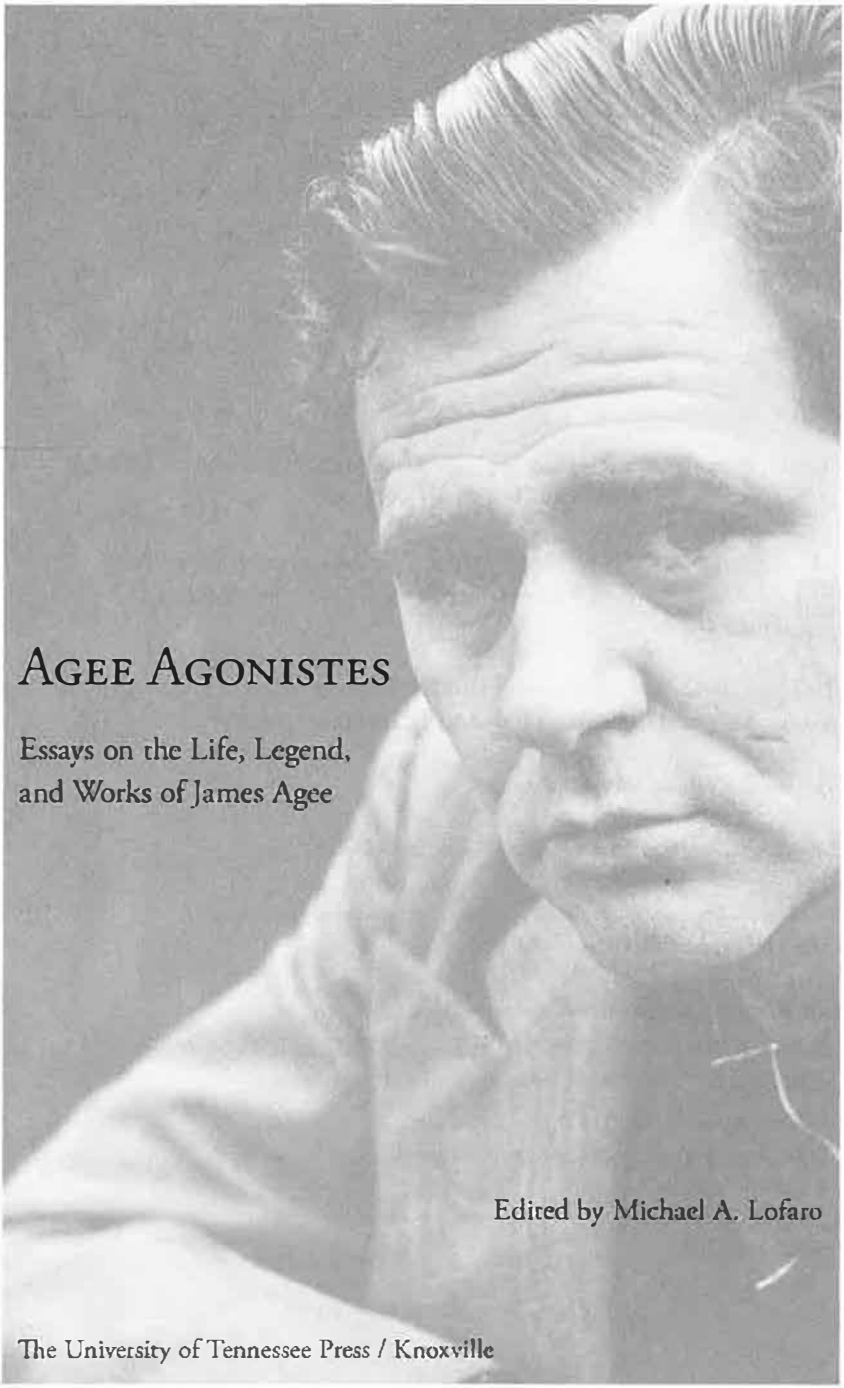

Agee Agonistes

Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee

Edited by Michael A. Lofaro

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Sociological Poetry

John H. Summers

In 1937 James Agee paused from his work on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to write out an application for a Guggenheim fellowship. He was dissatisfied with the available styles of expression and analysis and wanted, he said, to evolve "new forms," "new styles," "new terms," and "new kinds" of poetry, prose, photography, cinema, and music. His current manuscript had involved him in a minor paradox. In order to describe the given reality of the tenants' lives, he needed to create a fresh language. He needed "to tell everything possible as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing. It involves therefore as total a suspicion of 'creative' and 'artistic' as of 'reportarial' attitudes and methods, and it is likely therefore to involve the development of some more or less new forms of writing and of observation."[1]

Few in that first generation of readers and reviewers grasped the importance of Agee's effort. Seven years after the publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Dwight Macdonald surveyed the response. In an essay in *Politics* magazine, Macdonald noted that the book had sold poorly and had gone out of print. "Although it still enjoys some word of mouth reputation," he added, "it is rarely mentioned any longer in print, including the 'little magazines.' It was, in a word, as bad a publishing failure as could be imagined." Macdonald, usually a pitiless critic, said *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* compared in importance to *Moby-Dick.* He urged subscribers of *Politics* to shun the opinion of officialdom and its surrogates, and to read Agee's volume. Discounted copies were available through the magazine. Macdonald thought so much of the book, in fact, that he lent his copy to Simone de Beauvoir during her visit to the United States. De Beauvoir had been so moved, she had arranged for parts of it to be translated and published in *Les Temps Modernes,* the magazine she coedited with Jean-Paul Sartre.[2]

Macdonald's attempt to revive *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* brought rewards closer to home. This was because, in addition to giving the book to de Beauvoir, he pressed a copy into the palm of his friend and ally C. Wright Mills.

At age thirty-one Mills had behind him a lengthy record of publication in the sociology journals. He also wrote frequently for *Politics,* the *New Republic,* the *New Leader,* and *Partisan Review.* Yet Mills, like Agee, was displeased with his inherited vocabularies of expression and analysis. In *his* application for the Guggenheim fellowship, he identified himself as a sociologist but said, "I have never had occasion to take very seriously much of American sociology as such."[3]

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men crystallized his dissatisfaction with the stereotyped language of his profession. "I approached Agee's book with very definite expectations in mind," Mills reported to Macdonald. "From what you said when you gave it to me, I thought I might get some answers to a problem that has been consciously bothering me for six or seven years. How can a writer report fully the 'data' that social science enables him to turn up and at the same time include in his account the personal meanings that the subject often comes to have for him? How can the writer master the detaching techniques necessary to modern understanding in such a way as to use them to feel again the materials, and to express that feeling to the readers?" These were not technical questions, Mills cautioned; the answers implicated the writer in a whole attitude toward experience. "I think what is most important about the book is the enormity of the self-chosen task; the effort recorded here should not be judged according to its success or failure, or even degree of success; rather we should speak of the appropriateness and rarity of the objective." Like Agee, Mills wanted a new vocabulary. "We need some word with which to point, however crudely, at what is attempted here and at what I have tried to describe above. Maybe we could call it sociological poetry."[4]

Mills had been looking for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* or for something like it, since he left the University of Wisconsin in 1941 with a doctorate in sociology and a dissertation on American pragmatism. Though Mills had criticized pragmatism's social theory, he had assimilated its cultural ambitions.

In an address in 1890, "Poetry and Philosophy," John Dewey had contended that poetry and science could not do without each other. A poetry that ignored the achievements of science would spiral into mysticism, according to Dewey. It could expect to command no more allegiance "than freaks of a madman's brain." A science that ignored the strivings of poetry would conduct a traffic in desiccated abstractions. "Indeed, this present separation of science and art, this division of life into prose and poetry, is an unnatural divorce of the spirit," Dewey said. "Here, indeed, is just our problem. We must bridge this gap of poetry from science. We must heal this unnatural wound."[5]

Mills's absorption in this aspirational side of pragmatism relieved him of the need to choose between the expressive and the functional, between the aesthetic and the critical, or between the tender-minded and the tough-minded. Throughout his career he tallied examples of the elision of poetry and science for which

Dewey had called. He held up John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* as a model and praised the novels of Dashiell Hammett likewise. In his first major book, *White Collar* (1951), he tried to convey "the tang and feel" of the new middle class, much as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga had tried to convey the "tenor of life" in the middle ages. Mills told Dwight Macdonald that *White Collar* should be read as an overlapping set of "prose poems." In the early 1950s, as he wrote what would become his most famous book, *The Power Elite* (1956), he read the novels of Balzac. "There has never been anything like the creative continuity of his endeavor," he gushed. "Balzac is a man trying to understand an entire social order, and his work is a monument to what one man's mind can encompass. He has given us a sequence of exciting glimpses into the ways man and society everywhere are linked together."[6] But *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* left a permanent deposit in Mills's thoughts. Given that the prestige of Dos Passos, Hammett, Huizinga, and Balzac ran high throughout the 1950s, while Agee's book remained out of print, the abiding influence of Agee on Mills is notable. It is all the more notable that Mills decided to model his last book directly on Agee's book.

In summer 1960 Mills went to Havana to interview the leaders of the Cuban Revolution. Walker Evans had traveled to the island in the 1930s and photographed lottery vendors, stevedores, bootblacks, bare-faced storefronts, and women sleeping on park benches, the down-and-outers of Cuba in the Great Depression.[7] Agee himself had written bitterly about the island in a story for *Fortune,* "Havana Cruise," in which he called Havana "one of the whoriest cities of the Western Hemisphere," a place whose reputation for gambling aggravated the American middle class's "strongest and most sorrowful trait: their talent for self-deceit."[8]

Mills found that a great deal had changed. On his return to New York, he composed eight letters in the "voice" of the Cuban revolutionary. He titled them *Listen, Yankee.* He wrote in the choppy, colloquial cadences of rapid speech, communicating the speed and energy of the revolution. The evocative aspect of *Listen, Yankee* was at least as important as the argumentative aspect. The Cuban "voice" delivered a rude shock to the middle-class American who still believed that the island was another backward beautiful country good mostly for commercial cruises. The revolutionaries had a fistful of well-reasoned arguments to wave in the face of such ignorance, and they did not mind putting on a little swagger either. Mills had them sounding ambitious to the point of foolishness, proud to the point of arrogance, angry to the point of vengeance. The first letter pledged that "Our sisters are not going to be whores for Yankees any more."[9]

In spite of these differences in tone, Mills intended *Listen, Yankee* as Agee had intended *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men:* to be read aloud. "This is a *book* only by necessity," Agee had written. "More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality."[10] Mills depicted in the letters a society teeming with indivisible personalities

occupied in the joy of productive activity. While American intellectuals enacted the ready-made roles awaiting them in universities and policy institutes, the intellectuals in Havana made poetry of their lives. Mills brought along a camera, with which he tried to revise the portrait that Walker Evans had left of Cuba in its poorer days. He followed Che Guevara and Fidel Castro around the island, snapping scores of photographs and talking into a wire recorder, hoping to make an accurate record and to invent nothing.

Dwight Macdonald published Mills's letter on "sociological poetry" in *Politics* in spring 1948. Since Agee contributed to the magazine, it seems reasonable to surmise that he noticed it. Several weeks after it appeared, he wrote to a friend to recommend a film that chronicled the life of a farm family in France. Agee called it "agricultural poetry."[11]

Whether Agee and Mills met face-to-face, then or later, I have not been able to discover. Had their mutual friend Dwight Macdonald introduced them, their differences would have been conspicuous. Agee had an exquisite sensibility. He oscillated, meditated, and contemplated, as befitted the narrow range of his personal experience. He went from St. Andrew's to Phillips Exeter to Harvard to *Fortune* without a break. At age sixteen he traveled to England and France for a bicycle trip. Before graduating from college, he gave one summer to work on a midwestern harvest. But he never returned to Europe, and he associated mostly with American writers, photographers, and actors of similar temperament and disposition.

Mills was a man of action, speed, movement. *Listen, Yankee* was published in November 1960, barely ten weeks after the Cubans invited him to Havana. It made a spectacular splash, selling more than four hundred thousand copies. In the three years prior to his trip, Mills had written and published three books and about thirty articles; had given high-profile lectures in Great Britain, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Canada, and the Soviet Union; and had kept up a barnstorming tour in the United States that sent him from coast to coast, talking at campuses, churches, and conferences. In this same period he divorced and remarried, had a third child, build a home with his own hands, and convulsed all his friendships in bitter polemics. He won a bigger international audience than any sociologist in any nation had known. In 1968, in the aftermath of the global riots, the CIA identified him as one the three most influential intellectuals in the international New Left, even though he had been dead for six years.[12]

Mills's prose style, as muscular as his physique, rebelled against the gentility of the nineteenth-century writers as well as the lyricism of the Greenwich Village bohemians. The liability of his affirmative and affirming cadences was that he treated human weakness as an embarrassment. Mills wrote in the company of

the great profaners of the bourgeois self-image, Henry Thoreau, Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, Thorstein Veblen, H. L. Mencken, and Richard Yates.

Agee wreathed himself around narrower landscapes, but the range of sympathy in his writing took in a wider share of human complexity. The memoirs by his friends affirm William James's belief that some people possess a genius for taking an interest in the lives of other people.[13] The erotic grace of Agee's writing deserves a place in the sacred school of American writing, alongside James and Walt Whitman, Jane Addams and Robert Coles, all those who approach human existence with mystery and reverence. Agee drew the title of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* from Ecclesiasticus, whose teachings laid stress on the virtue of humble association.[14] Mills called himself a pagan. Of the three words in the slogan of the French Revolution, *liberty, equality,* and *fraternity,* he understood the first two but said the last one eluded him.

If Mills and Agee met in Manhattan for an evening of conversation, these differences would have been conspicuous. Might the two men have uncovered a common background by which to measure them? Both were reared by overbearing, pious mothers in the bosom of southern religiosity. Agee, from Tennessee, had been altar boy in the Episcopal Church. Mills, from Texas, had been an altar boy in the Catholic Church. Ambition introduced both men to Dwight Macdonald and to the world of the New York intellectuals in which he moved so adeptly. Agee knew he wanted to write "narrative poetry" when he was still in college. "I'd do anything on earth to become a really great writer," he told his boyhood tutor, Father James Harold Flye. He would try to parallel Shakespeare's achievement.[15] Macdonald got him his first journalism job in 1932. Mills discovered his ambition in college as well, and he never looked back. As a junior at the University of Texas, he scribbled a note on the back of a postcard and mailed it to his father in Dallas. "I work and live very rapidly these days. Mine is a pen from whose point much ink will flow and some day into the brains of the populace. But let that be."[16] When he got to New York in 1945, Macdonald brought him to attention of the left-wing community. "We were both congenital rebels," Macdonald later wrote of his relationship with Mills, "passionately contemptuous of every received idea and established institution, and not at all inarticulate about it—he could argue about practically anything even longer and louder than I could."[17]

The other qualities of character Agee and Mills shared do not make for the kind of topics usually discussed in casual conversation. People who take them literally, that is, at their word, assume that the aspect of sincerity slides language along the smooth planes of surface feeling. But a sincere vocabulary is not the same thing as an authentic vocabulary. I mean to point out that Agee was reputed to be thoughtful, courteous, and modest, the exemplification of the liberal man after his boyhood is leavened with a wholesome dose of Christianity. In an

autobiographical fragment, he spoke of himself in starker terms: "He is pronouncedly schizoid, and a manic-depressive as well, with an occasional twinkle of paranoia."[18] Others saw him this way too, the children who chalked a warning on the steps of his home in Brooklyn, "THE MAN WHO LIVES HERE IS A LOONY," and Thomas Wolfe, who reported, after a long evening of conversation, that Agee was "crazy," that he "was always talking about things in spirals and on planes and things."[19] A colleague at *Time* magazine overheard a drunk and belligerent Agee cursing the telephone operator as if he hated her guts. "A wild yearning violence beat in his blood, certainly, as just as certainly the steadier pulse of a saint."[20] Agee's writing was *personal* not only in the sense that it drew from and tried to make manifest what surrounded him. It reported his estrangement from himself. A heartbreaking sadness moves through *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family,* as surely as the sublimated terror of his Episcopalian devotionals animated the brutal Reverend Harry Powell in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) in his screenplay. It was characteristic of Agee to urge his readers to sit down and listen to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, only to suggest they punish themselves while doing it. "Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it."[21] Macdonald left behind the most insightful comment I have read concerning *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* He said Agee had used the rhythms of joy and suffering in the lives of the tenants to thread a parable of entrapment. Agee wound himself around his subject and made himself a witness to the fury and anguish of us all.

Mills believed his rage was his best and most useful quality.[22] *White Collar* and *The Power Elite* depict a nightmare for which anger was the most appropriate response and the one emotion most wanting for expression. The Promethean aspirations of nineteenth-century life continually aborted at the moment of conception, according to Mills. Intimations of this filled the American psyche with confusion and uneasiness, as opposed to a clear sense of outrage or indignation or exasperation. Mills warned of a homegrown form of totalitarian rule descending on a free people. His unsparing prose style was a way of keeping alert, of standing guard against "the sense of the trap." *Listen, Yankee* had him at a fever pitch of anger and audacity. It is difficult to describe the daring needed for a full professor at an Ivy League school in the 1950s, a place and a time that required jackets and ties on campus, to go to Havana and express solidarity with Cuba. At the apex of the American self-congratulation, in the midst of a war over cultural prestige with the Soviets, Mills flung the Cuban Revolution in the face of the liberals. "I don't know what you guys are waiting for," he said to his students, stalking the classroom at Columbia University. "You've got a beautiful set of mountains in those Rockies. I'll show you how to use those pistols. Why don't you get going?"[23]

The violence and disorder whirling in the minds of Mills and Agee spun out different postures. Agee paraded his self-accusations before his readers. Mills hid

his doubts away from public view, adopting a pose of cool nonchalance. But his letters and diaries vibrate with instability. Under the skin of the tough-talking, motorcycle-riding professor there was a disappointed novelist and poet. In high school Mills had composed a novel (now lost) and a series of short stories and poems. He felt his sensitivities too feminine, too humiliating. He told himself he had to "learn to jeer instead of cry." He experienced little of the male camaraderie that makes fraternity not merely palatable, but pleasurable and reinforcing. His writing was a way of *composing* himself. Like Agee he wrote best when pushed by strong feelings. When he was running hot, the line between ambition and compulsion dissolved. The independent man, the lonesome fighter, the craftsman of experience, these self-images had to be repeated in a certain arrangement, like the founding myth of an epic poem. Mills authored a body of social thought that had a little to say about a great many subjects and a lot to say about a few subjects of great importance. Equally important, he authored an image of himself that flashed in and out of a surrounding darkness. To his diary he confided that he forged ahead by obeying Stendhal's self-command. "I see but one rule: to be clear. If I am not clear, all my world crumbles."[24]

James Agee and C. Wright Mills were young men from the provinces, searching for themselves while they searched for a new vocabulary. Perhaps they were the last representatives of a motif carried in Western letters since Balzac, for over the course of their lives the line between city and country faded into the past. It is only superficially true that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Listen, Yankee* belong to the 1930s and the 1960s. In a fuller sense they belong to an epoch that began in the First World War and came to a climax in the mid-century, when a shelf of books announced that a qualitatively new society had arrived: *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), *The Big Change* (1951), and *The Great Transformation* (1944), in which Karl Polanyi identified three "constitutive facts in the consciousness of Western man: knowledge of death, knowledge of freedom, knowledge of society."[25] Randolph Bourne, one of John Dewey's students, saw it coming as early as 1918. "It is only in recent years that our civilization, so chaotically individualized in the middle ages, has begun to weld for itself, through the growth of industry and the spread of communications, a new cohesion, accompanied by consciousness and sympathy," Bourne wrote. "This new social consciousness demands its poetry." Bourne called for a "poetized social psychology—a thrilling demonstration that poetry has still the unconquerable power to make significant even our most abstract knowledge."[26]

What did the "poetized social psychology" or "sociological poetry" of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *Listen, Yankee* accomplish? It engaged a group of undefended, unfamiliar people located on the margins of the mass society for the purpose of making their faces and voices comprehensible to the newly impersonal,

dense networks of human association. It intensified awareness, enhanced sensibility. Agee went to Alabama, and Mills went to Cuba, and told what it was like to be in the presence of sharecroppers and revolutionaries. To understand the complexity of this achievement consider the conventions they had to dishonor.[27] They could have tried to discover new knowledge about their subjects, like scientists. They could have tried to rescue them from condescension, in the manner of the social historian. They could have written as spokesmen, overflowing with humanitarian concern, or as psychologists, building up case histories, or as ideologists, advancing a science of concepts, or as artists, restoring subjectivity, or as bureaucrats, solving problems, or as methodologists, deriving from their investigations a set of techniques to be submitted for juridical status in the community of scholars. "If complications arise," said Agee of his work with Walker Evans, "that is because they are trying to deal with it not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously."[28] Complications did arise. The reviewer for the *New York Times* called Agee "arrogant, mannered, precious, gross." The *Saturday Review* and the *New Republic* mocked him. *Time* magazine said his book made "the most distinguished failure of the season."[29]

The organs of middle-class liberalism pilloried *Listen, Yankee* too. The *New Republic* compared Mills to "a merger of Judas Iscariot, Benedict Arnold, and Vidkung Quisling, retaining the worst features of each."[30] The *Washington Post* compared him to Wilhelm Reich, a genius gone mad. The *New Leader* cried, "The document is almost pathological in its furious hatred for the United States and its paranoid fixation with the idea that everything that may be amiss in Cuba in particular and in Latin America in general is the direct fault and responsibility of the hated 'Yankee.' One need not be an expert on Cuba or Latin America to spot the crazily distorted history, the incredibly muddled economics, the corny histrionics."[31] Newspapers called him shrill, pompous, ignorant, naive, preposterous, angry, tasteless, stupid, degenerate, and repulsive, a "vile propagandist" who operated with "massive disregard for truth and reason." The *Saturday Review* called him a communist. Syndicated columnists, those brave avengers of the conventional wisdom, took after the book in hundreds of towns and small cities from coast to coast. "DON'T LET PROF. MILLS FOOL YOU ON CUBA" ran one headline.[32]

Columnists and reviewers responded to the explosive political content of *Listen, Yankee.* The angriest criticisms, however, took the name of professional social science. The book was a "travesty of sociology," one critic opined.[33] Had any of the reviewers consulted *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills's critique of the schools and sects of his profession, they would have seen that his Cuba book was consistent with his interpretation of the sociologist's vocation. Then again, *The Sociological Imagination* horrified the professionals too. Mills put literature and science in a continuum, viewed them as complementary tools

for keeping perceptions as close as possible to the disorderly actuality of experience. "To overcome the academic *prose* you have to overcome the academic *pose,*" he quipped. Modern methodology he approached as a science of interference. "Every man his own methodologist! Methodologists! Get to work!"[34]

The professional's response to this plea was foretold in 1929, when the president of the American Sociological Society, William Ogburn, urged his colleagues to drive their field into the complexus of natural science. "Sociology as a science is not interested in making the world a better place in which to live, in encouraging beliefs, in spreading information, in dispensing news, in setting forth impressions of life, in leading the multitudes, or in guiding the ship of state. Science is interested directly in one thing only, to wit, discovering new knowledge." What of the cultural ambitions of the pragmatists, who had rescued sociology from Herbert Spencer's scientific pretensions and had charged it with democratic purposes? Ogburn could not abide this mission any more than Mills could abandon it. "One of these new habits will be the writing of wholly colorless articles and the abandonment of the present habit of trying to make the results of science into literature, the precedents set in this regard by William James being considered a bad legacy for the apprentices of science." If Ogburn had not dedicated the rest of his career to enforcing just this message, helping to ensure that professional sociology had the most well refined techniques of the postwar period, it might be possible to be look charitably on his address, to attribute his excesses to a bout of intemperance. In fact he told the future. In order to make sociology into a science, he said, "It will be necessary to crush out emotion and to discipline the mind so strongly that the fanciful pleasures of intellectuality will have to be eschewed in the verification process." *Crush out?* Henceforth all expressions of individuality in sociological writing would be considered pathologies. "A smaller and smaller proportion of research will be done single-handed by the lone researcher. This is regretted by some schizophrenic persons who believe that one cannot think if one works in an organization."[35] Professional sociology, meet C. Wright Mills.

Listen, Yankee and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* left some admirers, but they generated no successors. For they refused to gratify the fixed demands of the institutionalized, computerized, disembodied professionals who continue to dominate thought in this country. After Agee stopped writing poetry and after he brought his "purple prose" under control, he entered into the world of middlebrow entertainment. He wrote five scripts for "Mr. Lincoln," episodes in *Omnibus,* a popular television series which ran in 1952 and 1953. In one of them he included the story of the love affair between young Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. *Omnibus* received so many complaints about this story that it decided to televise a debate between Agee and Allan Nevins, the Columbia University historian. At the debate ("Lincoln and Ann Rutledge: Fact or Fiction?") Nevins cheerfully

chastised Agee for advancing a legend. Did he not understand that professional historians had sifted the evidence with great care and had ruled out any such affair between Rutledge and Lincoln? "I plead entirely guilty," replied Agee.[36]

Approaching poetry and science as binary opposites was possible only after the medieval system of moral philosophy broke up, splintering the faculty of curiosity and spinning out innumerable specialties and divisions to proliferate on the "unnatural wound" bemoaned by Dewey. Writing in praise of Matthew Arnold, Dewey entered an Anglo-American community riven by the Arnold-Huxley debate.[37] By the 1950s the stakes of that debate had grown much higher, and the distance between *understanding* and *explaining* had widened. "Literary intellectuals" and "natural scientists," said C. P. Snow in his lecture of 1959, neither trusted nor comprehended each other. The occasion of Snow's lecture, and the controversy that followed, indicated the need for representatives of "the humanities" and "the sciences" to increase their social commerce. Lionel Trilling stated what seemed obvious to everyone. "As between, say, poets and painters, or musicians and architects, there is very little discourse, and perhaps the same thing could be remarked of scientists of different interests, biologists and physicists, say. But the isolation of literary men from scientists may well seem to be the most extreme of these separations, if only because it is the most significant."[38]

Agee and Mills thought that such definitions of the modern crisis gave too much away, that the rivalry between literary intellectuals and scientists was really a contest among experts, and that the real problem penetrated to the system that divided the operations of human reflection into opposite social types, experts and ignoramuses, professionals and amateurs. Emerson had a name for intellectuals-as-specialists: "walking monsters." His disciple Nietzsche called them "inverted cripples," disabled not because they lacked an organ, but because one organ had swollen to such distended size that it vitiated the others.[39] Agee and Mills wrote in the same aristocratic spirit, opposed to the mutual isolation of the aesthetic, ethical, imaginative, and logical properties of mind. "The genuine individualist is virtually extinct," Agee wrote in 1950. "Allegiance to 'the modern mind' must have deprived countless intellectuals of most of their being. Certainly among many I have known or read, feeling and intuition are suspect, sensation is isolated, only the thinking faculty is thoroughly respected; the chances of interplay among these faculties, and of mutual discipline and fertilization, are reduced to a minimum."[40] Mills praised Agee's refusal to suppress himself in the service of a singular technique, form, or style. The sociologists alongside whom he toiled did everything possible to disembody intelligence. "They have developed several stereotyped ways of writing which do away with the full experience by keeping them detached throughout their operation. It is as if they are deadly afraid to take the chance of modifying themselves in the process of their work."[41] What everyone else took for granted in "the modern

mind," Agee and Mills refused to acknowledge. As if to anticipate the barrage of criticism their books were destined to receive, they armed them with fighting introductions, much as Balzac armed against the tendency of his middle-class readers to edify themselves at the sight of human passion, to turn themselves into spectators. "Their hearts are momentarily touched; but the impression made on them is fleeting, it vanishes as quickly as a delicious fruit melts in the mouth."[42]

In such comments there was a hatred of dogma. "I cannot give any unconditional loyalties to any institution, man, state, movement or nation," Mills wrote in *Listen, Yankee.* "My loyalties are conditional upon my own convictions and my own values."[43] In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* Agee wrote that the Communist Manifesto belonged to no "political party, faith, or faction," this in the middle of the 1930s. Neither man supported the United States in World War II.[44] The specialist system, ritualized in the folkways of the middle-class professions, turned their hatred into truculence. Agee's attitude toward Father James Harold Flye comes across with solicitude in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (1962). Yet he produced two of the most vicious portraits of clergymen in midcentury letters. There was the preacher-as-murderer in *The Night of the Hunter.* Then there was the sinister depiction of Father Jackson in *A Death in the Family.* About two-thirds of the way through the novel Agee juxtaposed a pair of scenes. In the first Mary, alone in her room for the first time after news of her husband's death reaches her, pleads with her God to tell her why this awful, arbitrary thing has happened to her. In the second Rufus hangs around with a group of older and smarter boys who ask him to dance for their pleasure. Suspicious that they are tricking him, but unable to summon the anger to tell himself so, his perplexity mirrors his mother's. In the juxtaposition Agee posed the problem of theodicy, the traditional preoccupation of theologians, but refused to allow the priest in the novel to venture an answer. Father Jackson is a sort of spiritual terrorist in the household. "I tell you Rufus, it's enough to make a man puke up his soul," Andrew says at the end of the novel. "That–that butterfly has got more of God in him than Jackson will ever see for the rest of eternity. Priggish, meanly-mouthed son of a bitch."[45] What did Father Flye think when he reached this conclusion?

Agee and Mills were strangers where they might have been expected to be comfortable. Dwight Macdonald, to be sure, was not their only ally in New York. Harvey Swados and Richard Hofstadter supported much of Mills's work. Agee had many more admirers. Alfred Kazin called his Lincoln series "the most beautiful writing ever done for television." Of *A Death in the Family,* Kazin said, "It is an utterly individual and original book, and it is the work of a writer whose power with English words can make you gasp."[46] Lionel Trilling praised Agee's "brilliant intensities of perception" and pronounced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "an American classic" in the *Kenyon Review* when the middlebrow magazines were

calling him arrogant, mannered, precious, and gross. In 1960, when the book came roaring back into print, Trilling returned to the cause. He hoped "there will always be some young person turning up to recognize that these pictures and this text constitute not merely an aesthetic object but a moral act."[47] Agee mocked Kazin in the introduction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*[48] He did not play second to Macdonald or Trilling either. In 1939 Macdonald sent him a questionnaire from the offices of *Partisan Review,* asking him to answer a series of questions of interest to the intellectuals surrounding the magazine. Agee's response was so belligerent that Macdonald declined to publish it, though he allowed Agee to use it, along with the questionnaire, in a section of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* "I feel violent enmity and contempt toward all factions and all joiners," Agee wrote. "I 'conceive of' my work as an effort to be faithful to my perceptions."[49]

Mills wrote for *Partisan Review* on occasion, but he did not fit in there any easier than Agee. Invited to participate in the magazine's symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture" (1952), he called into question its premises. "American intellectuals do seem quite decisively to have shifted their attitudes toward America," Mills responded. "One minor token of this shift is available to those who try to imagine the old PR running the title 'Our Country . . .,' etc. in 1939. You would have cringed."[50] Here one can witness the dynamic in a double sense, once in the evidence of Mills's words, once again in their context. Mills criticized *Partisan Review* by invoking its own critical standards in 1939, the same year Agee had found the magazine too smug.

But there was more than truculence. Agee and Mills called themselves anarchists, not during their upswells and effusions, but repeatedly.[51] Agee identified himself as "an anarchist" on four occasions, the first in 1938, when one might expect it, and the last in 1951, when there was every reason not to expect it. He used the label as a way of praising his closest friends, describing John Huston as "a natural-born antiauthoritarian individualistic libertarian anarchist, without portfolio."[52] The first page of Mills's first book carried a prose poem from an unnamed member of the Industrial Workers of the World. A decade later, after completing his trilogy, he reaffirmed this sense of himself. "What these jokers—all of them—don't realize is that way down deep and systematically I'm a goddamn anarchist. I'm really quite serious and over the next few years I'm going to work out the position in a positive and clean-cut way."[53]

A list of self-described anarchist intellectuals would include, in addition to Agee and Mills, Edward Abbey, Noam Chomsky, Emma Goldman, Paul Goodman, William James, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Albert J. Nock, and Pitiram Sorokin, just for starters. Who has ranged these powerful figures into a vital tradition? Not the metaphysics of progress, not the science of concepts, not the academic professions, but the power of individual example advances the

anarchist creed. It is possible to interpret the writing of intellectuals so avowed as the moral and aesthetic equivalents to the "propaganda of the deed." Agee, who occupied the juncture of conservative and leftist anarchism, wrote about "*Personal responsibility.* Virtually the whole 'modern mind,' at its popular intellectual level, denies it and tends to destroy the sense of it. It is fashionable to feel, and to force upon others, an acute sense of social responsibility; but it is rare to find a non-religious person who recognizes that, granting extenuating circumstances, every person is crucially responsible for his thoughts and actions."[54]

First-time readers of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* often take it as an art book and accordingly find Agee's many disclaimers puzzling. "Above all else: in God's name don't think of it as Art," he says.[55] What could he mean? Jean-Jacques Rousseau interpreted the growth of techniques, forms, and conventions, the mediating architecture of modern thought, as the effluvia of human estrangement. His "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts" (1750) argued that art and science "spread garlands of flowers" over the chains of existence and corrupted virtue because they celebrated inequalities of talent and because they encouraged authors to pursue applause, to elevate vanity over wisdom.[56] A remarkable passage from the preamble to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* quoted by Mills in his letter to Macdonald, expressed this idea beautifully. "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 symptom that salvation is beaten again."[57] Rousseau expressed the same idea, using nearly the same words, in his discourse: "Our souls have been corrupted in proportion as our sciences and our arts have advanced toward perfection."[58] Not speaking well, not writing well, but acting well ought to be the highest aim, Rousseau said. Look again, in the light of this insight, at the differences between perception and conception, character and criticism, enlightenment and edification, wisdom and education. Anarchism's stance discourages the tendency to bury these antinomies in inherited modes of expression and analysis. In Agee and Mills, it released the flow of emotional and imaginative energy that enlarged *Listen, Yankee* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* far beyond their stated purposes.

Whatever else might have happened at that dinner, massive quantities of liquor surely would have been consumed. For both men dissipated themselves with great determination, in a manner that indicates contempt toward the very idea of a long, moderate, well-managed life. After Agee's first heart attack, John Huston went to see him in the hospital. "We arrived, more or less independently, at a same ringing affirmation of the minimal, inalienable rights of a man," Agee reported to Walker

Evans. "That he has the right, even the obligation, to write and to fuck as much as he can and in the ways he prefers to, even if doing so shortens his life or kills him on the spot."[59] Agee composed his books and essays with a bottle of whisky placed at one corner of his desk, and a bottle of Benzedrine tablets at the other.[60] In 1955 he was enduring five or six minor heart attacks each day, swallowing nitroglycerine tablets one after the next. He wrote a letter to Father Flye. "Nothing much to report. I feel, in general, as if I were dying: a terrible slowing-down, in all ways, above all in relation to work."[61] Five days later he died in a taxicab.

"Let us die with our pens going!" Mills vowed with the same mix of piety and play, self-assertion and self-abandonment, found in Agee's letters. The timing of *Listen, Yankee* betrayed him. Having already suffered several bouts of angina, he took on the strain anyway and depleted what remained of his strength. "I am on the edge of exhaustion from the pressures of the Cuba business," he wrote, two weeks before he was scheduled to debate the revolution on NBC television before an audience of forty million. "Well, no matter. One does what one must, and takes the consequences." The night before the debate, he was struck by a massive heart attack. He lived fifteen months more. On discovering that he could no longer write, Mills, like Agee, lapsed into despondency and destroyed himself by indirect means.

Estranged from stable images of themselves, from the leading institutions of politics and society, from the readers they refused to flatter, from professional standards and practices, even from those "New York intellectuals" who were supposed to be as estranged as they were, Agee and Mills died at age forty-five, broke and bewildered, each man believing he had failed, as indeed each had expected to fail from the start. The life-giving properties so flamboyantly displayed in their books foreshortened their own lives. Therein lies the paradox of their biographies.

Notes

I would like to thank David Greenberg, Roy Rosenweig, and George Scialabba for their careful readings of this essay and their many excellent suggestions.

1. Agee, "Plans for Work: October 1937," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee,* ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 150.
2. Dwight Macdonald, "After Seven Years," *Politics* 5 (Spring 1948): 123–25. Lionel Trilling said, independently of Macdonald's comment, that he never heard the book praised in conversation. Lionel Trilling, "An American Classic," *Speaking of Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 380.
3. C. Wright Mills to John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Nov. 7, 1944, as reprinted in *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings,* ed. Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 79.

4. C. Wright Mills, "Sociological Poetry" *Politics* 5 (Spring 1948): 125, 126.
5. John Dewey, "Poetry and Philosophy" (1890), in *The Early Works, 1882–1898, Volume Three, 1889–1892* (Carbondale: Univ. of Southern Illinois Press, 1969), 122, 123. For a stimulating discussion of the relationship between poetry and pragmatism, see Richard Poirier, "Why Do Pragmatists Want to Be Like Poets?" in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture,* ed. Morris Dickstein (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998): 347–61, and responses by Louis Menand and David Bromwich. For some reason, however, none of the contributors mentions Dewey's essay.
6. C. Wright Mills, "Man Exuberant" *Labor and Nation* (Jan.–Feb. 1947): 8–9.
7. Walker Evans, *Cuba* (1933; Los Angeles, 2001).
8. "Havana Cruise" (1937), reprinted in James Agee, *Selected Journalism,* ed. Paul Ashdown (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 153, 141.
9. C. Wright Mills, *Listen, Yankee* (New York: Ballantine, 1960), 16.
10. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; rpt., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), xlviii.
11. Agee to Father Flye, March 2, 1948, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York: Bantam, 1962), 156. The film was *Farrebique* (1947).
12. "Restless Youth," Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, No. 0613/68, September 1968; declassified in 1975; Declassified Documents Reference System, doc. #CK3100344745.
13. William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition,* ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 629–645.
14. Robert Coles, "James Agee's Religious Sensibility," *Harvard Diary: Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 54–57.
15. Agee to Father Flye, Dec. 19, 1930, in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 41, 42.
16. Mills to father, March 7, 1937, Box 4B353, C. Wright Mills Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.
17. Dwight Macdonald, "The Mills Method," *Discriminations: Essays and Afterthoughts* (New York: DaCapo, 1974), 299.
18. James Agee, "James Agee by Himself" (1942), *Agee: Selected Literary Documents,* ed. Victor A. Kramer (Troy: Whitston Publishers, 1996), 195–97.
19. As quoted in David Herbert Donald, *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), 444–45.
20. Robert Fitzgerald, "A Memoir" in *Remembering James Agee,* ed. David Madden (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974), 73; T. S. Matthews, "Agee at *Time*" in *Remembering James Agee,* ed. Madden, 118.

21. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 15–16.
22. "But of course the quality about Agee that is best of all is his capacity for great indignation. Printed less than a decade ago, the book in its fine moral tone seems to be a product of some other epoch. For the spirit of our immediate times deadens our will very quickly, and makes moral indignation a rare and perilous thing. The greatest appeal of this book comes from Agee's capacity for great indignation." Mills, "Sociological Poetry," 125.
23. Quotation in Arnold Abrams, "C. Wright Mills: Controversial Figure in Conforming Sociology," *Columbia Daily Spectator,* Nov. 29, 1960.
24. The closest version I have found is Stendhal's comment, "If I am not clear, my whole universe crumbles into nothingness." Quoted by Clifton Fadiman, introduction, Stendhal, *The Red and the Black,* trans. Lowell Blair (New York: Bantam, 1958), 4.
25. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944; rpt., Boston: Beacon, 2001), 267.
26. It is possible that Mills borrowed the phrase "sociological poet" from Bourne. But I do not know whether Bourne's essay was available at the time, and Mills did not (so far as I have been able to tell) read widely in Bourne's writings. In any case, see Randolph Bourne, "A Sociological Poet," *The Radical Will: Selected Writings, 1911–1918,* ed. Olaf Hansen (Berkeley: Urizon Books, 1977), 520, 521, 525. Bourne here discusses a French poet, M. Jules Romains. Also suggestive along these lines is Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), 219.
27. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* xlviii.
28. Ibid., xlvii.
29. John Hersey, "Introduction: Agee," in Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* xxxi–xxxii.
30. Editorial, *New Republic,* January 16, 1961: 2–3.
31. William Henry Chamberlain, "Mills and the Spirit of Cuba," *New Leader* (January 2, 1961): 21–22.
32. All these reviews are located in Box 4B392, C. Wright Mills Papers, University of Texas at Austin.
33. Theodore Draper, "Castro's Cuba: A Revolution Betrayed?," *Encounter* 16 (March 1961): 8.
34. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 219, 123.
35. William F. Ogburn, "The Folkways of a Scientific Sociology," *Publications of the American Sociological Society* 24 (Dec. 1929): 2, 3, 10. For background see Barbara Laslett, "Unfeeling Knowledge: Emotion and Objectivity in the History of Sociology," *Sociological Forum* 5 (Sept. 1990): 413–33.

36. James Agee, "Mr. Lincoln," *Omnibus,* 1952–1953, episode 5. University of Tennessee, Special Collections.

37. "But still it will be *knowledge* only which they give us; knowledge not put for us into relation with our sense of conduct, our sense for beauty, and touched with emotion by being so put; not thus put for us, and therefore, to the majority of mankind, after a certain while, unsatisfying, wearying." Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Science," *Poetry and Prose,* ed. John Bryson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 650.

38. Lionel Trilling, "The Leavis-Snow Controversy" (1962), *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent,* ed. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 407; C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1969). I have also found useful David Joravsky, "Knowing Ourselves: Literary Art versus Social Science," *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870–1930,* ed. Dorothy Ross (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 91–127; James T. Farrell, "Some Observations on Literature and Sociology," *Reflections at Fifty and Other Essays* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1954), 180–87.

39. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 44; Nietzsche quoted in Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 185.

40. The quotation is from Agee's contribution to "Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium," *Partisan Review* 42 (Feb. 1950): 107, 110.

41. Mills, "Sociological Poetry," 125.

42. Honore de Balzac, *Old Goriot,* trans. Marion Crawford (1834; rpt., New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 27–28.

43. Mills, *Listen, Yankee,* 179.

44. Agee called the war "a rattlesnake-skunk choice, with the skunk of course considerably less deadly yet not so desirable around the house that I could back him with any favor." Agee wrote in 1943, "On our plans for post-war and on Russia, I should either write hours or not at all. I expect the worst of us and of the English; something so little better in most respects (if we get our way) than Hitler would bring, that the death of a single man is a disgrace between the two." Agee to Flye, Oct. 30, 1943, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 122. Ibid., Jan. 13, 1939, 103. Also see ibid., June 14, 1943, 130; and Agee, "Popular Religion," "Three Sonnets," and "Scientists and Tramps," *Agee,* ed. Kramer, 225–28, 237, 291–96.

45. James Agee, *A Death in the Family* (New York: Vintage, 1957), 308. "Some have felt James Agee saw in me something of a surrogate for his father, but I do not think this was the case. Our friendship and association and feeling toward each other were such, it seems to me, as we might equally well have had if his father had been living." Father James H. Flye, "An Article of Faith" in *Remembering James Agee,* ed. David Madden (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974), 17.

46. Alfred Kazin, "Good-by to James Agee" (1957), *Contemporaries: From the 19th Century to the Present,* rev. ed. (New York, 1982), 194, 196.

47. Trilling, "American Classic," 380.

48. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 14.

49. Ibid., 356.

50. Partisan Review, *American and the Intellectuals: A Symposium* (New York: Partisan Review Press, 1953), 75.

51. "I am essentially an anarchist," Agee to Father Flye, June 28, 1938, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 89. "If I weren't an anarchist I would probably be a left-wing conservative–though I write even the words with superstitious dread." Agee to Father Flye, March 8, 1940, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 114. Also see Agee to Father Flye, Nov. 7, 1951, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 180; and Agee, "James Agee by Himself," in *Agee,* ed. Kramer, 196.

52. James Agee, "Undirectable Director" (1950), *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 421.

53. Mills to Harvey Swados, Nov. 3, 1956, in *C. Wright Mills,* ed. K. Mills, 218.

54. "Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium," *Partisan Review* 42 (Feb. 1950): 108.

55. Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* 15.

56. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts," *Basic Political Writings,* trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 3.

57. On Agee's hostility to "art," see his comments about the relation between his family and the writing of *A Death in the Family.* "I can remember and represent them, far beyond any transmutation of these matters which I have made, or might ever make, into poetry or fiction. I know that I am making the choice most dangerous to an artist, in valuing life above art; I know too that by a good use of fiction or poetry one can re-enter life more deeply, and represent it more vividly, intimately and truthfully, than by any such means of bald narration as I propose; but it now seems to me that I have no actual choice, but am in fact compelled, against my judgment and wish as an artist. Within the limitations imposed by this plain method to which I seem compelled, I shall, of course, in so far as I am able, use such varieties of artfulness as seem appropriate." Agee, "Now As Awareness," in *Collected Short Prose,* ed. Fitzgerald, 142–143.

58. Rousseau, "Discourse," 5.

59. As quoted in Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 350.

60. As reported in ibid., 265.

61. Agee to Father Flye, May 11, 1955, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye,* 210.