FRIEDMAN, DONNA REISS. Cosmic Consciousness in James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. (1968) Directed by: Dr. Donald G. Darnell.
pp. 60.

The influence of Walt Whitman on the style and themes used by James Agee is best seen in Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Both Whitman himself and Richard M. Bucke referred to Whitman as a "poet of the cosmos," and in Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry, James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote discuss "cosmic consciousness" in the work of Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, and Hart Crane. Cosmic consciousness is defined by Miller, Shapiro, and Slote as an elevation of the consciousness to an awareness of the harmony and unity of all elements in the universe, such as Whitman experienced in "Song of Myself."

Agee felt and several times stated that Whitman's poetry was influential on his own work and thought, but the extent of that influence is apparent more in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men than in any of his other works. In many ways Famous Men represents Agee's own transformation from human to cosmic consciousness, in the same way that "Song of Myself" represents Whitman's cosmic elevation.

Through a comparison of Whitman's "Song of Myself" with Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, the similarities of their cosmic consciousness can be seen, and through an analysis of their themes and imagery, this quality is more clearly evident. Sometimes the influence of Whitman is direct, as in Agee's abundant use of musical analogy; at other times it is indirect, as in Agee's expression of compassion and love for humanity.

There are, of course, differences in the expression of this cosmic consciousness by each of them. The Whitman influence, however, was an

important one in the formation of Agee's major themes of individual sanctity and dignity in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, and in the lyrical prose style which characterizes his later works The Morning Watch and A Death in the Family.

COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN JAMES AGEE'S

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

by

Donna Reiss Friedman

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Donald G. Darnell
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser — Donald G. Darnell

Oral Examination Committee Members

Donald G. Darnell

Robert D. Stephens

Edward M. Cady III

Arthur W. Dixon

June 3 1968
Date of Examination

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Almost a century after Walt Whitman had published Leaves of Grass in New York, a young man from Tennessee named James Rufus Agee demonstrated his admiration for and inspiration by Whitman in his Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. "Song of Myself," the most famous of the early poems in Leaves of Grass, was an expression of the beauty of all living things and of every aspect of the human condition; and Agee's book was founded on the same principle.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men contained over four hundred pages of prose, the result of an assignment from Fortune magazine to investigate the living conditions of sharecroppers in Alabama in 1936. Agee was so affected by the lives of the farmers that he knew no magazine article designed to sympathize with the popular concern of the masses for social issues could do justice to what he had confronted in Alabama. He therefore spent five years writing a song of praise to the exploited and impoverished families of the rural South. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men became a microcosm of the human condition and the universe in much the same way that the poet and the blade of grass in "Song of Myself" became symbolic of humanity and the universe.

When Whitman's first edition of Leaves of Grass was published in 1855, its iconoclasm stunned his contemporaries. The poet proclaimed himself a prophet and a seer and the center of a universe which celebrated the senses equally with the intellect. His style was so unconventional and

his metaphors so overtly sensuous that he was praised or blamed for egotism and experimentation with verse, long before the poetic unity of his work was seriously considered.

Agee's style was as new in the mid-twentieth century as Whitman's had been in 1855. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is neither a novel nor a documentary, although it presents a structured development of its major "characters" and describes with scientific precision the picking of a cotton crop and the dimensions of George Gudger's house. These facts are as essential to Agee's book as the details of cetology are to Moby Dick. They are facets of the poetic concept involved; in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men the bending of a man's body at his labor of farming becomes his posture throughout life. The excerpt from a geography text-book used by the farm children is pathetically ironic as it invites the impoverished students to "imagine" themselves hungry, naked, and un-sheltered from climatic conditions so they may identify with and study their "world brothers and sisters."[1] These details contribute to the themes of the isolation and sanctity of the individual which are the basis of the universal love Agee evokes in Famous Men.

But it is the lyrical prose of much of the book which best expresses the attitudes and events of that summer in Alabama. The passionate faith in the beauty of the farmers' lives evoked by Agee's sensitive choice of images and words is the contrast to the analytic descriptions of the farm family's work which give the book its apparent formlessness and disunity.

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[1] James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston, 1960), p. xx.

The reasons for Agee's startling and uncategorizable form in Famous Men were the same as Whitman's for the form of "Song of Myself," that the subjects and themes demanded a completely organic expression and could not be imposed on some established literary form, even, in Agee's case, on some established genre.

The link between Whitman and Agee is best explained by the term "cosmic consciousness." Richard M. Bucke used the term to describe Whitman, who referred to himself as a "poet of the cosmos."[2] And more recently, in Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry, James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote have studied Hart Crane, D. H. Lawrence, and Dylan Thomas as cosmic poets in the tradition of Whitman. The tradition is not derivative. The influence of Whitman is indirect; it is rather a similarity of "vision" than of style. The merging of the individual with the cosmos elevates the consciousness of the poet so that the beauty implicit in even the most "degrading" cir - cumstances is revealed because its entirety, its relationship to all other circumstances, is revealed. Whitman proclaims in Section Nineteen of "Song of Myself":

> This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,
> It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous . . .
> . . . . . .
> There shall be no difference between them and the rest.[3]

Individual differences still exist, of course, but they are parts of a universal whole. They make up the whole rather than divide it. The

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2 Richard M. Bucke, Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind (New York, 1923).

3 Walt Whitman, The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, Deathbed Edition (New York, 1948), I, 77.

cosmic consciousness is aware of individual differences, but perceives the unity that is implicit in these differences.

The details of the expression of the cosmic consciousness in the work of Whitman and Agee show considerable similarity. Agee's best prose is repetitive, alliterative, and rhythmic like the chants of "Song of Myself." The divinity of mankind, as of all living things, is expressed in biblical tones, supported by the lyricism and elevated seriousness of scripture. Agee regarded Famous Men as something of a symphony; much of the structure and thematic development was intended to be an adaptation of sonata form. Whitman's musical bent is obvious from his title "Song of Myself" and from the symphonic structure of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

In the pages that follow Agee's style will be discussed in terms of this cosmic consciousness. Just as the blade of grass is the central image of "Song of Myself," the globe is one of the central and unifying images of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. In the works of both Whitman and Agee music --- its terminology and techniques --- plays an important and unifying role in expressing the universal love which is the highest realization of the cosmic consciousness.

CHAPTER II

COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE COSMIC POET

In Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry, James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote discuss the influence of Walt Whitman on the work of D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, and Hart Crane. The authors maintain that Whitman was the first poet to fulfill the definition of "cosmic poet" and that Lawrence, Thomas, and Crane are a part of that tradition because of a spiritual affinity.

In order to understand the influence of Whitman on these three poets, and finally on James Agee, it is necessary to understand the nature of the cosmic consciousness, for the similarities among the writers are based upon this concept. Karl Shapiro defines the trait:

> 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.
>
> Cosmic consciousness differs from human consciousness in that human consciousness is ordinarily consciousness of oneself as distinct from all other objects and beings in the universe. In cosmic consciousness there is a sense of enlightenment or illumination which may last only briefly but which (according to the testimony of all illuminati) places the individual on a new plane of existence.[1]

The poet of the cosmos is intensely aware of himself as transmitter of the cosmic "message." The "new plane of existence" which follows his

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[1] James E. Miller, Jr., Karl Shapiro, and Bernice Slote, Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1960), pp. 30-31.

"illumination" is this awareness, accompanied by a sense of responsibility to attempt to make all men aware of their own beauty and holiness, and especially of their essential unity with all other men.

What Karl Shapiro wrote of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" describes the major themes of cosmic poetry: "It is all there: the greatness of the body and the greatness of the soul; the touching of the world and the heroism of departure; the magnificent motion of death; the expanding cycle of consciousness; the essential holiness of all things."[2] In cosmic poetry it is always all there, as in Whitman's claim in Section Forty-Eight of "Song of Myself": "I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/ And I have said that the body is not more than the soul."[3] The body is a physical manifestation of the soul, the spiritual made tangible. Emerson presents a similar theory in Nature when he maintains in Section IV on "Language" that

> 1. Words are signs of natural facts.
> 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
> 3. Nature is the symbol of the spirit.
>
> Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture.[4]

Physical facts stand as symbols of spiritual facts, and, as the transmitters of truth, can hardly be considered of lesser value. The paradoxes of cosmic poetry are not contradictory; flesh does not seek to hide, tempt

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2 Ibid., p. 70.

3 Deathbed Edition, p. 111.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (New York, 1940), pp. 32-33.

or destroy spirit, but to mold it and give it visible, physical representation. The material world does not conflict with, but represents the spiritual. Death does not compete with life, but completes the cyclical movement of creation and re-creation. The sides of the paradox are balanced; death has no less value than life and the body is no less significant than the soul.

In Whitman's poetry the cosmic consciousness is characterized in part by unashamedly emotional exhilaration, where even "the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me."[5] The common bond among cosmic poets is this vital celebration of life and the senses equally with the spirit. James E. Miller, Jr. maintains that this dynamic presentation of the unity of body and soul is central to the cosmic poet's poetic theory and style. Miller calls this tendency the "unfrenzied fit" and "controlled abandonment,"[6] two oxymorons appropriate to the paradoxical nature of cosmic art. Whitman himself, in "Song of Myself," announced that "I permit to speak at every hazard,/ Nature without check with original energy."[7] What seems unrelated or chaotic to the normal human mind and eye is realized by the cosmic vision as complete and ordered. Whitman answers for the apparent contradictions among the cosmic poet's lines in Section Fifty-One of "Song of Myself" with, "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)."[8]

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5 Deathbed Edition, p. 72.

6 Start with the Sun, p. 45.

7 Deathbed Edition, p. 62.

8 Ibid., p. 113.

Bernice Slote points out a dual trend in twentieth-century poetry. She speaks of the New Puritanism, typified by Eliot, with its "intellectual pride and a wry despair."[9] The other and opposite trend she calls the New Paganism, and this, of course is where Lawrence, Thomas, and Crane follow the Whitman tradition of "pagan joy and wonder in the natural world, the living cosmos."[10] Miss Slote explains that the poetry of the New Paganism "believes in the body as well as the soul, both in a unified duality that also combines emotion and intellect, good and evil. It is religious, physical, passionate, incantatory. It is affirmative in its constant sense of life."[11] The affirmation of faith in a physical, sensual universe which is in harmony with the spiritual and intellectual universe contrasts Eliot's intellectual concern for the disunity of the physical and spiritual worlds. The vitality and optimism of the New Paganism contradicts the despair of The Waste Land. Lawrence's probings of the deepest "life forces," Thomas' lyrical Welsh rhythms, and Hart Crane's tormented attempts to build an American epic were "Whitmanesque" in their affirmation and awareness of cosmic unity. So, too, was Agee's work filled with this ecstatic praise and exhilaration, showing the beauty of man's darkest moments as well as his brightest.

James E. Miller, Jr. explains that "these poets have drawn a faith in the 'act' of art as a direct participation in the mystical progression of the universe: creation of the poem is one of the infinite acts

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9 Start with the Sun, p. 4.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

in the continual creation of the world."[12] Love of the mysteries, which Miller describes as "direct participation in the mystical progression of the universe," is central to cosmic poetry. Bernice Slote states that the poetry of the New Paganism is often more difficult than the more intellectually demanding poetry of the New Puritanism, because it requires the use of so mysterious a thing as the "heart" as well as the mind. "'Life poetry,' . . ." she says, demands the attention of "the whole emotional, even physical self. And the most difficult of all things in poetry --- when the poetry demands it --- is the necessary engagement with mystery."[13] The cosmic poet demands the attention of his reader's feelings, and exercises his emotions as well as his intellect. It is more difficult to define and control the evocation of a response to this kind of poetry than to require the reader to investigate literary allusions.

For the cosmic poet the creative act is an act of faith, and the creation of a poem is the creation of the cosmos of which the poet speaks. The poet stands at the center of this universe only because he has recognized his equality with all the elements of which it is composed. Thus "Song of Myself" describes the illumination of the poet while creating the poem; it describes the raising of the poet's own knowledge from human to cosmic consciousness. The narrator in "Song of Myself" does not merely sympathize with the situations he describes; he shares all experience. This total identification with other human beings is possible because of the poet's cosmic consciousness. Aware of universal suffering, he recognizes that each man's gesture or thought is a universal gesture or thought.

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12 Ibid., p. 44.

13 Ibid., p. 5.

Agee's thematic similarity to Whitman lies in his affirmation, his enthusiastic rendering of his own awareness of cosmic unity. Like Whitman, Agee makes great demands of his readers. He expected his lyrical prose style, the style he determined to be the best medium for communicating his own cosmic consciousness, to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Whitman, for example, wrote in A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads that

> from a worldly and business point of view "Leaves of Grass" has been worse than a failure --- that public criticism on the book and myself as author of it yet shows mark'd anger and contempt more than anything else . . . . and that solely for publishing it I have been the object of two or three pretty serious special buffettings--- is all probably no more than I ought to have expected.[14]

Whitman wrote this as hindsight. This is the same kind of reaction Agee anticipated when he included in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men his expectations of failure to develop a style and structure appropriate to the subject and his own response to the subject. He feared he would be unable to create the "organic, mutually sustaining and independent, and as it were musical form" (10)[15] which he felt the work demanded. To this he cynically added, as if it were for his own protection, that "official acceptance is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again, and is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the kiss of Judas." (15)

In his prefatory material Agee quotes King Lear and the Communist Manifesto, and in a footnote he comments: "These words are quoted here

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14 Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Emory Holloway, Inclusive Edition (New York, 1940), pp. 522-523.

15 James Agee and Walker Evans, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston, 1960). Footnotes in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

to mislead those who will be misled by them. They mean, not what the reader may care to think they mean, but what they say." (xvi) Warnings such as this occur throughout the book, along with other guides which instruct the reader in the proper method of reading the book. For example, Agee advises that "the text be read continuously" and that "the reader attend with his ear to what he takes off the page." (xv) This latter statement anticipates the musical analogies which recur throughout Famous Men.

The cosmic consciousness allows the poet to generalize. He is the speaker of truth who knows what all men know and feels what all men feel; Emerson would call him a "Representative Man." Whatever particulars he mentions are examples of the universal, for he is a representative of the universal. The cosmic poet does not impose order on a chaotic universe; he recognizes the actual order in an apparently chaotic universe. This is the most significant characteristic of the cosmic poet and the cosmic consciousness; this is his distinction from other poets. Bernice Slote has said that through Whitman's poems "the whole is made whole."[16] The cosmic poet cannot despair of a waste land when he knows that the desert is merely the opposite of the garden, and that one is as beautiful as the other when realized as parts of a complete and meaningful universe.

James Agee's first recorded expression of his acquaintance with Whitman's work was a 1927 letter to his lifelong friend Father Flye. Eighteen-year-old Agee had discovered Leaves of Grass and with it an awareness that he and Whitman shared the values and ideas which would

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16 Start with the Sun, p. 8.

eventually be one of the major influences, both thematically and stylistically, on Agee's early poetry and prose. Agee wrote in this letter:

> I've been reading Leaves of Grass . . . . 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 stuff --- all the better (for me) because it was just what has been knocking at me unawares.[17]

Agee never stopped "feeling the beauty of everything," and his work, like Whitman's, is celebration of this feeling. Despite his perceptive eye and constant criticism of various aspects of American life, his lyric gift expressed itself primarily in the songs of affirmation and praise that characterize poets of the cosmos.

Agee's first published book, Permit Me Voyage, was a small volume of poetry published in 1934 by the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Of the long poem "Dedication" one reviewer said, "In atmosphere it is a prayer, but it is also a cosmology . . . a comprehensive globelike symbol of the present, its accumulative past, its indicated future."[18] This poem, indicative of Agee's future work, and especially of the themes that would dominate Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, includes a dedication to Whitman:

> To Mark Twain; to Walt Whitman; to Ring Lardner; to Hart Crane; to Abraham Lincoln; and to my land and to the squatters upon it and to their ways and words in love, and to my country in indifference.[19]

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17 Letters of James Agee to Father Flye (New York, 1962), p.34.

18 Lincoln Kirstein, "First Poems," New Republic LXXXII (February 27, 1935), 81.

19 James Agee, Permit Me Voyage (New Haven, 1934), p. 17.

Here Whitman is mentioned in a list, a catalogue much like those found in his own "Song of Myself." This particular list contains names of influential Americans, whose "ways and words" were especially significant to the country; and Agee's "indifference" here is like that of Whitman in "Song of Myself" when he declares, "Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent."[20] This is not a refusal to recognize differences, but a refusal to pass judgment, or as Whitman maintains of the poet in his preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass: "His brain is the ultimate brain. He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as a judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. As he sees the farthest he has the most faith. His hymns are the hymns of the praise of things."[21] This indifference, then, is a sensitivity to individual differences, which perceives the relationship of these idiosyncracies to the entire cosmos. The cosmic poet illuminates ("as the sun falling around a helpless thing") the characteristics of the nature of an object, and does not describe the "other" as either "better" or "worse." The significant parallel between Agee and Whitman in this regard is that their songs "are the hymns of the praise of things." This praise includes the full scope of the universe, and the prayer-poem "Dedication" anticipates Agee's future work through its list of past influences on his work.

What Richard Hayes wrote of Agee's A Death in the Family applies also to the style and themes of Famous Men; he wrote of Agee's

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20 Deathbed Edition, p. 81.

21 Inclusive Edition, p. 492.

> 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. This vision --- void of anything like personal egotism or insistence, so infinitely, gently attentive to the specific --- has not many American masters, one only, I would think: Whitman, the chanter. It is a dangerous mode, vulnerable to an easy lyricism and disembodied rhetoric, to catalogues.[22]

This concept of human isolation and dignity, in a personal as well as a universal sense, characterizes the love and compassion underlying the cosmic poet's vision. In the poems of Permit Me Voyage Agee was experimenting, discovering. It was not until the summer of 1936, the inception of Famous Men, that the cosmic awareness began to mature in Agee's mind and work. The Whitman influence was already evident in the list-making of "Dedication" and in the alliteration and balanced rhythms of other poems in the early volume. But the cosmic vision which Whitman inspired was transformed through Let Us Now Praise Famous Men into a distinctive voice which characterized the mature prose of Agee's later works.

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22 Richard Hayes, "Rhetoric of Splendor," Commonweal, LXVIII (September 12, 1958), 591-592.

CHAPTER III

THE GENESIS OF LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

James Agee wrote to his friend Father Flye in July of 1928, after receiving praise from S. Foster Damon and Robert Frost for some plays he had written, "The general verdict is that I can do a lot if I don't give up and write advertisements. If I remain convinced they're right I'll croak before I write ads or sell bonds --- or do anything except write."[1] In order to write, however, a writer must eat, and after he graduated from Harvard in 1932, Agee went to work for the popular magazines. He wrote for Fortune, Time, Life, and The Nation. An assignment by the Fortune editors in 1936 led to the publication in 1941 of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

In the summer of 1936 Agee and photographer Walker Evans were sent to Alabama to do a feature article on sharecroppers. Agee was enthusiastic about the assignment. He was from the South himself, although he had been away from his native Knoxville for many years. Walker Evans accompanied Agee, and wrote the foreword entitled "James Agee in 1936" for the 1960 reprint of the book. This brief biographical sketch reveals that Evans' attitudes toward the experiences of that summer were closely aligned with Agee's.

Evans' photographs comprise the first part of the book. Only half of the sixty photographs published in the 1960 edition appeared at the

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[1] Letters, p. 37.

first printing. Agee's admiration and respect for the camera, and for Walker Evans' use of the instrument as a transmitter of truth, are mentioned several times in the book. The photographs themselves are all black and white; many of them are casually posed portraits, almost snapshots, of the tenant farmers and their families. They are a perfect complement to Agee's verbal descriptions, and include the interiors and exteriors of tenant houses with the stark symmetry of their wooden constructions and the futile attempts of the women to decorate walls with yellowed newspaper clippings and obsolete calendars.

In the Preface to Famous Men Agee informs the reader that the photographs are not to be considered subordinate to the text. He states that they "are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully colloborative." /sic/ (xv) Agee's respect for the camera and the skilled photographer are illustrated in Famous Men primarily through the presence of the photographs themselves. In the 1940's, however, he articulated his opinion of the camera in the text for a series of photographs of Spanish Harlem by Helen Levitt. Miss Levitt's book, A Way of Seeing, was published in 1965. Agee's view of the camera, as he expressed it there, suggests that this instrument is itself a transmitter of the cosmic consciousness:

> In every other art which draws directly on the actual world, the actual is transformed by the artist's creative intelligence into a new and different kind of reality: aesthetic reality. In the kind of photography we are talking about here, the actual is not at all transformed; it is reflected and recorded, within the limits of the camera, with all possible accuracy. The artist's task is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of aesthetic reality but to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its most expressive crystallization.[2]

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[2] Helen Levitt and James Agee, A Way of Seeing (New York, 1965), p. 4.

The photographer who is in this manner able to "perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world" and to capture it as it is, that it may be communicated as it is, has the same quality of mind as the cosmic poet. These men do not inject their own concept of beauty into what is essentially non-beautiful, but see the beauty that less enlightened visions may fail to see. Evans' aesthetic was consistent with Agee's, and the candid realism of his photographs complement perfectly Agee's text.

Sympathy for the poor dirt farmer was in vogue in 1936, and Agee and Evans both found the experience of that summer to be enlightening in a different way from the modish sympathy and interest. Wilbur M. Frohock writes of Famous Men:

> That there had been other books about sharecroppers made no difference, because his real deep subject was not the sharecroppers themselves, it was the emotional experience of meeting the fact of sharecroppers. For this subject, everything he had learned on Fortune and elsewhere about making prose do what he wanted, and everything he had learned about words from writing poetry, would barely be adequate.[3]

Agee came away from Alabama with written and remembered notes regarding his intimacy with the family of George Gudger, as well as the external aspects of the tenant farmer's life. But Agee was uncertain about what to do with the ideas and feelings, much less the notes. The necessity to communicate adequately and accurately his realization of the degradation of the dignity and sanctity of the individual which was forced upon the improverished dirt farmers by circumstance, contributed to the major artistic concern of his life.

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[3] Wilbur M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America (Dallas, 1957), p. 218.

The problem which faced Agee as he prepared to write Famous Men was not unlike that of other American writers. The position of the American writer, R. W. B. Lewis points out in The American Adam, has often been that of "the isolated individual, standing flush with the empty universe, a primitive moral and intellectual being."[4] Agee recognized that his fresh approach to a popular situation was the singular aspect of his book, and that his special awareness of and empathy with the Gudgers would make his own book about sharecroppers different from others. While other writers were telling of farmers, Agee was telling of human lives.

Whitman had introduced the Adamic vision of the poet viewing his world in his 1860 poem "As Adam Early in the Morning":

> As Adam early in the morning,
> Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep,
> Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach.[5]

Finding himself in the position of the first man to treat the subject of sharecroppers organically, Agee, too, was required to draw attention to the newness of his approach. Agee advised his readers that he and Evans were dealing with the subject differently from the way others had and would have, "not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously." (xv)

The "characters" of Famous Men are not presented in a fictional framework. The author claims not to depict them as representative

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[4] R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago, 1955), p. 50.

[5] Deathbed Edition, p. 131.

according to his own personal interpretation, but to relate their lives and personalities in order to evoke the already existing representative nature of not only these men he names, but of each solitary individual in the world. Whitman wrote in "Song of Myself" as a first person bard who was not only the narrator but, spiritually, the other men of whom he sang. Agee writes in the same manner of the Gudgers, with whom his life becomes inseparably linked and interrelated.

"In a novel," Agee wrote, "a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists . . . ." (12) Whitman had declared this same sentiment in the Preface to the 1876 edition of Leaves of Grass. Looking back on his work, he felt that "the whole of these varied songs, and all my writings, both Volumes, only ring changes in some sort, on the ejaculation, How vast, how eligible, how joyful, how real, is a Human Being . . . ."[6]

In 1930 Agee had written in a letter to Father Flye of his ambition

> to write primarily about people --- giving their emotions and drama the expression that, because of its beauty and power, will be most likely to last.... and to do the whole so that it flows naturally, and yet, so that the whole --- words, emotions, characters, situation, etc. --- has a discernible symmetry and a very definite musical quality --- inaccurately speaking --- 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. . . . Prose holds you down from the possibility of such music. And put into poetic drama, it would certainly he stillborn or worse. . . .

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6 Inclusive Edition, p. 517.

> It's got to be narrative poetry, but of a sort that so far as I know has never been tried. 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.[7]

Agee eventually discovered that prose would be the medium best suited to his intentions, and this prose style developed through his later works, The Morning Watch and A Death in the Family, until it reached perfection. Five years of work on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men led to the discovery of the technique he sought. His subject demanded an organic development, "a poetic diction that will cover the whole range of events as perfectly and evenly as skin . . . ." His feelings and thoughts about the farm families and their lives inspired the style and structure that the reviewers at the publication of Famous Men could not classify. Agee was a poet who found that prose permitted his best use of language; because he was a poet this prose was lyrical, and in the sense of the cosmic poets, Whitmanesque.

In Peter Ohlin's Agee, the only book-length study of Agee's work, the author maintains that "Agee's aesthetic derives ultimately from Whitman, for whom, as Charles Fiedelson put it, a poem 'instead of referring to a completed act of perception, constitutes the act itself, both in the author and in the reader; instead of describing reality, a poem is a realization.'"[8] When Agee became primarily a prose writer his poetic sensibility remained intact; thus the alliterative and lyrical passages of Famous Men which so closely approach poetry that one hardly

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[7] Letters, pp. 47-48.

[8] Peter Ohlin, Agee (New York, 1966), p. 30.

dares call them prose. The book is best comprehended when approached as the record of an experience, both the art and its inspiration. It is a merging, as the experience itself was, of form with content.

Despite conflicts involved in his personal life, Agee retained the affirmation which characterizes the cosmic consciousness. Those qualities of Whitman's which are emphasized in Start with the Sun are evident from Agee's early poetry through his final Pulitzer Prize-winning novel A Death in the Family. But these qualities are especially evident in Famous Men, for here he made the transition between poetry and the musical prose which would become his own style.

In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men the men praised are hardly famous. Agee went to Alabama as a reporter and during his sojourn there learned that the least famous of men are to be praised equally with the most famous. The title of the work is from the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, and in the final pages of Famous Men the biblical passage is quoted. Significant is the fact that "some there be who have no memorial; who perished as though they had never been" but "whose righteousness hath not been forgotten." These are praised equally with those "that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported." (445) The title of Agee's book is ironic as well as sincere. The irony pervades the entire work; the sincerity becomes evident at the last when the passage from Ecclesiastes is presented. The beauty in the lives of the farmers, apparent to Agee the cosmic poet, is their memorial. The poet's task here is to recognize and relate those elements which illustrate that beauty as both particular and general. The Gudgers are introduced as a family, composed of specific individual members, but develop

in the book, as a result of Agee's confrontation with them, into representatives of the entire human family and the entire human condition.

Agee's eventual spiritual merging with the Gudgers is a slow process. It takes perhaps the entire month he lived among them and the next five years of his life, during which time he wrote and continually revised Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. He had guiltily spied through the contents of the family dresser drawers in order to complete the picture of each Gudger as a whole person. In his role as cosmic poet Agee was able, then, to show the elements of daily living which linked the individual Gudgers together as a family, and finally of all members of the human race as members of a great cosmic "family." Every detail of a man's life is essential to his individuality; every detail aids in comprehending his relation to all men. Agee describes with painstaking detail the odor of the mattresses, the taste and texture and smell of the bacon and biscuits, in his awareness that each of these descriptions is essential to the faithful rendering of the Gudgers' lives.

Agee approached the tenant farmers at the beginning of his 1936 summer with journalistic curiosity and youthful enthusiasm, but he departed deeply touched and compassionate, still feeling a bit guilty about the original nature of his mission. He then decided that the subject, which he defined as "an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity," (xiv) must be dealt with on its own terms and with complete fidelity to the actual human beings who had inspired the author's awareness.

The final product received rather uncertain reviews. Time's anonymous reviewer called it "some of the most exciting prose since Melville . . . .

caused by Agee's determination to be ruthlessly faithful to his own thoughts and feelings even when they fail to make sense."[9] Selden Rodman wrote in the Saturday Review of Literature that "part of the greatness and unique quality of 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,' then is its structural failure . . . ." but he also spoke of "the unparalleled intensity of much of the writing."[10] Harvey Breit of the New Republic stated that "Mr. Agee, at times writes brilliantly . . . he is extraordinarily sensitive and aware . . . ."[11] John C. Cort of Commonweal declared the book "too repetitious, too obscure, too obsessed with irrelevant detail, and particularly too obsessed with the author's complex reactions to his subject and to everything from Cezanne to Kafka to his own relatives."[12]

As Ohlin points out in his study of Famous Men, Agee received much attention and even praise for his prose style and for his sensitivity, but he received little affirmative notice for the book itself as a meaningful unity. Even at the 1960 reprint, Ohlin states, "nobody really tried to see the work as a unity, structured in its peculiar way for a definite

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9 "Experiment in Communication," Time, XXXVII (October 13, 1941), 104.

10 Selden Rodman, Review of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Saturday Review of Literature, XXIV (August 23, 1941), 6.

11 Harvey Breit, "Cotton Tenantry," New Republic CV (September 5, 1941), 348.

12 John C. Cort,"Contemporary Social Problems," Commonweal, XXXIV (September 12, 1941), 449.

purpose instead of being merely a collection of fragmentary notes and reflections."[13]

The structural and stylistic unity of Famous Men depends on the subtle recurrence of themes and on the central image of the globe, which becomes a symbol for cosmic unity. The themes of the isolation and sanctity of the individual and of the interrelatedness of all things are repeated and re-emphasized throughout the book. The structure is symphonic in the same way that Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" are symphonic. The symbols of the globe and the musical motif, as well as a constant reverence for human dignity, are woven through Famous Men, and like a repeated though varied theme in a sonata, provide the unity in a subtle but distinct manner that early critics often failed to realize.

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13 Agee, p. 54. Ohlin refutes Rodman's criticism of structural failure with a detailed description of the actual structures of the book. He describes its five major divisions and their subdivisions, as well as the cyclical movement from dawn through night and back to dawn, and from the birth of a tenant farmer through his death.

CHAPTER IV

COSMIC UNITY AND COMPASSION

The recurrence of the symbol of the globe in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men provides an artistic unity for the work. Agee sees the globe, which is the central image of Famous Men, as a microcosm for the universe. The presentation of the poet's cosmic awareness through a concrete image provides both a structural and thematic unity, as the image of the blade of grass had for "Song of Myself."

In Whitman's "Song of Myself" the blade of grass is a microcosm of all nature's patterns. Within the poem it represents all growth and all life; it is an unified individual organism, but its existence depends on its interaction with other elements of the universe. It symbolizes the cosmic consciousness because it represents the duality of individual distinctions and universal harmony. James E. Miller commends Whitman's use of the grass as the organic symbol of cosmic unity. The structure of the book, even its title Leaves of Grass, suggests various relationships among the poems

> comparable to those that exist among spears and clusters and varieties of grass. These relationships are many; the poems, like grass have "grown" organically; like grass, these poems simultaneously celebrate individuality and "en-masse"; like grass, the poems are themselves evidence of an ever recurring life and immortality; and as some varieties of grass, like calamus, have special and subtly distinct characteristics, so do some elements of Whitman's poetic vision.[1]

Each poem in Leaves of Grass is a leaf which makes fertile and beautiful the field of which it is a vital part, as all beings, objects and ideas are significant individually and in infinite patterns of interrelationship.

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[1] James E. Miller, Jr., A Critical Guide to "Leaves of Grass," (Chicago, 1957), p. 168.

Whitman declares the leaf of grass "no less than the journey-work of the stars" and the "beautiful uncut hair of graves."[2] These metaphors present the symbolic nature of the green stuff, through which could be seen the hand of God and the mystery of the universe, as well as the ephemeral nature of man.

In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men the globe image not only provides an artistic unity for the book, but is symbolic of cosmic unity. The globe is representative of the entire earth, of any entirety or infinitely joined surface without distinct beginning or end. The globe, a sphere, had no single side, but a continuing non-linear surface. The eternally cyclical nature of the globe's physical as well as metaphorical connotations make it an appropriate symbol for universal unity.

The primary and concrete globe of Famous Men is a kerosene lamp providing light for Agee while the members of the Gudger household sleep. The illumination provided by this lamp is rich with significance, for by its light Agee gathers his thoughts and feelings as well as his notes. Here he composes, and reflects in and on the shadowy reflection of the oily glow.

Agee describes the lamp and its globular receptacle for the coal-oil which feeds the light, and through which the wick shoots up "like a thought, a dream, the future," and "ends fledged with flame." (50) This description suggests the hope and affirmation of the cosmic poet's vision, for it is in his own mind that the appearance of the flame is like "a dream, the future."

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[2] Deathbed Edition, pp. 88, 66.

Writing by the light of this lamp, Agee suggests that the structure of his work, if it were not necessary for it to be a book, would be globular, since he observes the structure of society as globular. He sculpts the shape as "eighteen or twenty intersected spheres, the interlocking of bubbles on the face of a stream; one of these globes is each of you." (101) Like molecules with individual nuclei, individual and isolate but necessarily interacting for the composition of matter, these globes are the individual lives which, though distinctly spearate and unique, comprise the cosmos and its unified order of existence. Like bubbles, they are isolated parts of a larger order which unites them, and they are fragile so that bursting or dissolving they lose their individual identities. This inevitable merging with the stream's water, which is their substance, is in itself a metaphorical representation of the cosmic elevation and its movement from individual distinction to immersion in the cosmos.

The "eighteen or twenty intersected spheres" Agee describes are human beings in their interaction with each other. The individual nature of the human-being-as-globe begins at the moment of conception, for "in this instant already his globe is rounded upon him and is his prison, which might have been his kingdom." (103) Here he describes the particular predicament of his subjects, the families of tenant farmers who are born enchained and without hope of or chance for breaking out of the environmental and emotional imprisonment. The image of the intersected globes must here be visualized as a chain binding the individual to the plight of his predecessors. Agee describes this entrapment, not simply as enclosure but an integrated element of his existence, from the first

dramatic bursting forth of the human infant (which Agee calls at one point "globular damagements" /106/):

> his lungs ready to burst his heart breaking, his body naked, his primal weapons lost that he might swim at all, bursts bleeding into freedom of his breathing element to find, surrounding him, not just in circle on a floor in closured den as Daniel, but in such complex of such circle as blows round him one bubble and sutureless globe, his grinning grincing machinearmed scorcheyes raving foes. (104)

This juxtaposition of adjectives describes the world which awaits this child as a ferocious bird of prey as well as a cold "machinearmed" automaton. The particular enemy in the farm child's life is a landlord, a shopkeeper, a schoolteacher, and a society which clucks its tongue in quasi-sympathy for the plight of the tenant farming class it perpetuates. This child, "defenseless and unknowing" is "without choice, without knowledge for choice if he had it, without power of choice if he had knowledge." (104) For the adult there is only the rhetorical question strung through Part II of the section "A Country Letter" like a symphonic theme: "How was it we were caught?" (81) This farm child develops within his globular structure until, "five or six years old, he stands at the center of his enormous little globe a cripple of whose curability one must at least have most serious doubt." (109)

Though the child's environment, as well as his person, is from birth a prison for him, the future void of hope for change, Agee does not suggest that these people are the only sufferers among mankind. Their condition is especially pathetic because they are helpless --- improverished and often unhealthy. Whitman, in his embrace of all mankind, also distinguished a special beauty among the circumstantially

unfortunate. In his 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass he referred to the "indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius. The poet sees for a certainty how one not a great artist may be just as sacred as the greatest artist . . . ."[3]

The misfortunes of other men's lives, however, are no less significant than those of the Gudgers when all are recognized in the cosmic sense. Conversely, and this of course is Agee's main concern, the pitiable condition of the Gudgers' life is no less meaningful within the cosmic order than Lear's cry:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of the pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these: O! I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physick, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just. (xviii)

In the tragedy of King Lear's life he realizes his own failure to recognize the tragedy in other men's lives. These lines from the third act of King Lear appear in the prefatory material of Famous Men as an indication of not only Agee's own reaction to the events of that summer, but of the response he wishes to elicit from the reader.

Agee again echoes Lear's sentiments to emphasize the cosmic relationship between kings and wretches when he says:

> This human sphere is all one such interlocked and marvelously variegated and prehensile a disease and madness, what man in

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[3] Inclusive Edition, p. 492.

> ten million shall dare to presume he is cleansed of it more
> so then another, shall dare better than most hesitantly to venture,
> that one form of this ruin is more than a millionth preferable
> to another? (108)

This cosmic linking of the fabric of all men's lives is further emphasized by an image which resembles in attitude Whitman's statement that a blade of grass is "no less than the journey-work of the stars."[4] Agee maintains that each living human "is intimately connected with the bottom and the extremest reach of time" and that "each is composed of substances identical with the substance of all that surrounds him, both the common objects of his disregard, and the hot centers of stars." (56) On the cosmic level, then, the globular shape of each man's life is meaningful through its interlinking with all other lives. Its meaning is emotionally intense, more involved with the mystery of the stars than with the earth. Gay Wilson Allen's comment on "Song of Myself" illustrates the manifestation of the cosmic consciousness. On the social level the poet enters vicariously into the life of every man or woman he has known or can imagine. "On the cosmic level he intuits his identity in the evolution of the stars, the origin of life, and the beauty of all elemental things."[5]

The social level of "Song of Myself" which Allen mentions is the poet's personal interaction with other living creatures. At the base of this interaction is a love and respect for all humanity, for the important reason that each individual is a unique but essential portion of the cosmic whole. It is difficult to separate the cosmic level in which the globe

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4 Deathbed Edition, p. 88.

5 Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman As Man, Poet, and Legend (Carbondale, 1961), p. 469.

symbolizes cosmic unity, from the social level in which the spheres symbolizing each man's particular identity intersect. The compassion of Lear's cry is a theme which recurs in the songs of both Whitman and Agee, who have each learned "to feel what wretches feel."

In Section Thirty-Three of "Song of Myself" Whitman lists animals, places, and persons with whom the poet merges in his search for self; he passes "through the curtained saloon, through the office or the public hall" and is "pleas'd with the native and pleas'd with the foreign . . ./ Pleas'd with the homely woman as well as the handsome."[6] Mingling with the various aspects of human nature he becomes them all, and cries, "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there."[7] And, more specifically, he recalls

> Agonies are one of my change of garments
> I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,
> My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.[8]

This is full identification, not mere sympathy, and the experience leaves the poet aware of his own cosmic consciousness through his awareness of the unified cosmos.

Agee's compassion, too, reached its cosmic height through a projection of himself into the experience he shared with the Alabama sharecroppers. The experience is presented through many separate events of the summer, but the nature of Agee's response differs from Whitman's. Whereas Whitman cries with joy at his discovery of unity, Agee maintains despair at the difficulty of the confrontation with another person's

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6 Deathbed Edition, p. 92.

7 Ibid., p. 94.

8 Ibid.

emotional being. The difficulty for him lay not only in the intensity of the experience itself, but in his continual knowledge of the impossibility of communicating it without altering the richness of the occasion and the vicissitudes of its significance. In Famous Men Agee is obsessed with this impossibility, and constantly fears his failure to treat it justly.

This personal torment of Agee's contributes to the reader's understanding of the author's great compassion for his subjects. His description of Emma Woods begins, "What's the use trying to say what I felt." (64) Eighteen-year-old Emma, the sister of George Gudger's wife, was leaving the family to join her middle-aged wastrel husband, and Agee was with the family at the parting, joining in the task of remaining dignified amidst the obvious sorrow of the occasion:

> she stood looking straight into my eyes, and I straight into hers, longer than you'd think it would be possible to stand it. . . . and all I could do, the very most, for this girl who was so soon going out of my existence into so hopeless a one of hers, the very most I could do was not to show all I cared for her and what she was saying, and not to even try to do, or indicate the good I wished I might do her and was so utterly helpless to do. (64-65)

Agee's compassion was combined with his awareness of his human limitations and utter helplessness. Erling Larsen wrote in a review of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men that for Agee "'compassion' was a word used . . . in its basic sense; he wanted to and needed to suffer with these people."[9]

At the 1960 reprint of Famous Men Priscilla Robertson challenged this point of view. She had spent the summer of 1937 with sharecroppers and found them "too unselfconscious to know the meaning of their own lives," and she felt that Agee had rather presumptuously "made himself

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[9] "Let Us Not Now Praise Ourselves," Carleton Miscellany, II, No. 1 (Winter, 1961), 93.

their organ of preception." To this she added that "James Agee couldn't imagine anyone's being either happy or self-propelled. He was a tragic poet who had to see and magnify and beautify into art the suffering in any life . . . ."[10] This criticism was perhaps to some extent true, for even in Agee's mature work A Death in the Family, it is through suffering that human dignity is revealed.

The Gudgers, however, while not conscious of the meaning of their lives, were aware of certain failings. They attempted to "beautify" their squalid homes with ancient snapshots and obsolete calendars. Parents attempted to provide each child with at least one store-bought item of apparel. Agee's transmittal of this into art is certainly no fault; in his cosmic vision these details of the Gudgers' lives are art. And thus he painstakingly re-creates each detail in order to present the reader with an awareness, not that he makes them beautiful, but that the lives of these people are inherently beautiful, as are the lives of all human beings.

Whitman could be similarly accused of seeming to magnify into beauty what he recognized as the inherent beauty of human life. In Section Seven of "Song of Myself" he sings of those unaware of their own magnificance: "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself,/(They do not know how immortal, but I know)."[11] As cosmic poet he knows, and says for the unenlightened what they are not yet aware of in their own lives.

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10 Priscilla Robertson, "Agee's Special View," The Progressive, XXV (January, 1961), 44.

11 Deathbed Edition, p. 68.

Agee's full realization of the significance of the summer's experience and his love for the Gudger family came in one quiet moment when circumstances forced him to arouse the family from sleep. After leaving the Gudgers' home on a rainy night, his car had become caught in the mud. He walked to the then-dark house and embarrassedly awakened George Gudger, who in turn awakened his wife Annie Mae. Agee apologized with perhaps too much humility as they welcomed him to stay the night and insisted he eat some supper before retiring. While he was sitting in the kitchen with George and Annie Mae Gudger, the intense love he felt for them came into focus:

> the feeling increased itself upon me that at the end of a wandering and a seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home, between two who were my brother and sister, yet less that than something else; these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents, in whose patience I was so different, so diverged, so strange as I was; and all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing else on earth, and as if well known in a deep past and long years lost . . . . 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. (415)

In the quiet intimacy of this totally shared experience and in the intensely personal quality of the moment, the universality of all experience and sentiment became evident to Agee. Through love and through shared suffering the origin of this recognition became apparent, and Agee was elevated to the cosmic consciousness.

The major difference between Whitman's and Agee's compassion is a difference in tone. Whitman's "barbaric yawp"[12] is energetic and dynamic, whereas Agee's song is gentle. Agee's gentleness, contrasting with the vitality of his rambunctious life, extends into his final work; in A Death in the Family the author's gentle tone provides the mood for the work.

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[12] Deathbed Edition, p. 113.

Where Whitman cries "I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself" and "There is that in me --- I do not know what it is --- but I know it is in me/ . . . . It is not chaos or death --- it is form, union, plan --- it is eternal life --- it is Happiness,"[13] Agee whispers, "there is a particular sort of intimacy between the three of us which is not of our creating and which has nothing to do with our talk." (417)

The intimacy Agee shared with the Gudgers and which Whitman attempted to share with all men, depends on cosmic awareness. What might have been merely personal and sentimental was elevated by the universal love that the personal contact inspired. The evocation of this intimate and cosmic knowledge required not only compassion and a universal symbol, but a strong, emotive voice. In each man's work the cosmic symbol is supported by the sounds of music, songs which suggest the emotional intensity of the cosmic experience itself.

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13 Deathbed Edition, pp. 101, 112-113.

CHAPTER V

HYMNS OF PRAISE

Whitman and Agee both felt that the power of poetry was similar to the evocative power of music, invoking a mood or an emotion rather than merely stating facts or describing situations. They wished to create an effect similar to that produced by music, and found that musical metaphors and nuances of sound patterns were the most effective ways to combine music with language. Peter Ohlin points out Whitman's statement that "'my poems, when complete, should be a unity, in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body . . . or that a musical composition is.'"[1] Agee's own wish was "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."[2] Both men considered "verbal symphonies" the ideal form for their cosmic visions.

In 1930 Agee had written to Father Flye of his desire to give his work a definite musical quality: "... Inaccurately speaking --- I want to write symphonies."[3] He went on to define this: "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. . . ."[4] Famous Men was in part

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1 quoted in Agee, p. 46.

2 Letters, p. 48.

3 Ibid., p. 47.

4 Ibid., p. 47-48.

a testing ground for this style, which Agee would later perfect in The Morning Watch and A Death in the Family. Just as Debussy's La Mer does not attempt to reproduce the actual sound of the sea, but the quality of the sound --- the emotions and introspections of a man hearing and observing the eternal motion of the sea --- so does Agee wish to reproduce in Famous Men the quality of his experience in Alabama and of the lives with which his own had become interrelated. Agee speaks of Famous Men as musical in intent and scope, and communicates this in much the same way Whitman had.

The musical nature of "Song of Myself" depends both on specific musical references and on the symphonic structure with its repetition and variation of one or several themes. In Section Eighteen of "Song of Myself" the poet announces that "with music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums"[5]; throughout the poem musical imagery supports this theme; he hears "bravuras of birds," or loves "the hum of your valved voice," or watches as "the pure contralto sings in the organ loft."[6] He chants "the chant of dilation or pride," or admits that the "call in the midst of the crowd" is "my own voice, orotund, sweeping and final."[7] The image of the leaf of grass, the poet's continued identification with all men in all situations of life, the sanctity of the whole individual, body and soul --- these are introduced and

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[5] Deathbed Edition, p. 77.

[6] Ibid.,pp. 85, 65, 73.

[7] Ibid., pp. 79, 102.

repeated as symphonic themes are introduced, varied and recapitulated. In the final section of "Song of Myself" there is total organic unity of the poet and the microcosmic blade of grass:

> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your boot-sole.
>
> You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
> But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
> And filter and fibre your blood.[8]

This symphonic technique, as Whitman used it, is defined by Calvin S. Brown in Music and Literature. He states, in reference to "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'e," that "the principle (though not the structure itself) is that of sonata form: statement of related but contrasting themes, development of these themes, and recapitulation of them in much their original form."[9] "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" begins with the introduction of the lilac, the star in the west, and the "shy and hidden bird."[10] Separate symbols have been introduced which eventually represent the developing themes of the poem. They serve as signals for the poet's eventual awareness of the beauty of death. Repetition of words, which become symbols for themes, leads to the ultimate union in song: "Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul."[11] Similarly, but less obviously, does "Song of Myself" operate, its themes

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8 Ibid., p. 114.

9 Calvin S. Brown, Music and Literature (Athens, 1948), p. 193.

10 Deathbed Edition, p. 298.

11 Ibid., p. 305.

either suggested or stated, then repeated and developed, and unified by the singer and the microcosmic blade of grass.

Agee employs this same principle in Famous Men, as in his later prose work. The emotions and responses which music can evoke were what Agee sought to inspire through his prose. This lyrical prose style created moods and atmospheres as often as it created descriptive scenes. Agee wished to use language to present not only the physical actuality, but the entire psychological and emotional temper of a scene and situation. Musical imagery and technique provided the direction for this. Whitman, too, had discovered that music had the power to convey mood through the quality of sound. Robert D. Faner points out in Walt Whitman and Opera that Whitman was attracted by music's power to "suggest" rather than declare an attitude or atmosphere.[12]

The musical motif is introduced early in the text of Famous Men. In the Preface Agee quotes a portion of the fourth act, third scene, of King Lear,[13] and the famous words from the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win." (xviii) Of the latter words Agee adds, in a footnote,

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[12] Robert D. Faner, Walt Whitman and Opera (Philadelphia, 1951), p. 129.

[13]
Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of the pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these: O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physick, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (xviii)

that "in the pattern of the work as a whole, they are, in the sonata form, the second theme;" and of the quotation from Lear that "the poetry preceding them is the first." (xviii) The poetry from King Lear invites the reader to empathize with the human beings presented in Famous Men, and this is the first theme. The words from the Communist Manifesto are both deeply sincere and ironic, for the Gudgers were incorrigibly resigned to their quiet, exploited lives. As themes, the dignity of the individual and the degradation of circumstances, respectively, are varied throughout the book. They appear and re-appear as symphonic themes do.

Agee attempts in his introductory material to explain in brief the impact of his experience during the summer of 1936, and also the necessity for the reader to be capable of the same sort of emotional empathy. He suggests getting the loudest possible radio or phonograph for a performance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or of Schubert's C-Major Symphony. Then, he recommends,

> turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there breathing as lightly as possible . . . . 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. As near as you will ever get, you are inside the music; not only inside it, you are it; your body is no longer your shape and substance, it is the shape and substance of the music. (15-16)

Agee requires of his reader what Whitman required of his; total unity with author and subject. As Whitman expanded his own being in "Song of Myself" to become joined with those of whom he sang, so Agee demands that his readers empathize as he did, expanding human consciousness to the cosmic level in order to comprehend, as fully as possible, the

subject by becoming a part of it. The images, techniques, and sounds of music came as naturally to Agee as they had to Whitman. As Whitman asked the reader to merge with himself and the song of the bird in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Agee invites, and requires, the serious reader of Famous Men to do the same.

One of the first experiences Agee relates about his summer in Alabama is the forced song of three young Negro men. Agee's description duplicates not only the emotions of the singers, but the quality and tone of their voices, involving also the sorrowful humiliation felt by Agee and Evans and the singers at the occasion of the song:

> the tenor lifted out his voice in a long, plorative line that hung like fire on heaven, or whistle's echo, sinking, sunken, along descents of a modality I had not heard before, and sank along the arms and breast of the bass as might a body sunken from a cross. . . . the tenor winding upward like a horn a wire, the flight of a bird, almost into full declamation, then failing it, silencing; at length enlarging, the others lifting, now, alone, lone, and largely questioning, alone and not sustained, in the middle of space, stopped . . . and they are quiet, and do not look at us, nor at anything. (29-30)

Agee's discomfort while listening to this religious song of which the boys were embarrassedly proud is evident in this description which emphasizes in the tenor's portion "a body sunken from a cross" or after "the flight of a bird" the "failing it, silencing." Yet this song was indicative of the obstacles facing Agee as an intruder in this area, and of the communication barrier he must overcome in order to transfer his humanitarian sympathy for the poor to a recognition of the common bonds among all men.

From the beginning of the book proper, Agee employs assonance and alliteration to set the tone for the overall musical effect he wishes to

create. The tone is reverent, the pace slow as he describes the summer night, the house "descended deep beneath the gradual spiral it had sunk through, it lay formal under the order of entire silence." (19) The use of the word "formal" here enhances the solitude and solemnity Agee is presenting, while the "order of entire silence" creates an atmosphere of vast quiet, a universe hovering away from the house. Agee continues: "that region of the earth on which we were at this time transient was some hours fallen beneath the fascination of the stone, steady shadow of the planet, and lay now listing toward the last depth . . . ." (19) The gentle rhythms created by the alliterated "s" and "t" sounds in this passage emphasize the silence of the evening; and the "fascination of the stone, steady shadow of the planet" suggests a distinction between the house and the rest of the world, which seems to weigh upon the house so heavily.

The rhythms created by alliteration and phrasing in Agee's prose are not so methodical as Whitman's poetry (Agee is, after all, writing prose), but resemble it nevertheless in passages such as those quoted above and sometimes in entire chapters. In the section entitled "A Country Letter III" Agee describes the beginning of a day:

> Spired Europe is out, up the middle of her morning, has brought her embossed cities, her front of country snailed with steel;
>
> the Atlantic globe is burnished, ship-crawled, pathed and paved of air, brightens to blind;
>
> from stone shore, bluff-browed tree, birds are drawn sparkling and each plant: erects upon his root, lifts up his head, accepts once more the summer:
>
> The night has dried. (83-84)

Like Whitman, Agee lists the parts, distinct and separate but of equal importance, which portray the whole scene which he has perceived and now

transmits. The image of the city sky-line, "spired Europe is out," suggests a lifting movement, as if the city, rather than the sun, were rising at dawn. This same upward movement is conveyed by the plant which "erects upon his root, lifts up his head." The motion and images of ascent in this selection provide a contrast to the stillness and withdrawal of the world in Agee's description of a summer night in Alabama. Whereas at night the land is portrayed as "descended deep beneath the gradual spiral it had sunk through," (19) in the morning "the land, in its largeness: stretches: is stretched . . . ." (85)

The arrival of the new day, which seems to be, through Agee's lyrical description, the arrival of the world to greet the day, is accompanied by the morning songs of a whipporwhill and a rooster. The rooster's voice rings out with a musical image reminiscent of Whitman: "It cleaves in its full fortissimo: so valiant a noise as rescuing bugle, or tenor, broke his throat for . . . ." (86) The similarity to Whitman's "I hear bravuras of birds . . . ." and "I hear the violoncello ('tis the young man's heart's complaint . . . .)"[14] in "Song of Myself" is one of thought and feeling rather than mere stylistic affinity. For both men loved music and believed it had a power to evoke a feeling which could only be transmitted verbally by borrowing the terminology of the musical medium. Where assonance and alliteration or the rhythms of the language did not suffice to convey the musical quality the poet wished, each used images characterized by musical terminology.

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14 Ibid., p. 85.

Agee's use of musical terminology extends to every aspect of that summer's experience, including the after-dinner chatter of the family and the structure of a tenant shack. The evening talk of the Gudger family is "not really talking, or meaning, but another and profounder kind of communication, a rhythm to be completed by answer and made whole by silence, a lyric song, as horses who nudge one another in pasture, or like drowsy birds who are heavying a branch with their tiredness before sleep." (71) The kind of communication Agee describes here is the kind that his own literary style employs. It is emotive because it presents the details of a scene or situation in such a way that the author's emotional response is communicated and the reader responds similarly. Thus can silence and a lyric song be related, by the quality of the silence. Though without vocalization, there is communication in the gesture between two horses who nudge each other gently, and there is communication between that scene and its observer. Again, the observer's description enhances the communication by duplicating not only the scene, but its significance, and the atmosphere which surrounded it.

Agee describes the frame structures in which the tenant families lived in both the architectural detail which provides dimensions and characteristic shapes, and also in terms of the kind of life which such a home nurtures. The houses are insufficient as protection from the elements, and they allow no privacy. Yet Agee, with a description characteristic of the cosmic consciousness, sees that "there can be more beauty and more deep wonder in the standings and spacings of mute furnishings on a bare floor between the squaring bourns of walls than in any music ever made." (134) The bare house,

exposed to the winds and a victim of seasonal changes, corresponds with the lives of its inhabitants, also at the mercy of external forces. It is the beauty of their unornamented lives that Agee learns to love during his stay.

In his observations of the tenant house and its stark wooden structure Agee found that amid its carefully joined surfaces were slight incongruities such as discoloration of the cheap wood due to weather conditions, inconsistent grain textures, and the presence of a hole where once there was a knot. Agee saw these variations, in their unawareness of the insulated, polished finishes of contracted houses, as "convulsions and ecstasies such as Beethoven's deafness compelled." (145) These spontaneous asymmetrical patterns provide the particular beauty of the tenant shack.

Elsewhere Agee expands this musical imagery in describing the symmetry of a tenant house in its

> intensities of relationship far more powerful than full symmetry, or studied dissymetry, or use of relief or ornament, can ever be: indeed, the power is of another world and order than theirs, and there is, as I mentioned, a particular quality of a thing handmade, which by comparison I can best suggest thus: by the grandeur that comes of the effort of one man to hold together upon one instrument, as if he were breaking a wild monster to bridle and riding, one of the larger fugues of Bach, on an organ, as against the slick collaborations and effortless climaxes of the same piece in the manipulations of an orchestra. (144)

The quality of beauty, the cosmic aesthetic as it were, is best portrayed here by the musical analogy, showing an effective relationship between vision and sound. And yet the individual, personal involvement in the creative act, as Agee explains above, provides the beauty both in the homes and in the lives of the people who inhabit them.

Agee's recognition of an elemental beauty in the dilapidated homes of the rural South and of a lyrical beauty in the lives of their inhabitants testifies to his own cosmic consciousness. His organic expression of this knowledge provides the logical development of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. The book is vast and various, but its structure is essentially symphonic, as in Whitman's "Song of Myself." In "Song of Myself" Whitman had written, following one of his catalogues of people in their habits and occupations,

> And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
> And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
> And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.[15]

And Agee wrote in Famous Men, to the families whom he had grown to love during his summer in Alabama, "you of whom I write are added to the meaning of this song, and its meaning to yours." (391)

The symphonic structure of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is developed through the sonata-like presentation of themes and the sounds and terminology of music. Agee found musical imagery particularly evocative of mood, but its appeal was not entirely abstract. Like Whitman, he knew that this most abstract art was concretely present in nature. The onomatopoeia of poetic language was an effective device for presenting this, and the sounds of nature and of various musical instruments (including the human voice) support their faith in music's communicative power. The emphasis on musical technique in Agee's work did not cease with the completion of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, however; his later prose continued to be lyrical. But his rhythms matured, became more carefully controlled, and presented more concisely the cosmic themes of which he first became fully aware during the five years in which Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was in progress.

CHAPTER VI

THE MATURITY OF AGEE'S COSMIC VISION

The sweeping, lyrical prose style which Agee devised as the organic medium for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was almost experimental in the perspective of the full body of his work. Excluding his early poems, film scripts and film criticism (published in the two volumes of Agee on Film), and other magazine publications, his mature prose style is most evident in The Morning Watch and A Death in the Family. Especially in the latter work can the Whitman influence be seen; in A Death in the Family the image of leaves recurs with the gentle motion of falling leaves themselves. These three important prose works are obtrusively autobiographical, and the maturity of Agee's style is almost an exact opposite parallel to the maturity of his subject. In A Death in the Family, Rufus is seven years old; in The Morning Watch Richard is twelve; in Famous Men Agee is twenty-seven.

When Let Us Now Praise Famous Men was re-issued in 1960, it included a foreword by Walker Evans entitled "James Agee in 1936." Evans gave a brief sketch of the idealistic young man who spoke the way he wrote, with dramatic gestures, rolling lyrical rhythms, and unquenchable enthusiasm. The style which is so characteristic of Agee's written prose seemed not only natural, but inherent. Evans attributed this to Agee's "sheer energy of imagination." (x) This exuberance continued for the rest of Agee's life; he was a prolific writer, though much of what he wrote remained

imcomplete or appeared anonymously in the pages of Time magazine. Even his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel A Death in the Family was unfinished when Agee died in 1955; his publishers patched the manuscript together.

While Agee was unable to edit his final work because of his death, he also had difficulty editing his first major work, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. It was too vast in scope for the magazine article which was the purpose of its inception, and even the final published product contained vast digressions from his nominal subject, though not from its theme. For example, Agee quotes his answer to a poll by Partisan Review of the artist's position in twentieth century America. While this is irrelevant to the lives of the Alabama sharecroppers, it is deeply entrenched in Agee's personal confrontation with their lives. When asked if he was conscious of his use in literature of a usable past in American experience, he responded that for an artist the utilitarian implications of that word are offensive, and that the elements from the past which an author "uses" are universal and out of time. (352-353) This digression is appropriate to the cosmic theme of Famous Men, whose subjects became, through Agee's "use" of them, symbolic of man's sanctity and dignity amidst the difficulties of a universe beyond his comprehension. While he writes of the particular plight of Southern rural Americans, he writes also of all men in this struggle.

Another reason for the vastness of Famous Men is the exuberance of its author. The book is a constant conflict between love of humanity and bitterness at man's exploitation of his fellow man. While Agee wrote Famous Men government programs were being initiated which sought to alleviate the problems of hunger, ignorance, and disease which constantly confronted the Gudgers. Their problem in the days of the

New Deal, however, was not much different from that of families in similar situations today. Because George Gudger was a healthy male in the home, the family was ineligible for welfare aid to families with children. George Gudger was a tenant farmer, living and working as an employee on another man's land, and therefore could not work for the WPA because tenant farmers "are, technically, employed, and thus have no right to it: and if by chance they manage to get it, landlords are more likely than not to intervene." (120) Although the Depression years had been hard on these families, it was not for them, as it was for formerly higher income families, a substantial change in their standard of living. They had been born into poverty and were too much in debt to their landlords to leave the South. Agee attempted to share not only that 1936 summer, but the whole life experience of the Gudgers. Through this attempt to know fully another human being Agee found the theme and the style which would characterize his later prose.

The Morning Watch was first published in 1951 in Rome in Botteghe Oscure. In the same year it was published in this country by Houghton Mifflin, and in 1966 brought out in a Ballantine paperback with an introduction by Allan Pryce-Jones, who states the common complaint that "for some tastes the prose may be almost too sonorous."[1] The elaborate, lyrical quality that pervaded Famous Men appears in this short novel, with an image of a rooster's song strongly reminiscent of the rooster in the earlier work: "Proud, fierce behind the cook's house, the cry of a third rooster shining sprang, speared, vibrated as gaily and teasingly in the centers of their flesh as a jews-harp."[2] The alliterated "s" and

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1 James Agee, The Morning Watch (New York, 1966), p. xi.

2 Ibid., p. 123.

the musical imagery remained a characteristic of Agee's mature literary voice.

In The Morning Watch twelve-year-old Richard attempts to live within the experience of the Crucifixion of Christ. In Famous Men Agee had found total immersion in another's experience to be impossible, but he also found that identification and empathy were possible. It was, however, difficult to communicate. Like Whitman, he found that listing sensory details was perhaps the best, most organic method of re-creating verbally this identification. The Morning Watch presents this problem more concisely, and therefore more effectively, than the earlier Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

The communication problem that confronted Agee was the central theme of The Morning Watch. The middle chapter of the book presents Richard in chapel on Good Friday, confused by his own adolescent inability to "fit in" with the other boys in his private school, and striving to know the pain of the crown of thorns and the nails. In a carefully structured alternation of his religious and secular thoughts, the boy's constant inability to feel the actual pain is a testimony to his own human limitations. As he prays "Blood of Christ inebriate me," the youth's mind wanders to the connotations of the verb and its association with what the schoolboys call "good ole whiskey."[3] Throughout his hour's watch, and part of another hour, Richard's mind approaches the knowledge of Christ's suffering, and loses it in secular speculation.

He is saved, however, later that morning when he joins some other students in an illicit trip to a nearby swimming hole. They arrive as the sun

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[3] Ibid., pp. 53-54.

rises, and amid the day's newness, Richard holds his breath in the water until he feels pain in his chest and head, and tells himself that he cannot reach air in time to save himself, thinking "O Lord let me suffer with Thee this day."[4] When he is exhausted and leaps for the surface he cries, "I didn't have the nerve!" and "Anyhow I tried."[5] John S. Phillipson points out that Richard "tries desparately to find reality, to escape from subjective states of mind."[6] Knowing that he could sympathize with Christ's death only through the experience of his own actual death, Richard failed. But, as Phillipson emphasizes, Richard is able to experience a symbolic rebirth by water in his own nakedness at dawn.[7]

The symbolic experience is satisfactory for a human being; though not full identification, it is as close as a man can come. This fictional presentation of the experience is more artistically successful than the non-fictional presentation in Famous Men because the point of view of Richard is consistent and the experience itself more severely limited than the scope of a man's life in Famous Men.

When A Death in the Family was posthumously published in 1957, Agee's name was already familiar in literary circles for various reasons;

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4 Ibid., p. 136.

5 Ibid., p. 137.

6 John S. Phillipson, "Character, Theme, and Symbol in The Morning Watch," Western Humanities Review, XV (Autumn, 1961), 361.

7 Ibid., p. 364.

Famous Men had won him some distinction, many readers had enjoyed his film scripts and film criticism, and he was known among New York intellectuals. One reviewer dismissed the novel as an overly sentimental work in which nothing happens.[8]

A Death in the Family won a Pulitzer Prize in 1958 and in 1961 Tad Mosel's dramatic adaptation of the novel into All the Way Home also won a Pulitzer Prize. W. J. Stuckey wrote in 1966, in The Pulitzer Prize Novels, of "the sensitive and precise language, the specific details which bring scenes and characters alive, and the sharp insights into the minds and feelings of the major characters."[9] The book is indeed sentimental, but only in the sense that the sensitive evoking of the response of a young wife and a young son to the death of a husband and father must be. That the book is autobiographical is irrelevant; that this "sensitive and precise language" is the product of obvious development in Agee's style is of great importance.

Dwight Macdonald praises Agee's penetration of the emotion of "domestic love" in a time when "the uneasiness the Victorians felt in the presence of the base we feel in the presence of the noble."[10] The language of A Death in the Family is what James E. Miller, Jr. called

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8 George P. Elliott, "They're Dead but They Won't Lie Down," Hudson Review, XI (Spring, 1958), 131-139.

9 W. J. Stuckey, The Pulitzer Prize Novels (Norman, 1966), p. 181.

10 Dwight Macdonald, Against the American Grain (New York, 1962), pp. 143, 148.

in his description of the cosmic poets, the "poetry of the ordered emotions."[11] In both The Morning Watch and A Death in the Family these emotions are more carefully ordered than they had been in Famous Men.

A Death in the Family was structured by his editors since Agee died before the text was fully prepared, but the style is clearly the mature version of the lyrical rhythms of Famous Men. Peter Ohlin points out that A Death in the Family, like Agee's earlier work, "derives ultimately from Whitman and the romantics in its method and sensibility."[12] Leslie Fiedler and Dwight Macdonald agreed with Ohlin that Agee's "poetry" in the novel was "an unanalysable fusion of theme and image, significance and language."[13]

A Death in the Family deals primarily with the reaction of the Follet family to the sudden death of the father Jay Follet. Seven-year-old Rufus (James Rufus Agee was known to friends and family as "Rufus" until he was an adult) is the primary respondent, although the point of view shifts as needed in different scenes. The respect and affection young Rufus feels for his father, and his difficulty in comprehending the "death" of his father as well as the entire adult world around him, are portrayed with a lyrical sensitivity which merges with the child's

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11 Start with the Sun, p. 45.

12 Agee, p. 7.

13 Leslie Fiedler, "Encounter with Death," New Republic, CXXXVII (December 9, 1957), 26. Macdonald wrote of the "unison of major emotion with good writing" in Against the American Grain (New York, 1962), p. 150.

own confused sensitivity. The themes of individual isolation and universal harmony which Agee developed in Famous Men are more subtly presented here.

The conflict in the marriage of good-natured, sometimes blasphemous Jay Follet and sensitive, pious Mary Follet develops one aspect of this theme. Despite their continuous antithetical attitudes toward the church, drinking, and childbearing, there is deep tenderness and affection between them. Young Rufus is aware of both their separateness and their unity. Rufus himself, while he cries for the warmth of the nearness of his family, knows he is in many ways alone and distinctly different from them. As a child he is aware of those who "receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am."[14]

The lyrical rhythms of Famous Men and A Morning Watch appear in A Death in the Family primarily in Rufus' consciousness. Often this gentle, musical sound is accompanied by the sound of leaves, suggesting a parallel in nature with the circumstances of human lives. As Mary Follet lay in bed the night of her husband's death, "one by one, million by million, every leaf in that part of the world was moved."[15] In a later flashback Rufus recalls warm and pleasant evenings with his family, hearing the sounds of a summer day's end, and seeing "the slow twinkling of the millions of heavy leaves on the trees."[16]

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14 A Death in the Family (New York, 1957), p. 8.

15 Ibid., p. 212.

16 Ibid., p. 227.

In an earlier passage the sounds of a summer evening are described with the vivid musical imagery characteristic of evocations of atmosphere and mood in Famous Men. On another summer evening, in the introductory section entitled "Knoxville: Summer 1915," Agee describes the song of the locusts:

> The noise of each locust is pitched in some classic locust range out of which none of them varies more than two full tones: and yet you seem to hear each locust discrete from all the rest, and there is a long, slow, pulse in their noise, like the scarcely defined arch of a long and high set bridge.[17]

Like man in his world, each locust is perceived as both distinct and isolate, and interrelated with all other locusts in the creation of his music. Once again Agee returns to the cosmic theme of the paradox of individuality and harmony, the theme to which his presursor Whitman so often returned after his original "One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."[18]

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is easily recognized as a stepping-stone in the body of Agee's work, much as Whitman's "One's-Self I Sing" anticipates "Song of Myself." But this would be dismissal of the uniqueness of the expression of the cosmic vision in Famous Men. In Famous Men the full experience of cosmic elevation and illumination is presented. The songs of praise continue in Agee's later work in constant perfection of the richly poetic prose style he developed to communicate his cosmic consciousness. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is the poet's confrontation with universal love; The Morning Watch is the poet's

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17 Ibid., p. 6.

18 Deathbed Edition, p. 41.

confrontation with his religious insecurities and their reconciliation with his secular existence; A Death in the Family is the confrontation with the enigma of death. The diversity of human nature and experience is perceived in all of Agee's work as uniquely sacrosanct and universally interrelated like infinitely interlocking spheres or leaves of grass. The dynamic and organic presentation of these themes, with the love that the cosmic poet naturally feels, is intensely imminent in Agee's, as in Whitman's, hymns of praise.

The five years during which he wrote Famous Men were the major years in the development of Agee's prose style. Although his ideological affinities with Whitman are evident in Agee's work before his 1936 summer in Alabama, the culmination of his own thoughts about human suffering and compassion were concurrent with the events of that summer. Other writers were exploring similar predicaments of the post-Depression years, in the South and elsewhere. Erskine Caldwell described Southern sharecroppers, John Steinbeck described migrant workers, James T. Farrell described the problems of life in the city. In Harvey Swados' collection of representative works of the thirties, selected to give a new generation an understanding of American life during those years, Famous Men is singled out. Its distinction, he says, is that it "expresses in quintessential form everything most ardent and unafraid about the creative men of those years" and that it is unparalleled in its "searching not for absurdity but for meaningfulness, not for individual dissolution but for the profoundest kind of comradeship."[19] The intensity of that search, and the poetry in which

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19 Harvey Swados, ed., The American Writer and the Great Depression (Indianapolis, 1966), pp. xxxii, xxxiii.

Agee presents it, provide the universality of Famous Men. Famous Men is not concerned primarily with the Depression; by its publication date the stock market crash was more than a decade past. The problems of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men are universal --- the problems of compassion, communication, human dignity, and personal sanctity. Social issues are secondary to personal realization, especially Agee's own. Agee's personal growth during his summer in Alabama provided the cosmic illumination which gave his future prose its distinct style. The attention to correctness of word and detail were remnants of his years of writing poetry; when transferred into prose his style remained lyrical and rhythmic. After having become aware of universal harmony, Agee could not avoid making that awareness a major theme in his work. The importance of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men in the sixties is not as the voice of the thirties, but as the voice of poet finding his relationship with the cosmic, and singing the glories of that discovery, as Whitman sang it in "Song of Myself" and the other Leaves of Grass.

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