanimate; blurring the distinction between life and death, they dissolve the boundaries, as sign (garden) displaces referent (coral), between the imaginary and the real. Breton's most important example consists of a description and a photograph of a crystal. He emphasizes that the crystal is "nonperfectible by definition" (11) since it is already perfect. It grows without being alive, and its rigidity, regularity, and luster are the product of the "spontaneous action" of mindless nature, the aesthetic and moral opposite of "a willed work of voluntary perfection that humans must desire to do" (11).

Breton also describes a photograph of a "speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of virgin forest" (10), but does not reproduce it while including a blurred Man Ray photograph (without commentary) of a female tango dancer caught in mid-whirl (20). This juxtaposition (not unlike the relationship between text and

photograph in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) of description (without image) and image (without description) functions as an example of both the "veiled-erotic" and the "fixed-explosive." As Hal Foster explains, beginning with the vine-covered train, "Nature here is vital yet inertial: it grows but only, in the guise of death, to devour the progress of the train, or the progress that it once emblematized. . . . Under this sexual sign [i.e., the consuming forest as "virgin"], nature, like pleasure, is seen to serve death: this image of expiration suggests not only the inertia of the entropic, the regression toward the inanimate, but also the immanence of death in sexuality" (25). As for the dancer, her beauty "is indeed convulsive, at once disruptive and suspended. . . . In this regard the dancer complements the train precisely. . . . For whereas the stalled train represents the expiration of sexuality for the patriarchal subject, the suspended dancer images the sadistic projection of this masochistic expiration onto the figure of the woman: here it is her vital activity that is violently arrested. Again the uncanny confusion of the psychic role of sexuality: does it serve life or death?" (27).[48] Because it depends on the disintegration of the opposition between sex and death, sign and referent, conscious and unconscious, life and art, convulsive beauty destabilizes all categories, creating a tension that admits opposition only as a way of collapsing it. As Breton states, "There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned—convulsive beauty—except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and in its repose" (*Mad Love* 10). In the "Shady Grove" chapter of *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

[48] While Foster's emphasis is on the relationship between convulsive beauty and the uncanny, he does mention the importance of photography to Breton's formulation, noting, "Automatically as it were, photography produces both the veiled-erotic, nature configured as sign, and the fixed-explosive, nature arrested in motion; this is in part why Rosalind Krauss has argued that it supplies the very conditions of the surrealist aesthetic" (27).

Men, Agee evokes convulsive beauty in the image of the tea set he and Evans have bought for Clair Bell Ricketts. In the course of describing the objects left on children's graves, he anticipates that the tea set will soon adorn Clair Bell's as well, "for it will only be by fortune which cannot be even hoped that she will live much longer" (386), and hopes that her parents can provide the other objects he sees on another grave—Coke bottle, milk bottle, headstone and footstone, white dress, epitaph—that will lend material form to their memory and love. The pretty tea set, which he hopes will give Clair Bell pleasure, at least until "the heaviness has sufficiently grown upon her," is in its "daintiness" (386) a reminder of both the fragility of her young life and a symbol of an economic status so far removed from her own as to be unimaginable. What in other contexts is simply the plaything of a four-year-old here becomes the uncanny signifier of death in life, a symbol of her inescapable role as servant to both husband or landlord.

Another reference to convulsive beauty is Agee's description of the Gudger house, in which he invokes an aesthetics of motion in repose in the course of reinscribing the structure, which is "rudimentary as a child's drawing," as "Doric architecture" (127). He calls attention to the fact that the house is where it is solely "by chance" and notes that its existence is "alien" to the land, whose "rhythms" are determined by geological time (129). Lumber has been brought in and "caught up between hammers upon air before unregarding heaven a hollow altar, temple, or poor shrine, a human shelter," but even though the house "for the space of a number of seasons shall hold this shape of earth denatured," it will not matter in the end since, from the earth's perspective, "this house shall have passed soft and casually as a snowflake fallen of black spring ground, which thaws in touching" (130). Agee suspends the house in time; transforming it into a

"tabernacle" (121), he insists on his own incorporeality as he moves throughout its sacred, timeless space. However, even as he describes it in the present, he evokes a future in which the house has already ceased to exist. Having crumbled, rotted, and returned its plot to empty space by the end of time, it serves as a rebuke to the consciousness that constructed it in the first place. This urge to order is manifest in its very boards, however, as is its undoing. As Agee describes the boards,

> in the musculatures of their stripped knots they have the flayed and expert strength of anatomical studies. . . : in the surfaces of these boards are three qualities of beauty and they are simultaneous, mutually transparent: one is the streaming killed strength of the grain, infinite, talented, and unrepeatable from inch to inch, the florid genius of nature which is incapable of error: . . . moreover, since the lumber is so cheap, knots are frequent, and here and there among the knots the iron-hard bitter red center is lost, and here is, instead, a knothole; the grain near these knots goes into convulsions or ecstasies such as Beethoven's deafness compelled; and with these knots the planes of the house are badged at random, and again moreover, these wild fugues and floods of grain, which are of the free perfect innocence of nature, are sawn and stripped across into rigid ribbons and by rigid lines and boundaries, in the captive perfect innocence of science, so that these are closely collaborated and inter-involved in every surface. (128)

In a near-Bretonian description of convulsive beauty, Agee discovers in the weather-beaten boards of a sharecropper's shack attributes both fixed-explosive and veiled-erotic. Natural objects, the boards are also cultural signs, their flayed "musculatures" evoking

"anatomical studies" and transforming Agee's self-appointed religious experience into the dissection, if not violation, of a cadaver. Like Breton's crystals, they exhibit the "florid genius of nature which is incapable of error." Both "streaming" and "killed," they somehow swirl in "wild fugues and floods of grain" while holding their "rigid lines and boundaries." They combine the "free perfect innocence of nature," exemplified by the feminized knotholes, around which the grain "goes into convulsions or ecstasies such as Beethoven's deafness compelled," and the "captive perfect innocence of science," embodied by the house's masculine structural planes. (This image also recalls Evans's portrait of Louise Gudger, whose round hat and face offset her stark, horizontally lined background.) As Agee explains in the passage preceding the excerpt above, the tension that holds the boards that comprise the house together "is of another world and order than theirs"; he compares it to "the grandeur that comes of the effort of one man to hold together upon one instrument, as if he were breaking a wild monster to bridle and riding, one of the larger fugues of Bach, on an organ, as against the slick collaborations and effortless climaxes of the same piece in the manipulations of an orchestra" (127).

As are many of Agee's rhetorical flourishes, this one is a bit baroque. Yet a simile within a metaphor that brings together a virtuoso musical performance with the breaking of a wild monster as an explanation for why a house does not collapse does not seem out of place in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* In fact, this mixed metaphor is a fairly accurate description of Agee's method in the book: he is trying to play an orchestra's worth of instruments without being thrown. Utilizing surrealist and other avant-garde techniques and ideas to destabilize potentially straight narrative, exposition, and description and not-so-straight digressions, hallucinations, and imprecations, Agee

creates a formless structure that somehow coheres, although its order is that produced by chaos. That this formlessness—the book is neither documentary, journalism, novel, nor poem—cannot be ascribed to an existing genre is part of its meaning, since the book's relegation to a readily recognized category would be "the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding" (12). Agee does hint at a structure to guide the reader, though. In "On the Porch: 2," he writes, in a passage that suggests the one-man orchestra, above, as follows:

> It seems likely at this stage that the truest way to treat a piece of the past is as such: as if it were no longer the present. In other words, the 'truest' thing about the experience is now neither that it was from hour to hour thus and so; nor is it my fairly accurate 'memory' of how it was from hour to hour in chronological progression; but is rather as it turns up in recall, in no such order, casting its lights and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience.
>
> If this is so the book as a whole will have a form and set of tones rather less like those of narrative than like those of music.
>
> That suits me, and I hope it turns out to be so. (215)

This fairly forthright statement, written in 1937, does not stand on its own, however; in a footnote to the second paragraph, from 1940 or 1941, Agee extends the comparison, writing, "The forms of this text are chiefly those of music, of motion pictures, and of improvisations and recordings of states of emotion, and of belief" (215n).

While Agee's hope that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* will approach the condition of music is, on one level, an indication of the Romantic strain that runs

throughout the book, countering with powerful emotional identification the empiricism of both the capitalist system that creates sharecroppers and the scientific management by government bureaucracies that makes their condition even worse, it also reveals a desire for the pure abstraction of music, the attempt to embody emotional experience rather than to describe it. In the paragraph quoted above, though, Agee associates musical form most fundamentally with the abolition of linear time, writing that he wants to capture experience "as it turns up in recall, in no such order, casting its lights and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience." In this, he is following Henri Bergson, who distinguished between external, mechanical time, which is time conceptualized as space, and *durée reelle,* or real time, which is subjective and unconstrained, moving freely between past and present. As Bergson writes in *Time and Free Will,* "Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. . . . In recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another" (100). In this formulation, each note exists simultaneously with all the others and is indivisible from the musical structure as a whole. In *Matter and Memory,* Bergson further distinguishes between normal memory and *memoire reelle,* in which past events are preserved in the unconscious in their original intensity and from which the past can erupt into the present. In recall, the unconscious thus infuses the conscious, present experience with more intense meaning and significance. If Breton's convulsive beauty reveals in the fixed-explosive paradox of

motion in repose an uncanny prefiguration of death in life, Bergson's *durée,* through which temporally constrained conscious life may be rejuvenated through accessing the unconscious *memoire reelle,* holds out the promise of life outside of time.

Viewed in relation to Bergson, Agee's equation of the temporal structure of the book with musical form implies a direct link to the unconscious, especially as it relates to the regeneration of conscious life or, as he later phrases it, "the power of sleep and the healing vitality of dreams" (*FM* 200). In fact, the complex of ideas associated with the healing power of the unconscious—whether in memory or dream or through tapping into primitive states—constitutes a structural and thematic bass line for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* over which Agee plays the documentary and journalistic melody. As free expressions of an interior, ever-changing state, the "improvisations and recordings of states of emotion, and of belief" that Agee refers to as the forms of the text mimic the unconscious as experienced in automatic writing, even after—perhaps especially after—they have been artistically arranged. Motion pictures are also like improvisations in that receiving them is largely a passive act, but more to the point is that films, especially silent films (and a book, to the extent that it can be read like a film, is silent), communicate primarily through images rather than verbally. The opposition between word and image is one of the crucial tensions in the book and is evident both in the book's structure as a photo-text and in Agee's constant struggle to give his words sensual immediacy. "[S]ince I cannot make it the image it should be," Agee laments at the beginning of the "Work" chapter, "let it stand as the image it is: I am speaking of my verbal part of this book as a whole" (281).

Whether expressed in terms of consciousness and unconsciousness, time and timelessness, or word and image, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* locates the primitive in a series of binary contrasts in line with other early-twentieth-century models. In *Psychology of the Unconscious,* for instance, Carl Jung distinguishes between reality-based, language-oriented "directed thinking," the purpose of which is communication, and "dream or phantasy thinking" (20), which is passive and characterized by the random association of images. He quotes William James on the latter, emphasizing that it is something not exclusive to human beings: "Our thought consists for the great part of a series of images, one of which produces the other; *a sort of passive dream state of which the higher animals are also capable*" (19). Jung identifies language with civilization and the transmission of cultural knowledge in linear time, imagistic thinking with the unconscious. Drawing on Nietzsche ("In our sleep and in our dreams we pass through the whole thought of earlier humanity") and Freud ("[M]yths correspond to the distorted residue of wish phantasies of whole nations, the secularized dreams of young humanity"), he further develops the "parallel between the phantastical, mythological thinking of antiquity and the similar thinking of children, between the lower human races and dreams. . . . Consequently, it would be true, as well, that the state of infantile thinking in the child's psychic life, as well as in dreams, is nothing but a re-echo of the prehistoric and the ancient" (25). As Breton states in the first sentence of *Surrealism and Painting,* "The eye exists in the savage state" (2).

Agee plays on the primacy of the image to the word throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* associating the interaction between the two forms of communication with the relationship between the unconscious and the way it is reflected in childhood or

primitive states and reason, which distorts it through language. At the end of the book, after the "Shady Grove" passage but before "Let us now praise famous men," "Notes and Appendices," and "On the Porch: 3," Agee begins the "Two Images" passage with this sentence: "The last words of this book have been spoken and these that follow are not words; they are only descriptions of two images" (389). Of course, this is not the final passage of the book, and the descriptions do, in fact, consist of words, but Agee wants to make the reader react to the words as if they were actual images or at least in the attempt to do so to acknowledge the loss of sensual immediacy through intellection that occurs in translation from one form to the other.

Both focusing on twenty-month-old toddlers, the two images are of Squinchy Gudger nursing at his mother's breast and Ellen Woods sleeping on her front porch. Agee writes that Squinchy, "spilled" in his mother's lap like water, "suggests the shape of the word siphon" and that his hands "are blundering at her breast blindly, as if themselves each were a new born creature, or as if they were sobbing, ecstatic with love" (389). His face is "beatific, the face of one at rest in paradise" (389). "I see how against her body he is so many things in one," Agee continues, "the child in the melodies of the womb, the Madonna's son, human divinity sunken from the cross at rest against his mother, and more beside, for at the heart and leverage of that young body, gently, taken in all the pulse of his being, the penis is partly erected" (390). Agee's rendering of this silent image evokes a complex set of connections: not only does he associate music with preconsciousness, drawing on the timeless myth to unite birth and death, human and divine, in the casting of Squinchy as crucified Christ child, but he also underscores the polymorphous nature of desire, uniting sexual and oral fulfillment, as well as

incorporation into the mother, as the attainment of paradise, giving pictorial form to Freud's pleasure principle. Further, Agee identifies Squinchy's hands as creatures in their own right—unconscious, grasping embodiments of instinctual will.

The image is also important as a symbol of the primitive. In *Civilization and Its Discontents,* Freud identifies the child at its mother's breast as the archetypal image of the "oceanic" state that exists before "the primitive pleasure-ego" (14) becomes aware of external reality, the first step toward the formation of the ego that will repress it, not to mention civilization, which is founded on the same principle. Though buried in the unconscious, this "oceanic" feeling—a "limitless narcissism" (20) and a feeling of "oneness with the universe" (21)—has a residual existence into adulthood; Freud compares it to the ruins of ancient Rome that underlie and are evident in various ways in the modern city (17-19). Freud's analogy reflects the idea that individual development recapitulates the evolution of the species, an idea also evident in *Totem and Taboo,* in which he asserts that in the mental life of "savages and half-savages" civilized man can see "a well-preserved early stage of our own development" (3). Agee also explicitly made the connection between psychology and anthropology, writing in April 1936 to his mother-in-law as follows: "V[ia] and I are reading Life on the Mississippi together and after she gets to sleep I read Golden Bough till I get sleepy, which is none too soon. The Twain a very fine book and the other, in a way, above or irrelevant to critical reaction; in the bible and cyclopedia class; very exciting reading especially after having lately read Freud" (1).

In the second image, that of Ellen Woods sleeping, Agee again discovers an archetypal truth in the form of a child, describing her navel as "so dark, the deep hole, a

dark red shadow of life blood: this center and source, for which we have never contrived any worthy name, is as if it were breathing, flowering, soundlessly, a snoring silence of flame" that "shall at length outshine the sun" (*FM* 390). Drawing on the iconography of the *omphalos,* the navel as the center of the world, Agee casts Ellen Woods as cosmic node, an image bolstered by the oblique allusion to Vishnu, the Hindu god of creation, from whose navel grows the lotus flower, from on top of which Brahma illuminates the universe. With these images, Agee underscores the idea that in "every child who is born . . . the potentiality of the human race is born again" (256), but even more important is the extent to which he is able to find in their combination of childhood, the primitive, and preconsciousness the source of his own creativity. As he writes of the ineffable, musical merging of his consciousness with the unconscious of the sleeping Gudgers,

> I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it, sunken in sleep like stones; so that I know almost the dreams they will not remember, and the soul and body of each of these seven, and of all of them together in this room in sleep, as if they were music I were hearing, each voice in relation to all the others, and all audible, singly, and as one organism, and a music that cannot be communicated. (52)

The unconscious and the complex of ideas associated with it—childhood, animals, the primitive, the feminine, music, images as opposed to words, improvisations—are an overwhelming presence in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* The book begins with uncaptioned photographs (images that literally precede language); it ends with the words "we too fell asleep" (416). The "On the Porch" sections, which constitute the philosophical core of the book, take place at night, with everyone inside the

house slumbering, leaving Agee's consciousness alone to wander. For example, "On the Porch: 1" begins in the deep darkness of "entire silence" (17): "The house had now descended / All over Alabama the lamps are out" (15). The family is asleep, as is the dog, and as is "a great portion of all the branched tribes of living in earth and air and water upon a half of a world" (17). The sleep is "in so final depth, that dreams attend them seemed not plausible" (18), and Agee shows that in this sleep the individual unconscious loses its individuality and merges with that of not only the animals and plants but the universe itself: "Fish halted on the middle and serene of blind sea water sleeping lidless lensed; their breathing, their sleeping subsistence, the effortless nursing of ignorant plants; entirely silenced, sleepers, delicate planets, insects, cherished in amber, mured in night, autumn of action, sorrow's short winter, water hole where gather the weak wild beasts; night; night: sleep; sleep" (18). As with the allusion to Vishnu, here Agee evokes a concept from Eastern religion, that of *sushupti,* or deep sleep, in which the self passes beyond dreaming into union with Brahman, or all of undifferentiated creation (296). According to the *Upanishads,* the self, having been incarnated, passes through a series of states "in which its real metaphysical nature becomes gradually more and more plainly visible" and back again; these states consist of waking, dream sleep, deep sleep, and *turîya,* in which "that disappearance of the manifold universe and the union with Brahman on which the bliss of deep sleep depends takes place not as before unconsciously, but with continued and perfect consciousness" (296-97). In "On the Porch: 1," Agee hints at both the notion of deep sleep, the state in which the self finds fulfillment and its "desire has been laid to rest" (Deussen 306), and that of dream sleep, in which "the spirit in dreaming forsakes the body, and 'moves

whither it will'" (303) through the image of the summer night as "prowler" or "straggling camp whore" (*FM* 18). Even after a sigh breaks the silence, the sleepers slip back "not singularly but companionate among the whole enchanted swarm of the living, into a region prior to the youngest quaverings of creation" (19).

"On the Porch: 1" is followed by the "July 1936" section, which consists of "Late Sunday Morning," "At the Forks," and "Near a Church," all of which take place during the day at a specific place and time. However, "July 1936" closes with a short vignette beginning with the repetition of "All over Alabama, the lamps are out" (41), thereby returning to "On the Porch: 1" and enclosing the other three chapters within its dream. In "July 1936," rather than staying on the porch, Agee emphasizes the soul's pursuit in dream sleep of its desire for ultimate union by moving in his imagination out across the fields, past "little towns, the county seats," to Birmingham and then to New Orleans, which is "stirring, rattling, and sliding faintly in its fragrance and in the enormous richness of its lust" (41). New Orleans is not asleep, but even in its "waking pain" it embraces "the tender desolations of profoundest night" (42). The city taps into the primitive unconscious, pulsing with the "black blood drumthroes of an eloquent cracked indiscoverable cornet, which exists only in the imagination and somewhere in the past, in the broken heart of Louis Armstrong" (42). Ultimately, it serves as a passageway: "Beneath, the gulf lies dreaming; and beneath, dreaming, that woman, that id, the lower American continent, lies spread before heaven in her wealth" (42). While "On the Porch: 1" proceeds temporally, beginning in the present and moving back to before "the youngest quaverings of creation," the vignette progresses spatially, moving south from Hale County to New Orleans and then beyond. The ultimate destinations of both

passages are the same, however: the deep unconscious, where time and space dissolve into one another.

Agee represents this deep unconscious as a sexually receptive exotic woman; she "lies spread," waiting for his arrival to assign her treasures. Agee represents the id as a source of "wealth," but his own position is that of the consciousness that recognizes its value. As with automatic writing, the benefits of the unconscious cannot be achieved until it is integrated into conscious life. In order for its healing power to be realized, the id will have to be shaped by reason; as the feminized Other, the unconscious requires a masculine consciousness to complete her. In a draft of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee expresses this idea in similar terms but even more directly, describing the feminized South as passively awaiting his advent by train, as follows:

> In all the ways in which the South is peculiar to itself and distinct from all else it lay out there ahead of me faintly shining in the night, a huge, sensitive, globular, amorphous, only faintly realized female cell, towards which in determined speed, winding and gliding upon rails as upon the always fortuitous and perfect and beautiful preshaping predestination (like the music that remains wound up in silence to be played when the needle has eaten an inch into beyond the slow eating of the needle into the disk) this sperm carrying my little mind and its hungers and intentions, this sperm-shaped, strong-headed, infinitesimal train was traveling to pierce and, in my infinitesimal yet absolute terms, to fertilize. (*JAR* J 1.1)

The South, as the unfocused, "amorphous" potentiality of the unconscious, can have no shape or meaning until it is fertilized by Agee's consciousness. This passage also recalls

the intersection of "chance and need" (*FM* 178) that can produce beauty in Beethoven or the Gudgers' front bedroom, as music here is shaped by the phonograph record, its timeless beauty revealed in the conscious awareness of ineluctable chance spinning it out in time.

While this passage is one of a number of examples of Agee's use of musical metaphors to evoke the tapping of the vitality of the unconscious through a formal structure that allows it to manifest itself in conscious life, he also expresses the idea in visual form. In the first part of "A Country Letter," Agee feels by lamplight in the sleeping house "such holiness of silence and peace" that the type of deep communication that he seeks is possible, writing, "I can tell you anything within realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you, and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it" (46). In the quiet and "frightening darkness," though, his mind begins to play tricks on him:

> so that I muse what not quite creatures and what not quite forms are suspended like bats above and behind my bent head; and how far down in their clustered weight they are stealing while my eyes are on this writing; and how skillfully they suck themselves back upward into the dark when I turn my head: and above all, why they should be so coy, who, with one slather of cold membranes drooping, could slap out light and have me: and who own me since all time's beginning. Yet this mere fact of thinking holds them at distance, as crucifixes demons, so lightly and well that I am almost persuaded of being merely fanciful; in which exercise I would be theirs most profoundly beyond rescue, not knowing, and not fearing, I am theirs. (47-48)

This visual allusion to Goya's *Capricho 43* (*"The sleep of reason produces monsters"*) is apt for several reasons. Complex, unique, and poorly received, just like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Goya's series of etchings *Los Caprichos* (1796-99) passionately indict the social order, picturing the clergy in fool's caps, love polluted by myth, education as harmful (and, in the hands of doctors, deadly), and the ruling classes as asses, riding the backs of the poor. *Capricho 43,* originally the first of the series but moved to the beginning of the second volume when the collection was expanded, depicts the artist asleep, slumped over his table, while being descended upon by menacing bats and owls, one seeming to hand him a chalk with which to begin drawing, as a sharp-eyed lynx keeps watch from behind him. Many critics have taken the legend written on the artist's table—"The sleep of reason produces monsters"—to mean that Goya is identifying unconscious desires as the source of society's ills and advocating the use of empirical reason as a means of overcoming them. However, Goya's own gloss on the etching is more complex. As he explains, "Imagination, deserted by reason, begets impossible monsters. United with reason, she is the mother of all arts, and the source of their wonders" (100). In 1938, Alfred Barr included several of the *Caprichos* (which may be translated "improvisations") in his *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show, recognizing their affinity with the revolutionary movements in art attempting to harness the power of the irrational in his own time. Similarly, Agee's identification of himself as the artist in Goya's *Capricho 43* serves as an acknowledgment of his place within the continuum of artists whose formal experimentation embeds a social critique. It is also a recognition that neither the unconscious nor reason is sufficient in itself. As Agee points out above, the moment when reason thinks it has exorcised the monsters of the

unconscious may well be the moment when it is most fully "beyond rescue" theirs. Goya witnessed the promise of the Enlightenment culminate in the Reign of Terror and bloody wars over French occupation in Spain; Agee's age saw the rationalism of dialectical materialism lead to the Soviet purges and terror famine in Ukraine and democratic capitalism create both the conditions that supported tenant farming and laws that prevented tenants from planting crops. For both, faith in reason alone was as untenable as full abandonment to irrational impulses, as either leads inexorably to destruction.

Yet, despite its possible abuses, consciousness is necessary for the apprehension of truth and beauty. In "On the Porch: 2," Agee describes a mystical experience that he shares with Walker Evans, in which "the whole realm of what our bodies lay in and our minds in silence wandered, walked in, swam in, watched upon, was delicately fragrant as paradise, and, like all that is best, was loose, light, casual, totally *actual*" (*FM* 199). He continues,

> There was, by our minds, our memories, our thoughts and feelings, some combination, some generalizing, some art, and science; but none of the close-kneed priggishness of science, and none of the formalism and straining and lily-gilding of art. All the length of the body and all its parts and functions were participating, and were being realized and rewarded, inseparable from the mind, identical with it: and all, everything, that the mind touched, was actuality, and all, everything, that the mind touched turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth, or rather, revealed, of its self, truth, which in its very nature was joy, which must be the end of art, of investigation, and of all anyhow human existence. (199)

This joyous and transcendent experience of "at least [the] illusion of personal wholeness or integrity" (200) is rare, even though it is "possible at any junction of time, space and consciousness" (199); when it occurs, it is "almost purely a matter of chance" (199). However, its random nature is central to the experience, becoming "inextricably a part of the whole texture of the pleasure: at such a time we have knowledge that we are witnessing, taking part in it, being, a phenomenon analogous to that shrewd complex of the equations of infinite chance which became, on this early earth, out of lifelessness, life" (199). To return to the *Upanishads,* this is a state not unlike *turîya,* in which the bliss of unconscious union with creation is not only experienced but apprehended by the conscious mind. On the one hand, Agee reminds himself and the reader, "we may do well to question whether there is anything more marvelous or more valuable in the state of being we distinguish as 'life' than in the state of being a stone, the brainless energy of a star, the diffuse existence of space" (200). At those moments when we consciously experience "oceanic" oneness with the universe, we should remember that consciousness is what separates us from it in the first place. On the other hand, "it is our consciousness alone that we have to thank for joy" (199), even if it is also the reason we often fall short of it. The unconscious that connects us to "the region prior to the youngest quaverings of creation" (19) and all of existence merely is; for those of us who are living and conscious, life and consciousness are the "special crutches" (200) we need to apprehend it. As Agee writes in "On the Porch: 3," which contains a similar account of being seized by joy, "the ear always needs the help of the eye" (410).

As a means of giving conscious structure to the contents of the unconscious, Agee's sonata form infuses *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with a dynamic of creative

destruction that produces both the dissolution of stable constructs and reconciliation of contradictory ideas. Following Freud and Breton, Agee identifies the unconscious as the source of revolution, a disruptive force that is a constant reminder of the uncanny presence of death in life. Following Bergson and Jung, he represents the unconscious as a source of creativity, the transcendent site of cosmic union. In Agee's hands, these opposing positions infuse one another, allowing metaphors relating to childhood, the feminine, music, images, and improvisation both to signify the unconscious and, as metaphors rather than the thing itself, to destabilize the conscious attempt to give it form. The tension created by the interplay of conscious and unconscious, representation and reality, unifies the text. However, Agee's assumptions about the regenerative role of the unconscious undermine the ethical pretensions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* when extended to the sharecroppers he is supposed to be documenting. Their function in the text is to serve as exemplars of the primitive, another metaphor for the unconscious that Agee is trying to access. As such, they cease to be actual human beings. Agee was aware of the revolutionary potential of ethnographic surrealism in that it represented not only a critique of existing social structures through its examination of exotic cultures but also an alternative to them through a celebration of primitive sensuality. As a critique of liberal capitalism, Agee's depiction of the sharecroppers is effective, but since they are inextricable products of the system, his attempt to offer them as an alternative by transforming them essentially into religious icons is unconvincing. Faced with the impossibility of reconciling the reality of their lives with the demands of art, Agee relegates their existence to a metaphor for his own personal needs.

***Travels in the Congo* and the Limits of Primitivist Discourse**

In the summer of 1936, on a sharecropper's porch in Hale County, Alabama, Agee experienced a joy so profound that its nature is "not only finally but essentially beyond the power of an art to convey" (201). He then spent the next five years attempting to find a way to put it in writing. It is worth reiterating that "North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families" is only the "nominal" subject of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men;* the actual subject is an "effort to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity" (x). Most critics assume that phrases like "unimagined existence" and "human divinity" refer to Agee's deification of a group of people from whom his readers could be expected to be so separated by material conditions as to have almost nothing in common except their humanity—and they do. But they also refer to Agee (and Evans) and the readers themselves. As Agee writes, the book "is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell" (xi). The central fact about George Gudger is that "he *exists,*" but Agee reminds the reader that "I too exist, not as a work of fiction, but as a human being," and "you do" too (9). Agee wants to dissolve the boundaries between life and art, writer and reader, word and image, individual and other, so that the "we" of the "On the Porch: 2" who melts into cosmos will include everyone who picks up the book, and he wants to do so by breaking the formal categories—novel, journalism, documentary—that preclude the possibility. The reader cannot have the same immediate sensual experience as Agee did in Alabama no

matter how well he describes it. The reader can tap the same unconscious root, though, whereby "Everything that is is holy" (406), if Agee shows the way.

Agee's working out of how to represent an essentially ineffable experience gives *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* its dialectic structure, as his repetition of images associated with the formlessness of the unconscious gives them a conscious order, which never quite embodies the experience but does mimic its reconciliation of opposite states, allowing the reader to participate as he moves back and forth through the text. By representing the healing vitality of the unconscious in different forms, Agee is able to play multiple variations on the same theme, all of which reinforce the central idea. As long as he signifies the unconscious through abstractions such as music or the night, he is part of a literary tradition dating back to the earliest mythologies. Agee's portrayal of twentieth-century American sharecroppers as primitives, though, which places them in the same register as stones and fish, is more problematic.

In a draft of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* recounting his drive from Chattanooga to Birmingham that echoes throughout the published text, for instance, Agee generalizes about the inhabitants of the rural South as follows:

> For these people and this country, though they are of our century, and represent a great and ill-recognized weight not only in human existence but in history, do not belong to time as most cities and city people do. It would be no more correct to call them primitive, or medieval, or old-fashioned, than to call them modern: they simply do not belong to time, though they must take part in it; they belong to some other order of existence: just as animals, or uninhabited parts of the earth, do not belong to time in the sense of the word.

> Moreover this is not just true of any part of the country: it is much stronger in the South and has a special quality there. The South is generic, basic, primal, like my idea of what China must be or of what Czarist Russia must have been. And yet in every detail it has edge, and participation and involvement in what we think of as the present. (*JAR* J 2.20)

In a passage that recalls his earlier description of the South as an amorphous egg requiring fertilization by his controlling consciousness, Agee here relegates a priori virtually everyone he will encounter in Hale County to "another order of existence," the mindless equivalent of their mules or dogs or the southern landscape from which they are indistinguishable. Though Agee admits that rural southerners somehow exist contemporaneous with the present, he is obviously more interested in their timeless, primordial qualities. Agee claims to be interested in "human actuality," but this establishing of the type as primary to the individual is the exact opposite of what he purports to be doing in depicting the "cruel radiance of what is" (*FM* 9). According to the dialectic he has set up, Agee needs the sharecroppers to be primitives both so that he can fertilize them and so that they can invigorate him. However, this primitivist discourse depersonalizes them in a way that also serves to undermine Agee's avowed project of capturing their unique existence and so creates a fundamental incongruity within the text, one that Agee will either have to capitulate to or resolve.

That the problems inherent in the representation of the primitive Other destabilize Agee's documentary project in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is evident in comparison to a contemporary work that exerted great influence on Agee's approach to the subject. As he records in his journal on January 10, 1938, Agee paused during his detailed

examination of crime-scene photographs from the pulp magazine *Picture Detective* described in the previous chapter, feeling "tired and restless, and nearly sure to surrender to one form or another of weakness" (*JAR* J 4.4). Rejecting "the pacifications of masturbating" (J 4.4), he turned to a book instead. Reading also failed to soothe him, since the book, André Gide's *Travels in the Congo,* seemed to track too closely Agee's concurrent project of attempting to find a way to communicate his experiences in Alabama. "What I finally surrendered to was reading Gide, the Congo," he writes:

> With about one sentence in every two I knew the mistake I was making [and what] I was doing wrong, for I was disturbed as you are bound to be when you find even minute aspects of your mind, and methods, and technical ideas, anticipated or cut across. I must not touch this book again until I have finished mine, though my own thinking would in some obvious respects gain by it. It causes weakness and paralysis and can indeed suggest death, which it literally is: one 'ego' masked by another, the masking of binary stars. (J 4.4)

Though Gide's journal of his expedition across French Equatorial Africa in 1925-26 has little superficial resemblance to the work that later became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* that it was a source of anxiety for Agee is a clear indication that he saw Gide struggling with the same type of problems of representation in a similar context and did not want to be unduly influenced by it. Despite his warning to himself not to "touch this book again," he was unable to resist returning to it. In late February or early March of 1938, he confesses again to his journal that "I will now read more of the Congo, Gide, as usual with a streak of guilt behind my eyes" (J 4.10). Guilt soon gives way to

acceptance, though, as he admits, "I have thought of trying turning parts of the Congo into my own kind. Maybe I will try it" (J 4.11).

After finishing writing *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-Monneyeurs*) in June 1925, Gide left for a tour of French Equatorial Africa in July, accompanied by Marc Allégret, a family friend thirty years his junior. Though Gide and Allégret, who intended to make an ethnographic film of the region, paid for the ten-month trip themselves, it was officially sanctioned by the French government, which assured them of porters, provisions, and lodging by the colonial administration, and they were expected to make a report on the state of the colonies on their return (Lucey 151-52). For Gide, the journey to sub-Saharan Africa was the fulfillment of a long-held dream; as he records in the first entry in his journal, "I have plunged into this journey like Curtius into the gulf. I feel already as if I had not so much willed it (though for many months past I have been stringing my will up to it) as had it imposed upon me by a sort of ineluctable fatality—like all the important events of my life" (4). Gide apparently expected to find, in Daniel Durosey's words, a "land of natural liberty, of spontaneous eroticism, of infinite sensuality" (qtd. in Lucey 152), and in much of the journal he casts himself in the role of a sensuous and detached aesthete, alternately enraptured and bored with exotic but undifferentiated flora, fauna, and native populations and filtering the experience through readings from the well-appointed library (La Fontaine's *Fables, The Master of Ballantrae, Romeo and Juliet, Elective Affinities, Heart of Darkness*) he had thought to bring along. Traveling by boat, automobile, horseback, and *tipoye* (a chair raised on poles and carried by porters), Gide and Allégret covered more than two thousand miles, from Kinshassa, in the Belgian Congo (modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo), in the south to Rafai, in

Ubangui-Shari (Central African Republic), in the east to the city of Bol, on Lake Chad (Chad), in the north. Gide read, chased butterflies, wrote in his journal, and amused himself with his pet potto,[49] Dindiki, and his teen-aged attendant, Adoum, while Allégret filmed the landscape, the wildlife, and the natives, not all of whom were cooperative. After returning to France in May 1926, Gide published his journal in two parts, *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and *Retour du Tchad* (1928); *Travels in the Congo,* the English translation by Dorothy Bussy of both works in a single edition, followed in 1929. Allégret's film, a hybrid *documentaire* including both unscripted depictions of native life and staged reenactments, was also released in 1927 as *Voyage au Congo: Scènes de la vie indigène en Afrique Équatoriale.*

The publication of his African journals marked a significant change for Gide, who had traveled to the Congo in search of the exotic but instead underwent a political awakening. In October 1925, as he recounts in his journal, in the town of N'Goto, Ubangui-Shari, Gide and Allégret were roused from sleep by a local chief named Samba N'Goto. N'Goto assumed that Gide, because of the official car he was traveling in, was the provincial governor and had come to him at great personal risk to inform him of an incident involving officials of the Compagnie Forestiere Sangha-Oubangui (CFSO), the company that held the rubber concession for the province. On the orders of French company administrator Georges Pacha, a security official named Sergeant Yemba had been dispatched with a small force to punish the members of a village who had refused to relocate. Yemba seized a number of men from several villages and executed twelve of them by firing squad; his men then turned on the women and children with machetes,

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[49] *Perodictius potto,* a squirrel-sized lemur.

killing fifteen. As the coup de grace, he locked five young children in a hut and set it on fire. Though Gide had seen other abuses by this point in his journey, namely collusion by rubber traders to depress prices paid to the natives who harvested it, the enormity of this massacre, coupled with the news of another atrocity committed by Pacha, the "Bambio ball," in which rubber harvesters who had failed to meet their quotas were forced to march in a circle carrying a heavy beam and flogged when they stumbled, forced him to take action. "When I accepted this mission, I failed to grasp at first what it was I was undertaking, what part I could play, how I could be useful," he writes. "I understand it now and I am beginning to think that my coming will not have been in vain" (*Travels* 71). Having realized that Pacha's abuses were "nothing exceptional" (71) in the region, he decided to write to the governor of the province, even though there would surely be reprisals and his letter might be dismissed. In his journal, he records a moment of moral clarity that is also a questioning of his own understanding of the role of artist and his art:

> Impossible to sleep. The Bambio "ball" haunted my night. I cannot content myself with saying, as so many do, that the natives were still more wretched before the French occupation. We have shouldered responsibilities regarding them which we have no right to evade. The immense pity of what I have seen has taken possession of me; I know things to which I cannot reconcile myself. What demon drove me to Africa? What did I come to find in this country? I was at peace. I know now. I must speak.
>
> But how can I get people to listen? Hitherto I have always spoken without the least care whether I was heard or not; always written for tomorrow, with the single desire of lasting. Now I envy the journalist, whose voice carries at once,

> even if it perishes immediately after. Have I been walking hitherto between high walls of falsehood? I must get behind them, out on the other side, and learn what it is they are put to hide, even if the truth is horrible. The horrible truth that I suspect is what I must see. (72)

Despite his previous apathy toward contemporary concerns, Gide deployed his letter to the governor detailing the massacre, the Bambio ball, and other examples of cruelty and exploitation as only the first volley in his attack on the concession system and the CFSO. On his return to France, he sparked a public debate through the publication of an article entitled "La Détresse de notre Afrique Équatoriale" in *Revue de Paris* in October 1927, coordinated with Allégret on the release of his film of the journey, and timed the publication of *Voyage au Congo* and *Retour du Tchad,* the latter including an appendix of notes, letters, and articles documenting colonial abuses, to maximize the exposure of problems with concessionary companies, most of which were operating under thirty-year leases that were scheduled to expire in 1929 (Putnam 105-6). While Gide's goal was to reform rather than abolish the colonial system (indeed, one of CFSO's worst sins was to have failed to make a profit, despite the company's mistreatment of workers), he proved an effective advocate for its victims, and though other forms of exploitation continued, none of the concessions, including that of CFSO, were renewed by the French Parliament (107).

Though *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is not as overtly political as *Travels in the Congo,* the fact that Agee saw his "mind, and methods, and technical ideas, anticipated or cut across" by Gide's journal and that he thought explicitly in terms of "trying turning parts of the Congo into my own kind" suggests that the two works may be

profitably considered, in Agee's term, as "binary stars." In fact, while the structure of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is much more complex than that of *Travels in the Congo,* Agee apparently adopted one of the stylistic devices that contributes to this complexity directly from Gide. Gide's narrative consists of a straightforward, chronologically ordered series of short diary entries, unedited for the most part (Gide removed references to sex with Adoum after consulting with his publisher) and in the order they were written. Gide augments some entries in his journal with footnotes, most of which are explanatory or supply information that he only learned later. However, a number of these footnotes directly challenge the journal's credibility as a factual record of experience, offering alternative readings of entries they ostensibly support. In an early entry beginning with the trial of an "unfortunate" (*Travels* 14) young administrator, for instance, the highlight of which is Gide's capturing a beautiful butterfly that alights on his desk, and ending with a description of the city of Brazzaville, Gide writes, "And then I realize that it is impossible to get in contact with anything real; not that things here are factitious, but civilization interposes its film, so that everything is veiled and softened" (16). Lest the reader become lost in the same exotic haze, Gide here attaches a footnote: "I could not foresee that these questions of dealings with the natives, which are so distressingly urgent and which I had then only caught a glimpse of, would soon engage my attention so much as to become the chief interest of my journey and that I should find in studying them the *raison d'être* of my presence in the country" (16n). Rather than letting the theme emerge over the course of the journal, Gide immediately interposes a competing narrative that will run alongside and correct his initial impressions. Similarly, having left the Congo, where "there are nothing but down-trodden races, not so much vile in themselves perhaps

as made vile by others, enslaved, without an aspiration but for the grossest material well-being," Gide is relieved upon entering the Muslim city of Fort Archambault in Chad to be "on the other side of hell," where "barbarism is behind one, and one enters into contact with another civilization, another culture" (157). Again, he quickly corrects himself in the footnote: "On re-reading these notes they seem to me greatly exaggerated" (157n). After all, he can hardly call others to punish affronts to the dignity of the Congolese if he is unable to see it himself.

As originally published in France, Gide's journals were part of a political strategy, and the footnotes did not stand alone against the text but were part of the documentary apparatus appended to the end of *Retour du Tchad;* as such, they were intended to bolster, as merely one element, the prosecution's brief. In the English translation read by Agee, however, the letters, articles, and other documents were not included, leaving the footnotes with greater weight and more potential to undermine any truth claims asserted by the journal or inherent in its form. Furthermore, the journal itself constantly questions whether the facts can ever be known or justice be done. In the description of the trial of the young administrator mentioned above, Gide notes that the interpreters translated the judge's questions without understanding them, the witnesses testified to crimes committed by the accused that they had committed themselves, and the accused was convicted but his sentence was remitted (15). Similarly, later in the journey, Gide and Allégret attempt to interrogate various people about the forced conscription of the children from a certain village but initially get nowhere. "Is this to be a game of hide-and-seek?" Gide asks and answers, "Then we are determined to play it out to the end" (149). After many circumlocutions and contradictions by various witnesses and officials,

Gide and Allégret eventually solve the mystery to their satisfaction and make their report, but when they return to the village, the children's parents pretend not to understand what they are saying, "so as not to be obliged to answer us" (153). "It is impossible to imagine more wretched objects than these human cattle" (153), Gide concludes.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee uses footnotes in the same way as Gide, mostly to explain or amplify content but often to contest the text proper. The two footnotes on page 214, for instance, read "I am no longer so sure of this" and "This is more complicated now." Though the tension produced by the footnotes in *Travels in the Congo* is between the differences in meaning of the same event at two different points in time, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* operates on multiple temporal levels, not only within individual passages but also between and among them. While individual descriptions or bits of exposition or narrative, like free association or automatic writing, move "forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience" (*FM* 215) and are not bound by linear logic, their relationships to one another are determined both by spatial arrangement and by their order of composition. Agee specifically calls attention to this temporal scheme, dating contemporaneous notes to the summer of 1936, the "On the Porch" sections to 1937, his answers to the *Partisan Review* questionnaire to 1939, and the footnotes to 1940 and 1941. The footnotes, then, having been written last, are both the final word on the volume yet structurally subordinate, and this tension helps to subvert whatever viewpoint is being asserted by the text. As with Gide, Agee emphasizes that truth is elusive and that meaning is contingent on context, which changes according to when it is perceived. Also, as with Gide, the footnotes both conceal and disclose a political transformation. While *Travels in the*

Congo reveals the unlikely politicization of the consummate aesthete, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* begins with an explicit revolutionary agenda but devolves into individual self-actualization.

Facing each other on the two pages following the preface are two quotations juxtaposed to enhance their importance: one from *King Lear,* ending with the admonishment to "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou may'st shake the superflux to them, / And show the heavens more just" (xii), and the other adapted from the *Communist Manifesto:* "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win" (xiii). Embodied in the two extracts are dialectic relationships between empathy and violence, anarchy and organization, art and action. Agee immediately undermines the dialectic, however, by appending a footnote to the second quotation that not only is longer than the quotation it supposedly elucidates but also drains it of any force it might otherwise command. "These words are quoted here to mislead those who will be misled by them," Agee explains. "They mean, not what the reader may care to think they mean, but what they say" (xiii.n). The distinction between what words mean and what they say is a subtle one, though, as connotation requires context. Unfortunately, context will have to wait: "They are not dealt with directly in this volume; but it is essential that they be used here, for in the pattern of the work as a whole, they are, in the sonata form, the second theme; the poetry facing them is the first" (xiii.n). By deferring the definition of the second theme (and by implication, then, the first, as well as how they are supposed to interact), Agee forces the reader to suspend any attempt at understanding or judgment until he has seen or heard the whole composition, which is not (and will never be) complete. "In view of the average reader's

tendency to label," he concludes, "and of the topical dangers to which any man, whether honest, or intelligent, or subtle, is at present liable, it may be well to make the explicit statement that neither these words nor the authors are the property of any political party, faith, or faction" (xiii.n). Reiterating his insistence that the reader not try to make words correspond to preconceived ideas, Agee leaves open the possibility that they may not mean anything at all.

While part of Agee's intention in frustrating the reader is to defamiliarize the act of reading so that he can transcend it, the negation by footnote of the Marxian paraphrase also introduces the theme of political disillusionment into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* through a veiled allusion to the source of its form of expression. After returning from Africa and leading the campaign against the concession system, Gide became a hero to the left, both in France and internationally, and his considerable celebrity as a man of letters was translated into moral authority on a wide range of issues (2). Although he had been committed throughout his career to a moral imperative that placed individual freedom and self-realization above all else, during the decade from 1926 to 1936 Gide became deeply involved in politics, and though he never became a member of the Communist Party, he nonetheless served as a highly visible spokesman for the world-transformative project of the Soviet Union. In 1932, perhaps seeking to justify his previous lack of commitment, he wrote in his journal, "Emotionally, temperamentally, intellectually I have always been a communist. But I was afraid of my own thought and in my writings strove more to hide than express it" (qtd. in Hollander 171); he later vowed that "if my life were necessary for the success of the USSR I would give it at once" (qtd. in March 328). Speaking as an elder statesman of the revolutionary avant-

garde at the First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture in June 1935, Gide declared, "What we expect of [Communism], and what the Soviet Union is beginning to show us after a difficult period of struggles and temporary constraints in expectation of greater freedom, is a condition of society which would permit the fullest development of each man, the bringing forth and application of all his potentialities. In our sad Western world, as I have said, we still fall far short of the mark. . . . As long as our society remains what it is, our first concern will be to change it" (qtd. in Shattuck 154). The most serious problem for the artist, it seemed, was that for the first time there would exist a society to which he would not have to live in opposition.

Just as his Romantic fantasy of sub-Saharan Africa had given way to a debased and brutal reality, though, so would this utopian vision of the Soviet Union as the vanguard of human freedom. From June to August 1936, Gide toured the Soviet Union as a guest of the state-supported (and well-heeled) Union of Soviet Writers, and in November of that year, after his return to France, published a book of his impressions entitled *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* (published in English in 1937 as *Back from the U.S.S.R.*). He had found much to praise, especially the warmth and friendliness of the people he met, but over the course of the trip he gradually discovered much more to criticize. Rather than nurturing individual talents, he wrote, the Soviet system smothered intellectual and political freedom to the degree that "everybody knows beforehand, once and for all, that on any and every subject there can be only one opinion" (*U.S.S.R.* 45). State paranoia produced both an isolation that stifled curiosity about the outside world and an aggressive ignorance that defended it. Instead of a worker's paradise, he found a sharply delineated class system, and the luxury with which his sponsors made sure he

was continually surrounded disgusted him, existing, as it did, as an island in a sea of poverty. Having made a career of championing individual morality, he was disturbed that his homosexuality made him a criminal. Most of all, he was disillusioned with the turn the revolution had taken under Stalin: "We were promised a *proletarian dictatorship.* We are far from the mark. A dictatorship, yes, obviously; but the dictatorship of a man, not of the united workers, not of the Soviets. It is important not to deceive oneself, and it must be frankly acknowledged—this is not what was desired. One step more, and we should even say—this is exactly what was *not* desired" (71).

Condemnation of Gide by the left upon publication of *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* was swift and unforgiving. The same writers in France who had exalted him as the scourge of colonial exploitation now derided him as a capitalist stooge. *Pravda* attacked him as "a kind of Judas"; Sergei Eisenstein and Boris Pasternak, who had entertained Gide just a few months earlier and had tried to warn him about Stalin, were forced to make public denunciations; the worldwide Communist press assailed him as "a traitor, fascist agent, an imposter, a hypocrite, a degenerate" (510).[50] In answer to critics who dismissed the book for its lack of documentation, Gide published *Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* (translated in English as *Afterthoughts: A Sequel to Back from the U.S.S.R.*) in 1937, which took an even harder anti-Communist line and, not unlike *Retour du Tchad,* was augmented with statistics, correspondence resulting from the first book, and other documents. While other writers and intellectuals lost their enchantment with Communism over the course of the late 1930s and especially into the 1940s and 1950s,

[50] To add insult to injury, in 1940 the Nazis attempted to discredit France in the estimation of America and England by using Gide's book as the basis of a propaganda pamphlet entitled *Experiences in the Congo: France's Inefficiency as a Colonial Power* (Putnam 108).

Gide's high-profile renunciation and subsequent public denunciation were the most significant of such events to date. *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* went through eight printings in the first ten months after its initial publication, and by the end of 1938 it had been translated into fourteen languages (510). Gide's book and the response to it sparked debate on both sides of the Atlantic—in America, notably, in *Partisan Review,* whose editors had recently broken with the Communist Party over the issue of freedom of artistic expression.

In January 1938, *Partisan Review* published Gide's preface to *Retouches à mon Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* as "Second Thoughts on the U.S.S.R.," which Gide begins by noting that his Africa journals had provoked the identical criticisms from the right that he was now receiving from the left. On January 10, 1938, Agee wrote in his journal, "What I finally surrendered to was reading Gide, the Congo." It is highly probable that Agee picked up *Travels in the Congo* in connection to having seen the Gide piece in *Partisan Review* or, perhaps, through a mention by Dwight Macdonald or one of the other editors, as he had poems in both the December 1937 and the February 1938 issues and would have been in contact with them throughout that winter.[51] As Gide's politics were in the air and on the pages of the same journal in which he was publishing, Agee would not have read *Travels in the Congo* without thinking of Gide's book—or his own—within the context of Gide's recent transformation, which, by the time of the final revisions to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* could be seen to have anticipated his own.

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[51] Agee's "Lyrics" appeared in the December 1937 edition of *Partisan Review;* "Dixie Doodle" in February 1938.

As was already mentioned, in 1936 and 1937 Agee produced a substantial amount of explicitly Marxist proletarian poetry and published "Art for What's Sake," an essay defending the use of surrealist techniques in service of the revolution, as well as "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House," which put this theory into practice. By 1937 Agee had also begun writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* and early drafts of the book demonstrate that he was still committed to the goals of Communism, if not completely confident in their means of implementation. In the course of a 1937 draft describing his receiving the sharecropper assignment at *Fortune,* for instance, Agee writes,

> Also I am in any case a great deal more a communist than not. Most of the things I felt about the assignment on this score must be self-evident.
>
> Also, though I knew the south, the Tennessee mountain-city-valley aspects of it, I knew little or nothing about the cotton country, beyond a rough idea of the look of it and an even sketchier idea of just what the situation was there, beyond what I had got out of Tobacco Road, some passages in Faulkner, and a few meetings of the Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers, the purpose of which, raising money, was all right enough, but which leaned pretty tiresomely on such words as terrorism and fascism and which by the cheap uses of the word had already made me unable to hear, say or think "sharecropper" without a certain amount of nausea.
>
> The winter before, I had started a novel and had sketched a play and pieces of a couple of movies on the subject, projecting all I could from the mountain stuff I knew, and had given them up in self-disgust.

> Here was a chance to see more than I otherwise could have short of learning how to be of use as an organizer, a thing I had considered but never done anything about.
>
> Also, I was intensely interested to learn all I could about the unions, especially the straight communist Sharecropper's Union; and here was my chance on that, too. I knew I could get help and could get all this stuff. I intended to research and write three pieces: the first on the family, the second a generalized piece, a big fatassed analysis of the situation and of cotton economics and of all Governmental efforts to Do Something about It, which latter I was quite sure could beautifully hang themselves in their own rope; and the third a straight union piece, starting with inch-by-inch process of a couple of organizers opening up new territory, leading that on through night-riding et cetera, and mushrooming it into a history of both unions. (*JAR* J 1.4)

In this excerpt, Agee portrays his interest in and knowledge of tenant farming in terms of union organizing, referring to the Communist-backed Sharecroppers Union, which was a largely underground operation based in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, and the Socialist-led Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which was not active in the state. He also mentions having attended meetings of the Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers, an auxiliary of the International Labor Defense of the Communist Party later absorbed into the League for Southern Labor. Agee's original plan to write a three-part series consisting of a piece on tenant families, an exposé of cotton economics and "Governmental efforts to Do Something about It," and a history of union organizing was radically transformed by the time he finished *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* in part

because of changes in labor relations and particularly the dissolution of the Sharecroppers Union, but there is no doubt that his approach was initially framed by a hard-left political perspective.

Continuing the narrative, Agee writes that he was excited about the assignment and that he spent the first few days "reading up on it, shooting off my mouth about it, and trying to locate Walker Evans and Bob Smith and Beth Mitchell" (J 1.4). While the fact that Agee wanted to work with Evans is well known, it should be noted that here he places equal importance on contacting Beth Mitchell, whom he describes as "a party member whose work is in the South and who for a while if I remembered rightly had worked with the [Sharecroppers Union] in Tallapoosa County Alabama," and Bob Smith, who "was a friend of hers, a communist too, a New York newspaper man. He had never been south but had organized Defense Comm. [and] could and I felt would put me onto some people too" (J 1.4). Smith later gave Agee contact information for organizers in Tarrant City, an industrial suburb of Birmingham that was a center of Communist activity in Alabama in the 1930s. As he recounts in the "Inductions" chapter of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee did, in fact, meet with the organizers in Tarrant City, whom he characterizes as "also spies and enemies of our enemies" (*FM* 329), and one of the reasons he is more interested in George Gudger than the other sharecroppers is that "some of the things he had said made it possible" (340) that he had heard of the Sharecroppers Union. In another draft, Agee is even more explicit: "The very least that can really help [the sharecroppers] is a thoroughly successful and thoroughly communist revolution, and even the communists, in proportion to the relative strength and depth of their knowledge, suffer dangerously from over-confidence and from delusions of

completeness" (*JAR* J 1.10). Though critics and biographers have tended to downplay Agee's connections to Communism, these excerpts demonstrate strongly that he saw himself as a fellow traveler of the party during the Alabama trip and for at least a year afterward.

In "On the Porch: 2," Agee reiterates this commitment but backtracks in a footnote, explaining that the passage, also written in 1937, "is used without revision" (*FM* 220n). "I am a Communist by sympathy and conviction," he avers, but insists that being right does not exempt Communists from "the most dangerous form of pride," which is complacency (220), and he further admits, "I am under no delusion that communism can be achieved overnight, if ever" (221). However, despite its imperfections, it is necessary to continue the Communist project, since "beyond denial, we, human beings, at our best are scarcely entered into the post-diaper stage of our development, and it is common sense to treat us as what we are, and would be as harmful and criminal as it would be foolish to treat ourselves as what we aren't. But it would be bright if the treatment caused us consistently to reach out and grow: you don't clamber out of infantilism by retreating, or staying, or being ordered to retreat, into what any average fool can see is the bedwetting stage" (220-221).

By 1939, though, Agee's support for the revolution had faltered. In "Intermission: Conversation in the Lobby," which contains his unpublished answers to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire on "The Situation in American Writing," Agee responds to the question concerning whether his "writing reveals any allegiance to any group, class, organization, region, religion, or system of thought" (311) as follows: "'I find, in retrospect,' that I have felt forms of allegiance or part-allegiance to catholicism and to the

communist party. I felt less and less at ease with them and I am done with them. . . . I am most certainly 'for' an 'intelligent' 'communism'; no other form or theory of government seems to me conceivable; but even this is only a part of much more, and a means to an end: and in every concession to a means, the end is put in danger of all but certain death" (315). Agee had always had misgivings about the imperfect implementation of Communist ideas—in "On the Porch: 2" he echoes Gide in calling attention to the "social eminence and the high pay" given artists in the Soviet Union as well as the country's "aristocracy of superior workers" (221) as failures of the system—but the goal of the international dictatorship of the proletariat was still worth pursuing. By the summer of 1939, he could no longer justify the means by the ends.

Though the exact reason for and timing of Agee's change of heart are unknown, it was probably the result of some combination of events that may have included the testimony of high-profile "traitors" such as Gide, the Ukrainian terror famine of 1934-35, the revelation of the Moscow show trials of 1936-38 as fraudulent, and the Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact of August 1939. The Moscow show trials, especially, received a great deal of attention in America. When Leon Trotsky, along with many other enemies of the state who were not as fortunate as he to have been exiled, was convicted in absentia of conspiring with Germany and England to reintroduce capitalism to Russia, American Trotskyites leapt to his defense. A Congressional subcommittee led by John Dewey interviewed Trotsky in Mexico and established that the trials were fraudulent and that the charges against Trotsky were "frame-ups." Even for Western intellectuals predisposed to support the ideals of Communism, the reality of Stalinist Russia as manifest in the brazen fabrication of an absurd pretext justifying the execution of an

entire generation of Stalin's political opponents was ample cause for reconsideration of the morality of Communism in practice. In response to *Partisan Review*'s publication of Gide's preface, for instance, Katherine Anne Porter wrote the following in a letter to the editor:

> Doing evil that good may come is the most obvious of all fallacies. The good is problematical, no one can guarantee it: but the end having once been gained, the habit of doing evil remains. Let me tell you frankly: I am not a Trotskyist, but I am not a Stalinist, either. (According to the New Masses line of reasoning, I suppose this makes me a Fascist, or a Hitlerite, or an advocate of lynching, or a capitalist, or an anti-Semite, or a person who beats children. Oddly enough, I am none of these things either.) And some of the reasons for this, after all my years of intense sympathy with the Soviet regime, are given very clearly and sharply in Gide's *USSR Reconsidered.* (62)

Porter was undoubtedly speaking for many of her peers, Agee perhaps included.

While it is unknown when Agee decided upon the combination of excerpts from *King Lear* and the *Communist Manifesto* as alternating themes for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* it is certain that his politics changed during the interval between the time of this initial section's composition and its publication. It is to Agee's credit that he—like Gide—let the original political statement stand, even after he had moved beyond it. If he refused to erase it, though, he also refused to endorse it, as the footnote calls attention to the shifting contexts that may alternately support or undermine any stated political position. Though Agee's original impetus for writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was clearly in line with Communist ideals, he had just as clearly rejected those ideas by

the time of publication five years later. The footnote supersedes the possibility still open in the text that a recourse to politics is achievable or even desirable. Ultimately, then—or, rather, from the beginning—Agee undermines the idea that there can be an "'intelligent' 'communism'" or any political solution; those who persist in believing so will find themselves to have been seriously misled.

Reading Agee's political transformation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* requires an understanding of his treatment of the theme through several versions, including footnotes, that exist simultaneously, but the text also contains an allusion to it that is revealing of more than Agee's disenchantment with Communism. In the list of "Persons and Places" at the beginning of the book, Agee numbers French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline among the "unpaid agitators" (*FM* xvi), and in the "Preamble," Céline is identified as a "madman" and "moreover, a fascist"—in the same way that Jesus is a "dirty gentile" (11). Agee may have been attracted to his cynicism, as Céline's treatment of colonial brutality in *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) is just as disturbing if much less hopeful than Gide's. In fact, Agee probably saw Céline's temperament as closer to his own than Gide's and replaced the older writer with a younger incarnation. Like Gide, Céline had been cured of his illusions about Communism by a trip to the Soviet Union, which he made public in December 1936, a month after the release of *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, through the publication of a pamphlet entitled *Mea Culpa,* and like Gide, he had been excoriated for his honesty. The editors of *Partisan Review,* for instance, who found the whiplash excommunications by the left of formerly politically correct writers a source of great amusement, repeated this nugget from *New Masses:* "Celine, the French merde-writer, came for a brief spell close to Communism, then

departed. Now Celine is an avowed fascist. From merde he came, to merde he has returned" (63). As an "unpaid agitator" in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Céline joins William Blake, Sigmund Freud, Jesus Christ, and others; one of a select company, he is obviously intended to be an important reference point for the reader. But Agee's journals confirm that Gide was a much more important influence, which makes the one reference to him in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* seem less gratuitous than ungracious. Describing various animals kept by the sharecroppers, Agee mentions a "sober, dark-brown, middle-sized dog named Rowdy, who, though he is most strictly suggestible in his resemblance to André Gide, is nevertheless as intensely of his nation, region, and class as Gudger himself" (*FM* 188). By making Céline an "unpaid agitator," Agee signals the significance of his own political disavowal in the book; by substituting Céline for Gide, though, he reveals his own profound anxiety about having "even minute aspects of your mind, and methods, and technical ideas, anticipated or cut across." Concerned that he may be eclipsed by the more mature artist (an unease that may also explain why the retarded man in "At the Forks" looks like D. H. Lawrence), Agee acknowledges Gide in order to deflect attention from him. The fact is, though, that *Travels in the Congo* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are very much like "binary stars," orbiting, if not one another, the same complex of ideas.

On the one hand, there are obvious dissimilarities between Agee's eight-week sojourn in Alabama with sharecroppers and Gide's ten-month journey across West Africa. Agee stayed in one place and tried to understand and represent it thoroughly through a thick description of its most minute details, while Gide was almost constantly in transit, barely able to register one set of impressions before moving on to the next

seemingly identical village or waterfall or jungle landscape. Agee craved acceptance from the people he was writing about; Gide neither pretended nor desired to be anything other than an enlightened outsider. Agee took five years to write what he conceived as a mere prologue to a still unfinished "effort in human actuality"; Gide's goal in repackaging his journal was to effect the immediate political goal of making the French colonial system more efficient and more humane. Agee's book on the experience was an immediate failure; Gide's book, at least in the short term, was a critical and popular success.

On the other hand, there are many more points of correspondence, not least of which is the fact that neither Agee, whose assignment was to produce a magazine piece that showed sharecroppers making do, nor Gide, who was supposed to write a favorable report for the Ministry of Colonies, produced the work that was expected of them—in fact, quite the opposite, as both *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Travels in the Congo* are powerful indictments of the organizations that sponsored their creation. In addition, both works are highly self-referential; as Walter Putnam writes (in a sentence that could just as easily apply to Agee), "The reader who comes to the *Voyage au Congo* expecting to 'see' Africa through Gide's eyes finds the author constantly blocking his view" (93-94). Furthermore, both writers were accompanied by another artist—Agee by photographer Walker Evans and Gide by filmmaker Marc Allégret—who completed separate yet complementary works on the same subjects, and both Agee and Gide employ references to their companions' methods of working as a commentary on their own. There are also coincidences of detail: Agee and Gide both note early on that their watches have stopped, signifying, as Agee puts it, that "time by machine measure was

over for me at that hour" (*FM* 42; *Travels* 19); Agee calls himself a "bodyless eye" (*FM* 164), and Gide laments a missed chance "to have forgotten my own presence and turned all vision" (*Travels* 191). Agee acknowledges a failure of representation in his inability to capture the reality of George Gudger's existence, which is "a much more important, and dignified, and true fact about him than I could conceivably invent, though I were an illimitably better artist than I am" (*FM* 205); concerning the drunken rant of a colonial administrator, Gide admits, "I can only repeat his remarks more or less roughly; I cannot give any idea of the fantastic, uncanny atmosphere of the scene. One could only manage this with a great deal of art and I am writing as it comes" (*Travels* 92). No wonder Agee, when reading *Travels in the Congo,* had such a sense of déjà vu. The most important correspondence between *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Travels in the Congo,* though, is Agee's recognition that he and Gide were struggling with the same fundamental question, that of how to represent the primitive Other.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee explicitly casts the sharecroppers as primitives, emphasizing their essential innocence and ignorance. Mrs. Ricketts, for instance, whose dress "is the most primitive sewn and designed garment I have ever seen" (245), is also "probably indistinguishable from a woman of her class five hundred years ago" (234). Similarly, the Gudgers' house is "very new" but "already, in the sense of scale that country supposes, timelessly ancient" since "from the beginning the tenant types have held a primitive common denominator which has had no reason to change" (183). While "innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads" (10), they are also superstitious. "It is therefore not surprising that they are constant readers of the sky," Agee writes, cataloging a propitious attitude toward weather

phenomena that would not be out of place in Levy-Bruhl's *Primitive Mentality,* "that it holds not an ounce of 'beauty' to them (though I know of no more magnificent skies than those of Alabama); that it is the lodestone of their deepest pieties; and that they have, also, the deep storm-fear which is apparently common to all primitive peoples" (297).

If the white sharecroppers are primitive, though, their black counterparts are even more so and therefore more purely representative of natural, preconscious man. "What a joy to find oneself among Negroes!" (5), Gide exclaims early on in *Travels in the Congo.* He contrasts blacks and whites to the latter's detriment, asserting, "The less intelligent the white man is, the more stupid he thinks the black" (14), and effusing, "What I cannot describe is the beautiful expression of these people's eyes, the touching intonation of their voices, the dignity and reserve of their bearing, the noble elegance of their gestures. Beside these blacks, how many white men would look like vulgar cads!" (185). Agee also sees blacks as superior because they are more primitive than whites. In the notes for "Late Sunday Morning," for instance, in which three black singers perform songs of "nearly paralyzing vitality" (*FM* 26) in a manner "entirely instinctual" (27), he writes:

> We are living in their ancient history. In their histories and social memory, when they are the dominant race and culture, this will be the period of emergence: 1800–2000 A.D.: and these [race] records, for instance, and any movie or written records of their living, will have an almost holy character.
>
> Their mental shape will not be white; the shape won't even be mental at the centre; not on the other hand hindu or any such different organization.
>
> The effort or effect of communism will be to obliterate or in any case poison this character. (*JAR* J 5.1)

Not only does this passage call attention to Agee's evolutionary assumptions, which are fundamental to the intersection of anthropological and psychological ideas that contribute to his representations of the unconscious, but it also applies them to communism—another evolutionary model—in order to contend that rationalism is both opposed and poisonous to the primitive mind. Although there is variation among the styles of clothing worn by white sharecroppers, "among the negroes the original predilections for colors, textures, symbolisms, and contrasts, and the subsequent modifications and embellishments, are much more free and notable" (*FM* 233); furthermore, "negro work and sunday clothing . . . seems to me, as few other things in this country do, an expression of a genius distributed among almost the whole of a race, so powerful and of such purity that even in its imitations of and plagiarisms on the white race, it is all but incapable of sterility" (233). Addressing Fred Ricketts silently, Agee writes of Evans's taking surreptitious photographs, "you never caught on; I notice how much slower white people are to catch on than negroes, who understand the meaning of a camera, a weapon, a stealer of images and souls, a gun, an evil eye" (320).

While Agee and Gide both describe the people they are observing as possessing an authenticity that is directly proportional to their lack of civilization, they also cast themselves as inauthentic in their attempts to access it. Gide, for instance, notes that he is beginning to enjoy his role—"We played the part of great white chiefs with much dignity, saluting with our hands and smiling like ministers on tour" (*Travels* 69)—and even has his retinue stop before entering a village so that he can prepare himself for a grand entrance, which is invariably met, by the women especially, with "a delirious astonishment and rapture that the white traveler should consent to notice their advances

and acknowledge them with cordiality" (59). Hiding in plain sight, though, Gide has become an undercover agent, securing information to be passed on to those who would do his colonial hosts and benefactors harm. Similarly, Agee emphasizes the importance of deception to their project by introducing himself and Evans in the list of "Persons and Places" as spies, and Evans writes in his preface to the 1960 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that Agee "felt he was elaborately masked" (v), even though a good deal of his youthful diffidence and Romantic idealism managed to shine through. This dramatis personae, which gives false names for the sharecroppers and the towns closest to them, produces a Brechtian alienation-effect, as it calls attention to its own artificiality, especially through the listing of people such as Jesus Christ and William Blake as "unpaid agitators" (xvi), thereby undermining any claims to straight documentary.

Such performance also announces that what is to follow is a spectacle. Equally enjoying with Gide the adulation of the villagers who comprised his audience, Agee cannot resist depicting himself and Evans in Emma Gudger's imagination as having "the mystery or glamour almost of mythological creatures" (56), to whom she speaks "as though facing some formal, or royal, or ritual action" (59). Of course, neither project would exist without a fundamental deception of the Africans and the sharecroppers that is also a self-deception. If he had not been mistaken for a provincial governor, Gide would never have learned about the N'Goto massacre and other abuses. His acceptance of responsibility for the information was an act of moral courage, but it was also an act of great hubris in that the end to which he directed it, the amelioration of the colonial system, was, in effect, treating the symptom rather than the disease. Agee, too, was able to gain access to the sharecroppers because, as he admits to them, "you could not get it

out of your head that we were Government men, who could help you" (320). Gide, through his exposé, helped bring an end to some of the worst forms of exploitation in French Equatorial Africa; Agee accomplished much less. Both were actors in a drama larger than themselves, whose roles—as representatives of civilization attempting to make sense of a situation prefigured as its opposite—were largely scripted the moment they stepped onto the stage.

By framing their treatments of sharecroppers and Africans through a primitivist discourse, Agee and Gide associate them with the regenerative powers of the unconscious, the sensual freedom of natural man. The danger in doing so, however, is that such a discourse invariably tends toward condescension or aestheticization; people thus represented become less than human. Gide, for instance, often draws on "the rather unoriginal stereotypes of Africans as mentally limited, sexually precocious, hypersensitive because closer to nature, and devoid of reason and logic" (Putnam 99), which tends to dehumanize them. A group of women who have been forced to work all night repairing a road so that his retinue can pass over it are "poor creatures, more like cattle than human beings" (*Travels* 67); the young son of a local chief crouches "between my knees, like a little tame animal" (128). Alternately, aware that he lacks the conceptual scaffolding to depict accurately what he is seeing, Gide, like most other travelers to exotic lands, translates Africa into a familiar field of reference: "a village in ruins becomes 'a sort of African Pompeii'; gigantic trees do not look older than oaks found in France or olive trees in Italy; the African woman becomes Eve, '*éternel féminin,*' albeit with sagging breasts" (Putnam 98).

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee uses the same type of imagery, but in a way that is more insistent than Gide, so that it calls attention to itself. When he describes the Gudgers' garden as "about two thirds the size of a tennis court" (114), for instance, the comparison, as with the existence of their too obviously middle-class cupboard,[52] "veers so wide of the ordinary as to seem comic or even surrealist in this setting, as a frigidaire might" (158). That the middle-class reader understands exactly what Agee means and the Gudgers do not is the point of the juxtaposition; calling attention to the gulf between their two frames of reference is the first step to bridging them, though the apprehension will have to precede in only one direction, the Gudgers having no reason to compare their garden to anything except what it is. Similarly, in "At the Forks," the second of the three and a half chapters that comprise "July 1936," Agee sets up categories of metaphors for the sharecroppers—as animals or imaginative fictional or mythological figures—that will continue to resonate throughout the text.

At the beginning of "At the Forks," Agee and Evans are lost and far from civilization; they decide that Agee will ask directions from three people sitting on a porch who are watching them "steadily and sternly as if from beneath the brows of helmets, in the candor of young warriors or of children" (30). As Agee comes closer, he sees a young man and young woman "of a kind not safely to be described in an account claiming to be unimaginative or trustworthy, for they had too much and too outlandish beauty not to be legendary" (30). Though Agee reminds himself that "they existed quite

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[52] Agee writes, "It really is a good piece of furniture; and has a sort of middle-class lovenest look to it which connects it to advertisements in women's magazines and to the recipe voices of radio women, so that it is here peculiarly insulting and pathetic; and already it has picked up tenant-kitchen redolences for which it was never intended" (158).

irrelevant to myth" (30), his descriptions of them are of gods who have deigned to dwell on earth for a while. The young man has "the scornfully ornate nostrils and lips of an aegean exquisite," and his eyes, which have "the opal lightings of dark oil," are so intense that they "relaxed me to cold weakness of ignobility" (30). The eyes of the young woman have "the splendor of a monstrance, and were brass" (30). Her body is also "brass or bitter gold" and her "blenched hair drew her face tight to her skull as a tied mask" (30). Sitting "as if formally, or as if sculptured, one in wood and one in metal, or as if enthroned," they look down on their visitors, and in their eyes is "so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves, and toward the damages they sustained, as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude" (30). They communicate "thoroughly with each other by no outward sign of word or glance or turning, but by emanation" (31).

Agee is "transfixed as between spearheads" at the intersection of the gazes of the young man, the young woman, and the third person on the porch, whom he at first mistakes for a man of about fifty but soon realizes is also young, though mentally incapacitated, through his "walleyed" look, the "almost infantine" frailty of his hands, hair, and skin, and his childlike motions, which "suggested rather a hopelessly deranged and weeping prophet, a D. H. Lawrence whom male nurses have just managed to subdue into a straitjacket" (31). While Agee talks with the other two, the third man tries to get his attention, but communication is impossible, as the man can only nod violently and croak "*Awnk, awnk*" in a voice that Agee describes as the "loud vociferation of a frog" (32). The young woman finally reproves him "sharply though not unkindly . . . as if he were a dog masturbating on a caller" and gives him a piece of cornbread, into which he

strikes his face "like the blow of a hatchet, grappling with his jaws and slowly cradling his head like a piece of heavy machinery" (32). Though his keepers consider him "just a mouth" (33), Agee's final image is that of the man "on his hands and knees coughing like a gorilla" (34).

In this episode, Agee completely aestheticizes the first young man and the woman: they are not people but precious objects to behold, worthy of contemplation but ultimately inaccessible to mere mortals such as Agee, to whom they may speak but will not trust. If they are the "furious angel nailed to the ground by his wings" (87) of the "Colon" a few pages later, though, the other man is the "trapped wild animal" (87). He is a child, madman, prophet, artist, beast, alimentary canal, and machine, all variations on the primitivist theme, and just as unknowable as the gods. As D. H. Lawrence, he represents the creative power of the unconscious trapped in a system calculated to suppress rather than utilize it. "Clients of Rehabilitation," these rustic nature deities have been undone by the efforts of the government to regulate farming practices along scientific lines. The second man tries to give back a farming magazine; in the context of this depiction of the fall from natural grace, it, like Agee, is "more stupid than he is" (33). Agee listens to them, and they give him directions to "a lonesome and archaic American valley," but there "we did not find what we sought" (33).

Vacillating between the bestial and the mythological, Agee continually represents the families in terms other than the actually human. Animal imagery, in particular, dominates his descriptions of the children. One "lies sunken along the floor with his soft mouth broad open and his nakedness up like a rolling dog, asleep" (48); another's head falls back "as that of a dead bird" (64). Sleeping, the Woods children are "Pearl, pale,

adenoidal, already erotic; and Thomas like a dance, frog-legged, his fists in his eyes; and Ellen, like a baby, fish-mouthed between her enormous cheeks" (79). Ivy Woods wakes "in the serene quietness of a woods animal, neither tired nor rested, but blank and fresh like water" (79). What do Ivy and her mother dream about? Agee answers rhetorically: "[W]hat are the dreams of dogs?" (69). The Ricketts children are "like delirious fawns and panthers" (285). Regarding their first meeting, Agee apostrophizes: "you children: you started out from behind bushes and hid behind one another and flirted at us and ridiculed us like young wild animals, and even then we knew you were wonderful" (321). Mrs. Gudger is "a scrawny, infinitely tired, delicate animal" (64), but at least she has some capacity for intellection—her sister is "soft as a bloomed moon" and "emanates some disordering or witless violation" (64).

On the other hand, Woods's wife is "a serenely hot and simple nymph" (328), and his daughter Emma, "rather a big child," has the build "of a young queen of a child's magic story who throughout has been coarsened by peasant and earth living and work" (53). In fact, Emma's story has the beginning of a fairy tale in which a princess marries a monster—though in this case there will be no happy ending. While Evans takes their pictures surreptitiously, the girls prepare for their portraits, "standing like columns of an exquisite temple, their eyes straying, and behind, as in a dance, attending like harps the black flags of their hair" (322). The only white man working at the sawmill, George Gudger is symbolically "among these negroes a scarred yet pure white mule, whose presence among them in this magic light is that of an enslaved unicorn" (83). Of a photograph of a young Mrs. Gudger, Agee writes, "she was such a poem as no human being shall touch" (252).

Although he insists that he is attempting to present these families as they are, Agee's tendency to bestialize or aestheticize them demonstrates the difficulty of representing them outside of predetermined primitivist categories. It also renders them totally passive, objects of pity or contemplation for the civilized gaze. Even when he extols their primitive virtues, the effect is ambiguous. For instance, in describing the end of the workday for the Woods family, when they may briefly relax on the porch for a while as darkness falls before going to bed, Agee writes,

> the talking is sporadic, and sinks into long unembarrassed silences; the sentences, the comments, the monosyllables, drawn up from deepest within them without thought and with faint creaking of weight as if they were wells, and spilled out in a cool flat drawl, and quietly answered; and a silence; and again, some words: and it is not really talking, or meaning, but another and profounder kind of communication, a rhythm to be completed by answer and made whole by silence, a lyric song, as horses who nudge one another in pasture, or like drowsy birds who are heavying a dark branch with their tiredness before sleep. (63)

Though "not really talking," the Woodses are still able to communicate, just as horses or birds do; the rhythmic alternation of their grunts and silences produces a "lyric song" that is beyond meaning, emerging from somewhere much deeper than thought and irrelevant to consciousness. Recalling the communication through "emanation" of the young man and woman in "At the Forks," the Woodses' silent conversation anticipates the call and response of the foxes (or what Agee thinks are foxes) in "On the Porch: 3." A purely instinctual act occurring beyond any human intention or comprehension that nonetheless constitutes an "infallible art" (415), the two animals' identical rhythmic calls create a

syncopated pattern of repetition so perfect and so powerful that Agee and Evans break into "a laughter that destroyed and restored us more even than the most absolute weeping ever can" (413). Agee can compare the experience of such spontaneous, sublime joy only to Mozart or Shakespeare or the agony and ecstasy of new love—"the explosion or incandescence resulting from the incontrovertible perception of the incredible" (413n). Like Dante in the Empyrean, for whom the Trinity has "one appearance only [yet] was ever changing as I changed" (*Paradiso* 33.114), Agee asserts that even though neither fox "changed a note or a beat of his call," the fact remains that "certainly, one way or the other, its meanings changed" (*FM* 411). Successively sexual, casual, admonitory, desperate, ironic, laughing, and triumphant, "at all times it was beyond even the illusion of full apprehension, and was noble, frightening and distinguished: a work of great, private and unambitious art which was irrelevant to audience" (412). Paradoxically existing beyond binaries, the foxes' calls reveal "the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and the grief of incommunicability" (414).

That the Woodses communicate in the same way that the foxes do is significant—this is one of the patterns in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to which "On the Porch: 3" supplies a key for re-reading. As Agee writes in his notes for the passage, "The noise itself is exciting nearly to the point of fear with mystery: I don't know any wilder noise in the woods; more entirely alien to human existence; nor with half as much implicit contempt. (The contempt is implicit, though, not real; it is like seeing into the secret life of Negroes)" (*JAR* J 2.7). The foxes' performance collapses the boundaries between instinct and consciousness, life and art, Agee and Evans, the speaker without words and the listener who hears them. The experience is transcendent but not out of this world; it

is, rather, more intensely in it, since it is not the world that has changed but only Agee's ability to perceive it. "It is the sort of mystery," Agee explains, "which we should run against in all casual experience if we found ourselves without warning possessed of a new sense" (*FM* 412). For Agee, the Woodses also generate a "rhythm to be completed by answer and made whole by silence"; horses and "drowsy birds," they are equivalent to the foxes in their access to the unconscious, their pre-linguistic mode of communication deeply profound. While this is a positive association in the context of regenerative primitivism, its implications are disturbing. If sharecroppers are no different from animals, they cannot be expected to act other than instinctually; with no conscious will, they have no capacity for morality; unable to think for themselves, they will have to be controlled by someone able to think for them. Agee's ability to change their silence into song does not ameliorate their situation. In fact, the act of transforming the Woodses' conversation into a "lyric song" is an assertion of the power of consciousness to define the unconscious, as Agee does something to them that they are not able to do for themselves.

Agee similarly situates himself in his discussion of the sharecroppers' capacity for beauty. "I have a strong feeling that the 'sense of beauty,' like nearly everything else, is a class privilege" (277), he writes. Even though he can recognize that "they themselves, and the clothes they wear, and their motions, and their speech, are beautiful in the same intense and final commonness and purity" as virtually everything around them,

> they are little if at all more aware of 'beauty,' nor of themselves as 'beautiful,' than any other member in nature, any animal, anyhow. It is very possible, I would believe probable, that many animals are sensitive to beauty in terms of

> exhilaration or fear or courting or lust; many are, for that matter, accomplished and obvious narcicists: in this sense I would also guess that the animals are better equipped than the human beings. I would say too that there is a purity in this existence *in* and *as* 'beauty,' which can so scarcely be conscious of itself and its world as such, which is inevitably lost in consciousness, and that this is a serious loss. (277-78)

The loss of the purity in existence in and as beauty is one of the things that consciousness—civilization—entails, and this type of pure existence is the goal of the kind of art that Agee, along with the surrealists, is pursuing. There is also something to be said for being able to perceive beauty, however; in fact, the conscious apprehension of the pure aesthetic state as Agee presents it contains the unconscious, but the unconscious can never contain consciousness since it admits no divisions. Agee can see virtually everything the sharecroppers see and more; what he cannot see, they can explain to him in terms he can understand. But they can never see what he sees and would not understand if they could. No different than exotic fauna, the sharecroppers are beautiful, but in order to perceive themselves as such, they could no longer be what they are—innocent, ignorant, and passive, valuable in themselves but unaware of their value, valuable to Agee because he can possess what they do not know they have. In notes to "John Carter," the long Byronic epic he abandoned just before leaving for Alabama, Agee defines civilization as "merely the immense shifting projections of a restless, questioning energy that is the mind & soul of the race" (*JAR* P 2). "It is this energy that is constant," he writes: "it is this that poetry should deal with, should always try to be sensitive to, to understand, to record. . . . Man as set apart from nature: caught in the

torture of a mind: ultimate knowledge will restore man to nature" (P 2). Here he identifies the primary aim of poetry as the reconciliation of man to nature, but this presupposes an earlier separation. The conscious human being is by definition "caught in the torture of a mind" but may be reintegrated with the unconscious through "ultimate knowledge." The dissolution of pure existence is a loss, but it can be recouped by consciousness in a higher form. Agee's words give the sharecroppers' lives a form and meaning they are incapable of realizing themselves.

While Agee's sonata form requires the sharecroppers to exemplify the primitive unconscious—to serve as objects that he can invest with meaning, eggs that he can fertilize—he nevertheless does not allow them to escape the taint of civilization, even though they do not benefit from it. This is another typical theme in primitivist discourse. Gide, for instance, writes of two dishonest servants that they "are thieves, liars, and hypocrites, and would justify the irritation certain colonists feel against the blacks. But that is just it—they are not the natural products of the country. It is contact with our civilization that has spoilt them" (*Travels* 372). Similarly, Agee is so devoted to the notion of primitive nobility that he has to struggle to convince himself of the worthiness of indoor plumbing. "I cannot unqualifiedly excite myself in favor of Rural Electrification," he writes, "for I am too fond of lamplight. Nor in favor of flush toilets, for I despise and deplore the middle-class worship of sterility and worship-fear of its own excrement" (*FM* 185). While he admits that there are some good things, for instance, about electricity and automobiles, they also "have incalculably powerful and in many respects disadvantageous influences upon the mind and body" (185). Only the fact that the sharecroppers, even lacking privies, have neither indoor nor outdoor plumbing and

must "retire to the bushes" (185) allows him to concede the point. "To say they are forced in this respect to live 'like animals' is a little silly," he concludes, "for animals have the advantage of them on many counts. I will say, then, that whether or not The Bathroom Beautiful is to be preached to all nations, it is not to their advantage in a 'civilized' world to have to use themselves as the simplest savages do" (185).

This dismissal of, ambivalence toward, and, finally, concession to civilization offers an important counterpoint to the idea of the primitive as a source of vitality in that it is a reminder that Agee's design in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is to embody a dialectic of conscious and unconscious that aims at "ultimate knowledge." It also points to the inescapability of conscious form that is embedded in the act of representation, regardless of content, as well as to the fact that this form can simultaneously illuminate and distort unconscious materials. While Agee strives for synthesis, he often fails. In fact, the incompatibility of conscious and unconscious, civilization and the primitive is established at the beginning of the book in the chapters that comprise "July 1936" and resonates throughout the text.

As with many other scenes in Agee's work, "Late Sunday Morning" has a suggestive parallel in *Travels in the Congo*. In Bambari, Ubangui-Shari, Gide witnesses a dance that involves a number of pre-adolescent boys, whose bodies are painted white, and black-painted men, who move in opposite revolutions, as well as women and a convulsing demon (*Travels* 55-56). Gide's description is perfunctory, but he adds this footnote:

> This is the dance which is so admirably represented in the Citroën mission's film. But did the members of the mission really believe they were assisting at a very

> rare and mysterious ceremony? "Circumcision dance" the screen calls it. It is possible that the dance may have had a ritual signification in primitive times; but at the present moment the Dakpas, who have been subjected ever since 1909, have no objection to offering it as a spectacle to passing travellers who are curious to see it. When requested, they come down from their village or, more accurately, from the rock caves where they live, north of Bambari, and exhibit themselves for payment. (55n)

In "Late Sunday Morning," Agee and Evans have a similar experience, accompanying a landowner to meet his tenants, even though they are black and therefore, as Agee remarks, "no use to me" (*FM* 24). Soon after they arrive, three young men are summoned "to sing for Walker and me, to show us what nigger music is like" (26). Agee describes their singing as follows:

> It was as I had expected, not in the mellow and euphonious Fisk Quartette style, but in the style I have heard on records by Mitchell's Christian Singers, jagged, tortured, stony, accented as if by hammers and cold-chisels, full of a nearly paralyzing vitality and iteration of rhythm, the harmonies constantly splitting the nerves; so that of western music the nearest approach to its austerity is in the first two centuries of polyphony. But here it was entirely instinctual. (26-27)

By associating the young men's singing with that of Mitchell's Christian Singers,[53] an a cappella gospel quartet whose intense rhythmic style, lack of formal training, and unfamiliarity with canonical spirituals were taken as signs of authenticity, in contrast to

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[53] "Discovered" by John Hammond in 1933, Mitchell's Christian Singers, from Kinston, North Carolina, made a number of recordings from 1934 to 1940. In the "Notes and Appendices" to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee recommends the Christian Singers' "Who Was John" and "My Poor Mother Died Ashouting" (397).

the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a much more polished ensemble made up of university students, Agee is again drawing a distinction between instinct and artifice, privileging the former because of its quality of being relatively uncorrupted by civilization. In his notes to the passage, Agee elaborates, calling the music of the Fisk group "pitiful-to-tragic, and disgusting" (*JAR* J 5.1). "They are every bit 'genuine'," he writes, "but 'genuine' like good house dogs. A smugness in it & what is worse a humble smugness. Nothing left in their voices or music but sweetness though this is of a kind that cannot be matched or faked. They are shifted over in their style into effects: pleasing a benevolent white audience in its idea of what negro music should be" (J 5.1). By comparing the Fisk singers to "house dogs," Agee is emphasizing that they are safe—the polar opposite of art that is "dangerous enough to be of any remote use to the human race" (*FM* 11). Furthermore, their music conforms to a preexisting idea of what white people think it should be, thereby losing any authenticity it might otherwise claim. On the other hand, "There is not an ounce of affect in the Christian Singers, not even at the close, which is always terse. They are absorbed. It is not for publication" (*JAR* J 5.1). Echoing his letter to Evans—"what the hell is anyone doing publishing these things"—Agee casts Mitchell's Christian Singers and therefore the singers in "Late Sunday Morning" as examples of the pure, spontaneous folk art that counters and undermines institutionalized aesthetic production.

Agee's depiction of the singers' authenticity is complicated, however, by his position as an outside observer who determines its value. Just as Gide filters his appreciation for the circumcision dance of the Dakpas through an ethnographic film made by Europeans, Agee appeals to technology—phonograph recordings of Mitchell's

Christian Singers—for the framework for how he should identify and evaluate the Alabama singers. Both Gide and Agee's attempts at contextualization demonstrate perfectly the idea of civilization as controlling consciousness that absorbs, packages, and reproduces experience, fundamentally altering its nature by naming it. The film and the phonograph allow the civilized observer to possess and interpret the primitive activity in ways that the participants cannot anticipate or understand. For Gide, the fact that the dancers perform for pay completely devalues the experience; having been co-opted by Western interests, the dance cannot be an authentic expression of anything besides base economic motives. In the same way, Agee finds his efforts to recognize the singers' "human actuality" severely circumscribed—by his own technologically based conceptual field, by the coerced nature of the performance, and by his participation in the transaction that transforms it into an economic exchange. As he explains at the end of the chapter, "during all this singing, I had been sick in the knowledge that they felt they were here at our demand, mine and Walker's, and that I could communicate nothing otherwise; and now, in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part through. I gave their leader fifty cents, trying at the same time, through my eyes, to communicate much more" (*FM* 28). Just as Gide cannot do anything other than fulfill his role as privileged traveler bestowing gifts on grateful natives, so Agee must follow the script written long before he came to Alabama. As the audience for the spectacle, he is also a participant in it, since it comes to pass only because he is present. His giving the singers fifty cents is an admission that he is fully implicated in the system of exploitation that produces their songs on demand, regardless of their (or his) intentions. It is also an admission that the system is inescapable. The equivalent of the mission film that purports to show an authentic native

ritual but instead co-opts it for its own purposes, destroying its significance in the process, "Late Sunday Morning" constitutes a critique of the culture that by documenting the primitive appropriates it. Agee feels guilty for his part in the charade, but he is trapped, too.

Indeed, the undermining of pure experience by conscious representation in this passage recapitulates the structure of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a whole, as Agee continually asserts the primacy of the unconscious, the primitive, the actual but in the end watches it succumb to the inevitability of the word. This is evident in the other chapters of "July 1936," as well, where the taint of civilization precludes true communication. Because they have been infected by government-approved scientific management practices through a rural rehabilitation program, the young man and woman of "At the Forks" are unable to direct Agee and Evans to where they need to go. In "Near a Church," Agee himself is the problem. The chapter begins with Agee and Evans stopping so that Evans can photograph a church while Agee watches, wondering "what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized, in the leisures and shyness which are a phase of all love for any object" (36). They debate whether or not to break into the church, the better to possess it aesthetically, but when a young black couple passes by, Agee decides to ask them if they know someone who will let them in. At first, Agee describes the couple in glowing terms, noting their "extreme dignity" and their "mild and sober faces, hers sensitive to love and to pleasure, and his resourceful and intelligent without intellect and without guile" (38). Agee walks after them, which they detect, "not through having heard sound of me, but through a subtler sense" (37). They miss his signal to stop, though, and move on, so Agee begins to run. When the sound of his shoe in the gravel

alerts them that he is running after them, the man and woman are suddenly transformed. The woman reacts "like a kicked cow scrambling out of a creek, eyes crazy" and springs "forward into the first motions of a running not human but that of a suddenly terrified wild animal" (38). The man, who now has a "wild face," tries to comfort her, but "the shattering of their grace and dignity" (38) has been too traumatic. Agee apologizes profusely, but, as with the singers, he realizes that the fact that they have stopped to listen to him derives completely from his position as a white man in a power dynamic that requires their obeisance. Saying "the thing that it is usually safest for negroes to say, that they did not know" (39), the man and woman refuse to give Agee any information, and he apologizes again. Having "retreated still more profoundly behind their faces" (39), they watch him walk away. Like "Late Sunday Morning" and "At the Forks," "Near a Church" ends in frustration, as Agee not only fails to discover what he is looking for but also makes the situation worse by attempting to do so.

In *Travels in the Congo,* Gide narrates the story of his conversion from disinterested aesthete to committed advocate, shaping the personal record of his impressions of Africa into an argument for political action. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* relates a quite different tale. Rather than documenting a political awakening, Agee's text discloses the five-year process of his disillusionment with political and aesthetic solutions to human suffering, as the social goals of ethnographic surrealism give way to the individual search for psychological wholeness. The story Agee tells in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is how the political becomes the personal.

"Inductions" and Objective Chance

On the one hand, the false starts in the chapters of "July 1936" serve as a counterpoint to the rest of the text, as Agee does later achieve a relationship with the three families who are the nominal subject of the book and does attain moments of insight that seem to reconcile conscious and unconscious, art and experience in a transcendent balance, if only briefly. On the other hand, they introduce the theme that representation is identical with consciousness and therefore unable to transcend it. The implications of this idea are central to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and explain why Agee ultimately abandoned his attempt to document the lives of sharecroppers and moved instead to depicting his own experience with them as the product of internal necessity. If Agee has previously asserted the need for conscious control of unconscious materials, he finally argues that this relationship usually does not result in a liberation but, rather, a stifling of creativity.

This idea finds its fullest expression in "On the Porch: 2," the intellectual and literal center of the book. Following his description of the "lucky situation of joy" in which Agee recognizes that life and consciousness are the "special crutches" that allow us to comprehend our oneness with the universe, he immediately inverts the argument, writing that life instead is an "ultimately mortal wound," upon which the products of civilization are a "scab" (202). Fields, houses, towns, and cities grow up in the "literal symmetry of a disease," since they are the expressions of consciousness. As Agee explains, "The prime generic inescapable stage of this disease is being. A special complication is life. A malignant variation of this complication is consciousness. The most complex and malignant form of it known to us is human consciousness. Even in its

simplest form this sore raises its scab: all substance is this scab: the scab and the sore are one" (202). What Agee calls "symmetry" is the state in which the scab and the sore are identical; another way to express the idea is "necessity," since there is no way that either can be other than what it is. This symmetry can take different forms; it can approach "simple absoluteness under the imposed rigors of a city, a company town, a series of machines, utter poverty, a flower, a strongly organized religion, a sonata, or a beehive" (203). While cities, flowers, sonatas, and beehives seem to occupy different states or flow from different intentions, they are all "manifestations of being" (203), expressions of an underlying order, which is the product and determinant of inevitable chance. This symmetry, Agee writes, is

> sensitive to shape and quality of land, to irregularities and chances of weather, to the chance strength or weakness and productivity of the individual man or mule, to the chance or lack of efficacy or relative obsolescence of machinery, to meteorological, geological, historic, physical, biologic, mental chance: to other matters which I lack the imagination here to consider. Yet of these irregularities of complex equations, which are probably never repeated, inevitabilities infallibly take their shape. . . . Because it is a symmetry sensitive to so many syncopations of chance (all of which have proceeded inevitably out of chances which were inevitable), it is in fact asymmetrical, like Oriental art. But also, because it is so pliant, so exquisitely obedient before the infinite irregularities of chance, it reachieves the symmetry it had by that docility lost on a 'higher' plane: on a plane in any case that is more complex, more comprehensive, born of a subtler, more numerous, less obvious orchestration of causes. (203-4)

Ultimately, though, since it is so comprehensive, Agee's foray into chaos theory explains nothing by explaining everything, a problem of which he is all too aware. "This hearing and seeing of a complex music in every effect and in causes of every effect and in the effects of which this effect will be part cause . . . 'gets' us perhaps nowhere," he writes, and one "reason it gets us nowhere is that in a very small degree . . . we are already there" (204).

As a search for metaphysical truth, Agee's philosophizing is too circular to be very satisfying, but as an introduction to his disquisition on various genres of writing, it is vital to the structure of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* The fact that "the symmetry and the disease are identical" (204)—that being, life, and consciousness are expressions of the inevitable chance that governs the universe—has fundamental repercussions for Agee in deciding his methods of representation in the book, a process he examines systematically. He begins with aestheticism, which, since it represents only itself and makes no claims on the outside world, has a sort of formal purity that replicates the "symmetry" from which it derives. This formal symmetry, he concludes, "is one strong argument in favor of art which proves and asserts nothing but which exists, as has been dangerously guessed at, for its own sake" (204). However, even the purest, most abstract art falls short of existence, since the most "casual passages in our experience, carry a value, joy, strength, validity, beauty, wholeness, [and] radiance" that "equal in their worthiness as a part of human experience, and of existence, the greatest works of art" (204). In fact, "the best art quite as powerfully as the worst manages, in the very process of digesting them into art, to distort, falsify and even to obliterate them" (204).

Agee next turns to "'fantastic' works of the imagination," which, he claims, "advance and assist the human race, and make an opening in the darkness around it, as nothing else can" (205). Works such as those created by the surrealists and their predecessors "create something which has never existed before, they add to and somewhat clarify the sum total of the state of being" (205). However, George Gudger has an existence "in an actual part of a world" that is "irrelevant to imagination" (205), and Agee's purpose is to capture "that fact that he is exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when and why he is" (205). Though Agee ultimately prefers fantastic art to aestheticism, he admits that memory and imagination "are quite capable of muddying as of clearing the water and frequently indeed, so frequently that we may suspect a law in ambush, they do both at the same time, clouding in one way the thing they are clearing in another" (205).

Journalism, naturalism, and documentary are inadequate to the task at hand as well. Journalism, like art and science, "is true in the sense that everything is true to the state of being and to what conditioned and produced it," but it is poisonous because of its "complacent delusion . . . that it is telling the truth" rather than merely being "a broad and successful form of lying" (207). Similarly, a realistic or naturalistic description can capture "materials, forms, colors, bulks, textures, space relations, shapes of light and shade," and so on but in doing so "gathers time and weightiness" that the scene described does not have; this "in important ways is at the opposite pole from your intentions, from what you have seen, from the fact itself" (208). At its best, naturalism approaches documentary, but documentary "is not of itself either poetry or music and it is not, of itself, of any value equivalent to theirs" (210). Only photography comes close to

"recording and reproducing" reality "for its own, not for art's sake" (206). "So far as it goes," Agee writes, "and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, [the camera] is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" (206). However, the fact that it can so easily capture reality without distorting it is also a weakness, since "this ease becomes the greatest danger against the good use of the camera" (208).

The problem with writing, no matter what genre, is that words "like all else are limited by certain laws" (209). Although they are superior to the instruments of any other art in that they can "be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit," words are also "the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication" (209). Agee identifies two primary attributes of words that impair "the value and integrity of their achievement": "falsification (through inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion); and inability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy" (209). He allows that the modernist "cleansing and rectification of language, the breakdown of the identification of word and object, is very important, and very possible more important things will come of it" (209). However, "Human beings may be more and more aware of being awake, but they are still incapable of not dreaming; and a fish forswears water for air at his own peril" (209).

Words, in other words, are the only tools the writer has, and what he produces will necessarily reflect their limitations. Scientific discourse can describe, but it cannot embody; art is by its nature false. Art, at least, "accepts the most dangerous and impossible of bargains and makes the best of it, becoming, as a result, both nearer the

truth and farther from it than those things which, like science and scientific art, merely describe, and those things which, like human beings and their creations and the entire state of nature, merely are, the truth" (210). However, art requires selection and invention, and "the whole weight of art tradition, the deifying of the imagination" has so inured the reader "to the idea that art is a fiction that he can't shake himself of it" (213). Reiterating that the "centrally exciting and important fact" of his experience in Alabama is that "every force and hidden chance in the universe has so combined that a certain thing was the way it was," Agee laments "that, written, these facts lose so much of their force and reality" (209). In order to approximate the reality of the experience, he will have to find a new form of expression, one that will overcome the "cleavage between the 'scientific' and the 'artistic'" (213). "Isn't every human being both a scientist and an artist," he asks, "and in writing of human experience, isn't there a good deal to be said for recognizing that fact and for using both methods?" (213).

As early as 1932, Agee had written to Father Flye of "inventing a sort of amphibious style—prose that would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression" (*LFF* 48), and although he was speaking primarily of narrative poetry (specifically "John Carter," with its mingling of ottava rima and American vernacular speech), he returns to the idea here, proposing a form of writing that will combine the precision of scientific description with the imaginative scope of art. As he explains,

> I will be trying to write of nothing whatever which did not in physical actuality or in the mind happen or appear; and my most serious effort will be, not to use these 'materials' for art, far less for journalism, but *to give them as they were and as in my memory and regard they are.* If there is anything of value and interest in this

> work it will have to hang entirely on that fact. Though I may frequently try to make use of art devices and may, at other times, being at least in part an 'artist,' be incapable of avoiding their use, I am in this piece of work illimitably more interested in life than in art. [emphasis in original] (*FM* 213)

Though Agee downplays his use of artistic techniques, this blending of art and science is another example of the sonata form that constitutes the dominant stylistic technique in the book, replicating the interplay between conscious and unconscious, word and image, civilized and savage, motion and repose. More important, Agee discloses that his clinical description of the Alabama experience will be transcendent not because of its form but because of its material. He insists that he will "write of nothing whatever which did not in physical actuality or in the mind happen or appear" and he will treat these materials "as they were and as in my memory and regard they are." Unspoken is "as they were in my perception": things "as they were" were things as he saw, heard, touched, and smelled them. Agee will not invent anything, he claims, and for the most part, he is true to his word. But what he describes so faithfully are not the objects themselves but his impressions of them—alone in the Gudgers' house, he confesses, "If I were not here . . . this would never have existence in human perception" (164). Furthermore, he treats actual objects and the products of his imagination equally, describing each with the same depth of detail and seriousness. The demonic forms suspended over him like bats in the darkness are as real as the newspaper clippings in the Gudgers' "tabernacle," and both are as real as Agee's repeated memory of masturbating in his grandfather's house. "Nothing of what surrounds us is object, everything is subject" (65), Breton writes in *Surrealism and Painting,* and Agee confirms it, allowing conscious perception and unconscious

eruptions of *memoire reelle* to point to a deeper order. Emphasizing that life is not just human life, that consciousness is merely a bubble, he concludes the passage on writing in "On the Porch: 2" with a return to a description of the land, lost in memories "of its early childhood, before man became a part of its experience," as its creatures do not "even so much as tolerate the great hypnotized existence, the suspended animation of human life" (*FM* 218) but simply ignore it.

Agee's attempt to contrive techniques necessary to a thick description of his own mind and its unconscious antecedents resulted in a book that defies classification. Agee argued that it should not be a book at all. However, having identified a style appropriate to the "cruel radiance of what is," he writes,

> I think there is at the middle of this sense of the importance and dignity of actuality and the attempt to reproduce and analyze the actual, and at the middle of this antagonism toward art, something of real importance which is by no means my discovery, far less my private discovery, but which is a sense of "reality" and of "values" held by more and more people, and the beginnings of somewhat new forms of, call it art if you must, of which the still and moving cameras are the strongest instruments and symbols. It would be an art and a way of seeing existence based, let us say, on an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms. Nothing that springs from this intersection can conceivably be insignificant: everything is most significant in proportion as it approaches in our perception, simultaneously, its own singular terms and its ramified kinship and probable hidden identification with everything else. (216-17)

With his opposition to art, appeal to scientific discourse, and acknowledgment of inevitable chance, Agee here aligns himself with the surrealists in offering "a series of careful but tentative, rudely experimental, and fragmentary renderings of some of the salient aspects of a real experience seen and remembered in its own terms" (217). "But if that is of any interest to you whatever," he continues,

> it is important that you should so far as possible forget that this is a book. That you should know, in other words, that it has no part in that realm where disbelief is habitually suspended. It is much simpler than that. It is simply an effort to use words in such a way that they will tell as much as I want to and can make them tell of a thing which happened and which, of course, you have no other way of knowing. It is in some degree worth your knowing what you can of not because you have any interest in me but simply as the small part it is of human experience in general. (217)

In this definitive statement of the book's form, the result of a meticulous calculation of the limits and possibilities of representation, Agee makes a casual disclosure that is obvious but needs to be stressed: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has much less to say about sharecroppers than it does about Agee's perceptions of them; in fact, since everything the reader learns about them, not only their physical circumstances but even their thoughts and words, is invented by or filtered through Agee's consciousness, on one level the book is not about sharecroppers at all. Agee wants to make his words "tell of a thing which happened," which, he explains to the reader, "you have no other way of knowing." If the subject were "North American cotton tenantry," the reader could turn to many other resources for information (including tenants themselves or landlords), most of

which are likely to be more accurate than Agee's book and certainly more useful; furthermore, if the reader is Walker Evans or Floyd Burroughs, he knows as much as or more than Agee about the lives of sharecroppers or the economics of tenant farming or the South. The reader has no way of knowing what Agee experienced internally, though, and "the thing which happened" is something that happened only to him and to which the sharecroppers were the proximate cause but ultimately incidental. Agee wants to share a "small part . . . of human experience," but he acknowledges that the reader will have to show at least a minimal "interest in me" to experience it.

While the sharecroppers are the primary subject of the ostensibly documentary chapters that dominate the middle of the book, in the final quarter (the last one hundred pages or so), they are largely secondary. Just as he has to explore various techniques in order to discover the appropriate form for the book in "On the Porch: 2," with the "Inductions" section Agee discovers the purpose of his journey to Alabama. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an unstable text with multiple beginnings and endings and several climaxes and anticlimaxes, but "Inductions"—as Agee's working through of the nominal subject to reveal in it the manifestation of his deepest desire—is its emotional and spiritual culmination, the embodiment in language of the surrealist concept of objective chance.

As with Agee's treatment of the primitive Other throughout the book, there is a connection to André Gide in "Inductions," though it is much less direct. Gide, as a leading man of letters, exemplified the very cultural establishment the surrealists (and Agee) wanted to overthrow, but his ideas and support were nonetheless attractive to them. The surrealists, especially Breton, were drawn to Gide's *disponibilité,* the state of

availability or openness to every new experience, and admired his fictional characters for their refusal to compromise in the pursuit of unconditional freedom. This desire for freedom—sexual, moral, intellectual—was a fundamental posture for the surrealists and was reflected most importantly in their embrace of the liberating possibilities of chance. As Breton writes in *Mad Love,* "Again today, I expect everything from my *availability* [*disponibilité*] alone, from my thirst for wandering out to meet whatever comes, which I am certain keeps me in mysterious communication with other available creatures, as though we had been called to sudden union" (41). Whether disclosed in automatic writing or random encounters or dreams, the hidden workings of chance, they thought, reveal an underlying and unconscious significance in conscious life. Breton, attempting "to interpret and reconcile Engels and Freud on this point," defines chance as "*the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious*" (23). While this is "an admission of the reality of the exterior world" (23), it is also an affirmation of the determinative role of unconscious desire.

While Breton asserted automatism for its own sake in the early years of the movement, by the 1930s he had come to see chance as the expression of an external as well as internal necessity, developing the concept of objective chance, which he identifies in *Mad Love* with the "magic-circumstantial" (19) aspect of convulsive beauty. A detailed examination of a random encounter with an unknown woman that Breton in retrospect realizes has been determined by his unconscious desire for her as revealed in objects to which he is drawn and even a prophetic poem, *Mad Love* is his own answer to a surrealist questionnaire, the answers to which were printed in the journal *Minotaure.* Breton and Paul Eluard had asked, "What do you consider the essential encounter of your

life? To what extent did this encounter seem to you, and does it seem to you now, to be fortuitous or foreordained?" (19). Although the 140 answers to the questionnaire were "quantitatively satisfactory," Breton writes, they also revealed "an unrest of much broader meaning," namely, that of "the paroxysmal disturbance current in logical thought when it has to explain the fact that the order, the goals, and so on of nature do not coincide objectively with what they are in the mind of man" (21). He admits, though, that questions may have been flawed, since they focused on the event rather than the "chain of *circumstances* which produced it" (24). In *Mad Love,* Breton scrutinizes the circumstances leading to his own encounter with Jacquiline Lamba and ultimately the birth of their daughter. What he discovers is that both trivial and meaningful events "share a common denominator situated in the human mind, and which is none other than *desire*" (25). The purpose of the book, then, "is to show the precautions and the ruses which desire, in search of its object, employs as it wavers in preconscious waters, and, once this object is discovered, the means . . . it uses to reveal it through consciousness" (25). While Agee begins *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by depicting chance as the manifestation of external causation, in the "Inductions" section, he inverts the idea, emphasizing how the "chain of circumstances" that allows him to glimpse the significance of his Alabama trip flows from unconscious desire.

"Inductions" begins with the sentence "I remember so well, the first night I spent under one of these roofs" but immediately reverts to "*First meetings*" (*FM* 319), an account of Agee and Evans's initial contact with Bud Woods, Fred Ricketts, and George Gudger and their families. This brief section ends with Agee hoping that Mrs. Ricketts "shall fear us no further, yet not in forgetfulness but through ultimate trust, through love"

(327), but considerable damage has already been done. Fred Ricketts, thinking that Agee and Evans are from the government, gets them to give him a ride out to his place, where he shows them his parched corn and calls his children and neighbors to come have their picture made while Mrs. Ricketts fumes, knowing that they are "naked in front of the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitiableness to be pried into and laughed at" (321). Agee feels sorry for Mrs. Ricketts while Evans secretly photographs her and begs her with his eyes to "know, oh, not to fear us, not to fear, not to hate us, that we are your friends" (322). Freshly scrubbed and wearing their best clothes, the Gudgers then arrive, and George Gudger insists on a family portrait separate from the others against a clean background, further shaming Mrs. Ricketts. Agee emphasizes Mrs. Ricketts's pain and the pain her pain causes him (their "mutual wounding" (327)), but he also reveals in his later rendering of the scene that he is as capable of subtle deception as Evans.

George Gudger obviously knows how he wants his family represented, and Evans takes the picture; Agee admits that his arrangement "is perfectly in one of the classical traditions: that of family snapshots made on summer sunday afternoons thirty to forty years ago" (326). However, though Evans included it in *American Photographs* (1938), this family portrait emphatically does not appear in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* Agee has established a dichotomy in which the sharecroppers are objects rather than subjects, and this requires him to undermine George Gudger's assertion of an aesthetic intention by presenting an alternative portrait of Louise Gudger than the one framed by her father. Seeing her walk up to the Rickettses' house, Agee remarks, "it is entirely obvious that you are not what this dress is pretending you are, Louise, and that the whole

thing is a put-up job" (324-35). Erasing her father's and her own attempts at self-representation, he tells her silently, "there is no other blankness like you" (325)—any meaning or worth she has will come from him. Watching her try not to squirm under his and the camera's gaze, he writes, "I realize a little more clearly that I am probably going to be in love with you" (326). On one level, this is a simple act of usurpation: Agee is claiming possession of her image and displacing her father by calling this act love. In the context of the rest of the "*First meetings,*" though—the open and hidden acts of dishonesty; the violations of privacy, inducing feelings of shame and rage; the refusing the families a voice or a vision of their own—it becomes a stark admission of the problems of representation by a privileged observer of the less powerful. As the first induction, this scene signals that Agee recognizes that, since any description of another is fundamentally deceptive and even hurtful, he will have to turn to himself.

The second induction begins with a short section in which Agee identifies Bud Woods "as a sort of father to us" (327) and quickly moves to "*Reversion,*" which returns to the opening sentence: "But before this there has occurred an incident which helped determine it: that which I spoke of saying, 'I remember so well, the first night I spent under one of these roofs'" (329). He recalls that this incident took place "a time about at the most intense, the most nearly insane, of our frustrations" at not having been able to find "anything which could satisfy our hope, our need, our determination to do truly" (329). Though the repetition of "determine/determination" is an indication that the narrative will be marked by the intersection of inevitability and will, it initially seems little more than a digression, far removed from the subject at hand. Seemingly at an impasse, Agee and Evans decide to escape the pressure of being followed everywhere by

"secret small-town eyes" (330) by prescribing themselves the "medicine" of "a day or two in Birmingham," where they can "use rooms and beds and bathrooms and eat foods and walk through lobbies whose provincial slickness we could simultaneously rest upon and ridicule and in both ways delight in" (329). They can also take care of various tasks and talk with the Communist union organizers at Tarrant City, who are capable of speaking "nearly our own language" and "who at least were also spies, and enemies of our enemies" (329). After weeks in the Alabama countryside, Birmingham seems a comforting urban oasis; Agee finds walking around the "cruel great spread-out country town" (330) as exhilarating as his first trip, at age fifteen, to Times Square. Having been rejuvenated, at least in part, Agee is set to return to Centerboro (Greensboro) the next Sunday by car, but before leaving he lingers over a "large, cold, expensive lunch . . . the way you might unbandage treat and dress some complicated wound on your body" (330) with Evans, who will follow him by train a couple of days later.

When he finally gets on the road, Agee realizes that it is the first time in weeks that he has been alone. Relaxing into the dual pleasures of nicotine and speed, he lies "down into the driving as if into a hot bath" (331) and lets his mind wander. "I knew very badly that I wanted, not to say needed, a piece of tail," he writes, remembering a prostitute in Cherokee City (Tuscaloosa) he and Evans had encountered. Soon, his vague urge begins to take on a life of its own:

> As I got nearer the filling-station-lunch-house where we had seen her, my mind ran on ahead and slowed around her. It lounged around and talked dialect with her and made out what it could about her and where she had come from; then it took her out to an iron bed in one of the pine log cabins out back. The sun

> stenciled an astronomical chart on the drawn, cracked windowshade and slivered through chinks in the logs, and in the odor and shade of heated pine a wasp aligned his nervous noise. I found her body heavy, sour, and wet with the heat on the squealing bed, spongy and so discouraging I was good for nothing, while she grunted lines like got it in good, honey, and, sock it to me, shugah. (332)

Despite the fantasy's unsatisfactory turn, Agee slows as he nears her location "on the chance that my eyes would tell me different from my imagination," but when he sees her "loafed up heavily against the flank of a Plymouth, one thick thigh lifted, lowheeled slipper on the running-board, loosening out like hair her thick whore's dialect upon the white-hatted driver as he drank his dope," he speeds up, leaving both the woman and the fantasy behind and "glad for good and all that I was not going to move in on that piece of head-cheese in such a guy's tracks" (332). The incident does, however, evoke the memory of another woman, Estelle, who is identified in the cast of characters only as "a middle-class young woman" (xvi), but Agee again demurs: she is "not worth the sacrifice of this solitude however well it probably wouldn't work out" (332).

Passing through Cherokee City, Agee heads for Centerboro, where he expects a hostile reaction but finds instead deserted streets and unremitting silence. He slows down to five miles an hour, driving down the main street lined with wooden houses, which are as "numb with sleep as ruins" (334). Their porches are "empty, beyond any idea of emptiness" (334), and the street is as "silent as the crossing of an old-fashioned ferryboat, where no motor was used and the flat barge, attached to a rope, is swung on the bias of the flat stream's relaxation" (335). Again, though, Agee's imagination expands to fill the

emptiness, and he has soon stepped out of himself and onto one of the sleeping houses' porches in his mind:

> On the cool, gray-painted, shaded boards of one of these middle-class porches my body stretched its length and became the loose and milky flesh of its childhood who listened, hours long in the terrible space and enlargement of silence, while the air lay in the metal magnolia leaves asleep, once in a while moving its dreaming mouth on the shapeless word of a dream or lifting and twisting one heavy thigh and creating in the leaves a chaffering and dry chime, and I, this eleven-year-old, male, half-shaped child, pressing between the sharp hip bone and the floor my erection, and, thinking and imagining what I was able of the world and its people and my grief and hunger and boredom, lay shaded from the bird-stifling brilliance of the afternoon and was sullen and sick, nearly crying, striking over and over again the heel of my bruised hand against the sooty floor and sweating and shaking my head in a sexual and murderous anger and despair: and the thought of my grandfather, whose house this now was, and of his house itself, and of each member of his family, and of all I knew so keenly and could never say and of those I too did damage to, and of the brainless strength and mystery behind all that blaze of brightness, all at once had me so powerfully by the root of the throat that I wished I might never have been born. (335)

While there is a brief echo of the "thick thigh" of the prostitute in the wind's "heavy thigh" and dreamlike bargaining, and the location—"on the porch," an echo of the fantasy that is the book itself—underscores the thematic importance of the passage, Agee here even more strongly evokes another episode. In "Shelter," the "inhuman solitude"

(121) of the Gudgers' house triggers the same memory of being left alone in his maternal grandfather's house, where his violent yet unfocused desire manifested itself in "rifling drawers, closets, boxes, for the mere touch at the lips and odor of fabrics, pelts, jewels, switches of hair" (120) and permitting "nothing to escape the fingering of my senses nor the insulting of the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire which was upon me" (120-21). Both recountings of the memory involve solitude and shame, but the earlier confession allows Agee to expiate his sin of "anguish and contempt" (120) and to approach the Gudger home with "no open sexual desire, no restiveness, nor despair" as a "tabernacle upon whose desecration I so reverentially proceed" (121). Desire is sublimated first into the memory of a superflux of fetishized objects and then, "beneath upward coilings of transparent air" (121), into a singular holy object of adoration, the house itself: "a creature of killed pine, stitched together with nails into about as rude a garment against the hostilities of heaven as a human family may wear" (121).

In the second iteration of this onanistic memory—which occurs later in the book but earlier in time, signaling that each must be read in terms of the other, though the second must inevitably lead to the first—Agee emphasizes his "sexual and murderous anger and despair." Rather than a manifestation of Freudian Eros (à la Breton), which transforms the whole world into a transcendent object of desire, the same situation in this instance provokes the death drive, Thanatos (à la Bataille). The thought of the instinctual drive, the "brainless strength and mystery behind all that blaze of brightness" (335), so overwhelms Agee that, realizing the "damage" to his grandfather's house is damage to his own house (here meaning his entire maternal genealogy), he can only acknowledge, "I wished I had never been born" (335). Agee snaps out of his reverie, but the oppressive

silence and heat gnaw at him. Recalling Boiffard's notorious *Documents* photograph, he describes the feet of the few stragglers he finally notices on the street as "dragged in the rich boredom as if in flypaper" (335). "There was not only nothing to do but nothing to talk about," he writes, "and nothing to think about or to have the vitality to desire; there was not even any reason to exist, nor was there enough energy to care that there was no reason" (336). He attempts to call up another erotic fantasy—"I knew that miles out the red road at the swimming pool there would be girls whose bright legs, arms and breasts in the thick clay water warmth would be comforting to look at as they lolled or lifted" (336)—but it, too, succumbs to a hopelessness that expands quickly into almost apocalyptic despair:

> but I knew too that they would be inaccessible, and that I would hate them, and myself, if they were accessible, and that even in their cruel laughter and flirtation there would be the subdual of this sunday deathliness in whose power was held the whole of the south, everything between Birmingham and the smallest farmhouse, and the whole of a continent, and much of the earth. It was like returning several thousand years after the end of the world. . . . But it was worse. For this was not the end of the world, it was contemporary. (336)

The world not having ended, Agee stops to eat.

At a café in Centerboro, he encounters "three hard-built, crazy-eyed boys of eighteen" who look at him "with immediate and inevitable enmity" (336). Agee looks back, "impersonally, almost wishing there might for their sake and mine be a fight" (336), even though "I would have got the hell beat out of me by even one of them, to say nothing of three" (337). The boys do not seem interested in his need for chastisement,

and he casually finishes his tomato sandwich and three cigarettes. A thundercloud rolls in, but Agee is once again frustrated, this time by its false promise of a respite from the heat. Back in the car, he starts to light another cigarette, wet from his sweaty fingers, but stops, once again, as on the porch, immobilized by desire. "There was nothing in the world I wanted so much as a girl," he reiterates, "but she must not be a whore or a bitch, nor any girl I knew well either, but a girl nearly new to me" (338). She would "know enough to be quiet and to talk lazily," and lying in the grass, she and Agee would "very lazily meddle around with each other's bodies, and talk some. It would be pleasant if we were in the course of becoming in love with each other, so long as that wasn't too strenuous, and this fact would from time to time overtake our cool and lazy, semierotic talk with its serious and honorable joy" (338). He continues, "This girl would have a good body in a thin, white cotton dress, and her flesh would have the talent for being cool no matter how closely you touched it" (338). Most important, "she would feel as much as I did the seaweight of broad leaves the summer had brought out above us and how they hung on the air, and the sense of the damned south spread under and around us, miles and hundreds of miles, millions and millions of people, in this awful paralysis of sunday, and the sense of death"; and when he cried "the living blood out of myself, this girl would not only know what it was about but would know that in the only way I would stand for anyone to know it, and we would still be companions in the fall of the afternoon, though we might never find such good of each other again" (338).

This serene fantasy seems to calm Agee somewhat, as its reconciliation of love and death (if a bit Ligeia-like, through the preternaturally cool body of the girl in her white cotton dress) is accomplished through mutual understanding of the pain of the

world. Agee's sense of calm does not last, however, as he turns toward Madrid (Moundville) and sees a few locals looking out at him from their front porches, "turning their heads very slowly, too far gone even subconsciously to be grateful for so small and meaningless a variant" (339). This image triggers a rapid sequence of responses, as the complex of connected ideas that has been building throughout the trip erupts in a burst of free association: "God damn such a life. I began thinking of the girl again. She was all right but what the hell, fantast. Where was I going to get her and would I want her if I had her. If I was ever in my life going to do one page of decent writing or one good minute of movies that was all in hell I wanted and I knew I wouldn't; not by any chance; and that didn't make much difference either. Who the hell am I" (339). Agee initially and instinctively takes refuge from the plight of the poor in the fantasy of the girl, who, among other things, is his ideal reader; his refusal to accept the emollients of imagination in the face of reality causes a crisis in his confidence to communicate with anyone, which in turn leads to his questioning of his identity, which has to be that of a writer or nothing at all. He knows that there "is nothing that exists, or in imagination, that is not much more than beautiful" (339), but he is no longer sure he cares. The passage ends with an outburst of psychoanalytic self-flagellation and the most passionate conversation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* one that he has with himself:

> I could put my foot to the floor right now and when it had built up every possible bit of speed I could twist the car off the road, if possible into a good sized oak, and the chances are fair that I would kill myself, and I don't care much about doing that either. That would do Via some bad damage, just as continuing to live with her is bound to, and just as leaving her is bound to. My father, my

> grandfather, my poor damned tragic, not unusually tragic, bitched family and all these millions of each individual people that only want to live in kindness and decency, you never live an inch without involvement and hurting people and fucking yourself everlastingly and only the hard bastards come through, I'm not born and can't be that hard apparently and God fuck Genius and Works or Art anyway and who the hell am I, who in Jesus' name am I. This is a beautiful country. You can take that and good art and love together and stick them up your ass. And if you think da dialectic is going to ring any conceivable worthwhile changes, you can stick that and yourself up after. Just an individualizing intellectual. Bad case of infantilism. And fuck you, too. (339)[54]

This fierce churning of suicidal thoughts, family entanglements, aesthetics, politics, and psychoanalysis is the antithesis of the "lucky situation of joy" of "On the Porch: 2," though it, too, is characterized by a dissolution of boundaries—the infantilism with which Agee diagnoses himself recalls his other encounters with the "oceanic" state, but here, rather than allowing him to be more intensely in the world, it instead precludes his participation.

The intensity of this diagnosis disguises the fact that it is a misdiagnosis, however, at least insofar as it identifies its elements as ends in themselves. Having driven 135 miles from Birmingham to Centerboro, Agee has been driven himself by an irresistible and ineluctable appetite, alternating between the thirst for sexual fulfillment and the hunger for the rest of death. Largely passing over its spatial and temporal

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[54] This passage was censored by Houghton Mifflin, containing as it does the famous "words illegal in Massachusetts." I have restored the original text, as per Walker Evans's undated letter to Lovell Thompson at Houghton Mifflin regarding the 1960 edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*

aspects, he instead casts the journey as a succession of frustrated urges: the prostitute and Estelle; solitude and masturbation and damage; the bathing girls, the end of the world; random violence, cigarettes; the girl in a white dress who shares his sense of death. It culminates in a burst of profane automatic poetry. The fantasies, the frustration, the despair provide a perfect snapshot of the workings of Agee's id; images propagating themselves in response to lack, they are phantasmagoric emblems of desire.

In the found object alone, Breton writes, "can we recognize the marvelous precipitate of desire. It alone can enlarge the universe, causing it to relinquish some of its opacity, letting us discover its extraordinary capacities for reserve, proportionate to the innumerable needs of the spirit. . . . I am profoundly persuaded that any perception registered in the most involuntary way . . . bears in itself the solution, symbolic or other, of a problem you have with yourself" (13-14). Desire, he explains, is "the only motive of the world, desire, the only rigor humans must be acquainted with" (88). Agee's trip from Birmingham to Hale County takes the form of a series of sexual fantasies, which are continually frustrated, but this frustration is necessary, since the actual object of his unconscious desire is something much deeper and much more meaningful. Agee finally identifies it: "The one I wanted to see was Gudger" (340).

Of the three sharecroppers he has recently met, Agee considers George Gudger the "sorest and most intelligent" (340) and a likely candidate for union recruitment. Agee wants to avoid Bud Woods and Fred Ricketts, if possible, but as soon as he gets near their group of houses, the Ricketts children spot him and run up "with the grinning look of dogs" (341). He asks them for directions to the Gudgers' and is about to leave, when Fred Ricketts turns up and volunteers to ride with him and show him the way. At this

point, Agee abruptly interrupts the narrative with "Yet all this city-business, you can see; you can see how it was not really satisfactory: it was as alien, indeed as betraying, of the true and only possible satisfaction of our need and purpose" as when "a would-be 'artist' breaks down" (343), succumbing to music or movies or sex and alcohol or wandering the streets. The "city-business" is both the literal business of union organizing and all the things that had drawn him to Birmingham and away from the countryside in the first place. The need for urban comforts and conversation was a distraction from his purpose, though, a betrayal of the desire that had delivered him to the South. The healing he had anticipated had instead inflamed the wound.

"All it had brought me was this terrible frustration," he reiterates, "which had in its turn drawn me along these roads and to this place scarce knowing why I came, to the heart and heart's blood of my business and my need" (343). If Birmingham had intensified his frustration, though, returning to the sharecroppers will lead to the fulfillment of his desire. "[A]nd so was I satisfied," Agee writes, "as how can I dream to tell you, first in one incident, so fully it seemed there could be no more, then in a second so rich, so plain and fair, so incalculably peaceful, that the first in retrospect seemed of the ordinary body of events" (344). It is "as if again as of Birmingham it was thirst: as if in some inconceivable thirst and blaze of aridity, you had been satisfied twice over, twice differently, with the first not in the least detracting from the second; two 'dreams,' 'come true'" (344).

Before Agee picks up the narrative leading to the two incidents, he again describes their significance and intensity symbolically, first together and then separately. Connecting the fulfillment of desire back to the frustrations of the drive from

Birmingham to Centerboro, as well as the mystical union of "On the Porch: 2," Agee writes that the two dreams' coming true is as if one of his fantasy girls of adolescence had "materialized before me, smiling gently yet gaily, abolishing all fear save that which is in wonder and in joy, that I might behold and touch and smell and taste her, speak to her, worship her, and hear her words, show her places I had found in walking, music I knew and loved, find that she, too, in a distant city had seen that movie whom few others had noticed and no one cared for" (344). He notes that they will "never hear in our heads the words and the music of 'tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching, cheer up comrades they will come,' without breaking up inside" (344). The allusion is to the 1863 George F. Root composition "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!" written about the Confederate prisoner of war camp at Andersonville, Georgia. Also known as "The Prisoner's Hope," the song expresses from the prisoners' point of view the desire that they will one day be freed by their comrades in arms and allowed to return home. For Agee, the song operates as a point of connection between the girl and himself, even though they each associate it with different wars, but its more significant point of reference is Andersonville itself, which Agee explicitly compares to the plight of the sharecroppers: "you of whom I write are added to the meaning of this song, and its meaning to you: for here, here, in this time; on this vast continental sorrowful clay it is I see you, encamped, imprisoned, . . . so inextricably trapped, captured, guarded; in the patience of your lives; and though you cannot know it you like these prisoners are constantly waiting" (345).

If Agee admits their state of being trapped, though, he also points to the possibility that they will someday be free: "that it shall come at length there can be no question" (346). Within the context of his narrative of inevitable chance that leads from

frustration to joy in the dissolution of the boundaries between desire and fulfillment, Agee is constructing a prison in order to show the light between the bars. As Michel Carrouges explains, writing of surrealism in 1950 but equally explicating the passage above, "In our time, there is no movement of the mind which has put more emphasis than surrealism on the thirst for liberty, for it wants totally unlimited liberty. It is not surprising then that surrealism has taken the greatest care to inform itself of the determinisms that weigh on man, so that it can measure the dimensions of the obstacles that bar the path of the great desire. Finally, no other moderns have experienced so intense a feeling of expectancy" (201). This mixture of determinism, desire for liberty, and expectancy also resonates through the allusion to "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!" that extends to songs that adopted its tune: Joe Hill's cynical "The Tramp," published in the International Workers of the World's *Little Red Songbook* (1913), in which a hobo can find rest in neither heaven nor hell, and "Jesus Loves the Little Children" (1910), by C. Herbert Woolston, combining—with special relevance to this passage in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—expectation of a better world with an implicit colonial theme. Deliverance will come, Agee writes, because "I know in my own soul through that regard of love we bear one another: for there it was proved me in the meeting of the extremes of the race" (*FM* 346).

Agee follows this first set of images ending with a meeting of extremes with two more, the first relating to the first "dream," the second, to the second. The first is "refreshment" to a "thirsting man" who leans back and opens his mouth to receive "more rain . . . than heaven might carry," which, as it falls around him, produces a sound that "is the simple roaring of all souls for joy before God, as I have seen occur a few times when

Beethoven through Toscanini has imparted his full mind (he who truly hears my music can never know sorrow again)" (346). Beethoven's music, which is called "beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous" in the "Preamble," is here pure joy, and the repetition of "He who understands my music can never know unhappiness again" (13) is a reminder of Agee's assertion that he "would be a liar and a coward and one of your safe world if I should fear to say the same words" (13). The achievement of art is a supremely human achievement, the conscious understanding of which in its most intense form is the same joy as undifferentiated life.

The second image of rapture is "quite so silent, and so secret, as the other was wild" (346), but it also recalls earlier passages in the book. Rather than art falling from the sky, here the joy is that of the creative unconscious—as water, as woman—that flows from deep within the earth: "it is in this same thirst the sudden transport, the finding of one's self in the depth of the woods, beside a spring: a spring so cold, so clean, so living, it breaks on the mouth like glass: whereto I prostrate myself as upon a woman, to take her mouth" (346). Since "this joy is human," though, Agee amends the image, writing, "it is not in a woodland I stand, but in a springhouse, of plain boards, straddling a capacious spring, a place such as that which was at my grandfather's farm, with the odor of shut darkness, cold, wet wood, the delighting smell of butter" (346). Significantly, Agee's reference is to his paternal grandfather, whose farm and springhouse are the repository of memories of natural plentitude that stand in stark contrast to those of the pain and frustration he associates with being alone in the home of his mother's father. In the springhouse he sees "between two sweating stones, sitting there, watching me, shining with wet in the dark, with broad affronted eyes, the face and shoulders and great

dim belly of a black and jade and golden bullfrog, big as a catcher's mitt, his silver larynx twitching constantly with scarcely controllable outrage (347).

In order to emphasize the importance of what follows, Agee breaks the narrative of his advent at the Gudgers' by calling up a series of images that anticipate the experience of mystical union: the woman of his imagination who becomes real, the prison that can be opened through love, songs with and without words, water that falls from heaven and streams from the earth—and an outraged bullfrog the size of a catcher's mitt. As the culmination of an otherwise logical succession, this image can only be called surreal. But this frog is a crucial image for Agee, as it symbolizes himself, who hoped to develop an "amphibious style" and later claimed to be an "amphibian" in spiritual matters, claiming to be "pro-religious" while eschewing religion (106). A passive receptacle (in that the mitt awaits the pitch) in the bottom of his grandfather's springhouse, Agee further identifies with the retarded man from "At the Forks" who looks like D. H. Lawrence and croaks like a frog. The man's inarticulateness mirrors Agee's self-professed inability to communicate a truth beyond sorrow. Like Mrs. Ricketts, the frog resents being seen and resists any action other than simply to be.

As Agee resumes the narrative, he and Ricketts pull up to the Gudgers' "holy house" (*FM* 348) and, as a violent storm begins, are invited inside. They sit with the Gudger family under the leaky roof in an awkward silence punctuated for the most part only by thunder and Ricketts's inappropriate comments, but, as Agee writes, "something very important to me is happening, and this is between me and Louise" (352). This is the first incident, the first dream come true. Agee realizes Louise Gudger has been watching

him, and he wants to return her gaze but cannot out of a combination of fear, respect, panic, and love. Finally, he relents, letting

> all these elements, in other words all that I felt about her, all I might be able to tell her in hours if words could tell it at all, collect in my eyes, and turned my head, and stood them into hers, and we sat there, with such a vibration increasing between us as drove me half unconscious, so that I persisted . . . blindly and deafly, and gained a second strength wherein I felt as of a new level, a new world, and kept looking at her, and she at me, each 'coldly,' 'expressionlessly,' I with a qualifying protectiveness toward her from myself, she without fear nor wonder, but with extraordinary serene reception and shining and studiousness, and yielding of no remotest clue, whether of warmth, hatred or mere curiosity. (353)

She looks down, then up again, but "this time," Agee writes, "it is I who change, to warmth, so that it is as if I were telling her, good god, if I have caused you any harm in this, if I have started within you any harmful change, if I have so much as reached out to touch you in any way you should not be touched, forgive me if you can, despise me if you must, but in god's name feel no need to feel fear of me" (353). Despite the intensity of Agee's emotional engagement, though, "these eyes, receiving this, held neither forgiveness nor unforgiveness, nor heat nor coldness, nor any sign whether she understood me or no, but only this same blank, watchful, effortless excitation; and it was I who looked away" (354).

This episode is very literary, or even cinematic—like John Donne's lovers in "The Exstasy" or Dante and Beatrice, Agee and Louise gaze into one another's eyes while a storm rages around them, recalling also Aeneas and Dido, Troilus and Criseyde.

But Louise resists Agee's attempts to write her into his story; she maintains her "blankness' (325) despite his efforts to inscribe his meaning, any meaning, onto her. In fact, there is no indication that the moment holds any relevance at all for her, despite Agee's fears that his impassioned stares have caused a vaguely defined loss of innocence connected with the onset of sexual awareness or puberty. Asserting an existence outside of Agee's ability to define or even imagine, Louise deflects his gaze back onto himself.

While Agee has framed other moments of heightened perception as the union of opposites—conscious and unconscious, word and image—his experience with Louise is characterized by separation. Unable to possess her visually, Agee looks away. By defying Agee's controlling consciousness, Louise forces him to admit that his capacity for representation ends at the edge of his own perception. Though there are instances of transcendental union in the book, these take place at the level of the unconscious, which everyone shares, dissolving any differentiation between individuals. Rather than being transformed by Agee, Louise initiates a change in him. He realizes that she has a reality beyond discourse, literary or ethnographic or otherwise, and though it takes four hundred pages of probing at her existence with every means of art available to arrive at the futility of the exercise, the failure is worth it, as it releases Agee from the impossible project of embodiment of the other to the recognition that the documentary subject is himself. As in "On the Porch: 2," where an experience of oceanic joy leads to a digression on the inadequacies of naturalistic and other types of writing, Agee underscores the importance of Louise's flouting his gaze by demonstrating how the aesthetic form of the situation is transformed.

Once the rain has stopped, the light in the house changes. Agee describes the "personality" of the room and people in it by explaining, "what began as 'rembrandt,' deeplighted in gold, each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean, staring, colorless light, almost without shadow" (356). The movement of the Gudger household from art object to document parallels Agee's treatment of Louise, whose "blankness" he sees initially as an invitation to indulge himself artistically but subsequently as an assertion of her existence apart from him. While a Rembrandt painting is more self-evidently a projection of artistic consciousness, a photograph is as well, and neither is equivalent to the person or object it represents. Once again trapped by the limitations of representation, Agee attempts to move beyond it. Looking outside after the storm, the family discovers that a peach tree has been damaged, and Agee helps repair the tree and sort the windfall. In a scene recalling the morning after the deluge in "Notes for a Moving Picture: The House," Agee describes a world transfigured as the sun invigorates the glistening earth:

> you know well enough how cleansed, and glad, and in what appearance of health and peace, every twig and leaf and all the shape of a country shine in such a light, and can fill you with love which has no traceable basis: well, this beyond such had come at the end of a long and cruel drought, and there was a movement and noise all round me of creatures and meanings where at length I found myself; and that I was not crying for joy was only that there was still so much still to watch, to hear, and to wonder before (358).

As in "The House," Agee generates a new order of existence out of the dissolution of the old. Progressing from painting to documentary photograph, he eschews both for

experience. Surrounded by "creatures and meanings," Agee is filled with love, but he does not pretend that he has become one with the others. Instead of depicting a situation, as in "On the Porch: 2," where "the body and all its parts and functions" are "inseparable from the mind, identical with it," and where "all, everything, that the mind touched, was actuality" (199), Agee here emphasizes that, even though he is in the midst of the same type of joy, he is still watching, listening, wondering. Agee is in the action but not of it; in the changed world, the Gudgers exist as separate creatures with their own reality quite apart from Agee's perception of them. In this world, where the individual consciousness recognizes the other's fundamental difference and accepts it, Agee writes, "at length I found myself."

In *Mad Love,* Breton writes of convulsive beauty—the type of beauty that integrates love and death, motion and repose—that "Such beauty cannot appear except from the poignant feeling of the thing revealed, the integral certainty produced by the emergence of a solution, which, by its very nature, could not come to us along ordinary logical paths. It is a matter—in such a case—of a solution which is always superior, a solution certainly rigorously fitting and yet somehow in excess of the need" (13). At the end of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee details three "inductions," a series of initiations into a deeper understanding of his purpose, beginning with the realization that he has harmed Mrs. Ricketts by appropriating her image, followed by his acceptance of Louise Gudger's refusal to allow him to do the same to her. This acknowledgment of the futility of the effort to speak for the Other has certainly not arrived "along ordinary logical paths"; rather, it is a step for Agee toward, in Breton's words, "the solution, symbolic or other, of a problem you have with yourself" (14). From Birmingham, where

the sore and the scab are one, through frustrated sexual fantasies that climax in a nihilistic "who the hell am I" (*FM* 339) to the Gudgers' front room, Agee has been drawn toward the fulfillment of a desire he has yet to understand, much less articulate, even as he becomes more and more aware of its ineluctability. In finding a solution "rigorously fitting and yet somehow in excess of the need," Agee gives himself over to objective chance.

Although George Gudger invites Agee to stay the night, he succumbs to "some paralyzing access of shyness before strong desire" (358), and leaves, dropping Fred Ricketts off at home before setting off back toward town on the muddy, nearly impassable road. "The joke of this," Agee writes, "was that my forces of will or of wish were crossed on themselves between the curiosity to manage this two miles of road, out of amateurish pride, and the regret that I was not at the Gudgers' and the desire to be there and to have a good excuse for being there" (360). His desire is more powerful than he is, though; he does not mention it, but the subconscious reason for his having left was to dispose of Ricketts so that he can be alone with the Gudgers. He feels the back wheel slide into the ditch and claims not to know "whether or not it was by my will that I wrung the wheel and drove so deep that there was no longer any hope at all of getting it out: but I do know that as I felt it settle it was a thorough pleasure to me, an added pleased feeling of, well, I did all *I* could . . . feeling a smile all over the bones of my face as strange to me as greasepaint" (360). Propelled by desire, Agee relinquishes conscious control of his actions, experiencing a strange, liberating joy in the "happy accident" that has befallen his car. He writes that this joy covers his face like greasepaint, but the clown's mask is only ostensibly a disguise; instead, as with the masks of primitive rituals that allow their

wearers to channel the spirit embodied in them, it signals his participation in something larger, a mythic reality in which he will lose his individual, conscious personality in a timeless, elemental role determined by unconscious necessity.

Having changed his shoes (another symbol of transformation), Agee walks away from the immobilized car, noting that the change in his situation is that between "a conducted tour of a prison and the first hours there as a prisoner" (361). Just as his new mask changes him from spy to accomplice, so does Agee here invert his previous reference to Andersonville, which symbolizes the economic determinism that constrains the lives of the sharecroppers, now equating prison with a state analogous to the Christian yoke of freedom. Before, he has resisted the impetus of desire or tried to shape it to his own ends; now, he is experiencing the freedom of allowing desire to shape him. Looking back, he laughs at the car "and so, too, at myself, marveling with some scorn by what mixture of things in nature good and beneath nausea I was now where I was and in what purposes," and walking on, he watches for landmarks "less by need . . . than for gratification in feeling them approach me once more in a changed pace and purpose and depth of feeling and meaning" (361). As he approaches the Gudger place, he is "thinking, how through this night what seepage in the porous earth would soon express this storm in glanded springs, deep wells refreshed; odors all round so black, so rich, so fresh, they surpassed in fecundity the odors of a woman" (362). Above the ravine "floats the house" (362).

Continuing to stress both the deterministic quality of what is transpiring and how it derives from his own need, Agee writes that "realizing myself now near, I came stealthily, knowing now I had at least half-contrived this" (362). He waits outside the

house in expectation, "aware of a vigilant and shameless hope that . . . 'something shall happen,' as it 'happened' that the car lost to the mud" (362). The dog (the Gide-like Rowdy) barks; Gudger, "ready for trouble," asks who it is; Agee identifies himself; Gudger softens and invites him in, explaining, as Agee writes, that "he had thought I was a nigger" (382). For Agee, this association underscores the previous image of his being masked, signaling his participation in a primitive ritual of identification with something deep within the self. Even after he enters the house, Agee feels Gudger's "antagonism and fear," which are directed "toward the negro he thought I was" (363). The situation soon develops into another ritual, though, that of the hospitable feeding of a guest, and Mrs. Gudger, "sleepy as a child" (364), plays her role, preparing a meal for Agee despite his protestations. This is the beginning of the third induction.

Agee writes that he has "lost hold of the reality of all this," running back through "[t]his country, these roads, these odors and noises, the action of walking the dark in mud, the approach," and so on, until he has come back to the room where he and George and Annie Mae Gudger sit and eat and "care toward one another like three mild lanterns held each at the met heads of strangers in darkness," but, he admits, "I have not managed to give their truth in words, which are a soft, plain-featured, and noble music" (364-65). Eating from "unsorted plates with tin-tasting implements the heavy, plain traditional food which was spread before me," Agee begins to experience a deep connection, not with the Gudgers, but with his own heritage through them. He writes,

> the feeling increased itself upon me that at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home, between two who were my brother and my sister, yet less that than

> something else; these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents, in whose patience I was so different, so diverged, so strange as I was. (365)

Rather than capturing the reality of the Gudgers' existence, Agee finds in them the source of his own. Having been transformed by his imagination into his parents, they provide him with a glimpse of his origin, which emphasizes not his oneness with them but his difference from them and everyone else, his individuality, his strangeness. Even though this is his first night at the Gudger house, Agee writes, "all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing else on earth, and as if well known in a deep past and long years lost; so that I could wish that all my chance life was in truth the betrayal, the curable delusion, that it seemed, and that this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right" (365). Reverting to the notion of chance as external causation rather than internal necessity, Agee contrasts the person he has become with "right home, right earth, right blood" from which he has been separated, but he feels the pull of this legacy, particularly as it is his through his father, who at the time had been dead for twenty-one years. In fact, his father is the opposite of the betrayal and delusion of an educated, middle-class existence that Agee identifies as having made his life false and unhealthy. In order to be cured, he will have to reach back to a more simple, primitive source of meaning, and he realizes that it is to this reconciliation—with himself through the unwitting intercession of the sharecroppers—that he has been called. His induction into a deeper understanding of the uncorrupted life he associates with his father's mountain heritage is not a universal experience, though, and while he insists he has no right to it, it

is his alone. His father's death left his mother to shape his sensibilities, and the course that his life has taken—from Saint Andrew's to Philips Exeter to Harvard to *Fortune* magazine—suddenly seems a repudiation of his paternal lineage, the reassertion of which is the end to which his subconscious has driven him without his knowing why to this room on this night in Alabama. "For half my blood is just this," he writes, "and half my right of speech; and by bland chance alone is my life so softened and sophisticated in the years of my defenselessness, and I am robbed of a royalty I can not only never claim, but never properly much desire or regret" (365). Agee maintains that he has been unable "properly" to regret the loss of his paternal birthright or to desire what he did not know he was missing, but "properly" should be read as "consciously," since everything that has happened (or, to adopt Agee's tic, "happened") to this point in the narrative is the manifestation of his unconscious desire to recover the one thing the loss of which more than anything else has defined him. In the conclusion to the passage, Agee steps out of the scene, commenting from the position of remembrance: "And so in this quiet introit, and in all the time we have stayed in this house, and in all we have sought, and in each detail of it, there is so keen, sad, and precious a nostalgia as I can scarcely otherwise know; a knowledge of brief truancy into the sources of my life, whereto I have no rightful access, having paid no price beyond love and sorrow" (365-66). Notably, the Gudgers are absent in this summation—the "we" is Agee and Evans, which soon contracts to "I." Apart from fulfilling their role as a conduit for Agee "into the sources of my life," they are not particularly relevant to the meaning of the moment.

Agee finishes eating and talking with the Gudgers, and when it is time for them to go (back) to sleep, they make the children get up and give Agee their "child-warmed bed"

(369). Having been driven by the desire to reclaim his father, whom he discovers in George Gudger, Agee finds himself literally taking the place of a child (and by the end of the "Inductions" section will have symbolically regressed even further by crawling in his memory into a culvert). Once alone and in the children's bed, he provides a description by lamplight of the room, the centerpiece of which is the family Bible, a New Testament given to George Gudger by his wife in honor of their wedding. Though it seems digressive, this break in the narrative actually serves two functions. The first is to reiterate the major theme of the preceding passage, as Agee reproduces the Bible's "Family Record" page, which lists the names of family members and dates of birth, marriage, and death (372-73). This document is more than a mere source of information—it signifies generational continuity and positions each person within a meaningful context that transcends the limits of temporal existence, exactly what Agee has lost and hopes to regain through identification with his father's line. He further establishes this point by including the epigraph from the title page, Malachi 4:6: "And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (371). In addition to highlighting the relationship between children and fathers, the verse casts Agee's previous reference to his life as a betrayal and a delusion as the result of a curse from his having not attended to the paternal half of his lineage.

As with earlier digressions, though, Agee also uses the Gudger Bible as a commentary on the form of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The two-page family record is printed so as to give the illusion of being actual pages from a Bible, and the names and dates are in cursive script so as to imitate handwriting. There are even a

couple of squiggly, ostensibly hand-drawn lines. Through this elaborate typesetting, Agee is signaling that these pages constitute a document, a faithfully rendered record, even down to the reproduction of errors made in the original. By attempting to make it more like the original document, however, Agee demonstrates how artificial the act of reproduction is. The pages are obviously not the document itself—not only is the script twice removed from the handwriting of the original by the way of Agee's notes, but the names have been changed as well. In other words, the documentary value of the reproduction, that is, the extent to which it is an unaltered and accurate source of information, is nonexistent. Occurring as it does at a critical point in Agee's narrative of his recognition that his subject is not the sharecroppers but himself, this passage calls into question the documentary value of Evans's photographs and Agee's words as well. Sounding a warning that the representation with the greatest claim to accuracy is by virtue of that fact the least trustworthy, Agee reminds the reader that, to the extent that it functions as a document, the book is not an accurate depiction of sharecroppers' lives but a record of an individual self-realization.

The next passage, "In the Room: In Bed," returns Agee to the center of the narrative, as he recounts being bitten by bedbugs, which is extremely uncomfortable at first but which he comes to accept, even to find pleasure in, as a heightened sensual experience. While this scene is justly acclaimed for its powerful evocation of one of the casual and ubiquitous indignities that constitute the sharecroppers' lives, it should not be overlooked that its ending is also the fulfillment of Agee's desire for a connection with his father. Waking in the children's bed as George Gudger enters the room, Agee writes that he "saw the wall of their room slit with yellow light, only with a deep and gentle

sorrow, in some memory out of childhood which seemed now restored like the ghost of one beloved and dead: and was taken out of full sleep by the sound, a little later, of his shoes on the floor, as he came to the side of the bed and spoke to me" (377). In this moment, Agee returns to childhood and is reunited with his father, "the ghost of one beloved and dead," through an irruption of the *memoire reelle* triggered by George Gudger, who has symbolically taken his father's place. The climax of the third induction, this reunion is also the climax of the book, as Agee finds the meaning of his journey to Alabama through his working out of the impossibility of representation of the Other, which turns him inward to a consideration of the chain of circumstances that he can then recognize as a manifestation of his deepest desire: to have his father once more come to his bedside and speak to him.

George Gudger is not Agee's father, but he becomes a surrogate for him, as is Bud Woods at the beginning of the "Inductions" section; that Agee sees his father in both men is a sign that he is seeking something beyond who they actually are. In his account of receiving the sharecropping assignment, Agee writes that its main appeal, apart from political and artistic possibilities, was the chance it would give him to reconnect with his roots. As he explains,

> Also, I was born in the south. I spent my first fifteen years about equally divided between a Tennessee city and Tennessee mountains, and since then I had lived north and had seen the south very little, not at all until two years before. In a limited, entirely unstudied way I knew a good deal about the south in terms of some of its parts, and I a great deal more than loved this country.

> My father was of mountain people who were tenant farmers. My mother was Michigan born, raised in the south; she was of middle-class, somewhat cultivated, small capitalists. My father died when I was six and though I spent some lucky years in a mountain school most of my life had been middle-class. I have always more resented this fact than not, and have to a degree felt cheated and irreparably crippled of half or more than half of what I am.
>
> I am not quite such a fool as to think anything can ever really be "done" about this sort of thing; but here was about the most that could be done. (*JAR* J 1.4)

From the beginning, then, Agee's desire is to repair what he sees as a "crippled" psyche through recovering his paternal heritage, which Bud Woods and especially George Gudger most fully embody. Although Agee does not specifically identify their place of origin as the Tennessee mountains, he does note that neither is a native of Hale County, Woods having migrated "from shacks on shale, rigid as corn on a cob, out of the mining country" and Gudger having lost his birthright in the mountains "and that boyhood among cedars and clean creeks where no fever laid its touch, and where in the luminous and great hollow night the limestone shone like sheep: and the strong, gay girls" (*FM* 69). Agee also points out that the Gudgers' house is a dogtrot design "derived of . . . the homes of the more substantial frontier and mountain farmers" (181), adding "I remember such square-log double houses in mountain parts of Tennessee" (181n). Furthermore, Agee's trip from Birmingham to Hale County has an uncanny resemblance to his father's last trip to his own father's side and back as recounted in *A Death in the Family:* the ferry crossing, the diner, the car running off the road. In this sense, *Let Us Now Praise*

Famous Men is the prologue to a larger work, as Agee intended, but this work is not *Three Tenant Families* but, instead, the autobiographical project that encompasses *A Death in the Family* and *The Morning Watch.* That the book ultimately transcends, if not forsakes, its ostensible documentary subject is evident in Agee's inclusion of the line from Ecclesiasticus 44 that is the source of the title: "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us" (393).

Over the course of the late 1930s, Agee became disillusioned with radical Marxism, and his belief in the revolutionary potential of experimental art waned, giving way to the exploration of his own unconscious. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* records these changes, setting them in dynamic tension that precludes their resolution. The result is a book that resists classification and defies interpretation. Through the use of sonata form, Agee sets up a series of endlessly productive juxtapositions, but the primary opposition between the unconscious and its conscious representation through art is inadequate to, in Agee's phrase, "human actuality." Central to Agee's conception of the sharecroppers is their primitive status, which leaves them outside of time and change; they function as the vehicles for Agee's transformation without having the potential for their own. Agee reserves self-actualization through the apprehension of objective chance for himself, a path that is inaccessible to the sharecroppers, whose crushing poverty he casts as the unavoidable result of economic determinism. Ultimately, the intensity of expression in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* leads to exhaustion: defeated in his struggle to dissolve the boundaries between conscious and unconscious, representation and reality, art and life, Agee leaves the field.

At the end of *Travels in the Congo,* Gide describes the death of Dindiki, his pet potto, to which he had grown attached over the course of his journey, even coming to consider him a type of "familiar demon" (368). Gide writes that he had noticed a change in Dindiki's eating habits and demeanor followed by an obvious deterioration in health but was unable to discover the cause of or treatment for the malady. "On the last day," he relates with sadness and self-reproach, "this little creature who was so affectionate—or, at any rate, so sensitive to caresses—began to detest me. One felt that there was unconsciously working in him an obscure intelligence that *knew* the right cure. Dindiki was angry at being constantly stopped by me when he set out to find the salutary bark or herb" (368). As the emotional climax of *Travels in the Congo,* Dindiki's passing serves as a symbol for Gide of the problems he will face in confronting colonial abuses in French Equatorial Africa. On one level, his inability to communicate with Dindiki mirrors the difficulty he has as an outsider in understanding the frame of reference of those he would hope to speak for; on another, Dindiki's demise, which he probably hastened rather than forestalled, reminds him that the attempt to help may exacerbate an already horrific state of affairs. When Dindiki's heart stopped beating for the last time, Gide writes, he did not attempt to resuscitate him, as he had on a previous occasion, because "Even if I had succeeded, I should not have cured the root of the evil" (368). While it may have been humane for Gide to allow Dindiki to die, his actions on his return to France demonstrate that he was more willing to fight against long odds for the victims of colonization, choosing the good of publicizing abuses in the hopes of lessening them over the unattainable goal of abolishing the system altogether. The irony of Dindiki's death, then, is that Gide ignores its lessons, choosing to act in an imperfect world rather

than waiting for complete comprehension of its causes and total justification of the consequences.

Though opposite in effect, there is a similar coda to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. After returning to New York, Agee kept in touch with the Burroughs, Tingle, and Fields families, corresponding with them for several years and passing information along to Evans. Towards the end of 1936, Floyd Burroughs apparently asked Agee and Evans to help him buy a mule for the following season. While Burroughs's end of the correspondence does not survive, Agee discussed his request in a letter to Evans in January 1937. Agee writes:

> I feel very troubled over the mule idea. Reasons are obvious but see if you agree.
>
> I wd like like hell to do it.
>
> By scraping the cervix of my bank account I could, in collaboration with you.
>
> But you can even less well afford it than I can—
>
> And we both know damned well he couldn't pay it back by next fall.
>
> So we wd become either, Moe & Joe Bountiful, or, as bad or worse, creditors to a friend who has too much credit now.
>
> And our position as Rich Guys wd become still more falsified and Floyd being as he is, wd get still tougher in future.
>
> Also the other families' jealousy must be counted in.
>
> But see what you think, & let me know will you—we ought to answer him soon. (1)

As Agee mentions in an earlier letter, he is happy to buy trinkets for the children and give the adults a small amount of money, but buying Burroughs a mule is more problematic. He mentions Evans's and his own poverty as a stumbling block, but this obstacle was not insurmountable, given his association with various left-wing fundraisers and salons, not to mention wealthy acquaintances such as Wilder Hobson and Agee's in-laws, the Saunderses. The real problem, as Agee frames it, is one of perception. Even though a quality mule would be of unquestionable material benefit to any sharecropper, Agee balks at providing one for Burroughs since such an action would inject discomfort into their friendship, possibly encourage Burroughs to make further requests, and cause friction with the other families. In a pose that is both an assertion of the artist's provenance as an uncontaminated sphere separate from commerce and a betrayal of deep-seated bourgeois values, Agee wants to keep the relationship unencumbered by financial concerns. Burroughs, though, may well have seen the fact of his exploitation in the name of art sufficient grounds for more tangible remuneration. From Agee's perspective, such an acknowledgment of the economic basis of their relationship is profoundly disturbing, impinging as it does upon the posture of the disinterested artist, a concern Burroughs obviously did not share. Agee's refusal to buy the mule is not so much an act of selfishness, then, than it is the preservation of aesthetic autonomy—a position diametrically opposed to the surrealist goal of integrating art and life. One of the culminating documents of modernism, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* embodies the struggle for representation and the paradoxes of political action, but its sheer complexity lends itself to moral paralysis. One of the great ironies of Agee's book is that it inspired a later generation to take the type of action that he could not take himself.

CHAPTER SIX

"By Any Virile Standard": The Influence of Popular Culture on *A Death in the Family*

Throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee insists that he is attempting to dissolve the boundaries between life and art, hoping to make the reader experience what he has experienced as intensely real. As a call to action, however, the text works at cross-purposes to itself. In the American documentary tradition, from Jacob Riis to the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, the representation of the living conditions of the impoverished masses implies a moral responsibility to remedy the situation, but Agee's detailed description of the squalor of the sharecroppers' lives is so beautiful, so aesthetically complex, so reverent that it undermines the impulse to change anything. In fact, since it allows him to realize his own unconscious need, Agee reifies their primitive state as a source of value that will lose its regenerative force if changed. He explicitly rejects the radical political solution that initially framed his approach and calls lesser remedies, such as education or unionization, into question, as well. Ultimately, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is exactly what Agee hoped it would not be: a work of art as powerful and painful as Beethoven's Seventh, but art nonetheless, as distant in form and content from the world it represents as today's readers are in time. The freedom riders who adopted Agee's book during the Civil Rights movement claimed what they understood to be its mandate, but only by making a concession to the liberal society Agee saw as a prison and wanted to destroy.

As the document of Agee's disillusionment with radical politics and the revolutionary potential of surrealism, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* records his

aesthetic and moral exhaustion, and by the end of the 1940s, he had moved away from its intensely self-conscious, ultimately self-negating formal experimentation toward simpler, more popular modes of expression. Reflecting his immersion in movies, mostly the products of the Hollywood studio system, through his work as a film reviewer for *Time* and the *Nation,* his creative works of the last decade of his life evince a turn towards realistic characterization and linear narrative. While *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* aspires to the photographic immediacy of Brady, the complexity of Joyce, the passion of Dostoevsky, the uncanniness of Kafka, and the gnosticism of Blake, by 1950 Agee had found another artist to emulate in B-movie director John Huston. Though they would later become close friends and Academy Award–nominated collaborators, Agee was first drawn to Huston's unpretentious camera-work and straightforward storytelling in feature films such as *The Maltese Falcon* and war documentaries such as *The Battle of San Pietro.* Agee had obviously been studying his films for some time before they began corresponding in 1948, and he was as perceptive a critic and as great an admirer of Huston's work as he was of Walker Evans's. As Agee wrote to Huston in June 1951, "I bar Chaplin, in the special world he works in. Outside of him, I think you're the best there is" (2).

In a profile of the director for *Life* magazine entitled "Undirectable Director," Agee argued that Huston, at the time generally dismissed as a maker of action films, was in fact an underappreciated and important artist. In the essay, Agee implicitly critiques *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by noting that in most movies "every effort is made to do all the work—the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling" (142). Huston, on the other hand,

> is one of the few movie artists who, without thinking twice about it, honors his audience. His pictures are not acts of seduction or of benign enslavement but of liberation, and they require, of anyone who enjoys them, the responsibilities of liberty. They continually open the eye and require it to work vigorously; and through the eye they waken curiosity and intelligence. That, by any virile standard, is essential to good entertainment. It is unquestionably essential to good art. (142)

In a radical departure from the determinism, whether of an exploitative economic system or of unconscious desire manifest as objective chance, that informs *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee here extols art that requires of the audience the "responsibilities of liberty." Rather than programming the audience's emotional response, Agee argues, Huston creates a superior, "virile" form of popular art by respecting his viewers' intelligence. He describes Huston as "a natural born antiauthoritarian individualistic libertarian anarchist without portfolio" (132) and asserts that since "action also is the natural language of the screen and the instant present is its tense, Huston is a born popular artist" (129). Equating popular art with action, Agee casts Huston as the embodiment of the artist as individual who creates not for an elite, specialized audience but instead relates to a broad cross-section of society in a way that respects its native intelligence.

In order to research "Undirectable Director," Agee sent a long questionnaire to Huston and members of his film crew, and the questions provide additional insight into why Agee found Huston's work so appealing. The questions, however, for the most part, are not so much questions as statements of Agee's ideas about Huston followed by a

request for further elucidation. In the questionnaire, for instance, Agee broaches the subject of his interaction with the audience by asserting that Huston, through "action, strong physical sensation, and idea" rather than emotion, "seduces it into being active in spite of itself" and then asks whether this is "second-nature" to Huston or "conscious and calculated" (1). While the published essay is mostly concerned with Huston's personality, Agee's questionnaire shows that he was more interested in technical issues such as camera placement and storytelling, and he complained to Huston that *Life* editors "cut a little more than sixty percent out," even though the "long piece I turned in was better than what is run, more coherent, making more points, and I think more perceptive" (1). While *Life*'s editors probably had good reason to think that the magazine's readers would not have found Agee's pronouncements as indispensable as Agee did, the questionnaire is revealing in that what Agee finds important about Huston's work is that it offers solutions to problems that he recognizes as his own. Formulated in 1949, the questionnaire reflects years of close attention by Agee to Huston's work; coming at the precise time when Agee was writing *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family,* it also serves as a commentary on the limitations of previous efforts and the possibilities of his own emerging style.

In a nod to Walker Evans's "straight style," for instance, Agee claims that Huston's "camera does nothing which is not natural to the eye, and never imposes on a shot, adding an extra leverage or prejudice of its own; it is put, rather, in the most natural, logical, impersonal and transparent relation to the content of that shot, which can be figured out" (Questionnaire 1). Although there is "Rarely any rhetoric, or use of the 'adjectival' or 'adverbial' camera," Huston nevertheless "is interested in 'magic', as the

diehard realists & documentors are not" (4). As Agee explains, "he differs from most 'realists' as follows: he realizes that a story is a story and that though it is very right to enrich it with a non-fictional kind of actuality, it is fatally wrong to confuse it with non-fiction—as wrong as for a painter to paste on glass, where he should paint the windows of a house. And differs from most fictionalists in the amount of non-fiction 'reality' he can let in, without confusing the art, or the audience" (5).

While Agee is responding to Huston's work on its own terms, he is also clearly doing so in a way that applies to his own. Whereas Agee had agonized over the problem of representation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* he saw Huston overcoming the same problem not by attempting to transcend the boundaries between art and life but by embracing generic limits and working within them. Agee had once lamented that his book could not be "fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth" (*FM* 10), and so on, but now sees that this is "as wrong as for a painter to paste on glass, where he should paint the windows of a house." He cites Huston's remark "that 'movies are a conventional rather than a realistic art'" (Questionnaire 5) as the key to understanding how he achieves a realistic effect, explaining, "though his characters seem & are more real than most, they are seldom perfectly 'realistic', as some people think, but simply better and more originally stylized than most" (4). If Agee saw the flaws in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* through the lens of Huston's work, he also saw the possibilities for translating what he had learned about the "close attention to direct storytelling" (5) to *A Death in the Family.*

Agee summarizes Huston's strengths as "Exceptionally fine sense of context, economy, apparent (or actual) accident as useful, 'extra energy', working symbols from

inside-out (i.e., from center and logic of story material), rather than applying them to the story" (6). It is unlikely that anyone would refer to the "economy" of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* and though the book contains plenty of context, Agee's rendering of the particulars of the sharecroppers' lives more often takes the form of an imposition of his own meaning than it is the natural outgrowth of their symbolic potential. On the other hand, Agee's summary applies extraordinarily well to *A Death in the Family.* As Dwight Macdonald pointed out in "Death of a Poet," not much happens in the novel, but it is precisely Agee's attention to the details of everyday life—Rufus's spats with his sister, his mother's solicitousness in rising to cook breakfast, the smell of his father's chair—that create the portrait of domestic wholeness that is shattered by Jay Agee's death. It is also a reflection of the influence of film that so many scenes consist of little more than dialogue, an economy of form that heightens the reader's engagement by involving them in the conversation. In fact, as Agee implies, providing too much detail has the effect of distancing the reader, creating a gap that the superabundance of words in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* not only can never close but actually widens and that works at cross purposes with the book's stated intention. And though the comparison to Huston's apparent or actual accidents is not exact, Agee develops the plot of *A Death in the Family* as a series of "surprises": the birth of Emma, the car, the call in the night, the cap, the accident, the look on Jay's lifeless face.[55] Given Agee's long-standing interest in the role

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[55] Examples of "surprises" include the following: "Next day his mother told him that soon he was going to have a very wonderful surprise" (77); "'Why Jay!' she cried above the happy throes of the auto; and she ran down the steps and joined them. 'You didn't *tell* me it was *today*!' He smiled down at her. 'Surprised?' 'Why I'm surprised out of my *life*!' '*He's* sure surprised,' his father said, for Rufus was jumping up and down as high and fast as he could and yelling with joy" (143); "'He can't have suffered, Laura, not even for a fraction of a second. Laura, I saw his face. There wasn't a glimmer of pain in it. Only—a kind of surprise. Startled'" (300).

of chance in art and life, the fifty-six occurrences of variations of the word "surprise" in the novel indicate a residual surrealism in the appreciation of the wonder of the everyday.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* when Agee describes the sleeping streets of Centerboro as "silent as the crossing of an old-fashioned ferryboat, where no motor was used and the flat barge, attached to a rope, is swung on the bias of the flat stream's relaxation" (335),[56] it is a literary convention, an allusion to Charon's ferrying of souls across the river Styx meant to remind the reader of Agee's sense of existential despair in a scene that will culminate in his fantasy of crashing his car into an oak. In *A Death in the Family,* Jay Agee's ferry crossing is also literary in that it has the same mythological allusiveness, but because it is so much more understated, it works "from inside-out," resonating in multiple ways. First of all, it is appropriate because Jay is traveling to see his father, whom he thinks is on his death bed, and ironic in that Jay, though the reader does not know it yet, and not his father is the one who is going to die. Furthermore, the ferryman's casual remark upon recognizing him—"You genally all ways come o' Sundays, yer womum, couple o' young-uns" (*DF* 222)—allows the allusion to reinforce the novel's ambivalence towards modernity. When Jay first brings up the possibility of getting an automobile, he justifies the purchase by arguing that it will allow him to keep in touch with his family more easily, and his wife, Laura, agrees, despite her reservations about the car's expense and potential danger. The ferryman's comment, then, signals that the family has been using the car to go to LaFollette on a regular basis, assuring that Rufus and Emma will maintain a relationship with their paternal relatives. But, they

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[56] All quotations from *A Death in the Family* are from the manuscript of Michael A. Lofaro's restored edition of the text.

would not have to travel the forty miles to see their grandparents if their father had not left home in search of economic mobility, moving as far away as Panama and settling in Knoxville. The Model T, then, is a double symbol, representing both Jay's desire to reconnect with his family and the ambition that drove him away from them.

This ambivalence is further underscored when the ferry, having crossed with Jay's car, picks up a farm couple in a mule-drawn wagon on the other side of the river. The farmer asks Jay not to start the car before he has control of his mule, and even though the engine is warm, "with every wrench of the crank a spasm of anguish wrenched the mule," after which it is "merely trembling" (224). Jay gives "the mule and wagon as wide a berth as possible, nodding his regret of the racket and his friendliness," but "the eyes which followed him could not forgive him his noise" (225). Taking place at the figurative and literal boundary between city and country, the encounter between Jay and the farm couple reinforces two other scenes, both involving automobiles and animals. The first occurs as soon as Jay brings the Model T home and takes his family for an inaugural drive. A few blocks from home, he slows down in order not to frighten a horse pulling a buggy, but almost immediately another driver roars past in his car, spooking the horse so that it struggles "in its harness like a dancer" (152) and making its owner get out of the buggy to comfort it. Though Jay opines to his family that cars will not replace horses completely, due to their utility on bad roads and superior style, it is clear that horses are ill suited for city streets and that their days are numbered.

Later, in the chapter narrated mostly from Frank's point of view, the account of his father's medical crisis begins with Thomas Oakes, the farmhand, saddling his horse and riding into LaFollette to rouse the doctor and notify Frank. After waking Frank,

Oakes rides back to the farm, but Frank, even after having paused to take a couple of drinks, passes him in his car before "he had scarcely passed the edge of town" (236). In neither case is the horse a match for the automobile, and both events foreshadow the imminent obsolescence of animal conveyance as a primary mode of transportation. Just as with Jay and the farm couple, the encounter between Frank and Thomas Oakes takes place on a border between town and country, and while Jay is sympathetic to the couple, Frank resents Oakes's natural self-assurance and capacity for action. All three episodes point to the passing of a way of life, which is emphasized by the symbolism of the ferry crossing and recalled in this description of Laura through her brother's eyes: "Months later, seeing a horse which had fallen in the street, Hugh was to remember her; and he was to remember it wasn't drunkenness, either. It was just the flat of the hand of Death" (298). A perfect example of "working symbols from inside-out," Agee allows the various implications of the ferry, itself once essential to settlement but increasingly obsolete, the crossing, and the encounter between car and mule to arise naturally from an unforced situation and echo throughout the text, most notably in the tableau of Jay, freshly killed in a car wreck, laid out in a blacksmith's shop. He also underscores the poignancy of the scene by showing Jay and the farm couple literally moving in opposite directions, he in his car toward the mountains and they in their wagon toward town but both to a predetermined end—a poignancy mirrored in Rufus's watching from Arthur Savage's car his father's body being carried away from the funeral in a horse-drawn hearse.

When Agee identifies "extra energy" as a hallmark of Huston's film work, he is speaking of both the energy created by action on the screen and the energy that results from the active engagement of the audience with what it sees. As Agee explains,

> Most movies over-explain the obvious—and even explain it prior to the action. In his, the material is much less obvious and the explanation is usually oblique, or the action requires, and stimulates, the involvement of the audience. The eye and the mind of the audience are being constantly opened up; i.e., energy is required of the audience & there is an exchange of energy between audience & screen. This is the only kind of "live" energy possible. (Questionnaire 6)

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee goes to great lengths to explicate every emotion and idea and their implications, providing a model for the reader and pointing him to conclusions rather than allowing him to find them on his own. *A Death in the Family* takes the opposite approach, relying on sharp cuts between chapters and scenes and leaving large gaps in the narrative. To give only one example: Jay Agee's fatal accident, the most important event in the novel, is missing. While the reader can infer to some degree what happened from what Agee reveals about Jay's character and from the accounts of the first people on the scene delivered secondhand by Hugh Tyler, it is impossible to know what exactly caused the accident, how Jay reacted, or whether it transpired in the way it appeared after the fact. It is quite possible that Jay was drunk, for instance. As Hugh relates the story, the man who discovered the body was also the last person to see him alive: "He said he was on his way home, about nine o'clock, coming in towards town, and he heard an auto coming up from behind, terrifically fast, and coming nearer and nearer, and he thought, 'There's somebody that's sure got to get some place in

a bad hurry' ('He was hurrying home,' Laura said) 'or else he's crazy' (he had said 'crazy drunk')" (*DF* 310). Although Agee does not give specific details, it is apparent that Jay had had a drinking problem that affected his marriage but also that he had largely overcome it, even though, as his taking Rufus to a speakeasy indicates, the potential for it to resurface was ever present. When they hear the news, both Jessie and Joel Tyler associate it with Jay's reckless driving, and at least one (and probably more) of the fathers of the boys who taunt Rufus knows about Jay's drinking either firsthand or by reputation and draws a reasonable conclusion. Even Laura fears the worst:

> And then a terrifying thought occurred to her, and she looked at Hugh. No, she thought, he wouldn't lie to me if it were so. No, I won't even ask it. I won't even imagine it. I just don't see how I could bear to live if that were so.
>
> But there he was, all that day, with Frank. He *must* have. Well he probably did. That was no part of the promise. But not really *drunk*. Not so he couldn't—navigate. Drive well.
>
> No.
>
> Oh, no.
>
> No I won't even dishonor his dear memory by asking. Not even Hugh in secret. No, I won't.
>
> And she thought with such exactness and with such love of her husband's face, and of his voice, and of his hands, and of his way of smiling so warmly even though his eyes almost never lost their sadness, that she succeeded in driving the other thought from her mind. (338-39)

Though Laura's refusal to entertain the obvious would seem incriminating in this context, there is no way of knowing that Jay was drunk. In fact, her reference to Frank may indicate the opposite, as he serves as a foil to Jay, wallowing in alcoholic self-pity in contrast to Jay's pride in self-control. It would be entirely consistent with his character to refuse to drink with Frank out of anger and disgust, and Hugh never mentions or thinks about, for instance, the smell of alcohol on Jay's corpse. On the other hand, both brothers drive too fast and compare themselves to Barney Oldfield, which implies that they share at least a few personality traits. Ultimately, the reader cannot be sure either way. While this absence of information may reflect, on one level, the fact that Agee himself did not know the details about his father's death and may have shared his mother's concern, it is a sign of his maturity as an artist that he did not force an interpretation, instead creating "extra energy" between reader and text.

Agee's change in emphasis from the overly analytical *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the more accessible *A Death in the Family* can be seen in his only piece of substantial fiction to come between them, *The Morning Watch,* probably written in the late 1940s concurrently with parts of *A Death in the Family. The Morning Watch* was published first in both the Italian journal *Botteghe Oscura* and *Partisan Review* in 1950 and then as a book by Houghton Mifflin in 1951. By that time, Agee and Huston had become friends, Agee having introduced himself as a critic and admirer of Huston's work in 1948, and they would later go on to collaborate, most notably on *The African Queen.* In September 1950, Agee wrote to Huston and, in response to a request to tell him about his new book, offered an overview of *The Morning Watch* that, in retrospect, nicely captures Agee in mid-transformation. Beginning by sketching out the novella, Agee

depicts it in terms of the contrast between intellection and action: "Roughly this: A long, very slow, winding, deeply introvert story, or cud-chewing, developing in its last pages into a short piece of violent action with heavy symbolic and ambiguous charges" (1). Agee casts the protagonist, Richard, as "a 12-year-old boy (roughly myself) at edge of puberty, peak of certain kinds of hypersensitive introversion, isolation, and a certain priggishness. Peak also, of religious faithfulness & sincerity, or a little past the peak" (1), who is participating in a boarding school ritual of taking a shift in the twenty-four-hour watch in the school's chapel from Maundy Thursday into Good Friday. "What you work on is for a long time almost totally inactive," he writes, noting "the interplay of the senses, and states of fatigue, and memory, and association, with varying levels of belief and of emergent kinds of curiosity, skepticism, intelligence" (1). In representing Richard's stream-of-consciousness struggle both to do honor to the ritual and to stay awake, Agee explains his own purpose as an attempt to "try on the whole to work on this miniature scale to work out or imply all the major valid forms of religious experience and all the most vicious misuses of same" (1) in a combination of "deadpan, very formal, highly variant tone and verbal rhythm and style: trying to get a thing which without change of surface tone will be at varying times or sometimes all-together 'religious', 'antireligious', funny, mysterious, beautiful, and sinister; and, I forgot, essentially melancholy up to the edge of clinical melancholia" (2). Agee concludes his synopsis of the first two introspective sections of the novella with a summary of the theme, which will take a different form in the third section, as follows: "By the time the child is done with the hour's watch you know damn well, and much better than he is, [*sic*] that he is

finished with religion but still carrying a deep load of it, some of that benign, much of it poisonous: a gravitation towards death, & a giant set of guilt-reflexes" (2).

While Agee glosses over the first two-thirds of the book fairly quickly, his treatment of the third section is more detailed and, perhaps because of the person for whom it is written, more focused on decisive action. He writes:

> Then you take him and two other kids about that age -- much harder and more easily likable boys -- out of the holy suffocation of the chapel into the last darkness of a spring night, and a total drench of the senses, recognized by them simply as the excitement and pleasure of being up at that hour, on a highly special Day, when any enjoyment has about it a touch of blasphemy & physical danger. They walk through the woods from the school (in the Tennessee mountains) as it gets light, towards the place they havent swum since last Fall. All the woods, walking & light stuff playing a violent sensual counterrevolution against the preceding religious material. They get to the place and the central character, a good swimmer who, characteristically, likes swimming under water, dives very deep and by a sudden locking of reflexes, decides to stay down. His physical reflexes, stronger than those imposed on him, push him up in time. Before they can get their clothes back on he sees a snake which has just shed its old skin, much the finest snake he has ever seen, sliding out to get the first sun. Snake is of course nature, art, pre-religion, anti-religion, in quintessence; also, in a sense, religion. He likes snakes; seldom has killed even the venomous ones; but by a holler of pleasure in seeing it, betrays it to the others, to whom it is automatic to kill any snake. One raises a rock over it; by reflex the central character, behind

> him, is about to grab the rock backward out of his hand when he is aware of the third kid, astounded by this gesture towards prevention. A physical and social coward, very used to being an "outcast" but not wanting to be, this slows him; he is also suddenly but vaguely aware that for some quite new reason he is guilty towards letting the snake live (in a sense it is his new-born soul or being, and by every religious reflex and hangover he must fear & abominate it). These practical and impractical things freeze him, and time, long enough; other guy brings the rock down, crippling but not killing the snake. In a general dazzle of mixed motive and impulse, guilt for the snake's crippling, pity for it, obligation to kill it, etc etc, he acts physically decisively for first time in his life, putting the others aside and getting down at the snake (which in this stage they all assume to be deadly poison) with a small rock, pounding at its head, which dodges and darts at him very cleverly, and as he thinks, risking his life. He is entirely reckless and incidentally very brutal in its killing and through this he realizes, once it is dead, that for the first time he has earned respect, and belongs. He finds he doesn't particularly care to, but he is personally very heartened to have done something brave for once in his life, and to have earned respect sufficiently to throw it away. (2)

In contrast to the ending of "America! Look at Your Shame!," in which the real shame is Agee's for not having the moral courage to act in the face of the threat of physical violence, here he represents the accomplishment of swift, brutal action as a transformative event, regardless of its justification. Though the act is ambivalent—as Agee claims, Richard kills the snake in order to exorcise his religious nature, not

realizing that he is motivated by religious guilt—it represents a threshold experience that initiates him into a new understanding of his place in the world. With this new knowledge comes another wave of guilt, though. Agee continues:

> On the way back to the School he gets a subconscious identification between the snake and the killing of Christ which practically paralyzes him with heaviness and guilt, but a few minutes later, watching hogs tear the twitching snake apart, he gets another still more obscure identification between the 2 parts of the snake and his father's death (for one) and his mother's over-religious reaction to the death (for the other); and proceeds into Good Friday pretty well anesthetized. (2-3)

Whether or not Agee's reading of *The Morning Watch* is definitive, the way in which he represents it for Huston is telling in that he asserts Richard's killing of the snake as the book's crucial act but associates its meaning ultimately with the death of his father and his mother's reaction to it. As previously mentioned, *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family* were intended as parts of a much larger autobiographical project outlined by Agee (in fact, in early drafts of *A Death in the Family,* Rufus is named Richard), and the culmination of the earlier work can be seen as developing from problems introduced in the latter.

Although obscured by David McDowell's original edition of the novel, Agee structures *A Death in the Family* so as to offer Rufus a choice between competing value systems in the form of religion, as represented by his mother, Jessie Tyler, and sFather Robertson; aestheticism, represented by Hugh Tyler, his maternal uncle; and action, as exemplified by his father, notably in the context of popular (or folk) culture.

That Laura will have an "over-religious reaction" to her husband's death seems a foregone conclusion, as both her father and her aunt recognize in her a desire "to realize the might, grimness and tenderness of God" (433) that they fear she will embrace with "a certain cool pride" (307), and her brother sees her face turn "thin, shy, and somehow almost bridal" (353) as she becomes wedded to the idea of martyrdom. For Joel, whose rationalism feeds a bitter cynicism towards anything he construes as supernatural, his daughter's Christianity, inextricably bound up in her role as mother, has led to the diminution of "all her spirit, which had resisted them so admirably to marry [Jay], then only to be broken and dissolved on her damned piety; all her intelligence, hardly even born, come to nothing in the marriage and brats and making ends meet and again, above all, the God damned piety" (289).

Agee contrasts Laura's religious passivity with the more active, questioning faith of Jessie, her paternal aunt, whose relationship to the church is vague in the novel but who is based on Agee's own aunt, who founded an order of Anglo-Catholic nuns. After Laura has received the news of Jay's accident but before his death has been confirmed, she speaks with Jessie, who comforts her, partially in the recognition that the acceptance of death may lead to spiritual growth. Jessie, however, senses that Laura is too eager to taste this spiritual fruit. When Laura says, "Whatever it is, I want so much to be *worthy* of it," Jessie replies, "Don't try too hard to be worthy of it, Laura. Don't think of it that way. Just do your best to endure it and let any question of worthiness take care of itself. That's more than enough" (282). Nonetheless, "There was a kind of ambition there, Jessie felt, a kind of pride or poetry, which was very mistaken and very dangerous" (282). Even as Laura seeks to embrace God's will, Jessie recoils not so much from Jay's

inscrutable death as from the spiritual threat it represents to Laura. "Even while Jessie watched her," Agee writes,

> Laura's face became diffuse and humble. *Oh, not yet*, Jessie whispered desperately to herself. *Not yet*. But Laura said, shyly, "Aunt Jessie, can we kneel down for a minute?"
>
> *Not yet*, she wanted to say. For the first time in her life she suspected how mistakenly prayer can be used, but she was unsure why. . . .
>
> God is not here, Jessie said to herself; and made a small cross upon her breastbone, against her blasphemy.
>
> "O God," Laura whispered. "Strengthen me to accept Thy Will, whatever it may be." Then she stayed silent.
>
> God hear her, Jessie said to herself. God forgive me. God forgive me.
>
> What can I know of the proper time for her, she said to herself. God forgive me.
>
> Yet she could not rid herself: something mistaken, unbearably piteous, infinitely malign was at large within that faithfulness; she was helpless to forfend it or even to know its nature.
>
> Suddenly there opened within her a chasm of infinite depth and from it flowed the freezing breath of eternal darkness.
>
> I believe nothing. Nothing whatever.
>
> "Our Father," she heard herself say, in a strange voice; and Laura, innocent of her terror, joined in the prayer. And as they continued, and Jessie heard more and more clearly than her own the young, warm, earnest, faithful,

> heartsick voice, her moment of terrifying unbelief became a remembrance, a temptation successfully resisted through God's grace.
>
> Deliver us from evil, she repeated silently, several times after their prayer was finished. But the malign was still there, as well as the mercifulness. (282-84)

For Jessie, Laura's unwillingness to struggle with God is evidence of "something mistaken, unbearably piteous, infinitely malign" in her acceptance of His will, and she despairs while witnessing in her niece's keenness for a chance to demonstrate her faith how the mask of devotion can cover the sin of spiritual pride.

Later that night, after they not only have learned that Jay has died but have even experienced the presence of his ghost, Jessie and Laura go to separate bedrooms, and Agee again contrasts their prayers in terms of Jessie's engagement and Laura's acquiescence. "I can't pray, God. Not Now. Try to forgive me. I'm just too tired and too appalled" (368), Jessie thinks as she tries to understand Jay's death, the reality of which she knows she will have to accept but not without questioning its purpose. At one point, she begins to entreat, "May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace," but only gets halfway before she clamps her teeth and angrily revises the prayer as "May the souls of everyone who has ever had to live and die, in the Faith or outside it or defiant of it, rest in peace. And especially his!" (368). Eschewing the fundamental notion that faith is necessary for salvation, Jessie explicitly counters the tenets of Christianity and the traditions of Anglo-Catholicism to assert not only the injustice of Jay's death but also the relevance of his not being a Christian, insisting, "Strike me down. . . . I don't care. I can't care" (368). Though she finally turns back to placing her faith in God by admitting "He'll just have to take care of it," she adds an

important qualifier: "Till morning" (369). She is secure in God's grace, but she fully intends to keep engaging Him actively on every point.

On the other hand, Laura is more passive, praying, "Thy will be done. All right. Truly all right" (369). As she looks at a stain on the ceiling, which, though seeming to have taken various other shapes in the past, tonight is "just itself, with one meaningless eye" (369). She hears "a voice speak within her" the first verse of Psalm 130: "Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord" (369). She joins in, reciting, "Lord, hear my voice. O let thine ears consider well: the voice of my complaint," and continues, though the voice is now silent, whispering, "If Thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss: Lord, who may abide it?" (369-70). After this verse, she begins "to cry freely and quietly," and her hands turn "downward and moved wide on the bed" as she sobs silently, "O Jay! Jay!" (370). Though Jessie sleeps soundly, Laura lies awake staring at the ceiling, repeating, "Who may abide it" (370). Part of the liturgy for "The Burial of the Dead" from *The Book of Common Prayer,* Psalm 130 (*De Profundis*) is appropriate in this context, but the fact that Laura is unable to move beyond the third verse is telling. While Jessie contests the idea that salvation is available only to the faithful, Laura cannot move beyond man's inability to resist God's justice, implicitly admitting that Jay cannot lay claim to the "mercy" and "plenteous redemption" that comes" from "trust in the Lord" (Psalm 130: 4, 7). Jessie is willing to risk her own salvation to make room for Jay, but Laura, under the stare of an unblinking, unforgiving eye, seemingly consents to his being damned.

Agee clearly prefers Jessie's active faith to Laura's submission as a more authentic form of spirituality, but with the arrival of Father Robertson from Chattanooga

at her request, the point becomes moot. Father Robertson, with his blue face and polished shoes, is the villain of *A Death in the Family,* the humorless embodiment of dogma enforced without compassion. Rufus and Emma are immediately suspicious of him and become even more so after he rudely appropriates their father's chair and tactlessly pronounces them "ill-bred" (420). When he goes upstairs to meet with their mother, they listen at the door:

> They could hear no words, only the tilt and shape of voices. Their mother's, still so curiously shrouded, so submissive, so gentle; it seemed to ask questions and to accept answers. The man's voice was subdued and gentle but rang very strongly with the knowledge that it was right and that no other voice could be quite as right; it seemed to say unpleasant things as if it felt they were kind things to say, or again as if it did not care whether or not they were kind because in any case they were right; it seemed to make statements, to give information, to counter questions with replies which were beyond argument or even discussion, and to try to give comfort whether what it was saying could give comfort or not. Now and again their mother's way of questioning sounded to the children as if she wondered whether something could be fair, could possibly be true, could be so cruel, but whenever such tones came into their mother's voice the man's voice became still more ringing and overbearing, or still more desirous to comfort, or both; and their mother's next voice was always very soft. (422)

As becomes apparent later, Father Robertson is telling her that he will not be able to read the complete burial service since Jay was not baptized; given her own doubts about the state of her husband's soul, this official expression of church policy is the consummation

of her initiation into religiosity based on obedience rather than love. Despite earlier doubts, Jessie sides with Father Robertson, too, and the children hear in her voice "a kind of sweetness and of sorrow they had not heard in it before" as she assists him in "the overpowering of their mother" (423). Confused and angry, Rufus and Emma react to what they sense as both a betrayal of their mother and their mother's betrayal of them by willing a violent act that will make things right. Agee writes:

> They could not conceive of what was being done to their mother, but in his own way each was sure that it was something evil, to which she was submitting almost without a struggle, and by which she was deceived. Rufus repeatedly saw himself flinging open the door and striding in, a big stone in his hand, and saying, "You stop hurting my mother." Emma knew only that a tall stranger in black, with a frightening jaw and a queer hat, a man whom she hated and feared, and broken into their house, had been welcomed first by Aunt Jessie and then by her mother herself, had sat in her father's chair as if he thought he belonged there, talked meanly to her in words she could not understand, and was now doing secret and cruel things to her mother while Aunt Jessie looked on. If Daddy was here he would kill him. She wished Daddy would hurry up and come and kill him and she wanted to see it. But Rufus realized that his Aunt Jessie and even his mother were on Father Robertson's side and against him, and that they would just put him out of the room and punish him terribly and go right on with whatever awful thing it was they were doing. (424)

Although the children are powerless to do anything about the situation, Emma instinctively knows that her father would act in opposition to Father Robertson, and

Rufus places himself in his father's place as protector of the family, prepared to use violence for moral ends. However, Father Robertson embodies the force of tradition that invests his words with the sense that they are "in every idea and in every syllable final, finished, perfected beyond disquisition long before he was born" (426), and Rufus and Emma can hear their mother's and aunt's voices merge with his, becoming "more tender, more alive, and more inhuman, than they had ever heard them before; and this remoteness from humanity troubled them" (426). Finally, the children, having lost their father, realize that they have lost their mother as well:

> They realized that there was something to which their mother and their great-aunt were devoted, something which gave their voices peculiar vitality and charm, which was beyond and outside any love that was felt for them; and they felt that this meant even more to their mother and their great-aunt than they did, or than anyone else in the world did. . . . And they felt that although everything was better for their mother than it had been a few minutes before, it was far worse in one way. For before, she had at least been questioning, however gently. But now she was wholly defeated and entranced, and the transition to prayer was the moment and mark of her surrender. (426-27)

While Rufus (as Richard) will continue to struggle with religion, the abdication of his mother to a legalistic religiosity that honors the letter of dogma more than the spirit of love is an act of weakness that devotion to his father will allow him to repudiate. By the end of *The Morning Watch,* Richard is, as Agee puts it in the letter to Huston, "finished with religion but still carrying a deep load of it," but the seed of his discontent has already been planted in *A Death in the Family.*

Though Rufus is too young to articulate the problem fully, Agee offers an alternative source of meaning and value in setting against Laura's religiosity her brother's aesthetic sensibilities. Agee establishes the conflict immediately. While Laura whispers "Oh God if it be Thy Will" (266) before knowing whether or not Jay is dead, Hugh stands in the door looking at her with "a cold and bitter sardonic incredulity, as if he were saying, 'and you can still believe in that idiotic God of yours?'" (267). Later, arguing that Jay's not being able to prepare for his death was positive even as he asserts its meaninglessness, Hugh cruelly reminds her, "He wasn't a *Christian,* you know" (300). Importantly, though, both Laura and Hugh sense the presence of Jay's ghost in the house, which places them at odds with their father, whose rationalism will not allow him to admit the possibility of the supernatural. For Agee, such a narrow empiricism disqualifies him as a model for Rufus, and though his wife can sense the ghost, her unreflective acceptance of it places her on the same level as the sharecroppers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* who are beautiful but unaware of beauty: she embodies an anti-empiricist position but cannot understand it as such. Though he is an atheist, Hugh, as an artist, is presumably well acquainted with the irrationality of inspiration and apprehension of beauty, and he accepts the presence of the ghost and is willing to entertain the folk belief in a residual life force as an explanation. Diametrically opposed on matters of faith, Hugh and Laura nonetheless both recognize that some forms of knowledge may be inaccessible to reason.

Just as Laura instinctively turns to prayer, Hugh's reaction to Jay's death is largely cast in aesthetic terms. His recollection of gazing at the body in the blacksmith's

shop, for instance, combines an appreciation of form with an acknowledgment of the transcendent potential of an aesthetic object:

> The strong frown was still in the forehead but even as they watched it seemed to be fading very slowly; already the flesh had settled somewhat along the bones of the prostrate skull; the temples, the forehead and the sockets of the eyes were more subtly molded than they had been in life and the nose was more finely arched; the chin was thrust upward as if proudly and impatiently, and the small cut at its point was as neat and bloodless as if it had been made by a chisel in soft wood. They watched him with the wonder which is felt in the presence of anything which is great and new, and, for a little while, in any place where violence has recently occurred; they were aware, as they gazed at the still head, of a prodigious kind of energy in the air. (352-53)

Or, as he has earlier explained, "I saw him—stripped—at the undertaker's. . . . Laura, there wasn't a mark on his body. Just that little cut on the chin. One little bruise on his lower lip. Not another mark on his body. He had the most magnificent physique I've ever seen in a human being" (326).

That Rufus shares Hugh's aesthetic sensibility is evident in his response to his father's corpse when he views it with his mother and sister before the funeral. "Rufus had never experienced this feeling before," Agee writes; "there was perfected beauty. The head, the hand, dwelt in completion, immutable, indestructible: motionless. They moved upon existence quietly as stones which withdraw through water for which there is no floor" (440). Rufus examines the body closely, following the lines of his arm, wrist,

nostrils, chin and finding in his almost smile "only strength, silence, manhood, and indifferent contentment" (440), but as he does, his father becomes more objectified:

> He saw him much more clearly than he had ever seen him before; yet his face looked unreal, as if he had just been shaved by a barber. The whole head was waxen, and the hand too was as if perfectly made of wax. . . .
>
> Out of the end of his eye he was faintly aware of his sister's rosy face and he could hear her gentle breathing as he continued to stare at his father, at his stillness, and his power, and his beauty.
>
> He could see the tiny dark point of every shaven hair of the beard.
>
> He watched the way the flesh was chiseled in a widening trough from the root of the nose to the white edge of the lip.
>
> He watched the still more delicate dent beneath the lower lip. . . .
>
> Within him, and outside him, everything except his father was dry, light, unreal, and touched with a kind of warmth and impulse and a kind of sweetness which felt like the beating of a heart. But borne within this strange and unreal sweetness, its center yet alien in nature from all the rest, and as nothing else was actual, his father lay graven, whose noble hand he longed, in shyness, to touch. (441)

As Rufus gazes at his father, he becomes aware that the beauty of his form is a timeless repository of the strength that animated him, and he hopes to preserve the moment. However, after Father Robertson prays with the family over the body, there is a transformation. Though his father has not moved, Rufus thinks, "he looked to have changed. Although he lay in such calm and beauty and grandeur, it looked to Rufus as if

he had been flung down and left on the street, and as if he were a very successfully disguised stranger" (446). He feels "a pang of distress and of disbelief" and wants "to lean to look more closely" (446), but his mother ushers him out. Later, at the final visitation, Rufus and Emma see "their father as idly as if he had been a picture, or a substituted image, and felt little realization of his presence and little interest" (450). In the period between Rufus's intense aesthetic experience of his father's body as a beautiful object that he desires to touch and its final state as an uninteresting "substituted image," Father Robertson with the weight of ritual had interposed, draining the beauty of the individual experience by pouring it into a predetermined mold.

Having lost both his mother and father to religion, then, Rufus should be greatly predisposed towards Hugh's aestheticism, both in its valorization of beauty as an invigorating force and its hostility towards Father Robertson and all he represents. In the final chapter of *A Death in the Family,* though, Agee complicates Hugh's position as a potential role model. After the funeral, Hugh invites Rufus to go for a walk with him through the Fort Sanders neighborhood. As with other image patterns in the novel, this walk recalls two similar episodes, namely Rufus's walk with his father to the spot overlooking North Knoxville on their last night together and Hugh's walk home with his parents on the night of Jay's death. In the first case, it may seem that Agee is using parallelism to imply that Hugh will take the place of Jay, and just as the earlier walk is a cementing of the father-son bond, so this one points to the establishing of an analogous relationship. However, taken with Hugh's other walk through Fort Sanders, the latter episode is less the foundation of a new relationship than it is an explanation for why it cannot replace the previous one.

In chapter 32, as Hugh is walking his parents home from Laura's, the song "O Little Town of Bethlehem" becomes stuck in his head. Since it so late, the city is in complete darkness except for an occasional streetlight, and the line "How still we see thee lie," which becomes conflated in Hugh's mind with the image of Jay's body in the blacksmith's shop, leads into "above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by" (363). The words of the song, which seem "to him as beautiful as any poetry he had ever known," remind him of his youth, "when he still thought he was Shelley. Watching the river. Leaning on the bridge rail and literally praying with gratitude for being alive" (364). Under the "tired" (364) stars, the lyrics seem particularly appropriate, and Hugh begins to react to them with an emotional intensity that takes him by surprise. As Agee writes:

> *The silent stars go by*, he said aloud, not whispering, but so quietly he was sure they would not hear.
>
> His eyes sprang full of tears; his throat, his chest knotted into a deep sob which he subdued, and the tears itched on his cheeks.
>
> *Yet in thy dark streets shineth*, he sang loudly, almost in fury, within himself: *The Everlasting Light*! and upon these words a sob leapt up through him which he could not subdue but could only hope to conceal.
>
> They did not notice.
>
> *This is crazy*, he told himself incredulously. *No sense in this at all*!
>
> Everlasting Light!
>
> *The hopes and fears*, a calm and implacable voice continued within him; he spoke quietly: *Of all the years*.

> *Are met in thee tonight*, he whispered: and in the middle of a wide plain, the middle of the dark and silent city, slabbed beneath shadowless light, he saw the dead man, and struck his thigh with his fists with all his strength.
>
> All he could hear in this world was only their footsteps; his father and mother, he realized, could hear nothing even of that. (364-65)

For Hugh, the lyrics of the song take on a bitter irony, as "the hopes and fears of all the years" are met not in Christ, the Everlasting Light, but in Jay's death, a meaningless event shrouded in darkness. "This is crazy," he thinks, referring both to the fact that, of all things, a Christmas carol is rising out of his unconscious in mid-May and to the message of the song, which seems completely at odds with the situation. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is more apposite than he realizes, however, and the irony is not that there is, as Hugh asserts, "No sense in this at all!" but that he cannot see the truth that is revealing itself directly to him.

Earlier in the novel, before Emma is born, the adults tease Rufus, already unsure what is happening, about the surprise that is coming, and he is even more confused by their teasing. "Afloat in the forest," his grandfather remarks, which Rufus does not understand, either, so Hugh explains: "*In the forest* is good . . . . Me retrroveye donze oona selve oscoorrrah" (89). Ostensibly, once again the joke is on Rufus, as he neither speaks Italian nor recognizes the allusion to the second line of the *Divine Comedy*. In true Dantean fashion, though, the joke is actually on Hugh since "in the forest" is not good at all, the "dark wood" being an allegory for the sinful life Dante must leave in order to know God. By having Hugh misappropriate Dante, Agee lays the groundwork

for an interpretation of his later actions, beginning with his inability to see the significance of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

One of the most powerful episodes in the *Divine Comedy* is Dante's encounter with Count Ugolino in Canto 33 of the *Inferno*. Taking a brief respite from gnawing the head of his enemy Ruggieri in the ninth circle of Hell, Ugolino tells the story of his imprisonment along with his four sons in a tower, which is subsequently sealed, leading to their deaths by starvation. As is typical of Dante's sinners, Ugolino reveals more than he knows. He mentions, for instance, that sunlight penetrates the tower, and quotes two of his sons, one of whom, thinking his father is gnawing his hands out of hunger, asks that Ugolino eat the sons instead, and another, who in his despair asks Ugolino why he has forsaken him. Though Ugolino tells his story to evoke Dante's pity, the poet recognizes that its true meaning is that even in the most hopeless circumstances the light of salvation can penetrate the darkness, and his sons' repetition of Christ's words—"Take, eat; this is my body" (Matthew 26:26) and "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (27:46)—is a clear indication that God is extending His mercy, if only Ugolino will accept it. Because he does not understand the message he is receiving, however, he is damned. Ugolino goes blind from hunger, but he is hungry because he is blind to God's grace.

In Hugh's dark wood, the "much darker" Laurel Avenue, where "heavy leaves obscured the one near street lamp" (363), the insistent repetition in his head of "the silent stars go by" should signal him that his unconscious (the "deep and dreamless sleep") is trying to tell him something. Not only does the line point back to the *Divine Comedy,* the three books of which each end with the word "stars," but in the context of "O Little Town

of Bethlehem," it also serves to underscore that the stars' light is merely a material reflection of Christ, the Everlasting Light now shining in the darkness. At the words "Everlasting Light," Hugh has to stifle a sob, but rather than noticing that the source of the emotion may be something other than irony dismisses his obviously deep-seated response as "crazy." He is afraid that his parents have heard him sob but then realizes they cannot even hear their own footsteps, a detail that evokes other lines from the song—"No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin / Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in"—that highlight the fact that it is not his parents who cannot hear but he himself. When Hugh thinks of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," he recalls the image of himself as Shelley, praying in gratitude for the gift of life, but as an atheist—like Shelley—he should certainly see the irony of praying to something that does not exist. As with Ugolino (whose name is an Italian form of Hugh), even in his darkest night, the signs are all around—or, rather, deep within—him; that he does not recognize that he is being offered the gift of everlasting life through God's grace is the signal that his attempt to interact with Rufus will fail.

When Hugh invites Rufus to go on a walk at the end of the book, Agee is setting up the possibility through the allusion to the earlier walk that Rufus and his father take that there will be a reconciliation of sorts, an acknowledgment of loss along with the establishing of a new relationship that will allow him to overcome it. What happens, though, is quite the opposite. Hugh tells Rufus about the "miracle" he witnessed at Jay's funeral, stating that it is the only thing that could ever make him believe in God or life after death. He had seen a butterfly land on Jay's coffin as it was being lowered into the ground and remain virtually motionless until the coffin touched the bottom of the grave,

at which point "the sun came out just dazzling bright and he flew up out of that—hole in the ground, straight up into the sky, so high I couldn't even see him any more" (466). Having told the story, Hugh looks "straight and despairingly before him" (466)—the butterfly is another sign that he cannot acknowledge. Initially, Rufus's reaction is positive. Honored that his uncle can share the story with him, he breathes in "a deep breath of pride and love" and begins to feel that "it was all right now, almost" (467). Hugh shatters the moment, though, by attacking Father Robertson, exclaiming, "And *that* son of a bitch!" As Hugh launches into his diatribe, Rufus feels as if he has been "hit in the stomach" (467). Especially incensed that Father Robertson had refused to read the complete burial service because Jay was not baptized, Hugh asks, "you come to one simple single act of Christian charity and what happens? The rules of the Church forbid it. He's not a member of our little club" (468). "I tell you, Rufus," he continues, "it's enough to make a man puke up his soul. That . . . that butterfly has got more of God in him than Robertson will ever see for the rest of eternity" (468). Though Rufus shares Hugh's dislike for Father Robertson, he recognizes that "that did not seem exactly the point" (468). There is a certain irony in Hugh's sudden concern with the fine points of Christian charity, but Rufus sees a more fundamental conflict. Looking out across a "waste of briers and embanked clay," Rufus tries to compose his emotions:

> Everything had seemed so nearly all right, up to a minute ago, and now it was changed and confused. It was still all right, everything which had been, still was, he did not see how it could stop being, yet it was hard to remember it clearly and to remember how he had felt and why it had seemed all right, for since then his uncle had said so much. He was glad he did not like Father Robertson and he

> wished his mother did not like him either, but that was not all. His uncle had talked about God, and Christians, and faith, with as much hatred as he had seemed, a minute before, to talk with reverence or even with love. But it was worse than that. It was when he was talking about everybody bowing and scraping and hocus-pocus and things like that, that Rufus began to realize that he was talking not just about Father Robertson but about all of them and that he hated all of them. He hates mother, he said to himself. He really honestly does hate her. Aunt Jessie too. He hates them. They don't hate him at all, they love him, but he hates them. (469)

Although Rufus can think of the ways Hugh has shown fondness for his mother and Jessie, he has to conclude that "When he's with them he just acts as if he likes them but this is how he really feels, all the time" (469). Even worse, Rufus feels, in turn, that Hugh has implicated him in his hatred: "He told me about the butterfly and he wouldn't tell them because he hates them but I don't hate them, I love them, and when he told me he told me a secret he wouldn't tell them as if I hated them too (469). Rufus tries to justify Hugh's position, but it becomes more and more untenable. He thinks,

> He doesn't want them to know it because he doesn't want to hurt their feelings. He doesn't want them to know it because he knows they love him and think he loves them. He doesn't want them to know it because he loves them. But how can he love them if he hates them so? How can he hate them if he loves them? Is he mad at them because they can say their prayers and he doesn't? He could if he wanted to, why doesn't he? Because he hates prayers. And them too for saying them. (470)

Rufus wishes he could ask, "'why do you hate Mama?' but he was afraid to" (470), and after a few minutes, the book ends as Hugh says, "'It's time to go home,' and all the way home they walked in silence" (470).

According to the logic of contrapasso, Dante's formulation that makes a sin and its punishment one, Hugh is so consumed by his hatred of religion that it consumes the rest of his life as well. Hugh's sin is that he is an atheist, one who denies the existence of God and who thinks Christians are fools; his punishment is that he is an atheist, whose hatred of their religion separates him from those he loves. Hugh faults Father Robertson—and by extension all Christians—for not living up to the ideals of Christian charity, but his critical distance makes him no better, as his insistence on the letter of his disbelief causes him not only to despise but intentionally to hurt his sister. Hugh can apprehend beauty, but his bitterness poisons his ability to share it with Rufus, who grasps intuitively that the butterfly "must be about as good a thing as a thing could be" since Hugh "even spoke of believing in God, or anyway, *if* anything could ever make him believe in God, and he had never before heard his uncle speak of God except as if he disliked him, or anyway, disliked people who believed in Him" (467). But Hugh's hatred blinds him to the significance of a sign that even a six-year-old can read.

Although obscured by the chronological displacement of David McDowell's edition of the novel, the narrative of *A Death in the Family* is for the most part shaped by Rufus's growing consciousness, beginning with such basic propositions as "The one with the gentle voice was mama" (44) and ending with his fairly sophisticated if largely intuitive analysis of how hate corrupts even beauty. Implicit in this development is Rufus's search for a source of meaning and value in the wake of a seemingly meaningless

event that alters his life irrevocably. If religion, exemplified by his mother's passivity combined with the cold legalism of Father Robertson, seems to dishonor his father's memory, his uncle's anti-religious hatred offers little more than bitterness and estrangement. At the end of the novel, Rufus is confused and lonely, seemingly without anyone to whom he can turn.

Taking *A Death in the Family* as part of Agee's much larger project of working through his own autobiography in fictional form, we can see him returning to religion in *The Morning Watch,* this time countering it with decisive action, which is immediately complicated by religious guilt. The act itself is important, though, since crushing the snake's head is, as Agee explains in his letter to Huston, simultaneously a confrontation with "nature, art, pre-religion, anti-religion, in quintessence; also, in a sense, religion" that produces "a subconscious identification between the snake and the killing of Christ" and "another still more obscure identification between the 2 parts of the snake and his father's death (for one) and his mother's over-religious reaction to the death (for the other)" (3). By taking action, Richard crystallizes and complicates the psychological trauma caused by his father's death and its aftermath, but just as in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *A Death in the Family,* the conclusion of *The Morning Watch* is less an act of closure than it is a reformulation of the central problem of all three works, namely, Agee's need to confront the fact of his father's absence. Perhaps because it was written after the other two, *A Death in the Family* tackles this theme more directly than *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Morning Watch,* reflecting an elaboration of Agee's previously sublimated desire. If Agee had used self-conscious aesthetic forms to examine his relationship with his father in earlier works, though, in *A Death in the*

Family the details of the relationship also serve as a commentary on his turn toward popular art.

Although Jay Agee is largely missing from McDowell's edition of the novel, in the restored edition of *A Death in the Family* he is a fully developed character, who, though a bit rash and prone to anger, is nonetheless a loving husband and father. He is also well aware that the price he has paid for economic and social mobility is a loss of connection with his agrarian roots, and Agee's desire in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for a revitalizing encounter with the primitive mirrors Jay's increasingly difficult attempts to maintain contact with his mountain ancestors. In the context of Agee's career, *A Death in the Family* is part of a progression (or regression) that moves from the twenty-six-year-old Agee seeking his father in sharecroppers in Alabama to the twelve-year-old Richard discovering his guilt over his father's death in spiritual rebellion to the six-year-old Rufus attempting to make sense of the death as it happens, through examining both his own reaction and those of his closest relatives. This progression also manifests a simplification of form, moving from the complex, self-referential experimentation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the stream-of-consciousness and archetypes of *The Morning Watch* to the linear narrative and domestic realism of *A Death in the Family*. As a reflection of Agee's contemporaneous rejection of modernist complexity, though, *A Death in the Family* is almost as self-referential as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in that formally and thematically it comments on its own position as a work of popular art.

With the exception of two short scenes, every episode in which Rufus and his father are alone together in *A Death in the Family* involves their participation in popular

culture, broadly defined. When Dwight Macdonald appropriated Agee for his assault on mass culture in the 1950s, he was doing so in the context of an American mass-media environment that, primarily through the advent of television, had become highly standardized, unabashedly commercial, and national in scope. As Michael Kammen has argued, though, truly mass culture, the dissemination of which depended largely on postwar advances in technology, was a fairly recent phenomenon, the beginnings of which dated to the creation of mass-circulation magazines around the turn of the century, phonographs and movies a couple of decades later, and national radio networks in the 1930s, but which only became pervasive on a national level in the 1950s (15-18). Kammen distinguishes between mass culture, which is passive and experienced privately, generating programmatic responses, with popular culture, which is interactive and public and has its origins in folk culture (22). He dates the heyday of popular culture thus defined to roughly the 1890s to the 1930s, a period marked by increased leisure time, innovations in transportation and other technologies, a broadening of social interaction across class lines, and a commercialization of entertainment that had not yet led to standardization (70-71). Most important, during this period manifestations of popular culture "remained participatory and interactive, based upon certain modes of sociability that began to fade in the decades following World War II" (71), when mass culture replaced by reproducing it on a previously unimagined scale. Concerning an upwardly mobile middle-class family in the years 1911 to 1916, *A Death in the Family* presents participation in various types of popular culture—singing, going to an amusement park, the movies, and a saloon, and joy riding—as a way of both strengthening family ties and constructing a public self.

At the beginning of the book proper, Rufus, afraid of the dark, calls out for his father, and Jay comforts him by singing to him. Rufus knows that his father likes to sing and that if he can get him started, he will stay with him. Jay begins with the folk song "Froggy Would A-Wooing Go," but, as Agee writes, "There were ever so many of the old songs he knew, country songs and darky songs, and he liked them the best of all, but he also liked some of the popular songs" (29). His mother likes to sing, too, and though her repertoire and style are different from her husband's, Rufus "liked both ways very much and best of all when they sang together and he was there with them, touching them on both sides" (41). For Rufus, his parents' singing is an expression of their love for him and each other, and for Jay, singing to his son takes him back to his own childhood, the songs functioning as a source of continuity with a heritage from which he feels increasingly estranged. By introducing the family's "harmoniousness" (278) at the beginning of the book, Agee underscores what is lost by the end. He also shows that it is irreplaceable by having Arthur Savage attempt to distract Rufus and Emma from the funeral by inviting them to listen to his gramophone. In the context of the change from popular to mass culture, the gramophone anticipates the shift from communal singing to private consumption of music, making it a particularly unfitting tribute to Jay.

Agee thus introduces the theme of popular culture by representing singing as an active form of recreation that serves to cement familial ties and extends it with a trip to an amusement park. As Kammen points out, amusement parks began to open in large numbers around the turn of the century at the end of trolley lines partially in order to generate weekend revenue for trolley companies (78). In *A Death in the Family,* Agee opens chapter 11 with "It was a long way out to Chilhowee Park but even the ride out

there was fun because the streetcar was all open" (110). The family apparently goes to the amusement park regularly, and Agee uses the setting both to demonstrate Rufus's growing powers of perception through depicting, for instance, the experience of riding the merry-go-round through Rufus's eyes and to flesh out Jay's character, particularly as he chooses to represent himself to his son. Besides various rides and concessions, the park contains a midway where people can compete against other players or the house in games of chance and skill. Jay likes the shooting gallery, but Agee focuses on another booth in order to draw a contrast between him and his wife. As Agee writes:

> There was another place where there was a darky with his head through a hole, only the man at the counter called him nigger, "hit the nigger in the head and you get a cigar", and the ladies got a kewpie doll. They threw baseballs at him, right at his head, and he dodged. Mama just hated it, she said it was an outrage and it ought to be stopped, there ought to be a law.
>
> Daddy didn't like it either but he wasn't mad about it like Mama was. "He's got to make his living," he said. "That's one way he can do it."
>
> "But what an unspeakable way to make a living, Jay."
>
> "Wouldn't catch me doing it," daddy said. "I'd starve first."
>
> "But the *principle* of it, Jay!," mama said.
>
> "I said *I* wouldn't stand for it," Jay said, "or throw at him either, case you don't know it."
>
> "Of *course* you wouldn't Jay, I know that. But *other* people do."
>
> "That's none a my business," daddy said. "If he wants that job that's none of my business either. He's a pretty good dodger," he said. "I bet he don't get hit

more'n one time in a hundred. Them balls look soft to me," he said. "They're lopsided like they're soft." Once he picked one up and held it out to Mama. "See they're soft," he said. "Couldn't even hurt if they did hit you." (122-23).

Though Laura is horrified by the game's obvious racism, Jay takes another view, asserting that the black man is actually making an informed economic decision, turning the table on those who would dehumanize him by using his athletic skills to take their money. Jay's underlying assumption is that the black man is an individual capable of making decisions in his own best interest, an assumption that reflects the importance that he places on his own autonomy. This becomes apparent when the vendor, who has seen Jay pick up a ball, asks him if he wants to play, precipitating this exchange:

"You buying that ball mister," the man at the counter said. "Three for a dime. Hit the nig—"

"Naw," daddy said, and he put the ball back on the counter.

"Don't handle nothing, Mac, if you ain't paying for it, the man said."

"It's back where it belongs, Buster," daddy said, "so look out who you try to boss around."

"*Jay*!," mama said desperately, and dragged him by the elbow. "*Your temper*."

"Soon bust his jaw's not," daddy said.

"He was in the right Jay. He wasn't trying to *boss* you."

"Don't worry, daddy said, I won't do nothing with you around"; and he came away, though Rufus could see the man and other men still watching after him. (123)

The next time Jay and Rufus go to the park without Laura, Jay confronts the vendor, staring him down until he reacts and then assuring him that if he wants trouble, "I'll give you all I got. You and them too. Way you talked tother Satdy you was looking for it. Now I'm here without my wife you ain't looking so sharp" (124). Reverting to his mountain dialect, which he is always careful to correct when he is around Laura, Jay challenges the man to "talk bossy now" (124) as he picks up a ball and puts it down, but the man "just kept looking at him, and his face got red all over. 'All right,' daddy said. 'Just watch out who you try to boss around, next time.' And he turned around and Rufus took his hand and people stood back and they walked" (125) away without looking back through the crowd that has gathered.

In this episode, Jay makes a point of taking Rufus with him in order to teach him how to be a man. The vendor challenges Jay's masculinity by telling him what to do, but the same sense of honor that demands he be treated with respect will not allow him to fight in front of his wife against her wishes. Although Laura's disapproval gives him a face-saving excuse not to fight, he chooses instead to assert his autonomy, daring the man to come after him, even though an altercation will arouse park security—as the vendor says, if someone is looking for trouble, "there's plenty here that's paid just to find it" (124)—creating a situation in which he cannot prevail. For Jay, though, the fact that he may be beaten is irrelevant; he must act regardless of consequences to rectify the affront to his honor, and he wants Rufus to understand how important it is to take a stand. Rufus is not his father, though, which is why Agee outlined the theme of *A Death in the Family* in his notes as "I worship him: I fail him: I need his approval: he is killed: everything is changed." Despite the starkness of the outline, Rufus's failure is not a specific act but,

rather, an inherent part of his personality, as he does not know how to confront the bullies who harass him about his name, for instance, and recognizes that when his father boasts about how well Rufus can read that "You don't brag about smartness if your son is brave" (189). Jay's public assertion of honor is the antithesis of Agee's rationalization of inaction in "America! Look at Your Shame!" and a rebuke of the ultimately ineffectual navel-gazing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. By presenting Jay's confrontation in the context of his participation in popular culture, Agee is pointing to his own transition from an elite artist seeking a niche within the highbrow world of limited production and limited reach to a popular artist seeking to engage his audience.

Other social activities that Jay introduces Rufus to are joy riding and going to a saloon. The first day Jay brings his new Model T home, he takes three joy rides, one with his family, one with his in-laws (who are not impressed), and one with Rufus. Until the 1930s, automobiles were uncommon enough that taking a drive with no particular destination was entertainment in itself (Kammen 81), and it is obvious that Jay enjoys the experience of driving. In an age when open cars shared streets with horse-drawn carriages, driving was also an occasion for direct engagement between drivers in working out new rules for social interaction in a changing transportation landscape. For Rufus, though, the emphasis in joy riding is on "joy," both in the thrill of speed and in the opportunity it gives him to bond with his father, whose "Don't say a word about this son" (*Death* 163) in the wake of their nearly disastrous accident provides him with a chance to demonstrate his honor. Jay also warns Rufus not to tell his mother that he has taken him to a downtown speakeasy after they have been to the movies, even though his primary reason for going is not to "hoist me a couple" (188) but rather to socialize with men from

his hometown who have come to the market in Knoxville. In both of these cases, Jay explicitly defines the masculine world as completely separate from the feminine sphere, and Agee implies that his death before Rufus has been fully initiated into it affects the latter's ability to act decisively later in life.

Laura also disapproves of Charlie Chaplin, to whom she refers as "That horrid little man!" (184). Agee's respect for Chaplin's genius in creating true art in a popular medium was unbounded, and his making a point of Laura's disgust with the Little Tramp is an indictment of her safe, enervated bourgeois values. Jay and Rufus, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoy the movies, from the "exhilarating smell of stale tobacco, rank sweat, perfume and dirty drawers" (184) in the theater to the thrilling action of cowboy heroes such as William S. Hart on the screen. While modern middle-class movie audiences tend to watch in silence, passively absorbing images and dialogue, Agee represents the 1915 Knoxville audience as raucous and engaged, reacting to Hart's heroics and Chaplin's antics without reserve. When the Little Tramp looks up a woman's skirt, for instance,

> everybody whooped with laughter, and she suddenly turned in rage and gave him a shove in the chest, and he sat down straight-legged, hard enough to hurt, and everybody whooped again; and she walked haughtily away up the street, forgetting about the streetcar, "mad as a hornet!" as his father exclaimed in delight; and there was Charlie. . . . The way his face looked, with the lip wrinkled off the teeth and the sickly little smile, it made you feel just the way those broken eggs must feel against your seat, as queer and awful as that time in the white peekay suit, when it ran down out of the pants-legs and showed all over your

> stockings and you had to walk home that way with people looking; and Rufus' father nearly tore his head off laughing and so did everybody else, and Rufus was sorry for Charlie, having been so recently in a similar predicament, but the contagion of laughter was too much for him, and he laughed too. (185-86)

Again emphasizing that Jay and Rufus share a connection defined by a popular cultural form, Agee establishes a contrast between the action and passivity, identifying Rufus's father with the former and his mother with the latter. Jay and Rufus do not merely watch the movie, but they and the rest of the audience participate in an experience they help to create. Or, as Agee writes in relation to John Huston, "energy is required of the audience & there is an exchange of energy between audience & screen. This is the only kind of 'live' energy possible" (Questionnaire 6).

In "Undirectable Director," Agee asserts that Huston is the consummate popular artist both because he makes action movies—and action "is the natural language of the screen" (129)—and because the way he presents the action requires of the audience "the responsibilities of liberty" (142), which, "by any virile standard, is essential to good entertainment [and] unquestionably essential to good art" (142). In *A Death in the Family,* Jay Agee is a man of action, as all who know him recognize. His wife, for instance, in deciding on the epitaph for his tombstone, justifies her choice of "In his strength" by imagining his last moments:

> "That's how he was taken," she said very tenderly; "in his strength. Singing, probably"—her voice broke on the word—"happy, all alone, racing home because he loved so to go fast and couldn't except when he was alone and because he didn't want to disappoint his children. And then just as you said, Hugh. Just one

> moment of trouble, of something that might be danger—and was; it was death itself—and everything in his nature springing to its full height to fight it, to get it under control, not in fear. Just in bravery and nobility and anger and perfect confidence he could. It's how he'd look Death itself in the face. It's how he did! In his strength. Those are the words that are going to be on his gravestone, Hugh." (326-27)

Whether or not this is strictly accurate, Laura's desire to remember Jay as bravely confronting death expresses what she thinks is most essential about his personality, and the other members of the family agree that the hallmark of his character was his vitality, even if, on the negative side, it was sometimes manifest in his quick temper and recklessness and may have contributed to the accident. In fact, having been visited by Jay's ghost, Laura, Jessie, and Hugh agree that it is because he was "someone very strong, very vital, who hasn't been worn down by old age, or a long illness or something" (347) that his spirit lingers. By representing Jay as a man of action, Agee creates a model for Rufus to emulate, but in his absence Rufus struggles with other examples, especially religion and art in the form of his mother and uncle. If Laura's religiosity is too passive and Hugh's aestheticism too weak to preclude hate, Jay's assertive masculinity is unavailable to his young son. One way the adult Agee reclaims it is through creating a work of art that forces its audience to accept the "responsibilities of liberty" by deciding if Jay's ghost is real.

In the 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism," Breton writes of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* that "What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer anything fantastic: there is only the real" (15n), explaining that "Ghosts play a logical role in the

book, since the critical mind does not seize them in order to dispute them" (15). In *A Death in the Family,* Agee similarly merges the fantastic and the real by having credible witnesses attest to the existence of the supernatural in a way that is completely consistent with their everyday lives. On one level, Jay's ghost returning to his son's bedside is the fulfillment of the desire for wholeness that animates *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* but it also represents Agee's attempt to move beyond psychological self-indulgence. In the coda to the nightmare sequence that opens *A Death in the Family,* Agee writes that he has come to understand that his dream of dragging his father's torn body to the spot overlooking North Knoxville where they had spent their last night together is an acknowledgment that his life "had been shaped above all else by his father and by his father's absence" (14). While he admits the importance of unconscious desire in determining his life, Agee rejects the inward thrust of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by introducing the dream as the impetus for *A Death in the Family* only to supplant it immediately with a realistic treatment of bourgeois life. If *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* transforms the larger social problem of the actual suffering of sharecroppers into a quest for individual psychological health, *A Death in the Family* begins with the individual unconscious and moves to an examination of how a child damaged by loss can come to an understanding of how to act in the world. Though Rufus, a surrogate for Agee as the artist as a young man, cannot express the problem in so many words, he recognizes the shortcomings of his mother's passivity and his uncle's aestheticism, both of which are evident in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in that neither the recognition of the sharecroppers' holiness nor their beauty gives him the moral force to act. By equating his father's vitality with popular culture, Agee announces the maturing of an

aesthetic that will derive its power from the active engagement of his private life with the public sphere.

It should be noted, though, that Agee did not finish *A Death in the Family.* While the manuscript is essentially complete, Agee, who was an inveterate reviser, had not yet submitted it for publication at the time of his death. Furthermore, the novel ends on the unresolved note of Rufus's rejection of Hugh's aestheticism, and it is only through the knowledge of where it fits in Agee's autobiographical project that the reader can identify his father as symbolizing the aesthetic goal of reconciling art and life that he has been the object of his virtually life-lone artistic quest. Personally and artistically, Agee was complicated, even contradictory: the fact that in *A Death in the Family* Rufus can accept neither religion nor atheism demonstrates the impossible task Agee sets for him, reflecting Agee's own self-imposed and completely impractical challenge in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to write words that will not represent but embody. Though much simpler in form than his earlier experimental works, *A Death in the Family* continues the surrealist project of attempting to reconcile life and art by dissolving the boundaries between the unconscious and the conscious; in this case, Agee conflates his longing to be reunited with his father with an aspiration to an aesthetic form that will erase the distinction between author and audience. It would seem that both goals are met in the novel, but the fact that Agee left it unfinished reveals perhaps an unconscious need on his part not to attain what he most desired. His father's death was emotionally devastating, but it was also the event that defined his subsequent development as a writer. He continued to return to it, both in a work such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* where it supercedes the ostensible subject, and in the paradoxical rejection of authority in his

personal life even as he sought out mentors such as Huston, Chaplin, and Father Flye. By leaving *A Death in the Family* unfinished, Agee was not forced to confront the fact that this resolution was an illusion as well.

On May 11, 1955, Agee wrote to Father Flye, but he did not live to mail the letter, succumbing to a heart attack within a week. Flye later found it in an addressed and stamped envelope in Agee's house. In the letter, Agee mentions his declining health, referring to "a terrible slowing down, in all ways, above all in relation to work," but it is most notable for the "movie idea" (*LFF* 229) he briefly sketches out for Flye. Agee begins the plot outline with God addressing an assemblage of elephants from all over Africa. Calling the elephants His "chosen people," God warns them that a "new age" (229) is beginning. Though they have previously worked for men, neither to man's nor their own improvement or detriment, they will now "be taken to be *looked upon,* to be regarded as strange and as wonderful and—forgive me, my dear ones—as funny" (230). God asks only that they be their "own good selves" so that "through so being" they "may convert those heathen, those barbarians, where all else has failed" (230). Apprehending the new state of affairs, "the oldest elephant sadly leaves the assembly, and walks away to the great, secret, elephant cemetery, and dies there" (230).

Agee then moves from "fiction to fact," recording what happened "when elephants were brought among civilized men" (230). In 1824, he writes, Old Bet, the first American circus elephant, was killed by religious fanatics who mistook her for Behemoth. Later that century, the world-famous Jumbo died when he was hit by a train. In 1916, in Kingsport, in northeast Tennessee, a circus elephant named Mary was hanged for murder from a railroad derrick. Agee saves the "Grand Finale" for 1934:

> The greatest choreographer of his time, George Balanchine, instructs the greatest elephant corps of any time, in ballet. The elephants are embarrassed, but dutiful. The big night comes. They dance to music by Stravinsky, in pink tutus. They do very nicely; hardly a mistake. But all through the performance, people roar with joy at their clumsiness, and their dutifulness. The elephants are deeply shamed. Later that night the wisest of them, extending his trunk, licks up a dying cigar-butt, and drops it in fresh straw. All 36 elephants die in the fire. Their huge souls, light as clouds, settle like doves, in the great secret cemetery back in Africa—
>
> And perhaps God speaks, tenderly, again; perhaps saying: "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding . . ." etc. (231).

Agee admits that almost "nobody I've described it to likes this idea, except me. It has its weaknesses, but I like it," finishing with "I hope you do" (231-32).

Though the fact that Agee died so soon after composing the letter perhaps creates more interest than it would otherwise command, this curious idea for an allegorical film about performing elephants serves in various ways as a commentary on his career. The dates are significant: his father's fatal accident, which was the event that shaped more than anything the course of his life and his art, occurred in 1916, the same year as Mary's execution only one hundred miles away, and he sets the elephants' ballet debut in 1934, the year he published his first book, *Permit Me Voyage.* While George Balanchine, the amphibious fuser of classical and modern styles, is an obvious choice for the choreographer, there is also a personal connection, as Balanchine's partner in founding the School of American Ballet in 1934 was Lincoln Kirstein, who published Agee's early

poetry as editor of *Hound and Horn* and introduced him to Walker Evans's work, if not Evans himself.

While it is probably too much to note that *Dumbo,* the Walt Disney film that Agee clearly derived some of the inspiration for his darker tale of even less adroit elephants, was released in 1941, the same year as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* it is not too much to see Agee as referring to the "clumsiness" and "dutifulness" of the latter work, which also expresses a nihilistic desire for an end to the impossible struggle to transcend the limits of art in the peace of death. When Agee makes the crucial fact of the "new age" for the elephants that they will "be *looked upon,*" he is signaling that the artist must make his miss-steps and display his embarrassments in public, and though the artist's holy charge is to "convert those heathen" through the power of "so being" one's own good self, he is more likely to find himself misunderstood or the object of ridicule or, like Mary or Old Bet, destroyed. In keeping with Agee's movement from formal complexity to simpler forms, this animal fable, like "A Mother's Tale" (1952), aspires to an emotional directness often lost with human characters that even a child can understand.

As his own most exacting critic, Agee faults himself for pirouetting with the awkwardness of a dancing elephant, forgetting that it is an achievement for an elephant to dance at all. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* one of the most complex and powerful works of an age of extraordinary accomplishment, needs no apology, and that it took twenty years for the book to reach a wide audience is a testament not to its failure but to its lasting relevance. Though much simpler stylistically, *A Death in the Family* achieves an economy of form that makes it a quiet masterpiece on the theme of domestic love. At the end of his life, Agee apparently saw these efforts as having been clumsily executed,

but as the work of reconstructing the Agee canon from surviving published works and manuscripts proceeds, it is evident that Agee's involvement with the intellectual currents of his time constitutes a complex commentary on the shifting definitions of art and the artist's role in society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE

"In Memory of My Father (Campbell County, Tenn.)" from (1) *transition* and (2) *The Collected Poems of James Agee*

(1)

In Memory of my Father
(Campbell County, Tenn.)

allegretto

Bluely, bluely, styles from stone chimneys crippling smoke of hickory larch and cedar wood of ash, of the white oak. The quell night blues above. The quell night blues : branchwaters, the black woods, begin to talk. The blue night blacks above. Lamps: bloom in their glasses and the stars: splinter and glister glass. Warmth: slops from the pigsty. In the barn pale hay, tussled in teeth, darkness, a blunt hoof. The black night blinds above. Tell me was ever love. so gentle in the hand. so tender in the eye.was ever love:more lovely to the loved. The secret water smiles upon herself; the blue cedar: stands in his stone of smoke. Mile on mile in mountain folded valley fallen, valley lies. Eyes fixed on silence small owls preach forlorn, forlorn: the metal thrill of frog and cricket thousands in the weltered grass: swinging his chain the whippoorwill; the whippoorwill, the answering chain: deep chested from his bowstring a big frog bolts response : swinging his grieving chain : cry, lonesome preacher; choir, shrill creatures of enamored dew; amorous water, parley, elapse; slow stars, display your edges; effortless air, love in the neat leaves the neat leaves: gentle colony in your green harbor throes of a common dream : throes in the leaves, and quiet : sweet tended field now meditate your children : child, in your smokesweet quilt, joy in your dreams: and father, mother : whose rude hands rest you mutual of the flesh : rest in your kind flesh well.

And thou most tender earth:
Lift through this love thy creatures on the light.

(2)

In Memory of My Father
(Campbell County, Tenn.)

allegretto

Bluely, bluely, styles from stone chimneys crippling smoke
of hickory larch and cedar wood of elm of the white oak.

The quell night blues above. The quell night blues:
Branchwaters, the black woods, begin to talk.

The blue night blacks above: Lamps:
Bloom in their glasses and the stars:
Splinter and glister glass. Warmth:
Slopes from the pigsty. In the barn pale hay,
Tusseled in teeth, darkness, a blunt hoof.

The black night blinds above. Tell me was ever love. so gentle in
the hand . so tender in the eye. was ever love. :
more lovely to the loved.

The secret water smiles upon herself; the blue cedar :
stands in his stone of smoke.
Mile on mile in mountain folded valley fallen valley lies.
Eyes fixed on silence small owls preach forlorn forlorn:
The metal thrill of frog and cricket thousands in the weltered grass:
Swinging his chain the whippoorwill the whippoorwill the
answering chain:
Deepchested from his bowstring a big frog bolts response :

swinging his grieving chain

Cry, lonesome preacher : choir, shrill creatures of enamored dew:
amorous water, parley, elapse : slow stars, display your edges :
effortless air : love in the neat leaves the neat leaves : gentle
colony in your green harbor throes of a common dream throes :
the leaves, and quiet : sweet tended field, now meditate your
children , child , in your smokesweet quilt , joy in your dreams,
and father , mother : whose rude hands rest you mutual of the
flesh : rest in your kind flesh well :

And thou most tender earth :

Lift through this love thy creatures on the light.

APPENDIX TWO

Poems from Father Flye's Typescript of "The Poems of James Agee" Excluded from *The Collected Poems of James Agee*

Rapid Transit

Squealing under city stone
The millions on the millions run,
Every one a life alone,
Every one a soul undone:

There all the poisons of the heart
Branch and abound like whirling brooks
And there through every useless art
Like spoiled meats on a butcher's hooks

Pour forth upon their frightful kind
The faces of each ruined child:
The wrecked demeanors of the mind
That now is tamed, and once was wild.

Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme

". . . and I look to the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come."

—Nicean Creed.

I look forward to that day
When human work is human play;
When all the Men with all the Hoes
Cut sirloins from the Morgan nose.

If you would raise that pleasant time
Work in the spirit of the following rhyme:
The man who weaves the future's wreath
Socks the present in the teeth.

If you haven't learned it, learn
Discontent with what you earn:
You'll get more only if you get tough
And more than you'll get's not half enough.

Learn to mistrust the sort of God
Who promises a Land of Nod
To those who ruin out their day
Meekly in their own decay.

Such a god can only be
A talking doll on Swindler's knee:

The church of such a god, remember,

Is nothing but a lethal chamber.

Learn the truth of present law:

It is a snaggletoothed crosscut saw

Swapped back and forth continually

By greed and fear: and we're the tree.

It is a narrow-wefted sieve

That screens off every urge to live:

Through which the guilty lifeless lapse

While anger and purpose rot in traps.

Learn the bloody fact of State,

The great fence with the narrow gate

Through which the splintered brotherhood

Is marched to meet itself in blood.

And learn the happy size of truth:

The human race is in his youth:

New power of metal earth and light

Are huge around him and his right.

He is not split hand against hand
By accidents of flesh and land
But is one man, whose farm's the earth.
And he is learning what he's worth.

What he's worth and what to do;
And the human race is you.
The earth turns in a morning air:
Wake your lungs and drink your share:

And, as along the wind's design
Wheat and the forest leaves align,
Stream in that strength of history
Which makes man what is man's to be:

Learning, above all, how the right
Is only forged of those who fight:
Who, more than leaves, have privilege
To lend that air their shaping edge

And who, their foot inside the door
Must urge it open more and more,
Dreaming no pity, nor self-merit,

Nor of the great house they inherit.

[He can't stand it forever]

He can't stand it forever.

After a while his cramped legs quiet off,

The poor crab quits objecting on the hook,

The smart fish sneer him past.

Take my advice, Boss,

Your bait's gone dead and useless. Scrap

This cheap cracked earth for something livelier

To unaccustomed pain: and try another cast.

Toss us to the small time nuzzling at the bottom

And tease the big boys on. Boss there are fish

Running these waters fit to freeze your dreams.

It takes real bait though. Ride on the hook yourself, you may

Interest one at the last.

I've got them all set; flies, spoons, live bait, big nets of nebulae.

They trawl, flutter, flash the light in every part of the sea.

But the best I had was a two-cent job I found in the sewage ditch.

He carried the tackle right out of my hands the crazy son of a bitch.

I hadn't thought much of him but I sort of liked his look
The funny thing about him was he seemed to like the hook.
He rode it like a hobby horse and he ate what tried to eat him,
He grew and grew and the time came when I couldn't even unseat him.

I tried with wars and wilting looks and the heaviest kinds of weather
And finally he got wise to the game and struck off hell for leather
The hell with you you bastard he shot back across his shoulder
I'll fry your ass in breadcrumbs before you're two days older.

Lord knows by this time where he's at or what the fool is doing.
I have a dirty feeling that I've set my trouble brewing:
So it's a comfort still to know there's a limit to his fun,
My little pal is strapped against the wrong end of the gun.[57]

[57] Fitzgerald casts this as one poem, covering pages 48-49. The top of page 48 reads "manuscript untitled undated. '36?"

VITA

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