JAMES AGEE'S NEW PROSE

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PREFACE

A cursory survey of contemporary American fiction might give one the impression that our culture fluctuates between two radical extremes. On the one hand, there exists the stuffed-shirt, pseudo-intellectual, in the grey-flannel suit, whom Sinclair Lewis introduced as Babbitt and whom William H. Whyte, Jr., modernized and nicknamed "the organization man." His counterpart, on the other hand, Kerouac's wandering, bearded vagrant of the open road and the expresso houses, emerges in the guise of the "hipster" or "beatnik." These writers, accompanied by such others as Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, and James Jones, suggest that man's choice of behavior rests somewhere between these two widely divergent extremes.[1]

Fortunately, man's relationship to his society does not fluctuate between these polar alternatives. Nor do the works of these novelists symbolize the heart of contemporary fiction. On the contrary, Fuller asserts:

> If you choose to limit your recognition and discussion of contemporary writing, ideas, and values to this carefully constricted field, you indeed can draw a strange, unreal picture of the status and condition of contemporary writing.

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[1]Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction, p. 60.

Step outdoors, boys, and see who's around.[2]

Stepping outdoors, one can find serious novelists who depict man's place in the modern world without relegating the individual to Babbitt's anonymous position in a herd of sheep or without picturing him as Kerouac's traveling Neanderthal man with a beard. Granted that the relationship between a writer and his society is a reciprocal one and that changes in society and the moral order will be reflected in the writings of the poet or novelist, nevertheless, society today is composed neither of sheep nor cave men.

Although modern writers claim that sexual taboos are breaking down, that the code of respectability and non-respectability is decaying, and even when these novelists argue that the standards of right and wrong, of good and bad, are giving way, it is still possible for a writer to discover order in this apparent chaos.

John W. Aldridge in _After the Lost Generation_ discusses the disintegration of values in the modern world. He remarks that the literature of today reflects a universe " . . . in which everything is possible because nothing is certain." It is a world in which no orderly body of belief

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[2] _Loc. cit._

exists, a world of guilt and hidden feelings--in short, a world where nothing is absolute but only relative.[3]

Regardless of these plausible assertions of Aldridge, one can find writers who represent the traditions and stability of an earlier time, writers who reaffirm the importance of man in the chain of existence. Thus, in reading the works of James Agee, one is tempted to make a comparison between his world and that of the metaphysical poet, John Donne, for both lived in a world in which new concepts were radically replacing the old, in a world of sweeping scientific and philosophic freethinking. Into such a world the need for order, permanence, and stability is imperative. Both Donne and Agee attempted to supply this order.

Therefore, in undertaking a study of James Agee, it will be necessary to demonstrate in what ways he agrees and disagrees with other twentieth-century American authors with regard to techniques of writing, literary consciousness, personal aesthetics, and moral sensitivity. Secondly, since James Agee made use of so many different forms of literary expression--the novel, short story, formal essay, informal essay, film reviews, film scenarios, and personal letters--the author of this thesis will include discussions of most

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[3]John W. Aldridge, <u>After the Lost Generation</u>, p. 233.

of the genres which Agee employed. Furthermore, the letters to Father Flye, an Episcopalian minister, teacher, and Agee's lifelong friend, since they bridge the years of Agee's creative activity, will serve to bring unity and coherence to the various chapters of the thesis.

I wish to thank Professor Green D. Wyrick, Department of English, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, for suggesting the rudimental outline of the thesis. Likewise, I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Charles E. Walton for his critical suggestions within each chapter.

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Emporia, Kansas

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN AND THE FAILURE

> You see, I should like to parallel, foolish as it sounds, what Sheakespeare did. That is, in general --to write primarily about people--giving their emotions and dramas the expression that, because of its beauty and power, will be most likely to last. But--worse than that: I'd like, in a sense, to combine what Chekhov did with what Sheakespeare did--that is, to move from the dim, rather eventless beauty of Chekhov to huge geometric plots such as Lear.
>
> --Letters of James Agee to Father Flye

Many appelations are used to describe the late James Agee--film critic, script writer, essayist, poet, novelist, intellectual, and genius. These terms, however, picture Agee the writer and not Agee the man. Applied to Agee, they are, perhaps, misleading because it is impossible for one to distinguish or differentiate Agee the man from Agee the writer. His commitment to be a writer, and a great writer, increased and intensified with each successive year of his life. Shortly before his twentieth-first birthday, Agee wrote to Father Flye that " . . . I'm from now on committed to writing with a horrible definiteness."[4] This young writer also confessed that he would " . . . do anything on earth to become a really great writer."[5] So strongly did this desire

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[4]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 46.

[5]Ibid., p. 47.

to write haunt him that Agee even spoke of it as an "unhealthy obsession."[6] Furthermore, this same, fierce desire pursued him all his life. In his last letter to Father Flye, dated only five days before the author's death, Agee formulated in detail a quite original fable which he planned to develop into a movie script.[7]

This overwhelming determination to write encompasses only one side of James Agee, yet it depicts an important phase of his character--an intensity for life. Agee's zest for living was innate, quite like his passion for writing. Although a gentle man, he lived as urgent and strong a life as anyone could wish:

> He did, all seem agreed, a courtesy to life by being. Which is not, of course, to fail in lamentation of the riot and mischance of life, squandering extravagance of self: that trajectory of excess on which he spun to early death. Still something in James Agee invited to a gentle awe.[8]

Despite his riotous living, James Agee possessed this "gentle awe." Perhaps, the photograph contained on the dustjacket of A Death in the Family reflects the splendour that was Agee, for it is a portrait of tenderness, illuminating both the

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[6]Ibid., p. 46.

[7]Ibid., p. 228.

[8]Richard Hayes, "Rhetoric of Splendor," Commonweal, LXVIII (September, 1958), p. 591.

strength and frailty of the man. Hayes has described it as follows:

> The face is more than appealing, more than beautiful: it is an announcement of that constant aspiration toward all excellence and light we sometimes call nobility.[9]

Gentle, tender, noble--these are terms that one would expect to appear in a description of a Victorian author rather than of an American author of the present century; however, despite his self-destructive tendencies, Agee possessed and exemplified the "sweetness and light" of a Matthew Arnold. It is a pity that this appreciation of Agee came about only after his death. Certainly his career was very remarkable in one respect: in terms of public recognition his limited degree of fame is almost entirely posthumous.[10] Yet, this modified degree of fame after death is even more strange. No other American writer of the past is so well remembered for what he did not write. Critics constantly reminiscence about the great work Agee would have produced had he lived only for a few years longer.[11] They contend that James Agee's future accomplishments would have made him

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[9] Loc. cit.

[10] David Dempsey, "Praise of Him Was Posthumous," The Saturday Review of Literature, XLV (August, 1962), p. 24.

[11] William Dunlea, "Agee and the Writer's Vocation," Commonweal, LXXVI (September, 1962), p. 499.

a great American novelist, but, as in the career of Thomas Wolfe, the fact is that his life was cut short.

These remarkable predictions indicate an unusual trait about Agee and about American letters, as well. Instead of examining what he did write, critics have classified him as a failure because of what he did not write. The reading public accepts this viewpoint as being correct because, very often, the novelists themselves claim to be failures. Indeed, Agee placed himself in this category of fugitives from greatness, when in March of 1940, he wrote with anguish:

> On the whole, though, I can notice that whereas I am much moved and excited by Ideas--related with general existence and with art--in my own personal living and performance itself I am a far from sanguine person. I don't know whether "cure" is possible or even advisable --I do suspect, though, that unless I learn some new holds or disciplines, I shall sooner or later break my heart or mind or both, without ever having done one thing I most wanted to and should have.[12]

In his letters, Agee has joined a growing cult of American authors who have given the world a record of their own personal history and failures to meet the common and popular expectation of what a writer should do. It seems apparent that the populace demands that, to be a success in the field of literature, a writer must first be a failure. John Updike, discussing this unusual requisite to the production

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[12]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 126.

of literature, satirically remarks that " . . . the study of literature threatens to become a kind of paleontology of failure, and criticism a supercilious psychoanalysis of authors."[13] Robert Phelps, also, objects to this morbid trend in literature which implies that writers do more than write:

> In Europe, works are all that is required of them, and they are honored accordingly. Here [United States] they must also use their bodies and personal histories and failures (above all, their failures) to make us emblems. And it is these emblems that we ultimately cherish. Is it for the truth in Walden that we still acknowledge Thoreau, or for the image of a superb Yankee crank that his own biography gives us? And didn't Poe, Melville, and Mark Twain, not to mention Hart Crane and Fitzgerald and most recently Hemingway, have to give us dramatic totems of themselves in order to make us take their work seriously? To these, and worthy of them, James Agee can now be added, with these letters as his testament, and the image of his scattered vocation as his didactic emblem.[14]

Although these letters, in a sense, constitute Agee's self-confessed failure, they also depict the warmth, breadth, and sincerity of the man. In the same respect, paradoxically, they do not represent an apology for failure. The author of A Death in the Family and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men needs not apologize to posterity.

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[13]John Updike, "No Use Talking," New Republic, CXLVII (August, 1962), p. 23.

[14]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, pp. 6-7.

At present, however, Agee has become the scapegoat of the great American myth--*i.e.*, the writer who could have been great, but somehow fell short of the mark. Agee has personified the embodiment of what Robert Phelps calls the two myths or prophecies of the twenties and thirties. The first myth was that of the Great American Novel, the novel *par excellence*, the *Ulysses* of the nation which would reveal to all what Joyce called " . . . the uncreated conscience of our race." The other, Phelps calls the myth of the Promising Young Man who would do with language what Charles Lindbergh had done with the *Spirit of St. Louis*--create an unprecedented work which would soar across the world and address humanity in a bold and fresh tongue. Indeed, Fitzgerald, Wescott, and Hemingway set the pace for a few years, with Hemingway tending, more and more, to enact this role in public. Then, with the advent of the Depression, a void filled the American scene, and the promising young artist sold his soul to Mammon, went to Hollywood, or took a job in the Luce organization. At the completion of World War II, James Agee inherited the dubious honor of being the fugitive of the myth: he had sold his birthright.[15]

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[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

Before examining Agee's individual works, one must first clarify his position in his role as a refugee from greatness. Two questions are of primary concern: Did this author sacrifice and waste his great talent? Did he sell his talents to the highest bidder? Certainly, there can be no doubt about his extravagant life, for the man so involved himself in life that he was always willing to lengthen his nights in discussing, arguing with, and listening to his fellow intellectuals. He spent too much time in talking, smoking, drinking, and acquiring what were probably the worst set of habits known in Greenwich Village. But it is important one realizes that these habits were inherent to Agee's vitality and zest for life.

There are, however, other more pertinent factors, secondary to the man, to be considered. Agee's boyhood and lifelong friend, David MacDonald, suggests several of these matters:

> The waste one senses in Agee's career had other roots as well. He was spectacularly born in the wrong time and place. He was too versatile, for one thing. In art as in industry, this is an age of specialization. There is a definite if "restricted" place for poetry; there is even a Pultizer Prize for it, and poets of far less capacity than Agee have made neat, firm little reputations. But his best poetry is written in prose and is buried in his three books.[16]

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[16] David MacDonald, "Death of a Poet," New Yorker, XXXIII (November, 1957), p. 236.

Of course, Agee spread his talents in many different mediums, several, for example, such as movie critic and script writer, which normally are not considered to be the realms of literary achievements. Possibly if he had concentrated his endeavors and activities in one direction, rather than having extended them into many, he might have written several good novels, instead of contributing several hundred anonymous articles to Nation and Fortune. Certainly, the times were equally incompatible for James Agee. As a result of the Depression and World War II, the 1930's and 1940's lacked definitive values and traditions. These unstable times contributed to the indirection and vacillation in Agee's life and writings. Consequently, according to MacDonald, Agee's full potential was never exploited and developed, but only thwarted and abused.[17]

Ignoring the historical, economic, and sociological conditions prevailing during Agee's life span, one need only scan his various writings to be totally aware of Agee, the sensitive and dedicated writer, not Agee, the failure. For example, when his volume of poetry was published in 1934 in the Yale Series of Younger Poets, readers were puzzled to find inserted near the middle of the text a rather long

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[17] Ibid., pp. 236-37.

dedicatory poem. Unlike most dedications which normally constitute a single line, Agee's address entailed eight pages of printed text, but it is the dedication itself and not its length which bears examination. In this dedication, Agee proffered the book to God and to anyone who had, in any way, influenced or directed his life--to friends, relatives, teachers, enemies, writers, and all men who had died with honor. Continuing, he enumerated people whom he particularly admired. These included the living and the dead, those he personally knew and those whom he did not know but for whom he had respect. Ultimately, he concluded with a universal, yet personal petition:

> Nevertheless have mercy upon us O great Lord God: for as there is some mercy, and the imaginations of nobleness, even in this your creature, surely, surely there is mercy in you and honor and sweet might: and a way to hear, and a way to see, and wisdom, and careful love. Have mercy upon us therefore, O deep God of the void, spare this race in this your earth still in our free choice: who will turn to you, and again fail you, and once more turn as ever we have done. And make the eyes of our hearts, and the voice of our hearts in speech, honest and lovely within the fences of our nature, and a little clear.[18]

Agee wrote this dedication when he had already begun to work for Fortune magazine, where he had immediately become engrossed with the various interests that were to engage the man during his life span. Thus, this dedication marked his

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[18]James Agee, Permit Me Voyage, p. 23.

initial efforts to organize and to clarify the conflicting ambitions which attracted him. Furthermore, it revealed the self-searching that would haunt Agee to the end of his career. The spectre of a man and a writer--these two attributes were to reappear in all of his major works.

Early in his literary career, then, and even until shortly before his death, Agee's works and letters embodied his attempt to understand himself and the complex world around him. Whether he was involved in writing a movie review, an article for Time or Life, or a study of the sharecroppers, Agee devoted himself with a complete and steadfast subservience to the task at hand. He learned to submerge himself completely in any work in which he could lose himself. This particular dedication, in Permit Me Voyage, therefore, set the foundation for Agee the writer--not Agee the novelist, or Agee the poet, or Agee the critic. For when he had completed this book of poetry, Agee had finished with the writing of poetry, per se:

> This was an embarassing text to find in the middle of a book of poetry. By no standard was it poetry, but rather a sort of declamatory prose; and in a way it seemed to be, and was, a wilful parade of eccentricity. Unfriendly readers had much fun with it. Friendly ones were likely to pass it off as a slip for which the quality of the rest of the book more than atoned. But as one looks back as it now, knowing what Agee was going to write later, it appears as a first systematic effort to straighten out the conflicts, and particularly the conflicting loyalties, of his own life . . . . The prayer for clarity of vision and speech, at the end of the "Dedication," announced much less the dedication of the poems than the dedication of the poet.

> Meanwhile his book got him known as a young poet of promise, at a moment in his life when writing poetry, as a regular activity, was already behind him.[19]

But Agee never considered himself exclusively as a poet. For him, the simple terms of poet or novelist did not exist; for him, they were synonymous. For example, when asked to identify his occupation, Agee simply put down writer.[20] This term connoted for him all forms of literary activity. Hence, one concludes that it best describes Agee the writer, Agee the man, and Agee the "failure":

> He was fully aware of how many different kinds of writing could give him satisfaction, and of how little he wanted to give himself to one, excluding the others. If he had wanted to pour his prose--and his almost embarassing, indiscreet honesty--into, first, a novel about Harvard, then a novel about working for the Luce magazines, perhaps after that a novel about share-croppers, and finally a novel about his family, he might have died at forty-five a well-known man and a "loss to American letters." But the truth is that with all the different possibilities open, he did not want to choose one and put the rest aside.[21]

Consequently, as a result of Agee's varied interests, it would relatively simple for one to categorize him as the fugitive from greatness, the great loss to American letters, the man who sold his birthright and escaped to Hollywood; but this explanation, however, convenient, minimizes the

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[19] W. M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, p. 214.

[20] Ibid., p. 230.

[21] Loc. cit.

importance not only of his Pultizer Prize winning novel, A Death in the Family, but also totally ignores the merit of his work in the motion picture, an art form which possessed for Agee a great deal of potentiality.

Secondly, since for Agee the term writer included all art forms, it obviously included the movie script and the film review, as well. This preceding statement becomes ostensible when one examines the meticulous care which Agee devoted to this entertainment medium. Agee's attachment to and involvment with the cinema occupied a large part of his life, and his letters to Father Flye reflect the fidelity of his affection for this form. When he accepted the position of film critic for the Nation, Agee joined a prominent and reputable group whose standards and tastes were comparable to his. He wrote the movie column for the Nation when Diana Trilling was criticizing fiction, Joseph Wood Krutch was handling drama, and Randall Jarrell was discussing current poetry--an impressive array of talent in this magazine's final hour.[22]

Ordinarily the person, who proposes to analyze two volumes of a writer's work pertaining to the cinema, might justifiably question the validity of undertaking such a study. With the great deluge of films being mass-produced in

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[22]Ibid., p. 223.

the studios of Hollywood, one might see little, if any, value in reading the criticism pertaining to this "wasteland." Thus, it is all the more strange that W. H. Auden should speak of Agee's film reviews as displaying a quality far surpassing the literary genre in which Agee dealt:

> Astonishing excellence . . . is the exception, and James Agee's film column seems to this reader, and to many others he has spoken with, just that . . . . In my opinion, his column is the most remarkable regular event in American journalism today. What he says is of such profound interest, expressed with such extraordinary wit and felicity, and so transcends its ostensible--to me, rather unimportant subject, that his articles belong in that very select class--the music critiques of Berlioz and Shaw are the only other members I know--of newspaper paper work which has permanent literary value. One foresees the sad day, indeed, when Agee on films will be the subject of a Ph.D. thesis.[23]

Consequently, to relegate the first volume of Agee on Film to a synopsis of the latest motion pictures or to a listing of what is playing at the neighborhood theater would be an absolute negation of Agee the writer. This unimportant subject assumes prominence, despite one's personal opinion of contemporary films, when examined in the light of Agee's literary aesthetics and artistic consciousness. In his columns for Time and the Nation, Agee elevated the position of this genre and caused it to excel its subject matter. In discussing the duty or obligation of the film critic, Agee

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[23]Letter from W. H. Auden to the editors of the Nation, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, October 16, 1944.

declared that the writer " . . . would be involved in the analysis of an industry, a form of government, and the temper of a civilization, as in the analysis of a film."[24] As the anthropologist investigates artifacts to understand the nature and mores of a long-vanished society, Agee scrupulously probed one medium in his world, and, in so doing, judged "the temper of a civilization." By ignoring the trivial position of the film critic as a man of letters, Agee employed this "wasted" talent as a literary vehicle for his criteria on art; as propaganda for his social, moral, and political beliefs; and as a recognition and appreciation of genius.

For example, Agee in his review for the Nation, August 3, 1946, explored Sir Laurence Olivier's contribution to the cinema. Summarizing Olivier's production of Henry V, Agee wrote:

> It is tantalizing to be able to mention so few of the dozens of large and hundreds of small excellences which Mr. Olivier and his associates have developed to sustain Shakespeare's poem . . . . I would like to suggest that it be watched for all that it does in playing a hundred kinds of charming adventurousness against the incalculably responsive sounding-boards of tradition: for that is still, and always will be, a process essential in most, though not all, of the best kinds of art, and I have never before seen so much done with it in a moving picture. I am not a Tory, a monarchist, a Catholic, a medievalist, an Englishman, or, despite all the good that it engenders, a lover of war: but the beauty and power of this traditional exercise was such that,

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[24]James Agee, Agee on Film, I, p. 23.

watching it, I wished I was, thought I was, and was proud of it. I was persuaded, and in part still am, that every time and place has since been in decline, save one, in which one Englishman used language better than anyone has before or since, or ever shall; and that nearly the best that our time can say for itself is that some of us are still capable of paying homage to the fact.[25]

Similarly, in an article on the film director, John Huston, Agee judged and evaluated a motion picture as he would have analyzed any other work of art:

Most movies are made in the evident assumption that the audience is passive and wants to remain passive; every effort is made to do all the work--the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling. Huston is one of the few movie artists who, without thinking twice about it, honors his audience. His pictures are not acts of seduction or of benign enslavement but of liberation, and they require of anyone who enjoys them, the responsibilities of liberty. They continually open the eye and require it to work vigorously; and through the eye they awaken curiosity and intelligence. That, by any virile standard, is essential to good entertainment. It is unquestionably essential to good art.[26]

Although he could find good in almost any film, Agee refused to let chauvinists disguise their work as art:

<u>The Roosevelt Story</u> is interesting to see, chiefly because it includes a good many revealing portraits of the late President, and because in most other respects it is so archetypically awful. It claims to be non-political, which is as absurd as if one put out a biography of Babe Ruth, taking care to avoid the hot subject of baseball. Its commentary approaches the low, to date, in pseudo-common-mannishness (and that is a pleonasm if every I perpetrated one). You can't

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[25] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 212.

[26] <u>Ibid</u>., pp. 329-30.

help realizing as you watch it, still more as you listen to it, that a terrifying number of Americans, most of them in all innocence of the fact, are much more ripe for benevolent dictatorship--and every dictatorship is seen as benevolent by those who support it--than for the most elementary realization of the meanings, hopes, and liabilities of democracy. It is doubtless an exceedingly well-meant film, but that doesn't exactly reduce its power to sadden and disturb.[27]

Or Agee could detect the current waste of genius:

This was the year during which Sergei Eisenstein once more got it in the eye. Part Two of Ivan the Terrible will never be released: Part Three will never even be made; Eisenstein was once more called a bourgeois and a formalist, and other words almost as dirty. Civilization has come a long way since the days when in Vienna, the High Altar of western music, Mozart and Schubert could die so young, largely for want of mere patronage. Today we appreciate our men of genius. In Russia we make corpses of them, living or genuine; here we drown them in cream.[28]

But whatever Agee reviewed, from Shakespeare to Chaplin, from The Birth of a Nation to Lassie Come Home, his reader sensed in Agee's criteria for judgment that "art is art" in any medium:

Throughout this book, in which the best criticism by the late Agee has been collected, there runs the assumption that the film is an art as well as a business --without, fortunately, any of the coterie cuteness about "art cinema." This assumption is apparent in the casual, unselfconscious way he used the word "poem" to describe a film in which realism is lifted beyond itself into the aesthetic, in his use of the arts--music most often--

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[27] Ibid., p. 275.

[28] Ibid., p. 238.

in comparing effects, not means, and his persistent discussion of superior films in terms of content and form, avoiding the ordinary preoccupation with content alone.[29]

Agee's volume of film reviews reveals the central images of a man who devoted his entire being to " . . . the disposal of a major contemporary art and passing on to us, through a literary cardiograph, the effect on him of that art."[30] The film reviews thus " . . . provide us with a picture of horrors and aspirations of an age, and of the torment and vision of an explorer who dares to leave the copynest of acceptances."[31]

To take an interest and delight in each and every endeavor, whether it be an article on machine-made rugs[32] or a classic study of the silent movie era,[33] attests not only to Agee's character but also to his belief in the various

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[29]Gerald Weales, "The Critic in Love," Reporter, XIX (December 25, 1958), p. 38.

[30]Stanley Kauffman, "A Life in Reviews," New Republic, CXXXVII (December 1, 1958), p. 18.

[31]Loc. cit.

[32]"Sheep and Shuttleworths," Fortune, VII (January, 1933), pp. 42-48. Although written anonymously, Agee refers to it in a letter to Father Flye, dated October 25, 1932; see p. 62, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye.

[33]James Agee, "Comedy's Greatest Era," Life, XXVII (September 3, 1949), pp. 70-82. This article also appears in Agee on Film, I, pp. 1-19.

modes of creative writing. And since Agee's search for and admiration of creative genius was not confined to writers but was extended to include scientists, movie actors, and directors, one comprehends Agee's theory that one must not judge a work of art according to the traditional forms and standards of literary expression. Particularly does this assumption possess validity when applied to the writings of James Agee. As Robert Phelps argues:

> . . . I have even wondered why, when we look for masterpieces, we keep thinking in terms of novels and poems, when it may turn out that our truest, our subtlest uses of the word have gone underground and borrowed other, less official forms. Certainly this much seems to me to be true: nothing that Agee wrote in conventional forms--his verse, his novella The Morning Watch, his novel A Death in the Family--expresses his temperament any better, or more memorably than what he managed to do with his film column in the Nation, or a maverick commentary like Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, or such letters as those to be found in the present book.[34]

Judging Agee's writings solely in terms of the official or traditional genre, then, perhaps one can think that Agee is somewhat of a failure. However, when examining the "less official forms" and when studying Agee's deviations within the framework of the traditional genre, not only does one achieve a better perspective of Agee's temperament, but he also is better able to evaluate Agee the "failure."

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[34]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 2.

Certainly, James Agee's entire life and most of his writings have deviated from the usual standards or norm. In his writings, Agee, definitely, partook of the "less official forms." Even his early book of poetry, Permit Me Voyage,[35] although employing a traditional literary genre, indicated a new direction in versification. Archibald MacLeish, in composing the "Foreword" for the volume, noted that this work displayed the earnest effort of a young poet struggling under the labor of an initial apprenticeship, and concluded that his verse announced a movement which might be capable of enduring.[36] For these reasons, MacLeish found Agee's poetry of great interest:

> . . . If a man succeeds in producing work which has a new direction, he will twist the road for all who come after him. Wherein that new direction will be felt is unpredictable and hopeless to define. A new technique may open to poetry a whole world from which it has been previously excluded or a new tone may profoundly alter the relation of the poet to any world. The important fact is that only successful work will show the way. It is not enough to assert in verse a vigorous belief in the beauty of existence. What is necessary in either case is to make the thing happen in the poem as it has never happened before . . . . It is for this reason that I find Agee's first book of more interest

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[35]Although many of Agee's poems have been published individually in magazines, this one constitutes his only collected volume; it was published when Agee was only twenty-five.

[36]James Agee, Permit Me Voyage, p. 7.

than any first book of poems I have seen for a long time.[37]

Even with this traditional form, Agee ventured into a new realm and found a new technique.[38]

A few years later, Agee voyaged even further into a new realm by employing a "less official form"--this time, the documentary, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men--to produce a book which was not only an attack upon the passivity of most documentary assignments but also a work which " . . . took on the deep personal suffering of Faulkner's novels."[39] The same pronouncement would hold true for Agee's film reviews. Agee molded this "less official form" to suit his own literary aesthetics, and in so doing, he fashioned an art out of this journalistic enterprise.

Ultimately, Agee visualized the movie script as a kind of literary form, possessing possibilities of sight and sound which are not inherent to other forms. While the ordinary movie script is made up of dialogue with a few stage directions, Agee's scripts represent much more. In his scripts

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[37] Ibid., p. 6.

[38] This new realm and new technique will be discussed in Chapter III, "Agee's Use of Myth."

[39] Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 495.

the most minute details are set down.[40] Thus, in reading Agee's scenarios,[41] one is almost reading a novel. Certainly, the scripts reflect the novelist's use of detail.

Again, it is not unusual to find that Agee's letters to Father Flye are a kind of literary form. Nowhere does one obtain a more intimate glimpse of Agee the man and "the failure" than in this epistolary form. Comparable to Agee's other writings in the "less official forms," not only do they afford one an opportunity for a personal insight into the man, but they also provide a sampling of a special literary talent. As Phelps notes:

> Most writers leave letters, but only those of a fairly small number can be read, as Agee's can, by people not necessarily interested in the writer's other works. It seems to require a special gift in addition to the usual literary ones--the gift of being able to give oneself freely, or to cast one's bread on the waters. Some very eminent literary masters have lacked it. Keats had it, and in his own way, so did Henry James. But think of Joyce's letters--trivial and wooden; or Rilke's, or Gide's, so studied; or even Yeats', interesting but very cold. In even the most youthful of these letters of Agee, there is the warmth

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[40] Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, p. 219. Chapter II treats of Agee's use of detail with the film script.

[41] Volume II of Agee on Film contains five film scripts that Agee wrote: (1) Noa Noa, a scenario based on the life of Paul Gaugin; (2) The African Queen, based on C. S. Forester's novel by the same name; (3) The Night of the Hunter, based on David Grubb's novel; (4) The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky; and (5) The Blue Hotel, based on Stephen Crane's short stories by the same name.

> and rhythm of a living man, his tone, his pulse, the color of his soul, and probably the greatest grafification in reading them will come simply from making his acquaintance.[42]

Finally, in the novels themselves, Agee would go underground and explore the possibilities of this literary genre. Agee divorced his work from the traditional narrative style of the novel by using ". . . no plot, no suspense, no development, and thus no novel."[43] With this style he added a new dimension and stature and breadth to this literary form.[44]

Violations of the accepted forms and practices of the various literary media are a trademark of Agee's work, but in no way should they be allowed to infringe upon or deprive him of his position in the field of American literature. To innovate does not automatically disqualify one as an artist. If, for example, one chooses to read Gulliver's Travels as the account of an imaginary voyage around the world, this decision does not destroy Swift's vein of satire and irony. Or if one examines Let Us Now Praise Famous Men as an economic or sociological study of the South during the

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[42]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, pp. 1-2.

[43]David MacDonald, op. cit., p. 236.

[44]Agee's variation on the traditional species of the novel will be discussed in Chapter III.

Depression, this view does not disturb the poetry, the drama, or the serene beauty of existence that the documentary bestows. One wonders what difference it makes what "form" Agee chose--only the art matters. Thus, to accept at face value the myth of James Agee, the self-confessed failure, the man who somehow did not live up to expectations, is to ignore Agee the man. It is to destroy a concept of art that is not relegated to the conventional forms of writing. It is to eradicate his personal aesthetics and literary consciousness that found worth and beauty where others saw only waste and triviality. More important, not only does this distorted view detract from Agee's gifts to American prose, it also violates Blake's dictum that "everything that is, is holy."

One, then, can merely speculate upon what James Agee might have written had he lived his Biblical span. However, Agee's real potential as a writer is only misconstrued when the emphasis is placed upon what <u>he did not write</u>. If a worthwhile study of Agee is to be made, one must look to what <u>he did write</u>.

CHAPTER II

RHETORIC OF SPLENDOR

> . . . I want to write symphonies. That is, characters introduced quietly (as are themes in a symphony, say) will recur in new lights, with new verbal orchestration, will work into counterpoint and get a sort of monstrous grinding beauty . . . . I've thought of inventing a sort of amphibious style--prose that would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression . . . . What I want to do is, to devise a poetic diction that will cover the whole range of events as perfectly and evenly as skin covers every organ, vital as well as trivial, of the human body.
> --Letters of James Agee to Father Flye

Before examining Agee's unique and dynamic style of composition, it would be expedient to trace the growth and development of the style of a man whose power with words can make one gasp for breath. It is this style which posthumously won for Agee a Pultizer Prize in 1958, and it is this rhetoric which has helped to foster the growing Agee cult.[45]

Not only did James Agee ignore the traditional species or forms of literature, he also created a style of writing unique in American prose because it is one that has few masters. Early in his literary career Agee adopted this method of rhetoric that he would later polish and refine. For example, in the middle of his first book of poetry, Agee

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[45]Richard Oulahan, "James Agee," Life, LV (November 1, 1963), p. 69.

composed his Dedication in "a sort of declamatory prose."[46] This special prose, Agee modified for use in his novels. The end result might be called, for lack of better terminology, "poetic prose." It is a prose that, when the occasion demanded, would run into poetry. And it is this unusual style of Agee, its origin and form, which will be examined in this chapter.

In uncovering the sources of Agee's "poetic prose," one must refer to the author's educational background and to his Letters. Having been reared as an Episcopalian and having attended St. Andrew's, a boarding school for boys operated by the Episcopalians near Sewanee, Tennessee, Agee developed a prose with Biblical overtones. The closing passage of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men reflects a mind that had spawned on the King James Version:

> Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.
> The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.
> *
> There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praise might be reported.
> And some there be which have no memorial; who perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.
> But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

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[46] W. M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, p. 214.

> With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are with the covenant.
> Their seed standeth fast, and their children for their sakes. Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.
> Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for evermore.[47]

Although this tone colors much of Agee's prose, his Letters reveal, to a greater extent, the influence of other sources of allegiance that helped to shape his prose style. In a letter written while he was a student at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, Agee acknowledged the profundity of ideas that Whitman had given him. The Good Gray Poet, sounding his " . . . barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world," had captured Agee's mind and heart. Agee admired the universality of Whitman's poetry. It was this totality of Whitman, "I am large, I contain multitudes,"[48] that brought to a climax all the thoughts and feelings which had been disturbing Agee.

> I've been reading Leaves of Grass since I came back. You know, since last winter or so I've been feeling something--a sort of universal--oh, I don't know, feeling the beauty of everything, not excluding slop-jars and foetuses--and a feeling of love for everything--and now I've run into Walt Whitman--and it seems as if I'd dived into a sort of infinitude of beautiful

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[47]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 445.

[48]Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, p. 68.

stuff--all the better (for me) because it was just what has been knocking at me unaware.[49]

But it was not only Whitman's "infinitude of beautiful stuff" that would fascinate the young Agee, it was also Whitman's melody. In Agee's three prose selections it would be the chanting technique of Whitman's poetry with its bardic song and hypnotizing rhythm which Agee embraced and converted to suit his own needs. Particularly, throughout the long descriptive passages of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee would, in a Whitmanesque manner, intone his hymn to the Southern tenant families whom he loved so well:

> That is the general pattern, its motions within itself lithe-unfolded, slow, gradual, grand, tremendously and quietly weighted, as a heroic dance: and the bodies in this dance, and the spirits, undergoing their slow, miraculous, and dreadful changes: such a thing indeed should be constructed of just these persons: the great, somber, blood-droned, bean-sprout helmed fetus unfurling within Woods' wife; the infants of three families, staggering happily, their hats held full of freshly picked cotton; the Ricketts children like delirious fawns and panthers; and secret Pearl with her wicked skin; Louise, lifting herself to rest her back, the heavy sack trailing, her eyes on you; Junior, jealous and lazy, malingering, his fingers sore; . . . I see these among others on the clay in the grave mutations of a dance whose business is the genius of a moving camera, and which it is not my hope ever to record: yet here, perhaps, if not of these archaic circulations of the rude clay altar, yet of their shapes of work, I can make a few crude sketches . . . .[50]

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[49]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 34.

[50]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, pp. 323-24.

This abandonment of the documentary form to chant the lengthy descriptive view of these people recalls the flexibility of Whitman's verse. Whitman and Agee's poetry resounds with the endless variety of all existence, which they both automatically record.

Like Whitman's, and perhaps not unlike Henry Miller's and James Joyce's, Agee's prose is accurate and poetic in relation to detail. The substance of his prose, like Whitman's, is focused upon the concrete world with its myriad of minute but infinitesimal particles.[51] All the sensuous world overflows the pages of Agee's world:

> People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival

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[51] Whitman's concentration upon trivia and the minute is explained by several critics: (1) Gay W. Allen comments " . . . but in passage after passage Whitman reveals his conviction that in the eternal scheme of creation, each part, regardless of how seemingly trivial, is equally important and equally immortal," Gay W. Allen, Walt Whitman As Man, Poet, and Legend, p. 36; Allen further notes " . . . by enumerating substantives or concrete details, Whitman created a montage of images, a vast composite picture," Gay W. Allen, Walt Whitman, p. 47; (2) James E. Miller, Jr., also, asserts that Whitman's universe overflows with detail. Miller observes that " . . . this environment for Whitman's muse seems entirely appropriate. The irreverence of surrounding the dignified Old World muse with drainpipes, artificial fertilizers, and kitchenware is the irreverence of a self-assured, democratic, supremely individualistic young poet. And the effect is achieved through the blending of the mystical with the natural, the elevated with the lowly, the spiritual with the physical. James E. Miller, Jr. (ed.), Walt Whitman, p. 143.

> body, talking casually, the taste hovering them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lover and horsemen, squarred with clowns in hueless amber. A street car raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faint; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints forgone: forgotten.[52]

This peculiar awareness of detail manifests itself in Agee's film scenarios as well. The treatment of visual detail in these film scripts, either for descriptive or narrative purposes, make the scenarios read like novels. In the script for The African Queen, Agee used this gift of visual narration of detail, the cameraman's eye, to create an unforgettable scene of movie film. It is the dinner scene, the meeting of the pious missionary and his sister with the gin-soaked captain of the antiquated African Queen. The contrast in appearance is startling enough, the captain being quite filthy and badly in need of a shave and bath; but the incongruity of the small group reaches its climax in the captain's gastric disturbances:

> All of a sudden, out of the silence, there is a sound like a mandolin string being plucked. At first the sound is unidentifiable, though instantly all three

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[52]James Agee, A Death in the Family, pp. 6-7.

> glance sharply up, each at the other two, then away; in the next instant they recognize what it is and each glances sharply, incredulously, at the other two--and then again, quickly away; then Brother and Rose glance with full recognition at Allnutt, at the instant that he knows the belly-growl is his. At the moment of recognition, he glances down at his middle with a look of embarrassed reproach. He glances up quickly and slyly--hopeful they've missed it--to find the eyes of both still fixed on him. The instant their eyes meet they bounce apart like billiard balls, and fix on the first neutral object they happen to hit. Then Allnutt looks at them again: neither will look at him.[53]

The apparent incompatability, the two different worlds in which the devout missionaries live as opposed to that of the worldly Allnutt, is thrown into sharp relief by the scene. By means of this visual narration, Agee set the stage for the entire sequence of events which centers around the attraction of opposite in moments of crisis.

This concentration upon detail, like that of Whitman's, is very highly organized. Fastidious in the selection and arrangement of the smallest item, Agee handled these visual scenes with the strictest artistic control. This unobtrusive, yet strict control, is best exemplified in the ferryboat scene from A Death in the Family:

> The wagon grew larger and larger, and now the dark, deeply lined faces of the man and woman became distinct: the sad, deeply lined faces of the profound country which seemed ancient even in early maturity and which always gave Jay a sense of peace. The woman sat high

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[53]James Agee, Agee on Film, II, p. 157.

> above the mule; the flare of her deep bonnet had the shape of the flare of the wagon's canopy. The man stood beside his wagon, one clayed boot cocked on the clayed hub.[54]

The reader first picks up the wagon coming into clear focus; then, one sees a fleeting image of the woman and man; and his eyes come to rest on the woman. Her bonnet resembles the wagon's canopy, and then the scene shifts to the man's clayed boot on the clayed hub. The woman's identification with the wagon balances beautifully with the clayed boot and clayed hub.

The ability to give significance and meaning to the most insignificant gesture, movement, or object is the gift of both Whitman and Agee. Although both men can hypnotize the reader with detail, yet both are capable of brilliant flashes of unexpected imagery. Here is Whitman's "mad naked summer night":

> Press close bare-bosom'd night--press close magnetic nourishing night!
> Night of south winds--night of the large few stars!
> Still nodding night--mad naked summer night.
>
> Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
> Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
> Earth of departed sunset--earth of the mountains misty-topt!
> Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
> Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!

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[54] James Agee, A Death in the Family, p. 47.

Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and
clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth--rich apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.[55]

And here is Agee's world of Knoxville on a sultry summer night:

Waking in darkness, he saw the window. Curtains, a tall, cloven wave, towered almost to the floor. Transparent, manifold, scalloped along their inward edges like the valves of a sea creature, they moved delectably on the air of the open window.

Where they were touched by the carbon light of the street lamp, they were as white as sugar. The extravagant foliage which had been wrought into them by machinery showed even more sharply white where the light touched, and elsewhere was black in the limp cloth.

* *

Where the light touched the leaves they seemed to burn, a bitter green. Elsewhere they were darkest gray and darker. Beneath each of these thousands of closely assembled leaves dwelt either no natural light or richest darkness. Without touching each other these leaves were stirred as, silently, the whole tree moved in its sleep.

* *

He heard the summer night.

All the air vibrated like a fading bell with the latest exhaused screaming of locusts. Couplings clashed and conjoined; a switch engine breated heavily. An auto engine bore beyond the edge of audibility the furious expletives of its incompetence. Hooves broached, along the hollow street, the lackadaisical rhythms of the weariest of clog dancers, and endless in circles, narrow iron tires grinced continuously after. Along the sidewalks, with incisive heels and leathery shuffle, young men and women advanced, retreated.

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[55]Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," p. 39.

> A rocking chair betrayed reiterant strain, as of a defective lung; like a single note from a stupendous jew's harp, the chain of a porch swing twanged.[56]

It is this microscopic view of the physical universe, this visualization of Whitman's blade of grass, a grain of sand, the egg of the wren, or Agee's gentle night with all the nuances of sound, that envelopes his world and touches it with meaning. Whereas Whitman would ask, "What is a blade of grass," Agee would sing of the joy of water gushing from the nozzle of a hose:

> The nozzles were variously set but usually so there was a long sweet stream of spray, the nozzle wet in the hand, the water trickling the right forearm and the peeled-back cuff, and the water whishing out a long loose and low-curved cone, and so gentle a sound. First an insane noise of violence in the nozzle, then the still irregular sound of adjustment, then the smoothing into steadiness and a pitch as accurately tuned to the size and style of stream as any violin. So many qualities of sound out of one hose: so many choral differences out of those several hoses that were in earshot. . . . Chiefly, though, the hoses were set much alike, in a compromise between distance and tenderness of spray, (and quite surely a sense of art behind this compromise, and a quiet deep joy, too real to recognize itself), and the sounds therefore were pitched much alike; pointed by the snorting start of a new hose; decorated by some man playful with the nozzle; left empty, like God by the sparrow's fall, when any single one of them desists: and all, though near alike, of various pitch; and in this unison.[57]

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[56] James Agee, A Death in the Family, pp. 80-81.

[57] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

By the use of this abundant and, at times, exorbitant language, Agee developed his poetic-prose style that is larger-than-life, almost Gargantuan, grandiose and titanic in its exuberance. Like that of Thomas Wolfe's, it is Whitmanesque in style; and it is a prose which has very few masters.

The vivacity of this new style runs throughout Agee's prose. The style acclaims the existence of the poet as well as the existence of the novelist. This dual style, the personification of the poet-novelist, the combination of the poet's eye for beauty and the novelist's intimacy for detail, assumes lyrical form in the Agee's "Prologue" to A Death in the Family.

> Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.
> Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes.
> Content, silver, like the peeps of light, each cricket makes his comment over and over in the drowned grass.
> A cold toad thumpily flounders.
> Within the edges of damp shadows of side yards are hovering children nearly sick with joy of fear, who watch the unguarding of a telephone pole.
> Around white carbon corner lamps bugs of all sizes are lifted, elliptic, solar systems. Big hard-shells bruise themselves, assailant: he is fallen on his back, legs squiggling.
> Parents on porches: rock and rock: From damp strings morning glories: hang their ancient faces.
> The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.[58]

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[58] Ibid., p. 7.

The hypnotic rhythms, the eye for the minute and the specific, the abundant rhetoric, and the lyric song--these talents Agee adopted from Whitman.

Another technique that Agee found in Whitman's poetry and incorporated into his own prose style was the use of musical devices. Describing his own style or method of composition, Agee declared:

> . . . It's got to be narrative poetry, but a sort that so far as I know has never been tried . . . . I've thought of inventing a sort of amphibious style--prose that would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression.[59]

By devising a type of "prose that would run into poetry," a poetic-prose, Agee discovered an appropriate literary device, similar to Whitman's use of the aria to deviate and then return to the main theme, for the delivering of his soliloquies. These soliloquies, which Agee felt demanded poetic expression, enabled him to break away from the factual and stifling nature of the documentary or to circumvent the restrictive form of the narrative novel. In the documentary, for example, the soliloquy supplied Agee with the occasion to "praise his famous men." This passage is all one colon:

> 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

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[59]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, pp. 47-48.

> all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small not matter, which surround and whom his senses take: in as great and perfect and exact particularity as we can name them:
>
> This would be our business, to show them each thus transfixed as between the stars' trillions of javelins and of each the transfixions: but it is beyond my human power to do. The most I can do--the most I can hope to do--is to make a number of physical entities as plain and vivid as possible, and to make a few guesses, a few conjectures; and to leave to you much of the burden of realizing in each of them what I have wanted to make clear of them as a whole: how each is itself; and how each is a shapener.[60]

In this chapter entitled "Colon," Agee, after discussing the general makeup of a tenant farm in the South, broke away from the technical matter at hand in order to soliloquize on man and his universe. This is an example of Agee's "symphonies." Here, his characters "recur in new lights." This is his musical device of counterpoint, a melody added to a given melody as accompaniment. Agee added these soliloquies "with new verbal orchestration" so that his tenant farmers appear in a new light. The result is, as Agee wanted, "a sort of monstrous grinding beauty."

In much the same manner throughout <u>A Death in the Family</u>, Agee wove these added melodies, his counterpoint, into the novel. But in this later work he perfected his soliloquies: here, is Agee's "amphibious style" where

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[60]James Agee, <u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u>., p. 110.

" . . . prose would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression." This Agee considered a type of writing which so far as he knew had "never been tried." In avoiding the traditional narrative style of the novel, Agee gave the novel a new dimension, stature, and breadth.

Since Agee died before A Death in the Family had gone to press, it is not entirely clear wherein exactly he intended to place these poetic melodies. Located as they are outside the span of the narrative itself, these soliloquies were spaced by the editors at the beginning of the novel and at the end of the first two of the three major divisions of the work. Regardless of the exact location which Agee may himself have chosen for them, these soliloquies, lyrical or melodious in style, are a trademark of Agee's prose. Agee apparently considered them his to be his brand of poetic diction that would " . . . cover the whole range of events as perfectly and evenly as skin covers every organ, vital as well as trivial, of the human body."[61] By adding them to his narrative, Agee achieved his goal: "I want to write symphonies."[62]

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[61] James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 48.

[62] Ibid., p. 47.

To develop a prose that possessed what he called "monstrous grinding beauty,"[63] Agee borrowed part of his technique from Whitman. Some of his prose, however, in tone is more like Melville than Whitman. Indeed, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men resembles Moby Dick in form:

> It is a miscellaneous book, as hard to classify as that earlier failure Moby Dick, which it resembles, being written in a "big" style and drawing poetry from journalistic description.[64]

Within the framework of this "big" style, Agee wrote passages which in tone reveal Melvillean fury:

> Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or as authority in one form or another. 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 sympton that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas.[65]

In thought, this passage is Emerson's "Self-Reliance," but its anguish and cutting edge are Melvillean. Another similarity between Moby Dick and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is the grand style in which they are written. Epic in structure and language, they chart the self-consciousness of different periods in America's history. At times, this self-awareness

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[63] Loc. cit.

[64] David MacDonald, op. cit., p. 239.

[65] James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 15.

is callous and shallow; at other times, it records the spirit which makes for an explosive age; but at all times, it investigates American life.

Apart from a strong dose of Whitman and a touch of Melville in the documentary and the film reviews, Agee's rhetoric is colored by one solitary shadow. It is the elusive influence of the Irish novelist, James Joyce. In his Letters, Agee mentioned the indefinable impact which Joyce had brought to bear upon him:

> . . . I've been . . . reading some slowly in A Portrait of the Artist, which makes me ashamed ever to have thought I'd read it before, and exceedingly suspicious on the whole question of when or how soon to read that: unless there is certain to be re-reading; and suspicious even then; and suspicious for that matter of my illusion that I am reading it now. I would suspect a chemical rule on reading as in "influence," "imitation," and "plagiarism"; that in reading or being influenced "successfully" one does as much work as the authors did originally.[66]

This subtle acceptance of Joyce's writings found expression in Agee's novels and the documentary. In style, Agee's works bear several strong similarities to Joyce's novels. Both fashioned a rhetoric quite distinct from that of other writers, yet analogous in function. Joyce and Agee discovered the possibilities and potentialities in a prose that would merge with verse when the occasion demanded. Richard

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[66]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 117.

Ellmann, a biographer of Joyce, clearly states Joyce's concept of a poetic prose:

> In prose he thought he might achieve more subtlety than in meter. Accordingly he began in 1900, and continued until 1903, to write a series of what, because he was following no one, he declined to call prose poems as others would have done.[67]

Joyce later used these prose poems to achieve what Agee wanted to do: to write symphonies. Furthermore, as Agee noted in his Letters that he wanted to write "symphonies," critics have also recognized that Joyce's novels are symphonic in form and style:

> He [Joyce] composed a novel as great poets compose their poems. Under his hand all the resources of word, rhythm, and tone conspired to create intricate beauty. His novels are more like poems or symphonies or statues than like ordinary novels. Maybe they are not novels at all but works of their own kind like Tristram Shandy or Gargantua, which we call novels for want of a word for them. We must approach Joyce's greater works as we would a poem or a symphony.[68]

With both writers it was their power with words which give them breadth. Naturally, each had absorbed Shakespeare, who was their lord of the language. Each, in turn, delighted in cataloging words; each delighted in abundance. In the appendix to Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee concluded his unusual study of the sharecroppers with a discussion of the

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[67]Richard Ellmann, James Joyce, p. 87.

[68]William Y. Tindall, James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the Modern World, p. 95.

generic use of words, a discussion which is then followed by an extremely long catalogue of words indigenous to American culture. Agee, here, examined the dialetic use of words:

> Other anglosaxon [sic] monosyllables are god, love, loyalty, honor, beauty, duty, integrity, art, artist, religion, truth, science, poetry, culture, fascism, communism, dialectical-materialism, fellow-traveler, anarchist, philosophical-anarchist, marx, freud, semantic, france, hitler, duce, committee, friend, enemy, state, totalitarian state, mental state, statement, education, teacher, maestro, woman, man, Woman, Man, humanity, kidnap, vigilante, sex fiend, perversion, normal, genius, guarantee, peaceful-picketing, collective bargaining, Negro, negro, Jew, jew, dinge, jig, boog, colored, jigaboo, nigger, darky, spade, eph, shine, smoke, hebe, kike, sheeny, eskimo, jewish, jow, joosh, antisemitic, swing, cat, alligator . . . .[69]

Separate from the documentary, this outpouring of words is reminiscent of a device of Joyce, who " . . . made grotesque catalogues of words."[70] It is obvious that Joyce and Agee were devoted students of their language.

A closer bond between the two styles of the two men is found in their use of the lyric prose--passages that soar above the narrative, and even though separate from the narrative, remain a vital part of the novel. The following passages, the first by Joyce and the second by Agee, treat of the mystic joy of night and the birth of dawn:

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[69] James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 456.

[70] William Y. Tindall, James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the Modern World, p. 95.

Towards dawn he awoke. O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy wet. Over his limbs in sleep pale cool waves of light has passed. He lay still, as if his soul lay amid cool waters, conscious of faint sweet music. His mind was waking slowly to a tremulous morning knowledge, a morning inspiration. A spirit filled him, pure as the purest water, sweet, as dew, moving as music. But how faintly it was inbreathed, how passionlessly, as if the seraphim themselves were breathing upon him! His soul was waking slowly, fearing to awake wholly. It was that windless hour of dawn when madness wakes and strange plants open to the light and the moth flies forth silently.[71]

And somewhat as in blind night, on a mild sea, a sailor may be made aware of an iceberg, fanged and mortal, bearing invisibly near, by the unwarned charm of its breath, nothingness now revealed itself; that permanent night upon which the stars in their expiring generations are less than the glinting of gnats, and nebulae, more trivial than winter breath; that darkness in which eternity lies bent and pale, a dead snake in a jar, and infinity is the sparkling of a wren blown out to sea; that inconceivable chasm of invulnerable silence in which cataclysms of galaxies rave mute as amber.[72]

These lyric melodies give birth and substance to all that Joyce and Agee held dear. In style and content, they display the wonder and exultation of the poet, yet both passages are segments from novels. They are, then, the work of the poet using the medium of the novel. Every nook and cranny of the city of Dublin--the novelist's eye for detail--viewed through the eyes of the artist, Stephen Dedalus, have a counterpart

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[71] James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p. 483.

[72] James Agee, A Death in the Family, p. 84.

in Agee's prolific world of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and A Death in the Family. Whereas Joyce saw the sewers, the docks, and the sordid life in the streets of Dublin, Agee saw the life of the tenant farmer: the odor of kitchen soap, of a rotted seed drawn from beneath the teeth, of beeswax on hot iron, the taste of a mountain summer night, the stiffening of snow in the woolen glove, and always the children, barefooted and robed in a garment made from a gunny sack, living in the shacks which the farmers must call home.[73]

Whitman and Joyce, therefore, have been the dominant contributors to Agee's poetic-prose style. But, of course, the finished product, the assimilation and digestion of their styles and thoughts, belongs uniquely to Agee. The result is a prose of a higher order in the American novel. It is a prose that gives a new dimension to American prose--"a rhetoric of splendor:"

> With the maturity of the Morning Watch and A Death in the Family he arrived at something like a rhetoric of splendor, weaving all that is courtly, choice and honorable in human expression into an elaborate artifact of verbal image, a ceremonial invocation through which man's experience in the world is not only known but constantly reborn.[74]

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[73]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 227.

[74]Richard Hayes, op. cit., p. 592.

With this new prose--this "rhetoric of splendor"--Agee possessed a medium flexible enough to meet and suit the temperament of the novelist and the poet. By amalgamating, in this manner, the techniques of the poet and the novelist, Agee has contributed a new prose style to American letters, in a language that is eloquent, passionate, and modern:

> Though a poet in his resonance and quality, Agee found, in the looser prose evocation, an ideal form for his sensibility. In his homage to images of pastoral simplicity, he invoked a rhetoric heavy with baroque sinuosity, courtly in its posture and eloquence. It is a language with a moral as well as an esthetic intention; against an archetypal modern consciousness, fragmentary, complacent, desiccated with rationality, Agee's language sets fiercely a passionate unity.[75]

Agee, thus, has created a language which, though it fits the modern temperament, echoes all that is sacred in the history and development of Western civilization:

> It is the singularity of A Death in the Family to give such blasted heaths their own shape and particularity; in Agee's commitment to the exact, the continuous quality of experience, the poetic and scientific impulse to accuracy . . . . Indeed, Agee's tender fidelity to the actual--to the precise sounds of a cracking automobile engine on a summer night; to the precise way a man will settle his shirttails--is a function of his love, rising from his conviction of each human destiny as unique but profoundly anonymous, solitary as a thumbprint yet drowned in time as those generations of men which fall in Homer, like leaves.[76]

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[75] Ibid., p. 591.

[76] Ibid., pp. 591-92.

In addition to reverberating the respected truths of the great Western, Judeo-Christian view of man, Agee has produced a rhetoric which is equally modern. In an age of sterile prose, Agee's language is passionate, eloquent, and dynamic--truly a "rhetoric of splendor."

CHAPTER III

AGEE'S USE OF MYTH

> The use of myth by such inventors as Joyce, Mann, Kafka, is obviously connected with religion, though not with the renewed interest, since they anticipate it by a generation, in any save a prescient way. The connection of most literary theorists and, for that matter, of most current eager-beavers among myth-writers and readers, is that of belated fleas to a dog. That, however, is unimportant; for myth seems the best available bridge, toward literary and aesthetic and several other deeper benefits of religion, for the sensitive science-minded agnostic.
> --James Agee, "Religion and the Intellectuals"

Before entering upon an examination of Agee's use of myth, one should examine the liberties that he took in employing the genre of the novel and the documentary. For Agee did not simply avoid the narrative stringency of the traditional novel, nor did he confine himself to the subject matter at hand in the documentary; rather, he broke from the pattern of movement through which the novel moves, the stream of time, and freed himself from the factual restrictions of the documentary. When Agee abolished the time sequence of events in his prose, he established a style in which the " . . . movement is circular, ruminative, unhurried."[77]

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[77]MacDonald, op. cit., p. 234.

To understand the direction which Agee's prose evocations take, one must initially review the current trends in the novel, for Agee was conscious of the writers who would shape the modern novel. Having been an avid reader of Joyce[78] and having had personal contact with T. S. Eliot,[79] Agee was fully cognizant of the use of myth within the framework of the novel. In a discussion of "Religion and the Intellectuals," Agee confirmed his view that " . . . myth seems the best available bridge"[80] for the artist and writer. To a certain extent, this is one prominent direction in which the modern novel has advanced, pointing towards a new order and form. It is one, as Eliot notes, which is no longer chained to the traditional narrative species of the novel:

> Instead of the narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, towards . . . order and form.[81]

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[78]On three separate occasions in the Letters, Agee refers to a profound study of Joyce's works, pp. 55, 97, 117. In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee pays tribute to Joyce's genius, pp. 14-15. Even in his film reviews, Agee quite often mentions Joyce.

[79]In a letter dated, March 4, 1953, Agee comments upon his correspondence with Eliot.

[80]James Agee, "Religion and the Intellectuals," Partisan Review Series, No. 3, p. 14.

[81]T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," Dial, LXXV (November, 1923), p. 483.

No longer is myth looked upon as an antiquated belief. The notion that myth is synonymous with fable, thereby being historically or scientifically untrue, is now no longer accepted. Jung, Freud, Frazer, Vico, and other anthropologists have given their own theories about myth; hence, myth today has a deeper significance.[82] Modern scholars now theorize that myth is not a relic, devoid of any meaning; it is not simply an old wives' tale which tradition and legend handed on from one century to another. Instead, myth is now recognized to be a faculty existing in all of man's experience through the ages. What is termed the "mythical method" is a way of presenting these experiences in symbolic form--in symbolic form because this is the way to universalize these immediate responses of every man's existence.[83]

For the contemporary artist and writer, myth holds a subtle and sometimes complex connotation. Myth, being an attempt to give meaning and order to a changing and, oftentimes, confused world, is also a means of understanding oneself and of representing reality. By means of the mythical method, the writer creates a framework within which he can organize human experience into a meaningful pattern. Thus,

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[82]Tindall, op. cit., p. 99.

[83]Elizabeth Drew, T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry, p. 3.

the myth-maker fashions a "universe" in which his characters, his themes, and his images achieve an universal importance, otherwise impossible to realize in the contemporary world. When this goal becomes reality, the writer has, thus, established a mutual frame of reference between himself and his readers; hence, the readers are enabled to fathom intelligently the truth of human experience depicted within the operation of the myth.[84]

Working within the mythic framework, the writer need not follow the narrative form of the novel or the factual content of the documentary. In invoking traditional mythic material, as Joyce did in Ulysses, the writers see in the traditional myth something permanent which is repeated in the modern individual's actions:

> Such a mythic framework thereby lifts the action out of the stream of time and gives it a simultaneous--and therefore permanent--character. The historical fact occurs only once; the mythic fact is.[85]

But the modern novelist very often chooses to create his own mythic framework within which to write. His reason for doing this is, very often, not so much a question of choice as of necessity. In a world of the Positivist and

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[84]Ignatius M. Melito, "The Literary Myth-Makers," The English Journal, LIII (March, 1964), p. 165.

[85]Loc. cit.

the Materialist, a world that separates fact and values, a world wherein science is believed to be omnipotent--in such a universe, the writer must express his own private, mythic experience. As Rovit notes, the writer must create his own mythic framework:

> The novelist, like the poet, has been thrown back on the capacity of his individual imagination to create a metaphor . . . which will sustain itself reflectively without the prop of a conventional social myth.[86]

While Faulkner created his own mythical kingdom of Yoknapatawpha County, his own microcosm of the South, and Hemingway embraced the so-called Christian myth--and in this sense is nearer Joyce's traditional or historical myth--Agee, like Faulkner, produced his own original framework in the mythical kingdom of the child in the Morning Watch and A Death in the Family, and that of the outsider or outcast in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

Before entering Agee's mythical kingdoms, one must first consider two premises which are in need of verification. If Agee adopted his "rhetoric of splendor" principally from two sources, namely Whitman and Joyce, to some degree he might also have contrived his own concept of myth from these two men. Thus, one wonders how Whitman and Joyce

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[86] Earl H. Rovit, "The Ambiguous Modern Novel," The Yale Review, IL (Spring, 1960), p. 422.

employed myth; and secondly, asks if Agee's use of myth is similar in its technique in any respect?

In an introduction to the poetry of Whitman, Miller states that the serious poet will immerse himself in his time, as Homer did in Greek "mythology" and Shakespeare did in "feudalism." For the nineteenth century American poet, Walt Whitman, reality consisted of science and democracy: science, the god of the nineteenth century; and democracy, the core of truth in Whitman's America.[87]

Science (Whitman's prophetic voice would say in "Song of the Broad-Axe" and in his "preface" of 1872) is the foundation of modern America:

> . . . With Science, the Old Theology of the East, long in its dotage, begins evidently to die and disappear. But (to my mind) Science--and may be such will prove its principal service--as evidently prepares the way for One indescribably grander--Time's young but perfect offspring--the New Theology--heir of the West--Lusty and loving, and wondrous beautiful.[88]

Whitman's democracy would contain his archetype personality of the New World: individual and en masse. Within his myth of democracy, Whitman's mythic hero would travel down the open road of life. This democracy would help to build Whitman's "Nation of the Body and the Soul:"

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[87] Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, p. xxxviii.

[88] Ibid., p. 431.

> Our America today I consider in many respects as but indeed a vast seething mass of materials, ampler, better (worse also,) than previously known--eligible to be used to carry toward its crowning stage, and build for good the great Ideal Nationality of the future, the National of the Body and the Soul.[89]

Like Whitman, Agee immersed himself in the times with his poetic and scientific insistence upon precision and accuracy of detail. For the documentary writer, the sharecroppers of the 1930's provided the focal point of his times. One only had to look to these tenant farmers to see the frustration and drama in the land:

> Here was America--the cars on the unending white ribbon of road; the workers in the mills; the faces of farmers' wives and their children in the roadside camp, a thousand miles from nowhere; the tenant farmer's wife with her child sitting on the steps of the old plantation mansion, where the columns were gray and crumbling with age. Here was the child in the grimy bed, the Okies crossing the desert in their jalopy, the pallor of August in the Dust Bowl, the Baptist service in the old Negro church. Here was the greatest creative irony the reportorial mind of the thirties could establish--a picture of Negro farmers wandering on the road, eating their bread under a billboard poster furnished by the National Association of Manufacturers--"America Enjoys the Highest Standard of Living in the World."[90]

With his entry into the lives of these rejected and impoverished people, Agee found a common ground between the poet and the reader in order for the latter to gain entrance into the poet's world--into his original mythic framework.

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[89] Ibid., p. 430.

[90] Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 497.

Following the Whitman tradition, Agee took the unpoetical lives of these people and made them poetic. By celebrating and identifying himself with these tenant farmers, he fashioned a system whereby the reader could enter into the poet's vision and into reality itself:

> But somehow I have lost hold of the reality of all this, I scarcely can understand how; a loss of the reality of simple actions upon the specific surface of the earth. This country, these roads, these odors and noises, the action of walking the dark in the mud, the approach, just what a slow succession of certain trees past your walking can implant in you, can mean to you, the house as it stands there dark in darkness, the indecisiveness and the bellowing dog, the conversations of questioning, defense, assurance, acceptance, the subtle yet strong distinctions of attitude, the walking between the walls of wood and the sitting and eating, the tastes of the several foods, the weights of our bodies in our chairs, . . . these are just a few . . . which are a soft, plain-featured, and noble music, each part in the experience of it and in the memory so cleanly and so simply defined in its own terms, striking so many chords and relationships at once, which I can but have blurred in the telling at all.[91]

With his quiet tender-mindedness, Agee found the symbolic world of the myth-makers--a world devoid of time and space, and yet a cosmos that had the timeless quality of the simple beauty of commonplace things. The simple beauty of eggs fried in the grease of pork, the muted voices at night, the sleeping of children, the muddy and worn-out boots

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[91] James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 414.

beside the bed--all these subjects are part of what Agee called, in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, the "Introit."[92] They are the psalms at the opening of the celebration of Agee's Mass. The entire structure of Agee's third section of the documentary is built upon the Christian Mass. This part of the documentary begins with the opening words of the celebrant of the Mass: "I will go unto the altar of God:/ Even unto the God of my joy and gladness."[93] Agee then proceeds to divide the successive segments into the several parts of the ceremony of the Mass: the gradual,[94] the introit,[95] the second introit.[96] The culmination of the book is announced with the recitation of the Lord's prayer.[97]

This direct glorification and celebration of the physical world of the sharecroppers to form a kingdom wherein the commentator and the reader share alike in the communion of their world constitutes Agee's own mythic framework. By directly making an analogy between Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and the sacrifice of the Mass, Agee has invoked a form of

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[92] Ibid., p. 370.

[93] Ibid., p. 360.

[94] Loc. cit.

[95] Ibid., p. 393.

[96] Ibid., p. 407.

[97] Ibid., p. 439.

the Christian myth. In celebrating and in sharing in the lives of these tenant farmers, he partook--like the celebrant of the Mass--of the ritual that unites the congregation with the priest:

> And so in this quiet introit, and in all the time we have stayed in this house, and in all we have sought, and in each detail of it, there is so keen, sad, and precious a nostalgia as I can scarcely otherwise know; a knowledge of brief truancy into the sources of my life, whereto I have no rightful access, having paid no price beyond love and sorrow.[98]

Together, Agee and the tenant farmers (and Agee's readers) share in the Mystical Body, the community of all people both living and dead. Thus, Agee's use of the framework of Christian sacrifice in the Mass elevates the very nature of his documentary. In form, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a documentary, and also something more. When the celebrant of the Mass consecrates the bread, in form and substance, it is bread; but it is also something more--the body of Christ. Agee's parallel with this ceremonial ritual invests the documentary with mythic elements.

In a certain sense, these tenant farmers became Agee's mythic heroes. They are not Whitman's prototype of the archetypal personality, however much they did grow out of a Whitmanesque appreciation of that great American phenomenon,

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[98] Ibid., p. 415.

the common man. On the contrary, Agee's mythic heroes would come closer to Hemingway's Christian myth and to his portrayal of the Christ figure. For Agee celebrated and invested his tenant farmers with the meekness and gentleness of a Santiago and with the humility of those whom Christ mentioned in His Sermon on the Mount. In fact, Agee went so far as to make Christ's Sermon on the Mount an integral part of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

Finally, it is Whitman's mythic view of the universe that verifies Agee's lineal descent from the Good Gray Poet. Agee, like Whitman, might be described as a poet of cosmic consciousness:

> By cosmic consciousness is meant the capacity of the individual consciousness to experience a sense of total unity with all Nature, or the universe, or some degree of that experience.[99]

This mythic view of the universe is neither chaotic nor paradoxical; on the contrary, it is orderly and progressive. It is a cosmos wherein each particle and each person possess infinite worth in the scheme of things:

> The universe is not chaotic but schematic, the scheme best defined by Whitman's term, Mystic Evolution--a coherent, rhythmical, and purposeful unfolding of time; impelling Mystic Evolution onward is the mystic life-force, primal, elemental, inexplicable, inexorable; man's and the world's body constitutes a

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[99]James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote, Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry, p. 30.

> mystical materialism, the paradoxical infusion of the material by the spiritual; man's participation in Mystic Evolution in the ritualistic acts of life places supreme importance on the mystic here and now, the focal point of all time past, the origin of all time future; . . . death, like birth, is a ritualistic act, neither to be courted nor abhorred, but accepted when inevitable as a contributory and mystically meaningful event.[100]

In depicting such a universe, Whitman's famous catalogues or " . . . lists have been more frequently condemned than praised,"[101] and in Agee's early poetry " . . . reviewers deprecated the preciousness (one remarked that the title itself is a circumlocution for 'gangway.')"[102] In the case of both writers, the critics objected to their wild abandonment, the listing of objects in a seemingly endless gushing. But beneath this flood of particles there appears a complex order. These enumerations or listings of substantives, although they appear chaotic and, perhaps, irrelevant--very often a senseless naming of objects with no logical order--possess an emotional logic beneath the surface. The items are related one to the other through a subtle, emotional

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[100] Ibid., p. 44.

[101] Ibid., p. 49.

[102] Frohock, op. cit., p. 212.

syntax which is, no doubt, confusing to a reader because of their complexity.[103]

Not only is there this symmetry in the cataloguing of objects between the works of Whitman and Agee, there is also a similarity of themes and symbols. The poets of the cosmic consciousness focus their symbols around basic rhythms and myths. In selecting themes which treat of the integrity of man and nature, cosmic poets employ symbols and images from processes rooted in archetypal experiences of birth, death, and renewal; from the elements of fire, water, earth and air; from day and night. These cosmic poets will, likewise, refer to mythic legends: Adam and the ark; Dionysus and Persephone; wine, the tree, the phoenix, the fish; the zodiac, and all weathers.[104]

Agee's A Death in the Family centers around the archetypal rhythm of death: it focuses upon the death of a husband and father, and " . . . this is about all that 'happens.'"[105] The novel revolves around " . . . the terrible illumination implicit in the fact of death."[106]

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[103]Miller, Shapiro, and Slote, op. cit., p. 49.

[104]Ibid., p. 231.

[105]MacDonald, op. cit., p. 225.

[106]Leslie A. Fiedler, "Encounter with Death," New Republic, CXXXVII (December, 1957), p. 25.

In the Morning Watch Agee engaged another symbol, the phoenix, used by the cosmic poets. Herein, the symbols of the snake and the locust shell stand as rebirth images for Richard, the young adolescent, in his "morning watch." Similarly, Good Friday, the time element in the novel, reinforces the image of death and rebirth. Richard, the protagonist of the story, finds himself caught between observing the solemnity demanded of the boys on Good Friday and the attraction of a day in the woods and a swim in the pond, their first of the spring. Spring, Good Friday, the snake, and the locust shell--these are the symbols Agee used for the phoenix and the rebirth image. It is on this image that the novel ends:

> It occurred to him, with a lancing quailing of horror and pity, that the snake was still alive, and would stay alive in their bellies, however chewed, and mangled, and diffused by acids, until the end of the day; but now, remembering the head, he told himself that the snake was so far gone by now that he must be a way beyond really feeling anything, ever any more (the phrase jumped at him): (Who has said that? His Mother. "Daddy was terrible hurt so God has taken him up to Heaven to be with Him and he won't come back to us ever any more.") "Ever any more," he heard his quiet voice repeat within him; and within the next moment he ceased to think of the snake with much pain. When the boys turned from the sty he followed them towards the Main Building carrying, step by step with less difficulty, the diminishing weight in his soul and body, his right hand hanging with a feeling of subtle enlargement at high thigh, his left hand sustaining, in exquisite protectiveness, the bodiless shell which rested against his heart.[107]

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[107]James Agee, Morning Watch, p. 120.

The same archetypal rhythms of birth, death, and renewal, the elements of water and earth, the alternation of day and night, and the myths of Adam, Dionysus, and all weathers appear collectively in Agee's poetry. In "Ann Garner," the longest poem in Permit Me Voyage, Agee incorporated these elements into a mythic poem. After the death of her child at birth, Ann "lay upon the bed which leaned against the firelight/Like a dark stone set to mark a death."[108] Ann lived this life-in-death until:

> One night Ann woke, and, ear pressed to the darkness,
> Knew that the world was called again to life.
> . . . . . .
> Ann stood a moment, hands upraised,
> Then sank upon the grave, her body tense
> Against the earth. And there she lay until
> Dawn's white sun-bladed wings soared up the east.
> . . . . . .
> Through the spreading dawn
> Leaped a wild, silver, wind, that circled round her,
> Then gathered all its power and blew against
> And through her, whipping her joy-maddened body
> Into the riot and revel of its dance.[109]

From then on as the years progressed, people turned to Ann on all matters regarding their planting. "For with the years, Ann seemed to grow more learned/In all the mysteries of darkened moon, of hidden wells."[110] And on the "night when

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[108] James Agee, "Ann Garner," Permit Me Voyage, p. 28.

[109] Loc. cit.

[110] Ibid., p. 30.

Spring and Winter overlapped,"[111] Ann returned from her winter's hermitage in the cabin. With the advent of spring, Ann became, like a female Dionysus, the goddess of fertility:

> And with life
> Of her own life thus given each year's rebirth,
> 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.
> The only intercourse with humankind
> She held, was at a childbirth or a funeral,
> Or in the spring, when all the people turned
> Toward her to guide them in their planting. Then
> With strange serenity she moved among them,
> Handling the simple farming implements
> Like sacred symbols of fertility.[112]

As long as Ann lived, "the countryside was rich in produce--as long as Ann lived."[113] For Ann could never die " . . . save in some great catastrophe of all the universe."[114] And on such a night when all the preachers of the country had proclaimed " . . . the blasting of evil and the doom of earth,"[115] Ann died amidst a "burning sphere."[116] Her

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[111] Loc. cit.

[112] Ibid., p. 31.

[113] Ibid., p. 32.

[114] Loc. cit.

[115] Ibid., p. 33.

[116] Loc. cit.

husband, then, buried her before the neighbors could arrive and stare " . . . at that flared and joyful mouth,/Should nudge and whisper, and believe the thing/He knew could not be true."[117]

Ann Garner takes her place along with Whitman and Lawrence's Adamic heroes. Ann came, like her predecessors, from the bowels of the earth. She is related to Whitman's leaf of grass in the germinal sun of each beginning. Ann belongs to forces that exist outside man's rationalism and his logic.

"Start with the sun," wrote D. H. Lawrence at the conclusion of the Apocalypse, "and the rest will slowly, slowly happen."[118] To start with the creative self, man will then find that he has touched the earth with love and warmth. Thus, Agee, by attaching this love, warmth, and significance to every object and every individual in the universe, has involved the reader in a cosmos firmly implanted in the Whitman tradition. Agee has rooted man's existence in awareness and love; he has joined forces with the cosmic poets and their sun's creative stream. Agee has aligned himself with writers who affirm man's place in the cosmos. These writers

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[117] Ibid., p. 34.

[118] D. H. Lawrence, Apocalypse, p. 195.

in the Whitman tradition are absorbed in the pulse of creation; they are instilled in the earth from which they grow. Agee, by joining them, has asserted and has maintained the integrity of man and his universe. Like writers in the Whitman tradition, Agee has started with the sun.[119]

By means of this new approach to reality through the use of myth, Agee has added a new dimension to the novel. In an age, as Norman Podhoretz argues, when " . . . the novel has taken over from poetry as the sanctified genre,"[120] Agee has achieved an amalgamation of the two forms to give the world the poetic novel:

> When the novel contracts into poetic form, it confesses its inability to share widely in the affairs of this world. But love must also call us to things of this world. The poetic novel is a paradoxical statement: it turns that failure of communication which is the shrill theme of our time into communicable form.[121]

In addition to a blending of the two forms, the traditional narrative form of the novel has, to some degree, been dissolved and been replaced by the autobiographical novel. With the advent of the "stream of consciousness" technique, the old-fashioned fictional character, standing

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[119]Miller, Shapiro, and Slote, op. cit., p. 238.

[120]Norman Podhoretz, "The Article as Art," Harpers Magazine, LXXVIII (July, 1958), p. 78.

[121]Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, p. 6.

now approaches the viewpoint of the author, instead of the

protagonist. When this occurs--when the viewpoint of the author and the protagonist coincide--the result is that the artist relies on material from his own life. The final product is a self-portrait of the artist, usually accomplished by means of the internal monologue.[122] The "stream of consciousness" technique has not only produced novels which are self-portraits of the artist, but it has also brought about an introversion of form in the modern novel: "The introversion of form, we see, guides the novel toward the inner process of the psyche: epiphany, myth, poetry, dream."[123]

These new forms of the novel are an attempt to preserve the language from the face of a sterile, rationalistic world. In this undertaking, the new novel is simultaneously attacking the reality of modern life. Consequently, the impetus is toward a redefinition of some of the current critical categories of literature:

> What we are witnessing, therefore, is not simply a scattering of trends and unrelated fictional forms. These trends and forms find a common impulse in an attack on the accepted view of reality, an attack, in its quiet way, as radical as that which induced

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[122] Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism," Varieties of Literary Experience: Eighteen Essays in World Literature, p. 323.

[123] Hassan, op. cit., p. 103.

> older writers to manipulate time and space in outrageous fashion. The decline in realistic techniques, suggest a redefinition of the function of the novel which in the past has always tried to keep its vision centered on the highroad of life. The redefinition of function has now made some of our critical categories--symbolism and naturalism, tragedy and comedy--nearly obsolete. But it still allows for searching novels that retain the central vision of life, that treat, say, the hallowed family themes--Malamud's The Assistant, Agee's A Death in the Family. . . .[124]

It is precisely this introversion of form and this attack on the accepted view of reality that unite James Agee and an early myth-maker, James Joyce. Both novelists developed and used extensively a unique form of the new novel--the epiphany.

In order to understand Agee's utilization of epiphany--since it is fundamental to an understanding of Joyce and Agee's works--one must examine Joyce's definition of epiphany. In a lengthy passage in Stephen Hero, the protagonist Stephen discussed with his friend, Cranly, his (and Joyce's, too,) personal aesthetics of art. Stephen, as he was passing through Eccles Street one evening with his friend observed a rather trivial incident. A young lady was addressing her gentleman on the steps of one of the brown brick houses which represented for Joyce the embodiment of Irish stagnation. Listening to their fragmentary

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[124]Hassan, op. cit., p. 104.

conversation, Joyce pondered this rather inconspicuous incident:

> This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany.[125]

Continuing his aesthetics, Stephen Hero explained to Cranly what Thomas Aquinas defined as the three requisites for beauty: a wholeness, symmetry, and radiance. It was this third quality, that of radiance, which Stephen found complex:

> --Now for the third quality. For a long time I couldn't make out what Aquinas meant. He uses a figurative word (a very unusual thing for him) but I have solved it. Claritas is quidditas. After the analysis which discovers the second quality the mind makes the only possible synthesis and discovers the third quality. This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing, in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is that thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.

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[125] James Joyce, Stephen Hero, p. 216.

> . . . He glanced up at the clock of the Ballast Office and smiled: --It has not been epiphanised yet, he said.[126]

This theory, which Joyce developed in Stephen Hero and later included in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, is the key to an understanding of all of Joyce's work. These moments of epiphany--these sudden spiritual manifestations, whether they occur in trivial conversation, in an object itself, or in the mind--these unostentatious moments form the nucleus of Joyce's novels. In an Introduction to Stephen Hero, Theodore Spencer explains the significance of epiphany in Joyce's works:

> This theory seems to me central to an understanding of Joyce as artist, and we might describe his successive works as illustrations, intensifications and enlargements of it. Dubliners, we may say, is a series of epiphanies describing apparently trivial but actually crucial and revealing moments in the lives of different characters. The Portrait may be seen as a kind of epiphany--a showing forth--of Joyce himself as a young man; Ulysses, by taking one day in the life of the average man, describes that man, according to Joyce's intention, more fully than any human being had ever been described before; it is the epiphany of Leopold Bloom, just as, years earlier, the trivial conversation overheard on a misty evening in Eccles Street (where incidentally, Mr. Bloom lived) was the epiphany of those two people's lives, shown forth in a moment. And Finnegans Wake may be seen as a vast enlargement, of course unconceived by Joyce as a young man, of the same view. Here it is not any one individual that is "epiphanized"; it is all of human history, symbolized in certain types of representatives of which combine with one another as the words describing them combine

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[126] Ibid., p. 218.

> various meanings, so that H. C. Earwicker and his family, his acquaintances, the city of Dublin where he lives, his morality and religion, become symbols of an epiphanic view of human life as a whole, and the final end of the artist is achieved.[127]

This microscopic view of life which Joyce dramatized reveals the essence of the thing itself in a special moment, a moment in which time holds still. This moment, in which the artist shows the "whatness of a thing," becomes timeless. As Spencer further notes:

> And if we keep this theory in mind, as a further aspect of the statis theory of art developed throughout the present text, it helps us to understand what kind of writer Joyce is. A theory like this is not of much use to a dramatist, as Joyce seems to have realized when he first conceived it. It is a theory which implies a lyrical rather than a dramatic view of life. It emphasizes the radiance, the effulgence of the thing itself revealed in a special moment, an unmoving moment, of time. The moment, as in the macrocosmic lyric of _Finnegans Wake_, may involve all other moments, but it still remains essentially static, and though it may have all time for its subject matter it is essentially timeless.[128]

Like Eliot's "objective correlative," the epiphany is a symbol. Similar to the ecclesiastical feast of the Epiphany, on January 6, it is a showing forth of the radiance of an object. When the three wisemen at the manager saw a baby, they saw merely a baby and _yet more than a baby_--they saw the Godhead. So Joyce's epiphany shows forth the

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[127] _Ibid._, pp. 22-23.

[128] _Ibid._, p. 23.

heart, the essence of the commonest object; and to one it is radiant. Thus, the object achieves its epiphany:

> For Stephen, common things--to use Baudelaire's phrase--have "the expansion of infinite things" and all their radiance. Like Baudelaire, then, he thinks this world a storehouse of things as other things, seeing this or that as revelation. Involving the poetency of a neutral object and the sensibility of a subject, epiphany is a transaction between object and subject that owes no less to the former than to the latter. Epiphany, he concludes, is identical with the "radiance" of the aesthetic theory he is expounding to Cranly and is to expound to Lynch in A Portrait of the Artist. Plainly Stephen's epiphany or radiance, a shining out or showing forth, is what we call symbolism and his radiant object a symbol.[129]

In Agee's two novels and in his documentary, there appear the same structural devices to be found in Joyce's novels. For example, there exists the steady flow of impressions from the external world--the sounds and sights of Knoxville on a summer evening, the buzz of the locusts, the sounds of water gushing from the nozzle of a hose, an engine starting to purr, the scuffling of feet going by, the streetcar whining as it picks up speed.

In addition to the innumerable sights and sounds of Knoxville and the variegated life of the tenant farmers in the documentary, Agee's viewpoint, like that of Joyce's, approximates the voice and viewpoint of his protagonist.

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[129]William Y. Tindall, A Reader's Guide to James Joyce, p. 10.

The result is, of course, an autobiographical novel. As Levin noted, when a novelist adopts this viewpoint, he is forced to " . . . fall back upon the raw materials of his own autobiography, refining them into self-portraiture of the artist."[130] By use of the interior monologue, Joyce created his disguised biography in Stephen Hero and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and Agee did similarly in three prose selections.

Agee's documentary, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, reflects the temperament of the artist, and the viewpoint is that of the writer. Although in appearance a treatise on economics, the documentary is autobiographical. To let the reader see the truth, Agee had to tell enough about himself in order that his readers could surmise about what had been distorted in passing through the artist's eyes. Agee, of course, was concerned about "point of view." Had he been writing a novel, instead of the documentary, the problem would not have been so intense. The truth about a fictional character is what the novelists assert to be the truth, but the truth about sharecroppers was what was true. In the final analysis, the writer could only distort what was true.

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[130]Levin, op. cit., p. 323.

Therefore, while the book is a treatise on sharecroppers, it is also Agee's autobiography.[131]

Throughout the Morning Watch, Agee employed a similar "point of view." The entire novel is autobiographical--the school, the protagonist, and several other characters. As in the documentary, the bulk of the Morning Watch is an interior monologue. The characters in the novel closely resemble those persons mentioned in the "Dedication" of Permit Me Voyage. The lad called "Hog Eye" Kelsey in the novella is a youth whom Agee knew at St. Andrews. Obviously, then, Agee used fiction to investigate his own past.[132]

Agee's final work, A Death in the Family, follows the same scheme which he employed in the other two works. The setting is Knoxville, Tennessee, Agee's birthplace. The death of the father in the novel is Agee's account of the death of his own father.[133] The point of view is usually that of the child's, brought out by the device of the interior monologue. Thus, in form, Agee's novels approximate Joyce's.

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[131]W. M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America, p. 219.

[132]Ibid., p. 224.

[133]The death of Agee's father is also mentioned in the closing passage of Morning Watch; see p. 59. In A Death in the Family, the entire movement of the novel is focused upon this autobiographical fact in Agee's life.

But the most obvious affinity between Joyce and Agee's works is the use of epiphany within the framework of the myth. The other similarities--the flow of detail, the interior monologue, the point of view, the disguised biography--serve to develop the epiphany. It is this use of epiphany within a mythic framework that gives Agee's prose its "rhetoric of splendor." By naming each object and restoring to it a purity and freshness, Agee has assumed the task of the epiphanist. Here, the poet creates the world anew. If the function of epiphany is to create anew, to give a "virginal freshness,"[134] Agee would then labor with the continuous flow of external stimuli in his prose. He would also engage the structural devices of the interior monologue and the disguised biography. In its amalgamation of the viewpoint of the protagonist with that of the author's, the work, then, assumes autobiographical proportions. The artist is, then, able to confer value and significance upon the everyday, commonplace world by rearranging and transmuting it. Thus, the most insignificant object or detail achieves its epiphany. Through the eyes of Agee's protagonist, the reader attains to a closer intimacy between himself and the object. Like Joyce and the Surrealists, Agee desired to push back the

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[134]Hayes, op. cit., p. 592.

boundaries which separate the physical and the metaphysical world; he hoped to wipe away the impediments which disassociate and castigate man from his universe. This goal would be realized, not by stripping objects of their physical characteristics, but by adding to their qualities through the ability to see. A strange identification, or intercourse, took place between the one who sees and the objects themselves. Seeing was not simply a receiving process but an exchange or interchange between sense and object. The senses would be trained not only to perceive objects simply but also to enrich the objects of their perception. In this way, matter would be revitalized, created anew--the task of epiphany.[135]

Following the Surrealists, Agee tried to demonstrate by his vision " . . . to what degree of intensity modern man can be imbued with mysticism even when in apparent combat against 'ancient myths.'"[136] Though Agee rejected the traditional mythic framework that Joyce employed, he still found myth to be " . . . the best available bridge."[137]

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[135] Anna Balakian, Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute, pp. 13-14.

[136] Ibid., p. 17.

[137] James Agee, "Religion and the Intellectuals," Partisan Review Series, No. 3, 1950, p. 14.

Agee still recognized the need for it:

> Man needs his myth. But our society, unlike some of its predecessors, has no common myth. In its place are the competing myths of Marx, Rome, and free enterprise. While tractor, Virgin, and icebox, the symbols of these contenders, clamor for allegiance, many people find themselves unable to give it. For expressing their needs some of them invent private myths; and myth, a preservative against confusion, increases it. Yet in the hands of an artist a more or less private myth may express the age as none of our public myths has done.[138]

Working without what Rovit termed a "conventional social myth,"[139] Agee fused the epiphany into his own mythical kingdom. His own private mythic framework would be the child, not the prototypes found in many of the modern novels, for Agee's child in no way resembles the precocious Holden Caufield of Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, nor the barbarism of the schoolchildren in Golding's Lord of the Flies, nor even the child as victim of adult guile as Huckleberry Finn, or Jem and Scout in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird. Rather, Agee's innocent world of the child unmarred by the corrupting influence of the adult world, is a celebration of innocence, familial love, strength and solidity.

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[138]William Y. Tindall, James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the Modern World, p. 105.

[139]Rovit, loc. cit.

Certainly, Agee's A Death in the Family is a very unusual novel to be written by a serious writer, particularly by an American novelist of this century. When death occurs, it is without violence. Agee's treatment of death is obviously un-American: death is conceived of not so much as a catastrophe but as a mystery. For the survivors, death brings an illumination and solidarity to the members of the family. As for love, it is not sexual, not even romantic. Love exists between husband, wife, child, aunts, uncles, and gradparents, but it is certainly not the revolting, romantic love to be found in most of the pulp magazines on the newsstand. In this novel, love is described tenderly, not physically. Nor does Agee avoid the negative aspects of life --he is, after all, a serious writer--but what he concentrates upon, what he "celebrates," are the positive aspects of life that have all but disappeared from the contemporary American novel.[140]

Approaching an Agee novel, the reader will find it very strange, indeed, for very seldom in the field of American fiction does one find himself engrossed in a world filled entirely with "sane" people. Very rarely does a world appear filled with the positive as well as the negative aspects of

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[140]MacDonald, op. cit., p. 224.

life, but such is the case in A Death in the Family. The novel is unique among recent novels, for the author centers the narrative upon a small world of "normal" people. In their moments of anguish and crisis, Agee examines their selfishness, their delusions and awareness, and, above all, their compassion and love.[141]

This same world appears in the Morning Watch. The reader discovers the small child, solemn and yet funny, pitiable but always appealing, " . . . rushing toward and retreating from a dreaded and fascinating world."[142] It is a world filled with vague archetypes--Parents, Strength, Love, Failure. Truly, it is a realistic world. The study of the boy is neither romantic nor sentimental. Realistic in the best sense, the novel studies the credible thoughts and feelings of an adolescent. Young Richard, under the influence of intense devotion during the holy time of Good Friday, struggles to reject a boy's normal preoccupations and interests on this solemn day.[143] Within this kingdom of the child, each object, each odor, each breath of air, and even

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[141]Selden Rodman, The Insiders, p. 51.

[142]Kate Simon, "The Kneeling Boy," New Republic, CXXIV (June, 1951), p. 21.

[143]Oliver LaFarge, "A Boys Is Risen," Saturday Review of Literature, XL (October 12, 1957), p. 78.

each book represents an untouched, joyous world. It is this world that Agee celebrates.

Finally, in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Agee chose another original mythic framework for his epiphany. On this occasion, he focused upon the prototype of the outcast or outsider invading a world of which he is not a part. Here, the documentarist entered the world of the tenant farmer. But, where others saw agony and revulsion, Agee saw these and yet something more: "Agee wrote of the sharecroppers with such love and rage that it is impossible to read the book without sharing his suffering."[144] He wrote with love, because in this world of the tenant farmer, Agee found something to praise or celebrate:

> 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 things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe:
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> So that is how it can be that a stone, a plant, a star, can take on the burden of being; and how it is that a child can take on the burden of breathing; and how through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another, does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to

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[144]Alfred Kazin, Contemporaries, p. 186.

> fragments of nothing: these are matters too dreadful and fortitudes too gigantic to meditate long and not forever to worship . . . .[145]

This is Agee the mythmaker, who with a word, can transform the monotony of the lives of these tenant farmers into a new reality. Like the Surrealists, Agee created a new world and attempted " . . . to replace the God without by a God within."[146] He took this sterile and often unappetizing world and transformed it into something significant.

Thus, Agee looked at the world, at times, as if he were way out on a star somewhere in the universe and saw its symmetry and integrity; but, then, at other times, he magnified this view until one sees as if through a microscope into each minute organism of life: and in doing so, all consciousness comes into focus:

> For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.[147]

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[145]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, pp. 56-57.

[146]Balakian, op. cit., p. 41.

[147]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 11.

"Welcome, O life!,"[148] cries Stephen Dedalus at the end of Portrait, as he goes to meet the reality of experience once more. Stephen goes to seek again the "whatness of a thing."[149] Agee, likewise, goes to " . . . perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is."[150] Both writers, like Blake, " . . . fashioned . . . a complex system whereby the reader would be able to enter into this poetic vision, and through it, into reality itself."[151] Agee speaks of this poetic vision in the closing passage of the documentary:

> Our talk drained rather quickly off into silence and we lay thinking, analyzing, remembering, in the human and artist's sense praying, chiefly over the matters of the present and of that immediate past which was a part of the present; and each of these matters had in that time the extreme clearness, and edge, and honor, which I shall now try to give you; until at length we too fell asleep.[152]

In appraising Agee's moments of ritual, in evaluating his secular connotation of epiphany, one must comprehend the radiance that Agee found in day-to-day existence, for these are the moments of reality that constitute his world. In the

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[148]James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, p. 525.

[149]James Joyce, Stephen Hero, p. 218.

[150]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, p. 11.

[151]Melito, op. cit., p. 166.

[152]James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, pp. 470-71.

ritual of everyday existence, Agee celebrated his own world. From the external world, Agee resurrected a new world for the reader--one that is timeless and that lives in the faculty of the imagination. It is this world which deserves thought, analysis, remembrance, and, in the human and artist's sense, prayer.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW REALISM

I have been fashioned on a chain of flesh
Whose backward length is broken on the dust:
Frail though the dust and small as the dew's mesh
The morning mars, it holds me to a trust:
My flesh that was, long as this flesh knew life,
Strove, and was valiant, still strove, and was naught:
Now it is mine to wage their valiant strife
and failing seek still what they ever sought.
I have been given strength they never wore,
I have been given hope they never knew.
And they were brave, who can be brave no more.
And they that live are kind as they are few.
'Tis mine to touch with deathlessness their clay:
And I shall fail, and join those I betray.
--James Agee, Sonnet #4 from Permit Me Voyage

Before considering the ramifications of Agee's poetic prose in American letters, one must undertake arbitrarily to assess the limitations of this writer. Though somewhat belatedly, Agee's passionate language is today being recognized and imitated. Furthermore, the posthumous award of a Pultizer Prize attests to his growing prestige.

Despite this deserved recognition, Agee still remains, relatively speaking, a minor figure in American prose, for several reasons. First, accurately speaking, Agee devoted too much of his time and talent to drudge work unworthy of him. Agee spent his time in a variety of activities, all of which he considered to be literary, that would doom him to failure in the eyes of most critics. By extending his talents to the various roles of a film critic, script writer,

epistolarist, short story writer, author of magazine articles, novelist, and poet, Agee spread his talents too thin and wasted his gifts. Had he concentrated on one form--for example, the novel--Agee might have given to the field of American fiction several novels of considerable worth. As it stands now, there is only one--A Death in the Family.

Certainly, the times might have been incompatible for Agee; yet, the artist, in any period, must rise above the obstacles confronting him. Likewise, Agee lacked the respect for literary traditions. This extravagence and liberality, similarly, carried over into his own personal life. His erratic living habits, in spite of continual heart attacks, helped bring on his untimely death. As in the case of Thomas Wolfe, Agee's unfortunate death deprived him of his proper stature. One can only speculate, therefore, on what Agee might have done had he reached a zenith in his literary maturity.

In defense of Agee the artist, one can refute an era which demands that the writer submit to the world his personal history and his failures before recognition is bestowed. One can also only wonder about how many other promising young writers have sold their birthrights and have gone to Hollywood or have adapted their genius to news magazines. Finally, one can only speculate about the reason for a literary effort having to conform to traditional literary

genres. Therefore, in Agee's defense, one must pay tribute to this man and the writer's vocation. As Kazin, in tribute, notes:

> And to think of Jim Agee, with his bad heart, writing with such fierce truth so soon before his own death. A Death in the Family is to marvel, all over again, how literally it is himself that a writer will give to his task.[153]

These elements must surely be taken into consideration in establishing a proper perspective with which to judge Agee the writer. In addition to this knowledge, one realizes that a comprehensive study of Agee must reflect his "rhetoric of splendor," for with this combination of style and thought, Agee has achieved a refreshing view of man and the cosmos. Instead of showing the stark realism, confusion, and morbidity of contemporary life, he chose to delineate the positive aspects of life, as well. In an age in which most "realistic" novelists tend to portray the influence of evil, who are, in fact, obsessed by the idea of malignity and bored to death by virtue, Agee, strangely enough, elected to picture life in terms of filial love, family responsibility, child amazement, and death as a necessary part of life. MacDonald claims that only a novelist of considerable worth would undertake such a theme:

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[153]Kazin, op. cit., p. 187.

> Jay Follet is a good husband and father, Mary is a good wife and mother, and their goodness is expressed in concrete action, as is the evil in the boys who humiliate their son or the lack of "character" Jay's brother, Ralph, shows in a family crisis. . . . The theme is the confrontation of love, which I take to be life carried to its highest possible reach, and death, as the negation of life and yet a necessary part of it. Only a major writer could rise to such a theme.[154]

Agee's portrayal of life treats of the realization of good as well as of evil, and captures all the nuances of sights and sounds, feelings and intimate glimpses, which constitute man's daily actions and life itself. By revitalizing life and by restoring to it a "virginal freshness," Agee has contributed a new realism to American prose. MacDonald asserts that this is realism of a higher order:

> The nuances of the husband-and-wife relationship come out in a series of everyday actions: Mary peppering the eggs; Jay making up the bed. . . . The bondage and binding of marriage are both these. This is realism, but of a higher order than we have become accustomed to, since it includes those positive aspects of human relations which are so difficult to describe today without appearing sentimental. The uneasiness the Victorians felt in the presence of the base we feel in the presence of the noble. It is to Agee's credit that he didn't feel uneasy.[155]

Rejecting the Gothic distortions of Faulkner, the primitivism of Caldwell, the " . . . structural machinations of Dos Passos and the lyrical interruptions of Steinbeck."[156]

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[154]MacDonald, op. cit., p. 227.

[155]Ibid.

[156]William Van O'Connor, Forms of Modern Fiction, p. 2.

Agee reinvoked the humanist's and the mystic's love for man. In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, he expressed his love for the tenant farmers, not because they were poor or underprivileged, but because in them he saw the beauty and innocence of God's handiwork. These creatures, of course, symbolized the betrayal of the modern world with its crassness which left them in shambles and in a state of degradation. Herein was the real tragedy of industrial America. The real tragedy lay in the destruction of the human spirit; it rested with the lost tenant farmers who could only wonder, fear, and distrust the arrival of a stranger in their midst. It was for these people that James Agee sang his hymn of praise; they were his famous men.

In photographing the meaning of modern existence, Agee employed his own special brand of realism. Rejecting the Naturalistic and Deterministic schools of realism, he brought to American letters a prose with fidelity of sound and precision in detail. In further discarding the traditional species of the novel with its " . . . rigorously delimited subject matter, a formalized neatness, a conscious gentility, and a lack of emotional and intellectual exuberance . . .,"[157] Agee developed a language that blends theme and imagery. Whatever failure A Death in the Family may

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[157] Loc. cit.

possess in novel form, it is, in the fullest sense, poetry. Agee's blending of language, theme, imagery, and significance remains in one's mind in this time of undistinguished prose.[158]

This new prose and new realism creates a framework in which to arrange human experience into a meaningful pattern. Agee as myth-maker gave to his themes and images a unity and significance whereby his readers can fathom the universal truths of human experience. These universal truths were successfully presented by metaphor. Agee works in metaphor, by discovering the correlations that exist between objects, and by finding in these a unity, previously unknown. It is very remarkable how, in Agee's works, the reader becomes aware of the manner in which the poet's works delve into the polar tension of metaphors--of age and youth, of violence and peace, of strength and tenderness, death and life. In all cases, each quality is known only in relation to its opposite, an attribute which identifies the author as poet, rather than novelist. Dealing in metaphors, Agee projected into language what is most deeply felt in man's experience, and, very often spoiled, in the agonized or joyous telling.[159]

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[158]Fiedler, op. cit., p. 26.

[159]Hayes, op. cit., p. 592.

Agee rooted his novels in the universal experiences of human life, what E. M. Forster called the five main facts in human life: birth, food, sleep, love, and death.[160] Agee's preoccupation in the novels and the documentary with these facts is almost obsessive, or, at least, haunting. Particularly with death did Agee dwell. Death, to him, was an experience implanted firmly in the ecstasy of life. For him, the impact of death was not the negation of life, not a deprivation from life; rather, it was an unfolding of life's extremes. It brought to the survivors much tenderness, compassion, and illumination. It gave to them the meaning of life as well as death. It made them aware, as John Donne stated, that one should " . . . never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Agee's treatment of life's fundamental processes does not constitute his role as myth-maker, nor does it explain the existence of his "rhetoric of splendor." Since he is an original myth-maker, like Faulkner, Agee's uniqueness rests in the development of the scope and unity of his chosen framework. For example, although his image of the child might bear a resemblance to Wordsworth's child-is-father-of-the-man thesis, yet Agee's depiction is his organic own. As a

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[160] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel, p. 47.

realist, Agee does not deny suffering or death--they are a part of human experience--but, as myth-maker, Agee's poetic vision mirrors a world of the child, a cosmos that reaffirms the mystic's joy of what Leslie Fiedler termed "the child's Great Good Place."[161] Pure reality consists in awe, reverence, gentleness, astonishment, and illumination in a world of virginal freshness--the world of epiphany. Though the callousness of the adult world often intrudes and mars this cosmos, it still remains undefiled in Agee's joyous telling. Even death is somehow purified in this rare atmosphere.

In the documentary, the outcast enters the mythic world of the tenant farmers. Beneath the coarseness of their shackled lives, the reader discovers another mythic kingdom, a new realism. Though overflowing with sensual objects, it is still a planet that is not of this universe. In the intelligible center of Agee's cosmos, there exists a radiance that glosses over the tangible world of guile and hypocrisy. Herein existed a universe that Agee could praise and celebrate.

Appropriate it is, then, that Agee's "rhetoric of splendor" enhances this mythic framework. As a language that is passionate and accurate, it creates by restoring each

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[161] Fiedler, op. cit., p. 26.

object to its original purity. Both courtly and eloquent, Agee's prose renews the simple pleasures inherent in every object and being. To find simple beauty in the child's fascination with a locust shell or the smell of fried pork in the early morning light of the tenant shack and to indulge these objects with their own significance is the task of the epiphanist. With a word, Agee transformed the monotony of existence. By enriching each object of his perception, Agee wove a mysticism and a new kind of realism into modern existence. He drew the spiritual from the material; and, although the physical or the tangible might appear detestable to others, Agee found a fuller significance. In doing so, Agee brought a metaphysical concept to twentieth-century reality. By use of his metaphors, Agee extended the limits of space and time to reveal the mystic world which surpass the bonds of logical reality and the depth of many so-called realistic novelists. Thus, Agee attempted to reconcile the apparent paradox between modern man and his universe by establishing a closer bond between the "see-er" and the object seen. By trying to bridge the gap that divorces man from his universe, Agee revealed a deeper reality, one which echoes the permanent stream of ideas which helped to shape Western civilization. In asserting the miracle of existence and an awareness of the sublime, Agee challenged the diminishing image of man. In the field of American prose, Agee stood like a John

the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness, weeping over the loss of wonder and the lack of awareness of life itself. Unlike most American writers, Agee resisted this age of disbelief:

> The new gullibility of our particular time is not that of the man who believes too much, but that of the man who believes too little--the man who has lost his sense of the miracle--the man capable of believing that Creation is in some way an automatic or commonplace thing, or even that man himself, physically and psychially, can be dissected into neat packages susceptible to complete explanation.[162]

In this reappraisal of the inherent worth of man and the miracle of existence, Agee emphasized the need for a vision and belief that is founded upon the Judeo-Christian view of man. Agee's works, then, belong to the humanities. They are, indeed, a part of the ideas that continuously shape and cultivate our fundamental ideas.

With James Agee's unfortunate death, American letters lost a preserver and nurturer of man's respect for his fellow human beings and the rest of the natural order, doctrines which have shaped the history of the Western world from the time of Sophocles. Secondly, not only did the American fiction lose a man who was involved in mankind, but also a writer who would, in his own words, " . . . do anything on earth to become a really great writer."[163] Although James

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[162]Edmund Fuller, Man in Modern Fiction, p. 163.

[163]James Agee, Letters of James Agee to Father Flye, p. 47.

Agee never reached his literary peak, in his defense, Edmund Fuller commented that " . . . he [Agee] was still growing when he died."[164]

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[164]Edmund Fuller, "I'd Do Anything on Earth to Write,'" New York Times Book Review (July 22, 1962), p. 25.

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