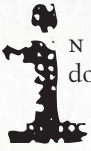


Vistas of Perfection

The self-dissatisfied life and art of James Agee

-by Adam Kirsch-



IN SEPTEMBER 1928, James Agee moved in to his freshman dorm at Harvard—room B-41 in George Smith Hall, a building that is now part of Kirkland House. Decades later, after Agee had become a kind of legend—for his tormented life and early death, no less than for his great books, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *A Death in the Family*—his roommate, Robert Saudek, remembered what it was like to catch a first glimpse of the 18-year-old Tennessean. Already, he wrote, Agee seemed somehow larger than life, more like an apparition or a force of nature than a college freshman:

The door burst open and in strode the roommate—tall, shy, strong, long arms and legs, a small head, curly dark hair, a spring in his heels as he bounded past with a wicker country suitcase in one hand and an enormous, raw pine box on his shoulder. He turned his head suddenly, squinted his eyes in an apologetic smile, said softly, “Hello, Agee’s my name,” swept through to an empty bedroom and deposited his belongings, bounded back through the gabled, maroon-and-white study, murmured “See you all later,” waved an awkward farewell and didn’t show up again for several days. Such was the magnetic field that had rushed through the room, that I didn’t even think to introduce myself. Now that I had seen him, heard him, and learned to pronounce his name, he was more of a stranger than before.

Saudek might have been even more surprised if he had known exactly where his roommate had disappeared to. According to his biographer Lawrence Bergreen, Agee “in all likelihood” spent his first days of college making a retreat at the monastery of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist—the Cambridge outpost of the Cowley Fathers, a religious order of the Anglican Church. The

for his attention. The freshman whose first act at Harvard was to visit a monastery would spend the next four years exploring all manner of worldliness: sex and friendship, ambition and poetry, and of course, in those Prohibition years, drinking. His appetite for experience—any and all kinds of experience—was bottomless. Agee’s roommate recalled that “Jim did not especially love Harvard,” but “he did appreciate its people and its atmosphere of personal freedom.”

A few of those people were professors, like Theodore Spencer, a young English department instructor who became Agee’s mentor, and I.A. Richards, the great English literary critic, whose lectures struck him with the force of a revelation. “It’s perfectly impossible for me to define anything about him or about what he taught,” Agee wrote, “but it was a matter of getting frequent and infinite vistas of perfection in beauty, strength, symmetry, greatness—and the reasons for them, in poetry and in living.... That sounds extravagant—well, his power over people was extravagant, and almost unlimited. Everyone who knew him was left in a clear, tingling daze, at the beginning of the summer.”

Yet looking back on his undergraduate education, Agee was skeptical about the value of the experience. According to Dwight Garner, a daily book critic for the *New York Times* who is at work on a new biography of Agee, he “was as conflicted about Harvard as he was about nearly everything else in his life. Clearly, he was proud to be there. Just as clearly, he loved to mock its sober and stuffy side. (In an unsigned editorial in the *Harvard Advocate*, he referred to ‘that high-falutin flub-drubbery which is Harvard.’)” Three years after graduating, he wrote that education means “everything which can open clear & sharpen [one’s] appetite and feed it, and I don’t know at all that that is best to be had at Yale or Harvard.... Thinking of it now I would give anything to have

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monastery, which still welcomes pilgrims at 980 Memorial Drive, was familiar territory to the young Agee. Even before coming to Harvard, he had spent some of his vacations from Phillips Exeter Academy with the Cowley Fathers. Their Anglo-Catholic ritual was a powerful link to his early childhood, when he attended an Episcopal school, St. Andrew’s, in rural Tennessee. Even decades later, when he could no longer believe in the religion of his youth, the rhythms of the Anglican hymnbook still echoed in the deepest stratum of his mind. In *The Morning Watch*, an autobiographical novella published in 1951, Agee conjured up his 12-year-old self:

The leaden melodies of the Lenten hymns had appealed to him as never before; lines in certain hymns seemed, during that time, to have been written especially for him. *Jesus, I my Cross have taken*, he would sing, already anticipating the lonely solace of tears concealed in public: *all to leave and follow Thee; destitute, despised, forsaken*, were words especially dear to him; *Thou from hence my All shall be....* he saw crowned God and Heaven shining and felt, in a humble kind of way, that he literally owned them.

Yet if Agee the child luxuriated in the mysteries and music of religion, by the time he got to Harvard, they had powerful rivals

had access to a good library and perhaps also to lectures, and to friends & acquaintances of all sorts and & to have let it go at that.”

Indeed, Saudek recalled, it was the private life of the College that Agee really relished. He would “sit up all night writing a poem or talking and smoking so that his fingers were stained to the color of a horse chestnut”; or he would see a favorite movie, *Coquette*, starring Helen Hayes, seven nights in a row; or he would take a girlfriend and a bottle of gin to Revere Beach on a Saturday night, singing and laughing until the police arrested him for disturbing the peace—and beat him bloody in the process. The next morning, however, Agee went as usual to sing in the First Church choir. “He felt no shame,” Saudek wrote. “He believed that the city of Revere should have wanted him to have a good time that night.... That they did not want him to—that instead of protecting him they should have pummeled him—was beyond Jim’s comprehension, and he was more confused than outraged by that brutal assault.”

It was a classic example of the dualism that would always define Agee’s life, and that animates his best writing. Saturday night and Sunday morning, recklessness and responsibility, the

world and the soul: Agee was passionately drawn to both, and never found a happy medium between them. Indeed, there can be few writers who have excelled Agee in the arts of second-guessing and self-dissatisfaction. "I realize that I have an enormously strong drive, on a universally broad front, toward self-destruction," he once told Father James Flye, a teacher at Saint Andrew's who became his lifelong friend, "and that I know little if anything about its sources or control."

If Agee had been a better governor of his life and talent, he might have written more and lived longer; but he would not have written at the particular pitch of desperate sincerity and fearful compassion that makes him so beloved. When he died, at the age of 45, in 1955, he seemed to many of his friends and admirers like a case of tragic unfulfillment—a victim



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of journalism, his not-quite-chosen profession, or of uncontrollable alcoholism, or of the sheer impossibility of being an artist in America. The critic John Leonard '60, writing about Agee, pointed out that the 1950s were "a time when postwar American culture conflated art with martyrdom and manhood with excess. Think of the poets lost to lithium, loony bins and suicide, the jazz musicians strung up and out on heroin, the abstract expressionists who slashed and burned themselves. Delmore Schwartz, Charlie Parker and Jackson Pollock pointed the way for Jack Kerouac, James Dean, Truman Capote, John Berryman, Elvis, Janis and Jimi." Agee fit all too neatly into this tragic pantheon.

Yet the poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald '33, who was at Harvard with Agee and after graduation became one of his closest friends, offered a different verdict on his achievement. "Jim's weakness and strength," Fitzgerald wrote in a long, loving memoir of Agee, "were not so easy to tell apart...When you reflect on his life...weakness and strategy, instinct and destiny seem all one thing." And it did not take long after Agee's death for him to find the literary fame that largely eluded him in life. In 1957, his novel *A Death in the Family* was published posthumously, and won the Pulitzer Prize. In the 1960s, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which had vanished without a trace when it first appeared in 1941, became enormously popular among a new generation of readers drawn to Agee's concern with spirituality and social justice. Even the movie reviews that Agee produced as a columnist for the *Nation* in the 1940s are now considered a landmark in the evolution of seri-

ous film criticism. According to film critic and historian Michael Sragow '73, Agee "established a new tone for criticism...I doubt Pauline Kael would have gone so far into a movie criticism based on personal sensibility if she hadn't had Agee's example. He forged more connections between high and low culture than any critic of his time."

In the last few years, Agee's status as an American classic has become clearer than ever. In 2005, the Library of America put out a two-volume edition of Agee's work, edited by Sragow, making him a peer of Whitman and Faulkner; last year, the Library even included Agee's poetry, the earliest written and least read part of his work, in its American Poets Project series. The University of Tennessee Press has begun to publish a scholarly edition of Agee's works, complete with manuscript variants. In 2009,

the centenary of Agee's birth, he seems as securely ensconced in the American pantheon as all but a handful of twentieth-century writers. As Garner puts it, "when you look at what he did accomplish, in so many fields, it's mind-boggling. There's no one quite like him today. Agee is seen as an unfulfilled talent, in part, because we simply can't get our arms around him. He contains multitudes."

AGEE WAS ALREADY a very ambitious writer during his years at Harvard. In the fall of his junior year he confided to Father Flye, "I'd do anything on earth to become a really great writer. That's as sincere a thing as I've ever said." But it was poetry, not fiction or journalism or criticism, that initially called to him: "nothing else holds me in the same way." Even before college, in fact, Agee had written a long poem that stands as his first substantial literary effort. "Ann Garner," a narrative in blank verse, was finished during his senior year at Exeter; Agee liked it well enough to have it published in *Hound and Horn*, the avant-garde literary magazine edited by his fellow Harvard student Lincoln Kirstein '30, and to include it in *Permit Me Voyage*, the book of poems he published in 1934.

While "Ann Garner" is far from a masterpiece—it is clearly derivative of the verse tales of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robinson Jeffers—it does show that Agee was already drawn to some of the central themes of his mature work. Ann is a farm wife, whom we first see struggling to give birth in the dead of

winter. Her baby is stillborn, but as a cosmic recompense, she is transformed into a kind of earth goddess, with the power to make crops grow:

Ann came to look upon herself as earth,
And lying strained against the earth, cried out
In joy at sweeping winds, at the warm sun,
At the black rain that plunged into the earth.
And thus, as the years passed, she lost the rhythms
That govern human life, and seemed to live
More like a tree, or like the earth itself.

This is a fairly literary conceit, but in its powerful, vague intuition of the intersection between life, death, and sex, “Ann Garner” suggests how early these themes preyed on Agee’s mind.

Indeed, his childhood had made death an intimate presence to Agee, thanks to the early trauma that in many ways shaped his whole personality. When he was six years old, growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, his father, Jay, was killed in a car accident. At a stroke, Agee—then still known by his middle name, Rufus, which he came to despise—was deprived of the parent he associated with tenderness and adventure, and left with his mother, Laura, a strict and pious Episcopalian who became only more so in her widowhood. Laura moved with James and his younger sister to the grounds of St. Andrew’s School, where the boy became a pupil and developed an intense adolescent faith. His friendship with Father Flye, which lasted until his death, began when Agee was a 10-year-old student and Flye a teacher at the school:



the priest remembered Agee as “very tender-hearted, touched to quick sympathy and pity at the sight or thought of suffering, human or other, and incapable of willingly causing it.”

Such a childhood could hardly help incubating in Agee strongly contradictory feelings about religion. On the one hand, he associated Christianity with the order and security of his school, and with his mother’s endurance in the face of tragedy. On the other, he inevitably questioned a God who could allow his father to die in such a random, pointless way; and he came to rebel against his mother’s conventional sanctimony.

It is a sign of how deep this dilemma went that it was not until

the end of his life that Agee was able to write about it directly, in the autobiographical *A Death in the Family*. Not yet completed when Agee died, the novel nonetheless feels quite finished, partly because it is based directly on experiences he had been ruminating over for decades. The novel’s emotional power comes from its precise, unflinching narration of an unbearable tragedy—the random death of a young, good, beloved man. Rufus—the dead man’s son shares Agee’s childhood name—observes his father’s corpse with the total absorption of a camera:

He could see the tiny dark point of every shaven hair of the beard.

He watched the way the flesh was chiseled in a widening trough from the root of the nose to the white edge of the lip

He watched the still more delicate dent beneath the lower lip.

It became strange, and restive, that it was possible for anyone to lie so still for so long; yet he knew that his father would never move again; yet this knowledge made his motionlessness no less strange.

Like the young Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—a work that powerfully influenced Agee—Rufus reminds us of the absolute vulnerability of childhood, and its paradoxical ruthlessness. The morning after his father’s death, for instance, Rufus wanders into the front yard so he can announce it to passing strangers and other boys—he wants to revel in the sense of distinction, the strange prestige, that tragedy brings.



Yet Rufus’s failure to obey, or even to understand, the protocols of grief makes him a much more sympathetic figure than his mother, Mary, who insists on seeing her husband’s death through the comforting, distorting lens of religion. When Rufus and his little sister eavesdrop on their mother praying—under the guidance of an odious, officious priest, Father Jackson—they are disturbed by the sound: “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 of her surrender.”

A Death in the Family is partly, then, a book about the perils of

he could not teach the younger writer the secret of balancing art and commerce so resiliently. Nor, on the other hand, did Agee have the resolve to quit, as the radical Macdonald did when he got fed up with Luce's conservative politics. Looking back, Macdonald decided that while Agee had been terribly grateful for his help getting a job on *Fortune*, "I didn't do him a favor, really."

Yet even here, Agee managed to snatch a kind of victory from the jaws of defeat. For if he hadn't gone to work at *Fortune*, he would not have been assigned to write an article on the dire condition of white Alabama sharecroppers; and if it were not for that assignment, he would not have found the subject of his strangest, most important book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee's editor paired him with Walker Evans, the photographer, and while the two men were enthusiastic about the assignment, they drove south not knowing exactly what to look for or where they would find it.

Agee's revelation came when he decided to spend three weeks actually living with the cotton-farming Burroughs family in their primitive shack, getting to know them and their neighbors, the Tingle and Fields families. Suddenly he was no longer writing a

Half Lives for the Cotton Belt—that is true of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* only in the sense that *Walden* is a book about pond ecology. In fact, Agee's book is a long meditation on the difficulty of capturing reality in language, on the incomparable uniqueness of the individual soul, on the prison of American materialism—much the same themes that inspired the transcendentalists a hundred years before. They are not themes that lend themselves to direct or shapely expression, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is at times maddening to read—Agee meanders, elaborates, doubts, catalogs, quotes, and versifies, more or less as the impulse takes him. Yet there is a rare and radical religious spirit at work in the book, as Agee, far as he has traveled from his childhood faith, still tries to convince the reader that the poor in spirit are blessed:

George Gudger [Agee's pseudonym for Floyd Burroughs] is a human being, a man, not like any other human being so much as he is like himself. I could invent incidents, appearances, additions to his character, background, surroundings, future....The result, if I was lucky, could be a work of art. But somehow a much more important, and dignified,



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magazine article about a socioeconomic problem; he was undergoing something very like a spiritual ordeal, in which he was granted a vision of the infinite value of each individual human being, even or especially the poorest. It is no wonder that when Agee returned to New York and tried to write about the experience for *Fortune*, the draft he produced was immediately rejected by his editor.

This rejection liberated Agee to turn the article into a book. It would take five years before *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* finally appeared, in August 1941—partly because of legal complications with various publishers, partly because of Agee's own compulsive rewriting of the manuscript. The delay meant that Agee missed whatever commercial opportunity he might have had—the agricultural depression had given way to the war as the major issue of the day.

But while the book Agee produced is still usually referred to, even today, as an exposé of agricultural poverty—a *How the Other*

and true fact about him than I could conceivably invent, though I were an illimitably better artist than I am, is that fact that he is exactly, down to the last inch and instant, who, what, where, when and why he is.

Here are the famous five Ws of journalism, the factual questions that a good reporter is supposed to answer. But in Agee's hands they have been transformed into a metaphysical mystery—just as the *Fortune* article has evolved into a lasting work of literature. In Agee's long and troubled journey from Tennessee to Harvard to New York to Alabama—and all the other stops along the way—it was this insistence on asking too much from the world, and from himself, that made his life so difficult and so unforgettable. ▢

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