

THE HONOURABLE OBLIVION OF JAMES AGEE

In 1936, *Fortune* magazine sent the young writer James Agee to rural Alabama “to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of ‘honest journalism’ (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money and for a reputation for crusading and unbiased which, when skillfully enough qualified, is exchangeable at any bank for money....” The sentence, which contains eight more lines of caustic self-questioning, gives a good idea of why Agee’s magazine article and subsequent book were rejected by the editors who had contracted them. Prefaced by more than sixty black-and-white photographs of chastening starkness by Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee’s study of three white sharecropping families, was published in 1941 and sold 600 copies. Reprinted in 1960, it came to be heralded as an ancestor of the New Journalism of Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe. Agee’s use of the techniques of literary modernism, and his nervous post-modern self-awareness, shook up journalistic conventions. Yet contemporary readers are likely to be struck by the book’s omissions, unabashed anger, ideological commitment and religiosity, as much as by what Blake Morrison, in his introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition, describes as “Shandyesque preambles and digressions, Joycean experiments with punctuation and stream of consciousness, Whitman-like rhapsodies on the American landscape and its people, Eliotic textual paraphernalia”.

Agee's sense of propriety can be frustrating. Pages of his lush high-flown prose, Biblical in its word-choices and extravagantly long-winded in its rhythms, are lavished on setting the scene, placing himself as an observer, and shoring up his subjects' dignity and humanity. There are a few vivid scenes: a family's sense of duty impels them to send back an eighteen-year-old daughter who has fled her husband, even though the husband has moved far away and they know she will be miserable with him; Agee eats in a small-town diner, then drives through the sun-scorched countryside to spend the night on a vermin-infested pine bed in a sharecropper's house. But the author's central concern is not to bring the families "to life"; rather, he wishes to make available to his readers a precise understanding of both the sharecroppers' circumstances and their flesh-and-blood humanity. An extensive list of *dramatis personae* appears to announce scenes of family life. But few such scenes occur. By thwarting these expectations, Agee blocks the reader's impulse to consume poverty as entertainment. There is a stern lesson here for anyone who has been titillated by reality television. Yet the material that Agee substitutes for dramatic action often makes for slow reading. In a textual complement to Walker Evans's photographs, Agee devotes entire chapters to describing, plank by plank, every room of the three houses, and listing the trousers, shoes and underwear worn by each character. The descriptions become more engaging when Agee's relentless eye moves on to the children's school records or the effect on the hands and back of picking cotton six days a week. The static quality of the descriptions means that many of the most compelling passages are found in the digressions, where Agee rages against American literary aesthetics, or Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (which he castigates for failing to protect poor families from the Depression) or explains why he is a Communist, or writes in lyrical terms about bird life or his relationship with deity.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a young man's book, full of earnestness, self-indulgence and misspent energy. Its sensibility is divided from that of the present by the grandiose diction of Agee's page-long sentences, but also by his candour, and by a strain of sarcasm that excludes irony. The great gulf of the civil rights movement separates us from the book's muted approach to questions of race. Blacks outnumbered whites five to one in the county where Agee did his research, yet the book contains only passing references to "negroes", and to the white sharecroppers' racism. After the 1960s, it would be impossible to write a portrait of poverty in rural Alabama that dealt only with whites. Agee (1909-55) did not live to see this social shift. Both Penguin Classics and the Library of America have marked the fiftieth anniversary of his death by bringing his work back into print. It is gratifying to discover that even though *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* remains the title for which Agee is remembered, his other work retains its terse intelligence and, in many cases, is less dated.

Blake Morrison's introductions to the Penguin editions are pithy and perceptive. "Oblivion," he writes, "is the reward of writers who work in different genres." It is difficult to imagine a novel as remarkable as *A Death in the Family* slipping into its present obscurity had Agee made a career of writing novels. The earlier work's self-questioning distance from the characters is abolished; the modernist techniques, notably a restrained version of stream-of-consciousness writing, are employed with great skill. Morrison mentions Proust, Joyce, Kafka and T.S. Eliot as models for this work, but the obvious model, already acknowledged as a source of "detail of gesture, landscape, costume, air, action, mystery, and incident" in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is William Faulkner. *A Death in the Family*, which was on the verge of completion at the time of Agee's death and won him a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1957, opens

with a blatantly Faulknerian evocation of suburban fathers watering their lawns on a summer evening in Knoxville, Tennessee:

These sweet pale streamings in the light lift out their pallors and their voices all together, mothers hushing their children, the hushing unnaturally prolonged, the men gentle and silent and each snail-like withdrawn into the quietude of what he singly is doing, the urination of huge children stood loosely military against an invisible wall, and gentle happy and peaceful, tasting the mean goodness of their living like the last of their suppers in their mouths; while the locusts carry on this noise of hoses on their much higher and sharper key.

In its capricious adverbs, its repetitions and multiple modifiers, suppressed commas, attentiveness to nature and pervasive aura of doom, the description transports the reader to Miss Rosa Coldfield's office at the opening of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* The evocation of fathers prepares the ground for a novel about the loss of a father. *A Death in the Family* is insistently autobiographical: like Rufus, the novel's central character, Agee was born in Knoxville to a devoutly Anglo-Catholic high-society mother and a manual labourer father of hillbilly ancestry who died in a car accident when the author was six. Yet there is never any sense that autobiographical debts are distorting the shape of this finely proportioned work of art. The novel is sliced into three parts, the first recounting the family's last night together, the second narrating the mother's response to the news of her husband's death on the highway, and the third, in which the children must be told and the dead man buried. The first two sections conclude with lyrical italicized passages that resemble the opening sequence. The rest of the narration, although it hugs the characters' internal thought processes, is concise and unflinching, dramatized by painful dialogue and wrenchingly persuasive contradictory reactions as different members of the family arrive to play their parts in comforting the widow and caring for her children. The little boy's efforts to understand that his father "can't come home ever any more"

(while maintaining his customary cruelty to his younger sister) are deeply affecting. But what makes this novel exceptional is the depiction of how the mother, Mary Follet, a young woman who has married beneath her against her family's wishes and whose marriage has been difficult, manages the clashing demands of her grief, her embattled feelings towards her husband, her religious faith and her maternal responsibilities. Spurning even a hint of sentimentality, the novel concludes in an uncomfortable snarl of family hatreds and religious hypocrisy. In its fusion of peeled sensitivity and rich lyricism, *A Death in the Family* is one of the masterpieces of mid-20th century American fiction.

Reference to a father who "won't come back to us ever any more" concludes the short novel *The Morning Watch* (1951), the one full-length work of fiction that Agee published during his lifetime. Here the words strike as a last-minute revelation that illuminates the obsessive behaviour of Richard, a pupil at a strict Catholic boarding school, who lives in a world of masochistic fantasy and occasional acts of daring through which he hopes to expurgate his sins and demonstrate his religious vocation. Dense and introverted, this work becomes more accessible when read in tandem with *A Death in the Family*. The Library of America volume of Agee's fiction also contains three short stories. The most memorable of these is a weirdly imaginative fable about a bull who escapes while being butchered in a Chicago slaughter yard and, horribly disfigured, returns to the great plains to warn other cattle of what happens to livestock who go to market. This father who returns from the dead faces scepticism from others of his kind at the news he brings from beyond the grave.

The foundation of Agee's reknown during his lifetime was his film criticism. W.H.

Auden claimed that Agee's film reviews had "permanent literary value". Agee also wrote screenplays, most notably of *The African Queen*. In addition to his film columns from *Time* and *The Nation*, the second Library of America volume includes assorted articles on film, magazine pieces and book reviews, and Agee's script of the film *The Night of the Hunter*. It opens with "Comedy's Greatest Era," which makes an impassioned case that the comic tradition of Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton never recovered from the advent of the talkies: "The only thing wrong with screen comedy today is that it takes place on a screen which talks. Because it talks, the only comedians who ever mastered the screen cannot work, for they cannot combine their comic style with talk. Because there is a screen, talking comedians are trapped into a continual exhibition of their inadequacy as screen comedians...." The columns contain some gems, an intimate portrait of John Huston among them, but are of fitful interest today; there are many short, devastating reviews of long-forgotten mediocrities. Agee's reviews are very revealing of the cultural politics of the 1940s in their mixed assessment of war-time propaganda films, their obsession with the Soviet cinema and their excoriating treatment of the cowardice that barred honest depictions of unsavoury American allies such as Franco's Spain and Batista's Cuba from the film adaptations of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* ("a defeat of Hollywood by Hollywood") and *To Have and Have Not* ("the kind of tinny romantic melodrama which millions of cinemaddicts have been waiting for ever since *Casablanca*").

Agee was a magazine feature writer during the pre-television era when magazines commanded wide influence. The Library of America includes a few of these pieces, but it is the University of Tennessee edition that provides the most complete picture of this important facet of his career. Paul Ashdown's informative introduction argues that, far from squandering his talent,

Agee expanded his range and consolidated his style through his journalism. Two long features on the Tennessee Valley Authority's efforts to develop one of America's poorest regions are obvious precursors to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee wrote with prescience of the roadside culture of filling stations, campsites and fast food that grew up with the rise of the automobile. He analyzed the social profile of cockfighting enthusiasts – “society's highest and its lowest, seldom those in between” – and savaged the vapidness of the first cruise holidays; he brought his readers a changing America with insight, bracing sarcasm and an original style. There can be few more honourable literary oblivions than that of James Agee.

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