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THE STRATEGIES OF WITHDRAWAL:
THE SELF AND THE WORLD IN THE WORKS OF JAMES AGEE

by

© Peter Sanders, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
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of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

With the decline of traditional humanist values and the rise of technological modes of seeing which together have been the hallmark of the twentieth century, James Agee spent his creative life exploring the significance of the modern age for mankind. Agee saw the age as one that denied the individual a place in which he could share his life with others, thereby robbing him of the only fullness and dignity life confers and dramatically increasing his loneliness. The economic collapse of the 1930's revealed this situation more clearly than ever before, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men views the depression in the light of the disappearance of a human place on the earth. A Death in the Family recalls a time when the place was secure; the book stands as a reminder of our loss. All of James Agee's works can be said to withdraw from modernity in some manner; the point of this thesis is that withdrawals were strategically necessary to maintain the values and sense of self threatened by an increasingly technological society. It is the purpose of the following to show how Agee's withdrawals were made more out of moral courage than out of cowardice.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Preface.....	v
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	46
Chapter Three.....	70
Appendix One.....	114
Bibliography.....	115

PREFACE

This thesis charts the course of James Agee's creative life through a succession of literary genres, from religious and pastoral poetry to social documentary and fiction. By far the bulk of commentary deals with the two major works, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and A Death in the Family. This was almost inevitable: the poetry is not substantial enough an achievement to warrant a complete treatment in a thesis of this length, and the film reviews, for which Agee acquired a little fame, prove elusive material when separated from the films they describe. References to both poetry and film reviews are frequently made, however, to clarify points of the argument along the way.

Agee began writing in earnest during the depression, and like so many intellectuals and writers of the day he held socialist ideas and rejected the values of the middle-class establishment. Through his work for Fortune magazine—articles on the Tennessee Valley Project, for instance, and an attack on the 'aristocratic' orchid—Agee quietly chipped away at establishment assumptions and made a case for working class perspectives. But Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a social documentary of the lives of three tenant farming families during the summer of 1936, was the first real attempt by Agee to define his position in a comprehensive and direct way. The book is in part an extensive cataloguing of the smallest details of tenant farming existence; chapter headings include "Work", "Money", "Shelter", and "Education". The book is also an

intensely personal document about Agee himself, full of the self-recriminations and protestations of guilt that increasingly seem to register the human in a wintry age. The attacks he makes on landlords, property, and power and his skepticism about the 'reformist' programs of the New Deal are not unlike the reactions of other proletarian-minded intellectuals of the 1930's. However, there is an important difference between other documentaries and Agee's.

called it. Where other works strenuously pushed for social change, the implications of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men were that social change could be very damaging, even regressive. Too often, in Agee's mind, socially progressive views fostered case-study ways of seeing, reducing human beings to objects as surely as the worst of middle class perceptions did. Caught between the overwhelming need for change and a distrust of change as it was reflected in the movements and ideas of the day, Agee was left quite unable to act, quite unable to do anything at all but register the miserable situation of the farmers and his own misery at being able to do so little. The only release he achieves in the book comes in quasi-mystical moments of sympathy and unity.

Yet what so many critics found defeatist in Agee's attitudes towards social change, and distasteful in his extravagant self-recriminations, was nothing less than an attempt to bring into focus a pattern not of the depression, or of the private neuroses of the middle class, or even of certain important social responsibilities, but of the unchanging conditions of human life to which all men are subject. "Our doom is in our being", Agee once wrote in a

sonnet, calling forth a configuration of human life replete with suffering and death. Beneath the social level of inquiry on which the vast majority of works on the depression operated, Agee evoked, through a fiercely personal identification with the farmers, and by an astute selection of allusion and technique, what we might call a moral level of inquiry. At this level the pattern of social imbalance of oppressor and victim becomes a sweeping, tragic pattern in which the oppressor is life itself as it is given to us and the victims are quite simply all of mankind, each individual equally bounded by mortality. The disastrous fact of the depression was not that economic hardship was inflicted upon so many helpless individuals, but that so few of the more fortunate recognized in the hardship its full import as a paradigm of all human life. In the plight of the poor lay the plight of all; every sorrow was one's own sorrow. The unbreachable gap between the poor and the middle class during the depression demonstrated the larger failure of men to draw together and help one another. Not to see how fully bound up with each other all human lives are, not to find oneself inexorably among the lost and the downtrodden—these were grievous lapses of humanity. They condemned individual men to a terrible loneliness.

The age was partly to blame. The developments of science and technology had gone a long way toward driving wedges, so it seemed to Agee, between men and alienating them from vital sources. The traditions of humanism—most notably the recognition of the bonds between men—which had provided a space where men could share their sorrows and give them meaning were in danger of disappearing

altogether. It was the absence of that space of human concern and the concomitant fragmentation and loneliness of human life that the depression revealed so dreadfully to Agee, and which Let Us Now Praise Famous Men chronicles in something of its full and tragic significance.

A Death in the Family approaches the modern predicament from quite a different tack, although Agee's perceptions had not fundamentally altered. If the space where connection and consolation was possible had vanished, it might do well to recall it. This Agee did, through recalling the Knoxville of his childhood. The force of A Death in the Family does not reside primarily with the sudden death in a family and its coping with grief, but how a space built on tradition and manners and wisdom passed down through the generations works to draw people together in order that they might share their sorrows and draw meaning from their experiences. The Lynch family, most notably Aunt Hannah, confronted with Jay's death, and by extension, with all death, have an astonishing power to wring joy out of sorrow and sense out of senselessness.

This space I have called the world. Although Agee does speak here and there of the world, he uses the word inconsistently, and the term did not suggest itself to me until I read, in the poet Robert Fitzgerald's splendid memoir of Agee, of Agee's new "worldliness" immediately after the war. Fitzgerald meant something of a common-sensical acceptance of compromise, a greater disposition towards tolerance in an ambiguous society and age. But when Fitzgerald's insight is coupled with Hannah

Arendt's use of the term in The Human Condition, we begin to see the way ' world ' can be used to elucidate Agee's work. And in an age when men were separated from each other, Agee was haunted by the drawing-together power of the world as it had existed in his childhood. We see this power in a rudimentary form in A Morning Watch, and in its full form in A Death in the Family.

Without the world man's life is one of loneliness, and Agee's documentary and poetry—the pre-worldly works — describe that loneliness. Two attitudes dominate this early work: a desire to escape from life into unconsciousness and death, and an overwhelming sense of despair and anger. These attitudes reflect the realms beneath and beyond the world, the earth and the universe, respectively. The earth is the realm of unconscious nature, where all individual things pass away, and only species last indefinitely. Man, who alone is conscious of his own death, is therefore never entirely of the earth, and longs for the eternity he glimpses in the starry universe. (Night is one of Agee's favorite images, and the documentary book is quite truly night permeated.) The world is the realm which draws into the rhythms of the earth some of the extraordinary permanence in the universe. Agee makes frequent and consistent use of both ' earth ' and ' universe ', and it was a natural step to include them with the world, the three realms comprising the whole of Agee's imaginative territory. Chapter Two describes these realms in greater detail with reference to Agee's work.

If Agee's early work is dominated by two attitudes, it is also dominated by two character types: the tormented, adolescent,

Agee-like narrator and the innocent child. (The child-like quality of Agee's Alabama farmers has often been noted.) The child, who exists without consciousness of death, and in the lulling rhythms of waking and sleeping and night and day, belongs to the earth. With growing individuality and the inevitable distancing from the earth, the adolescent finds himself lost in the chartless universe, having glimpses of the infinite but without the equipment to make use of them. The quasi-mystical moments of release in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men arrive and then vanish abruptly, and there is little sense that they are transmuted into a lasting form.

In the world it is precisely these solitary perceptions of the universe that are given meaning and a measure of permanence through their being shared. But only in A Death in the Family does this extraordinary conserving power of the world show itself, primarily through the characters of Aunt Hannah and Jay, who neither child-like nor adolescent, are adults, true worldly inhabitants. They possess identity, a balance of the belonging of the earth and the individuality of the universe.

Agee had a definite view of the world in which he lived. Humanism and Christianity were part of the sinews of his perception. He felt very keenly the religious, traditional base of contemporary American existence. He felt it so keenly that he became alert to and disenchanted with the erosions and betrayals of that base by a middle-class materialistic and functional conception of life. The activities of commercial advertising, of capitalism, of corrupt politics, attacked the roots of belief, of the individual, of the mystery as well as the wonder of life.

The world for Agee, the real world, was this sacred, lyrical base, private, collective, searching. This conception of world was the magnetic centre of Agee's life and work.

In his Knoxville childhood as he remembered it, Agee could glimpse the world, but the world had vanished by the time Agee reached adulthood. The anguish in Agee's writing came from his sense of loss at the world's departure. Agee felt he was living in a worldless age. The depression, the war, the explosion of the Atomic bomb — each demonstrated the absence of a world and the failure of men to recognize the responsibilities they had to each other.

The three realms are for Agee realms of withdrawal because they involve a retreat from modern exigencies. To lose oneself in the earth is a kind of death, and there is perhaps in Agee's long adolescent declamations of human life a too-easy denial of the possibility of community, a too-swift embrace of the universe. Even the Knoxville world, enormously vivacious and communicative, existed only in the past and had to be withdrawn to to be glimpsed at all. The charge of escapism has often been made against Agee and probably cannot be entirely dismissed. But the need to withdraw can also be a strategy of survival, a means of keeping alive threatened aspects of humanity. Although the Knoxville world is a world of the past, we need not forget that at the end of A Death in the Family both Rufus and the reader are thrust out of that idyllic world — quite literally into silence and confusion. The book is not so much an attempt to return to a lost world as a strategy to make use of that world in comprehending the present situation more fully. Vestiges of the world doubtless remain in Rufus, and in the reader, creating a restlessness

of the healthiest and profoundest kind and a conviction that a world for man is worth all the effort and love we can give to it. Such a conviction was implicit in everything Agee wrote and because it impelled him to bear testimony to the modern worldless age, and to throw up against the age a lost world of connection and consolation, it was stronger than the despair, also implicit in everything he wrote, that such world could exist at all.

CHAPTER I

1

In an age when the collapse of the world together with its inherited values and traditions have overshadowed in magnitude all other events, when the vitality of the self is determined by the extent of its opposition to the society in which it finds itself, and when the most extreme attitudes and visions seem to hold us most compellingly, what significance can we attribute to the fact that James Agee, in the very shadow of the Atomic bomb, as it were, spent the last years of his life writing works that celebrate the family, middle-class traditions, and the simple and harmonious relationship between individuals--works, in short, that stand in opposition to the overwhelming theme of alienation in contemporary literature? Is his celebration only a withdrawal from the exigencies of the present?

Richard Rupp is representative of many when he expresses dissatisfaction over Agee's work. "The novels are lyric--" he writes, "like the camera he understood so well, they focus on static scenes to portray universal reactions to human sorrow, guilt, courage, awakening, love. Such scenes work well." But, Rupp concludes, they represent a retreat from modern life:

[The saddest thing about them, and about Agee's fiction in general, is his inability to believe in the present reality of his celebrations. They are of a certain time and place, protected, nurtured, and embalmed by memory. Agee's ideal world is a lost world, out of touch with present living.... In large measure,

Agee's penchant for innocence is a death wish.¹

In fact the charge is extremely close to the mark. From his earliest work Agee's preoccupations involved a turning away from the world, from day, from present reality. The dominant images in the poetry are of sleep and night; themes focus on childhood innocence and the desirability of death. The novels, too, are of childhood and a simpler past. Even Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, while ostensibly a book on Alabama tenant farmers in the depression, appears on closer inspection to slip by the actuality it purports to confront. The farmers in Famous Men are passive men, robbed of the spark of initiative or will power. To Lionel Trilling the book displays "a failure of moral realism" by showing men as nothing but good, with "no human unregenerateness in them, no flicker of malice or meanness, no darkness or wildness of feeling..."² Dwight Macdonald calls Agee's farmers "passive, beaten, without much will or consciousness, victims of life with no more ambitious aim than to keep going from day to day."³ Reforms, where mentioned at all, are dismissed as hopelessly compromised and ineffective. It would appear that no amount of effort could right the imbalances and injustices of the farmer's lot.

Priscilla Robertson disagrees. Reviewing the second edition of Famous Men for The Progressive in 1960, she concludes that the book was "not much more to be trusted as a source for life in the thirties than

¹ Richard Rupp, Celebration in Postwar American Fiction (Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, 1972), p. 110.

² Lionel Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It", Kenyon Review IV (Winter, 1942), p. 102.

³ Dwight Macdonald, "After Seven Years. 1. A Way of Death", Politics V (Spring, 1948), p. 124. Quoted in Alfred Barson, A Way of Seeing (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974).

King Lear for early Britain." She had spent the summer of 1937 with a tenant farming family in Arkansas and had found them buoyed up by the changes that were beginning to affect their lives. Set beside her experience, Agee's account of the situation was wrong.

The system which seemed to Agee eternal ... did actually break down. This happened partly because some Americans were unwilling to have the system continue after they saw how bad it was; partly because of machinery and industrial change; and largely because the Americans whose lives were at stake stood up to help themselves.⁴

But it would be a serious mistake to dismiss Agee out of hand on these grounds. For it is simply not true that he was blind to the contemporary situation; in fact he was all too aware of the debilitating influences against which modern man struggled. Robert Fitzgerald has recalled the long, impassioned discussions he and Agee shared on current subjects;⁵ Agee's conversation had, to Walker Evans' mind, "extraordinarily knowledgeable contemporary content";⁶ and Donald Stanford is not the only one who, after meeting Agee and hoping to discuss poetry, came away disappointed by Agee's apparent indifference to the subject, his preoccupation with "the movies, the war against Hitler, and world politics."⁷ Agee took pride in the journalism he did for Fortune and Time, and he wrote brilliantly; he even cherished the notion of writing a column for a magazine on so-called 'topical' issues. ... (I put 'topical' in quotation marks because perhaps Agee would have done the same--and then

⁴ Priscilla Robertson, The Progressive II (Jan. 1961), p. 45.

⁵ Robert Fitzgerald, "A Memoir", in The Collected Short Prose of James Agee (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 20, 21.

⁶ Walker Evans, "Foreword", in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, by James Agee (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. x.

⁷ Donald Stanford, "The Poetry of James Agee: The Art of Recovery", Southern Review X (Spring 1974), p. xix.

4

gone on to show how no issue had simply the transitory 'topical' interest implied by journalism but reflected deeper, unchanging issues.) In other words we must be careful when we conclude that Agee did not see the situation before him. He may have seen it more profoundly than Miss Robertson, with her optimistic conclusions. In Famous Men, it is true, Agee is not quite speaking of the social and economic situation created by the depression; he is speaking of something that lay beneath that situation, and has laid beneath all human situations, our own present one included. For to Agee the suffering prevalent in the depression did not most importantly come from economic disparities but from a deeper, tragic source, and the real threat to modern man was in his refusal to admit of that deeper source. Agee's work, if it is in Rupp's words "out of touch with present living," if it represents a withdrawal of sorts, is at the same time a testament to the harsh and unmitigating conditions out of which human life has arisen since time out of mind and which man tampers with or ignores at the risk of losing his very human-ness. Famous Men may be found to be a repudiation of a present living Agee felt had become weightless and insignificant, nonetheless as it pushed for sweeping social change and the establishment of a new, improved society. By contrast the reality Agee described in Famous Men assumed as a first principle the inherent limitations to man's ability to improve or change or even comprehend the life he is mysteriously born into. It was hardly a popular assumption in the thirties.

Presenting--what did it constitute for Agee? The question of his withdrawal can only be understood in relation to the period in which he lived and out of which he wrote. Agee's writing career began during the depression, a period overwhelmed by catastrophic events, and Agee

spent most of the decade writing on aspects of those events for Fortune and Time. Few periods in American history can have been subject to such a fundamental shakedown of existing structures as the thirties; few periods can have left so many people bewildered by the course of events. Peter Drucker, an Austrian economist, probably understood the full significance of the depression for the individual more than anyone when he wrote:

He [the individual] can no longer explain or understand his existence as rationally correlated and coordinated to the world in which he lives; nor can he coordinate the world and the social reality to his existence. The function of the individual in society has become entirely irrational and senseless.... This disintegration of the rational character of society and of the rational relationship between individual and society is the most revolutionary trait of our times.⁸

Or as Alfred Kazin more mundanely put it: "Where the American had once needed only to adapt his life to the external development of society, he was now directly menaced by society and physically victimized by it."⁹

But the depression only brought home, albeit with great force, to the man in the street, what had been recognized already in the aftermath of the Great War by the intellectuals (of which the so-called lost generation was a part) of the previous decade: that the traditional order and values of the 1914 world had vanished and that nothing of consequence had taken its place. The seeds of the collapse had been sown centuries before, to be sure, in the dramatic rise of science and technology, the dominion of rationality, and the secularization of all facets of life.

⁸ Drucker, quoted by Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956), p. 284.

⁹ Kazin, p. 285.

It was not an exaggeration to say that the machine was replacing man as the measure of all things. What the Great War proved beyond any questionable doubt was that Western civilization as it had embodied humanism for five hundred years had run its course, that the mechanistic tinkering of science, perversely denying their source in the human mind, were now openly threatening human existence.¹⁰

Ironically one of the consequences of the depression was that the fact of civilization's collapse was obscured in a curious way. For while the breakdown of the economy demonstrated quite concretely the collapse of values and traditions of the pre-war world, it presented at the same time an opportunity for immediate response in the way of reforming economic structures and righting imbalances--changes which touched economic issues but did not even begin to comprehend the fundamental reality of a civilization that had lost its direction, its authority and worst of all, the ability to recognize the important and unchanging conditions of human life. People flocked to fight the Spanish war for democracy and socialism, for instance, but it was the rare observer that could admit, as George Orwell admitted in his eloquent Homage to Catalonia, that the so-called "right" side was equally symptomatic of the brutality and narrowness of a barbaric age as Franco's armies.

In America present living was fairly filled with ideologies, utopian blueprints, reform movements. The response to the crisis was phenomenal, and the thirties has been called the decade of participation and

¹⁰ Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 24. Fussell writes: "Out of the world of summer, 1914, marched a unique generation. It believed in Progress and Art and in no way doubted the benignity of even technology. The word machine was not yet invariably coupled with the word gun."

belonging. The intellectuals joined the Communist party, citizen groups filled the churches and the town halls, the New Deal gathered its supporters. An historian has described one of the "basic truths" of the decade as "the need to feel one's self a part of some larger body, some larger sense of purpose."¹¹ It became easy to respond to the social injustices revealed by the Depression; it was harder not to. A climate was bred that seemed to demand immediate responses. But there ~~was~~ and remains a curiously inauthentic air about the thirties' response, a narrowness that eschewed the complete situation in favour of particular 'usable' parts. The striking fact about the ideological movements was, as Warren Suzman notes, "a paucity of political ideas, and, more significantly, an inability to maintain effective political stances except on negative issues..."¹² Someone else wrote: "The slogans were pieces of twine throttling something that was struggling. Phrases like 'the toiling masses' did not answer terrible questions."¹³ To Alfred Kazin the proletarian novels of the time were depressingly shallow, for "Once the point had been made, the reader's apathy destroyed, the moment's urgent release effected, there was nothing left but to go round and round in the same vindictive circle."¹⁴ Even as detached and distinguished an observer as Edmund Wilson found in retrospect his response incommensurate with reality--too many parts ideology, too few sensibility.¹⁵

¹¹ Warren Suzman, "The Thirties", in The Development of an American Culture, ed. S. Coben and L. Ratner (Englewood Cliffe, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 206.

¹² Suzman, p. 206.

¹³ Josephine Herbst, quoted in Suzman, p. 204.

¹⁴ Kazin, p. 302.

¹⁵ William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 32.

In short, we are speaking of a massive response, that did not arise quite from the reality of the depression. It arose, instead, from a manufactured environment of slogans and sensational photographs, of simplistic ideologies and political naiveté, and was fostered by a widespread desire to belong. Not that the thirties did not have much that was genuine and of lasting influence, or that the response was inauthentic down to the last man. And man has perhaps always created an environment from reality by virtue of the issues and aspects of reality he selects to emphasize. Every age has its presiding environment. But in an urgent age ambiguous or contradictory or difficult aspects of reality are less likely to be admitted. The environment contracts and the virtues of disinterestedness and comprehensiveness and tolerance, always rare, become rarer. What disturbed Agee and others in the decade was the casual willingness with which reality was sacrificed for the sake of a narrow, manufactured environment in which answers to questions could be found and action taken with immediate results. Reality that did not enhance important doctrine, reality that could not in some way be 'used', was swept away by the righteous convictions of the reformers. When Partisan Review asked writers in a questionnaire whether they possessed a "usable past" Agee replied angrily that such things were "'usable' only by second-rate people and worse. To those who really perceive them they are too hot to handle in any utilitarian way." He went on to say that these things--the past, the more obscure and difficult aspects of reality--actually use "the good people" rather than the other way around.¹⁶ It is an interesting distinction Agee makes (I dare not say useful), for it implies behind his idea of man a sense of reality is

¹⁶ Agee, Famous Men, p. 321.

larger and more complex than human comprehension can fathom. The "terrible questions" that the slogans could not answer attest to this larger reality. And this complex reality was as far from the man-made environment of present living as Agee could get.

In any age, perhaps, there is a strong desire to live on the simple truisms, to avoid terrible questions. The disastrous events of the decade, and indeed of the several previous decades, made the burden of living particularly pronounced and made the desire for solutions and escapes particularly compelling. Nothing so demonstrates Drucker's melancholy assessment of the senselessness and irrationality of the individual's life as the desire to belong, the putting off, as it were, of the burdens of the self. Malcolm Cowley has recalled the feeling of importance and liberation conferred on those who joined the Communist party--people all too often with "psychological problems ... looking for some cure outside themselves."¹⁷ This was not of course restricted to the reform movements; equally antipathetical to complexity and ambiguity, and more obviously, were those who maintained and supported the status quo. So whether one lost oneself in the widely popular soap operas and Hollywood musicals, Carnegie's bestselling How To Win Friends and Influence People, and the 'American way of life'--which became a catch-all phrase in the thirties to justify all kinds of conformist behaviour¹⁸--or in an adherence to the party platforms and the sweeping slogans of the movements, the perplexities of a larger reality were discarded in favour of the pat formulas of a man-made environment.

¹⁷ Quoted in Suzman, p. 203.

¹⁸ Suzman, pp. 184, 197-199.

Still, we are not speaking of anything radically new: the very fragility of human affairs has made it easier throughout history not to face the complexities and burdens of reality. What was new, in the thirties, however, was the startling success of the man-made environment, its wide sphere of influence and the massive response it engendered. The success was due in large part to the newly developed mass media. Radio and movies could bring important events to the attention of vast numbers of people. According to Warren Suzman, whose article on the thirties is to be recommended highly, the media "helped create an environment in which the shaping of common experiences, be they of hunger, dustbowls, or war, made the uniform demand for action and reform more striking and urgent."¹⁹ Such an environment had its beneficial effects. But in an important way it prevented many from approaching reality; it highlighted and exaggerated and ignored so as to lose the thing it apparently portrayed. And for Agee the greatest danger in this regard did not involve the dream landscape of Hollywood or the growing realm of advertising; it was easy to see how far removed from reality that landscape was. The greatest danger lay in those works that seemed most adjacent to reality and were taken to be accurate accounts of the situation. Audiences could rest in the assurance of their awareness of difficulties without ever really confronting them. To a large degree the reality of the depression existed for the middle-class in the newsreels and documentary photographs and searing magazine exposés and proletarian novels that made the crisis vivid and comprehensible. In a certain sense the pictures in Life were the depression. Hardship and poverty were experienced in such documentary books as You Have Seen Their Faces and Say, Is This the USA and Tobacco

¹⁹Suzman, p. 191.

Road. The slogans did explain the issues. It has been said that the extraordinary photographs from the depression constitute the depression for us today, give us the ambience of America in the thirties more than anything else. But it would not be untrue to say it for the middle class in the thirties too: that for many even then the depression was an image of a migrant worker's lined face, or a dry, cracked field, or the bare interior of a sharecropper's home. Reviewing You Have Seen Their Faces Malcolm Cowley noted "drama, for example, and class conflicts and stories to the extent that they are written in the gullied soil, the sagging roofline of a house or the wrinkles of a tired face."²⁰ Yet it would be quite another thing to say that through such media the actual hardship and poverty and suffering were felt in anything more than an external way.

The mass media could reach unheard-of numbers. Tens of millions of people listened to Roosevelt's fireside chats each week, for instance; vast numbers turned out for political rallies. And not only were the media able to produce an environment for massive response toward action and reform--which, in fact, was more conformist than radical, Suzman tells us;²¹ far more significant were the lengths the media could go to serve the other side, to "reinforce a social order rapidly disintegrating under economic and social pressures that were too great to endure..."²² We have spoken of the conforming drive behind the radio soap operas and Hollywood musicals and mass magazines. There were very few places the mass media could not reach and establish its specious environment. Where in the past

²⁰ Quoted in Stott, p. 214.

²¹ Suzman, p. 191.

²² Suzman, p. 193.

peripheral areas had remained separate enough from a central society for different ways of life to be preserved and learned from, there was now the danger of a sweeping and flattening homogeneity. It became far less likely to find escapes from society in marginal groups, in the poor, the rural, the neglected, where were to be discovered traits of humanity and aspects of reality that had become extinct in the central society. The peripheral areas had been consumed by the whole. The number of documentary photographs of poor families with billboards of Coca-Cola or Pepsodent or, in one obvious but revealing example, the billboard reading "America Enjoys the Highest Standard of Living in the World," is very high indeed. The grass roots and agrarian movements of the thirties were an attempt to get beyond the pervasive ideology of society, to re-open accesses to reality closed off by the encroachment of the mass, but these searches, too, were quickly taken over by the instruments of modernity. The plights of the poor or the Okies or the Alabama tenant farmers were genuine issues, revealing hidden aspects of reality, but by the time they were taken up by the Saturday Evening Post, Fortune, Time, and Newsweek they were 'items' to flatter the progressive attitudes of complacent readers, to provide a frisson of social guilt. Their reality had undergone a sea-change. Even the supposedly good documentary genre was in Agee's mind suspect. What John Grierson, an early documentary film-maker, had anticipated as the genre to make people aware of events within an increasingly complex society, thus instilling citizenship and revitalizing democracy,²³ had in practice served to persuade and mold people toward greater conformity. With this danger in

²³ Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary", in Film: A Montage of Theories, ed. Richard MacCann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 207-215.

mind Agee makes the celebrated documentary photographer Margaret Bourke-White the villain of Famous Men. Miss Bourke-White was the most highly paid photographer in the world; her pictures were characterized by sensationalism and condescension (to say nothing of a fundamental distortion); her attitudes as revealed in her autobiography are callous and self-serving.²⁴ Nor was she alone among the documentarists in the degrading way she approached her subjects. In 1940 Lincoln Kirstein wrote of the candid 'social message' photograph that it makes up "in quantitative shock what it lacks in real testimony.... Its only inherent characteristic is the accidental shock that obliterates the essential nature of the event it pretends to discover."²⁵ The documentary was all too often missing what was essential. Much of Famous Men, which began, ironically enough, as an article for Fortune (it was ultimately rejected by that magazine), is a repudiation of the documentary books that preceded it. It has been called the documentary book to end all documentary books.²⁶

The failure in documentary work was to Agee particularly damaging because of its closeness to the elementary conditions of human existence. The documentary subjects were nearly always common men, the poor, the lower classes, people who felt more immediately, Agee believed, certain exigencies that were obscured in middle class society. This was especially true in the thirties when poverty was more absolute, the middle class distance more salient. To distort their rudimentary lives, where

²⁴ Margaret Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

²⁵ Quoted in Kazin, p. 386.

²⁶ "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men culminates the documentary genre and breaks its mold." Stott, p. 266.

shone "the classic patterns ... of human living",²⁷ was to lose forever a touchstone against which the man-made environment could be measured and judged. For in the elementary conditions of human life lay reality. The alarming thing Agee could see around him was that even the simplest portrayals of 'present living' had become suspect, were 'ideas' that obliterated the concrete actuality they represented. What present living consisted of, instead, was a manufactured event, no doubt with a basis in reality, but defused, defanged, so the response to it would not disturb. These were considerations neither Priscilla Robertson nor Richard Rupp understood when they spoke of Agee's refusal to face present living.

Equally damaging for Agee was the threat the man-made environment posed to one of the firmest bastions of Western humanist traditions: the great works of art. "Works of the imagination...advance and assist the human race and make an opening in the darkness around it as nothing else can,"²⁸ Agee declares in Famous Men, but warns against thinking of his book as Art.

The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not been thus castrated. Official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas.²⁹

Agee is speaking of a society that through the "emasculatation of acceptance" and the "deifying of the imagination" could ensure that art works

²⁷ Agee, Famous Men, p. 53.

²⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 209.

²⁹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 14.

were "hermetically sealed off from reality."³⁰ They too underwent a sea-change when harnessed to the immediate concerns of society. In this regard Alfred Kazin wrote of the Marxist literary critics that the "most remarkable thing about them was the extent to which they vented so much passion upon literature while betraying their essential remoteness from it."³¹ The new mass society was seemingly able to consume everything genuine (i.e. everything that bore witness in some manner to the conditions of human life) and wrest it into digestible form. Read Agee on the white popularization of jazz in Partisan Review, for instance.³²

The encroachment of a man-made environment into all areas of life did not, to repeat, characterize the entire decade, but as an alarming tendency (which masked itself in a sanguine aspect) it absorbed Agee's concern. Against the man-made environment Agee posited an existential reality (of which more later); against the groups, the movements, the mass, Agee posited the individual. Individualism, he wrote in a Christmas essay for Time, is "all that each man knows in the best conscience of his own soul, and all that has the humility and the courage to try to act accordingly, without compromise, against no matter what pressure or inducements."³³ In reply to Partisan Review's questionnaire Agee speaks of a "race which is much superior to an organization or Group or Movement or Affiliation, and the bloody enemy of all such, no matter what their 'sincerity', 'honesty', or 'good intentions,'.... men who do not breathe one another's breath nor require anything of one another: but

³⁰ Agee, Famous Men, pp. 13, 218, 216.

³¹ Kazin, p. 312.

³² Included in Agee on Film: I (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), pp. 404-410.

³³ Agee, "Christmas, 1945" in Time 46 (December 24, 1945), p. 56.

are of the only free human beings..."³⁴ The experience of the individual contradicted, in its complexity and palpability, the abstract, simplistic formulas that prevailed in society.

The created man-made environment roused people to push for change; it brought important things to light; it did much to re-enforce a disintegrating social structure. But for Agee and others the sacrifices far outweighed any gains. All too often the environment contrived a facile and interested rendering of events that obscured the reality behind. And as the response was a mass response, without the gradations of individual sensibility and dubiety, it was harder to think for one's self and out of one's own experience. The terrible questions not only could not be answered; they hardly even came up. But the really new thing that appeared in the thirties was a man-made environment that, through its technological prowess, could sweep everywhere and influence everyone and thereby cover over the reality of an individual's existence more completely than ever before. The danger was a profoundly human one. The mass media "helped create a unity of response and action not previously possible;" Warren Suzman concluded, but "it made us more susceptible than ever to those who would mold culture and thought."³⁵

111

The part the mass media played in creating an abstract, manufactured environment was only an aspect, although an important one, of a broader phenomenon, that of the widespread influence of science and technology and the perceptions that seemed inevitably to accompany them.

³⁴ Agee, Famous Men, pp. 321, 323.

³⁵ Suzman, p. 193.

We spoke earlier of the collapse of the 1914 world. We said that the Great War made clear above all else the sullied promise of science. Progress had discovered its shadow. It was now realized as never before that science was not only a solver of problems but a creator of problems. And humanism, the force that had hitherto marked the finest achievements of Western civilization, not only was without the power to check the increasing domination of what Agee called "scientific morality",³⁶ but was in danger of disappearing altogether.

In 1929 Joseph Wood Krutch published The Modern Temper, in which he traced the modern predicament, the concomitant disappearance of inherited humanistic values and traditions and widespread currency of scientific techniques and understanding. The concerns of man were being sacrificed to the demands of the machine. Those individuals still bound by humanistic considerations were operating by a "temporary suspension of disbelief in the mythology upon which they are founded." "Both our practical morality and our emotional lives," Krutch concluded, "are adjusted to a world which no longer exists."³⁷ But the problem was only exacerbated by the depression, for in the wake of the confusions of individual life instant solutions were wanted. To be sure, the depression exposed as never before the ugliness of modern industrial America; the machine became a symbol of a de-humanized society out of control. "The depression has made us acutely aware of the fact that our brilliant technological skills are shackled to the shambling gait of an institu-

³⁶James Agee, The Collected Poems of James Agee, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 80.

³⁷Joseph Wood Krutch, The Modern Temper (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956), p. 16.

tional Caliban...³⁸ Robert Lynd wrote in 1939 in a book with the haunting title Knowledge for What? Yet is it not almost a tragic flaw in human nature that in the very moment a way of life is being destroyed people are unable to see beyond it or to trust the alternatives that would infuse new strength and direction into their lives? The crisis of the thirties, so largely brought on by the organizing principles of science, was too pressing for society to pass up the promise that further scientific methods could offer: a rational ordering and understanding of events and of men; manageability; predictability. So reality was wrested into an environment that posed clear, answerable questions, and the terrible questions were lost.

The movement of modern science has been from the concrete to the abstract, that is to say, from the physical realm we apprehend with our senses to the micro- and macro-scopic realms apprehended only by technological instruments and empirical methods. In a way science no longer participates in the world humanity lives in, although scientific impact on that world is profound. It is a curiously circuitous route science takes in its flight from the concrete. The data registered by sophisticated instruments or within the laboratory of man-made conditions tell us more about the structures of our established conditions and hence the structure of our rational minds than it does about any reality beyond us. The farther we look outwards through our telescopes and microscopes, the more we are thrust back upon ourselves, the more the universe, in its mysterious otherness, escapes us. What we are talking about, of course, is the predisposition of science not to discover

³⁸ Quoted in Suzman, p. 187.

reality but to create in the furthest stretches of space and in the infinities under our noses, so to speak, the same man-made environment in which all things can be explained and used. The goal of science and technology is to transform all of reality--reality that comes to us through our senses--into an abstract environment that "works" according to the set conditions of its creation but can tell us nothing new.³⁹

The implication of this for human life is abysmal. When man turns the instruments of science on men to discover human nature, he discovers there a similar man-made abstraction: a collectivized man of behavior and responses, revealed through polls, questionnaires, tests, and capable of being organized and understood in large frameworks. Man is perceived as a unit in a mechanistic framework or the proverbial cog on the wheel of an industrial, bureaucratic society. The Romantic poets had been significantly aware of the dangers of seeing men as machines or parts of a machine. Max Weber, in The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism, has described the central movement of modern history as the ever-increasing rational organization of human life. But there were escapes from a mechanistic society, and the age-old humanistic traditions still weighed heavily on the perceptions men had. It was only in the twentieth century, and especially in the thirties, that the rise of the mass media and the widespread popularity of the social sciences effected the emergence of what is perhaps the supreme achievement of modern science, mass society. For mass

³⁹ These ideas are partly derived from Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 286-288.

society eliminates the mystery from human affairs--a mystery experienced by individuals in the face of an existential reality⁴⁰ and thus satisfies the goal of hundreds of years of scientific pursuits, to clear up the enigmas of the universe.

For Agee the individual stood against mass society and denied society's truth, denied the truth of scientific perception. The so-called "facts" of an individual's life--his job, his religious beliefs, marital status, neuroses, and so on--were all science could know of him. But his humanity, which arises in such experiences as love and joy and suffering and death--experiences that cannot be explained by any framework man devises and in fact explodes these frameworks--, confirms the complex nature of human life and the given, not man-made, conditions by which he lives.⁴⁰ Existence presupposes any truths man discovers. The true meaning of a person, Agee wrote at the beginning of Famous Men, "is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact."⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Hannah Arendt's discussion of "soul" in The Human Condition, p. 288.

⁴¹ See Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

Nothing perhaps so characterizes the scientific temper of the thirties as the disfavour with which Freud's later discoveries were met.

During the writing of Famous Men Agee read Freud extensively and admired him enough to include him as one of the 'unpaid agitators' (along with Jesus Christ, William Blake, and others) listed at the beginning of Famous Men. Freud had used scientific methods to study mankind, had praised the precision and detachment of science, but in his last books⁴² he was unable to persuade himself that man could ever be properly understood (let alone cured), or that the unconscious could be brought into consciousness. Freud's was a deep, tragic vision for which the thirties could have little use, and the disfavour signalled how completely the traditions to which his work is among the last great testaments have been lost to view.

Freud's work is marked by a pervading and deeply felt humanism, which has nominally been the driving force of civilization since the Renaissance. But man as the measure of all things had been replaced by the machine as the measure of all things. "The germinal force of Western civilization," Agee wrote in a film review, was "the humanistic attitude," which "resides in the ability to recognize oneself, and others, primarily as human beings, and to recognize the ultimate absoluteness and responsibility of each human being." But, he goes on to say, "no attitude is more generally subject to disadvantage, dishonor, and misuse today, and no other is so nearly guaranteed extinction."⁴³ In a present living dominated by technology, the full individual disappeared

⁴² The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and Its Discontents.

⁴³ Agee on Film: I, p. 278.

into the mass. The danger of machines, Agee explains in a Time essay, is that "once they are admitted, chain reactions seem inevitably to set in which get far beyond human control.... And though machines are neither good nor evil, much is [sic] lost when personal skill and strength are lost. People begin to group too largely, and to depend on groups, rather than on themselves and on each other as individuals. And that is always bad."⁴⁴ Agee's withdrawals were to retrieve and revitalize what he could of the humanistic attitude from present living.

Agee's humanism is as far away from scientific perception as one can imagine. Individuals are perceived bulging "with a depth and complexity of realness" rather than as units of this or that mental framework. Against the dispersing of mystery and the promise of predictability and manageability, humanism offers "rashness", "aliveness" (Agee's words) and a sense of unexpectedness. "[B]ecause everybody is a complete human being," Agee writes, "one feels at every moment that almost anything could happen, and that the reasons why any given thing happens are exceedingly complex and constantly shifting their weight."⁴⁵ Agee is writing of the Italian film Shoeshine, a rare film in its day. And the suspicion that we have moved even further away from humanistic ideals can hardly help to arise when we consider how dependent our films have become on formulaic characters and situations, our only release coming from the empty and hence increasingly brutal machinations of plot.

The apparent consequence of humanism is a shifting, uncertain awareness of people and events, for one can know conclusively so little, and one's perceptions must undergo constant re-evaluation. Yet humanism

⁴⁴ Quoted in Barson, A Way of Seeing (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), pp. 135-6.

⁴⁵ Agee on Film: I, p. 280.

cannot ignore the suspicion that that which is unmeasurable may be significant. When, in the fullness of consciousness, using both intellect and emotions as opposed to scientific rationality, one is confronted with that which is beyond one's own mind and one's own formulations, the impression is the opposite of relativism; the impression is of an unchangingness and surety in the conditions, however harsh they may be, to which man is subject. Agee makes that clear when he speaks of "the classic patterns ... of human living."⁴⁶ And consciousness ends up finding a dreadful relativism and comfortlessness in mass society as man-made conditions are seen in their 'arbitrariness'. The alternating moods of rage and despair that exude from nearly every page of Famous Men illustrate how much Agee felt he was in a state of siege against the influences of his age. For science had shrivelled what he called "a universe luminous, spacious, incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail" into a set of formulas and ideas and in the awesome success of scientific ways of seeing, man was being denied "what all ages before him were capable of achieving," that is, to experience the reality of what he himself is not."⁴⁷

iv

Agee was by no means alone in recognizing the dangers of his time. Josephine Herbst confirmed that the terrible questions were not being answered. Suzman speaks of "a deep current of pessimism in the thirties about the possible survival of individualism."⁴⁸ Katharine Anne Porter,

⁴⁶Agee, Famous Men, p. 53.

⁴⁷Arendt, p. 288.

⁴⁸Suzman, p. 186.

looking back in 1939, reflected that the decade largely comprised

a confused, struggling, drowning-man-and-straw sort of thing, stampede of panicked crowd, each-man trying to save himself--one at a time trying to work out his horrible confusions... I suffer from it, and I try to work my way out to some firm ground of personal belief, as others do... I have times of terror and doubt and indecision, I am confused in all the uproar of shouting, maddened voices.... I should like to save myself, but I have no assurance that I can.⁴⁹

Agee's aim in Famous Men, almost heroic in its eccentric monumentality, was to work his way out from the clamour and confusion to some firm ground too, but like Miss Porter he was continually unsure of his efforts. Happily he found in the documentary a genre elastic enough to encompass all his impressions, however diverse and inconclusive, that came out of his complex and individual experience of reality.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men began as a project for Fortune magazine on tenant farmers in the south. Robert Fitzgerald recalls an afternoon he and Agee spent together when the project was first announced:

The period I am thinking of covers '36 and '37, but now let me narrow it to late spring or early summer of '36... One day Jim appeared in my office unusually tall and quiet and swallowing with excitement (did I have a moment?) to tell me something in confidence. It appeared very likely, though not yet dead sure, that the editors of Fortune were going to let him go out on a story, a story of tenant farming in the Deep South, and even that they would let him have as his photographer the only one really fit for the job: Walker Evans. It was pretty well beyond anything he had hoped for from Fortune. He was stunned, exalted, scared clean through, and felt like impregnating every woman on the fifty-second floor. So we went over to a bar on Third Avenue.⁵⁰

Agee knew from the outset the opportunities of such an assignment.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Suzman, p. 203.

⁵⁰ Robert Fitzgerald, "A Memoir", in The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, pp. 4-5.

He was probably aware, too, of the difficulties he would face in the months and years ahead, trying to get the assignment written properly, trying to get it published. By the time the summer was over he knew the subject was much larger and more significant than Fortune magazine could handle. "The trip was very hard, and certainly one of the best things I've ever had happen to me," he wrote to Father Flye. "Writing what we found is a different matter. Impossible in any form and length Fortune can use..."⁵¹ Agee's subject was far more universal than the hardship caused by the depression; it was about the fact of suffering in human living. It was also about the joy that mitigates that suffering. Famous Men is part of the documentary literature that grew out of the depression, and out of the prevailing left-wing sentiments among middle-class intellectuals and writers of the time, but it is also an enduring document of what it means to be a human being when the odds against humanism are high, when the ramparts of civilization had crumbled and the individual was alone as never before.

The documentary literature of the thirties is a mixed bag: Archibald Macleish's Land of the Free, a combination of government-sponsored photographs and his own verse; An American Exodus, a pictorial and verbal study of "human erosion in the thirties" by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor; Harry Kroll's autobiographical novel I Was a Share-cropper; John L. Spivak's America Faces the Barricades; the ubiquitous Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's You Have Seen Their Faces and Say, Is This the U.S.A.?, a collection of photographs, fictional captions, and essays describing such popular horrors as chain gang slavery and

⁵¹ Agee, Letters to Father Flye, ed. James H. Flye (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 94.

starvation, et al. Each had its message to push, each its ideological stance to fall back on.

The meaning of the word 'documentary' as it is now used is attributed to John Grierson, who applied it in 1926 in a review of Robert Flaherty's film, Moana.⁵² The word is derived from two sources: document as official, factual information (government documents, legal documents, etc.); and the human document, a personal story of uncommon courage or insight ("It is a rare human document," we say about struggles against disease, or memoirs of extraordinary times.). These tendencies remain in the documentary genre, the first giving facts to the intellect, the second informing the emotions by showing the human side of situations. Ideally the two work together to increase our knowledge of public facts while sharpening that knowledge with feeling. Feeling is the key: Grierson believed that emotion, properly felt and understood, "does engender decent seeing, is intelligence."⁵³ The power of the documentary lies in its ability to move people, either to spur them to action against injustice, or to deepen their lives with glimpses of "unimagined existence",⁵⁴ as Agee puts it.

In his fine book, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, William Stott lists the main characteristics of American documentary literature.

Documentary, he argues, persuades by presenting facts directly and thereby calling into question the reader's humanity, his way of life, his responsibilities. It also presents the 'experience' of the documentary's subject. "The whole idea of documentary--not with words

⁵² MacCann, Film: A Montage of Theories, p. 207.

⁵³ Stott, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Agee, Famous Men, p. xiv.

alone but with sight and sound--makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other's experience."⁵⁵ Stott too emphasizes the primacy of feeling: "one knows another's life because one feels it; one is informed--one sees--through one's feelings."⁵⁶

The documentary has a proletarian outlook, which explains its appeal to left-wing intellectuals in the thirties. Stott writes: "Documentary is a radically democratic genre. It dignifies the usual and levels the extraordinary. Most often its subject is the common man, and when it is not, the subject, however exalted he be, is looked at from the common man's point of view."⁵⁷ In addition the role of the documentarist becomes crucial. Many of the biographical captions on the inside flaps of these books emphasized the author's political affiliations, proletarian experiences, and so on. The documentary subject was only as reliable as its witness; the journalist became part of the drama, intimating to his reader the correct response.

There are other characteristics harder to define. Many of the books suggest an underlying notion of a mythical Whitmanesque America. A fascination with artifacts--bowls, rooms, boots, the items of a dresser--abounds. Agee wanted to do no writing at all; in addition to photographs he would use

⁵⁵Suzman, p. 191. Quoted in Stott, p. 8.

⁵⁶Stott, p. 9.

⁵⁷Stott, p. 49.

"fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement."⁵⁸

What was perhaps the most important characteristic of the documentary Stott only intimates: a certain willingness to let the experience speak for itself, a certain disinclination to comment. The documentary genre at its best made no conclusive attempt to judge or to sum up.

Small wonder that the camera became so important to the genre, "the central instrument of our time,"⁵⁹ Agee called it. The camera was less likely to distort, less likely to impose an order that was not there.

The camera did not fake or gloss over, [writes Kazin]; It was at once so aggressive and uncertain that it highlighted an awakened, ironic, militant, yet fundamentally baffled self-consciousness.

And Kazin continues: "And if the accumulation of visual scenes seemed only a collection of 'mutually repellent particles', as Emerson said of his sentences, was not that discontinuity, that havoc of pictorial sensations, just the truth of what the documentary mind saw before it in the thirties?"⁶⁰

We have already noted how, in the hands of lesser documentarists, a genuine feeling of discontinuity soured into condescension, bathos, and propagandism. The impulse of the writers and photographers to move people inevitably ran the risk of overstating its case and falling into propaganda. A celebrated case of distortion involved a photographer moving a cow's skull he had found to a grassier location for better

⁵⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Kazin, p. 387.

effect.⁶¹ But the chance to portray discontinuity, to avoid summing up, must have appealed enormously to Agee, for it countered the prevalent tendency of the age, and allowed him the freedom to be unsure, tentative, circumnambulatory, to dredge up without help the experience of the summer of '36 in all its complex fullness.

Agee's task in Famous Men was two-fold: to see through and cast off the debilitating influences of his time, and thereby to receive into his consciousness the unchanging conditions of human existence still to be perceived in the farmers' lives. The entire effort hinges on consciousness, the book's 'hero', according to Agee. "[i]t is our consciousness alone," Agee writes, "that we have to thank for joy..."⁶² The way to reality is through consciousness, but the first act of consciousness must be the rejection of all received values and traditions--values and traditions that had either lost their force or were distorted to serve contemporary needs. This meant the casting off of all the trappings of human life to find the existential reality underneath. It is to this end that Agee directs his antagonism against his middle class reader. The first thirty pages of the book, Time observed, are "devoted largely to alienating the reader",⁶³ and Saturday Review complained that the reader is "unmercifully slugged, drugged, browbeaten, and outraged."⁶⁴ The effect is to stir the reader out of complacency. Once the individual consciousness

⁶¹ Stott, p. 61.

⁶² Agee, Famous Men, p. 203.

⁶³ Anonymous, "Experiment in Communication", Time 38 (Oct. 13, 1941), p. 104.

⁶⁴ Selden Rodman, "The Poetry of Poverty", Saturday Review 24 (Aug. 23, 1941), p. 4.

is activated, so to speak, and the individual compelled to think for himself out of his own experience, the underpinnings of the manmade environment begin to dissolve. The self grows in stature by its efforts of what Lionel Trilling has called elsewhere "indignant perception."⁶⁵ This included for Agee a repudiation of science and art (as it is commonly consumed), but it went further to include all authority, all tradition, all received values as they were transmitted by the contemporary middle-class establishment. Even language itself is attacked in a passage reminiscent of the "Oxen of the Sun" episode in Ulysses. Agee uses the word "sharecropper", which has absorbed "every corruptive odor of inverted snobbery, marxian, journalistic, jewish, and liberal logomachia, emotional blackmail, negrophilia, belated transference, penis envy, gynecological flumry and fairly good will ..."⁶⁶ to show the breakdown of language that coincides with the breakdown of civilization. Agee enjoined his reader to trust nothing but "individual, anti-authoritative consciousness", which is "our one hope, this monster world's one sure, most shrivelling enemy."⁶⁷

In Agee's view consciousness, as distinct from the imagination, did not mould or shape reality but simply absorbed it. Like the camera Agee admired so much, a passive consciousness allowed reality to make its impression on the mind with as little distortion as possible. Much of Famous Men is a series of almost mystic exercises to prepare and cleanse the consciousness for the weeping-in of reality. Once the received values and habitual perceptions have been cast out, Agee alleges, "there opens before consciousness, and within it, a universe luminous, spacious,

⁶⁵Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978, p.ii.

⁶⁶Agee, Famous Men, p.415.

⁶⁷Agee, Famous Men, p. 99.

incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail."⁶⁸

It is due to the abhorrence Agee felt for the constant moulding and shaping of events that went on simply as a matter of course either to consolidate existing structures or instill the need for change that he reacted so sharply against the ordering of the imagination. Even the book's shape, or rather shapelessness, betrays Agee's reluctance to emphasize one part of his experience over another, to impose upon it a shape it did not in reality have. "I am in this piece of work illimitably more interested in life than in art,"⁶⁹ he claimed, justifying the desultory procession of events. And there is some correlation between the shapelessness of the book and the shapelessness of life. Yet it was somewhat disingenuous of Agee to claim a lack of artifice and a superior objectivity when at the same time he admits to using as many artistic devices and imaginative techniques as any other artist and when his objectivity resulted in an extravagant, often indulgent, subjectivity. He was not portraying reality; he was portraying his reality.⁷⁰ The apparent artlessness and shapelessness of the book and the myriad disclaimers against ordering experience should not blind us to the very specific aspect of reality Agee attempts to portray: a reality as it was related to simplest existence and to the struggle of men against the elemental conditions of human life--conditions not softened or distanced by the pursuits and developments of modern society. To

⁶⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 218.

⁷⁰ Agee's admiration for the artlessness of the camera was in part wrongheaded, as he later came to realize. Walker Evans would have been more hesitant speaking about the camera's lack of artifice; he knew too well how much art went in to the simplicity of his photographs.

manage enough food to eat and shelter and the barest of clothing and utensils--that was the reality Agee was anxious to portray. The reality did not encompass the social conditions that are also important factors in human lives. When Agee looked at reality it was as though man had been born naked and alone into a universe of suffering. What there was of society and of tradition and of inherited knowledge he saw hardly at all. They no longer existed for him.

At this center we set this seed [an individual human life], this flower, whose genealogy we have suggested and whose context in eternal history, his royalty, his miraculousness, his great potentiality: we try at least to suggest also his incomparable tenderness to experience, his malleability, the almost unimaginable nakedness and defenselessness of this wondrous fivewindowed nerve and core: the size, the pity, the abomination of the crimes he is to sustain, against the incredible sweetness, strength, and beauty of what he might be and is cheated of:⁷¹

The message goes on for a page or two, and the excessively lush prose is perhaps indicative of Agee's untethering from his social surroundings, his attempt to speak directly in universal terms. But he seems to be seeing in the harsh struggle of the farmers the harshness and loneliness of all modern life; in a certain sense the farmers represent the modern self, unable to be a part of a specious man-made environment, yet alone and without support in the universe.

It is interesting in this regard that Agee's descriptions of the farmers' homes, while one might expect them to reveal the day-to-day life of the farmers, their habits and sparse traditions, do nothing of the kind. The attention Agee lavishes on tiny insignificant items (e.g.

⁷¹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 93.

"A pink crescent celluloid comb: twenty-seven teeth, of which three are missing; sixteen imitation diamonds."⁷²) actually has the effect of dissolving the social context to which the items belong. Their importance comes, instead, from the manner in which they reveal the unchanging harshness and impermanence of human life. Their beauty, Agee tells us, "is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time, and is inextricable among these, and as impossible without them as a saint born in paradise."⁷³

If Agee distorted portions of reality, if he demonstrated "a failure of moral realism", it was at least partly to make sure the book and the farmers could not so easily be consumed. To a large degree the farmers remain enigmatic. They are in a certain important sense unrealistic, it is true, "passive", "beaten", "without wildness of feeling", with their hardship exaggerated to show that no amount of reform or commitment could improve their lot. But no social scientist was about to fit them into theories or formulate solutions for them, no "imaginative" soul find in their lives a charming quaintness and pathos. Agee's portraits defy such handling. He would not permit the attribution of a man-made meaning to these human beings, whose simplest existence lay quite beyond man's comprehension. "Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me, "Agee writes," his true meaning is much huger."⁷⁴ His true meaning lay in the mystery of existence, the mystery

⁷² Agee, Famous Men, p. 156.

⁷³ Agee, Famous Men, p. 121.

⁷⁴ Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

surrounding his arrival and his departure from the earth and the experiences individuals have that cannot be explained. And the farmers' passivity was simply Agee's way of showing that action as it appeared in the push for reform and the easy solution of economic improvements only masked the conditions modern man lived under. But the entire thrust of the book depends on the reader's reaction to the farmers as Agee portrays them. It is not Agee's purpose to have us say, "We must improve the farmers' lot", but rather, "Their lot is our lot". There can be no separation between us and them.

To recognize another's plight as one's own is at the very core of Agee's perception of reality. Agee's reality was based on the idea that all men belong to a single body of mankind. There were bonds between people far beyond those involving social responsibility. And to Agee those bonds were best seen in the extremes of human living: deprivation, impoverishment, unrelenting hardship. From a contemplation of those situations men could move toward the kind of perception Agee spoke of as the humanistic attitude: "the ability to recognize oneself, and others, primarily as human beings, and to recognize the ultimate absoluteness and responsibility of each human being". The exchanges between Agee and his farmers were meant to show the humanistic attitude in action and perhaps to stir the attitude, latent in all people, Agee tells us, in his readers. What concerned

Agee was not so much their social context or their impoverished situation, as the way their lives laid bare the universal conditions of human existence.

But what are these conditions? If reality as Agee depicted it was meant to show clearly what had been everywhere else blurred, what things common to all human life do we see laid bare in the farmers' lives? We said Agee's reality was an elemental reality in which man struggled against the basic adversaries of hunger, shelter, and the elements. Danger of drought and starvation and unemployment lay constantly in wait. Work was heavy, almost unbearable, with minimal reward. Agee shows little alleviation in the farmers' lives -- although chances are their community life, which Agee deliberately ignores, actually lightened the burden of their hardship. Yet under what condition, the middle class reader might wonder, does this portrayal of unrelieved privation presume to represent something as large as "the classic patterns ... of human living"? Is not Agee guilty of an exaggeration against the pleasures of life that surely, too, represent a classic pattern of sorts? The answer lies in the way in which the hardship of the farmers stands for the limitations of human nature itself and for the hardship of life in its struggle against death. As the farmers come up against

⁷⁵ Agee wrote of the farmers' homes that "their beauty ... inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself." (Famous Men, p. 182.)

the "enormous assaults of the universe", there is the sense that what is being revealed to them is the essence of being human--to be limited in understanding and ability, to be mortal. Their inability to conquer their circumstances was paradigmatic of man's inability to overcome the finite circumstances he is born into. Here is our point: that reality as Agee portrays it in its harsh aspect betrays the basic and defining limit of all human life, namely, the condition of mortality. "Our doom is in our being,"⁷⁶ Agee writes in an early sonnet, confirming that all man's struggles against death are in vain. Mortality was subtly hidden in the softness and ease and man-made conditions of middle class life. How very far away from our own human finitude are we, for instance, when we read in Famous Men of Margaret Bourke-White's "superior red coat."⁷⁷

Science in its efforts to dispel mystery and create an environment conditioned by man rather than the givens of existence sought to render death irrelevant, and it has been argued that the efforts have been remarkably successful. Philip Aries in a recent book, The Hour of Our Death, speaks of death in modern time appearing only in the interstices of technology.⁷⁸ Perhaps the potential for enormous destruction science has achieved is the logical result of making even the condition of mortality a man-made one. By choosing to become extinct mankind wrests death from nature and brings it under his own control. Needless to say, it is the most meaningless of all victories.

⁷⁶Agee, The Collected Poems, p. 37.

⁷⁷Agee, Famous Men, p. 411.

⁷⁸Philip Aries, The Hour of our Death, (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p. 14.

Agee's amazing affirmation of the individual against a mass society is the counterpart of his affirmation of an objective, existential reality against a man-made environment.. The individual, because it is mortal and exists in time, is unique and mysterious -- coming from nowhere and disappearing into nowhere. The individual is, in Agee's words,

All that each person is, and experiences, and shall never experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself, and of one root, and are identical; and not one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent . . . "79

Agee's concept of the individual is existential and acts, like his larger reality, as a backdrop against which the narrow, machine-like perception of men as perpetrated by the social sciences, mass movements and 'scientific morality' is shown in all its speciousness. And in both the individual and reality shine "the cruel radiance of what is."⁸⁰ Cruel, because existence cannot be fully comprehended, either within the individual or without, and the individual, in his loneliness and awareness

⁷⁹ Agee, Famous Men, pp. 53, 54.

⁸⁰ Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

of "black vast and senseless death"⁸¹ is condemned to a life of suffering. Famous Men makes the ineluctability of suffering very clear.

Here at a center is a creature: it would be our business to show how through every instant of every day of every year of his existence alive he is from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter, which surround and whom his senses take.⁸²

Given this suffering inherent in individual human life it is small wonder man creates frameworks and mental constructions to escape from the condition of mortality. In Famous Men Agee speaks of the family drawn "cowardly close" upon itself, "as tramps are drawn round a fire in the cruelest weather."⁸³ This family is related to a mass society, huddled together to avoid the harsh condition of mortality. (It is not at all related to the Lynch family in Death, however, which, as we shall see, is the very antithesis of a mass.) In Agee's eyes every attempt of the individual to stand alone and suffer "the enormous assaults of the universe" was heroic, a strike against the modern environment.

[H]ow through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another, [Agee wonders] does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to fragments of nothing: these are matters too dreadful and fortitudes too gigantic to meditate long and not forever to worship.⁸⁴

The very fact that the farmers had "the aim to keep going from day-to-day," in Dwight Macdonald's disparaging words, that for a time they

⁸¹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 101.

⁸² Agee, Famous Men, p. 101.

⁸³ Agee, Famous Men, pp. 52, 53.

⁸⁴ Agee, Famous Men, p. 54.

endured in the face of unrelenting existence, is the reason these "famous men" are worthy of our praise.

v

Individual life, in its burden of suffering and mortality, was to Agee a mystery beyond any framework man could devise. The mystery included one's own self, of course, and the confessional flavour of Famous Men, a flavour not entirely self-indulgent, betrayed Agee's conviction that his own motives for meeting with and writing about the farmers must be looked at critically and any approaches made with great circumspection. Initial meetings are described with the utmost reverence. The elaborate deference Agee shows and the guilt he feels towards them perhaps prevents him from showing them as full human beings. In the absence of established humanist manners and traditions Agee could not have the same assurance as, say, Henry James,⁸⁵ that what he was seeing was the thing itself, the person itself. "Here [in Famous Men], a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger." His true meaning involves the complexity and fullness of life, which men increasingly find difficult to explain by any framework. The "excess of guilt" which Lionel Trilling described was symptomatic of an entire generation unable to make the assumptions of humanism, unable to be

⁸⁵ Henry James himself realized how the world he had inhabited for seventy years was changed utterly by the Great War. The day after the war began he wrote to a friend:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness ... is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words. (Quoted in Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, p. 8).

convinced that human living was possible without a betrayal of one sort or another. "You never live an inch without involvement and hurting people and ----ing yourself everlastingly and only the hard bastards come through..."⁸⁶ Agee laments toward the end of the book. Alfred Kazin talks of the Depression writer's extreme depictions of brutality and sentimentality as "the very expression of his need to survive."⁸⁷ People could not assume that they could share their experience with others, nor that they could know either themselves or anyone else. They were condemned to what Agee called, in a dark and noble phrase, "the grief of incommunicability."⁸⁸ The only traditions were distortions of humanist ones; yet to be beyond culture, beyond sharing one's life with others, meant a tragic loneliness.

Quite plainly I know [Agee wrote to Father Flye in 1938, while he was finishing the manuscript of Famous Men] that in the most important things, or many of them, in my existence, I cannot know for sure what I am doing, or why, or at all surely the difference between right and wrong....This may simply mean that he who moves beyond the safety of rules finds himself inevitably in the "tragedy" of the "human situation," which rules have been built to avoid or anaesthetize,⁸⁹ and which must be undertaken without anaesthetic....

In another age Agee might have found rules to give him a wider access to life, rules that were the very opposite of an anaesthetic, as Dante could, as Shakespeare, even as Proust could--Proust, who lost the consolations of belief but still retained the attitudes and manners of the faithful. As traditions ebb further away, humanism has precious little to promise

⁸⁶ Agee, Famous Men, p. 349.

⁸⁷ Kazin, p. 285.

⁸⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 426.

⁸⁹ Agee, Letters, p. 101.

beyond suffering and loneliness and fidelity to a certain melancholy truth.

Given this sobering view it will not surprise anyone familiar with Walker Evans's photography that Agee was thrilled beyond measure to have Evans on the Fortune assignment that became Famous Men. Evans was for Agee "the only one in the world really fit for the job", and as different as their work is, there is clearly a marriage of temperaments. Like Agee, Evans did everything to "de-sensationalize" his subjects--to prevent his viewers from responding in the easy way of the decade. All his pictures seem posed, but it does not take away from the reality he captures; instead, the people in the pictures gain dignity when allowed to defend themselves against the camera. They are not primarily victims; they are human beings. Through them the same suffering, the same condition of mortality are evident as in Agee's portraits, without the hardship ever being blatant. There is the same hesitant, respectful approach. And there is the same sense of ineluctable tragedy in human life. Writing on Evans's photographs, A.D. Colman found a 'subtler terror' in them than in the photographs of Dorothea Lange, another renowned thirties photographer:

for although the conditions Lange documented were brutalizing, they were implicitly temporary and rectifiable, so that one's sorrow could be tempered with anger--at those standing in the way of change--and hope. The grief Evans evokes may be quieter, but there is no tempering it ever; Lange dealt with chance, while Evans deals with fate.⁹⁰

"There is no tempering it ever"--how the phrase strikes us with its dreadful finality. To feel the tragedy of human life is an unbearable

⁹⁰ Quoted in Stott, p. 313.

sorrow. Yet is there not in the uncompromising hardness and intractability of Evans's photographs and Agee's text some dim affirmation? In the momentous and meandering garrulity of the book a gulf breached? The people in Evans's portraits are not easily approached,⁹¹ but when the effort is made there shines in them a dignity or endurance that fill one with inexplicable gladness. The true meaning of a person, Agee tells us, is "that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact."⁹² That another exists "as you do and as I do" - is vital to Agee's meaning. It is as though in the very steeping of oneself in the burden of human living one finds one is not alone, that the mystery and suffering are shared. The 'tragedy of the human situation' is briefly mitigated by awareness of the second condition of human existence, the condition of plurality, that an individual man is born into a world of men.

The two conditions of mortality and plurality are the sine qua non for the humanistic attitude and when the attitude is alive and well, the plurality becomes togetherness, by which individual selves can be with and share experiences with others. Such togetherness is not to be confused with the lonely solidarity of a headless mass society, which might be defined as a plurality that has not acknowledged the condition of mortality and therefore does not, strictly speaking, consist of individuals. True human togetherness is bought, it would appear, only at great cost: the ultimate absoluteness and responsibility of each human

⁹¹ William Stott writes of Evans's people: "[w]e have to work at knowing them, commit ourselves to a kind of relationship over time." (Stott, p. 278).

⁹² Agee, Famous Men, p. 11.

being for each other. And without the traditions that embody the humanistic attitude, the cost is almost beyond man's capacity. Agee tells his reader that if he (Agee) could capture the experience he is describing as it should be captured, "You would hardly bear to live."⁹³ Yet in moments of withdrawal from the present Agee could revivify the humanistic attitude and assuage the grief of incommunicability. In the stillness of an Alabama summer night, having reached something of an ideal of human living, the capacity to share his experience fully, Agee writes:

I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in not so much as touching this plain of water, 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.

The togetherness implied here is achieved by what he calls a paragraph later "a most complete and universally shared withdrawal to source"⁹⁵ and a confronting of the basic conditions of existence. Such conditions were not visible in present living. The withdrawal, a lonely and strenuous endeavour, was undertaken out of the unshakeable conviction Agee possessed of the promise of togetherness: that only in togetherness do the fullness and dignity of human life appear. By portraying the conditions out of which man emerges Agee reveals the tragedy of all human living, the cause for despair, but at the same time displays, surprisingly, a special kind of hope, a hope that exists side by side with despair. It is not a hope that the world shall become better, or that suffering shall be eradicated and the just life established; it is a hope

⁹³Agee, Famous Men, p. 13.

⁹⁴Agee, Famous Men, p. 49.

⁹⁵Agee, Famous Men, p. 50.

that, because we suffer together the lot of human living, in brief moments, moments of crisis, we can console each other. Out of that hope Agee lay before his reader a moral imperative much more difficult and powerful than any ideological movement could demand.

We spoke of Agee's reality consisting of the doomed struggle individual life wages against death, of the tragedy of life, but Agee would agree, I think, that there is another aspect to his reality that we have thus far only implied: the reality suggested by the book itself, the fact of its being written. The message of Famous Men is often deeply pessimistic. The chapter on Education in particular is likely to dishearten one for its disparaging of all attempts at improvement, no matter how careful and humanistic, its sweeping gloom of human life. From time to time in the text one suspects a too-easy cynicism that, mixed with self-pity, frees Agee from responsibility: it was a mixture of which Agee was well aware but rarely a master. But there was much to be genuinely despairing about, in both situation and improvement schemes, and in any case most of Agee's despair was far from being a pose, as the letters to Father Flye make abundantly clear. The dignity of the book comes from steady and hard seeing into the 'cruel radiance of what is.' Today perhaps even more than in Agee's day we know with what good cause our surroundings are looked on with despair. Yet the book was written, Agee tells us, as "a human effort which must require human cooperation",⁹⁶ and Agee calls on his readers to bring what they can to the narrative when he fails them. There is the assumption that despair did not tell the whole story, that there was always the possibility to begin again. The humanistic attitude was only

⁹⁶ Agee, Famous Men, p. 102.

dormant, Agee surmised, and "must sleep as a potential among almost unimaginably large numbers and varieties of people."⁹⁷ In Famous Men he envisions

a marching and resonance of rescuing feet which
shall at length all dangers braved, all armies
cut through, past, deliver you freedom, joy,
health, knowledge like an enduring sunlight ...
that it shall come at length there can be no
question: for this I know in my own soul
through that regard of love we bear one another...⁹⁸

It has been argued, with justification, that Agee did not really see the social situation the farmers were up against. The social injustice did not disturb him as it should. But by withdrawing from these immediacies he saw in his farmers the universal loneliness and sorrow of mortal human life that was no longer mitigated by human togetherness and by the traditions of humanism. And against all odds he remained haunted by the promise of humanism--the promise of a full, communicable life possible only when the conditions of human existence were faced and not turned away from. If the nation and indeed the entire civilization were disintegrating, if the extraordinary emptiness left by the departed world was being filled up by a lonely mass society increasingly blind to reality, it was a matter for great hope as well as despair to confront these elementary conditions anew.

⁹⁷ Agee on Film: I, p. 278.

⁹⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 356.

CHAPTER II

1

Agee's withdrawal to source, as he called it, to uncover the conditions of human existence thereby keeping alive an almost vanished humanistic attitude, resulted in the message of hope and despair in Famous Men. The book is an important document, and it has in the last few decades gained something of a classic status for its self-scrutiny, its refusal to find false hope or to belong to false groups, its gaze at the tragic loneliness of the individual and at a modern life without traditions or attitudes to foster togetherness. But Famous Men is also a step in Agee's development and as he moved to other tasks he sought other strategies of withdrawal and, as a result of private and public revelations, his outlook changed. Famous Men expresses, in its haphazard chronology, a discontinuity of impressions appropriate to an age unable to contain or order them. But it was precisely that discontinuity that ultimately did not satisfy Agee, and pushed him to explore, in the subsequent fiction, an ideal of togetherness less fugitive, a humanism that had achieved some permanence.

The change in outlook came partly from a strengthening of Agee's self; his private life became more settled, his profligate and self-destructive habits eased. He dredged up his past and, in therapeutic fashion, established a kind of truce with it. His dislike of the middle

class and of the impossibility of improvement¹ changed to a respect for those few who genuinely attempted to change things for the better, who put the humanistic attitude into action. It is no longer quite the passive pessimism of the Alabama book Agee shows when he writes Father Flye in 1951 that he was beginning to believe that "forceful enough individuals do in some important degree change the shape of things."² And while his last books affirm middle class virtues, he began to question his elaborate unthinking sympathy for the lower classes:

I have had and still have some to guard against a form of inverted snobbery in myself, i.e. an innate and automatic respect and humility toward all who are very poor and toward all the unassuming and non-pompous who are old. I'd rather not be without some form of this respect toward them, but it's very dangerous and can easily be false.³

In other words he was beginning to see with "moral realism"--to see the full human being in both bright and dark aspect. This was possible only with the conviction that 'moral realism' did not depend on his own judgment alone but would be understood by others, that there were certain humanistic values still holding sway in places here and there. Present living could not provide such assurance. Yet it was essential to Agee, as outside events became more menacing and his own personal sphere became happier and fuller, that the force of humanism not be lost. The fact that his last years afforded Agee a little peace and

¹ It is interesting in this regard to quote a passage from Father Flye's response to Agee's disparaging of society, his extreme individualism. Father Flye's is the sanguine view, one feels--although, to be sure, he is no artist--a view which sees improvements as well as backsliding in society. The passage is too long for a footnote, and I have placed it at the end of the thesis, immediately before the bibliography.

² Agee, Letters, p. 194.

³ Agee, Letters, p. 112.

renown and the freedom to work on what he wanted brought him to believe that, slim as the chances might be, only private extrusions of the humanistic attitude--of compassion and a sense of togetherness, and even imagination, on which Agee looked more favorably--could stem the vast modern tide of ruin. And like Auden's 'ironic points of light', the extrusions came from sheltered places, places of withdrawal.

In the course of his life Agee had a number of places of withdrawal, and nothing so marks his change of outlook as his turning from one place of withdrawal to another. Not all places of withdrawal affirmed the humanistic attitude equally; some withdrawals were more escapes, in the pejorative sense Richard Rupp meant, than others. But I do not think it can be disputed that Agee's last withdrawal displayed most fully the promise of humanism and carried into those minds still attuned the testimony of a lost world. The places of withdrawal are suggested by the autobiographical narrator of "1928 Story", an unpublished manuscript from the 1940's.

It was a stupefied country, and evidently a stupefied world, and as stupefied as anything else was this sense of universal mistrust and of hopeless regret, his dependence on mere taste, his pleasure in the sensuous, his miserable reluctance to live in the world as it was, and to discard the pleasure of recall.⁴

The stupefaction and the reasons for his "miserable reluctance to live in the world as it was" we have discussed in the previous section. But the withdrawal would seem to entail three realms. The two-fold flight from the world into the sensuous and 'mere taste' and into the feeling of "universal mistrust and hopeless regret" poses two extremes of the

⁴ Agee, "1928 Story," The Texas Quarterly, XI (1968), p. 21.

particular and the general. A third flight, into the past by means of the "pleasures of recall," is a different case which we shall examine in a moment.

The "sensuous" and "mere taste" point to a withdrawal to the earth, a realm of sensation and habit and forgetfulness. The rhythms of the earth, of summer and winter, day and night, birth and death, are endless, and provide the boundaries upon which all life rests. The earth is familiar and measurable, and no security of human life would be possible without its comforting routines. Modern science has dramatically increased our perception of the earth in these terms, and the earth's predictability and mechanistic workings have allowed for the manipulation and domination that have been the hallmark of the relationship of modern science to nature. The mechanization extended long ago to the groupings and actions of society, although the full impact of seeing men simply as a collection of behavioural responses, for instance, was not felt until this century. The result was a mass society whose only purpose was the most limited kind of survival. Life in the earth is not individualized; mortality, the individuating condition of human life, does not enter into nature's ken, where all things are continually re-born and replaced. Nor does it enter mass society's ken--as though it were true that each man was simply a member of a group and not a unique being at all. Yet the mass society and the earthly rhythms were a comforting escape from the loneliness of being an individual.

Agee's withdrawal into the earth was, to be sure, an escape from the burden of individual life, but it was by no means a direct retreat into a mass society, nor was it simply a revelling in the 'sensuous'

and 'mere taste', which are the pleasures the earth confers on its creatures. Throughout the poetry the withdrawal involves an invocation of peace and innocence and a sense of newness in life. The central character is most often a child, repository of innocence and instinct. Pastoral scenes of farms, woods, and domestic animals are frequent; never is a 'wild' nature depicted to disrupt the peacefulness of Agee's earth. But peace and innocence and newness were soon to be corrupted, and Agee's withdrawal was also an escape into death. If individual life was a torment, death ended it. Sensuousness itself drew toward death, as Agee intimated in the poem, "Epithalamium", where the bridal couple, by consummating the marriage, is drawn into a nothingness that is shared by all the sensuous things of the earth.

Such nothingness remains, and yet is gone,
looks upon all, and yet is void of sight...
It breathes from steady water, is the pain
Of bursting seeds, the agony of earth
Shuddering out its life; streams down in rain
That causes and alleviates all birth:⁵

The overwhelming presence of night corresponds to the search for peace and refuge and death, and the majority of the poems are, as Walker Evans said about Famous Men, "night-permeated."⁶ Day brought disintegration, betrayal, and endless suffering; night ensures rest and peace in death:

Quiet, forever free from all alarms,
They lie where light is strengthless to descend.
The night is come that hallows as it harms;
The night is come that day may never end.⁷

Yet one must be careful in judging against Agee on the basis of the sameness of tone and narrowness of theme in the poetry. It is true

⁵Agee, Collected Poems, p. 35.

⁶Walker Evans, "Foreword", in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, by James Agee (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. x.

⁷Agee, Collected Poems, p. 36.

that the poems of night and sleep and death far outweigh all others. But the poetry is the weakest of all Agee's achievements and he stopped writing it regularly rather early. Ultimately writing poetry did not interest him beyond the relief it gave him from a black mood, often in the midst of his other writing. Like so many of his letters to Father Flye, he wrote poetry for comfort and release. To lose one's self in the nothingness of the earth was a consolation. The prose works deal in far greater complexity with the ambiguity of Agee's reality. Prose really was his medium; it gave him the freedom to circle around questions, to qualify, to heighten or depress--rather than to pounce or reveal suddenly in the manner of poetry. Famous Men, like the poetry, is night-permeated, and no passage in all of Agee's work crystallizes the withdrawal into the earth as does a passage at the beginning of that book. Agee fancies that the Alabama forest--"birnam wood"--could "lounge in and suddenly and forever subdue us," and that civilization would sink "into a region prior to the youngest quaverings of creation."⁸ Such a consequence is described as though from exquisite longing. But the important fact is that in Famous Men this withdrawal is countered by other moods, other withdrawals. In prose Agee seemed more content to explore.

A poem from his slim volume of poetry, Permit me Voyage, presents the ambiguity felt towards the earth. The poem, "No doubt left. Enough deceiving", splendidly adduces the difficulty of living an individual human life. At the end of a love affair the narrator concludes its early demise to be a good thing because it prevented a worse disintegration later. By falling "fair in the fair season," the lovers can

⁸ Agee, Famous Men, p. 20.

severally cheer that they "cheated the long day/Of the long day's ill."
 But in a startling turnaround at the end of the poem the lovers are
 left knowing

this breathing joy, heavy on us all,
 Never, never, never.⁹

The poem suggests what nearly all Agee's prose works suggest: that though life is burdensome beyond telling, it is more important to live it than to escape it. This is a rather simple thing to say. No doubt most of us pride ourselves on our attachment to life, our refusal to submit to the death of non-being. But equally of no doubt is the fact that we have our own ways of escape, our own submissions. And when we are aware, as even a casual reading of Agee's letters will make us aware, just how close to suicide Agee often was, all his affirmations must be seen as hard-won triumphs. When he sought to disappear and throw off the burden of selfhood he was showing in the deepest way--by living it--the torments of an age without tradition or direction. The withdrawal to the earth was often simply a means of self-preservation. "I care a great deal to try to understand and approach and receive the center of the storm," Agee once wrote to Father Flye, "but there is such a thing too as learning enough when you're half-drowned to come in out of the rain."¹⁰

11

The earth is no more man's home than is man simply an animal without consciousness of his own existence--that is, without an individual self. Like the weeds Stephen Daedalus sees in the Liffey in Ulysses,

⁹ Agee, Collected Poems, p. 4.

¹⁰ Letters, p. 123.

the rhythms of the earth are "to no end gathered." At one extreme of Famous Men is the vision of the earth swallowing up civilization and man sinking into unconsciousness in the earth. But Famous Men, with its reliance on consciousness, finally draws away from the earth and affirms the lonely endurance of the individual "against the enormous assaults of the universe." However consoling the earthly rhythms may be, they cannot be all. At the other extreme of Famous Men, in a vision that might be called the high point of the book, if the first vision were called the low, Agee imagines the brotherhood of man,¹¹ "the simple roaring of all souls for joy before God."¹² It is a momentary vision, and fades quite soon, but it is a vision of harmony and completeness and absolute individuality and belonging for which man longs. It is precisely in the falling short of men from this ideal that Agee speaks of his "sense of universal mistrust and hopeless regret." Such a phrase posits an ideal realm which contrasts and points out the limitations of the earth and the modern attachment to it.

This ideal realm, the second realm of withdrawal, is the universe; it lies beyond the earth and illuminates the meaninglessness of the earth's patterns and rhythms. The universe is mysterious and eternal--

¹¹ I use that phrase with a celebrated image of Agee in mind: that of him alone in the Time-Life skyscraper in New York late at night, playing the final movement of the Choral Symphony at full volume. He writes to Father Flye: "Something attracts me very much about playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony there--with all New York about 600 feet below you, and with that swell ode, taking in the whole earth, and with everyone on earth supposedly singing it; all that estranged them and all except joy and the whole common world-love and brotherhood idea forgotten. With Joy speaking over them; O ye millions, I embrace you ... I kiss all the world ... and all mankind shall be as brothers beneath thy tender and wide wings." (Letters, p. 60.)

¹² Agee, Famous Men, p. 356.

in contrast to the earth's familiarity and its incessant comings and goings. Unlike the earth the universe is unattainable, yet it is extraordinarily compelling. In Death Jay stares out into the dark and recognizes the universe as "extraordinarily vivid and senseless."¹³ It is senseless not in the way that the earth's mechanical rhythms are senseless, but because it is beyond man's jurisdiction or understanding.¹⁴ To Joel's musing that Jay's death signified nothing Andrew replies, "Signifying something...but we don't know what."¹⁵ It is vivid because it offers moments of clarity, such as Agee's vision of harmony in Famous Men. Such moments are isolated, discontinuous, "sensitive to so many syncopations of chance"¹⁶ and they are registered on the passive consciousness that is emptied of habitual, earthly pursuits. The moment makes its impression on consciousness as though on the exposed film of a camera. Famous Men attempts to reveal such moments and to clear the mind in preparation for the momentary glimpses of the universe. When Agee speaks of reality--in the previous chapter we called it existential reality--he is speaking of the universe and the moments of clarity it affords man. When such a moment comes, it turns its extraordinary beams of light on earthly habits and patterns and transforms them. "[A]t that moment," Agee wrote in a story, "the whole commonplaceness of existence is transfigured--becomes monstrously powerful, and

¹³ Agee, A Death in the Family (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 36.

¹⁴ The extent to which Agee inhabited the universe with its sense of mystery beyond human effort to comprehend is reflected in the frequency he uses the rhetorical construction "beyond saying", "beyond imagining."

¹⁵ Agee, Death. p. 168.

¹⁶ Agee, Famous Men, p. 208

beautiful, and significant...¹⁷ From the point of view of the earth nothing is more ordinary than the simplest facts of existence, Nature's rhythms and conditions seem so obvious as to be hardly worthy of note. From the perspective of the universe, however, birth, death, the presence of others appear to an individual self as infinitely mysterious and inexplicable, a cause for wonder.

The universe is above all the reality man is not, the sense of otherness which lifts man from the earth. By subjecting the universe to the compartmentalizing of earthly frameworks modern science has eroded the sense of otherness and the experience of wonder at things in the universe as they really are. It is precisely those earthly rhythms that take no account of "the hungers of [man's] flesh, and mind, and heart"¹⁸ and from which the modern age has drawn its patterns to comprehend mankind.

Yet it is not surprising, as we saw, that the modern age has retreated so effectively from the universe. For man's perceptions of it are brief, discontinuous and isolated. Moments of clarity are gone almost as soon as they appear. The self emerges against a luminous background and then sinks back into habitual thinking and perception. The moment, says Agee, "descends through tangled discords, once more into commonplaceness, with nothing answered, nothing gained, and heaven undisturbed."¹⁹ And in fact in Famous Men no attempt is made to allow the moments of clarity to order other experiences; their brevity and rapid vanishing is maintained.

¹⁷ Agee, Collected Short Prose, p. 85.

¹⁸ Agee, Collected Poems, p. 37.

¹⁹ Agee, Collected Short Prose, p. 85.

To lose one's self in the patterns of the earth is death; it denies the fact that man qua man is not simply a creature of the earth. Yet to live in the universe is impossible except in the briefest moments, and the stretches between are dead time. "Who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth?"²⁰ the narrator asks in "Knoxville: 1915", compelling us to acknowledge that man exists between two realms, yet is at home in neither. To exist in the universe was for Agee to carry the burden of individualism, of intense moments beyond comprehension intersticed between long stretches of dullness and loneliness. It is tempting at all times, therefore, to put off the burden and come in from the rain--into the mass and into death. And without a realm to protect and conserve and embody man's fleeting perceptions of the universe, the otherworldly realm disappears entirely, and modern man is understood simply in earthly terms.

Yet there was for Agee the glimmer of a third realm, a realm where isolated perceptions could be shared and embodied and the burden of individuality eased. Earthly pattern and universal intensity could be combined to render meaning. Wisdom--the perceptions of the ages--could be passed down through tradition; one need never feel entirely alone. There was also the glimmer of a selfhood that did not appear momentarily and then vanish but possessed some fixity, some measure of permanence against the transitory phenomena of the earth. This selfhood contained not only individuality, born from the individual experience of mortality, but also identity, arising from the condition of plurality and confirming the possibility of an individual self belonging with other individuals, yet in no way losing its own uniqueness

²⁰ Agee, Death, p. 15.

and separateness.

So far as I know Agee does not speak directly of identity, although it is implied in his formulation of the humanistic attitude. Yet the question of identity hounded Agee as no other question did, and the search for identity may well be the central thrust of all his work, and of all modern work. "Who the hell am I, who in Jesus' name am I,"²¹ he cries out in Famous Men, and continues the refrain in the opening of Death: "those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home; but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am."²² For ultimately it was not enough to be conscious of one's separateness; it condemned man to a terrible loneliness. And Agee knew as few did the temptation of disappearing into the earth as he did the crushing consequences of that disappearance for mankind. Given the unsteady purchase upon the universe an individual possessed at best, was there not in the sharing of experience with other individuals a stronger footing found? Perhaps by concerted effort the blazing light of the universe could be made to stand still and shine on man's darkness? The glimmer of a third and final realm of withdrawal suggested something of that possibility to Agee. It was a realm of withdrawal because Agee saw the possibility as it existed in the lost world of his childhood, in the person he had been and the people he had known as a boy. To summon up by means of "the pleasures of recall" this lost world in all its affecting loveliness meant, once again, a removal from the importunate present.

²¹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 349.

²² Agee, Death, p. 15.

iii

Agee's past was connected to his present in a particularly immediate way. For a crucial event of his past had the effect of preparing Agee, as it were, for the collapsed civilization around him.

It represented a loss and disintegration it was impossible to ignore. The event marked the past off from the present far more distinctly and irrevocably than did the gradual erosion of civilization experienced by Agee's contemporaries. No doubt it made Agee more susceptible to modern influences and assisted his uncannily sensitive reading of his time. But it also prevented him from seeing beyond his time. By compounding the effects of the collapse the event ensured a certain shape to Agee's perception, a shape hesitant of alternative ways of seeing and perhaps particularly attuned to the machinations of despair. Towards the end of his life Agee came to terms with that crucial event, thereby restoring some of the identity he had lost and opening the possibility that a full life need not be, as he puts it in a letter, "full of crap."²³

The event was his father's death. James Agee Sr. was killed in a car accident in June 1916 when Agee was six. The death was the formative event in Agee's life. All his writing in some way circles it. The withdrawal that occurs in the poetry is frequently bound up with a search for his father. One early Harvard story describes a walk a father and his small son take along a cliff; the father, in a fit of depression, throws his son off the cliff and the boy dies.²⁴ The story reveals Agee's sense of guilt and betrayal toward his father, but also

²³ Agee, Letters, p. 227.

²⁴ Victor Kramer, James Agee (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 39.

suggests Agee's sense of dying in the world while his father lived on elsewhere. The later stories use Agee's father's death as though it were a touchstone of reality by which all other events should be measured, and that is true to an extent of Famous Men as well. With The Morning Watch Agee begins his move back in time which culminates in Death, where the event is confronted directly. The idea of writing about the death had been in his mind at least since his undergraduate years at Harvard.²⁵ For the tragedy evidently presented some kind of blockage to Agee and needed to be exorcised much in the way Virginia Woolf's parents were exorcised through the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in To the Lighthouse.

The kind of breakthrough it was probably had a good deal to do with Agee's own settling too. In 1942 he began a movie column in The Nation for which he became justly celebrated. W. H. Auden praised the work as belonging to "that very select class--the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw are the only other members I know--of newspaper work which has permanent literary value."²⁶ Movie offers began coming, and with an improvement of his financial situation--which was never very good--he was freer to do the work he wanted. In 1948 he stopped his regular columns in Time and The Nation to devote himself to free-lance projects--the screenplay of The African Queen, articles on the silent film comedians and the director John Huston--and to his own writing. He married his third wife in 1945 and remained married to her until his death ten years later; by all accounts it was a very happy union.

²⁵ Genevieve Moreau, The Restless Journey of James Agee (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1977), p. 40.

²⁶ Agee on Film: I, backleaf.

Robert Fitzgerald saw an increasing self-confidence in Agee, and a new worldliness as well, which seems an odd thing to say about someone who had written a social documentary.²⁷ In the letters to Father Flye, too, as John Updike has noted, there is evidence of a mellowing of temperament, a willingness to let things be.²⁸ Agee recognizes in himself a new affinity to the Anglican Church after years of bitterness. And he begins to admit--how far we are from the passive pessimism of Famous Men--that in small ways people can effect improvements, can sometimes avert disasters.

But there is no better indication of Agee's breakthrough and its relationship to his father than "Dream Sequence", a fragment found among Agee's papers after his death and written in the late 1940's. The fragment involves Agee's waking from a dream to think of his father and the central position he holds in Agee's mind.

He thought of all he could remember about his father and about his own direct relations with him. He could see nothing which even faintly illuminated his darkness, nor did he expect ever to see anything, yet if he could be sure of anything except betrayal and horror, he could be sure that that was where the dream indicated he should go. He should go back in to those years. As far as he could remember, and everything he could remember; nothing he had learned or done since; nothing except (so well as he could remember) what his father had been as he had known him, and what he had been as he had known himself, and what he had seen with his own eyes, and supposed with his own mind.

For a brief time his father appears to him, "not visible, but clearly visible to the imagination," and Agee achieves a peace which has been a long time coming. Agee continues:

²⁷Robert Fitzgerald, "Memoir", in The Collected Short Prose of James Agee, p. 52.

²⁸Updike, "No Use Talking," in Assorted Prose (New York: Knopf, 1974), p. 267.

And even if they could have talked there was not much they could have said to each other; but that was no great matter, for at last all was well. All his life, as he had begun to realize during recent years, had been shaped above all by his father and his father's absence. All his life he had fiercely loathed authority and had as fiercely loved courage and mastery. In every older man, constantly, he had looked for a father, or fought him, or both. And here he was, and all was well at last, and even though he was more rapidly fading, and most likely would never return, that was all right too. It might never be fully understood, but would be all right from now on. From now on it was going to be all right...

He was alone again now, but that was no harm, for in a way in which he had been alone for so many years, he knew that he would never be alone again.²⁹

There is little in this urgency and release that suggests the passive withdrawal Rupp has implied. And is there not an intimation that in his father's absence Agee did not see with his own eyes, did not suppose with his own mind? That he was not himself?

What did it mean to "go back into those years"? What, precisely, did his father symbolize to Agee? Jay Follet, Agee's portrait of his father, is a genial, kindly man, respected by everyone who knows him. He is a shrewd judge of character; yet he has enormous sympathy for others, especially those--like the Chaplin tramp--on the periphery of society. He has pulled himself up by the bootstraps out of rural farming life into the urban middle class and has committed himself to his family, his job, his social responsibilities. The commitment is not made without difficulties, and Jay is full of conflicting impulses, of small meannesses as well as accommodations, of weaknesses as well as strengths, yet he has without diminishment of self subordinated his

²⁹ Agee, "Dream Sequence", The Texas Quarterly, XI (1968), p. 39.

private indulgences to the demands of the world he has settled into. It was through Jay that Agee saw his third realm, to which the self could belong, yet remain individual. Jay's affinity to outsiders represents an attachment to the human in all its diversity, not merely to the "normative" traits prescribed by society. The complexity and tolerance with which he views things confirm the humanistic attitude; Jay's tolerance is thrown quite effectively into relief beside Mary's genteel tolerance, which often acts only as a cover for her narrowmindedness. In fact, due to the respect Jay gives to everyone almost as a matter of course, people draw around him--the people in the pub he stops at on his way home, who watch him quietly and respectfully; the Lynch family, who he has won over in spite of initial disapproval. His stature is brought into focus by Walter Starr when he tells Rufus, "I thought the world of [your father]... I always thought your father was a lot like Lincoln."³⁰ The comparison to Lincoln suggests Jay's public quality: Jay is someone men admire, someone that inspires direction and confirms human effort and purpose, someone always completely himself.

That sureness of self Jay possesses is identity, and it permits him a freedom to see for himself and to be himself among others. There is no need for the "armor of systematic certainties"³¹ Keats abhorred. It may not even be stretching the point to say that around Jay attends something of Keats's negative capability, the ability to remain "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after

³⁰ Agee, Death, p. 285.

³¹ Lionel Trilling, The Opposing Self, p. 33.

fact and reason"³²--certainly as it opposes the rigorously positive capability of not only the reformers of Agee's day but of Mary's own straitened religiosity. And with a renewed sense of identity in Agee himself, his own negative capability was much more in evidence. The characters of The Morning Watch and especially Death emerge with greater fulness and complexity than the Alabama farmers. Night is no longer simply a time of peace and alluring nothingness as it has been; Agee views it more ambiguously. Rufus, in Death, finds the dark terrifying. And in Morning Watch the affirmation comes with Richard's movement from night into day--a reversal of the habitual attitude of the poetry. The image of the child in the fiction is neither particularly innocent nor good, and the rural, common man is shown to be an alloy of both noble and squalid elements. The change that must at least partly be attributed to Agee's restored relationship with his father marked a replacing of the 'failure of moral realism' with a new clarity..

With the new clarity came a new, restrained prose style. Like the hoses watering the Knoxville lawns, the style represents a superb "compromise between distance and tenderness of spray."³³ No longer does Agee's despair of ever communicating what he experiences show itself in bursts of anger and incoherence. Nor is there a blurring of author and characters as in previous works. Agee has achieved a detachment that allows him to shift his emotional and technical focus from a lyrical self meditating on its own experience in the universe to the dramatic self in relation to others within a humanistic realm.

³² The Letters of John Keats, ed. M. B. Forman (London, 1948), p. 72.

³³ Agee, Death, p. 13.

This humanistic realm is the world, Agee's third and final realm of withdrawal. Robert Fitzgerald used the word 'worldliness' to describe the change of outlook Agee underwent during and after the war. Presumably Fitzgerald meant a lessening of Agee's extreme attitudes, a willingness to accept the inevitability of compromises; no doubt he also meant a disinclination to dismiss so peremptorily the frail state of human affairs. For in that frail state lay the only hope of re-vitalization, of a rebuilding of civilization which gave to the humanistic attitude its aliveness. To be worldly was to be willing against all odds to make a world. The world is the home for man, who has a home neither in the earth nor the universe. The world is the established space, so to speak, where the full awareness of others, essentially a momentary perception from the universe, can translate itself into a mode of life through its embodiment in traditions and manners. What was a momentary perception becomes the humanistic attitude, something of an earthly habit of sympathy toward others. In the established space people can come together as individual selves and belong with each other, with all the pleasures and responsibilities human togetherness implies.

In fact the distinguishing character of the world is togetherness --not the creaturely solidarity of the huddling farmers of Famous Men or the street boys in Death, nor the extreme religious belonging Mary displays (especially after Jay's death) in the last book, but the togetherness as it is demonstrated among the Lynch family and, less satisfactorily, among the three boys in The Morning Watch. The togetherness, possible only with the humanistic attitude, both separates and joins

individuals. Few people have felt a belonging with other people, either publicly through respect, or privately through love, will deny the paradox of increased individuality that results from that belonging. The "compromise between distance and tenderness of spray" achieved in the Knoxville lawn hoses quite accurately describes the mixture of detachment and attachment that marks the relations of men who are both individual and collective. Without the established space of the world, however, the awareness of others comes only intermittently to an individual self and soon disappears. For it to become an attitude and thereby a lasting force that survives the moment in which it appears, it must be shared by many others and be embodied in the traditions of society. Society without the humanistic attitude disintegrates, as we saw, into a mass society. Society that keeps alive in its traditions and beliefs the humanistic attitude is a world, a home for man. The vitality of the humanistic attitude as it showed itself in the film, Shoeshine, was fostered by the Italian milieu out of which it came and by the fact that "very large parts of a whole people must have been moved, for a while at least, by the particular kind of aliveness which gives this film its peculiar radiance." The film could never have been made, Agee believed, if the filmmaker did not feel "at one with a large, eager, realistic, general audience"--that is, if he did not feel the presence of a world. By contrast: "When most of a people are in apathy, or sufficient anxiety to stun the spirit, every talent or hope, no matter in which spirit or attitude it may operate, is reduced to a fraction of its potentiality."³⁴ Agee was perhaps thinking of himself when he wrote that. In any case his despair of

³⁴ Agee on Film: I, p. 279.

ever communicating his Alabama experience came out of the conviction that the humanistic attitude as it had been carried through Western civilization was nearly extinct, that there was no world to conserve it. The detachment and attachment of the humanistic attitude, having no world where a balance can be maintained, are in Famous Men pulled to the extremes of cynicism (toward the middle class, toward any scheme for improvement) and sentimentality (toward the farmers) respectively.

Strictly speaking there was no present world, only present living. To present an image of the world Agee conjured up the only one he knew, the world of his childhood. Chapter Two of Death describes Jay and Mary's late night preparations for Jay's departure to his family home in the Tennessee hills. It is a chapter of two selves coming close and moving apart in a pattern described with great delicacy. Jay and Mary are both creatures of habit, solitary reflection, and togetherness. The habits are earthly, done unconsciously. The moments of reflection --Jay's perception of the universe--are moments that 'partake of eternity',³⁵ in Virginia Woolf's phrase. The togetherness is reached through compromise and choice and a keen awareness of the other person. When each passes from solitary reflection to togetherness Agee says about them that they "came back into this world" and "life came back in- to focus."³⁶ The togetherness, and the traditions and manners and objects that arise from that togetherness, take into account both the earth and the universe, both man qua animal and man qua individual, conscious of his existence.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (Harmondsworth, England,: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 121.

³⁶ Agee, Death, pp. 41, 36.

The world lies between the two given realms, the earth and the universe . It rests upon the security of the earth and the earth's consoling rhythms of life and death, day and night, summer and winter. Frequently in the novels we are made to feel nature's presence about us, liberating us or hedging us in. Richard's dive into the icy water in Watch, for instance, is a freeing from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the chapel. And in Death Aunt Hannah is grateful when, in spite of great anxiety, Mary must tend to humbling bodily functions. But the world has drawn itself above the earth through human perception and effort and attained a measure of permanence against that which is continually passing away. From the universe the world absorbs the senseless vividness Jay perceives and makes sense of it. When the earth values survival and the universe represents intensity, the world struggles with both to extricate meaning.

We will not be so wrong if in our effort to imagine the world we think of people in conversation (although conversation in itself does not constitute the world in action), for conversation allows individuals to share their experiences and to go outside themselves. Conversation might also define our relationship with those most worldly of things, art objects. Is it not a kind of conversation that develops between ourselves and the books we read, the paintings we see, the concerts and plays and movies we attend? Only in the presence of others, each sharing his experience--in human togetherness in the world--can sense be made of the mysteries of the universe and the patterns of the earth. Death is about the world in action as it makes sense of the givens of life. Jay's death is the given event of the book and, as in all givens of human life, it occurs both in the earth and the universe. Jay is an

earthly creature and his death is therefore inevitable. Yet death, even among the old, is always somewhat unexpected, a shock and a mystery coming from elsewhere, and in Jay's case it is particularly so. Amid the paradox of the expected and unexpected the world wrestles with meaning. And the example of the world in action par excellence is the Lynch family's gathering for conversation to absorb the details of the death. There is a strong compulsion to speak about the death, by concerted effort to bring the senseless action of the earth and the universe into the world and give the death meaning. The world's response to death is an epitaph, as Joel realizes: "So you can feel you've got some control over the death, you own it, you choose a name for it."³⁷ And Jay's ghostly presence as it wanders restlessly about the house is quite literally made real by the confirmation that comes with the fact of its being a shared experience. The movement of the book is from a senseless death to the human celebration of the death--the triumph of meaning over meaninglessness.

In the world the fleeting and isolated individual self acquires something of the continuity and solidity that the body possesses in the earth. We have called this acquisition identity. The self achieves identity by sharing its experiences and thereby showing as fully as possible who it is. In Watch Richard kills the snake in order to belong with the other boys; regardless of our interpretation of such an action Agee's point is that Richard reveals who he is and takes on an identity that he had not in the previous hour of self-absorbed prayer. To possess an identity is to ease the individual burden of living by sharing it. The self with an identity needs less the armor of certainties; it

³⁷Agee, Death, p. 166.

acquires in the world a certain negative capability, which translates into the practical, worldly virtues of disinterestedness, tolerance, and a predisposition toward the comprehensive view.

We are at the farthest extreme possible from the predictability and manageability of a mass society. In Shoeshine the prevalence of the humanistic attitude meant people bulged "with a depth and complexity of realness" and certainly nothing was predictable or manageable: "because everybody is perceived as a complete human being, one feels at every moment that almost anything could happen, and that the reasons why any given thing happens are exceedingly complex and constantly shifting their weight." But with the strength of identity and the humanistic attitude preserved in the traditions of the world the self can be content with unmanageability and unpredictability. More than that it can endure the assaults of the universe and experience not only the burden but the wonder of human living. Walking home after the long conversation around the fire, Andrew finds himself "involved at least as deeply in the loveliness and unconcern of the spring night, as in the death."³⁸ The world had done its work. Through the worldly characters in Death, Jay, and even more Aunt Hannah, Agee extends a promise that even from the harshest or chaotic of circumstances a meaning can be extricated in the world to confirm life's dignity and fullness. Yet the world Agee saw Shoeshine emerging from was short-lived and was "already fading." And the world of his childhood existed only in his memory.

³⁸ Agee, Death, p. 197.

CHAPTER III

1

In the first two chapters we looked at the modern situation Agee found himself in and his artistic response to it. The response was a series of withdrawals, each withdrawal attempting to conserve a near extinct humanistic attitude from the ravages of present living. The fluctuation between the earth and the universe that dominates both the poetry and Famous Men is indicative of the extreme states to which man is subject in a worldless age. It was not until Agee turned to fiction and to the re-creation of his own past that he could posit, against the fluctuations, a world--a little shakily at first, but well in place by the time of Death, his last and most mature book.

The worldly fiction was a result of Agee's new-found trust in the imagination. The imagination and the world were excellent bed-partners, the imagination vitalizing the world, the world protecting the truths that liberate and discipline the imagination. Yet the relationship was not always harmonious. In Famous Men Agee expends much effort and many pages to attack the imagination. "Above all else," he enjoins, "in God's name don't think of this book as art."¹ The influence of I. A. Richards had been very strong in Agee's undergraduate days at Harvard; Richards's approach--that the perception of reality as it impressed itself on the mind gives the shape of the artistic creation--focussed on

¹ Agee, Famous Men, p. 14.

the mind as a passive receptacle of experience. The artist's task was to leave "heaven undisturbed." For Agee imaginative means were used, by contrast, to reshape reality according to established frameworks of the mind. Agee disliked the politically and socially relevant writing of the thirties for the same reason. And of course the great works of art were in danger of being "deified," which Agee saw as a means of using them for society's quite immediate uses. The distinction Agee draws between a clarifying consciousness and an obfuscating imagination makes clear Agee's distrust of any ordering of men of reality--there was enough cause for distrust in the events he saw before his eyes--or of anything within man's jurisdiction at all, save perhaps the ability to recognize the elemental conditions of human life.

Yet Agee does concede that works of art "advance and assist the human race and make an opening in the darkness around it as nothing else can."² And much of what Agee called consciousness was actually the workings of non-genteel imagination, of whom the artists he admired--Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka--were proponents. But it was during the war that Agee began to see the validity in the active quality of ordering reality and that there could be an even subtler distortion in the passive perceiving of it. One of the most significant aspects of his film criticism was his growing disenchantment with the value of photographic realism, especially as he found it in war documentaries.

Very uneasily, I am beginning to believe [he wrote] that, for all that may be said in favor of our seeing these terrible records of war, we have no business seeing this sort of experience except through our presence and participation... If at an incurable

²Agee, Famous Men, p. 209.

distance from participation, hopelessly incapable of reactions adequate to the event, we watch men killing each other, we may be quite as profoundly degrading ourselves and, in the process, betraying and separating ourselves the farther from those we are trying to identify ourselves with; none the less because we tell ourselves sincerely that we sit in comfort and watch carnage in order to nurture our patriotism, our conscience, our understanding and our sympathies.³

The viewing of graphic scenes of horror did not necessarily engender a humanizing emotion. We saw earlier that many of the more sensational documentary photographs of the 'victimized' poor could actually distance and harden a viewer against fellow-feeling. There is little sense in Miss Bourke-White's work that the subjects had much to do with you and me beyond curiosity and a certain dry distaste. There is none of the going-forth of sympathy and responsibility and imagination implied in the humanistic attitude. So too, evidently, in the war documentaries,

The aspect of the American documentary that appealed most to Agee -- its propensity against summing up or ordering reality -- was precisely the aspect he was beginning to distrust. It was not enough to be shown in some bald fashion the horrible scenes of war. Depictions of horror by themselves do not humanize; too often, in fact, they breed passiveness, emptiness, hopelessness in viewers. Only when such scenes are presented in a context of history and of humane significances, whereby the audience can be prepared gradually and where a feeling of participation might be reproduced by imaginative means, can they be said truly to be against war. That context was provided by the filmmaker's ordering of the reality the camera was recording.⁴

Agee's professed distrust of art and the imagination coincided

³ Agee on Film: I, p. 152.

⁴ This line of thought prompts a digression not irrelevant to our discussion. We are much steeped in images of actual horror from this brutal century—once again largely by means of the media. The images are there ostensibly that we might face terrible actualities and ensure history is not repeated. Yet in the casual way they are made available to us they produce the opposite effect: a passive hopelessness, a frisson of ugliness and chaos that frees us from responsibility.

with his "miserable reluctance to live in the world." The imagination reorders experience and makes a world out of it, so to speak, just as human effort and togetherness takes the given realms of earth and universe and constructs a world from them. The artists Agee admired he imagined to be non-worldly, but each, while they spurned the material deadness around them, created new worlds out of their imaginations. The imagination is neither entirely active, recreating reality to suit its purpose, nor entirely passive, as was consciousness in Famous Men. There is a give and take in its workings, a blending of invention and reception that perhaps characterizes all genuine human activity, and is in any case implied in Agee's note to himself for the composition of Death: he would tackle the material subjectively but "as detachedly as possible."⁵

In "1928 Story" the narrator imagines a smoky, all-night jazz café and decides that "if it didn't exist, it ought to, and that suited him." Alfred Barson concludes from this that Agee "found, or at least admitted, that as an emotion takes an imagined shape, a writer can be filled with a newer and fresher emotional response, which does not necessarily distort but can contribute to the integrity of the object."⁶ Agee's turning to fiction, spending the rest of his short life writing screenplays and the two novels, confirms Barson's conclusion. Not that the reliance on imaginative techniques immediately produced felicitous results, however; the forced order and imagery of The Morning Watch betrays the difficult pangs of that first novel's parturition.

⁵ Quoted in Barson, p. 147.

⁶ Barson, p. 141.

In the spring of 1950 Agee wrote his novella The Morning Watch about a boy's coming of age in a religious school in the Tennessee hill country. The book marks the difficulty of transition from non-fiction to fiction, as well as the change of outlook from the passivity and despair of Famous Men to an undistinguishing affirmation of action. Famous Men bore witness in an age when action seemed hopelessly compromised and a passive awareness of the conditions of human existence was the best one could hope to achieve. Yet the decade following put greater demands on the self and passive awareness was no longer enough. The Morning Watch is largely a rejection of that passivity; if reality could never be fully known there reached a point where action must be taken in blindness and trust. One's impression of the book, however, is that it comes out of despair as surely as does Famous Men. The book no doubt goes the lengths it does in order to free itself from the previous excesses but like almost everything he did, and in the absence of traditional boundaries, Agee goes too far; the result suggests a curious propinquity to the unthinking conformity of the thirties.

If The Morning Watch goes too far in its trust of action, it also goes too far in its trust of imaginative techniques to order the experience presented. After his time away from fiction, Agee came back to it with a vengeance. Robert Fitzgerald was rather dismayed with the book when it appeared but concluded years later that Agee "had to go to those lengths of artifice and musical elaboration simply to make the break with journalism decisive."⁷ Richard Chase complained of an "over-

⁷ Agee, Collected Short Prose, p. 55.

plus of imagination,"⁸ although he meant, perhaps, an overplus of "literariness" rather than imagination. The writer with an abundance of imagination does not need to resort to obvious images and symbols that seem imposed on his work rather than emerging from it. Agee himself is unsure of his efforts. "Is [the snake] too obvious a symbol," he wonders in his draft notes, "and the locust? They seem so."⁹

In spite of those rather obvious faults, however, the book reveals Agee's changing preoccupations. The outcome of the story is a result of Agee's own sense of urgency to find a world to which individuals can belong and find identity. The world he finds is predominantly masculine, not yet the full world of Death, but one where the masculine virtues of activity and courage and a loyalty to one's self¹⁰ are brought to light.

Our approach to The Morning Watch differs from our approach to both Famous Men and Death because, in a way that the longer books are not, The Morning Watch is best understood through its patterns of imagery. In the Alabama book Agee claimed he was "illimitably more interested in life than in art," more interested, that is, in the givens of life than in the human constructs. We might say of The Morning Watch that inasmuch as life could be shaped by human concerns and activity Agee was illimitably more interested in art. And imagery was a means of shaping life.

The book is structured by two groups of imagery: night-day and

⁸ Richard Chase, "Sense and Sensibility", Kenyon Review, XIII (Autumn, 1951), p. 690.

⁹ Quoted in Barson, p. 157.

¹⁰ Actually this last quality--loyalty to one's self--Richard does not demonstrate. But the boys he admires do, as does Jay Follet in Death.

feminine-masculine imagery. What is striking about these groups, aside from Agee's rather too-conscious use of them, is the new, ambiguous light in which they are perceived. Day, which has been hitherto a symbol of corruption and decay, is seen for the first time as something positive. In fact Morning Watch may be described most simply as Richard's (Agee's) emergence from night to day. And at the heart of the book, perhaps, is Agee's groping to understand masculinity, to escape the feminine retreats of his earlier work.

Night imagery has always been dominant in Agee's writing. The poems often take place at night and invoke a refuge from the torments of day. Walker Evans writes of Agee's work in Famous Men:

Night was his time. In Alabama he worked I don't know how late. Some parts of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men read as though they were written on the spot at night. Later, in a small house in Frenchtown, New Jersey, the work, I think, was largely night written. Literally the result shows this; some of the sections read best at night, far in the night.¹¹

Night suffuses the earthly and universal realms, in both cases permitting the self a kind of inviolability and limitlessness. In the earth the self can no longer suffer harm; there is perfection in dissolution: "Quiet, forever free from all alarms." Similarly, the "famous men" and the Agee narrator, isolated in the universe, are untethered to social concerns and the small diminishments of day-to-day living. Day revealed the concession and compromises the self had to make in living with others. Night is also associated with passivity and with clear seeing. In Famous Men it is in "the dry, silent and famished delicateness of the latest lateness of the night" that Agee

¹¹ Evans, "Foreword" in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, by James Agee (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), p. x.

feels he can "by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in so much as touching this plain of water, 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."

The first two sections of The Morning Watch take place at night and are familiar Agee territory. Richard is isolated both by his religious awareness and his superior sensitivity. The movement towards religious exaltation, privately felt by Richard, is punctuated by the familiar self-recriminations along the way. Yet there is an ambiguity here not found in the poetry or Famous Men. In the chapel there is a deathly quality. The air, freighted with the fragrance of flowers and burning wax, is "almost as difficult to breathe ... as water."¹² God is associated with death, and with Richard's dead father:

...his heart was lifted up and turned vague and shy as the words broke within him, upon each other, God: Death; so that the two were one. Death: Dead, the word prevailed; and before him, still beyond all other stillness, he saw as freshly as six years before his father's prostrate head...

The ambiguity lies in this: that while the religious atmosphere in the chapel is important there is a point to be recognized where it becomes a death-like retreat. Agee makes clear that a too-great attachment to it has dangers. For Richard the passive religious experience rapidly deteriorates into a self-aggrandizing fantasy. He recalls his past reverie of himself as the crucified Christ, looking down with pity on the fathers of the school, his mother, his schoolmates, all

¹² Agee, The Morning Watch (London: Peter Owen, 1964), p. 27.

¹³ Agee, Morning Watch, pp. 27, 28.

those who impose limits on him. Nor is the fantasy simply a past fantasy; he finds himself indulging in it again: "For these later imaginations were not wholly remembrance; some were newly his..."¹⁴ Something of the indulgence and inviolability and even cowardice of withdrawal is being suggested. Yet as he moves between hubris and contrition in the chapel there breaks in on him from time to time to clarify the fluctuations the awareness of others. The effeminate Claude's religious ecstasy seems a pose to Richard, and through him Richard sees his own poses. Willard, the athlete of the school and the person "most admired in the world" by the boys, has in contrast to Richard no need for fantasy or religious exultation, for his place among his fellows is secure and he can act the way he wants. A natural and very masculine leader, he is "much too grownup to be able to stand all the silly rules, and tame hours, and good behavior, that were expected of living in a school..."¹⁵

Night and passivity ~~are~~ associated with femininity, and nocturnal and feminine images serve to show the weakness of Richard's religiosity. Not only do the effeminate Claude's extravagant piety and the perfumed air of the Lady Chapel establish the religious ambiguity: even Christ becomes in Richard's mind a feminine figure with a gaping wound at the groin where people cowardly crowd:

Yet there in his mind's eye, made all the worse
by all the most insipid and effeminate, simpering
faces of Jesus that he had ever seen in pictures,
was this hideous image of a huge torn bleeding
gulf at the supine crotch, into which an ant-swarm
of the pious, millions of them, pleading and rolling

¹⁴ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 51.

¹⁵ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 21.

up their eyes, laden souls, by thousands meekly
stealing, struggled to crowd themselves, and lose
themselves, and drown, and dissolve.¹⁶

Against this dissolution are the distinct "enviably masculine" smells in the vestry where the older boys preside. Contrasting the concave wound of Christ is Willard's strange but admirable "hump". The "sense of honor and privilege" Richard feels as he observed Willard is due to Willard's "talking quietly and steadily like a grown man, among others whom he treated as grown men."¹⁷ The distinction is clear. The feminine retreats into the universe, into religious fantasies and a passive adherence to rules. The masculine virtues of strength, mastery and self-assurance establish a natural and harmonious community of selves, a community where the self is highly visible and individual. The third section of the book chronicles Richard's movement into day and into that masculine world. By instigating the truancy from the school's rules and by killing the snake Richard realizes he is "one of them [the boys] in a way he had never been before." He also realizes "he had been brave in a way he had never been brave before,..."¹⁸ bravery being the supreme masculine virtue, as Jay makes clear to Rufus in Death. Bravery permits the self to be fully present among others; it is the opposite of passivity.

The masculine world as Agee depicts it here is not yet the full conception of the world as it appears in Death. Here the masculine element dominates. Agee needed to go the lengths he did to clear himself from the feminine retreats in which he had for so long indulged.

¹⁶ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 35.

¹⁷ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 22.

¹⁸ Agee, Morning Watch, pp. 115, 111.

To be sure there can be wisdom in passivity, strength in endurance, as we shall see in the splendid portrait of Aunt Hannah, but in this early book the liberating effect of masculinity with its relentless action is the major concern. The liberation is achieved partly through a closeness to nature, which Agee associated with masculinity and his father's rural past. Richard's self begins to emerge. After he tries to stay at the bottom of the pool as a sacrifice to God, his body almost against his will struggles to the surface of the water to exult in life: "his body still blazed with pleasure in its existence, and it was no longer urgent and rigid... Here I am! his enchanted body sang."¹⁹ Richard's closeness with the mountain boys is almost animal-like as they regard each other's genitals with a mixture of rivalry and interest. In spite of a crudeness and even a brutality among them, Agee makes very clear that Richard's belonging with them is an affirmation, an increase in stature. There would seem to be little justification for killing the splendid-looking snake, which represented "all that is alien in nature and in beauty,"²⁰ and Richard at first wants to protect it from the other boys. But his concern for their good opinion of him, his being "one of them," becomes more important than the wish to save the snake. "But even as his own hand lifted forward [to stop them] he became aware of Jimmy's astounded eye on him, and thus became aware of what he was doing and caught himself, realizing that they would never understand why he did it, that they would be angry with him and rightly so.. "(my emphasis) And even though his killing of the snake is done "to put as quick an end as he could to all this

¹⁹ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 105.

²⁰ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 108.

terrible, ruined, futile writhing and unkillable defiance," he is also aware that his desire to protect the snake is due not only to "his habit of gentleness to animals," but also "something new in him which he could not understand, about which he was profoundly uneasy."²¹ The "something new" in him can only mean his old habits of retreat, now freshly perceived in the light of his new masculinity to be perhaps menacing and certainly wrong. He finds his new courage and belonging adequate compensation for the snake's death. "He was still pleased to have been accepted and still pleased with his own courage, though he was sorry the snake had been killed..."²²

We must wonder at Agee's study of courage. Would it not have been more courageous to have stood against the boys and protected the snake? Perhaps so, but Agee's concern is to show the importance of the self belonging in the world with others, not associating itself with "all that is alien in nature and beauty," in other words, the universe. In contrast with the previous sections the closing of the book is free of self-recriminations and indulgences; it is a release into action, regardless of how compromised. Entry into the masculine world means a release from the incessant torment indicated by the image of mirrors laid face to face,

...truly reflecting and extending each other forever upon the darkness their meeting, their facing, created, and he in the dark middle between them, and there was no true good and no true safety in any effort he might ever make to realize or repent a wrong but only a new temptation which his very soul itself

²¹Agee, Morning Watch, pp. 110, 109.

²²Agee, Morning Watch, p. 115.

seemed powerless to resist...²³

In the third section such cavilling is peremptorily dismissed. This endless haggling, resulting in passivity, characterizes much of Famous Men, while The Morning Watch is a deliberate thrust beyond the endlessly reflecting images into action. To be sure, action is compromised; Richard does feel guilty about killing the snake and a great heaviness grows in him on the walk home. But when he catches up with Hobe and Jimmy "the heaviness was somewhat less severe,"²⁴ and as he realizes that the snake, while still alive, is beyond suffering, he "ceased to think of the snake with much pain."²⁵ The presence of the Christian framework sits imperfectly with the narrative but the implication is clear that Christ's sacrifice frees Richard from the inertia and guilt of the first section into a sense of well-being in the world. Part of the liturgy Richard recites reminds us that Christ is properly served only in the newness of life, only when one is freed into the present:

That we may ever hereafter. Ever hereafter. Serve
Thee and please Thee. Serve Thee and please Thee
in newness of life. Forgive us all that is past.
All. Past. Ever hereafter, in newness of life.
Serve Thee and please Thee. To the honor and
glory of Thy Name.²⁶

The two symbols, the snake and the locust, are further elaborations of masculine and feminine elements in the world. The snake has obvious connections both with Christ and the devil. It is Christ in the sense that it is the otherness of nature and beauty, and the killing of it is

²³ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 79. This image is one of Agee's favorites.

²⁴ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 119.

²⁵ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 120.

²⁶ Agee, Morning Watch, pp. 58, 59.

contemporaneous with the Good Friday crucifixion. But clearly Richard's bravery is meant to be a step forward and the killing of the snake a triumph of sorts--a triumph of the human world over nature. Natural forces are converted into forces directed to human needs. Is it too much to suppose that something of the power of the snake passes to the boys and especially Richard after it has been killed? Certainly Richard feels a new bravery in him. The book closes with Richard's right hand, still covered with slime from the snake, "hanging with a feeling of subtle enlargement at his thigh."²⁷ The slime is a guilty remembrance of his act, of course, but the enlargement at the thigh suggests sexual power and masculine mastery.

Richard's left hand protects the locust shell as though to remind us that liberation into the present and into action can never be quite so simple; otherwise the world would become as shallow as, say, Hobe and Jimmy's world. When Richard first encounters the locust shell the pre-historic and historic pasts march "clanging in his soul."²⁸ The locust has been liberated from the shell of his past just as the snake has recently shed its old skin; but while in the earth all is present without past or future, in the world both the past and the future infuse the present with meaning. Richard cannot ignore the past, or his guilt; he does not simply live in the present. When he picks up the locust shell and pockets it he is acknowledging something beyond the masculine realm of action; the past must be remembered and protected.

In spite of the locust shell, however, The Morning Watch is a reaction against the feminine retreats of the poetry and the documentary.

²⁷ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 120.

²⁸ Agee, Morning Watch, p. 99.

22
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It bursts into daylight ready for action after a protracted passivity and withdrawal. Yet we cannot but feel the burst is indiscriminate. We remain uneasy about the brutal killing of the snake and Richard's pride in his part of it, his belonging with the other boys on these grounds. It is not so far from the brutal solidarity of the street boys in Death, nor from the mass belonging of the thirties. While Agee corrects, as it were, the withdrawal into the universe by bringing into focus the masculine traits (notably action), he concludes the story with this very un-masculine action, or what we might more accurately term behaviour. Richard's idol, Willard Riverburg, the exemplar of masculinity, would no more have succumbed to the compulsion of belonging with the other boys than did he succumb to the 'silly rules' and 'tame hours' of the school. Yet Agee gives sanction to Richard's act and thereby slips at the last minute out of the responsibilities that come with masculinity.

To be sure, forgiveness as it works in the novella frees the self from past action in order to begin anew. Christ's crucifixion permitted a participation in newness. Should not Richard be similarly freed from his action? But the fact that in spite of his guilt Richard remains proud of his act, that he gains stature from his senseless cruelty and betrays his own self, suggests Agee's refusal to look at the consequences of action in general--something he seems to have bent over backwards to do in the Alabama book. The evasion is understandable enough. For all the validity in a rebuke of modern society, a society characterized by stupefaction and in which the self defines itself by its mode of indignant perception, human affairs provide the only soil out of which a new society can grow. As much as one wants to escape the mass, there still

persists, there must persist, the conviction that only in the midst of everything is there real life, that to turn away and cultivate one's own inviolate world is death. This conviction is made all the more desperate, perhaps, by the encroachment of the inhuman on all fronts. Any action of the self shies against the dullness of mass. It was in an effort to release the self into action in the world that Agee affirmed Richard's action.

But there are actions that define the self and actions that only seem to define the self and actually diminish it; and Richard's killing of the snake, and more, his continued pride in it, must be regarded among the diminishing actions. It is as though Agee moved from one extreme--where action was impossible and the self stood alone in the universe--to the other--where any action was better than none and the self, in its belonging, seemed willing to give up much of its integrity. It was only in Death that Agee would find a middle ground between two despairing extremes, and, with the assurance of a world, albeit a past one, bring activity and passivity, the masculine and feminine, the earth and the universe, under the full scrutiny of worldly perception.

iii

A Death in the Family opens with a lyric fragment "Knoxville: Summer 1915", originally published in Partisan Review in 1936. So far as is known Agee had no intention of including the fragment in the text, and it was placed there by the editors of the manuscript after Agee's death. In fact it does not belong to the rest of the book; in its ambiguous stance toward the Knoxville neighbourhood, the passage describes the conforming sameness and individual loneliness of worldlessness, whereas the novel itself posits a world where individuals could belong without

becoming an undifferentiated agglutination of creatures.

"Knoxville: Summer 1915" describes a summer evening in a typical lower middle-class neighbourhood of Knoxville, Tennessee. The fathers of families are hosing their lawns, and in that "contemporary atmosphere" the eye begins to note the minute differences between things. The hoses are set much alike but all are of various pitch, and the atmosphere is "left empty, like God by the sparrow's fall" if any hose desists. The individual differentiation is sharpened in the same paragraph as the narrator listens to the locusts:

Also there is never one locust but an illusion of at least a thousand. The noise of each locust is pitched on some classic locust range out of which none of them varies more than two full tones: and yet you seem to hear each locust discrete from all the rest...²⁹

It would seem that the self and the contemporaneous atmosphere are in complete harmony, each contributing to the stature of the other. Yet the comparison between the fathers holding the hoses and the locusts makes us pause. While Agee claims to note each father's individuality, he places him in his most rudimentary form. It is not a world the fathers of families share; it is the fact of being alive on the earth. It is life in its simplest, habitual form, earthly life. The neighbourhood is not in any sense a world, having neither the privacy the self needs nor the public space where private selves can speak and act together.

There were fences around one or two of the houses, but mainly the yards ran into each other, with only now and then a low hedge that wasn't doing very well. There were few good friends among the grown people, and they were not poor enough for the other kind of acquaintance, but everyone nodded and spoke, and even

²⁹ Agee, Death, p. 13.

might talk short times, trivially, and at the two extremes of the general and the particular...³⁰

There is no human togetherness, no world; only creaturely solidarity. It is precisely this limitation that makes "the sorrow of being on this earth" untellable,³¹ and the solidarity something, finally, with which the narrator--Agee--can have nothing to do. He extracts himself from the contemporaneous atmosphere as soon as he completes it in all its peace. With his father and mother he is "as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but they will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am."³² The contemporaneous atmosphere, while at first glance consoling, cannot provide identity and distinctness.

The fragment reminds us of both the poetry and Famous Men, for it describes the familiar rhythms of the earth, of man as creature, of peace and night, while at the same time seeming to effect an individuation of objects and people within the universe in the manner of Famous Men. The seeming individuation--for all subjects, fathers, locusts, hoses, trees, cars, are actually presented in the general rather than the particular--bespeaks the difficulty Agee labours under to present anything alive without a world. When there is no world there seems to occur a curious merging of the earth and universe. We have seen how the farmers of Famous Men are creaturely, yet set in the universe. Without a world men achieve no distinction and are left at once lonely and mob-like; for the full self, unique and independent, yet able to share

³⁰ Agee, Death, p. 11.

³¹ The full phrase is the Thomas Wolfe-like "and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth..." (Death, p. 15).

³² Agee, Death, p. 15.

his experience with others, can emerge only in the world.

If we compare the vision here with the vision underlying Chapter Two we can see significant changes. I choose Chapter Two because it is on the surface similar to the preceding fragment. A family situation is described idyllically and ends on a jarring note. But in Chapter Two Jay and Mary appear as clearly defined selves sharing a world.

When we approach Chapter Two we have already been introduced to Jay and Rufus, and very briefly to Mary. Chapter One is about the loneliness of the self. Jay and Rufus experience the loneliness of the universe as they sit in a deserted lot, after having seen a Chaplin film. Rufus observes of his father that "although his father loved their home and loved all of them, he was more lonely than the contentment of his family could help; that it even increased his loneliness, or made it hard for him not to be lonely."³³ In Chapter Two, however, the loneliness, while it does not disappear, is compensated for by Jay's sharing of his experience with Mary. The inviolability of the self is time and again set aside in favour of the togetherness Mary and Jay share with each other. When the late night call comes the loneliness of an all-night lunch room appeals to Jay, but Mary gets up to make breakfast for him. At first he is "very faintly disappointed," but quickly is touched "by the simplicity with which she got up for him thoroughly awake." With Mary in the kitchen Jay is left to dress alone, and he experiences a moment of wonder in the presence of the universe.

The hour and beauty of the night moved in him; he heard the flickering of the clock, and it sounded alien and mysterious as a rat in a wall..... He only saw the window, tenderly alight within, and the infinite dark leaning like water against its

³³ Agee, Death, p. 26.

outer surface, and even the window was not a window, but something extraordinarily vivid and senseless which for a moment occupied the universe. A sense of enormous distance stole over him, and changed into a moment of insupportable wonder and sadness.³⁴

This is a typical Agee moment. The dialogue between the self and the universe had always been for Agee wondrous and intense. And again we have just the slightest suggestion of inflation with the word "insupportable." (The impression the passage leaves, surely, is of a wonder and sadness that is supportable.) But here the moment passes quickly. Jay shrugs it off with "we've all got to go sometime." Then comes an important sentence: "The life came back into focus." He returns to the world. The moment is put in a social context. Jay resumes dressing, even shaves out of respect for the solemn occasion.

Mary too responds with a mixture of reluctance and appreciation to the kindnesses extended to her. When Jay pours milk in a saucepan for her she almost stops him. But once he does it she knows she will like it. The tiny refusals and concessions show the contradictory impulses of the self--to be alone, to belong--present at all times. But when Mary grows distant--the female counterpart to Jay's solitude minutes before--the return is all that is important. "She came back into this world and again they looked at each other."³⁵ (my emphasis) The world they share is at least as important as the private realms they inhabit severally. Jay has another moment alone but this one affirms the world. He turns on the light in the living room: "In the single quiet light in the enormous quietude of the night, all the little objects in the

³⁴ Agee, Death, p. 36.

³⁵ Agee, Death, p. 41.

room looked golden brown and curiously gentle. He was touched without knowing why. Home."³⁶ This contrasts the earlier moment of the senseless and vivid universe. The mood continues as Jay and Mary step outside where "the fecund air lavished upon their faces the tenderness of lovers' adoring hands."³⁷

The chapter is about love but, perhaps more importantly, it is about the small accommodations and kindnesses that smooth out the daily living-together of two separate selves. It is the public aspect of love that is important; unlike so-called "romantic" novels, which concentrate on passion and subjective feelings, the chapter shows love as it appears in the world. Mary and Jay's union is more a marriage than a love affair, as much habit as passion, and its worldly place shows in the concern each has for the children. When Mary says to Jay she wishes she could go with him "in whatever happens" but cannot leave the two sleeping children, it is clear this is no Gothic romance that ends in the tragic death of the lovers. The death occurs, but only to one, and like any given in life, what is important is how the human community responds to the tragedy.

Chapter Two is central to the novel because it presents a marvelously sustained and harmonious image of the self in relation with another self. Perhaps two people do not a world make, but one is aware--through the concern for the children and for Jay's father, through the married (i.e. societal) aspect of their love, even, perhaps, through the song Jay and Mary habitually sing to each other on parting--of a world that extends beyond them. This is the new element in Agee, the

³⁶ Agee, Death, p. 42.

³⁷ Agee, Death, p. 45.

celebration of the world. Nor is the world an exclusive realm, but brings into itself the realms beneath and above. Chapter Two, and indeed the entire book, make clear how much habit and solitary reflection characterize life in the world. Only--they cannot be all. We become conscious of habits when we recognize habits in others. And solitary reflection, no matter how profound, retains a shadowy existence until it is subjected to the clarifying and consoling gaze of others.

iv

The realms below and beyond the world are realms to which we belong without effort. By the fact of being born we are part of the earth; by the fact that we possess a consciousness that distinguishes us from animals we are part of the universe. But we cannot assume existence in the world in quite the same way. To be sure, we are conditioned by the world, and our protracted education is a preparation for the world, but we do not enter it, strictly speaking, except by choice. The rites of initiation as glimpsed in primitive societies are tests which must be passed before a youth graduates into adulthood. Not all men achieve the sureness of self and sublimation of instinct³⁸ necessary to move into the adult world. When Jay's brother Ralph laments,

"Ralph is the baby,"³⁹ we note how far he is away from ever reaching adulthood or belonging to the world.

To the extent that Death is about the world, it also is about the wisdom the world extends, the sacrifices it asks for. It implicitly

³⁸ "Initiation takes the classic pattern of withdrawal and return, its context is the conflict between social and instinctive behavior, local choice and biological necessity." Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 328.

³⁹ Agee, Death, p. 72.

asks, What is adulthood,⁴⁰ and what answers it finds reside in the examples of Jay and Hannah. In each, we might say, are the attributes necessary for initiation into the world. In another work about initiation, Henry IV, Shakespeare presents three types of men: Falstaff, a chaotic mass of infantile wishes; Hotspur, the idealist, devoted to honour; and Prince Hal, an agreeable blend of the two, the ruler who knows his station and duties, but knows, too, something of the unruly impulses of the heart. It takes no great leap of insight to see in the three the child, the adolescent, and, once Prince Hal is Henry V, at least, the adult. Nor need we stretch the point to associate the sensual child with the earth, the individual adolescent with the universe, and the adult with the world. Ralph best typifies the child, as he grimly admits. Of the adolescent there are two types, the zealot and the cynic. Mary's blind religiosity demonstrates the first extreme; the passive cynicism and rebellion of Joel and Andrew demonstrate the second. Only Jay and Hannah of the major characters have properly achieved adulthood, although in different ways, and are able to recognize the limitations and strengths that accompany maturity. It is Rufus's initiation into the world to find his way amid these characters to adulthood.

In Radical Innocence Ihab Hassan speaks of two modes of initiation for the modern self. The first "may be understood as a process leading through right action and consecrated knowledge to a viable mode of life in the world. Its end is confirmation." The second involves "an estrangement from the world, and its values are chiefly inward and trans-

⁴⁰ This is an elaboration of the question of The Morning Watch, What is manhood?, which was answered unsatisfactorily. To be an adult is to possess an identity in the world.

cidental."⁴¹ It will be immediately obvious that the first mode is more appropriate to Death and the second to Famous Men. However, if we see within Death itself both modes, we are likely to find Aunt Hannah best characterizing the first mode, Jay the second.

Jay, we said, represents something of the estrangement-from-the-world mode, although this hardly seems true in a modern context of estrangement. Jay has set about establishing himself in the middle class --pulling himself up by his bootstraps, so to speak--and he is a good family man, is diligent at his job, and is by all appearances in perfect harmony with the world. But of course that is not entirely the case. Jay has had a drinking problem, and there is the suggestion that his rural background, something less than desirable in the Lynch's' eyes, makes it harder for him to belong to the world. Jay is the most solitary and lonely of all the characters of the novel. Like the Chaplin tramp he delights in, Jay never quite belongs to society. Even his family, as much as it is a joy to him, cannot fully compensate for his loneliness, as Rufus realizes.

Most of the passages in the book with Jay are celebrations of loneliness. When Jay begins his drive back to the hills he slowly sheds his worldly self and becomes more introspective. He feels different once he has crossed the river into the "real, old, deep country,"⁴² feels freer, more at leisure. Quite unconsciously he drives a little faster.

One of the italicized sections (placed by the editors) describes Jay singing the frightened Rufus to sleep. He then reflects on his own childhood:

⁴¹ Hassan, p. 35.

⁴² Agee, Death, p. 52.

How far we all come. How far we all come away from ourselves. So far, so much between, you can never go home again. You can go home again, it's good to go home, but you never really get all the way home again in your life. And what's it all for? All I tried to be, all I ever wanted and went away for, what's it all for?

The answer comes to him as he looks down at his sleeping son. "Just one way you do get back home. You have a boy or girl of your own and now and then you remember, and you know how they feel, and it's almost the same as if you were your own self again, as young as you could remember." Yet it is not enough. Jay reflects:

Everything was good and better than he could have hoped for, better than he ever deserved; only, whatever it was, and however good it was, it wasn't what you once had been, and had lost, and could never have again, and once in a while, once in a long time, you remembered, and knew how far you were away, and it hit you hard enough, that little while it lasted, to break your heart.⁴³

The loneliness cannot be accommodated for Jay; no sustaining worldly illusion fully appeases the sorrow and loss implicit in mortal life. Like Agee's Alabama farmers, Jay has confronted, in what he calls the "satisfying rural privacy"⁴⁴ of the hill country, a tragic existence that is not evident in middle-class society. Hence he has retained a vitality lost by the more refined Lynches, and his entry into the Lynch family in fact infuses it with new life. Mary's one act of independence, we are told, lay in her decision to marry Jay.

Although Jay has become part of the middle class community, he never quite belongs to it. In fact around his own solitariness there seems to form briefly a lonely circle of outsiders. His easy and

⁴³ Agee, Death, pp. 93, 94.

⁴⁴ Agee, Death, p. 48.

graceful identification with strangers and his natural courtesy are drawn from his own loneliness. As he and Rufus walk home from the movie he waves to a "dark-faced man" with "sad, pale eyes."⁴⁵ He offers Rufus a lifesaver, "courteously, man to man," and he stops for several beers at the warm-bodied pub where people treat him with quiet respect. Like Chaplin he symbolizes something of all the lonely selves who never find their way into the centre of society. But through him sanction is bestowed on the self and its search beyond the narrow norms of that society.

Jay's antithesis is his brother Ralph. Ralph is a loner too, but desperately unhappy with his loneliness, and unlike Jay he makes no attempt to reconcile himself with the world. He continues to drink, has little restraint, lacks any notion of social tact or manners. He flouts the convention of marriage, traditionally a symbol of the self's entry into society, by having pathetic little affairs. The chapter devoted to him is, significantly, written entirely in interior monologue, the only sustained interior piece in the book; Ralph lives quite literally in a shadowy world of his own, unable to restrain any random desire that comes along.

Ralph's presence in the book is interesting for another reason. The portrait is brilliant and devastating, a virtuoso piece of writing, based on Agee's father's cousin, whom Agee could have known only slenderly at best. There is, one suspects, a good deal of Agee in Ralph. Agee was an alcoholic and a womanizer, subject to extravagant bouts of self-pity and depression. Like Ralph he was a baby too. In "1928 Story", the narrator is "beginning to learn about himself that he was

⁴⁵ Agee, Death, p. 23.

infantile..., that he had never really grown up, whatever that might mean."⁴⁶ Agee's reconciliation with the world may have demanded a cleansing of himself which the portrait of Ralph in part effected.

Agee's conception of the world was inevitably associated with the middle class. Agee was born into the middle class and lived all his life--Phillips Exeter Academy, Harvard, New York intellectual circles--in it; it is hardly surprising that he attributes to the middle class the power and freedom and trust in human effort that are necessary to make and maintain the world. His rebellion against the middle class in Famous Men was also a rebellion against the world, and as he allowed the world credence his gaze moved from the rural tenant farmers to the middle class Lynch family. The Lynch family possess a good number of liberal middle class virtues, courtesy, tolerance, an intellectual tradition. The remarkable preparation they seem to have instilled in them for the tragedy comes not from any innate strength of self, but from the habits and traditions built up over the generations. Gerald Weales has called the power of the novel "Agee's unwavering knowledge that each human being lives and moves in the loneliness of self, but that the family, when infused with love, can occasionally, almost accidentally, shore up that lonely self."⁴⁷ But in fact the Lynch family do not show the "accidental compassion" Weales believes to be the working of the novel; it is not accidental, it is the result of living in the world and among the world's traditions. Hannah is at the centre of these traditions and her strength draws largely from them. Her initiation into

⁴⁶ Agee, "1928 Story", Texas Quarterly XI (1968), p. 23.

⁴⁷ Gerald Weales, "The Accidents of Compassion", The Reporter XVII (December 12, 1957), p. 43.

the world is "through right action and consecrated knowledge," and her place in the world is unquestionably the most secure in the book.

Hannah's presence in the world can never be better demonstrated than in her ability for action and speech, the two activities that belong strictly to the world and human sharing and togetherness. As we have said, the force of the world is strongest when the members of Mary's family sit with her to learn the details of the death. Although it is not cool enough to warrant a fire, they light it anyway; it represents the small sphere of human influence and effort. When a man walks by the house they listen to the lonely sound of the footsteps, and once the footsteps are gone "in the silence of the universe they listened to their little fire." Together the family wrestles meaning from the death, largely through speech, but the togetherness is all-important and contradicts in part what Joel warns his daughter in private: "You'll have to go through it alone, because there isn't a thing on earth any of us can do to help, beyond blind animal sympathy."⁴⁸ In fact they provide a good deal more than blind animal sympathy; they attempt to render the senselessness of Jay's death into something meaningful. Hannah's presence is a marvel of strength and restraint. She does not make the cruel blunders Andrew commits in his angry bursts of selfishness; nor is she reduced to the passive musings over the incomprehensibility of the universe in which Joel indulges, that cause so much pain to Mary. She is the one Mary asks to stay. She is the one who looks after the children. She bears with Mary while they are waiting for the news--her wisdom and tact are most remarkable--during which she neither proffers false comfort nor refuses sympathy where necessary. For her life's fullness is experienced

⁴⁸ Agee, Death, p. 148.

through the traditions of the world, not any private communion between self and universe. Accordingly she comprehends Jay's death and wrings almost joy out of its fact because it provides access to the full life: .

[She felt as if a prodigious page were being silently turned, and the breath of its turning touched her heart with cold and tender awe. Her soul is beginning to come of age, she thought; and within those moments she herself became much older and was content to be. Her heart lifted up in a kind of pride in Mary, in every sorrow she could remember, her own or that of others (and the remembrances rushed upon her); in all existence and endurance. She wanted to cry out Yes! Exactly! Yes. Yes. Begin to see. Your turn now. She wanted to hold her niece at arms length and to turn and admire this blossoming. She wanted to take her in her arms and groan unto God for what it meant to be alive.⁴⁹

This remarkable ability to incorporate suffering into a framework without diminishing its force or reality is above all a worldly action. And no small part of that ability comes from her almost automatic turning to her past sorrows and those of others she has known to understand the present sorrow and place it in a meaningful context. It does not lessen but actually clarifies the sorrow, so that the remembrances 'rush' upon her. The greatest gift the world bestows is this context of precedence and tradition and sympathy by which an individual's experiences are not lost but shaped and intensified.

The extent to which Hannah is a worldly being is indicated by the shock Mary feels when she sees Hannah's face for a moment without its social mask: "the strong mouth was loose and soft, the whole face terrible in love and grief, naked and undisciplined as [Mary] had never seen it before."⁵⁰ Yet Hannah is never subsumed by the world but always

⁴⁹ Agee, Death, p. 127.

⁵⁰ Agee, Death, p. 141.

maintains a high respect for the self. When she asks Mary if Rufus can accompany her on a shopping excursion she makes it quite clear that Rufus must want to come. And although she is "painfully tempted to interfere" when Rufus chooses a loud cap his mother will not like, she is "switched if she was going to boss him!"⁵¹ Her religion never overtakes her but is always balanced with common sense. This is in contrast with Mary's religiosity, in which even the sympathetic Hannah recognizes a too-ready self-abnegation: "something mistaken and unbearably piteous, infinitely malign was at large within that faithfulness..."⁵² Mary's self-abnegation extends beyond her religion to a dislike of anything outside the middle class, anything "vulgar", as she puts it. When we begin to recognize the vulgar--Chaplin, the store where Hannah buys Rufus's cap, Jay's family--we see that the vulgar often simply meant the self freed from restraints, the self outside middle-class society. Hannah is too aware of the self not to acknowledge the earthly "vulgar" realm.

We cannot fail to notice how distinctly Hannah stands out in the Lynch family. It is perhaps their distance from the earth and its vitality, their refinement, that has resulted in such marked enfeeblement. In the passive cynicism of Joel and Andrew--"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport,"⁵³ muses Joel--and in Mary's blind dogmatic faith we detect an escape from the world into the universe. Catherine, Mary's mother, seems hardly present in the world at all. Of the family only Hannah has retained the vitality and strength

⁵¹ Agee, Death, p. 80.

⁵² Agee, Death, p. 129.

⁵³ Agee, Death, p. 163.

of self because of her forays into and acknowledgment of the earthly realm.

Hannah's presence in the book can hardly be overestimated. Agee's protagonists up until Death were either the unintellectual, generally unresourceful common man, whose struggle against the human condition is seen to be noble but futile, or the Agee character, an anguished self-tormentor whose awareness of the magnitude of human suffering resulted in a guilt-obsessed inertia toward human affairs. In either case there was little trust in action or reform or effort; any kind of success was incommensurate with the damage caused. In spite of his vitality and his capacity for action, even Jay is in many ways the traditional protagonist: a common, unintellectual man from a rural background, to some extent estranged from the world. It is Hannah who is truly the new element in Agee's vision--a strong self belonging wholly to the world. Like Jay she experiences loneliness and awe, and in fact her loneliness is far more sweeping. His stems from homesickness, from the disappearance of childhood, and because Jay is not a thinker his loneliness remains a sentimental feeling. That childhood as a repository of all feelings of happiness and belonging is a fallacy is clearly demonstrated by Rufus. Hannah's loneliness is at its most profound an apprehension of nothingness: "there opened within her a chasm of infinite depth and from it flowed the paralyzing breath of eternal darkness."⁵⁴ Rufus experiences something of the same abyss, and one feels that as important as Jay is to Rufus, his (Jay's) authority must give way to Hannah: Hannah embodies the full range of experience, ever converted into meaning and brought into the world.

⁵⁴ Agee, Death, p. 129.

There need be no rebellion for Hannah to establish her selfhood, no antagonism between self and society which Lionel Trilling believed so necessary for the self's survival in the modern age. "Consecrated knowledge"--the wisdom the world extends to each generation--has still passed to her. Through her the world's purpose--to draw the seemingly intractable earthly and universal realms into a human dwelling place--is carried out; through her we see human effort is to avail, that wisdom can be the outcome of suffering, and that a full life need not be "a lot of crap."

Perhaps there is no better indication of Jay and Hannah's central positions than in their individual relationships with Rufus. Each has a chapter devoted to an outing with Rufus, and each is concerned with Rufus's education and subsequent initiation into the world.

Education at once protects and exposes. Education protects the child from the world's demands so that the child may develop in private and therefore be initiated into the world (at maturity) retaining the unique self. Jay affirms for Rufus the rewards and necessity of privacy, in spite of its loneliness. When they are together they are outsiders, like Chaplin, but they are together in their loneliness. It is Rufus's important realization that "although his father was lonely he was on good terms with the loneliness, that in spite of his homesickness he was well."⁵⁵ The sanction bestowed on the private life of the self through Jay's example ensures that Rufus is not subsumed by a false, unworldly togetherness--the brutal solidarity of the street boys, for example, or Richard's belonging in Morning Watch. This earthly solid-

⁵⁵ Age of Innocence, p. 27.

arity--the opposite of human togetherness in the world--is enticing because it eases the loneliness of the self, but it is self-destructive and world-destructive, as Rufus is dimly aware:

Why was it that when some of them were asking him, and others were backing them or just looking on, there was some kind of strange, tight force in the air all around them and that made them seem very much together and that made him feel very much alone and very eager to be liked by them, together with them... And when he walked away, or when he refused to answer, he always realized in some way he had defeated them, but he also always felt disconsolate and lonely.⁵⁶

Mary's religiosity is similarly self-destructive, demanding a sacrifice Hannah distrusts and even the children feel is malign. As they listen to her conversation with the reprehensible Father Jackson they are disturbed by his triumph:

They realized, fairly clearly, that the object of this devotion was not this man whom they mistrusted, but they felt he was altogether too deeply involved in it. 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.⁵⁷

The extent to which a child develops an understanding of and feeling of responsibility for the world is dependent on the extent to which he is exposed to the world's traditions, its potential timelessness. Such exposure prevents the other danger of the self, of a too-great solitariness, of making a world of one's own. Jay's solitariness gives way to togetherness--most obviously with Mary, but also with strangers. But Ralph's narcissism is not overcome. Nor are the angry self-indul-

⁵⁶ Agee, Death, p. 206.

⁵⁷ Agee, Death, p. 281.

gences of Joel and Andrew. Here the example for Rufus is Hannah, whose actions and presence continually acknowledge the world's presence.⁵⁸

When she goes shopping she prepares for it carefully, and her expert navigation through the world opens its wonders up for Rufus:

Hannah stirred her way through the vigorous sidewalk traffic and along the dense, numerous aisles of the stores with quiet exhilaration... She prepared her mind and her disposition for it as carefully as she dressed for it... Taken shopping with anyone else, Rufus suffered extreme boredom, but Hannah shopped much as a real lover of painting visits a gallery, and her pleasure clarified Rufus's eyes and held the whole merchant world in a clear focus of delight.⁵⁹

And of course it is Hannah who buys Rufus the cap, the symbol of his maturity, which, although he chooses it himself, brings with it quite clearly the responsibilities of adulthood he has begun to develop in the world.⁶⁰ Assuming, of course, that there remains a world to which one has responsibilities.

v

Jay and Hannah each represent a mode of initiation into the world that the self might follow. Hannah's mode of "consecrated knowledge and right action" exposes the self to the world and its traditions, thereby lessening the adolescent danger of the self inhabiting a world of its own. Jay confirms the integrity of the self; he offers by example a sanction to loneliness and thus strengthens the self's resistance

⁵⁸ The one time they do not is indicative of how firmly they do most of the time. When Mary asks her to kneel and pray in the kitchen she immediately thinks: "We can be seen... for the shades were up. Let us, she told herself angrily." (Death, p. 128).

⁵⁹ Agee, Death, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Jay exposes Rufus to the world as well of course, and not least importantly when he prompts Rufus to kiss his great-great grandmother. The world is continuous through generations; Rufus must recognize this.

to the mob-like solidarity of earthly life. Each character provides access to the world and the promise of a full life. But, as Ihab Hassan reminds us: What mode the hero elects depends on the particular world in which he finds himself.⁶¹

In what world does Rufus find himself? Are the modes of initiation offered actually open to him? Or to put it another way, how much do Hannah and Jay remain authorities to Rufus, giving sanction to life in the world? Jay is, as we saw, unintellectual, and his feeling of alienation manifests itself as homesickness and a longing for childhood. Through Rufus we see the sentimentality of Jay's attitude. Jay's authority is somewhat compromised, then, even before his death. Hannah seems a much more sympathetic example for Rufus. She is intellectual and vigorous, and one feels she has the tools to devour experience. Her loneliness is profounder than Jay's and we suspect Rufus's terror of the dark is of that deeper nature as well. Yet it is improbable that she can pass on her consecrated knowledge to Rufus. Both Jay and Hannah have disappeared in the last section of the book, which devotes itself to Rufus's uncertain apprehension of things. The one glimpse of Hannah suggests something death-like; she sits in an "unmoving rocking chair with her hands in her lap, the sunless light glazing her lenses, frost-like upon her hair."⁶²

As for Jay, his death has removed him from Rufus's life but the impact of his death signifies a fundamental change. Psychologist Robert Coles, seeing Death in a therapeutic light, believes that any alienation the death sparked between Rufus and his father was there before, that

⁶¹ Hassan, p. 35.

⁶² Agee, Death, p. 295.

the death threw into dramatic relief existing patterns and feelings.⁶³ However, while it is true that Rufus had felt distant⁶⁴ from his father long before his father's death, there was always the possibility of reconciliation.

Rufus seldom had at all sharply the feeling that he and his father were estranged, yet they must have been, and he must have felt it, for always during these quiet moments on the rock a part of his sense of complete contentment lay in the feeling that they were reconciled, that there was really no division, no estrangement, or none so strong anyhow, that it could mean much, by comparison with the unity that was so firm and assured, here.⁶⁴

After the death reconciliation was no longer possible, and as we have suggested earlier, access to reality appeared to close off. The splendid description of Jay lying in his coffin makes us sensible not only to the impotence of human effort in the world but to the world's weightlessness. As Rufus and Catherine approach the casket "their little sounds... vanished upon the stillness like the infinitesimal whisperings of snow, falling on open water.... Within [Rufus], and outside him, everything except his father was dry, light, unreal... and as nothing else was actual, his father lay graven..."⁶⁵ Andrew attempts to put the death into a manageable context by describing the butterfly landing on the coffin. But we cannot fail to notice the preciousness of the story. In a different world, one supposes, there might have been some manifestation less evanescent, more enduring to the mind. As it is, it is all but consumed by Andrew's diatribe against religion moments later.

What I am suggesting is something of the magnitude of Jay's death.

⁶³ Robert Coles, *Irony in the Mind's Life* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. 63.

⁶⁴ Agee, *Death*, p. 26.

⁶⁵ Agee, *Death*, p. 289.

It changed everything, and for Rufus it took away the world, a realm where things, no matter how mysterious or confusing, ultimately made sense. His father in the coffin felt to Rufus "like a boundless hollowness in the house and in his own being, as if he stood in the dark near the edge of an abyss and could feel the droop of space in the darkness..."⁶⁶

There were to be no more reconciliations. It was as though access to the world was closed off forever from Rufus, "as if the house were in shadow and were walking on tiptoe in the middle of an easy, sunny world."⁶⁷

With the old world gone the old authority figures are replaced. Hannah reacted to crises by feeling life more fully, "groaning unto God for what it meant to be alive"; but Hannah is replaced by Mary, who is overpowered by Father Jackson's mean-spirited Christianity. Andrew remains in place of Jay but does not have Jay's sense of well-being and can only pass on to Rufus a confused blend of awe and hatred. The burden of living passes from the world to Rufus, but without the consecrated knowledge or well-being that Jay and Hannah exemplify, and the pressure placed on the self is nothing short of making sense, without help, of all experience. This pressure is felt as Rufus attempts to counter the nothingness surrounding his father's body: "He therefore watched it all the more studiously, trying to bring all of his touch into all that he could see; but he could not bring much."⁶⁸

The change of outlook in Agee was due, we said earlier, to both private and public revelations. The private revelation was his imagined yet restorative meeting with his father. The public revelation was not

⁶⁶ Agee, Death, p. 297.

⁶⁷ Agee, Death, p. 296.

⁶⁸ Agee, Death, p. 293.

so happy. As distasteful as Agee had found the 1930's, the war and post-war era were, if anything, worse in the public sphere. "Only the meanness, and fatness, and insanity, seemed to survive," the "1928 Story" narrator concludes after the war, "as it had also survived the Depression; and in whatever ways these had changed, they seemed to have changed for the worse."⁶⁹ The disastrous effect of the machine on the humanistic attitude can be seen in the two idylls, "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" and Chapter Two, which are both disrupted by the mechanistic sound of modernism. The "contemporaneous atmosphere" is disturbed by the streetcar, with its spark "like a malignant spirit set to dog its tracks." The worldly happiness Mary and Jay share in the early morning vanishes with the sound of the automobile, and Agee spends several pages allowing the ugly sound to permeate everything--a sound "like a hideous, horribly constipated great brute of a beast: like a lunatic sobbing: like a mouse being tortured." But the public event that changed the shape of things irrevocably was the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945. The bomb, in its destructive potentialities, threatened the very existence of human life on the planet, and marked the past off forever from the future. In a Time essay of August 1945 Agee registered his own shock waves to the force of the bomb's blast.

In what they said or did men were still in the after-shock of a great wound, bemused and only semi-articulate, whether they were soldiers or scientists, or great statesmen, or the simplest of men. But in the dark depths of their minds and hearts, huge forms moved and silently arrayed themselves: Titans, surging out of the chaos in an age in which victory was

⁶⁹ Agee, "1928 Story", p. 24.

already only the shout of a child in the street.⁷⁰

Not only did the bomb herald in a new age of chaos; it closed off the age-old possibility of renewal for the world. As with the death of his father, Agee saw the nuclear threat forever ruling out a reconciliation for self and world. In a Christmas sonnet of 1945 he wrote:

I had, till lately, faced my death secure,
Knowing my hunger only was denied,
Knowing that all I loved was to endure.
But this year, dying, struck wild, as it fell,
Ending itself, me, and the world as well.⁷¹

The nuclear age is the direct outcome of a science that has left aside all worldly and humanistic concerns. The bomb, which represents an unleashing upon the earth of destructive forces found only in the universe, was made possible only when the world no longer provided a humanistic buffer--the concerns and hopes of man--to temper and perhaps redirect the advance of science. The separation between scientific and worldly concerns and the dominion of scientific concerns in our time has led to the problems the atomic bomb has posed. Writes one observer: "The simple fact that physicists split the atom without any hesitations the very moment they knew how to do it, although they realized full well the enormous destructive potentialities of their operation, demonstrates that the scientist qua scientist does not even care about the survival of the human race on earth."⁷²

The dilemmas of Agee's earlier works stem from their alienation from the world and, although this can be traced to a personal origin, the works

⁷⁰ Agee, "Victory, the Peace: The Bomb", in Time (August 20, 1945), p. 5.

⁷¹ Agee, Collected Poems, p. 68.

⁷² Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 276.

are unquestionably and most importantly a part of their time as well. The strategies of withdrawal, while they are perhaps more strenuous and unfocussed in Agee, are hardly unique. Ihab Hassan has called the central theme of the American novel the recoil of modern selves from all commitment and restraint in the world. Yet, Hassan continues, such "[a] withdrawal from the world compels them into a fragile or futile relation to themselves."⁷³ Agee acknowledges this "fragile or futile" relation the withdrawing self maintains when he speaks of the "stupefaction" of the modern age. Yet the atomic bomb made him see the consequences of withdrawal as never before, the deadliness behind the stupefaction, and brought clear to him with great urgency the burden of the self:

When the bomb split open the universe and revealed the prospect of the infinitely extraordinary, it also revealed the oldest, simplest, commonest, most neglected and most important of facts: that each man is responsible for his own soul, and, in the terrible words of the Psalmist, that no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him.⁷⁴

If the world had all but disappeared, as his father's death suggested privately, and the nuclear age suggested publicly, Agee felt he must find a way to rebuild the world, through "personal skill and strength," with people depending "on themselves and on each other as individuals." "The Atomic bomb only increased [Agee's] sense that the nation was asleep," Barson writes, "and that he, if no one else, must wake himself before consciousness was obliterated."⁷⁵

How to avoid stupefaction? How to maintain "personal skill and

⁷³ Hassan, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Agee, "Victory, the Peace: The Bomb", in Time (August 20, 1945), p. 5.

⁷⁵ Barson, p. 8.

strength"? How to remain responsible to one's own soul? These are questions Agee posed time and again to himself. And is it so surprising that the answer finally came that he should "go back into those years." Far from the withdrawal Rupp calls it, and which Agee saw the dangers of, it is Agee's first attempt to restore strength to the self in the face of the increasingly urgent demands put upon it. Through the "pleasures of recall" he sought to find himself--"what he had been as he had known himself, and what he had seen with his own eyes, and supposed with his own mind." As Barson correctly points out, Agee returned to Knoxville "because people seemed to Agee to have lived then according to values which gave significance to their being alive."⁷⁶ It became for Agee a matter of transforming the pleasures of recall into something permanent and meaningful for the present by means of the efforts of re-creation.

We have referred to the idyllic qualities of "Knoxville: Summer, 1915" and Chapter Two. But is not the whole novel really an idyll--of a cohesive community of individuals, a world, where senselessness is still compelled to make sense, where suffering leads to an enrichment of life? Schiller defines the idyll as the literary genre that embodies "the poetic representation of innocent and contented humanity." This often includes a distance from "the artificial conditions of society at large," although these conditions "are not to be considered as the purpose of the idyll, simply as the natural means to it. The purpose itself is invariably only to represent man in a state of innocence, i.e. in a condition of harmony and of peace with himself and his environment."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Barson, p. 145.

⁷⁷ Schiller, Naive and Sentimental Poetry, trans. and introd. Julius A. Elias (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966), pp. 146-7.

Jay is a true pastoral hero, unintellectual, rural, a common man who desired the idyllic virtues. "He wanted a good life, and good understanding, for himself, for everybody,"⁷⁸ Walter Starr says of him. And does not Hannah belong to that age-old society--how nostalgically we look back at it today--that absorbed the shocks of existence and prevailed against personal and public despairs? Is not Hannah in a state of harmony and peace with herself and the external world? Surely to the extent that we have stopped placing credence with the virtues expressed in the book--of marriage, of religion (tempered with worldly wisdom), of the limitations and responsibilities of a world we must share with others, a world which nonetheless provides, in Wordsworth's phrase, "abundant recompense"--surely to that extent we look on those virtues as on new things that can clarify our "present living." In the old forms Agee portrays, human life for a time survived, even flourished. The forms could not be retrieved, but the virtues they embodied might find new forms.

For Schiller the idyll is not the highest art. The idyll appeals to the heart, not to the mind. "Therefore we can love them and seek them out when we stand in need of peace, but not when our forces are striving for motion and activity. Only for the sick in spirit can they provide healing, but no nourishment for the healthy; they cannot unify, only assuage."⁷⁹ All the more fitting, then, that Death closes by thrusting Rufus out of the idyllic world into all the confusions and stupefaction of the modern age. The idyll does not then disintegrate; the memory of it heartens and inspires. Here is Schiller again:

⁷⁸ Agee, Death, p. 285.

⁷⁹ Schiller, p. 149.

[An idyllic condition] does not occur only before the beginnings of civilization, rather it is also the condition which civilization, if it can be said to have any particular tendency everywhere, aims at as its ultimate purpose. Only the idea of this condition and belief in its possible realization can reconcile man to all the evils to which he is subjected in the course of civilization.... Theoretically, then, [idyllic works] lead us backwards, while practically they lead us forwards and ennoble us.⁸⁰

This is the purpose of Death, to lead us forward and ennoble us by looking backward to a vanished world. With it the self attained that strength Agee called individualism, a strength without which a new world cannot be built. In a book review Agee spoke with admiring envy of Joyce's "self-faithfulness."⁸¹ Perhaps there is a connection between the self-faithfulness and Joyce's early conception of the "fair courts of life." "In that phrase," Lionel Trilling writes, "nostalgically recalling the vanished noble dispensation, [Joyce] expressed all that the world in the time of his youth might still be fancied to offer in the way of order, peace, honour and beauty."⁸² So is it with Agee, recalling his own world of "order, peace, honour, and beauty" to gain direction, a refreshed sense of self, a conception of "the state to which civilization aspires." Walter Starr's praise of Jay at the end of Death cannot bring Jay back but it can help to strengthen Rufus in the difficult life that lies ahead. In the same way Agee gives his family a kind of glory-- "touch with deathlessness their clay"⁸³--thus praising a past world and

⁸⁰ Schiller, pp. 148-9.

⁸¹ Agee, "Portrait of an Artist", in Time XXV (Feb. 19, 1940), p. 86.

⁸² Lionel Trilling, Sincerity and Authenticity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 41.

⁸³ Agee, Collected Poems, p. 38.

its lost virtues. For by reminding us "how far we all come" he extends a promise it is normally difficult to grasp and compels us to acknowledge something of the extent of the damage the world's collapse has wrought.

APPENDIX I

Father Flye on Individualism and Society:

I myself am a good deal of an individualist, and wish as much personal freedom as possible. Yet I see clearly that while this is very valuable--while there are gains both personal and social that come from one's acting as an individual, independent of society which may in this case seem a drag--yet on the other hand we are not individuals independent of society which in many ways in its usages and laws is the indispensable means that secures our being able to function at all satisfactorily as individuals, and thus is not a drag but a release to freedom. We live within a system of government and law. It has, to be sure, defects, stupidities, injustice, as would any system at all in which human beings would have any part; but on the other hand it is due to this system of government and law that we have any facilities and security of travel, that railroads and highways can be constructed and maintained, that there are not highwaymen infesting the roads, that there is a postal system, that a person has any security of possession of a house which he buys or rents, that because of a legal coinage and system of weights and measures one can make a purchase with any convenience and confidence, that we have any reasonable expectation of being able to carry out plans for the immediate or more remote future. We see evils, ineptitudes, stupidity, corruption in government; and yet if it were not for a system of government and law, imperfect as it may be--and as any system would be--none of us would be able to pursue his individual life with any sort of peace and security. People may be subjected to occasional inconvenience and injustice with traffic laws, but this is infinitesimal in comparison with what would happen if there were no traffic and liability laws, to say nothing of criminal laws. We are all of us continuously all of our lives, whether we like it or appreciate it or not, the beneficiaries of and indebted to this legal order, the system of government and law in which we live. It is a system partly good, partly bad: Call it a compromise if one will. Admit that there is a good deal of evil and injustice in it; just as whether we like it or not we owe much of what we enjoy--even life itself--to all sorts of sources to which we perhaps would rather not owe it; including the labor, the suffering, the sacrifice, the death of other beings.

Agee, Letters, pp. 238-9.

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