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# In praise of peasants : ways of seeing the rural poor in the work of James Agee, Walker Evans, John Berger, and Jean Mohr

Andrew Crooke  
*University of Iowa*

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**IN PRAISE OF PEASANTS:  
WAYS OF SEEING THE RURAL POOR  
IN THE WORK OF  
JAMES AGEE, WALKER EVANS,  
JOHN BERGER, AND JEAN MOHR**

by

Andrew Crooke

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy degree in English  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Emeritus John Raeburn  
Professor Phillip Round

*In Praise of Peasants* focuses on two sets of collaborators whose photo-textual depictions of the rural poor have been widely hailed on either side of the Atlantic but rarely discussed together. The British writer John Berger has acknowledged that the key inspiration for his projects with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr was *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941/1960) by James Agee and Walker Evans. As in that encomium to Alabama tenant farmers, Berger and Mohr straddle a line between social documentation and artistic expression in their own unclassifiable books: *A Fortunate Man* (1967), about a doctor's relationship with his patients in an English forest; *A Seventh Man* (1975), about the experience of migrant workers across Europe; and *Another Way of Telling* (1982), about the lives of Alpine peasants. All four of these cooperative endeavors brim with unresolved conflicts between ethics and esthetics, as well as authorial ambivalences toward rusticity and poverty. Manifold affinities in the two creative partnerships demand a transatlantic assessment that might view Agee and Evans as "unpaid agitators" for other artists and witnesses beyond an American ambit.

From among the many sensitive portrayals, including Berger's *Into Their Labours* trilogy, that constitute a rich literature of rural poverty, these collaborative enterprises are set apart not only by their interdisciplinary nature and fierce solidarities but by the equal weight they accord to images and words. Both pairs of authors develop innovative means for conjoining photography and writing. Both worry over the effects of their pictures and text on their subjects in addition to pondering how their distinct yet coordinated mediums might affect their viewers and readers. The enduring relevance of their representational techniques and motifs emerges from a productive dialectic between witness and artistry. Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr ingeniously explore how an ethical responsibility to bear witness for the exploited without inflicting further exploitation is enhanced or subverted

by an esthetic impulse to translate, verbally and visually, such marginalized lives into art. Their multifaceted ways of seeing the rural poor ultimately engender a means of praising their protagonists, transforming moments of witness into monuments of artistry.

Following a comparative analysis of these authors' attitudes, consistencies, and contradictions over the span of their careers, I offer chapters on their likeminded works. "Abashed Ambition" scrutinizes the contest deliberately staged between intentions and performance in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, while "A Continuous Center" examines how Agee's effusive text and Evans's austere photographs suspend instead of synthesize a pivotal tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. "A Sense of Measure" looks at why Berger and Mohr increasingly empathize with the rural poor, and how their three ventures generate "imaginative documentaries" or "narrative dialogues" between images and words. My epilogue knits together Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr by concentrating on a handful of their creative peers or heirs who have been inspired or agitated by their collaborations and whose own books similarly probe the ethical jeopardies and esthetic challenges of representing rural life or poverty through both prose and pictures.

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Andrew Crooke

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement  
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David Hamilton

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Shelton Stromquist

To Nidhi and Avantika



The only universal is the local as savages, artists and—to a lesser extent—peasants know.

William Carlos Williams

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

Isaiah 11:3-4

The relation of photography and language is a principal site of struggle for value and power in contemporary representations of reality; it is the place where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity.

W. J. T. Mitchell

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Thanking those who have contributed to this dissertation, whether tangibly or intangibly, is humbling as well as gratifying. Without the cogent critiques and frequent encouragement of John Raeburn, I would not have had the will to complete this project. Our shared enthusiasm for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* brought me to Iowa City, where he offered not just mentorship but friendship. John's continued engagement with my work from afar testifies to the intensity, forbearance, meticulousness, and perspicacity with which he has always responded to his students' writing. Any peccadillos evident in mine are likely the result of my obstinately not taking some sound piece of his advice.

I also wish to thank the other members of my committee: Phillip Round, whose passion for the land and for literature pushed me to explore how these entities intertwine; Linda Bolton, whose insightful devotion to ethics is indivisible from her infectious zeal for esthetics; Shelton Stromquist, whose historical rigor nonetheless tolerates those who suffer from literary fervor; and David Hamilton, whose own example of merging critical and creative sensibilities reminded me how fruitfully they can coexist within one unified consciousness. Additionally, among the other professors who helped shape my thinking for this study, I owe particular debts to Ed Folsom, Loren Glass, and Claire Fox.

Beyond the faculty and staff support of the English Department at the University of Iowa, I am grateful to the Graduate College for awarding me a Presidential Fellowship which made residence in the Midwest both productive and pleasurable while allowing me to maintain ties back East. Library services at Iowa and at the University of Pennsylvania ably facilitated research. I benefited, too, from a teaching position at Temple University.

My project was enhanced by serendipitous opportunities to interview John Berger and Jean Mohr. For getting the ball rolling in America and for passing the word along in

Europe, I am indebted to Lamar Herrin and Timothy O'Grady. Mr. Berger and Mr. Mohr each spoke with me affably and discerningly about their collaborations. I thank them for agreeing that I might record our conversations and use material from the transcripts.

A considerably different and much shorter version of my third chapter appears under the same title, "A Continuous Center," in *Agee at 100: Centennial Essays on the Works of James Agee*, edited by Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012). For his acceptance of and suggestions about this article, Michael deserves my gratitude, as does Jesse Graves for organizing panels of the James Agee Society on which I presented or will present portions of this study at the 2009 and 2013 conferences of the American Literature Association.

My interest in rural experience and agricultural hardship springs less from reading than from living, from my rearing on a small dairy farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. I thank my paternal grandparents, Leonard and Elizabeth Crooke, for establishing the place where I learned my most enduring lessons; my maternal grandparents, Raymond and the late Rachel Gross, for keeping their own family farm going into its third century; and my parents, David and Christine, for teaching me to see what I am looking at, whether on the page or in the strip cup. Likewise I thank my brothers, Peter, Matthew, John, Benjamin, and Joshua, for sharing all the work, exhaustion, exuberance, and remembrances of our agrarian upbringing, as well as the many aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends sympathetic to my persistent weddings of agriculture and literature, photography and memory.

After my own wedding midway through graduate school, an already large family circle expanded not only to the adjacent state of New Jersey but also to India. I thank my in-laws, Prem and Madhu Mehta, for welcoming me into their lives and cultural heritage, and my brother-in-law Manish, for proving that you can indeed finish a dissertation.

My daughter Avantika was born just before I began to write this thesis. Although it may have been done sooner had she not arrived at that precise juncture, these past two years have been such a joy because she did. Therefore I dedicate it to her and to my wife Nidhi, who motivated me to stay at my desk when I least wanted to and who inspired me through her own resilient commitment to her calling. To my mind there will only ever be one doctor in our household. For the daily gift of sharing her life with me I thank not her but the stars.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **MOMENTS OF WITNESS AND MONUMENTS OF ARTISTRY: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO RURAL POVERTY**

Who speaks for the poor? Through what means? Toward what end? How might the concrete experience as well as abstract essence of poverty be communicated by and to those who do not themselves live within it? Why are certain writers and photographers from the largely affluent, urbanized milieux of Europe and North America drawn keenly, fitfully, or committedly to poor rural dwellers? How might words and pictures cooperate to document and imagine such lives? How are both ethical and esthetic considerations key components of such interdisciplinary works about rural poverty? To what extent do their authors, as participant observers and modernist bookmakers, grapple consciously with competing motives of witness and artistry?

This study addresses these questions by focusing on two pairs of collaborators whose photo-textual works have been widely recognized on either side of the Atlantic albeit rarely discussed together. In 1999, the British writer John Berger, reflecting on his collaborations with the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, remarked: “We started from what James Agee and Walker Evans achieved in their magnificent *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.”<sup>1</sup> Much as Agee, in that 1941 volume on Alabama tenant farmers, denominates various spiritual and artistic forebears as the tome’s “unpaid agitators,”<sup>2</sup> so Berger belatedly pays a creative debt to him and Evans as the primary inspiration for his own unclassifiable books with Mohr: *A Fortunate Man* (1967), about a doctor’s relationship with his patients in an English forest; *A Seventh Man* (1975), about the experience of migrant workers across Europe; and *Another Way of Telling* (1982), about the lives of

Alpine peasants. Brimming with unresolved conflicts between ethics and esthetics, all four of these cooperative endeavors between a writer and a photographer straddle the line between social documentation and artistic expression. While continental and generational differences have militated against comparisons of the two creative partnerships, manifold affinities in the design and content of their books demand a transatlantic analysis that might suggest the lasting influence of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* on European as well as American representations of the rural poor.

But why these books instead of others? Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr are surely not the only artists to bear witness for a vulnerable yet unvanquished class of agricultural laborers or peasant villagers deemed obsolete by modernization.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, over the past century or so Americans and Europeans have produced enough accounts of hard work or hard times in the countryside to constitute a rich subgenre, a rather undervalued wealth of what might be called the literature of rural poverty.<sup>4</sup> Redolent with regional specificity, some literary testaments to life on the land are preserved in poetry, in such compelling collections as Robert Frost's *North of Boston* (1914) and Gary Soto's *The Elements of San Joaquin* (1977). From the depressed Midwest of Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) to the defaced Appalachia of Ann Pancake's *Strange As This Weather Has Been* (2007), stirring evocations likewise abound in American fiction. William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Wendell Berry's Port William Membership display their creators' imaginative rootedness in one place, fashioning rural universes around their postage stamps of native soil, while John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) distill the travails of masses of migratory farmworkers via unforgettable Okie and Chicano families. In Europe, too, the peasant receives lengthy literary treatment, whether pitiable or exalted, in novels

like Émile Zola's *The Earth* (1887) and Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* (1917), with agrarian communities and human relationships bound to the eternal cycle of Nature.

Berger himself contributes to if not utterly reinvents the subgenre with *Into Their Labours*, his fictional trilogy about peasant culture on the brink of transformation. In the “Historical Afterword” of its first volume, *Pig Earth* (1979), he describes the peasantry as a class of tough survivors who have resisted, yet been diminished by, the promises of bourgeois progress. His stories of hardy people in close contact with mercurial animals and natural perils reveal the daily chores, seasonal change, cyclic rituals, sensory fullness, tenuous livelihoods, and resourceful persistence of a peasant community in the French Alps. Not just in Western Europe but all around the world, however, Berger decries that such places—already relegated to the margins of history—have come increasingly under threat of destruction due to the modernizing pressures of mechanized agribusiness and corporate capitalism. Hence his second installment, *Once in Europa* (1987), depicts the devastating intrusion of industrial modernity on traditional village life, with factories marring the terrain and machines maiming the workers who cling desperately to each other's flesh and to their collective birthright. His third volume, *Lilac and Flag* (1990), charts the fortunes of peasants displaced to the mythic pan-European city of Troy, where they hunger to love one another while fighting to surmount dreadful living and working conditions. Enmeshed in the degradation of a globalized metropolis, their struggles are narrated by an omniscient old woman who stays in the isolated village of their ancestors. Berger's solidarity with these remnants of the peasantry, caught in an implacable clash of values as they transition to a restless proletariat, is expressed through diverse rhetorical strategies. Blending history, ethnography, and literature, along with essay, poetry, and story, his trilogy empathically chronicles the exploitation, perseverance, disfigurement,



ingenuity, and dispossession of mountain peasants throughout the twentieth century.

As *Into Their Labours* demonstrates, formally the subgenre of writings about the rural poor may take the shape of a mixed genre or anti-genre. Many such works defy classification, whether by conflating fiction and nonfiction, verbal and visual media, author and subject perspectives, or social scientific and humanistic disciplines. Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) merge poetry and prose to elucidate their peoples' deprivation and spirituality while limning Southeastern and Southwestern landscapes. Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) similarly plumb their cultural heritages by dramatizing authorial re-immersions in their rural birthplaces, interweaving the oral tradition with anthropological commentary and personal contemplation in pursuit of African American folklore and Native American myth. Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945) and Laurence Wylie's *Village in the Vaucluse* (1957) each recount a year spent in an insular European village: the former an ardent memoir of political banishment peppered with sociological observations; the latter an ostensibly sociological study that reads like an affectionate memoir.<sup>5</sup> Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969) and John Baskin's *New Burlington: The Life and Death of an American Village* (1976) render composite likenesses of their respective locales by situating and presenting the voices of villagers themselves, who brood on the waning of rural mores, old farming methods, and communal cohesion. Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (1974) and Émilie Carles's *A Life of Her Own: A Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France* (1977) are both "as told to" books, with mediators recording the autobiographies of resilient individuals and marvelous raconteurs who, due to illiteracy or illness, could not record them on their own.<sup>6</sup>

Several elements set apart the collaborative enterprises of Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr from these and many other sensitive portrayals of rural life or agricultural impoverishment. Foremost among their distinguishing features is the equal weight given to images and words. While a few of the aforementioned works—notably *Storyteller* and *Village in the Vacluse*—memorably incorporate photographs from family albums or authorial archives,<sup>7</sup> *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling* more thoroughly interrogate the harmonies and discords of coordinating two distinct mediums. Both pairs of collaborators develop innovative means for conjoining photography and writing, and both worry over the effects of their pictures and text on their subjects, besides pondering how they might affect their viewers and readers. The dual authorship of their books provokes a series of challenging questions: How did their dissimilar dispositions and callings inflect their collaborations? How did their ambivalences toward rusticity and poverty color their approaches and responses to particular places and people? How did they pursue their research and wed their findings? How did their projects hinge on historical contingencies yet remain fiercely self-governed undertakings? How authoritative are their accounts? To what extent are their depictions of the rural poor compromised or bolstered by their intellectual backgrounds, personal involvements, political principles, religious beliefs, artistic tastes? Why are they impelled to celebrate the peasantry, even while protesting its subservience? How persuasive—imaginatively or ideologically—are their interventions on behalf of beleaguered workers? Such questions entail deeper engagement with these books in their relevant historical contexts, as well as with the coauthors' formative attitudes over the span of their careers.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* had its inception in the summer of 1936, when Agee (on assignment for *Fortune* magazine) and Evans (on loan from the Farm Security

Administration) investigated cotton sharecropping in the American South. From among the approximately nine million persons then entangled in tenantry across the region, they eventually befriended and briefly lived with three interrelated families of white farmers in Hale County, Alabama. While Evans photographed them and their surroundings, Agee catalogued the drama and minutiae of their everyday existence in elaborate detail. What began as a journalistic exercise became an exhaustive purification of the photo-textual documentary genre—an excoriation both of its social purposes and its artistic facets—popularized during the Great Depression.<sup>8</sup> Rejected as an article thence expanded into a book, this joint exertion soon fell out of print but, in the wake of the writer's premature death and posthumous fame, was reissued with twice the number of pictures in 1960.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men's* photographs are an austere foil to its effusive text. These characteristics manifest not only the stylistic but also the temperamental bent of each contributor. In spite of the rebellious sensibility guiding both Agee and Evans, which made them so disdainful of editorial expectations and government patronage that they recast themselves as spies against their employers, the comrades maintained separate convictions, causing crucial disparities in how they bore witness. Whereas Evans was agnostic, apolitical, urbane, unsentimental, and disinterestedly dedicated to his craft, Agee was haunted by his Christian schooling and Communist leanings, as well as by longing for his lost southern roots, rancor toward his mainly middle-class upbringing, disaffection with his citified lifestyle, and angst that language could never adequately render what he believed to be the essential holiness of actuality, all of which underlie his self-tortured scrutiny of the environment and consciousness of tenant farmers.

Compared to the attitudinal yin and yang of Agee and Evans, Berger and Mohr are much more likeminded. While the writer is more outspoken politically, both he and

the photographer have consistently adopted a left stance in line with the doctrines of revolutionary socialism. Yet both meantime harbor romantic or atavistic instincts that swerve from the dialectical materialism and historical progress of orthodox Marxism, thus drawing them less avidly to the proletariat than to the peasantry. Albeit city-bred, both men are enamored with nature, village life, and small-scale agriculture. Their own experiences of exile and social activism (Berger) or humanitarian relief work and world travel (Mohr) give them cosmopolitan viewpoints and sharpen their identification with the uprooted or disinherited. They overlay their secular groundings, outrage at economic injustice, and emphasis on manual labor with a mystical humanism that imbues their acts of witness and artistry with a dual quality of urgency and timelessness.

Berger and Mohr first worked together in the mid-1960s. Their book *A Fortunate Man* assesses and pictures the practice of a country doctor among impoverished foresters in the English hinterland. Anticipating his own rapport with French peasants, the writer says that this doctor, aside from treating his patients with empathy and adeptness, is “the objective witness of their lives” and “the clerk of their records.”<sup>9</sup> Berger’s conclusion is troubled by his sensitivity, like Agee’s, to the dilemma that his subjects are not fictional characters but actual people, and to the absurdity that the capitalist society they live in promotes individualism (self-aggrandizement) yet devalues individuality (personhood). In *A Seventh Man* he and Mohr expose the unjust foundation of this inequitable economy, relating it to the subjective experience of migrant workers in Europe, who depart from its underdeveloped southern villages to toil thanklessly in its industrialized northern cities. By insisting, as does Agee, that his partner’s photographs are not illustrative but coequal with the text, Berger affirms mutual autonomy as well as symbiosis between images and words. In *Another Way of Telling*, their culminating collaboration, he and Mohr amplify

this concept by coupling wordless pictorial sequences with anecdotal reminiscences and theoretical speculations about the ambiguity of photographs and the enigmatic meaning of appearances. They address readers in gentler echoes of Agee's strident appeals for cooperation in his attempt to impart the living textures of tenant farming. Furthermore, they collaborate with their protagonists: peasants among whom Berger has worked since the mid-1970s, when, already an expatriate from Britain, he took up residence in France's mountainous Haute-Savoie, not far from Mohr's hometown base in Geneva.

Beyond forming passionate attachments to specific laboring classes, Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr show several commonalities in their receptiveness. They cherish the continuity of communal customs practiced in the countryside. They loathe the debilitating indebtedness and tawdry conformity spread by consumerism. They devote themselves to fathoming the demands of work as well as the patterns of consciousness in the lived experience of tenant farmers or peasant villagers. They rue the fate of the rural poor when faced with industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Positioned against the heralds of modernity, they counsel respect for the past and wariness toward the future. Offsetting an esthetic attraction to primitivism with an ethical stake in authenticity, they share a commitment to places eclipsed and people sidelined by the march of progress. Ever aware of their own problematic perspectives as privileged outsiders, even so they seek to participate in the lives of those among whom they sojourn and for whom they bear witness. Self-consciously mediated by authorial antipathies against the ruling classes and authorial avowals that human beings are sacred, their representations all exhibit a tendency to downplay any flaws or viciousness among the disadvantaged. Whatever their reasons for taking this laudatory tack, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling* do not sentimentalize so much as

heroicize their longsuffering, hardworking subjects.

Two overarching tensions animate these encomiums to the rural poor. The first concerns whether the authors identify with their protagonists more because they are poor or because they are rural. At times their subjects' humanity transcends geography, yoking them with the urban poor, while at others the particularity of their rustic origins and their capacity to survive their own decline provides the principal allure. Yet while one aspect may either be muted or pronounced at certain moments in the discrete contributions of Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr, ultimately both dimensions of their subjects' lives are fundamental to an understanding of the collaborators' deepest sympathies. They praise peasants partly for hailing from the country and partly for persevering amidst poverty. Enthusiastically rustivating to remote communities engrained with agrarian traditions and devoid of "civilized" trappings, the authors remain ambivalent about the countervailing, sophisticated enticements of elsewhere. Lamenting the adversities of social subordination and straitened circumstances, they nonetheless extol a commonplace beauty or tenacity bound up with peasant simplicity if not penury. Their projects therefore meditate on the loveliness they perceive beneath wretchedness, the hardihood that withstands hardship, the distinctive value of places or people denigrated as peripheral or backward, the moral lessons to be learned from working the land, and the human costs of cultural change.

The other chief tension these writers and photographers generate is between ethics and esthetics. An ethical responsibility toward poor rural persons—both as members of an oppressed or disparaged class and as luminously unique individuals—rubs against an esthetic incentive to make or translate, verbally and visually, such marginalized lives into art. The two sets of authors resolve not to paper over but to dig into the complexity of this friction, catalyzing their idiosyncratic studies and ensuring their enduring relevance. The

richness of their representational techniques emerges from a productive dialectic between witness and artistry. Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr ceaselessly ask themselves how the ethical exigencies of being a witness are either enhanced or undermined by the esthetic ambition to be an artist. To be fair to their nuances, such a stark polarity does not exist. Ethics and esthetics are not necessarily at cross-purposes in serving as stimuli. Indeed, often the function of one galvanizes, disciplines, or clarifies that of the other. Still, the paradox of striving for vividness while being scrupulous about documentation, which in these cases is tied to the paradox of writers who venerate the imagination yet valorize—sometimes naively, sometimes perspicaciously—photographic objectivity, pulses at the heart of their ventures, transforming moments of witness into monuments of artistry.

Borrowing a favorite phrase of both Agee and Berger, my first chapter explores how their written “ways of seeing” the rural poor, in concert with Evans’s and Mohr’s images, engender a means of praising their subjects. In order to trace the broader outlines of what Berger refers to as “a fraternal relationship” between himself and Agee,<sup>10</sup> I also compare their more general interests, biases, solidarities, constancies, and contradictions. Although their careers only overlapped for a few years, and although an ocean divided them, as writers, thinkers, artists, and witnesses they in fact register as many brotherly resemblances and counterbalances with one another as they do with their collaborators. Each a talented poet, storyteller, novelist, screenwriter, and documentarian, in addition to Agee’s vocations as journalist and film critic and Berger’s as essayist and art critic, their versatility as men of letters has occasionally led to misapprehension or underappreciation by their audiences. Always attuned to the esthetic possibilities and ethical predicaments inherent in linking words and pictures, they not only forge inventive hybrid forms with the photographers but also evaluate other efforts to portray the rural poor. Their thinking

about verbal and visual representation demonstrates a shared concern with concretizing abstract objectives such as the discernment of reality and the revelation of truth.

Following this comparative analysis, I offer two chapters on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In “Abashed Ambition” I appraise the ethical and esthetic significance of the contest deliberately staged between intentions and performance in Agee’s unruly text, which is preceded by Evans’s uncaptioned photographs to create a preliminary tension between visual and verbal modes of witness. Agee entwines his recollections of their journey to Alabama around a host of structural and philosophical contrasts: image versus word, writer versus reader, art versus life, beauty versus utility, success versus failure. Violently adapting musical counterpoint, repeatedly violating conventional features of the documentary genre, alternately ennobling and depreciating his perceptions, Agee yearns to overcome the misery and reproduce the singularity of what he encounters, all the while mindful that aspirations must not be confused with accomplishments.

Even though he himself agonizingly confesses his difficulty in locating the core of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, my next chapter explicates how Agee (and Evans, too, mostly through his changes for the second edition) establishes “A Continuous Center” by oscillating between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Whereas the centripetal propensity, activated by an ethical attentiveness, circles in on the tenant families and their dwelling places, a centrifugal countercurrent, spurred by the authors’ esthetic drives, propels them out from this hub to connect it with the farmers’ wider environs. Suspending instead of synthesizing dialectical oppositions between outer and inner spheres—global vistas and local knowledge, national uniformity and regional distinctiveness, urban preconceptions and rural realities, middle-class affectations and working-class priorities, impetus toward social reform and integrity of individual consciousness—Agee continually centers then



extends his mind's eye to revere the numberless nuclei and harsh brilliance of actuality, from sunbaked cottonfields to starry cosmos.

With *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a touchstone, Berger's and Mohr's later ways of seeing rural poverty might be viewed as European elaborations on an American masterwork. Yet in their geographic range, political trenchancy, observational precision, and audacious experimentation, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling* are not at all derivative but original, refined, and provocative. Moreover, while this photo-textual duo, like their predecessors, deploy modernist tactics to denounce modernization, their praise of peasants, unlike Agee's and Evans's, wrestles with the prospect of this class's imminent disappearance. My fourth chapter thus sheds light on why Berger and Mohr, over the course of their three projects, came to identify ever more closely and compassionately with marginalized subjects from rural areas. Bringing their reciprocal "sense of measure" to darkroom and writing studio as well as to village and metropolis, they produce "imaginative documentaries" or "narrative dialogues" between images and words, suggestively positing how these forms of expression might converse through complementarity, juxtaposition, or montage. Their multimedia combinations and ruminations foster a fresh manner of storytelling aimed at subjectively reconstructing the communal memory of people forgotten or browbeaten by mainstream society.

To knit together vital points of convergence or divergence between Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr, my epilogue concentrates on a handful of their creative peers or heirs who have been inspired or agitated by their work and whose own books similarly probe the ethics and esthetics of representing rural life or poverty with prose and photographs. Eudora Welty and Wright Morris, each a photographer as well as a writer born within a year of Agee, took most of their pictures in Mississippi and Nebraska during the 1930s

and 1940s, roughly contemporaneous with the best part of Evans's oeuvre, and then spent much of their careers contemplating whether to unite or segregate the look of fact and the feel of fiction. This twin impulse toward the camera's meticulous documentation and the pen's imaginative ornamentation may have had its roots in the fruitful collision of social consciousness and American modernism during the Depression, but the fertile merger of witness and artistry has long outlived that dire period and migrated abroad, as evidenced not only by the collaborations of Berger and Mohr but also by more contemporary works with transnational lenses. *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), a novel by Timothy O'Grady with photos by Steve Pyke, trains its verbal and visual eyes on Irish laborers in England, while William T. Vollmann's *Poor People* (2007) meanders all about the planet for images and opinions of its destitute inhabitants. Both books credit at least one of those at the heart of my dissertation as a pivotal stimulus. Re-illuminating the photo-textual models I home in on, the projects of these peers or heirs parallel or descend from them before departing on their own pioneering trajectories.

An early English admirer of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, regretting that it had gone unpublished in Britain, acknowledged that her compatriots, engulfed in World War Two, might ask why they should care about "the troubles of a group of peasants thousands of miles away on another continent."<sup>11</sup> American readers may ask the same about the subjects of *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling*. Yet the reviewer's answer applies just as well to Berger's and Mohr's books as to Agee's and Evans's: "Any representation, any experiment whatsoever, which may shock people into awareness of their responsibility to these undefended ones is of supreme importance."<sup>12</sup> Ethically and esthetically, the words and pictures of these artist-witnesses continue to resound with that shock of awareness, however far removed in time and space.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, “Jean Mohr: A Sketch for a Portrait,” Introduction to Jean Mohr and John Berger, *At the Edge of the World* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 14.

<sup>2</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), xxii.

<sup>3</sup> Historiography on “peasants”—a term often used derogatorily or nostalgically to denote farmhands or subsistence cultivators half-integrated into a market economy—comprises a broad spectrum of attitudes toward “modernization”: a term with similarly slippery usage and regional variability. While the terms are typically applied today to those parts of the planet once designated as the “third world,” or to those people who emigrate from such “underdeveloped” places, this study concentrates on the twentieth-century residuum of peasant values and cultures in the highly modernized societies of Western Europe and the United States, where the survival of the peasantry is as remarkable as it is precarious. For an interdisciplinary compendium of views on worldwide populations, see Teodor Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (1971; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). For a wide-ranging meta-theorization of the peasantry’s undoing and the proletariat’s making, see Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). On local defiance against government authority in Southeast Asia, with suggestions of broader application elsewhere, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). On the obsolescence of peasants in Britain, see J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Dying Peasant and the Future of His Sons* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1926). For different lenses on economic development and social change in rural France, see Henri Mendras, *The Vanishing Peasant: Innovation and Change in French Agriculture*, trans. Jean Lerner (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1970); Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Annie Moulin, *Peasantry and Society in France since 1789*, trans. M.C. and M.F. Cleary (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Stephen J. Russell, *Agriculture, Prosperity, and the Modernization of French Rural Communities, 1870-1914: Views from the Village* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004). For pungent analyses of gaps or links between Italian villages and communities in the United States, see Enrico Dal Lago and Rick Halpern, eds., *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno: Essays in Comparative History* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958; New York: Free Press, 1967); Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1962); Dino Cinel, *The National Integration of Italian Return Migration, 1870-1929* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For forceful critiques, on both state and national levels, of an exploitative agricultural system proliferating across this country during the Depression, see Carey McWilliams’s books: *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1939); *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942). For zealous cultural defenses or intensive local studies of southern agrarianism issued in the 1930s, see Twelve Southerners, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930); Arthur F.

Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); Herman Clarence Nixon, *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938). For collections of scholarship concerning the same region, see Richard Godden and Martin Crawford, eds., *Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Suzanne W. Jones and Mark Newman, eds., *Poverty and Progress in the U.S. South since 1920* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2006). For a comparison of two unclassifiable works on Alabama sharecroppers that ties their attitudes toward money and labor to those of foreign peasants, see Ronald E. Seavoy, "Portraits of Twentieth-Century American Peasants: Subsistence Social Values Recorded in *All God's Dangers* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Agricultural History* 68.2 (Spring 1994): 199-218.

<sup>4</sup> For a fine theoretical survey that aims "to redress the neglect of poverty as a category of critical discourse in the study of American literature and culture" (xiii), with special focus on Antebellum, Progressive, and Depression eras, see Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For another attempt "to expand a particular vocabulary in literary criticism, a lexicon of labor" (20), with attention to both ethics and esthetics, see Peter Hitchcock, "They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation," *PMLA* 115.1 (January 2000): 20-32. For literary or cultural studies concentrating less on poverty than on rural life, farm labor, agrarian ideology, and place-based mentalities, see Michael H. Parkinson, *The Rural Novel: Jeremias Gotthelf, Thomas Hardy, C. F. Ramuz* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1984); Gene Logsdon, *The Mother of All Arts: Agrarianism and the Creative Impulse* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002); Norman Wirzba, ed., *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the United States and Beyond* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001); Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> A doctor, painter, and writer banished from northern Italy for his outspoken criticism of Fascism, Levi was forcibly confined—albeit under a rather lax sort of village arrest that gave him an unusual hilltop vantage point on local happenings—in the remote southern region of Lucania from 1935-36. Wylie, on the other hand, lived of his own free accord in the southern French commune of Peyrane (his pseudonym for Roussillon) during an academic sabbatical from 1950-51. In prefaces to reprinted editions of their sociological memoirs, the authors disavow any literary pretensions. Wylie prides himself that *Village in the Vaucluse* (1957; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974) is "a straightforward account rather than an artistically transformed reality" (x), while Levi

asserts that in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Frances Frenaye (1947; New York: Farrar, Straus, 1963), he found “no place for embellishment, experiment—for literature—but only for the real truth that exists in and beyond things” (ix). Nevertheless, both books are in fact artful transformations of the peasant realities they so tenderly portray.

<sup>6</sup> Billed as “the autobiography of an illiterate man” and “the story of a black tenant farmer from east-central Alabama” (xiii), *All God’s Dangers* (1974; New York: Vintage Books, 1984) is the result of a collaboration between Rosengarten, a Harvard graduate student, and Ned Cobb (1885-1973), whose fictitious name is Nate Shaw. Having met the lively octogenarian while researching his role in a defunct sharecroppers’ union, Rosengarten later recorded Shaw’s orally recounted life story because they agreed that it “might prove useful to people interested in the history of his region, class, and race” (xvi). The author’s preface sketches the geographical features and social structure of Tukabahchee County, where, as in much of the Deep South after the Civil War, the plantation economy that had depended on slave labor transitioned into a tenant system that continued to exploit freed blacks as well as poor whites for the production of cotton. Before turning the narrative over to Shaw, whose “working years span approximately the same years as the Snopes family odyssey in William Faulkner’s trilogy,” and whose own genealogically complex “family chronicles express both the bonds among people and a man’s attachment to the land” (xxiii), Rosengarten, whose project was inspired by *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, remarks that his interlocutor “belongs to the tradition of farmer-storytellers” who “appear in all civilizations” but whose “survival is bound up with the fate of communities of small farmers” (xxii). As societies become more advanced, doing away with the work cycle enacted through each season’s harvest and replacing the rhythmic flow generated by craft activities (such as Shaw’s basketmaking) with clamorous cultural voices (such as television), Rosengarten argues that storytelling declines. Divided by the editor into four parts—Youth, Deeds, Prison, and Revelation—these captivating stories revolve around manual labor, communal ties, tense race relations, economic inequity, and cash cropping versus subsistence agriculture. Just as Rosengarten, through his intermediary role, cannot help but shape and cast interpretive light on Shaw’s tales, so Émilie Carles’s account of her life (1900-1979) was mediated by others. Though she kept notebooks for many years, cancer finally forced Carles to dictate her autobiography to Robert Destanque. Originally published in 1977 under the figuratively suitable and quite savory title *Une soupe aux herbes sauvages* (*A Wild Herb Soup*), the book was translated into English as *A Life of Her Own* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) by Avriel H. Goldberger, who contextualizes how Carles, an educated peasant woman, teacher, farmer, feminist, pacifist, and activist from the village of Val-des-Prés near Briançon in the Hautes-Alpes, contended from childhood onward with a patriarchal, retrograde, militaristic, bureaucratic society. Late in life she earned renown for leading a movement to preserve her beloved Clarée Valley from the threat of environmental decimation by a proposed superhighway.

<sup>7</sup> In *Storyteller* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981) Silko comments that she included family photographs—most of them taken by her father, just as Momaday’s father drew the illustrations for *The Way to Rainy Mountain*—because they are intimately related to her memories of listening to the stories she retells from her home pueblo of Laguna, New Mexico. “A photograph is serious business and many people still do not trust just anyone to take their picture,” Silko cautions (1). Wylie, in *Village in the Vaucluse*, recalls how he

became entrusted as “the village photographer” while staying in Peyrane, a function that enabled him to participate “most naturally” in village life and to garner appreciation from the villagers by sharing their likenesses with them (xv). Baskin’s *New Burlington* (1976; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) similarly assimilates old photos supplied by the inhabitants of this Ohio village with newer ones made by outside photographers.

<sup>8</sup> While some of these documentaries were autonomous collaborations between a writer and a photographer—such as Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Viking, 1937) and Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939)—more of them made extensive use of the photographic file of the Farm Security Administration supervised by Roy E. Stryker. See, for instance, the aforementioned *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* by Herman Clarence Nixon, as well as Arthur Raper’s follow-up studies of an American peasantry: *Sharecroppers All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), co-written by Ira De A. Reid, and *Tenants of the Almighty* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), with photographs by Jack Delano. For those two books Edwin Rosskam assisted with photo selection and layout, a role he also played significantly in Sherwood Anderson’s *Home Town* (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1940) and Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking, 1941), as anonymous editor of the former and named coauthor of the latter. Along with Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), which he envisioned as “a book of photographs illustrated by a poem,” these volumes—more resonant visually than verbally—exemplify the socially conscious and artistically portentous qualities of the photo-textual documentary that Agee was at pains to purify. For a lucid scholarly introduction to this genre, with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* held up as its masterpiece, see William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For coherent case studies in the same vein, see John Rogers Puckett, *Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from the Great Depression* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984). For a recent reevaluation of certain works central to this field, see Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For more general overviews of Farm Security Administration photographs and their diffusion in popular culture, see Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Cara A. Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003); John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* (1967; New York: Pantheon, 1981), 109.

<sup>10</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Anna Kavan, “Selected Notices,” *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art* 9 (April 1944): 285.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### WAYS OF SEEING AS MEANS OF PRAISING: AGEE, EVANS, BERGER, AND MOHR ON REPRESENTING THE RURAL POOR

Like most writers, James Agee and John Berger strive to be both seers of “reality” and tellers of “truth.” More than most, they interrogate their pathways from perception to communication, constantly asking themselves how much reality can really be seen and whether truth can truly be told. For them, “seeing” encompasses that which is discerned not only by the eyes but also by the other sensory organs, as well as by the faculties of reason, memory, and imagination. Likewise, to their minds, the instrument of “telling” might be a camera (or a piano or a paintbrush) instead of a pen. While their valorization of sight leads them to prize photographs—particularly those of their collaborators Walker Evans and Jean Mohr—for arresting reality in a form incommunicable through words, Agee and Berger nonetheless write copiously as they seek to transcribe multifaceted truths contained within or glimpsed beyond the borders of still images. Although openly skeptical about the truthfulness of language due to its tendencies toward abstraction and bias, they rely upon it both to penetrate the appearance of verisimilitude supplied by photographic evidence and to tease out potential meanings left ambiguous in pictures. Their paradoxical attitudes toward visual and verbal representation are productively engaged yet purposely unresolved through their photo-textual projects, which create complex combinations of images and words to make vivid and revelatory the experiences of others.

These others come from the ranks of the rural poor. Personal, political, religious, and artistic factors propel Agee and Berger, along with Evans and Mohr, to identify with

disadvantaged or displaced persons—tenant farmers, remote foresters, migrant workers, peasant villagers—whose lives originate on the land. Aware that such people have been victims not only of poverty and injustice but also of impoverished or unjust portrayals, the writers and the photographers are wary of idealizing or denigrating their vulnerable subjects. From their position of relative privilege (one likely shared by their readers and viewers) they gauge both the ethical hazards and esthetic challenges of representing the underprivileged. A responsibility to bear witness for the exploited without inflicting further exploitation conflicts with an impulse to translate the poor's struggles into art. Competing disciplines of witness and artistry thus generate tensions between ethical aims and esthetic ambitions that amplify those between visual and verbal forms. Rather than subordinate these tensions, the authors make them integral to the design and content of their books.

Not only in their collaborations with Evans and Mohr but throughout their varied writings, Agee and Berger advocate fresh “ways of seeing” that incorporate ethics as well as esthetics. Despite their guardedness against predetermined depictions of the rural poor, they invariably express empathy and solidarity with country dwellers or uprooted toilers, locating authenticity in their experience of manual labor and socioeconomic deprivation, discovering something “truer” or “realer” in their existence than in that of the urban rich or of the middle class. Agee's and Berger's ways of seeing tenants and peasants become, then, a means of praising them, of preserving moments from their life stories, of telling about their beauty as well as their suffering, of moving those on the margins of modern society to the center of individual and historical consciousness.

Somewhat surprisingly, in light of these congruencies in both form and content, Agee and Berger have seldom been linked. Critics who mention them together gesture



toward but do not sustain comparative analyses of their ways of seeing the rural poor.<sup>1</sup> One obvious reason for this neglect is the persistence of literary nationalism, as they are usually considered exclusively in relation either to American or to European culture and literature, with certain exceptions that draw them into transatlantic orbits.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since seventeen years separate their birthdates and since Berger has now lived nearly twice as long as did Agee,<sup>3</sup> they can hardly be thought of as belonging to the same generation or as responding to the same era's concerns. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was written by a young man half a century before *Into Their Labours* was completed by a middle-aged man. In spite of Berger's acknowledgment that Agee's joint opus with Evans jumpstarted his own collaborative endeavors with Mohr, resulting in *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling*, comparisons of their work have probably been discouraged because the current only seemed to run in one direction.

Two months before his death, however, Agee left a tantalizing suggestion that he may have read some of Berger's articles in the *New Statesman*, to which the Londoner regularly contributed art criticism during the 1950s. Approving of the British periodical, though without singling out any of its columnists by name, Agee pinpoints a trait that has always epitomized Berger's tone, even when entreating: "the pleasure is that even when they do special pleading, the lack of shrillness leaves you your own mind, with a sense of courtesy intact between you and the writer, and the thing or person written about,—by *courtesy*, I mean also, a clear sense of mutual assumption that all three parties, however disagreeing, hold the fundamental standards of intelligence and humaneness in common. This will no longer often be found in the United States, as a matter of habit, in print."<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether he had Berger specifically in mind, this transatlantic assessment signals Agee's shared determination to communicate his ideas in a forum analogous to an

equilateral triangle among writer, reader, and subject. Just as Berger, in *Pig Earth*, hopes to preserve “the dignity of the reader, the experience communicated, and the writer,”<sup>5</sup> so too Agee, in his 1942 debut as film reviewer for *The Nation*, pledges “to use this column about moving pictures as to honor and discriminate the subject through interesting and serving you who are reading it.”<sup>6</sup> Although in other platforms, such as at the start of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee could be deliberately shrill and discourteous to the reader, and although Berger’s early pieces could in fact be quite combative, both writers nonetheless set out, intelligently and humanely, to probe the tensions between ethics and aesthetics framing all of their literary undertakings.

In terms of mechanics, however, their prevailing styles present a striking contrast. Whereas Agee’s is typified by long winding sentences, belabored syntax, unconventional punctuation, and baroque descriptions larded with adjectives, archaisms, and neologisms, Berger’s is characterized by short declarative statements, straightforward subject-verb construction, fastidiously selected details, and a more sparing or less agonized authorial presence. In spite of these markedly different manners, their prose, which accounts for the bulk of each writer’s output, maintains a dialogue with poetry. Not only does poetic language enliven their esthetic strategies, shaping the rhythms and images of their prose, but it also strengthens their ethical commitments, grounding their identification with the material at hand.

Just before Agee’s twenty-first birthday, in a letter to Father James Harold Flye, an Episcopal priest who served as his boyhood mentor and closest correspondent, the precocious Harvard junior, proclaiming himself “committed to writing with a horrible definiteness,” went on to avow that he had “thought of inventing a sort of amphibious style—prose that would run into poetry when the occasion demanded poetic expression.

... 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.”<sup>7</sup> Two years later, in an unsuccessful application for a Guggenheim Fellowship to support his work on “John Carter,” an unfinished satire in *ottava rima* modeled on Byron’s *Don Juan*, one of Agee’s ten announced objectives was to “bring back into poetry a sense of dramatic and narrative (as well as lyrical) vigor and resourcefulness which now, for the most part, is found at its best only in prose.”<sup>8</sup> Although his best writing would ultimately be done in prose, at this stage, unfulfilled by his job as a *Fortune* reporter, he was still tapping into his resources of meter and rhyme to turn out lyrics and sonnets soon gathered for *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), the sole collection of Agee’s poetry published during his lifetime. In an unused preface drafted partly as a mock self-review of the volume, he dubbed himself an “over-self-conscious and exceedingly ambitious poet,” yet dismissed the majority of his rather rarefied verse: “Most of these poems I no longer give a damn for, whether in manner or in matter.”<sup>9</sup> Such flaunting of the contradictory gap between intentions and performance, whether his own or those of others, would form a crucial component of his perspectives on art. After another few years as a reluctant journalist, an occupation he worried might eclipse his calling as a poet, Agee confided to his journal, while struggling to get started on a project about his recent experiences in the South: “I am so griped that this Alabama book is not poetry (which it should not be) that it’s hard to keep writing it.”<sup>10</sup> Despite his vexed recognition that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* should be written in prose, many of its pages vigorously experiment with the mix of amphibious grammar and expressive vocabulary he had once expounded could fit events as snugly yet stretchily as skin.

In contrast to Agee, often eulogized as a poet albeit mainly remembered for his prose,<sup>11</sup> Berger’s poetic legacy appears less pivotal. As if to underscore that his verbal

skills are better suited to discursive forms, in *Pages of the Wound* (1996), his only book made up principally of poetry, he reflects that since adolescence he has “written poems when I could do nothing else. Poems are born of a sense of helplessness.”<sup>12</sup> By helpless, however, Berger does not mean inept or futile; instead, when faced with the intransigence of facts, with the world’s ubiquitous cruelties, he believes that poetry provides him with the supplest outlet for resistance, with the most forceful yet intimate type of address. *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (1984), Berger’s wandering meditation on time and space, contains some insightful distinctions between prose and poetry that help to explain why he gravitates toward the latter when feeling helplessly fragmented. “The boon of language is that *potentially* it is complete,” he writes, “it has the potentiality of holding with words the totality of human experience. ... it is potentially the only human home, the only dwelling place that cannot be hostile to man. For prose this home is a vast territory, a country which it crosses through a network of tracks, paths, highways; for poetry this home is concentrated on a single center, a single voice.”<sup>13</sup> While Berger’s conception of poetry sounds more hospitable to lyric than to epic voices, he stresses its contemporary role as a refuge for humankind from life’s (and language’s) indifferences. Whereas in “the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most direct protests against social injustice were in prose,” appealing to reason in order to reveal truth and thence alleviate suffering, Berger argues that “more and more it will be poetry, rather than prose, that receives this truth. Prose is far more *trusting* than poetry; poetry speaks to the immediate wound.”<sup>14</sup> What he defines as “the labor of poetry” is its ceaseless task to invest language with caring, thereby “reassembling what has been scattered” by violence or separation.<sup>15</sup> Glued throughout his books, Berger’s verses assemble scraps of imagery, metaphor, and emotion that cannot be accommodated by the oxymoronically ponderous pithiness of his

prose. Though less refined and largely less memorable than his paragraphs or aphorisms, they perform a gentling or hallowing function upon the totality of his writing. “Poems are nearer to prayers than to stories,”<sup>16</sup> says this storyteller, whose poetic petitions, like his occasional drawings, fill the interstices of his language with faith in a healing balm that prose may be helpless to impart.

For all their love of and belief in language, whether in poetry or prose, Agee and Berger are both heedful of its limitations. In the same letter rhapsodizing on stylistic springiness, Agee also plans to transcend his chosen medium by means of “verbal orchestration” that would enable him, at least figuratively, “to *write symphonies*” charged with euphonious contrapuntal language, building “a sort of monstrous grinding beauty.”<sup>17</sup> But he quickly despairs of this ambition: “Prose holds you down from the possibility of such music. And put into poetic drama, it would certainly be stillborn,” when above all, he insists, “the words *must* be alive.”<sup>18</sup> The next semester Agee again attempted to endow words with living musicality, through his story “They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap.” Its narrator, while “aware of a definite form and rhythm and melody of existence,” fails to tally “some aspects of the mind’s reaction to experience ... with the patterns of music; the idea is incongruous; I should be kicked for trying it.”<sup>19</sup> Unable to concentrate on his narration, this student-turned-laborer frets that “words burred so constantly in my brain that they spun themselves free of all meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Emulating the linguistic empiricism of his professor I. A. Richards,<sup>21</sup> Agee later toyed with compiling a dictionary of key words to be “examined skeptically in every discernible shade of their meaning and use,” chiefly to point up “the ambiguity of language.”<sup>22</sup> This proposal was just one among forty-seven submitted with his second rejected Guggenheim application, in the fall of 1937. Topping his list was “An Alabama Record,” intended to maintain “as total a suspicion of ‘creative’

and ‘artistic’ as of ‘reportorial’ attitudes and methods, and ... likely therefore to involve the development of some more or less new forms of writing and of observation.”<sup>23</sup>

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* does indeed develop such innovative rhetorical forms, although with heightened if intermittent wariness that language may not only be ambiguous but also deceptive. Hence Agee’s frequent use of scare quotes around words whose definitions are too often taken for granted, as well as his inclusion of a long list of freely associated, commonly misused or unexamined “anglosaxon monosyllables” in one of the book’s five “Notes and Appendices.”<sup>24</sup> Hampering his faith in their fitness “to tell anything within human conceit,” words, he concedes, “are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record,” because of their “falsification ... and inability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy” (236-37). Agee readily accepts his obligation to guard against falsehood, but he regrets that “one can write only one word at a time” (111), thus impeding his progress toward reconstructing the “language of ‘reality’” (236). A relish of paradox pervades his frustrations with language. “Words cannot embody,” he rues, “they can only describe,” yet he strives to give them “an illusion of embodiment” (238). And in spite of his self-admonishment, “‘Description’ is a word to suspect” (238), he is bursting with descriptive exuberance, prompting him to reconsider “that the lust for describing ... is not necessarily a vice. Plain objects and atmospheres have a sufficient intrinsic beauty and stature that it might be well if the describer became more rather than less shameless” (239). Unashamed of finding ordinarily overlooked things beautiful and delineating them to excess, Agee only wishes that his words could outdo what all words can only do, could embody all at once what they can only describe one by one.

Berger echoes these apprehensions in his novel *G.* (1972), which, like many of his fictional works, shares Agee’s propensity to interrupt the unfolding of dramatic scenes in

order to interpose didactic commentary on the esthetic and ethical dilemmas of literary representation. "Description distorts," Berger states, after explicating that his "power to select (both the facts and the words describing them) impregnates the text with a notion of choice which encourages the reader to infer a false range."<sup>25</sup> When trying to embody the sensations and emotions of a woman making love to his Don Juan protagonist, Berger admits, as if relieved by his shortcomings: "Any attempt at an exhaustive description of what she was experiencing is bound to be absurd. ... Armed with the entire language of literature we are still denied access to her experience."<sup>26</sup> While this denial of his verbal arsenal may seem dubiously portentous, he does not wear his inadequacy as a badge of false modesty, at least not to the extent that Agee does. Rather, the author of *G.* frankly scrutinizes his own struggle to access the experiences of others. "Whatever I perceive or imagine amazes me by its particularity ..." notes Berger. "From this arises my difficulty ... perhaps the magnificent impossibility of my being a writer. How am I to convey such uniqueness?"<sup>27</sup> Instead of plotting out his novel's action and character development in linear fashion, focusing on cause and effect, he remarks, "I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician."<sup>28</sup> He therefore aims to connect all the points that might impinge upon each spatial field. Making these geometrical connections requires him to step beyond his amazement at particularity and liken one thing to another through a liberal exercise of figurative language.

Even in those of his works which are nominally more analytical than imaginative (nominally in that he generally blurs boundaries between nonfiction and fiction), Berger demonstrates that the ethical exigencies of criticism and documentary can be made more

manifest via esthetic devices, from the startling images and ingenious similes that vivify many phrases and accentuate many ideas in his essays on art and politics, to the poignant vignettes of encounters between doctor and patient that precede his hardheaded reasoning in *A Fortunate Man*, to the poems and snippets of dialogue that complement his rigorous analysis in *A Seventh Man*. In that book, relating the experience of migrant workers to the neocolonial economy which exploits their labor, Berger justifies his metaphorical moves: “Yet necessarily the language of economic theory is abstract. And so, if the forces which determine the migrant’s life are to be grasped and realized as part of his personal destiny, a less abstract formulation is needed. Metaphor is needed. Metaphor is temporary. It does not replace theory.”<sup>29</sup> Of these lines, Geoff Dyer complains, “the terseness of his prose lapses into an inverted rhetoric of understated grandiloquence. There is a pomposity of brevity as well as of loquacity. Full stops salute the passing of each sentence.”<sup>30</sup> If Berger is prone to pompous brevity, then Agee, who wanted to experiment with the “maximum-suspended periodic sentence” in order “to suggest or approximate a continuum,”<sup>31</sup> can be accused of pompous loquacity. Notwithstanding their rhetorical predispositions, either to understatement or overstatement, both redeem themselves by remaining fiercely attentive to the distortions and insufficiencies of their own undeniable gifts with words.

How do they turn their verbal talents toward the troublesomely vague and abstract tasks of seeing “reality” and telling “truth”? Throughout their writings, especially in their collaborations with or reflections on practitioners of the visual arts, Agee and Berger both traffic in abstractions and seek to concretize them through specific illustrations that might make their meanings less elusive or insipid. Stimulated by the senses, foremost among them being sight, these writers promote multidimensional ways of seeing to reconcile the discrete vantage points offered by eye and heart, memory and imagination, ethics and



esthetics. Pondering what they perceive, whether the work of a farmer or that of an artist or of any person who kindles their empathy, they then devise ways of telling previously concealed truths about individual experience and historical reality. Their fascination with the visible universe steers them toward photography as still another method of telling, of attempting to see “real” things in a “true” light. Paradoxically more direct than, yet often dependent upon words, photographs provoke them to reassess the liabilities as well as the assets of their preponderant means of expression.

In Agee’s all-embracing prose poem “Dedication,” penned for the publication of *Permit Me Voyage* yet meant as “a dedication not of the lousy volume ... but of all I am or can be: to God, to truth, and to art,”<sup>32</sup> he venerates “those who in all times have sought truth and who have told it in their art or in their living,” naming Evans (among various artists, living and dead) as one of the world’s preeminent truth-tellers, before praying that God might grant him “a way to hear, and a way to see, and wisdom, and careful love.”<sup>33</sup> As if answering the prayer himself, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee cultivates a way to see tenant farmers that lets him lavish his love upon them. The questionable wisdom of estheticizing their lives is held in check by an ethical regard that demands careful documentation of their environment. Upholding the “dignity of actuality” (245) over “the deifying of the imagination,” he forswears fiction and proposes “another way of seeing and telling of still another form of the truth” (241): a mode of observation and communication keyed to “an intersection of astronomical physics, geology, biology, and (including psychology) anthropology, known and spoken of not in scientific but in human terms” (245). This heady blend of diverse spheres of knowledge insinuates that the true nature of existence is only viewable through an interdisciplinary lens: a lens wide enough that humans might see themselves in simultaneous relation to the earth and the cosmos,

their own bodies and minds, their behavior and culture. Despite the scientific basis of these fields, Agee values them less for any set of applied principles than for their overlapping perspectives, as they provide multiple angles to apprehend actuality. While admiring great works of art for revealing truth, this literary artist adopts an anti-artistic stance as “the only possible way of telling the kind of truth” (246) he fervently cares to tell about those he and Evans “dwelt among, investigated, spied on, revered, and loved” (13). The collaborators may run into difficulties in representing the rural poor, but only, quips Agee, because they have elected to treat the subject “not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously” (xv). Disavowing the expertise or agenda of any single discipline or profession, the authors wryly seize the moral high ground. Ethics thus seems to counterbalance if not outweigh esthetics, at least in their stated intentions toward the three tenant families, to whom the book is dedicated “In gratefulness and in love” (vii).

Of course Agee’s ways of seeing and telling are not the only ones on display in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Here as elsewhere he acknowledges that “the still and moving cameras are the strongest instruments and symbols” of the modern enterprise to reproduce reality without adornment, an enterprise which earns his grudging concession: “call it art if you must” (245). Agee’s movie reviews, film scenarios, and screenplays contain ample evidence of his cinematic eye, but perhaps his visual esthetic is verbalized most lucidly in his introductory essay to Helen Levitt’s *A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New York* (1965). Depending on the user, notes Agee, the camera has a singular power either “to develop and to delight” or “to defile and to destroy” the sense of sight.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, he remarks, “the camera has been used so much and so flabbily by so many people that it has acted as a sort of contraceptive on the ability to see.”<sup>35</sup> For those

few photographers who rise above the camera's ill uses, their aim should be "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."<sup>36</sup> Agee suggests two ways that photographic artists transmit such an instant's innate creativity. Either they capture reality's fluid, volatile, lyrical, emotional moments, as in the work of Levitt and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who practice "the most direct way of seeing the everyday world, the most nearly related to the elastic, casual and subjective way in which we ordinarily look around us"; or else they seize on its static, meditative, material, monumental qualities, as in the "Tolstoyan nobility" of Mathew Brady's photographs and the "Joycean denseness, insight and complexity resolved in its bitter purity" of Evans's pictures.<sup>37</sup> Excited by both approaches, Agee's complementary task in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is to dialectically engage with these two ways of seeing by harnessing the elasticity and density of his own medium. His text is therefore replete with dualistic actualities, with oscillating magnetic poles of motion and repose, impulsiveness and reflectiveness, immanence and transcendence.

A glance at the titles of Berger's essay collections—*The Look of Things* (1972), *About Looking* (1980), *The Sense of Sight* (1985)—indicates his similar preoccupation with visual perception. Not only as an art critic and creative writer but also as a practicing visual artist who began his career as a painter and still works as a draftsman, he has always been invested in exploring the process of seeing.<sup>38</sup> *Ways of Seeing* (1972), a polemical, influential book that originated as a series of television programs, delivers the most succinct formulation of Berger's priority to vision. "Seeing comes before words," he commences, continuing in an epigrammatic vein: "We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. ... We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the

relation between things and ourselves.”<sup>39</sup> Vision is active, restless, interpenetrating. Our eyes continually flit about, situating us in our surroundings, fastening on nearby objects and bringing us closer (not in bodily proximity but in mindfulness) to distant phenomena such as the sunset or the treetops. Albeit forever antecedent to attempts at explanation, our experience of the visible often initiates the verbal. In *Another Way of Telling* Berger asserts: “In every act of looking there is an expectation of meaning.”<sup>40</sup> Whether the act be random and roving or, as through a camera lens, deliberate and concentrated, meaning is determined not only by the looker’s or photographer’s decisions about where to redirect the gaze or when to click the shutter, but also by unexpected, ineffable characteristics of whatever is seen. “The one who looks is essential to the meaning found,” he writes, “*and yet can be surpassed by it*. ... Revelation, when what we see does surpass us, ... does not easily lend itself to verbalisation. The words used remain aesthetic exclamations!”<sup>41</sup> Just as Agee hopes that his introduction to Levitt’s visual eloquence in *A Way of Seeing* will trigger “a further ability to see and enjoy, without the further interference of words, still other photographs,”<sup>42</sup> so too Berger is enthralled by revelatory ways of seeing achieved without recourse to an alphabet.

Moreover, just as Agee, in hailing the camera’s seemingly unmediated capacity to bear witness to the actual, hesitates from ascribing extrinsic artfulness to photography, so too Berger is loath to consider the activity a fine art. Indeed, in rather blandly defining photographs as “records of things seen,” he deems them “no closer to works of art than cardiograms.”<sup>43</sup> Berger makes this comparison in order to refute the more prevalent and, in his judgment, mostly misleading one between photographs and paintings. Maintaining that their resemblances are merely formal, not functional, he differentiates the two both in terms of how they are made and appraised. Whereas painted images become valuable

possessions through the capitalist fetishism of them as unique artworks, photographic images carry “no rarity value” because they are “infinitely reproducible.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, in their composition and relation to what they represent, Berger denies all but superficial similitude. The arts of drawing and painting, he argues, translate visible entities into established pictorial languages; each mark or stroke on paper or canvas is entirely “mediated by consciousness” and informed by a systematic visual grammar.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, “photography has no language of its own,”<sup>46</sup> and so it must quote from whatever appears before the camera by receiving traces of light onto film, no matter how culturally constructed the process of framing, printing, cropping, and using the pictures may be. Instantaneously selected rather than fashioned over time, the photograph, unlike a painting, is “weak in intentionality.”<sup>47</sup> Berger’s insistence that “an art of translation cannot usefully be compared to an art of quotation” leads him to shelve the issue of whether photography qualifies as a fine art.<sup>48</sup> He prefers to plumb the gulf between how photographs are normally used either ideologically (as positivist proofs of incontestable truths) or individually (as personal mementos with emotive resonance). Nevertheless, retaining a residual interest in how this vehicle of receptivity instead of re-creation can still reverberate esthetically, Berger speculates about why pictures of unknown subjects sometimes move us as much as if not more than those of loved ones. Such exceptionally expressive photographs, he posits, fulfill the desire for revelation intrinsic to all acts of looking, prolonging the meaning of a frozen moment by illuminating correspondences to the viewer’s past experience. Thus, while basically tabling the discussion of calculated photographic artistry, he proceeds to hypothesize that photos might be artfully arranged in sequences or montages to forge a narrative form akin to the workings of memory.

For all his theorizing about photography’s prospects and limits, Berger, like Agee,

subscribes to unsurprising propositions that the best photographs are made via intuition, not intellection, and that the maker's eye is decisive to their truthfulness. Both writers question the truth-telling pretensions of the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, whose popular book *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), an exposé of Southern sharecropping coproduced with Erskine Caldwell, in part instigated the angry iconoclasm of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In one of its appendices Agee reprints a newspaper profile of Bourke-White in which she claims that a group of pictures tells the squarest truth about a given situation because photography is more objective than writing. In *Another Way of Telling* Berger quotes a similar statement by Bourke-White. Although conceding that he admires her photographs and those of her contemporaries who "helped to alert public opinion to ... the degree of rural poverty in the United States in the 1930s," Berger contends that "to believe that what one sees, as one looks through a camera on to the experience of others, is the 'utter truth' risks confusing very different levels of the truth." He asks: "how does a photograph tell the 'utter truth' about a man's experience of hunger or, for that matter, his experience of a feast?"<sup>49</sup> Due to the photographed instant's discontinuity from ongoing experience, and to the analogous "abyss between the moment recorded and the moment of looking" at a picture some time afterward, its meaning is ambiguous for anyone without a private connection to all that it shows.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, despite the factual directness of its quotation from appearances, the photograph, lacking its own language, therefore lacks the agency to interpret and defend itself.

However, Berger ruefully points out that "as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion,"<sup>51</sup> at once seeming to authenticate declared positions or sentiments and to confirm the irrefutability of photographic images. Hence, "in public the ambiguity of photographs is hidden by the

use of words which explain, less or more truthfully, the pictured events,”<sup>52</sup> even though the subjective correspondences suggested by these events may be “too extensive and too interwoven to enumerate very satisfactorily in words. (One cannot take photographs with a dictionary.)”<sup>53</sup> Yet one cannot very well talk about photographs without a dictionary. Berger proposes that, kept apart from words, “photographic ambiguity ... could offer ... another way of telling” about human experience,<sup>54</sup> but he nonetheless relies on words to clarify how this means of communication might operate. Agee likewise goes on writing in spite of misgivings over his medium’s ineluctable duplicity and inexactness. In *A Way of Seeing*, though wanting to evade an explicit “attempt to discuss the ‘meanings’ of the photographs,” he realizes that “we are all so deeply caught in the tyranny of words, even where words are not needed, that they have sometimes to be used as keys to unlock their own handcuffs.”<sup>55</sup>

Paralleling these writers’ uneasy captivation with photography, their collaborators are attracted to yet chary of language for its sweeping yet abstracted representations, its tyrannical yet liberating capacities. Inspired by their associations with Agee and Berger, Evans and Mohr value writing as a counterpart to their self-taught craft, but they adhere to image-making as their primary way of seeing reality and telling truth. Even though Evans took up the camera to pursue esthetic aspirations while for Mohr ethical ones were paramount, nevertheless tensions between witness and artistry (as with those between verbal and visual expression) are regular features of both photographers’ careers.

“I am very much drawn to literature,” Evans remarked two days before he died, “but I cannot recommend that as an approach, and I keep trying to tear it down because words are abstract.”<sup>56</sup> The camera, he believed, could more concretely convey the visible world’s poignancy or pathos. “Although photography is more descriptive than music,” he

continued comparing it to other art forms, “it still is not a story.”<sup>57</sup> Evans’s conflicted sense of *métier* harks back to his youthful literary ambitions, the earliest outlet for his creativity. During a year overseas, spent mostly in Paris, he had immersed himself in the works of Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Gide. Frustrated with his own writing, Evans turned (first tentatively, then compulsively) to photography. Returning to America in 1927, he rejected the romantic artiness of reigning photographic sage Alfred Stieglitz and instead began applying “the French esthetic and psychological approach ... to the problem of rendering what I saw,” soon recognizing Eugène Atget as his chief stylistic predecessor in objectively documenting yet lyrically transcending what the camera framed.<sup>58</sup> Though he later professed only the scantest interest in technique, Evans did deem photography “the most difficult of the arts. It does require a certain arrogance to *see* and to *choose*. ... The secret of photography is, the camera takes on the character and the personality of the handler. The mind works on the machine—through it, rather.”<sup>59</sup> This conviction that his own forceful mentality could dominate his mechanism indeed led him to arrogant claims, both for the artistic challenge of photography and for his singular perceptive powers.<sup>60</sup>

Indicative of this self-assurance, Evans typically minimized or excluded textual apparatuses around his photographs. While pictures and texts (often penned by him) were usually integrated in the layout of articles he produced over twenty years at *Fortune*, whenever his photographs appeared in book form, whether as exhibition catalogs or collaborative efforts, he accorded them greater autonomy, in self-contained portfolios with laconically titled plates.<sup>61</sup> Prior to any words, even to the title page, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* opens with his uncaptioned images: thirty-one in the first edition, sixty-two in the second. For the latter he also added an appreciation of Agee, who had died five years earlier. Despite the import of these contributions, in retrospect Evans felt



that he had “come into too much prominence on the tail of Agee’s genius.”<sup>62</sup> Awed by his friend’s prose, albeit disapproving of such unbridled subjectivity, Evans refused to assist Agee in editing the manuscript.<sup>63</sup> Their ways of seeing on the page would conform to their discrete ways of witnessing in the summer of 1936, when, as Evans remembered, “we worked intensely, separately. I didn’t see much of Agee. He was working all day, interviewing and taking notes, and I was photographing. ... We left each other alone.”<sup>64</sup>

Mohr says something comparable about his longstanding partnership with Berger: “we work together, but first each one is doing his own work. ... I never have the feeling of having to take pictures to illustrate the text or John having to write captions or text to make a point about my pictures.”<sup>65</sup> Of *A Fortunate Man*, their initial collaboration, Mohr recalls that they each tried to do too much at first, so that Berger, on viewing two hundred or so of Mohr’s prints, reacted violently, exclaiming that a single image could outstrip the representational force of many words, yet setting aside more than half of the photographs for being overly esthetical.<sup>66</sup> Berger corroborates Mohr’s tale of mutual noninterference and eventual compromise, reflecting that in their books they “have needed a shared sense of measure in order to create pages which flow. ... What so often checks any flow, when images and text are used together, is tautology, the deadening repetition of the same thing being said twice, once with words and once with a picture.”<sup>67</sup> This sense of measure—of verbal and visual ingredients being mixed in balanced proportions, though in accordance with a flexible recipe—infuses their pages with a dual flavor of surety and improvisation. Berger compares the process of concocting *A Seventh Man* to the experimentation of two experienced chefs, as if they worked in a kitchen “with about ten pots on the stove all the time,” he and Mohr dipping into them to sample “different juxtapositions of pictures with different bits of text,” deciding which ones fit together most tastefully.<sup>68</sup> The hybrid dish

they finally cooked up is seasoned with the sophisticated formal play of a lively creative conversation between writer and photographer.

In spite of their designated roles as verbal and visual interlocutors, they have been amenable to swapping positions: a tactic that enriches their dialogues. In *Another Way of Telling*, for instance, Berger includes three of his snapshots and recollects that his passion for photography began when Mohr instructed him in the medium. Of larger significance, here Mohr is responsible for some of the writing, unlike their previous projects. “Beyond My Camera,” his clever opening section, interlinks images and reminiscences to explore esthetic dimensions and ethical quandaries of his experience as a photographer. “I often feel the need to explain my photos, to tell their story,” he remarks. “Only occasionally is an image self-sufficient.”<sup>69</sup> In contrast to Evans’s preference for printing pictures free of textual accompaniment, Mohr has thus willingly surrounded them with words. His book *At the Edge of the World* (1999)—for which Berger furnishes a drawing and a rumination that amount to “A Sketch for a Portrait” of Mohr—combines pictures taken in numerous countries over the course of four decades with his memories of the delicate circumstances under which these photographs were made. Contemplating how he might have responded to certain scenes had he been a writer instead of a photographer, Mohr looks back across his wide travels to revisit places that pushed him close to the edge (emotionally as much as geographically) of his professional terrain.

Like Evans, Mohr did not set out to be a photographer but came to learn the trade slowly yet adroitly on his own. Also like Evans, though differing in receptiveness toward their respective institutional affiliations, much of Mohr’s later productivity was tied to political bodies with photographic units that hired them to document relief programs but allowed them to transcend publicity shots. In 1949, while serving as an International Red

Cross delegate on a mission to aid Palestinian refugees,<sup>70</sup> Mohr procured a camera and started to keep a pictorial notebook for the weekly letters he had promised his father. “I discovered that in one or two minutes I could say more about my work and environment than in pages and pages,” so Mohr stopped writing and just sent pictures home.<sup>71</sup> Back in Europe he studied painting in Paris, but friends persuaded him to hone his photographic aptitude. Establishing himself as a freelancer based in Geneva, many of his subsequent forays with the camera were commissioned by assorted branches of the United Nations, focusing on humanitarian crises and development issues. Although Mohr has always been ambivalent about rifts between international policies and local customs revealed by his assignments, he has never been as uncooperative with his sponsoring organizations as Evans was with the Farm Security Administration, under whose auspices he took some of his best known photographs, including those used in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Standoffishly protecting his artistic independence (provoking his dismissal) while on the staff of this New Deal agency, Evans insisted that he did not endorse its reform agenda and vowed that he would “never make photographic statements for the government.”<sup>72</sup>

Relationships with and attitudes toward their bureaucratic employers—Evans’s short-lived and antagonistic, Mohr’s long-lasting and compliant—point to vocational values that underpin the stylistic hallmarks of both photographers. Galvanized by and celebrated for his documentary work during the Depression, Evans nonetheless saw his objective realism (exemplified by a frontal approach to neglected subjects) as an esthetic rather than an ethical enterprise. He assumed the severity of dispassionate documentation yet incorporated a paradoxically transcendent element of unselfconscious lyricism, which imbues his style with clarity and beauty while diminishing its instrumentalist overtones. “I *do* have a critical mind, and it creeps in, but I am not a social protest artist, although I

have been taken as one very widely.” Evans wrestled with this reputation all his life. “If you photograph ... in an impoverished environment, you’re not—and shouldn’t be, I think—trying to change the world or ... saying, ‘Open up your heart, and bleed for these people.’ ... I equate that with propaganda; I think that is a lower rank of purpose.”<sup>73</sup> By contrast, Mohr’s photographs, as Berger comments, “often make the heart bleed,” yet they neither judge nor exaggerate.<sup>74</sup> Their impetus and their affectivity are not overtly propagandistic but quietly humanistic. More comfortable with the label “concerned” than “committed” photographer,<sup>75</sup> Mohr hopes his pictures may benefit his subjects, perhaps not by alleviating their specific misfortunes but at least by promoting understanding of their region’s adversities. While disputing any contradiction between the roles of witness and artist, he does not “pretend to be an artist” but only “to have some artistic feelings,” which serve “as a surplus” to his guiding principles of compassion, honesty, and lack of precise expectations.<sup>76</sup> According to Berger, whereas Evans looked “for qualities of endurance” in his subjects, Mohr, with “caring nonchalance ... looks for nothing. What he finds is what he happens to come upon. And not infrequently, this involves somebody else looking at him!”<sup>77</sup> Mohr likens his almost passive search for subjects to “a kind of game” in which, unsure of his exact destination, “I’m usually quite happy if I’m misled somehow.”<sup>78</sup> Outcomes of his openness to surprise, suggests Berger, Mohr’s photographs are “offhand, casual, maverick, personal records of moments which astonished Jean,” and thus their “special authenticity” derives from “a habitual alertness” to the spontaneous and the unfamiliar.<sup>79</sup>

Whether encountered via deliberation or happenstance, the people photographed by Evans and Mohr, as with those written about by Agee and Berger, tend to be poor. These artists are therefore liable to let their general attitudes toward the underprivileged

color their ways of seeing particular individuals. But to what extent is this coloration self-conscious? How do they adjust their presuppositions about poverty after facing and at times befriending members of marginalized economic classes? As witnesses who always keep an eye on esthetic possibilities, how do they confront their rights and responsibilities to represent those whose experiences have been underrepresented or misrepresented? Grappling with such questions forces them to invent ethically appropriate forms with which to picture and probe the poor's hardships, hardihood, and praiseworthiness.

As he felt himself "getting into home stretch on the book" about tenant farmers, Agee wrote to Father Flye that he had "to guard against a form of inverted snobbery in myself, i.e. an innate and automatic respect and humility toward all who are very poor .... I'd rather not be without some form of this respect toward them, but it's very dangerous and can easily be false."<sup>80</sup> Evans was also wary of a preconceived partiality for the poor. "I do have a weakness for the disadvantaged," he confessed, "but I'm suspicious of it. I have to be, because that should not be the motive for artistic or aesthetic action. If it is, your work is either sentimental or motivated toward 'improving society,' let us say."<sup>81</sup> Both authors of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* thus warn themselves that, in creating this work of art (or artful anti-art) representing poverty, they risk letting their inbuilt soft spots toward those withstanding it subvert either their esthetic judgment or their ethical alignment. An overweening respect for the poor, that is, may lead to spurious depictions of them, shot through with mawkishness, or else to facile pleas for their socioeconomic betterment. Neither Agee nor Evans, though each abhorred social injustice, ever regarded his creative aims as reformist, believing that uplift was not the purpose of art.<sup>82</sup>

As for falling prey to sentimentality, the photographer always prided himself on maintaining disinterestedness toward his subjects, no matter the depth of their misery,<sup>83</sup>

but the writer found it harder to stay detached, often descrying virtues in the indigent presumed to be absent among the comfortable. In a piece about Brooklyn drafted while he was still tinkering with his Alabama manuscript, Agee scans ethnic neighborhoods and conjectures “that all street and domestic art is talented and powerful in proportion to poverty and disadvantage of blood.”<sup>84</sup> Similarly, lauding Levitt’s photographs of poor people, Agee avers that they befit her lyrical style, because “in children and adults alike, of this pastoral stock, there is more spontaneity, more grace, than among human beings of any other kind,” whereas “weeds and cactuses” outnumber flowers in the soil of higher classes.<sup>85</sup> As a descriptor for denizens of New York City, “pastoral” seems misplaced, but Agee fancies them “wild vines . . . fantastically misplanted in the urgent metropolis.”<sup>86</sup> His inverted snobbery reappears here, impelling him to exalt the vivacity of the poor over the aridity of the rich, just as he had idolized destitute sharecroppers in spite of his self-injunctions against such sentimentalizing esteem.

More candidly than Agee and Evans, Berger and Mohr also side with the poor, striving to unite ethics with esthetics. In *Another Way of Telling* Mohr recounts a railroad journey across Java. While other passengers ignored the sprawling humanity outside the closed windows, he could not bear to look away from the “squalid poverty” of a slum on the outskirts of Djakarta, which struck him, like many sights he had witnessed the world over, as the “typical tragedy of a city smothered by the daily influx of peasants trying to live somewhere.”<sup>87</sup> The countryside they had abandoned was direly impoverished. As the tracks wound into the hills Mohr suddenly saw “emaciated children running barefoot the length of the train,” begging for handouts.<sup>88</sup> Haunted by their unheeded entreaties, on the return trip, ensconced behind his camera at the window, he photographed these children, hoping that pictures, “the only homage I could offer them,”<sup>89</sup> might release him from his

obsession with their desperate hunger. Since neither Mohr nor anyone else gave them any sort of alms, however, his esthetic solution could not truly mitigate his ethical horror, as he signifies by titling this subsection “A Doubtful Exorcism.”

Berger likewise doubts whether ethics and esthetics can ever be harmonized in representations of the poor, but he never doubts the worthwhileness of endeavoring, nor his loyalty to the disadvantaged. Despite shifts in emphasis that mark his evolving artistic sensibility and political disposition, as well as his movement from an urban to a rural milieu, he holds fast to “two things that are so deeply inside me that they are hardly at the level of informed ideas. One is a relation to what I have always felt to be the ‘mystery’ of art. The other is a gut solidarity with those without power, with the underprivileged.”<sup>90</sup> During his tenure as an art critic Berger fused these two intuitive feelings, arguing that “we can only make sense of art if we judge it by the criterion of whether or not it helps men to claim their social rights.”<sup>91</sup> Although denying “that the artist, when actually working, can or should be primarily concerned with the justice of a social cause,” he responds most appreciatively to works in which “the artist’s way of looking at the world” is injected with “the fervour of an implied desire for change,” with “the possibility of an increase, an improvement” in human potential.<sup>92</sup> Among those driven by this desire, he counts such otherwise disparate artists as El Greco, Rembrandt, Watteau, Goya, Van Gogh, and Léger, all of whose paintings and drawings, thinks Berger, promise less that reality might be mastered than that it might be transformed.

Meanwhile, his tenet that the most effective art speaks at least indirectly for the disempowered energizes not only his political essays and his documentaries with Mohr but also many of Berger’s fictional portrayals, from the embattled peasants of *Into Their Labours* to the evicted squatters of *King: A Street Story* (1999) to the undaunted prisoner

in *From A to X: A Story in Letters* (2008). In his role as storyteller he has given manifold voice to the poor. Commending likeminded storytellers such as Danilo Dolci and Andrey Platonov, Berger's occasional pieces plumb the unjust, pervasive persistence of poverty. Engrossed by these "annals of the poor," he scrutinizes a problematic term central to his work: "I choose the word 'poor' deliberately. I might say: of landless peasants and of the lumpenproletariat. The word 'poor' has a very long tradition to it, and it is necessary to ... respect this tradition, without, for one moment, falling into the revolting complacency which accepts poverty as an ordained component of the human condition."<sup>93</sup> Berger contends that the contemporary countenancing of poverty shamefully reflects capitalist greed, since socioeconomic suffering is no longer, "as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied—except by individuals—but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing."<sup>94</sup> Beggars remind Berger that mere pity is feckless. He demands a cross-class solidarity that will support the poor in claiming their legitimate economic and social rights.

Identification with persons who endure poverty, sparked by artistic investment in their liveliness (Agee and Evans) or moral indignation at their wretchedness (Berger and Mohr), ranges across the human spectrum for these four men, extending to urban as well as rural inhabitants. But the works that bind them most notably either take place in the countryside or chart the fates of city newcomers with roots in the soil. Why are these cosmopolitan artists and witnesses drawn so strongly to provincial lives? How does their empathy with the poor dovetail with their apprehensiveness about modernization? For the two writers in particular, the folkways of agricultural laborers or peasant villagers offer a



revitalizing alternative to their own disenchantment with metropolitan society.

Although for personal and professional reasons Agee resided almost all his adult years in New York City, emotionally and ancestrally he felt himself pulled back to the country. As Evans recollected in the second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, conjuring up Agee in 1936: “Backcountry poor life wasn’t really far from him, actually. He had some of it in his blood, through relatives in Tennessee. Anyway, he was in flight from New York magazine editorial offices, from Greenwich Village social-intellectual evenings, and especially from the whole world of high-minded, well-bred, money-hued culture, whether authoritarian or libertarian. In Alabama he sweated and scratched with submerged glee” (xi). A native of Knoxville, whose “unplaceable” or “variable” accent, according to his more urbane collaborator, “veered towards country-southern” in order to ingratiate himself with the sharecroppers (ix),<sup>95</sup> Agee indeed sought to escape Manhattan whenever he could, yearning to reconnect with rural settings reminiscent of his paternal grandparents’ farm in East Tennessee.<sup>96</sup> Trying to fathom if not resurrect his tragically shortened bond with his father, whose demise in an auto accident while driving between country and city would form the main action for Agee’s posthumously published novel *A Death in the Family* (1957), he wrote to his psychoanalyst: “My sense of my father is that he was of the deep country, fought to emerge from it, emerged into a bugging mediocrity, in the city, never lost his love or allegiance towards the country. ... Things I chiefly share with him are: veneration for ‘nature’ and for the simple, insulted & injured; ... essentially ‘peasant’ as against urban feelings.”<sup>97</sup> Agee’s own “peasant” allegiances and affinity for agrarian landscapes, while rendered most extravagantly in his Alabama book,<sup>98</sup> crop up across his literary creations, from the early poem “Ann Garner” (1928) to the late fable “A Mother’s Tale” (1952). The summer after his freshman year of college he bummed

around the country and tried his hand at farm work, “hauling and scooping grain” on a migratory harvest crew in the Great Plains, experiences he fictionalized in undergraduate stories.<sup>99</sup> Agee’s *Fortune* articles on a calamitous drought in the Dakotas, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and rustic customs like cockfighting all testify to his nostalgic penchant for “the lonely rural stretches which are still America,” geographic pockets constituting a non-modern preserve that he could cherish “until some remote time when the nation turns wholly urban.”<sup>100</sup> For him this pastoral sanctuary was centered in the South, the region he refers to as “this colossal peasant map” in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (9).

Few followers of the first half of Berger’s career, which revolved around high art, urban culture, and radical politics, could have predicted that he too would “turn” peasant, forsaking the maelstrom of modernity in order to live among relatively primitive people, upholding their authentic relations to nature, place, labor, animals, and one another.<sup>101</sup> Of a piece, nonetheless, with his hindsight “that even when I was writing on art, it was really a way of story-telling,”<sup>102</sup> Berger’s rural proclivities are rife in his earlier work, before he began telling stories about a peasant village. For example, unwittingly foreshadowing his mid-seventies move to the French Alps, his first novel, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958), visualizes how, “after years in a city, a man can fall in love with a mountain village and decide to build a cabin there.”<sup>103</sup> His art criticism also exhibits an ardor for rural themes. While regretting that “Millet’s holy humble peasants have been used to illustrate many moral lessons”—his sensitive depictions of agricultural labor sentimentally “requisitioned for false preaching” by those who would ennoble the rural poor or by those who would suppress social unrest—Berger affirms that the Barbizon painter “was a moralist in the only way a great artist can be: by the power of his identification with his subjects.”<sup>104</sup> By contrast, tying *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965) to that painter’s upbringing in

and exile from a still-feudal Spain, Berger argues that eschewing the peasant worldview he had grown up beside precipitated his moral and artistic bankruptcy.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps wishing to avert the trap he believed Picasso had fallen into by losing touch with his subjects after moving abroad, Berger (since 1962 likewise a self-imposed expatriate in France) started to look farther afield for his own subjects, aware that, away from one's homeland, "you either feel increasingly exiled as time passes, or increasingly absorbed by your adopted country."<sup>106</sup> In 1974 he embarked on a deeper absorption in his adopted nation, relocating permanently to the mountainous eastern *département* of the Haute-Savoie.

The seeds for this shift were planted, however, by Berger's mid-sixties return to England for his initial documentary excursion with Mohr. Preparing the ground for their later immersion in peasant life, their first several projects unearth equivalences or dig into discords between the country and the city. Suffused with glimpses of forested landscapes and observations on rustic mores, *A Fortunate Man* is an intertwining photographic and novelistic essay about an overworked physician's intricate ties to a poor rural community in Gloucestershire, where he at first presses his patients to be as hardy as Greek peasants he had treated in World War Two. Switching from the role of a doctor under capitalism to that of an artist under communism, subsequently Mohr supplied pictures for Berger's study of Russian sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, *Art and Revolution* (1969), which also opens with an evocation of landscape—the earth seen, bizarrely or willfully, as "mysteriously of the countryside" inside Moscow, where "women are dressed like peasants"—and closes with an outcry against "the intolerable condition of inequality in the world."<sup>107</sup> Whereas photographs mainly serve the more conventional purpose of illustrating that text, the two mediums again engage in a complex dialogue in the authors' next collaboration. Both formally experimental and politically trenchant, *A Seventh Man* refuses to tolerate the

unequal conditions under which country folk come to toil in the city, as the European-wide phenomenon of migrant labor buttresses urban development and perpetuates rural poverty. While working together on this book, Berger and Mohr grew interested in the villages these migrants had to leave behind. Wanting to bear witness to their disappearing culture, the writer, often visited by the photographer,<sup>108</sup> resettled among Alpine peasants who became the subjects of *Another Way of Telling* as well as Berger's trilogy *Into Their Labours*. Empathically chronicling their perseverance in *Pig Earth*, decline in *Once in Europa*, and displacement in *Lilac and Flag*, he shows that these villagers had much to teach him about his newfound, abiding identification with the peasantry.

Whether living among the rural poor for close to four weeks, as Agee did, or close to four decades, as Berger has now done, both writers are propelled toward intimacy with marginalized farmers because tenants and peasants embody a way of life contrasting with modern consumer society. Agee's briefer stay with his subjects may make his fellowship and solidarity with them seem more contrived or less committed, but he cleaves to them with zealous imaginativeness partly to compensate for a cleavage with his own caste that runs as deep as Berger's. Reacting against the avaricious precepts underpinning middle-class values, a hypocritical code that constricted the writers' childhoods and incited their lifelong assaults, Agee lambastes "the inability of the benevolent bourgeois to understand the very poor,"<sup>109</sup> and Berger deplores "the devastation caused by the pursuit of profit, as defined by capitalism."<sup>110</sup> Repelled by such pitiless moneygrubbing, they find themselves reinvigorated by contact and communion with hardscrabble agricultural workers. Hence, prejudices magnify predilections in both men. Being fervidly *against* one class, in other words, inclines them to be all the more ardently *for* another.

In a notebook Agee kept intermittently while writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous*

*Men*, he delineates why *Fortune*'s sharecropping assignment appealed so much to him: "My father was of mountain people who were tenant farmers. My mother was Michigan born, raised in the south; she was of middle-class, somewhat cultivated, small capitalists. My father died when I was six and though I spent some lucky years in a mountain school most of my life had been middle-class. I have always more resented this fact than not, and have to a degree felt cheated and irreparably crippled of half or more than half of what I am."<sup>111</sup> Agee's resentment leads him not only to identify intensely with Alabama tenant farmers as paternal surrogates who might restore the rural self he felt robbed of, but also to mock those of substantial means as haughty, materialistic, stultified, timorous bores. A *Fortune* article on orchids, for instance, satirizes anyone who grows, promotes, sells, or buys this fashionable, commercialized flower. He justifies his derision less of the orchid itself than of its allure as a status symbol, "I dislike it by transference: because I ... dislike the kinds of people who like ... a thing because it is the Largest, the Loudest, the Most Expensive, the most supercharged with Eroticism, Glamor, Prestige."<sup>112</sup> Agee's ire against superlative ostentations rebounds with a vengeance in his final piece for *Fortune*, published after the sumptuous business magazine's editors had declared his impassioned report on sharecroppers unusable for its condescending "Life and Circumstances" series. Accompanied by Evans, who likewise detested the glamorization of capitalism,<sup>113</sup> Agee interloped on a cruise to Havana. "Six Days at Sea" bitterly ridicules the showy apparel, fatuous diversions, sexual inhibitions, and emotional bafflement of the ship's passengers, members of "the American urban middle class," whose "strongest and most sorrowful trait," sneers Agee, was "their talent for self-deceit."<sup>114</sup> Implicitly goading these tourists to be more honest about their hollowness, so that they might shuck off their standardized habits and act on their repressed desires, he told Father Flye that this article's "cruelty

was used to inspire pity in readers who never feel it when it is asked in another's behalf directly," for, as Agee asserts in the same letter, "Irony and savage anger and even certain planes of cynicism are, used right, nearly as good instruments and weapons as love, ... good lens-wipers and good auxiliaries."<sup>115</sup> Although doubtless dissembling about hoping to inculcate pity for the pleasure-seekers he so cruelly portrays, his cynical planes carry over to the tenant book, wherein Agee deploys savagely ironic thrusts at the middle class to supplement his loving praise of unpretentious farmers and to wipe the reader's lenses of any philistine specks.

Diverging in tactics but sharing Agee's target, Berger's cultural criticism in behalf of the working classes fires off polemics instead of satire as his rhetorical weapon against the bourgeoisie. "Ever since I was a student," he pointedly states, "I have been aware of the injustice, hypocrisy, cruelty, wastefulness and alienation of our bourgeois society as reflected and expressed in the field of art. And my aim has been to help, in however small a way, to destroy this society."<sup>116</sup> His biggest way of helping to fan the flames of class warfare has been to disseminate cogent contrary ideas, and his most successful offensive, in terms of audience reached, came with *Ways of Seeing*, conceived in part as a retort to Kenneth Clark's magisterial *Civilization* (1969). Whereas Clark acclaimed the timeless authority and perfection of Western art and architecture, Berger attacked the hierarchical tradition of the European oil painting for its mystification of history, objectification of women, glorification of property, and appropriation through advertising, all enabled or exacerbated by the mass reproduction of images. Publicity, charges Berger, propagates consumerism by marketing glamor: a quintessentially modern brand of enchantment that capitalizes on the proliferation of social envy in industrialized societies. Lubricated by sexual imagery, glamorous advertisements try to persuade people that they can purchase

happiness, that they can obviate their anxiety about being unlovable merely by spending money, or at least by indulging in acquisitive daydreams. “Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy,” he contends. “The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of significant political choice.”<sup>117</sup> By ensuring the availability of readymade products as a compensation for the undemocratic, exploitative tendencies of industrial capitalism, advertisers abet the powerful and dupe the powerless.

Berger refines these insights in several essays written after he rusticated himself away from consumerist nexuses. Using a comparative method, he outlines bourgeois and peasant attitudes toward food, animals, clothes, and social intercourse. In “The Eaters and the Eaten” he invidiously differentiates eating routines among the bourgeoisie, for whom meals are theatrical commodities, and the peasantry, for whom meals represent continuity with yet respite from labor. Berger concludes that “the peasant way of eating is centred on the act of eating and on the food eaten: it is centripetal and physical. Whereas the bourgeois way of eating is centred on fantasy, ritual and spectacle: it is centrifugal and cultural. The first can complete itself in satisfaction; the second is never complete and gives rise to an appetite which, in essence, is insatiable.”<sup>118</sup> A related contrast animates “Why Look at Animals?” Before modernization ruptured the practical companionship between humans and animals, reducing the latter to pets, toys, zoo captives, or cartoon simulations, he argues, agrarian cultures treated nonhuman creatures with affectionate prudence—a dualism based on familiarity *and* need. For example, “A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*.”<sup>119</sup> Berger further excoriates capitalist hegemony and upholds the country over the city in similar sketches on the tailored suit and on social behavior.<sup>120</sup>

Peasants harbor few personal secrets, he points out in *Pig Earth*; they “do not *play roles* as urban characters do. . . . not because they are ‘simple’ or more honest or without guile,” but simply because the space for performance, idealization, deceitfulness, and hypocrisy is restricted by their frank, mordant, pragmatic dealings with their neighbors.<sup>121</sup> Berger’s attentiveness to these village interactions is sharpened by his disillusionment, dourer than Agee’s, with metropolises like Manhattan, which he condemns as “the purest locus of the reflexes, thought patterns, compulsions, and psychological inversions of capitalism.”<sup>122</sup>

Although neither writer ever joined the Communist Party, their animus toward bourgeois, industrial, corporate capitalist society is grounded in Marxist ideology, albeit to differing degrees. While Berger remains a staunch socialist, for whom the demands of art often bolster those of politics, Agee reckoned himself a lackluster revolutionist whose inchoate political philosophy wavered with the times<sup>123</sup> and who therefore redoubled his autonomously artistic exertions. But to neglect Agee’s politicization, or to overemphasize Berger’s, is to misconstrue both their maturity and their malleability as writers. Berger may seem more politically mature and Agee more politically malleable, but each evinces a contrariness engendered by their diverse literary pursuits and whetted by their broader intellectual developments. Accordingly, they caution that resoluteness to revolutionary doctrines must be weighed against historical contingencies, that the struggle to abolish inequality can be stymied by internal contradictions, that Marxist solidarity with manual laborers does not necessarily embrace the rural poor, and above all that class advocacy should not negate the merits or idiosyncrasies of individual experience.

Agee’s most politicized period, followed by his steepest withdrawal from politics, coincided with his writing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Its text, in fact, discloses his shift, during the five years he spent composing it, from a radical leftism to an anarchic



individualism. “I am a Communist by sympathy and conviction” (249), he proclaims in a section written in 1937, before adding, “I am under no delusion that communism can be achieved overnight, if ever” (250).<sup>124</sup> Another section, from 1939, restates his communist principles only to withdraw further in practice: “I am most certainly ‘for’ an ‘intelligent’ ‘communism’; no other form or theory of government seems to me conceivable; but ... I feel violent enmity and contempt toward all factions and all joiners,” due to a determined “effort to be faithful to my perceptions” (356). As with his ambivalence about art when assaying actuality, Agee’s convoluted feelings toward communism stem from a disparity between what he believes would benefit humankind and what he perceives to be the real workings of politics. Irritation over this discrepancy wells up in one of the four dozen proposals he tossed off soon after beginning his “Alabama Record.” Plans for an “Anti-communist manifesto” oddly start out pro-communist but quickly switch to conjecture on current deficiencies: “Assumption and statement in the first place of belief in ideas and basic procedures of communism. On into specific demonstrations of its misconceptions, corruptions, misuses, the damage done ... from contemporary communist writing and action.”<sup>125</sup> Although he never wrote this somewhat perversely equivocal manifesto, Agee obliquely alludes to it via an epigraph for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Sticking to the same design of exhortation and then qualification, he adapts the final rallying cry of the *Communist Manifesto*—“Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win”—yet immediately undercuts it with a footnote asserting “that neither these words nor the authors are the property of any political party, faith, or faction” (xix). While seemingly endorsing revolutionary credos, Agee wards off any sectarian ties, in keeping with faithfulness to his own perceptions, with the volume’s “governing instrument” of “individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness” (xiv).

But why should his politics swing fitfully from engagement to renunciation, from professions of communism to flirtations with anarchism? Agee's political equivocations are a consequence of his personal experience and his artistic temperament, both of which reroute him toward an autonomous estheticism that nonetheless unexpectedly enunciates an ethical standpoint. During the mid-1930s, disgusted with commerce after "three years of exposure to foulness through *Fortune*,"<sup>126</sup> he forecast an "inevitable and literal war, in which, again inevitably, government and capital stand together against labor."<sup>127</sup> Aspiring to stand with laborers, he drafted a number of darkly humorous proletarian verses, most of them later excluded from and only recently restored to his poetic canon.<sup>128</sup> Advocating the violent overthrow and replacement of state-backed liberal capitalism by a pastoralized collectivized utopia, these poems include "Millions Are Learning How," which prods the people to "kill America" (a poisonous mental construct) but to reunite with its revivifying land;<sup>129</sup> "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," which looks forward to that time "When all the Men with all the Hoes / Cut sirloins from the Morgan nose," when a brotherhood of discontented wage-earners will march against "the bloody fact of State," when the human race will learn its true worth as "one man, whose farm's the earth";<sup>130</sup> "[Marx, I agree]," which similarly envisions that "The chains and emblems of the ghastly State / Rust off: the race, the earth, are groom and bride";<sup>131</sup> and "Fight-Talk," which satirizes New Deal agricultural programs for "cutting down on planting wheat / Lest anyone should overeat; / ... And plowing under extra cotton / To prove the tenant's not forgotten."<sup>132</sup> Assigned to investigate sharecroppers shortly after penning many such topical poems, Agee was set to prove his proletarian sympathies. He initially sought out labor organizers with contacts in Alabama and planned to chronicle the efforts of Southern unions as well as government agencies to ameliorate conditions among cotton farmers.<sup>133</sup> Agee's sojourn in the South,

however, culminating in his passionate identification with three particular tenant families, edged him away from partisan movements of any stripe, communist or liberal, from what he came to regard as “the narrow-frontedness and lack of self-skepticism of all organized reformers and revolutionists,” toward a pessimistic independent outlook “more interested in what is wrong than in what is half-heartedly right” with political solutions.<sup>134</sup> By 1938 he considered himself “essentially an anarchist” and “a frenetic enemy against authority”; in 1940, almost done with his individualistic treatment of tenant farmers, he pronounced paradoxically: “If I weren’t an anarchist I would probably be a left-wing conservative.”<sup>135</sup> Agee’s perplexity over politics steered him back toward his gift for poetics, as his social activism took the shape of a complex literary ethics and modernist esthetics rather than a call for revolutionary governmental change.

Berger’s more consistently engaged political writing, informed by his reading of the founders of anarchism and Marxism plus successive socialist theorists,<sup>136</sup> originally appeared in the Communist press, but his “reservations about the party line in relation to the arts” prevented him, as with Agee, from becoming a member.<sup>137</sup> Devoted foremost to artistic creation, Berger’s concern for its societal function spurred him to adopt adamant political principles. “Far from my dragging politics into art,” he asseverated in 1953, “art has dragged me into politics.”<sup>138</sup> Defiantly interfusing these domains, his reviews for the *New Statesman*, collected under the bold title *Permanent Red* (1960), criticized abstract expressionism and championed social realism, yet distinguished the latter from socialist realism, warning that “theoretical militancy only produces forced propaganda.”<sup>139</sup> In the polarized climate of the Cold War, despite inveighing against Stalinist cultural policies, Berger supported the Soviet Union until it cracked down on Eastern European uprisings and obtained nuclear parity with the United States, which he has doggedly assailed as an

oppressive citadel of opportunistic, militaristic imperialism.<sup>140</sup> Parallel to Agee's satirical barbs at the New Deal for its patronizing of the poor, Berger professes himself "immune to the apologetics of liberals. Liberalism is always for the alternative *ruling* class: never for the exploited class."<sup>141</sup> For the past two decades, molding "a pocket of resistance"<sup>142</sup> to the inhumanities of neoliberal economic globalization and indiscriminate wars against terrorism, Berger's essays and fictions have empathized with the "undefeated despair"<sup>143</sup> of indigenous or disinherited peoples such as the Zapatistas and the Palestinians, leading him to reaffirm recently that he is "still amongst other things a Marxist."<sup>144</sup>

His ideology, however, as hinted at by the "other things" constituting his eclectic, exiled, countrified perspective, has never been rigidly conventional. "Where perhaps I am a bad Marxist," he said in 1984, "is that I have an aversion to political power whatever its form. Intuitively I am always with those who live under that power."<sup>145</sup> For Berger, lived experience is much more valuable than conformity to revolutionary goals. "I believe that Marxism," he writes, "with its precise social and historical analysis, is an apprenticeship which the poor have already undergone or will undergo. ... Yet Marxism cannot draw a line under the centuries' experience of the poor and thus close the account, as if thereafter this experience were no more than an anomaly."<sup>146</sup> Since the seventies Berger's Marxism has been anomalous due to his concentration on the peasantry instead of the proletariat. By projecting an inexorable class struggle between industrial manufacturers and factory workers, the *Communist Manifesto* pays little heed to the wisdom of subsistence farmers, uncharitably alleging that the growth of bourgeois cities has "rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life."<sup>147</sup> Berger disputes this in *A Seventh Man*: "About the idiocy of rural life Marx exaggerated. Writing in 1848, he overestimated the capacity of urban rationality, and judged the village by the standards of the city."<sup>148</sup> *Pig*

*Earth* delivers a thoroughgoing rejoinder to brash metropolitan judgments. In a review of these village tales, Todd Gitlin hails the riskiness of Berger's ideological deviation: "For orthodox Marxism as for capitalism, peasants are momentary obstacles on the speedway to the rational future. The upshot has been either neglect or a romanticism in which urban intellectuals turn Marx's slogan on its head, celebrating the happy genius of rural life."<sup>149</sup> Mostly avoiding such facile celebrations, while infusing his trilogy with what he views as positive elements of romanticism, Berger's unorthodox *Into Their Labours* redresses the disregard of peasants in the Marxist imagination.

Religious or spiritual impulses temper Agee's and Berger's political persuasions, stirring them to represent their peon subjects less as socioeconomic victims than as sacred beings. Not only do both authors draw on Holy Writ for the titles of their major works on marginalized people, but they also exercise prophetic ways of seeing that ascribe mystical properties to mundane substances. Their books thus resonate as elaborate praise songs to the rural poor, esthetically apotheosizing those whom they ethically embed in the earth. Agee, looking into the eyes of a tenant farmer in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, sees the "angry glory ... of a furious angel nailed to the ground by his wings, or however else one may faintly designate the human 'soul'" (99), while Berger's narrator in *Lilac and Flag*, having imagined its lovers as butterflies cavorting in the grass she will symbolically scythe, blesses "all the poor of the past and all the poor of the future, among whom there are many who go straight to heaven, if you want an old woman's opinion."<sup>150</sup> Indeed, in Berger's own opinion, the majority of the poor, by virtue of their resilience in adversity, are worthy of salvation, which means that he, like Agee, is predisposed to forgive them their sins and shortcomings. But whereas Berger's moral imperatives and transcendental faith are predominately secular, Agee's sense of human holiness is a highly personalized

take on the Christian tradition.

Although he drifted away from institutional religion in adulthood, much of Agee's work exudes a sanctified aura evoking his formidable Anglo-Catholic rearing.<sup>151</sup> As with his film criticism and his writing style, he deemed himself an amateur and an amphibian with reference to religion. Figuring he was therefore "capable of some perceptions which the trained thinker and the convinced partisan may overlook," at age forty Agee reflected on his protean faith: "I veer between belief in God, non-belief, and a kind of neutrality. In all three frames of mind I keep what I believe is meant by the religious consciousness."<sup>152</sup> Such consciousness, often riddled with doubt or guilt, permeates his correspondence with Father Flye,<sup>153</sup> not least during those years when he was also most politically conscious. Christ's teachings, thought Agee, were truly revolutionary—absolutely antithetical to the status quo—but they had been softened by followers to accommodate "people with less spiritual energy," who failed to discern "that the full literal Christian idea has no regard for existence in the world as it is, but ... is *utterly* destructive to *any* contentment with" worldly affairs.<sup>154</sup> This apocalyptic construal echoes the belligerence of his proletarian poetry.<sup>155</sup> Short of such utter destructiveness and collective inheritance by the poor of a spacious pastoral realm, however, Agee prophesied meager room for meliorating action through existing religious or political channels. "I feel bound," he declared in 1938, "to be an anarchist in religion as well as 'politics' and to feel that the effort toward good in both is identical," implying that any do-gooders (presumably excepting his good friend, the priestly recipient of this confessedly "ill-tempered" letter) who worked within corrupt ecclesiastic or governmental bodies were "thus inevitably inimical to human good."<sup>156</sup>

Agee's heterodoxies prompted his disavowal, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, of prior sympathies with Catholicism and Communism. While his recantations may seem

no more than the bluster of a cantankerous nonconformist, whose refusal to compromise sometimes led him to moralizing preachments or, after he had weighed opposing claims, to moral paralysis, his dissenting spirit might be seen as encouraging a stronger sense of personal (not to be mistaken for social) responsibility toward others.<sup>157</sup> As Evans says in his foreword, Agee's Christianity "was a punctured and residual remnant, but it was still a naked, root emotion. It was an ex-Church, or non-Church matter," a private conviction that "human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls" (xii). Just a few months before their trip to Alabama reconfirmed this belief through their encounter with tenant farmers, Agee conflated his religious and political viewpoints in "an intended sort of Christian-Communist morning hymn, as sung probably in America."<sup>158</sup> Imploring the "hundred million ruined souls" of his fellow countrymen to awake from their spiritual malaise and material indignities, he hoped they might better learn "The love of Jesus and the mind of Marx."<sup>159</sup>

This merger of Christian compassion and Communist vehemence—both shorn of dogmatism and retooled to address the peculiarities of cotton tenantry—informs much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which is at heart, as Agee notes near the beginning, "an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity" (xiv), or, as he makes clearer in an earlier draft, "an enquiry into human divinity, beset by certain normal circumstances of disadvantage."<sup>160</sup> Since his readers are unlikely to be acquainted with these disadvantages, Agee would apprise them that living with privation is not abnormal for most human beings, nor does it preclude such persons from sharing divine attributes. Borrowing some of his book's structure from Catholic liturgy, he quotes several Biblical passages and lifts his ironic, exhortatory title from an Apocryphal hymn (Ecclesiasticus 44) that honors past generations of "famous" (closer to "pious" in the original Hebrew)

men. Among those deserving of praise, according to this panegyric, are not only eminent personages but also devout forefathers who left no memorial yet whose righteous deeds and steadfast seed shall not be forgotten. Agee's full "Title Statement" cunningly links himself, as one who has "recited verses in writing," to his unheralded subjects, in effect establishing a literary "covenant" that "their praises might be reported ... and their glory shall not be blotted out ... but their name liveth for evermore" (445).

Just as Agee rouses the reader to join him straightway (*Let Us Now ...*) in exalting unfamous farmers, so Berger invites imaginative participation in his peasant trilogy. He too invokes scripture for its overall title, *Into Their Labours*, from the Gospel of John: "Others have laboured and ye are entered into their labours" (4:38). The context for this utterance by Jesus is his passing through Samaria, whose tribes, though worshipping the Lord God of ancient Israel, were scorned by Jews as inauthentic observers of the Torah. Metaphorically adapting an agrarian saying, Jesus counsels his disciples to reap the ripe fields others have sown, gaining converts by entering into their spiritual labors. Likewise in a foreign land, witnessing to people slighted by mainstream proponents of modernity, Berger's title secularizes Christ's charge through the author's robust involvement in the physical labors of marginalized others. Rather than proselytizing, he himself seeks to be converted to their ethos. "The best way to get to know peasants," states Berger, "is not by talking but by doing things, working together."<sup>161</sup> His willingness to work alongside them has not only deepened his knowledge of the many tasks they perform—planting, digging, calving, milking, feeding, herding, butchering, harvesting, woodcutting, cheesemaking—but has also given him plenty of opportunities to gather in their talk and thus store away fodder for his storytelling. Berger's fictionalized history of communal peasant experience demonstrates his hands-on, able-bodied, strong-minded, wholehearted immersion in their



lives. Imparting his participatory approach and gradual familiarization with the villagers, he prints the stories in *Pig Earth* in the order in which he wrote them, “so that the reader may accompany me, and we can make the journey side by side.”<sup>162</sup> The following two volumes of his trilogy, like his collaborations with Mohr, also show him striving to enter into, travel within, or fully inhabit the labors of his subjects, as well as striving to achieve what he calls “a kind of complicity” with the reader.<sup>163</sup>

While Berger’s emphases on manual labor and material conditions are congenial with his politics, neither does he shirk his characters’ spirituality and subjectivity, leading some critics to label him “a spiritual materialist” or “a romantic Marxist.”<sup>164</sup> Around the time he was finishing *Into Their Labours*, the writer himself acknowledged his apparent paradoxes in an essay evaluating the 1989 collapse of Communist regimes across Eastern Europe. Since 1789, Berger argues, the economic basis of both bourgeois capitalism and its socialist opposition has vitiated religious values. “The human imagination, however, has great difficulty in living strictly within the confines of a materialist practice,” and so, throughout the previous two centuries, “the spiritual persisted, but in new, marginalized forms,” such as the implicit faith undergirding the struggle for social justice: a struggle undertaken by individuals as unlike as “illiterate peasants and professors of etymology,” who, regardless of their education and notwithstanding their strategic materialism, were really “transcendent visionaries,” their hearts and sights all set on a classless society.<sup>165</sup>

Although surely counting himself among this heterogeneous group for whom this secular quest is a surrogate for religion, Berger also puts his faith in romanticism: another persistent even if debatably nebulous form of spirituality during the revolutionary epoch. His application of the term—less as an identifier for a specific artistic period or school of thought than as a catchall for passion or intuitiveness—can be regrettably loose,<sup>166</sup> but to

ignore the romantic strain in his work would be almost as imprecise as to ignore Agee's connections with Christianity and simply to characterize them both as being spiritually or mystically inclined. Ironically, in disposition if not in actions, Agee may be closer than Berger to the Byronic paragon of an unfettered, impetuous romantic, while Berger may be closer to Agee's romanticized conception of an uncompromising saint like Francis of Assisi.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, Berger declares himself a romantic as well as a Marxist, without fretting over this dualism.<sup>168</sup> The respective accents of romanticism and Marxism on the personal and social dynamics of human experience appeal equally to his spirit,<sup>169</sup> in spite of these philosophies' clashing modes of combatting capitalism. For instance, alluding to remarkable love poems composed in the midst of the Russian Revolution, he admonishes that even the most politically committed artists must not deny "those subjective intuitions which romanticism is about and which are frequently expressed in love," lest something wither inside them during their ideological battles.<sup>170</sup>

Internal presentiments and romantic love, though usually caught up in political currents, find frequent expression in Berger's fiction, not least in *Into Their Labours*.<sup>171</sup> For all its material contours and tragic undertones, his trilogy limns not only the daily chores, threatened livelihoods, and hazardous emigration of mountain peasants but also the dense web of memories spun around their friendships, intergenerational families, and turbulent affairs: the weathering of what he calls "the leather of love" in *Once in Europa*, "a collection of love stories set against the disappearance or 'modernisation' of ... village life."<sup>172</sup> To convey modernity's disruption of traditional communities and dislocation of villagers, *Pig Earth* and *Lilac and Flag* end with magic realist scenes that encapsulate the transcendent loves and counteract the tremendous losses of the books' resourceful heroes. Berger's incorporation of these fantastic incidents, sewing together spiritual and material

fabrics to construct earthbound tapestries of the afterlife, bespeaks his multifaceted vision of reality, formulated through a conjunction of philosophical investments in romanticism, socialism, modernism, and humanism.

As critical no less than as creative writers, Agee and Berger are keenly interested in works about the rural poor. Throughout their careers they routinely assess other efforts both to bear witness for and make art from impoverished country dwellers. Photographs, paintings, movies, novels, and hybrid artworks deriving from folk sources help them to prepare for or reflect on their own intense engagements with tenant farmers or peasant villagers, hence enlarging or amending their notions of how to blend witness and artistry, fact and fiction. As they test the ethical and esthetic parameters of depicting those who labor on the land, they reveal a great deal about their underlying mindsets. Agee can be wildly contradictory in his commentaries, verging at times on opaqueness or incoherence, whereas Berger, even if just as much a contrarian, is fairly consistent within the terms of his discourses, as though the latter is blessed with “negative capability” and the former cursed with it. Agee is often peevish or strident, that is, in voicing his uncertainties or expatiating on the beauties of the commonplace, whereas Berger keeps his cool when musing on other representations of rural poverty.

*Fortune* assignments prior to Agee’s sharecropping investigation twice gave him the chance to mull over visual framings of agricultural subjects. His 1934 account of the drought blistering the middle third of the continent relies not on firsthand observations but on photographs by Bourke-White, whom he would hold up for mockery in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In this article, albeit beholden to her pictures, Agee is already pushing back with his words, as well as chiding the reader for not being more ethically cognizant. “Really to know,” a phrase he repeats to rub in that his snug audience cannot

really know how “simply and gruesomely” the drought has decimated millions of acres, livestock, and livelihoods, “you should have stood with a Dakota farmer and watched a promissory rack of cloud” dissipate overhead without sending a drop of rain to relieve “the earth baked stiff and steaming. You should have been a lot more people in a lot more places, really to know.”<sup>173</sup> Realizing that such simultaneously ubiquitous and localized knowledge (not to mention empathy) are beyond most readers, however, he proffers as proxy “the clear dispassionate eye of the camera, which under honest guidance ... has recorded this brutal season.”<sup>174</sup> Yet Bourke-White’s photographs of scorched farmland, gaunt animals, and distressed farmers merely serve as springboards for Agee’s verbose, melodramatic, poetically allusive captions. For example, between shots of starving cattle and skinned carcasses left to rot on the parched ground, he quotes from an ode by Keats and a motet by Carissimi,<sup>175</sup> thus converting an act of vicarious witness into a brazenly aestheticized operation.

The next year, in a survey of contemporary American painters, his words again cut against the images they are supposed to be supporting. While admiring the ingenuity of Joe Jones, whose series on wheat encodes subtle tributes to communist defiance, Agee is troubled by a trend among left artists: “the concern of their generation with humanity as humanity, rather than as a diversity of individuals. ... There are no longer men: there is Man. And Man is a heroic, pathetic, exploited, self-sacrificing, beaten, rising figure seen at a great remove.”<sup>176</sup> Agee’s preference for distinct personalities over types, for specific men over Man, would dictate his intimate scrutiny of the rural poor. His disquietude with universalized radical paintings, like his distanced riffs on drought photos, motivates him to examine in person (and to reexamine through Evans’s portraits) the faces of particular tenant farmers whose trust he covets.

But looking at marginalized others, whether straight into their eyes or secondhand via visual mediation, is just the first step toward writing about them with due attention to both ethics and esthetics. Despite his deference to artistic individuation of people and place, Agee nonetheless bucked the constraints of over-meticulous literary regionalism. In a letter penned a year before his Alabama odyssey, he noted the “strong consciousness of ‘anthropological’ correctness” in much thirties writing, with painstaking care that one working-class locality’s dialect not be mingled with another, then went on to speculate inconclusively whether proletarian literature would be enhanced if, disregarding “this scientific-journalistic-scrupulousness, you should instead feel at liberty ... to develop a ... generic Workers’ Language.”<sup>177</sup> Perennially ambivalent about how to report dialogue, Agee reevaluates the linguistic quandary not only in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* but also in his 1944 essay “Pseudo-Folk.” This cheeky diatribe on the “bourgeoizified” folk tradition unwarrantedly lampoons the hyperbolic primitivism and artificial language of black musicians and white writers who effect, he claims, “a lowering or full dismissal of ethical and moral standards” through “esthetically execrable” amalgamations of classical and folkloric content.<sup>178</sup> That his own work might indulge in such admixtures apparently does not perturb him, or remains repressed out of a will to sustain conflicting ethical and esthetic benchmarks. “Tolstoy’s opinion that the one reliable judge of art was a clean old peasant has never convinced me, but it has strongly moved, interested and unsettled me,” Agee vacillates. “But thanks to our nominal democracy and to the machines for universal manure-spreading ...”—to bourgeois advertising, that is—“the ‘peasants’ themselves, the sources of folk art, are if possible even more dangerously corrupted than the middle-class audience.”<sup>179</sup> Rehashing a key theme (the perception of beauty as both a fruit and a pitfall of class privilege) from his tome on peasants, Agee’s whim that they stay uncorrupted by

all aspects of modernity (modernism no less than modernization) cancels out his intuitive attraction to the idea that they may be the most trustworthy arbiters of artistic taste.

While “Pseudo-Folk” sounds off on almost every imaginable genre (from jazz to soap operas) of modern art, its recommendations on the literary uses of ordinary folk are, like Agee’s previous comments on books about the rural poor, most self-revealing of his own approach to portraying them. Before completing his tenant volume he weighed in on another agriculturally-oriented photo-textual collaboration: *An American Exodus* (1939) by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor. Although rating Lange’s photographs and Taylor’s text superior to those of Bourke-White and Caldwell in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Agee demurred at how Lange and Taylor (as did Bourke-White and Caldwell) affixed quotations beneath the pictures, which exposed the “tearjerking inherent in dialect re-used by sophisticates.”<sup>180</sup> Anxious to avoid such mawkishness, he not only would agree that Evans’s photographs be printed uncaptioned in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* but would hesitate to utilize dialects picked up during fieldwork within his sophisticated text, galled that southern “tenants’ idiom has been used ad nauseam by the more unspeakable of the northern journalists” (340). With similar doses of spleen and approbation, Agee’s 1937 review of two homegrown sharecropper novels—*Black Earth* and *River George*—also let him contemplate how the circumstances he had witnessed in the South might be given artistic structure, even if he would do so by spurning fictionalization and questing toward an assiduous reproduction of actuality.<sup>181</sup> As for other fictional treatments of poor whites, though he elsewhere extols Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man* (1926) and William Faulkner’s *The Hamlet* (1940),<sup>182</sup> in “Pseudo-Folk” Agee reprovingly quotes from John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939),<sup>183</sup> lumping it in with the puzzlingly “snobbish, affected and anti-human” disgracefulness of “the ‘talk-American’ writer, the

Common Man as normally represented in left-wing, liberal and tory fiction alike, and the pseudo-Biblical diction which chokes so much of our writing once we try to ‘dignify’ the vernacular.”<sup>184</sup> This accusation of inverted snobbery—precisely what he himself felt the need to guard against when writing about “common” people—may in part be colored by bitterness over the fame of Steinbeck’s book versus the flop of his own.<sup>185</sup> Incriminating the novelist and his ilk for their unintentional travesties of the rural poor, Agee holds out hope for a more judicious use of colloquial speech.

Both his pettiest and sharpest critiques of art that aims to dignify the folk are of movies, which he reviewed for *Time* and *The Nation* during the 1940s. In his inaugural “amateur” column for the latter, he defers specifying his candid regret over “ninety-nine feet in every hundred” of John Ford’s adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>186</sup> Two years earlier, shortly after its 1940 release, Agee had worked up extensive contradictory notes, ostensibly about why it bothered him. In what would become his customary belittle-then-applaud—or, conversely, acclaim-then-tarnish—manner, this incomplete piece gestures toward “long efforts ... on film esthetics and on critical ethics” in order to elucidate the picture’s “encyclopedia of flaws, substandards, inadequacies,” only to then highlight the moments he most liked in it.<sup>187</sup> Irked as much by its popularity as by its unreality, arguing that since its serious focus on dispossessed sharecroppers is so “near the centres of human living, pain and dignity,” he must therefore be “severe in proportion to the nobility of the attempt,” Agee leverages his disappointment with its impostures as a “documentary” film into his wider grievance with leftists (and, as he typically adds, liberals) who appropriate works of art while overlooking or forgiving these sources’ “non-political gaffs [sic].”<sup>188</sup> Glaring among such blunders, he alleges, is the acting in *The Grapes of Wrath*, yet Agee foresees the hoodwinked collective reaction of Okies upon viewing their portrayal: “it is

unhappy to reflect how many farmers, watching these high-paid, earnest, cruelly insulting oafs embody their self-dream, will be completely flattered of their reality.”<sup>189</sup> This unkind postulation, partly rescinded by his esteem for Jane Darwell’s carriage as Ma Joad, stems from his caprice that farming folk remain unmodernized. Just as, in “Pseudo-Folk,” Agee would admit himself intrigued but unconvinced by the notion that peasants might be the most dependable assessors of art, here his annoyance with their commercial co-option by Hollywood not only provokes him to deem them hopelessly uncritical of their egregious impersonators but also masks his worry that no art form (not barring his own anti-artistic artistry) can ever authentically represent them.

Agee’s exactingness toward what he judges valid embodiments of reality, and his vigilance against fraudulent ones, which are conspicuously displayed and contradictorily debated throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, similarly pervade two later *Nation* reviews of films about agrarian life. Outwardly like his study, except set in Texas rather than Alabama, Jean Renoir’s *The Southerner* (1945) tries “to tell the story of a year in the life of a family of cotton tenant farmers.”<sup>190</sup> While appreciating the movie’s atmospheric cinematography, Agee gripes, perhaps recalling his own lengthy inventories of farm work and clothing: “The heart of this kind of living is work, and the picture should have made the work as immediate to the watcher as to the worker in all its methods, meanings, and emotions. It offers instead, mere token shots of work; and in these, too often, the clothes aren’t even sweated.”<sup>191</sup> Even more disconcerting, due to his “respect for people” and for “regional exactness,” is the film’s careless miscasting of actors to play rural southerners, which proves, he says, “how massively misguided, and how swarmed with unconscious patronage, the whole attitude of the theater has always been toward peasants.”<sup>192</sup> As Agee avowed in 1938, “you cannot possibly honor what you patronize.”<sup>193</sup>



*Farrebique* (1947), a French film by Georges Rouquier, likewise “a record of the work and living of a single farm family,” comes closer, thinks Agee, to honoring without patronizing this holiest of subjects for him, which, to prevent mishandling its genuineness when presented as nonfiction, whether on the page or on the screen, requires a “discipline of imagination” that must subordinate esthetic dramatization to ethical documentation.<sup>194</sup> Pleased even so that Rouquier “is infinitely more than a mere documentor, that his poetic intelligence is profound, pure, and vigorous,” Agee hails the director’s realization that the camera is uniquely equipped to capture “the peculiar kinds of poetic vitality which blaze in every real thing.”<sup>195</sup> *Farrebique*, “without actors or a fictional story,” renders farm life as “agricultural poetry,”<sup>196</sup> much as he and Evans do in their volume. The movie is, Agee avers, “one of the finer works in the whole great line of rural art which extends backward through Van Gogh and Brueghel to the *Georgics* and to the *Works and Days*. It combines the cold deep-country harshness of Hesiod with a Vergilian tenderness and majesty; and its achievement is wholly of our time, through that reverence for unaltered reality which can be translated into a work of art only through the camera.”<sup>197</sup>

Agee’s enthusiasm for the venerable tradition of rural art, updated and refocused by technological inventions, also touches Berger, whose essays less testily ponder efforts by painters and photographers, as well as peasants themselves, to delineate lives wrought on the land. “The White Bird” designates the esthetic emotion—derivative of an emotion felt before nature—he feels upon beholding homemade wooden doves that his neighbors hang indoors during the long austere Alpine winters.<sup>198</sup> In contrast to the prevailing urban sentimentality toward nature, contends Berger, those who live with acuter vulnerability to its perils, such as peasants, nomads, and sailors, regard natural beauty as secondary to its elemental fearsomeness, its indifferent energy. Rather than imitating natural phenomena,

then, “Art supposes that beauty is not an exception ... but is the basis for an order. ... Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply ... the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer,” while its historical face, he reiterates, has an obligation to help “men in the modern world claim their social rights.”<sup>199</sup>

Although he advises that the wooden bird, a simple albeit skillfully made object, should not be compared, say, to a masterpiece by Rembrandt, Berger analyzes esthetic discordances between unschooled and trained artists in another essay, “The Primitive and the Professional.” Whereas the former’s art arises from concrete experience incompatible with societal norms, he argues, the latter’s reliance on artistic conventions predisposes it to abstraction, thus fortifying incongruities along class lines. Among so-called primitives derided as clumsy, naive, or eccentric is Ferdinand Cheval, a postman from the Drôme, who combed the French countryside gathering strange-shaped stones with which he built a geological palace, melding poetry, sculpture, and architecture into what Berger heralds as a “direct expression of peasant experience,” emphasizing its everyday combination of physicality and innerness.<sup>200</sup> Again employing urban temperaments as a negative foil, as in his piece on the carved birds, he points out how Cheval’s animal imagery and mineral masonry, modeled on the organic growth of a forest, are imbued with the simultaneously visceral and spiritual “vision of a class of cunning, hardened survivors.”<sup>201</sup>

Neither a born primitive nor an assured professional, Berger long ago renounced his bourgeois heritage and embraced peasant experience.<sup>202</sup> To comprehend this class’s survival, he too has sought to reconstruct its dual vision, its synchronic concentration on body and soul, ancestry and progeny. “Inexhaustibly committed to wresting a life from

the earth, bound to the present of endless work,” he ruminates in *Pig Earth*, “the peasant nevertheless sees life as an interlude,”<sup>203</sup> a brief span between the vastness of the past and the indeterminacy of the future, bridging tradition and change, memory and anticipation. Daily acquaintance with the natural cycle from birth to death through the raising of crops and livestock reinforces the concept that single lives are infinitesimal arcs on an immense wheel of time, which in turn fosters a fundamentally religious (but neither fundamentalist nor sacerdotal) interpretation of existence. Berger’s peasant stories are instilled with this twofold sight, both fixed on earthly occurrences and lifted toward heavenly mysteries.

But how, he wonders, might images, in addition to words, convey such experience of the natural as well as the supernatural, of manual labor as well as religious devotion? If Cheval’s “temple to nature”<sup>204</sup> is better experienced by being entered (failing that, Berger implies, by being read about) than by being viewed two dimensionally, why does he print his essay on it with a photograph? Yet just as he assists Mohr in putting together pictorial sequences of work and rest, Berger often meditates on other photographic representations of those who persevere amid poverty. In “Christ of the Peasants,” for instance, musing on Marketa Luskacova’s pilgrim photographs from the Slovak village of Sumiac, he remarks that remembrances of the dead are challenging to picture for the eyes of the living, much as “the visual never allows itself to be translated intact into the verbal.”<sup>205</sup> Trying anyhow to decipher the photography of Paul Strand—by his reckoning (along with Evans) one of “the great witnessing masters of the medium”<sup>206</sup>—Berger observes that Strand’s portrait of a half-blind beggar woman wearing a sign reading BLIND (an image that stimulated Evans)<sup>207</sup> “forces us to reflect on the significance of seeing itself.”<sup>208</sup> Indeed, what most impresses Berger about Strand’s (again not unlike Evans’s) posed, frontal, biographical way of seeing people, frequently peasants, “is his ability to invite the narrative: to present

himself to his subject in such a way that the subject is willing to say: *I am as you see me*,” so that he might bring to light “the visible evidence, not just of their presence, but of their *life*.”<sup>209</sup> Seemingly given an indefinite exposure time, the resulting portraits, according to Berger, acquire a historic duration, outlasting what he considers a photograph’s minimal, instantaneous message: “*I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*.”<sup>210</sup>

Prior to decisions made by twentieth-century photographers about the esthetic and ethical value of preserving peasant likenesses on film, certain nineteenth-century painters strove to expand their medium’s heretofore rather elitist territory by recording on canvas their empathic ways of seeing the rural poor. “All new subjects have been introduced into painting in the same way,” comments Berger, through “the artist identifying himself with those who had previously been ignored or dismissed.”<sup>211</sup> Identification with the peasantry occurs with increasing intensity in Courbet, Millet, and Van Gogh, who all focus on one patch of the multifarious humanist quilt that occupied their precursor Pieter Breughel.<sup>212</sup>

“As an artist of peasant origin,” reared in the rainy Loue valley beneath the rocky Jura range, Courbet’s painterly imagination “perceived according to senses developed by habits different from those of the urban bourgeois.”<sup>213</sup> Depicting the sensuous materiality of his home region, remarks Berger, “His country landscapes were revolutionary in so far as they presented real places without suggesting any romantic antithesis with the city.”<sup>214</sup> A committed socialist who spurned the adulation of art for art’s sake, Courbet “realized that the artist’s independence could only be productive if it meant his freedom to identify himself with his living subject, to feel that *he* belonged to *it*, never vice versa,”<sup>215</sup> a rule that Berger himself carefully follows in his identification with Savoyard peasants. Due to Courbet’s sensory weightiness, however, he did not provide “any insight inwards,” which “explains why the peasant *as subject* could not be his theme.”<sup>216</sup>

Millet, meanwhile, from a village in Normandy, “chose to paint peasants because he was one,” limning both the exterior and interior world of “the peasant driven by the seasons,”<sup>217</sup> treating hitherto unpainted “rural labour as the central theme of his art.”<sup>218</sup> His resolve to portray agricultural tasks in realistic settings, observes Berger, elicited at times stunning originality, as in his night scenes, at others technical unfeasibility, as when he suspended seed potatoes in midair on their descent from hand toward soil, which “may be filmable, but is scarcely paintable.”<sup>219</sup> Nostalgia for his rural background did not tempt Millet to sentimentalize conditions in the countryside, where French peasants, making up two-thirds of the entire population, lived in penury and endured brutally exhausting work. Conscious that his urban viewers were largely ignorant of these circumstances, he aimed, in his own words, “to disturb them in their contentment and leisure.”<sup>220</sup> Reproduced and distributed, his images later reached the peasantry, affording this class the opportunity to recognize itself pictorially. Berger describes the widespread impact of Millet’s earthiness: “A pride which was, before, an obstinate refusal of shame, becomes an affirmation,” even though seen in stark terms.<sup>221</sup> In spite of his moral rectitude and his skilled draftsmanship, concludes Berger, Millet’s efforts to monumentalize marginal figures and integrate them with their environment “failed because the language of traditional oil painting could not accommodate the subject he brought with him.”<sup>222</sup> Incommensurate, that is, with bucolic picturesque landscapes pandering to a privileged spectator’s gaze, “there was no formula for representing the close, harsh, patient physicality of a peasant’s labour *on*, instead of *in front of*, the land.”<sup>223</sup>

Having copied from Millet, “his chosen master, both spiritually and artistically,” Van Gogh then tried to concoct such a formula as he “united the working figure with his surroundings by the gestures and energy of his own brush strokes,” an energy “released

by his intense sense of empathy with the subject” of peasant life.<sup>224</sup> No other painter, in Berger’s opinion, ever worked so hard to re-create the activity of labor and the dynamism of nature, bringing reality and its artistic representation closer together, tearing down the curtain of cultural clichés that obstruct perception and trivialize truth. Berger likens Van Gogh’s paintings not to mirrors but to lasers: “They do not wait to receive, they go out to meet, and what they traverse is, not so much empty space, as the act of production.”<sup>225</sup> In doing so, however, Van Gogh ironically risked converting empathy into egotism, which, argues Berger, occluded objectivity and opened the door to expressionist autobiography: “The witness had become more important than his testimony.”<sup>226</sup>

In their own roles as witnesses to the lives of the rural poor, Agee and Berger both broach the ethical conundrum of testifying literarily on behalf of underprivileged persons with whom they have initiated relationships. Before generalizing about the tenantry or the peasantry as marginalized agricultural classes, they must learn from particular tenants or peasants who happen to be their hosts or neighbors. Yearning to be participants, not just onlookers, the writers immerse themselves as fully as possible in their adopted agrarian communities. Aware that the portrayal of friends may dissolve into a betrayal of trust if the representation of poverty implodes into a poverty of representation, they take on their responsibilities with a gravity of conscience matched only by bottomless curiosity.

Written by an artist who gleaned his material as a journalist and then vociferously discounted both art and journalism, plus most other forms of inquiry, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is at root the work of a fervent witness who fancies himself a contrite spy. Enamored with his perceptive abilities but ashamed of his job, Agee fluctuates between self-inflatedness and self-castigation while observing the conditions of tenant life. Hence, reverently yet remorsefully rummaging through the possessions of a household where he

is a guest, as if compelled against his will to extend his senses, he comments: "I am being made witness to matters no human being may see" (136). Whom does Agee bear witness for, and to whom does he address his findings? His "Preamble" broods over the "curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying" circumstances which led him and Evans "to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of 'honest journalism' (whatever that paradox may mean), of humanity, of social fearlessness, for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased" (7). Repudiating the principles, profits, and prestige of reportage, Agee prefers to dwell on the authors' "human responsibility" toward their unprotected subjects, on "the strange quality of their relationship with those whose lives they so tenderly and sternly respected, and so rashly undertook to investigate and to record" (8). Although Evans would later claim, "In making pictures of people no harm is being done to anybody or deception practiced,"<sup>227</sup> Agee feared that their acts of witness were indeed harmful, that even if used artistically instead of journalistically, their photographic and verbal records might misrepresent the families they intended to honor, much as they had deceived or embarrassed these people before winning them over. This ethical qualm induces the book's tender dedication to its protagonists, as well as Agee's uncertainty, littered with quotation marks, about how he should speak of them: "as 'tenant' 'farmers,' as 'representatives' of your 'class,' as social integers in a criminal economy, or as individuals, fathers, wives, sons, daughters, and as my friends and as I 'know' you?" (100). In their particularities, he insists, rather than in their class designation, lie not only the tenants' true worth but also his principal interest in them, though he leaves room to discuss them more broadly by affirming that "from any

set of particulars it is possible and perhaps useful to generalize” (245).

But what might they themselves think of how he decides to depict them? Either as individuals whom he “knows” or as “representatives” of a criminally exploited working class, should not their own quiddities be consulted and their susceptibilities be taken into account before tackling the problem of giving literary shape to their lives? Would not it be an ethically “obscene” crime to embroider his knowledge of them into an esthetically ornate representation, just as it would to knowingly “parade” their unmitigated hurts for readers far removed from the realities of tenantry? While agonizing over his prose Agee likewise agonizes over those for whom he bears witness, guiltily confessing an exciting attempt yet ultimate failure to write in simple language that might be understood by such poorly educated farmers: “The lives of these families belong first (if to any one) to people like them and only secondarily to the ‘educated’ such as myself. If I have done this piece of spiritual burglary no matter in what ‘reverence’ and wish for ‘honesty’, the least I can do is to return the property where it belongs, not limit its language to those who can least know what it means.”<sup>228</sup> Scolding himself for his arrogation of actual lives as intellectual property, Agee’s metaphor of metaphysical theft is particularly apt considering how little the tenants have ownership of materially. The one thing they can indubitably lay claim to (albeit intangible) is their own existence, but his ethnographic slumming and highfalutin writing—regardless of how sincerely he might be inquiring into their “human divinity”—threaten to rob them even of their own sense of themselves. Since he can neither banish his literariness nor make reparations for allegorically stealing souls, however, Agee must resort to harrying well-educated readers, reproaching them for their absentee empathy in the hope of activating their dormant consciousness to his subjects’ complexity. Ruthlessly policing his own representational maneuvers, he swings between doubt and confidence in



the efficacy of his mediating performance.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* sets out to shame its assumedly remote, maudlin, financially comfortable readership by announcing that it is “a book about ‘sharecroppers,’ and is written for all those who have a soft place in their hearts for the laughter and tears inherent in poverty viewed at a distance, and especially for those who can afford the retail price” (14). In contrast to this caustic tone, Berger’s authorial mediations on behalf of the rural poor are as obliging to his readers as he himself is obliged to his subjects. Whereas Agee’s multiple introductory feints deliberately complicate more than clarify the subject and insult more than invite the reader, Berger’s prefaces and asides seek to communicate transparently. In *Another Way of Telling*, recapitulating his collaborations with Mohr, he says they always ask themselves, “How can we approach the reader together?”<sup>229</sup> In like spirit, their tales and pictures demonstrate a conscientious joint approach to their subjects, who also collaborate with them by offering constructive criticisms which are woven into the books’ content. Mohr’s series on a cowherd and a woodcutter, for example, assimilate their photographic preferences. In addition to letting them suggest (as Evans at times let the tenants do) the composition of their portraits, Mohr takes note, on showing them his prints, of how they reject certain photos while treasuring ones that attest to their working lives. Berger, too, sets such great store by what his subjects make of their portrayals that he seems readier than Agee to accept Tolstoy’s hunch that peasants are the most qualified appraisers of art, or readier in any case to calculate that that they might make up a sizable percentage of his readership. For the 2010 republication of *A Seventh Man*, unfazed that pundits had initially “dismissed it as being insubstantial: a pamphlet, according to them, wavering between sociology, economics, reportage, philosophy and obscure attempts at poetry,” Berger contends that the book has been substantiated by its favorable reception

among migrant workers when translated into their languages and “read by some of those whom it was about,” for whom its original urgency as a sociopolitical treatise intended to boost “international working-class solidarity” has been modified to a more intimate form of address: “a sequence of lived moments” or “a family photo album” for those uprooted or separated by emigration.<sup>230</sup> Elsewhere he proudly recalls a comparable response to his storytelling from peasants who have read *Pig Earth*.<sup>231</sup>

Although trimmed and rearranged once this volume took its place at the head of his trilogy, the first edition of these communal stories and intercalary poems contains two handily informative essays through which Berger interrogates his participant observation of village life and generalizes about peasant experience worldwide. Eventually shifted to stand as the overall introduction to *Into Their Labours*, the “Historical Afterword” to *Pig Earth* revives an outdated mode of explicitly linking literary creations to societal trends. Berger points out that in the nineteenth century—“a century of revolutionary change in which the relation between the individual and history was becoming a conscious one”—imaginative writers would sometimes accompany a poem or story with an essay denoting how their particular evocation related to universal developments.<sup>232</sup> This practice fell out of fashion during the twentieth century, a period of even rapider transformation in which literature, rues Berger, “elevated itself into a pure art,” though it mostly “degenerated into pure entertainment.”<sup>233</sup> He thus echoes Agee’s apprehensive disclaimer that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is “not a work of art or of entertainment” (111) but rather “an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell” (xvi). While both writers, being in part both personal witnesses and social commentators, gainsay the purity of art and the frivolity of entertainment, their positions relative to presumed audiences appear to differ here. Berger regrets that authors

are no longer guides, serving to instruct as well as to delight their readers, whereas Agee, when not playing bully, issues a postmodernist appeal for self-directed readers capable of finding their way through his disjointed book, of helping him “make clear some essential coherence in it, which I know is there, balanced of its chaos” (319).

But the tension between steering and stimulating, between imposing set meanings and leaving an array of possible ones available, vibrates throughout all of their writings. As their ways of seeing, whether on their own or in collaboration with the photographers, yield a means of praising the rural poor, they debate how insistently to sing these praises. At the heart of their work is the always imperfect yet never abandoned quest to establish a triangular rapport among writer, reader, and subject, guaranteeing, as Agee envisages, the central involvement of all three. Berger the essayist, as dogged in his afterword to *Pig Earth* as in *A Fortunate Man*, may feel constrained to “imagine readers interrupting” him, only to “try to lead” them back to where he is going,<sup>234</sup> but Berger the storyteller, likelier to imagine the reader as a companion or even an accomplice in his hunt to identify with others, is therefore likelier to leave many things unstated, because to say too much would be “to overburden and to overwhelm the reader, instead of allowing space for the reader to collaborate.”<sup>235</sup> These “silent connections”—tacitly agreed-upon “discontinuities of the story”—as he argues in *Another Way of Telling*, “fuse teller, listener and protagonists into an amalgam” which might be thought of as “the story’s *reflecting subject*.”<sup>236</sup>

In an earlier part of *Pig Earth*, lamentably excised from later editions,<sup>237</sup> Berger anticipates a probable query from readers regarding his “relationship with the place and the people he writes about.”<sup>238</sup> Detailing how he pitches in with the village’s strenuous summer haymaking, he reflects that his primary vocation as a writer is “both a link and a barrier” to his subjects: “My writing about peasants separates me from them and brings

me close to them.”<sup>239</sup> By way of explanation Berger provides two lists: of things he has in common with those among whom he now lives (including experience of manual labor, readiness to exchange services, participation in local ceremonies, standards of household comfort) and of things he does not have in common with them (such as mother tongue, economic prospects, landed patrimony, kinship connections). A comparison of these lists reveals that, for all their commonalities, Berger is both more privileged than his peasant neighbors, since he has come to share their way of life as a matter of choice rather than necessity, and at a certain disadvantage, since he is far less knowledgeable in local terms. While remaining a familiar stranger in their village, who can neither entirely efface his outsider’s perspective nor match their capacity for physical endurance, Berger is not only “a pair of working hands when needed, the *subject* of stories, a guest, a host,” but also, in his “double role” as novice and witness,<sup>240</sup> a listener and an observer lending his ears and eyes to the daily history which the villagers forge for themselves from the raw materials of gossip, riddles, rituals, and work. Such an ongoing oral portrait, leavened by legends from the distant past, bestows meaning on their collective experience. Berger admonishes that “the making of this continuous communal portrait is not a vanity or a pastime: it is an organic part of the life of the village. Should it cease, the village would disintegrate.”<sup>241</sup> Reciprocally learning from and witnessing to their labors against disintegration, he dons the mantle of storyteller, as stated after finishing his trilogy, “in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called ‘backward,’ whether they live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis.”<sup>242</sup> With equal love and gratitude but less guilt or agony than Agee, Berger dedicates *Pig Earth* to his many peasant friends, before welcoming the reader to join him as he retraces his journey into the storied depths of their community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Geoff Dyer, for instance, remarks that in combining words and images for documentary purposes, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the key precedent for *A Fortunate Man*: see his *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 65. Notes to two articles also suggest that the collaborations of Berger and Mohr, especially *Another Way of Telling*, carry forward the overall approach of Agee and Evans: see T. V. Reed, "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 176; Paula Rabinowitz, "Voyeurism and Class Consciousness: James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Cultural Critique* 21 (Spring 1992): 168. For more extensive interrogations of formal attributes and ethical dilemmas in the union of literature and photography, with attention to Berger and Mohr as well as Agee and Evans, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Ethics of Form in the Photographic Essay," *Afterimage* 16 (January 1989): 8-13; Carol Shloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Discussions of transnational currents as they affected or paralleled Agee's development include David Peck, "'The Morning That Is Yours': American and British Literary Cultures in the Thirties," in Ann Massa and Alistair Stead, eds., *Forked Tongues? Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American Literature* (London: Longman, 1994), 214-231; Keith Williams, "'The Unpaid Agitator': Joyce's Influence on George Orwell and James Agee," *James Joyce Quarterly* 36 (1999): 729-763; Hugh Davis, *The Making of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008); Earl Fitz, "William Faulkner, James Agee, and Brazil: The American South in Latin American Literature's 'Other' Tradition," in Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 419-445. Davis argues for the influence of both transatlantic surrealism and André Gide's *Travels in the Congo* (1929) on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, while Fitz compares the latter work to *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902) by Euclides da Cunha. As for Berger, he too is sometimes likened to a South American writer, Gabriel García Márquez, that continent's best-known wielder of magic realism. Indeed, in an admiring review of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) reprinted in *The Sense of Sight*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (New York: Pantheon, 1985), Berger affirms that he considers himself García Márquez's "colleague in an art of storytelling" (240). In the introduction to John Berger, *Selected Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 2001), editor Geoff Dyer explains that although Berger can be put into a trajectory with other British writers like D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, and Raymond Williams, his long-term expatriation has led scholars to associate him more closely with European intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roland Barthes.

<sup>3</sup> Agee was born in Knoxville on November 27, 1909 and died in New York City on May 16, 1955; Berger was born in London on November 5, 1926. As for their collaborators, Evans was born in St. Louis on November 3, 1903 and died in New Haven on April 10, 1975; Mohr was born in Geneva on September 13, 1925.

<sup>4</sup> James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, ed. James H. Flye (1962; New York: Ballantine, 1971), 230-31.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 196.

<sup>6</sup> James Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, ed. Michael Sragow (New York: Library of America, 2005), 34. Coaxing what would become a loyal readership, Agee goes on to intimate that his and the reader's doubtless mutual status as amateur critics may be advantageous to their critical conversation.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 47, 49.

<sup>8</sup> James Agee, "A Project for a Poem in Byronics, John Carter," *The Collected Poems of James Agee*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 80.

<sup>9</sup> James Agee, *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 189, 188. Its title borrowed from Hart Crane, whose esoteric esthetic tinges many of Agee's poems, *Permit Me Voyage* was initially printed in the Yale Younger Poets Series, with a foreword by Archibald MacLeish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).

<sup>10</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> For two superb accounts of the process by which Agee has been mythologized as a tragic poet, apart from measured consideration of his actual writings, see "'Death of a Poet': The Agee Myth and the Agee Canon," in Hugh Davis's *The Making of James Agee*, 1-25; and the introduction to Alan Spiegel's *James Agee and the Legend of Himself: A Critical Study* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 1-20.

<sup>12</sup> John Berger, *Pages of the Wound: Poems, Drawings, Photographs, 1956-96* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), n.p.

<sup>13</sup> John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> James Agee, "They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 85. This story was published in *The Harvard Advocate* in May 1931.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>21</sup> For an astute explication of Richards's influence on Agee, see Robert M. MacLean, *Narcissus and the Voyeur: Three Books and Two Films* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> "Plans for Work: October 1937," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 137-38.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>24</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 456-58. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter.

<sup>25</sup> John Berger, *G.* (1972; New York: Pantheon, 1980), 80.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>29</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* (New York: Viking, 1975), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> "Plans for Work: October 1937," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 145-46.

<sup>32</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Agee, "Dedication," *Permit Me Voyage*, 16, 23.

<sup>34</sup> James Agee, Introduction to Helen Levitt, *A Way of Seeing: Photographs of New York* (1965; Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), vii. Agee's essay was written in 1946. In addition to praising Levitt's photographs, he collaborated with her during the 1940s on two films: *In the Street* and *The Quiet One*. Evans, meanwhile, also encouraged Levitt's photography, shared a darkroom with her, and accepted her voluntary assistance with his own photographic activities in 1938. See Belinda Rathbone, *Walker Evans: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 155-56, 160-61, 170-71.

<sup>35</sup> Agee, Introduction to Levitt, *A Way of Seeing*, ix.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as Lloyd Spencer comments in his introduction to Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, “with John Berger seeing really does come first. And despite the career he has made in writing, ... there is a sense in which *seeing*, perceiving and imagining, has retained its primacy as a way of understanding the world” (xiii). For recent samples of Berger’s draftsmanship, see his *Bento’s Sketchbook* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), a meditation on drawing in which he establishes this dictum: “We who draw do so not only to make something visible to others, but also to accompany something invisible to its incalculable destination” (9). And for evidence that Agee, too, tried his hand at drawing (having his wife model for him and copying from postcards) while working on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, see *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, wherein he claims that drawing “sharpens your eye and gives you more understanding and affection for even some small part of a human or architectural feature. ... I now ‘possess’ and ‘know’ Alma’s face and a Brooklyn street in 1938 as if they were a part of me, as much as my hand, the same with one of the tenant houses from memory. ... I’d want that everyone would draw, for a long time, from photographs and from nature first, just as patiently and accurately as they were able; who wanted to learn and ‘see’ the world” (117-18). This mixture of tenderness and possessiveness aptly characterizes Agee’s attitude toward the tenant families when trying to limn them through the act of writing rather than drawing.

<sup>39</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 7-9.

<sup>40</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (1982; New York: Vintage, 1995), 117.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>42</sup> Agee, Introduction to Levitt, *A Way of Seeing*, xv.

<sup>43</sup> John Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” *The Look of Things*, ed. Nikos Stangos (1972; New York: Viking, 1974), 179.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.



<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>55</sup> Agee, Introduction to Levitt, *A Way of Seeing*, xiii.

<sup>56</sup> Lincoln Caplan, ed., "Walker Evans on Himself," *The New Republic* (13 November 1976): 24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59.2 (March-April 1971): 84. Evans expressed enthusiasm for Atget in a review essay, "The Reappearance of Photography," *Hound & Horn* 5.1 (October-December 1931): 125-28. For more on Evans's role in devaluing Stieglitz and elevating Atget, see John Raeburn's helpful chapter, "Disestablishing Stieglitz," in his *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 19-29.

<sup>59</sup> Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," 86. And see also Caplan, ed., "Walker Evans on Himself," for a similar asseveration of this mysterious personalizing process: "One really doesn't associate a machine—a little box with a glass in it—with the personal imprint of the operator, but it is there, and it's a kind of magic, inexplicable quality" (24).

<sup>60</sup> In his "Random Notes & Suggestions for Photographers," printed in *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), Evans exhorts: "Concern yourself not with the question whether the medium, photography, is art. The question is dated and absurd to begin with. *You* are art or not; whatever you produce is or isn't. And don't think about that, either; just do, act" (222). In "A Visit with Walker Evans," transcribed in Bill Ferris, *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans* (Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977), comparing his photographs with those of his peers who also worked for the Farm Security Administration during the thirties, Evans bragged late in life: "I look at those other photographs, and I see that they haven't got what I've got. I'm rather egotistical and conceited about that. I knew at that time who I was, in terms of the eye, and that I had a real eye, and other people were occasionally phony about it, or they really didn't see. I know that's immodest, but I have to say it" (33). Earlier in this visit, recalling how he acquired his photographic eye, Evans said, "you sort of teach yourself how to see, more or less consciously, from childhood on. If you have an eye, you develop it" (28). As the optical autodidact urges in another comment reproduced in *Walker Evans at Work*: "Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long" (161).

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Evans's separate portfolios at the rear of Carleton Beals's *The Crime of Cuba* (1933) and Karl A. Bickel's *The Mangrove Coast* (1942), as well as the catalogs for exhibitions of his work at the Museum of Modern Art: *American Photographs* (1938)

and *Walker Evans* (1971). John Szarkowski provided an introduction for the latter, while Lincoln Kirstein wrote an afterword for the former, alluding to the collaboration of visual and verbal poets in the as yet evolving project that would eventually become *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Before that book was completed, Agee drafted an introduction for another group of Evans's photographs, taken with a concealed camera on the New York City subways, a selection of which was finally published as *Many Are Called* (1966). On the design and reception of these volumes, see John T. Hill's informative section, "The exhibition, the book, and the printed page," in his *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 28-39.

<sup>62</sup> *Walker Evans: Photographs from the Let Us Now Praise Famous Men Project*, ed. William Stott and David Farmer (Austin: Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, 1974), n.p.

<sup>63</sup> See Caplan, ed., "Walker Evans on Himself," 25.

<sup>64</sup> "A Visit with Walker Evans," in Ferris, *Images of the South*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," ed. Philip Corrigan, *Screen Education* 32-33 (1979/1980): 28.

<sup>66</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011). According to Mohr, Berger particularly objected to certain "esthetic pictures" which "tried to describe the landscapes and the moods of the sky and details of nature," although he selected several such shots for the book's opening plates. In total, *A Fortunate Man* includes seventy-five of Mohr's photographs.

<sup>67</sup> John Berger, "Jean Mohr: A Sketch for a Portrait," Introduction to Jean Mohr and John Berger, *At the Edge of the World* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 14-15.

<sup>68</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>69</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> Some three decades later, after several more trips to refugee camps and other locations in the Middle East, Mohr supplied the photographs that prompted Edward W. Said's text for *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), a book that emerged from the pair's somewhat thwarted contributions to a United Nations conference on the Question of Palestine. Having admired Mohr's collaborations with Berger, Said, a Palestinian exile consulting for the conference, recommended that the photographer be sent to document conditions among his people. Said was dismayed, however, by a bureaucratically mystifying proscription on writing to accompany Mohr's photographs when they were exhibited at the conference. "It was then," recalls Said, "that Jean Mohr and I decided to work together. Let us use photographs and a text, we said to each other, to say something that hasn't been said about Palestinians," about whom, he rues, too much had already been written, "most of it polemical, accusatory, denunciatory" (4). Perhaps fittingly, considering that the subject is literally unsettling, the relationship

between photographs and text in *After the Last Sky* is rather unsettled, as though the two mediums constantly compete for representational authority. For instance, in response to a few pictures by Mohr of people working on the land, Said writes, “We—you—know that these are photographs of Palestinians because I have identified them as such; I know they are Palestinian peasants, and not Lebanese or Syrian, because Jean has been my witness. But in themselves these photographs are silent; they seem saturated with a kind of inert being that outweighs anything they express; consequently they invite the embroidery of explanatory words” (92). Painfully living through his exile and vicariously accessing his homeland through images that spark memories, Said seems both inspired and perplexed by Mohr’s photographs. For his part, Mohr remarks in the introduction, the idea of exile ceased to be abstract for him during his boyhood in Geneva in the late 1930s, when his father, a German citizen opposed to Nazism, requested and received Swiss naturalization for their entire family. After reporting again on Red Cross operations in the Middle East, accompanied by Berger on one trip, Mohr published another book on the troubled region as a catalog for an exhibition of his pictures at the organization’s museum: *Side by Side or Face to Face: Israelis and Palestinians: 50 Years of Photography* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2003).

<sup>71</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011).

<sup>72</sup> *Walker Evans at Work*, 112. This vow comes from a memorandum Evans drafted in the spring of 1935, before taking a position as “Information Specialist” with the Resettlement (later Farm Security) Administration, an appointment which kept him busiest through the summer of 1936, terminated officially in the spring of 1937, and resumed briefly during the summer of 1938. To pursue his activities as a government photographer, Evans drew up a rather overbearing “Want” list (including a car, cameras, film, retention of all rights to his work, and guarantee of a one-man performance) in return for which he pledged to deliver only one set of prints with “word records” that would tersely identify the subjects and locations of his pictures. “NO POLITICS whatever,” Evans decreed to himself; intent on compiling a “pure record” while avoiding any “photographic chores,” he believed that “even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done.” Despite his aloofness and his prescience regarding these matters, Evans did occasionally take “project shots” for the agency that align with “shooting scripts” furnished by its director, Roy Stryker. As for the photographs eventually published in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, technically Evans made them through the sponsorship of Time, Inc., which borrowed his services from the FSA for *Fortune*’s article on sharecropping, with the agreement that the magazine would have rights of first publication (rights not acted on, since the piece was never printed) but that the negatives would then be housed in the FSA file.

<sup>73</sup> Caplan, ed., “Walker Evans on Himself,” 25.

<sup>74</sup> Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 12.

<sup>75</sup> See Bertrand Tappolet’s introduction to Jean Mohr, *Side by Side or Face to Face*, 22. As a sign of Mohr’s photographic concern, if not commitment, in *After the Last Sky* the motivations for his coverage of the Palestinian cause are unequivocally ethical and “very

close to my heart,” though he also mentions his progress on “some rather more aesthetic experiments, in color” (7).

<sup>76</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 11. As one example, see the final picture in *After the Last Sky*, in which two young girls aim a camera right back at Mohr’s lens. The caption reads: *Jerusalem, 1979. The photographer photographed*. Said reflects on this snapshot: “I would like to think that we are not just the people seen or looked at in these photographs: We are also looking at our observers. We Palestinians sometimes forget that . . . we too are looking, we too are scrutinizing, assessing, judging. We are more than someone’s object. We do more than stand passively in front of whoever, for whatever reason, has wanted to look at us” (166).

<sup>78</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011).

<sup>79</sup> Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 13, 11.

<sup>80</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 116, 114.

<sup>81</sup> Evans quoted in Shloss, *In Visible Light*, 190.

<sup>82</sup> *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is sprinkled with jests at liberal reformers. On Agee’s adversarial artistic ideals and antagonism toward social reform, see Michael Augspurger, *An Economy of Abundant Beauty: Fortune Magazine and Depression America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). In “A Visit with Walker Evans,” in Ferris, *Images of the South*, Evans describes his dichotomous respect for the aristocratic tradition that fosters fine art and his disgust that people often amass fortunes at the expense or by the ruination of others. “I don’t know how to reconcile all these things,” he says, “because I believe in cultural distinction, and I also believe in social justice, and they don’t go together” (36).

<sup>83</sup> In a quotation reproduced in *Walker Evans at Work*, the photographer reflects on his portraits of Cuban dockworkers: “Those people have no self-pity. They’re just as happy as you are, really” (82). In another indication of his cautiousness against sentimentality, what might be Evans’s most searing image of destitution—that of a despondent mother and her three ragged children sprawled in the shadow of a Havana doorway—is simply captioned “Family” as it appears in Carleton Beals’s *The Crime of Cuba* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1933). For further comment on this ironically understated representation of poverty, see Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>84</sup> “Southeast of the Island: Travel Notes,” *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 185. This piece was commissioned but rejected by *Fortune* in 1939 and first published under the title “Brooklyn Is” in *Esquire* in December 1968.

<sup>85</sup> Agee, Introduction to Levitt, *A Way of Seeing*, xii.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., xiii. Agee's attitude toward the urban poor is far less fanciful in his 1945 movie review of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, reprinted in *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*. With satirical invective toward the hazy religious and political sentiments of the picture's makers and viewers, he notes that its "attention to poverty and need, though frank as such things go in films, is also temperate compared with the staring facts of poverty and need; the comfortable have always been able to lick their chops over the hunger of others if that hunger is presented with the right sort of humorous or pathetic charm; if certain Christian or Marxian glands are tactfully enough stimulated, they will drool as well" (169).

<sup>87</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011). As Mohr pointed out to me, he could not give the children anything tangible because the train's windows were bolted shut. While this factor might excuse him from an ethical obligation to provide them with actual succor, he remains disturbed by the ethics of witnessing their suffering, especially since he was the only passenger who seemed to notice them. Perhaps the others, as native Indonesians, were inured to and thus likely to shrug off such sights, whereas Mohr, as a foreigner, could not help but stare. He emphasizes this difference in perspectives through his exchange with an art student who offers him the window seat and assures him that the countryside they will pass is beautiful but then keeps his eyes diverted when the children appear beside the train. While Mohr's premeditated decision to photograph them on the ride back could be interpreted as an exploitative act of voyeurism, he does so not just to salve his conscience but also to enlighten the world to their plight through publication of the images. The privileged Western viewer can hardly avert a reaction of mixed guilt and pity upon seeing the skeletal children midstride with pleading faces and outstretched arms beyond the edge of the window frame in *Another Way of Telling*.

<sup>90</sup> Geoff Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing: Interview with John Berger," *Marxism Today* (December 1984): 36. Possible conflict between these two attachments prompts Berger, in another interview, to make "a kind of ethical point. All artists, all photographers, all writers are, in relation to the intolerable world in which we live, highly privileged beings. They are privileged because, even though they may perhaps suffer considerable economic hardships, they are doing what they want. So how can you comment on that world which is so under-privileged? Actually you can't, unless you begin to allow a kind of violence to be done to yourself" (quoted in Willis, "The Authentic Image," 29). Agee likewise felt, early in 1937, as he tried to organize his privileged comments on tenant farmers, that he would "have to get violent with" himself in order to write properly about the poor (from *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 98).

<sup>91</sup> John Berger, Introduction to *Permanent Red* (1960), reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 9.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 7, 8.

<sup>93</sup> John Berger, "Sicilian Lives," *The Sense of Sight*, 264. This foreword to Dolci's tales, while calling for "a vast social and political world struggle" to abolish poverty (268), also

celebrates the tragic realism of storytelling among the poor, who, unlike their optimistic, technocratic oppressors, accept contradiction and defy abstraction. “To say that the poor are closer to reality than the rich is a cliché,” notes Berger. “And a somewhat patronizing one, in that it suggests that reality is coarse, material, brutal, physical. And it suggests that reality is thus opposed to the spiritual, from which the poor are mostly excluded. Yet the true antithesis of the real is the abstract” (266). He returns to these matters in “Ten Dispatches about Endurance in Face of Walls,” an afterword to a collection of stories by Platonov, reprinted in John Berger, *Hold Everything Dear: Dispatches on Survival and Resistance* (New York: Pantheon, 2007). “The poor are collectively unseizable,” he says, explaining “why the essential activity of the rich today is the building of walls” to keep out the poor, whose lives “are mostly grief, interrupted by moments of illumination” (98). “The poor’s acceptance of adversity is neither passive nor resigned,” he continues. “It’s an acceptance which peers behind the adversity and discovers there something nameless. Not a promise, for (almost) all promises are broken; rather something like a bracket, a parenthesis in the otherwise remorseless flow of history” (102). Often these brackets or parentheses enclose a story, which, according to him, may help the poor to communicate in their worldwide quest for justice. “The secret of storytelling amongst the poor,” states Berger, “is the conviction that stories are told so that they may be listened to elsewhere, where somebody, or perhaps a legion of people, knows better than the storyteller or the story’s protagonists what life means” (101).

<sup>94</sup> John Berger, “The Soul and the Operator,” *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 234. A little more than a decade later, near the start of this century, Berger reexamined these pitilessly inequitable consequences of global capitalism: “The world today is suffering another form of modern poverty. ... Local cultures, with their partial remedies—both physical and spiritual—for some of life’s afflictions, are being systematically destroyed or attacked. The new technology and means of communication, the free-market economy, productive abundance, parliamentary democracy, are failing, so far as the poor are concerned, to keep any of their promises beyond that of the supply of certain cheap consumerist goods, which the poor can buy when they steal” (from “Ten Dispatches about Endurance in Face of Walls,” *Hold Everything Dear*, 101).

<sup>95</sup> Born in St. Louis, Evans was raised in Chicago, Toledo, and New York. Although less enthusiastic than Agee about staying with tenant farmers in Alabama, preferring to sleep at a hotel in their county seat, Evans later claimed that he too had “an understanding and love for that kind of old, hardworking, rural, southern human being” (from “A Visit with Walker Evans,” in Ferris, *Images of the South*, 31).

<sup>96</sup> After graduating from Harvard in 1932, Agee moved to Manhattan to take a job with *Fortune*. Over the next few years, as tracked by his sentiments in *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, he swiftly grew dissatisfied with the metropolis. Although Agee enjoyed playing Beethoven at top volume on his phonograph late at night in the magazine’s empty offices some fifty floors up in a midtown skyscraper, “with all New York about 600 feet below you” (61), the city’s pace and congestion soon had him calling it a “hideous town” (66), so that by the fall of 1935, looking forward to a six-month leave of absence from the world of journalism, he wondered where to spend his furlough, hoping to find a place that might be conducive to his own writing. Turning down an offer of a house in Connecticut,

he reported, “Everything within a hundred-mile radius of NYC seems thudding and overpopulated, a sort of suburb of this town—even the open country: and New England seems to have been lived-in by so many people the soil is in all ways exhausted. All of which is oversensitive but has all the same some literal meaning to me” (81). Agee finally settled on Anna Maria, an island off the west coast of Florida. Shortly after returning northward, he got the assignment from *Fortune* that sent him back south in search of sharecroppers. Recapturing this rural experience in Alabama, much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was written, while under contract with Harper & Brothers, in the New Jersey countryside along the Delaware River, first in the village of Frenchtown and then on a farm in nearby Stockton. Again seeking a rural retreat, Agee later purchased an unkempt wooded farm in Hillsdale, New York, which served as his occasional refuge from the frenetic literary and cinematic poles of Manhattan and Hollywood during the last seven years of his life. After dying in a city taxicab, he was buried at this country place in 1955.

<sup>97</sup> Undated letter to Frances Wickes, who treated Agee during the 1940s, quoted in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 209. On tensions between city and country in Agee’s novel, see Victor A. Kramer, “Urban and Rural Balance in *A Death in the Family*,” in Michael A. Lofaro, ed., *James Agee: Reconsiderations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 104-118. And for a reconstruction of the book from manuscript materials, making for a very different version from the one edited by David McDowell in 1957, see James Agee, *A Death in the Family: A Restoration of the Author’s Text*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro, vol. 1 of *The Works of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).

<sup>98</sup> Although Agee only uses the term “peasant” a handful of times in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he clearly considers the tenant farmers to be American equivalents of that marginalized class of agricultural laborers designated as the peasantry in other parts of the world. On the book’s dynamic constructions of space and evocative descriptions of land, see Christoph Irmscher, “‘Muscles of Clay’: James Agee’s Southern Landscapes,” in Tony Badger, Walter Edgar, and Jan Nordby Gretlund, eds., *Southern Landscapes, Transatlantic Perspectives* 7 (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), 127-141.

<sup>99</sup> Agee’s account of his agricultural employment comes from a 1929 letter “written in a wagon bed . . . between loads,” dated “Maybe August 1st,” and sent to Dwight Macdonald from Oshkosh, Nebraska. Quoted in Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 66. Although Agee was apparently a lousy farmworker, who fessed up to stabbing himself in the heel with a pitchfork, his summertime experiences as a hitchhiker and manual laborer gave him the raw material for two stories. In addition to “They That Sow in Sorrow Shall Reap,” discussed earlier, he wrote “Death in the Desert,” published in *The Harvard Advocate* in October 1930, also reprinted in *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, in which he mentions working in the wheat fields.

<sup>100</sup> James Agee, “Cockfighting,” *Fortune* 9 (March 1934), reprinted in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, ed. Paul Ashdown (1985; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>101</sup> For urban puzzlement and leftist disaffection with Berger’s midcareer makeover, see Gerald Marzorati, “Living and Writing the Peasant Life,” *New York Times Magazine* (29

November 1987): 38-39, 46, 50, 54; Fred Pfeil, "Between Salvage and Silvershades: John Berger and What's Left," *TriQuarterly* 88 (1993): 230-45; and Charity Scribner, "Second World, Second Sex, and Literature on the European Left," *Comparative Literature* 55.3 (Summer 2003): 217-28.

<sup>102</sup> Berger quoted in Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," 38.

<sup>103</sup> John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (1958; New York: Pantheon, 1989), 26.

<sup>104</sup> Berger, "Millet and Labour," *Selected Essays*, 61-62. Berger contends that Millet's commentators have distorted the truth he expressed about peasant experience, through paintings that were neither sentimental nor sententious. "It is fatal for an artist's moral sense to be in advance of his experience of reality...." expounds Berger. "The artist, isolated, knows that his maximum moral responsibility is to struggle to tell the truth; his struggle is on the near side, not the far, of drawing moral conclusions. The public, or certain sections of it, then draw moral conclusions to disguise the truth" (62). Having mulled over Millet's morality and reputation in this short piece from 1956, twenty years later Berger would assess his accomplishments and limitations more systematically in a longer essay discussed below.

<sup>105</sup> Spain is stretched "on an historical rack ... between the tenth and the twentieth centuries," Berger claims in *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 22. Assisted by several of Mohr's photographs, Berger skims "the consciousness of the average Spanish peasant. Somehow he *remembered* a communal way of life," which, "combined with his bitter and unchanging poverty, made him despise private property and cling to an idea of freedom" that execrated all money (19). At the time of Picasso's birth, Berger points out, Spanish feudalism was complicated both by these pre-feudal collective memories of the peasantry and by the enervation of an administrative middle class, whose wealthiest members, landowners rather than bankers as in the bourgeois capitalized countries to the north, maintained their supremacy without hypocrisy because "their class enemy was the peasantry, not a proletariat. A proletariat has to be outwitted and tricked; peasants can mostly be ignored and occasionally intimidated by force" (21-22).

<sup>106</sup> Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, 15. On the exilic experience in Berger's life and early work, see Nikos Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile: The Stranger in John Berger's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>107</sup> John Berger, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny and the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 14, 160.

<sup>108</sup> For his shedding of urban manners and gradual induction into the rural community on visiting and photographing Berger's peasant neighbors, see Mohr's vignette "Sommand, Haute Savoie, France 1979: Père Nicoud," in their *At the Edge of the World*, 130-32.

<sup>109</sup> Unpublished manuscript in response to Donald Davidson's article in the Summer 1945 *Southern Review*, quoted in James A. Crank, "Racial Violence, Receding Bodies: James



Agee's Anatomy of Guilt," in Michael A. Lofaro, ed., *Agee at 100: Centennial Essays on the Works of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 58.

<sup>110</sup> John Berger, "Ten Dispatches About Place," *Hold Everything Dear*, 119.

<sup>111</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 13. This entry also adumbrates a class tension at the heart of his autobiographical *A Death in the Family*. While he stresses the agrarian heritage of his father's kinfolk in the hills north of Knoxville, the writer's paternal ancestors included doctors, lawyers, and teachers in addition to generations of farmers. On his mother's side, Agee's grandfather Joel Tyler was a progressive businessman who moved from Michigan to Tennessee and dabbled in land speculation before establishing a construction company (see Bergreen's biography, *James Agee*, 4-5). The "mountain school" Agee refers to is St. Andrew's, near Sewanee, on the Cumberland Plateau, where he felt lucky to meet Father Flye. Agee attended this Episcopal school for boys from 1919-1924 and fictionalized it in his novella *The Morning Watch* (1951). In another sketched but unfinished piece, "a story about homosexuality and football," which he hoped would "have the essential qualities of folk epic," Agee alludes to St. Andrew's as "a Tennessee mountain peasant school" (from "Plans for Work: October 1937," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 136). Having gone on from there to Exeter Academy then Harvard University, Agee became tied more securely and fretfully to the cultured, middle-class ethos of his maternal relatives, among whose distant English progenitors he counted both Edmund Grindal, a sixteenth-century archbishop of Canterbury, and Wat Tyler, a fourteenth-century leader of a peasant revolt (see *James Agee Rediscovered*, 326).

<sup>112</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 82. For this article, see "The U.S. Commercial Orchid," *Fortune* 12 (December 1935), reprinted in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*.

<sup>113</sup> On his return in 1927 to what he would later (in Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans") deride as "a puritan, materialistic, middle-class, bourgeois society" (87), the photographer saw himself as "really anti-American at the time. America was big business and I wanted to escape. It nauseated me. My photography was a semi-conscious reaction against right-thinking and optimism; it was an attack on the establishment" (84). After the Wall Street crash and the onset of the Great Depression, he recalled in "A Visit with Walker Evans," in Ferris, *Images of the South*, Evans looked vindictively upon stockbrokers jumping out of windows. "Capitalism is falling apart," he exclaimed, "and none of these people has a cent of money. Good! Let them find out what it's like. Let 'em kill themselves" (35).

<sup>114</sup> Agee, "Six Days at Sea," *Fortune* 16 (September 1937), reprinted as "Havana Cruise" in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, 128, 129.

<sup>115</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 99, 98.

<sup>116</sup> Berger, Preface to 1979 edition of *Permanent Red*, reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 4. At the age of sixteen Berger ran away from St. Edward's, a severely authoritarian boarding school in Oxford. In London he enrolled at the Central School of Art, but his studies were interrupted by two years of service in the British army. Refusing the officer's commission his social background entitled him to, Berger stayed on as an instructor at a recruitment

camp near Belfast, where he first came into significant contact with working-class men. Back in London after the war, he resumed his education at the Chelsea School of Art.

<sup>117</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 149.

<sup>118</sup> Berger, "The Eaters and the Eaten," *The Sense of Sight*, 32.

<sup>119</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 5.

<sup>120</sup> In "The Suit and the Photograph," in *About Looking*, Berger analyzes several portraits by August Sander and argues that "as a professional ruling class costume" (34) the formal suit imposes contradictory "standards of chic and sartorial worthiness" (35), conferring authority on sedentary bureaucrats but managing "to undermine physical dignity" when worn by active workers (31). And in "The Theatre of Indifference," in *The Sense of Sight*, he describes how a villager displaced to a city—as are the migrants in *A Seventh Man* and many characters in *Into Their Labours*—tragically misinterprets the "living caricatures" (69) and "exaggerated expressions" (71) of most longtime urbanites, whose over-the-top performances of emotiveness merely mask their social estrangement from one another.

<sup>121</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Berger, "Manhattan," *The Sense of Sight*, 65. Berger's description of Manhattan's physical exteriority and spiritual bleakness bears instructive comparison with Agee's remarks on its "mad magnetic energy which," outstripping adjacent cities or boroughs such as Brooklyn, "sucks all others into 'provincialism'" (from "Southeast of the Island: Travel Notes," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 178).

<sup>123</sup> Agee's politics, like his attitudes toward art, accommodated contradictions. Although he often lambasted New Deal policies and never felt at ease with American involvement in World War Two, he not only faulted but also eulogized Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the redbaiting blacklisting postwar era, which left Agee himself unscathed, he continued his contrarian ways, defending both Charlie Chaplin from charges of anti-Americanism over his film *Monsieur Verdoux* and Whittaker Chambers for his denunciations of Alger Hiss as a Communist spy. The *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* show a moderation of the writer's earlier leftist leanings. In 1945, proposing a weekly column which would "work as hard against the grain as possible in a would-be liberal paper," Agee notes, "Whatever dignified thing may ever have been meant by 'liberalism,' such a thing as a true 'liberal' hardly exists any more" (142). A verse letter the next year, insisting that democracy must be both political and economic, contends that "looking through the shattered prism, / The one clear light is Socialism" (168). Reverting to prose, he later clarifies his stance: "My conception of socialism is of something in which absolute victory is unthinkable; what one works for is the least disastrous and most honorable defeat available against great odds. Within those limited terms, and in that kind of humility, I greatly prefer hope and faith and one's best efforts, to despair and resignation. . . . I am capable of many doubts and qualifiers about democracy. But . . . I prefer it to any other conception of how people should try to live together" (172). In 1952 his political preferences led him to participate electorally. Impressed with Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson, "the first grown man

and civilized mind and literate tongue to run for President within my knowledge” (207), Agee dismissed the import of party loyalties but allowed, “I am registering and voting for the first time in my life. Wonder if it will be the last; or does that become a habit?” (208).

<sup>124</sup> Greed may be the sinful bedrock of capitalism, thinks Agee, but pride incarnated as complacency toward the progress of societal overhaul is the bane of communism, deluding its adherents and hindering its implementation. Hence his censure of artists who fail to “refuse the social eminence and the high pay they are given in Soviet Russia,” where he also decries the establishment of “an aristocracy of superior workers” (250).

<sup>125</sup> “Plans for Work: October 1937,” *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, 140.

<sup>126</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 89.

<sup>127</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 54.

<sup>128</sup> On Agee’s brief but fervid radicalism, later concealed by Robert Fitzgerald’s editorial suppression of his proletarian poetry, see Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 27-50. Most of these poems, many of which are now available in *James Agee Rediscovered*, date from the first few months of 1936, during the sabbatical from *Fortune* that Agee spent mainly in Florida, just before the magazine assigned him to write about Southern sharecroppers.

<sup>129</sup> James Agee, “Millions Are Learning How,” in *A New Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Selden Rodman (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 346.

<sup>130</sup> James Agee, “Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme,” printed in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 258-59.

<sup>131</sup> James Agee, “[Marx, I agree],” quoted in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 41.

<sup>132</sup> James Agee, “Fight-Talk,” in *James Agee Rediscovered*, 235. Cast in pungent couplets addressed to a downtrodden working-class man, this acerbic pep talk begins: “Pal, have bosses bled on you so / There’s no blood left nor place to go?” (233). Departing from the call to arms issued in the foregoing poems and in others such as “Collective Letter to the Boss” (241-43), however, “Fight-Talk” concludes with a mordantly ironic plea to reelect President Roosevelt and to perpetuate the New Deal: “*So pledge allegiance once again / To Franklin and his merry men*” (239), no matter their efficacy at assuaging the nation’s economic woes.

<sup>133</sup> For an incisive assessment of Agee’s political evolution while researching and writing about tenant farmers, see Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 144-51. Of the two unions founded to protect the welfare of Southern agricultural laborers during the 1930s, often in the face of white vigilante violence, the Socialist-linked Southern Tenant Farmers Union was most active in Arkansas, while the Communist-supported Sharecroppers Union was based in Tallapoosa County, Alabama. For an impassioned defense of the former union as an indigenous, interracial organization rising up against repressive plantation owners, see Howard Kester, *Revolt among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1936).

The latter union mainly recruited black tenants whose earlier attempts to organize as the Croppers' and Farm Workers' Union had been broken up by a rash of attacks and arrests. Although Agee seems to conflate these unions in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* when saying that he discussed "what the tenant farmer could do to help himself out of the hole he is in" (431) with a particular sharecropper who may have "at least heard of the union" (385), the writer was well aware of efforts by both unions as well as other organizations to agitate on behalf of farmworkers. As confirmed by notebook entries printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, he not only attended political meetings in New York sympathetic to the plight of sharecroppers but also tried to locate (besides Walker Evans) Bob Smith and Beth Mitchell (pseudonyms for Communist Party members with connections in Alabama) immediately after *Fortune* handed him the new assignment. A fellow traveler of the party who now had "a chance to see more than I otherwise could have short of learning how to be of use as an organizer" (13), Agee was especially interested in investigating activities of "the straight communist Sharecropper's Union" (14). Filled with ambitious goals, he originally thought of the job thus: "I intended to research and write three pieces: the first on the family, the second a generalized piece, a big fatassed analysis of the situation and of cotton economics and of all Governmental efforts to Do Something about It, which latter I was quite sure could beautifully hang themselves in their own rope; and the third a straight union piece, starting with inch-by-inch process of a couple of organizers opening up new territory, leading that on through night-riding et cetera, and mushrooming it into a history of both unions" (14). Similarly, a letter dashed off on June 18, 1936, the day Agee received his instructions, just as enthusiastically but rather less confidently remarks that the article was to cover, in addition to "a sharecropper family (daily & yearly life): and also a study of Farm Economics in the South (impossible for me) ... the several efforts to help the situation, i.e. Govt. and state work; theories & wishes of Southern liberals; whole story of the 2 Southern Unions" (from *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 94). Hardly any of these matters, however, wound up in the book that emerged from Agee's journey. With his performance diverging so greatly from his intentions, and with his depoliticizing embrace of actuality, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* mushroomed in other directions.

<sup>134</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 113, 127. His pessimism is already apparent in a letter from early 1936. Resolved to be honest about his political convictions, Agee scorns "things which appear useless or cruel even though honestly convinced, like the Roosevelt administration or plenty of the processes of Stalin" (88-89).

<sup>135</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 100, 105, 128.

<sup>136</sup> Among the twentieth-century thinkers with Marxist or socialist slants to whom Berger feels indebted are Georg Lukács, Frederick Antal, Max Raphael, Ernst Fischer, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes, Raymond Williams, Frantz Fanon, and Susan Sontag.

<sup>137</sup> Berger quoted in Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," 37. Despite the proletarian sympathies expressed in many of the poems recuperated in *James Agee Rediscovered*, Agee thought the "Sweet anodyne" of "hewing closely to / The Party Line" was escapist (217), and he crudely mocked the Communist Party for its callow artistic manias: "Numerous Leftists

find The Dance / Grounds for going off in their Leftist pants / As for me I think a fart / In a typhoon stands a better chance as art" (216).

<sup>138</sup> John Berger, *New Statesman* (4 April 1953): 400.

<sup>139</sup> John Berger, *New Statesman* (30 July 1955): 134.

<sup>140</sup> Broadly influenced by his communist convictions and capitalist antipathies, Berger's support for the Soviet Union over the United States during the late forties and early fifties was also swayed by several enthusiastic visits he made to the former country and to East Germany, as well as by his anxieties over the threat of nuclear annihilation. As quoted in Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," Berger reflects that while the Soviet Union was "the victim of nuclear blackmail by the United States ... at that moment, whatever your doubts, I felt you had to be *for* the Soviet Union" (36). That moment of technological inequality was, of course, very brief, and Berger's doubts about Russia's commitment to socialist ideals deepened as the Cold War arms race between the two superpowers accelerated and as the Soviets flexed their military muscle to repress rebellions in their satellite states, invading Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Berger's novel *A Painter of Our Time*—which was speedily withdrawn by its original British publisher, Secker & Warburg, after reviewers alleged that it aired his totalitarian sympathies—ends mysteriously in the midst of the earlier conflict with the émigré hero returning to Hungary, and he wrote movingly about the later crisis in articles for *New Society* reprinted as "Czechoslovakia Alone" in *The Look of Things*, 225-244. *Art and Revolution*, also written in the late sixties, argues that Russia's sclerotic bureaucracy has throttled not only its own people's "revolutionary initiative" but the whole globe's, due to "the grave compromises imposed by Stalin which still, more than a decade after his death, dominate a large part of Soviet policy" (159-60). Yet in that book Berger is even more critical of American imperialism. He points out, for example, these vast disparities: "The United States, which makes up six per cent of the world population, controls or owns sixty per cent of the world's resources. The military expenditure of the United States ... annually exceeds all the national revenues of Africa, Latin America and Asia added together" (156). As for his condemnations of American militarism, he has persistently denounced many atrocities, from the atomic bombings of Japanese cities, to the napalm burning of Vietnamese villages, to the recent war in Iraq.

<sup>141</sup> Berger, Preface to 1979 edition of *Permanent Red*, reprinted in *Selected Essays*, 4.

<sup>142</sup> John Berger, "Correspondence with Subcomandante Marcos," *The Shape of a Pocket* (New York: Pantheon, 2001), 233.

<sup>143</sup> Berger, "Undeclared Despair," *Hold Everything Dear*, 13-25.

<sup>144</sup> Berger, "Ten Dispatches About Place," *Hold Everything Dear*, 127.

<sup>145</sup> Berger quoted in Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," 37.

<sup>146</sup> Berger, "Sicilian Lives," *The Sense of Sight*, 264.

<sup>147</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; London: Verso, 1998). Later, though, in the first volume of *Capital* (1867; New York: Penguin, 1992), Marx speaks more favorably of rural life, contrasting a peasant family's harmoniously interdependent division of labor with industrial capitalism's reduction of wage-labor to abstract exchange-values through the fetishism of commodities.

<sup>148</sup> Berger and Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, 36.

<sup>149</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Pig Earth by John Berger," *The New Republic* (20 September 1980): 40.

<sup>150</sup> John Berger, *Lilac and Flag: An Old Wives' Tale of a City* (London: Granta Books, 1990), 154.

<sup>151</sup> Not only are many of the poems in *Permit Me Voyage* steeped in religious language, but Agee's two longest works of fiction, *The Morning Watch* and *A Death in the Family*, draw respectively upon his stern tutelage at an Episcopal (also known as Anglo-Catholic) boarding school and the clash of pietistic and atheistic sensibilities among his traumatized maternal relations following the death of his father.

<sup>152</sup> Agee quoted in the midcentury symposium *Religion and the Intellectuals* (New York: Partisan Review, 1950), 8, 14.

<sup>153</sup> A few samples from the *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* show Agee struggling to come to terms with religious consciousness as it patterned his life and art. "I have a great deal of Puritan in me. I both despise it and am seized by it," he confessed to his spiritual counselor in 1938, worrying that "Puritanism is the slickest disguise of the greatest of the earthly devils" (103). The next year, pondering his puritanical approach to artworks, he wrote: "In proportion to sacredness of territory one needs to be merciless of mishandling .... In certain respects this mercilessness is non- or anti-Christian. It is absolutely required however of a 'good artist,' meaning a 'pure' 'heart,' meaning a 'moral' 'man.' I am personally confused on this and by my own definition of what ought to be, am frequently a bad artist, impure of heart, and an immoral man" (121). Just after *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published in 1941, Agee again grappled with his religious mindset. Regretting his years at Harvard and on the staff of *Fortune*, he thinks his time would have been better spent in the artistically rich milieu of Paris, yet wonders whether his muddled mentality might have unfit him for the heady atmosphere of that city: "I have a funny, very middle-class, and in a bad sense of the word, Christian mind, and a very clouded sensibility. To use my mind cleanly is as intense but also as rare and brief a desire to me as occasional returns of religiousness. Good minds, like good souls, don't have to make that elementary, childish sort of resolution" (133).

<sup>154</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 101.

<sup>155</sup> Agee's "Rhymes on a Self-Evident Theme," for instance, augurs the Second Coming via an epigraph from the Nicene Creed—"and I look to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come"—then calls for destruction not only of the state but also of the church, advising the meek "to mistrust the sort of God / Who promises a land of Nod

/ ... The church of such a god, remember, / is nothing but a lethal chamber” (printed in Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 258). As Davis persuasively suggests, these rhymes promise nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth to those who cast off repressive institutions by trusting the integrity of their own collective strength, “Learning, above all, how the right / Is only forged of those who fight: / ... And who, their foot inside the door / Must urge it open more and more, / Dreaming no pity, nor self-merit, / Nor of the great house they inherit” (259).

<sup>156</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 102-104. In this long letter with a postscript that begs the priest to forgive him if it “seems bad, annoying, ill-tempered or otherwise no good,” Agee is responding to what he takes to be Father Flye’s unqualified respect for the current U.S. Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, “as a strong and unusually constant kind of Christian and gentleman and statesman, in good meaning of these words.” Hung up on what it might mean to do good in such roles, and on “the body or conception of ‘truth’ or ‘goodness’ as a whole,” Agee qualifies his own respect for the secretary and explains that his anarchism stems from a “belief that the operations of human need and acquisitiveness, in concentration on purely material necessities and half-necessities, and the structures of law through which these operations are canalized, restrained, and governed: that all this is tragic, mistaken and eccentric from the root up, and cannot come to good; and that the effort to manipulate for good within such a framework, no matter how sincerely, can only result in compromise; and can finally or even in detail add only to a sum total of evil, misfortune, and misapplication of human energy towards goodness.” Questing toward absolute rather than relative goodness, since he believes that religion and politics are both corrupted by the latter, “with the tragic complication that good is enlisted in the cause of evil and that sincerity is almost the most destructive virtue of all,” Agee hesitantly asserts that his own effort as a writer and as a person “has been and is towards goodness and true thinking and conduct and against rationalization; and I suppose it is only in knowledge of my ‘sincerity,’ (that again damnable and limiting word) that I can feel any integrity, or basis for peaceful and clear living and work. But I know also that the most dangerous rationalizations are unconscious and indivisible, and that if no one is superior to these, then certainly I am not” (100-104).

<sup>157</sup> Agee later spells out this distinction between personal and social responsibility in his “shapeless” contribution to *Religion and the Intellectuals*: “People have been badgered half out of their minds by the sense of a sort of ‘global’ responsibility: the relentless daily obligation to stay aware of, hep to, worked-up over, guilty towards, active about, the sufferings of people at a great distance for whom one can do nothing whatever; a sort of playing-at-God (since He is in exile) over every sparrow that falls, with the sense of virtue increasing in ratio to the distance. This enormous and nonsensical burden can be dropped, with best intelligence and grace, by religious men; in any case by Christians. Believing in the concern, wisdom and mercy of God and in ultimate justice, roughly aware of how much (and little) attempts at social betterment can bring, rid of illusory responsibilities, Christians can undertake real and sufficient ones: each to do no less than he as a human being is able (and he is not apt to be a saint), for the human beings within his sight and reach and touch; and never to presume it other than anti-human to try to do more. Thus alone, it becomes possible to be quiet, to begin to learn a little bit thoroughly, directly, through the heart; to begin, in fact, to be human” (10-11). Agee’s argument here,

nearly a decade after publishing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, jives with his sense of personal and writerly responsibility toward the tenant farmers who had come “within his sight and reach and touch” in Alabama, but contradicts his attempts to make the reader feel “guilty towards, active about, the sufferings of people at a great distance.”

<sup>158</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 91.

<sup>159</sup> James Agee, “[Now the steep and chiming coasts],” in *James Agee Rediscovered*, 231.

<sup>160</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 153.

<sup>161</sup> Berger quoted in Marzorati, “Living and Writing the Peasant Life.”

<sup>162</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>164</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 134; Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile*, 35.

<sup>165</sup> Berger, “The Soul and the Operator,” *Keeping a Rendezvous*, 231-32.

<sup>166</sup> With particular attention to the visual arts, however, Berger does endeavor to situate Romanticism historically in “The Dilemma of the Romantics,” reprinted in his *Selected Essays*, wherein he argues that the two faces of this revolutionary movement consisted of “exploratory adventurousness” and “morbid self-indulgence” (59), and that once its faith in Nature and its privileged hopes for personal freedom were disabused by ecological and political realities, “Romanticism degenerated into effete aestheticism” (60). As applied to literature, Berger’s notions of romanticism seem to conform to Wordsworth’s declaration in his preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) that poetry should channel “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

<sup>167</sup> For a cautionary critique of Agee’s unrestrained romanticism in defying conventions and glorifying iconoclastic artists as well as unsung farmers, see Jeffrey J. Folks, “James Agee and the Culture of Repudiation,” in Lofaro, ed., *Agee at 100*, 37-51. In an epistolary aside that, if secularized, could pertain to Berger’s uncompromisingly radical stances on art and politics, Agee remarks, “Francis of Assisi seems to me violently to have restored ideas of Jesus: of complete disregard for the structures of the world or of living as it was” (from *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 101).

<sup>168</sup> Papastergiadis explores the dynamic tension between these polarities in *Modernity as Exile*, arguing that “for Berger, an alliance between romanticism and Marxism is possible because both philosophies ground the concepts of justice, authenticity and freedom on the prior belief in the possibility of an unalienated society. While the perspectives of romanticism and Marxism are premised on the ubiquity of alienation and the necessity for transcendence from the material conditions of society, their prescribed routes out of alienation are diametrically opposed. ... Marxism commands the integration of the artist with the political, whereby the resulting art is not just subordinated to an imminent



revolution, but is also an active expression of the revolutionary struggle. Whereas romanticism offers the image of the suffering and misunderstood artist who rejects the distortions on subjectivity imposed by society, and whose critical response is embodied by 'his' apartness from society and 'his' longing for an appointed time and place in which balance will be restored. ... Thus the Marxist struggles to identify the ascendant forces within society, while the romantic yearns for the moment when the individual can ascend beyond the struggles of society" (38).

<sup>169</sup> As Papastergiadis remarks in *Modernity as Exile*, "Berger finds in romanticism what Marxism represses, and in Marxism what romanticism disavows—an engagement with the social without an abandonment of the personal" (40).

<sup>170</sup> Berger quoted in Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," 37. Berger alludes, in particular, to the poems of Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose reputation "as a romantic political legend rather than as a poet" he also tried to demystify in "Mayakovsky: His Language and His Death," an essay coauthored with Anya Bostock and included in Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, 226.

<sup>171</sup> In addition to *Into Their Labours*, see especially Berger's *G., To the Wedding* (1995), *King, Here Is Where We Meet* (2005), and *From A to X*.

<sup>172</sup> John Berger, *Once in Europa* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), xi, xiii.

<sup>173</sup> James Agee, "The Drought," *Fortune* 10 (October 1934): 76. As was standard in his contributions to the magazine, this article is unsigned. Bourke-White, however, is not only credited for her photographs but also given a byline between the title and the text, ironically making it appear that she composed Agee's comments on her pictures.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. For more on Agee's maneuvers in this article to defy the limits of the caption as a literary form, see Hunter, *Image and Word*, 76.

<sup>176</sup> James Agee, "U.S. Art: 1935," *Fortune* 12 (December 1935): 68. With rather obscure orotundity, Agee continues to trace leftist painters' failures to limn the common man with any distinctiveness: "Portraiture does not reach him. Landscape leaves him out. Only by erasing the features of the portrait and humanizing the loneliness of the landscape, only by a kind of artistic triangulation which runs its lines from the known points of individual men and experienced earth, is the figure found."

<sup>177</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 76-77. As a possible example of this all-purpose lexicon, he proposes that a fictional Pittsburgh millhand freely "avail himself of cowboy slang, mountaineer idiom, racetrack jargon—anything under the sun which might in that instant most enforce his language." After hedging literary bets between fastidiousness to accurate dialogue and deployment of flexible voices, Agee confesses his ambivalence: "I don't know. The job a highly special environment plays in building a way of speech and a human being is too tremendous to think of garbling if you can help it: but there are all the same more essential ways of making a man's speech 'in character'."

<sup>178</sup> James Agee, "Pseudo-Folk," *Partisan Review* 11.2 (Spring 1944): 219, 222, 220. This article elaborates on Louise Bogan's remarks about bourgeois appropriations of folk art.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 220. With his wish that peasants remain pure, Agee laments, "Advertising is a kind of bourgeois-folk art to which they are quite as vulnerable as the target audience," thus anticipating Berger's later blasts against the adulterating impact of consumerism.

<sup>180</sup> Agee quoted in Paul Ashdown, "Agee on Books," in Lofaro, ed., *Agee at 100*, 32. While *An American Exodus* and *You Have Seen Their Faces* both paired photographs with quotations, Lange and Taylor reported what they heard spoken by their subjects, whereas Bourke-White and Caldwell admittedly invented their captions.

<sup>181</sup> See James Agee, "Sharecropper Novels," *New Masses* 23.11 (8 June 1937): 23. Even though he considers both novels to be failures in regard to their artistic ambitions, Agee commends each of them for being "clear and unpretentious enough to make it possible to see through it, as into a lighted home, the true country and society and the individuals" it describes. More specifically, he approves of George W. Lee's *River George*, about black croppers in Tennessee, for its "documentation of deep-country," and Louis Cochrane's *Black Earth*, about white croppers in Mississippi, for supplying "something of their house and its furnishings, something of their relationships, of the struggle between generations, something of the vacuum into which they are thrust by poverty and exploitation." Agee, of course, would illumine more than "something" of the lives of poor exploited farmers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. His endeavor to grasp the actuality of cotton tenants surely swayed his reaction to these novels. Thus he lauds the "considerable immediacy" imparted by "Lee's acute and uncorrupted instinct for the power, in writing, of the five senses." So also, despite faulting Cochrane for being "peculiarly deaf to dialect," Agee exonerates his book for implanting a "painful conviction which grows on you that nearly everything he writes of has actually happened. Once that conviction becomes established, the whole account takes on a new and really large value; you sit in on the trouble, and a whole year's life, of a family you would probably care to know all you can about. It is no longer just an unsuccessful novel."

<sup>182</sup> For his commendation of *The Time of Man*, see *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 40. "Genius-à-la-King," a book review of *The Hamlet* published in *Time* (1 April 1940) and reprinted in *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, glowingly compares Faulkner to Shakespeare. Heralding the novelist as "one of the most dazzling and inchoate talents in contemporary letters," Agee elaborates, "Through his people, both normal and daemonic, through his animals, through his fascination in the mysteries of gesture, tones of speech, stature of objects, phases of weather, and through his magical ability to isolate them in words, William Faulkner records the much-investigated South more subtly and truly than any dozen more simple reporters on it" (678). Similarly, the first appendix to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee's own southern investigation, lists as its lead suggested item: "Detail of gesture, landscape, costume, air, action, mystery, and incident throughout the writings of William Faulkner" (449).

<sup>183</sup> Slightly misquoted in *The Pocket Book of Quotations*, out of which Agee copies these lines from *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ma Joad declares: "I'm learnin' one thing, learnin' it all a time, ever' day. If you're in trouble, or hurt or need—go to the poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones." Agee pairs this Steinbeck passage with a selection from the poem "Home" by Edgar Guest and then suggests that they represent mainstream mishandlings of dialect. "The very small body of writing you might find which would not incriminate itself by comparison," says Agee, "which attempts to use the vernacular, and which at the same time shows good judgment both in using and in depriving itself of the Mandarin manner, is the prospect we have for the development of a popular literary art" (from "Pseudo-Folk," 221).

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* became a runaway bestseller and garnered the Pulitzer Prize, the first edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* attracted little public renown. Nevertheless, Agee's rancor in "Pseudo-Folk" should be compared to his other critiques of Steinbeck's work. In an apparently unsent letter to Father Flye, printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, he recommends *In Dubious Battle* (1936) but worries that this novel about the role of labor organizers in a strike among fruit pickers might increase the priest's bias against Communists (54). More negatively, Agee's reviews for *The Nation*, reprinted in *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, of two movies adapted from Steinbeck novellas, frown upon the author's characterization and point up wider cultural artifices. "I respect Steinbeck's insistence that both the Nazis and their enemies are human beings," concedes Agee about *The Moon Is Down* (1943), before carping: "The sort of Nazi Steinbeck must have intended is post-humanistic and unprecedented." Delineating irony as false naivete, he grumbles, "Steinbeck's 'little people' use it so much that they become false and naive out of all conscious proportions. So the irony itself becomes unpalatable, and the people become dehumanized victims of a well-intended, unconscious patronage," reeking of an "already over-ripe vocabulary of democratic claptrap" (49-50). Agee swings even harder at *The Pearl* (1948), as its "poor Mexican fisherman ... and his wife and child suffer the quasi-tragic consequences" of discovering "the Wealth of Nations and the Hope of Man." Repeating a phrase from his "Pseudo-Folk" article, he grouses: "These simple folk speak a kind of pseudo-Biblical Choctaw, by Steinbeck; most of the posing and camera work is earnestly luscious salon idealization. An extremely sincere and high-minded effort and, in my opinion, perfectly lousy 'art.' There's a lot of stuff like it, nowadays." Having labeled such art "the contemporary equivalent ... of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*," Agee marks a crucial class distinction: "The difference is that then the heroes were well-born people who had never existed and so were in no position to object. In our more democratic times the very salt of the earth is reverently changed into so much stale saccarin. And nobody objects. In both cases the artist's target is the big, soggy heart of the middle class, which doesn't know anything about art, that is, about objectivity and imagination" (348). Agee thus defines his primary objection to middlebrow artistry as its misappropriation of class.

<sup>186</sup> Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 35.

<sup>187</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 142, 141. Likely his first sustained adult effort at reviewing a movie, these notes were made in reply to Edwin Locke's review, "Adaptation of Reality

in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” published in the Spring 1940 number of the short-lived journal *Films*, which folded before Agee’s scheduled response could appear.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 141, 142, 141.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>190</sup> Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 195. “Though its people are exceedingly poor,” Agee observes of *The Southerner*, which Renoir adapted from George Sessions Perry’s novel *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, “this is not a political or social ‘exposure’ of the tenant system, nor does it pay any attention to class or racial friction. It tries simply to be a poetic, realistic chronicle of a farm year’s hope, work, need, anxiety, pride, love, disaster, and reward—a chronicle chiefly of soil, seasons, and weather,” rather like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 196. “To cast and realize such a film correctly would be, I must grant, one of the hardest conceivable jobs; but when has that stopped being an artist’s responsibility?” asks Agee. Though fretting that “in my objection to this kind of inaccuracy there are streaks of parochial pedantry,” he then asserts: “If you are going to try to show real people, in a real place, I think that you have to know how their posture and speech and facial structure can alter even within the width of one county; that you have to communicate the exact beauty of those minute particulars without their ever becoming more pointed to the audience than to the people portrayed, and without a single false tone; that if you don’t you are in grave danger of unconscious patronage, you don’t see or appreciate or understand your subjects as well as you think you do, you stand likely therefore to be swamped by your mere affection or respect, and so perhaps should give up the whole idea” (196-97).

<sup>193</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 110. Agee’s axiom extended to politics as well as art. In “Pseudo-Folk,” for instance, he reproaches anyone who is “hopelessly detached from, and benevolently interested in, and unconsciously patronizing towards ‘the folk,’ like Roosevelt” (222). This cheap shot at the president echoes Agee’s invidious quotation of him at the start of the “Money” section in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: “You are farmers; I am a farmer myself” (115). Proceeding to delineate the financial insecurities of tenant farmers, Agee thus implies that their lot is a world apart from Roosevelt’s mutedly paternalistic, patronizingly chummy self-characterization as a (gentleman) farmer.

<sup>194</sup> Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 342. “Both the subject of the new film and the particular kind of movie treatment happen to be obsessions of mine;” comments Agee, “so I cannot hope that many other people will be as deeply excited and satisfied by this film as I am. On the other hand, it is clear to me that because of the same obsessions I would be more merciless toward any mismanagements and betrayals, of the subject or in the treatment, than most people would.”

<sup>195</sup> Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 342. Defending *Farrebique* against what he sees as myopic complaints that it is too repetitious or lacking in dramatic effects, Agee

acclaims Rouquier's understanding "of the power and the beauty there can be in absolute plainness," his remarkable "ability with all the small casual scraps of existence which are neither plot nor incident nor even descriptive, nor revealing of mood or character, but are merely themselves, and of the essence of being" (343). This achievement, argues Agee, runs against the grain of the Frenchman's artistic peers: "One could watch the people alone, indefinitely long, for the inference of his handling of them, to realize that moral clearness and probity are indispensable to work of this kind, and to realize with fuller contempt than ever before how consistently in our time so-called simple people, fictional and nonfictional, are consciously and unconsciously insulted and betrayed by artists and by audiences: it seems as if the man is hardly alive, any more, who is fit to look another man in the eye. But this man is; and this is the finest and strongest record of actual people that I have seen" (342-43). Agee's encomium on the filmmaker's way of seeing farmers certifies that "this picture is not for cultists, but for those who have eyes capable of seeing what is before them, and minds and hearts capable of caring for what they see" (344).

<sup>196</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 174.

<sup>197</sup> Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism*, 345.

<sup>198</sup> For a Mohr photograph of one such wooden bird, see *Another Way of Telling*, 179.

<sup>199</sup> Berger, "The White Bird," *The Sense of Sight*, 9.

<sup>200</sup> Berger, "The Ideal Palace," *Keeping a Rendezvous*, 83.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>202</sup> In *Pig Earth*, contemplating the complications caused by his vocation not as a peasant but as a writer interested in peasant experience, Berger disaffirms his professional status: "I have never thought of writing as a profession. It is a solitary independent activity in which practice can never bestow seniority. Fortunately anyone can take up the activity. Whatever the motives, political or personal, which have led me to undertake to write something, the writing becomes, as soon as I begin, a struggle to give meaning to experience. Every profession has limits to its competence, but also its own territory. Writing, as I know it, has no territory of its own. The act of writing is nothing except the act of approaching the experience written about; just as, hopefully, the act of reading the written text is a comparable act of approach" (6). For a pungent critique of his seemingly transparent approach to experience, see Bruce Robbins, "Feeling Global: Experience and John Berger," *boundary 2* 11.1-2 (Autumn 1982 - Winter 1983): 291-308.

<sup>203</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 200.

<sup>204</sup> Berger, "The Ideal Palace," *Keeping a Rendezvous*, 91.

<sup>205</sup> Berger, "Christ of the Peasants," *Keeping a Rendezvous*, 120.

<sup>206</sup> Berger, "Uses of Photography," *About Looking*, 48.

<sup>207</sup> “I remember coming across Paul Strand’s *Blind Woman* when I was very young, and that really bowled me over....” Evans recalled of the 1916 portrait. “It’s a very powerful picture. I saw it in the New York Public Library file of ‘Camera Work,’ and I remember going out of there overstimulated: ‘That’s the stuff, that’s the thing to do.’ It charged me up” (quoted in Katz, “Interview with Walker Evans,” 88).

<sup>208</sup> Berger, “Paul Strand,” *About Looking*, 41.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 46, 41. In “The Suit and the Photograph,” preceding his overview of Paul Strand in *About Looking*, Berger also pays tribute to the archetypal portraits of August Sander (whom Evans likewise admired) by ruminating on what this “translucently documentary” photographer may have told his subjects: “Did he simply say that their photographs were going to be a recorded part of history? And did he refer to history in such a way that their vanity and shyness dropped away, so that they looked into the lens telling themselves, using a strange historical tense: *I looked like this*” (27).

<sup>210</sup> Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” *The Look of Things*, 179. Distinguishing an ordinary snapshot from an unforgettable photo, he adds that the latter more transparently but no less paradoxically (because wordlessly and automatically) explains or decodes the message it transmits by giving visible reasons for why the photographer chose to preserve that particular sight at that particular moment to the exclusion of others. Hence, asserts Berger, “Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious” (180).

<sup>211</sup> Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, 142.

<sup>212</sup> In “Millet and the Peasant,” in *About Looking*, Berger writes of their sixteenth-century forerunner’s more composite reach: “In Breughel, peasants form a large part of the crowd which is mankind: Breughel’s subject is a collectivity of which the peasantry as a whole is only a part; no man has yet been condemned in perpetuity to solitary individuality and all men are equal before the last judgment; social station is secondary” (70).

<sup>213</sup> Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” *About Looking*, 70.

<sup>214</sup> Berger, “The Politics of Courbet,” *Selected Essays*, 64. See also Berger, “Courbet and the Jura,” *About Looking*, 134-141.

<sup>215</sup> Berger, “The Politics of Courbet,” *Selected Essays*, 64.

<sup>216</sup> Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” *About Looking*, 70.

<sup>217</sup> Berger, “Millet and Labour,” *Selected Essays*, 61, 62.

<sup>218</sup> Berger, “Millet and the Peasant,” *About Looking*, 69.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 71. For a fine example of Millet’s mastery of night scenes, see his final painting, *Bird’s-Nesters* (1874). Based on stories from his rural childhood, it depicts four peasants

hunting pigeons in the dark by blinding them with torchlight and clubbing them to death as they fall from their roosts. Illuminated by a flaming torch held up at center, the canvas displays a dramatic tension not only between light and shadow but also between vertical and horizontal movement. Two men reach upward wielding their clubs (the one holding the torch is fairly leaping) while beneath them a man and woman lunge along the ground with their arms outstretched to grasp the wounded birds. Together the four figures form a dynamic human unit in the rough shape of a cross. They might thus be seen as viscerally enacting and spiritually symbolizing the concurrent dimensions which Berger locates in peasant experience.

<sup>220</sup> Millet quoted in Berger, "Millet and the Peasant," *About Looking*, 72-73.

<sup>221</sup> Berger, "Millet and the Peasant," *About Looking*, 75.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> Berger, "The Production of the World," *The Sense of Sight*, 281.

<sup>226</sup> Berger, "Millet and the Peasant," *About Looking*, 77.

<sup>227</sup> Evans quoted in Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," 86.

<sup>228</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 117. Agee continues to agonize over whom he is writing for: "But I can't and should not sacrifice 'educated' ideas and interests which the 'uneducated' have no chance or reason, yet, to be other than bored by; and until I can keep these yet put them in credible language I guess there's nothing better I can do about it than write as to the 'educated.' Also in spite of intense convictions I mistrust myself; and if you're going to write what may be poison better write it to adults than to perfectly defenseless children." In a draft for the preface of his book Agee again apologizes to its defenseless subjects and mocks its target audience: "To those to whom this record should belong, if to any: that is, to all those capable of reading or hearing languages and least of all to that educated for whom he has written it, the author of the text wishes to express his apologies" (from *James Agee Rediscovered*, 150).

<sup>229</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 83.

<sup>230</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: A Book of Images and Words about the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe* (1975; London: Verso, 2010), 7-8. As one sign that the authors, too, have recast their purpose from circulating a treatise to fashioning an album, this reissue of the volume no longer includes, as the first edition had, an appendix listing the addresses of organizations devoted to the interests of migrant workers.

<sup>231</sup> In Dyer, “Ways of Witnessing,” asked what his peasant neighbors think of him and his writing, Berger replies, “How do I know? I feel part of them so I’m not going to speak *for* them. All I will say is this: a friend of mine was in South West France and he mentioned my name to a young peasant there. The peasant had read the book (*Pig Earth*) and said: ‘it is the best book about us of the century’. . . . I mention it not out of literary pride but to make a point about communication. It shows that peasants have a sense of identity—he said ‘us’—that they read books and that they do not see my books as those of a stranger” (38). See also Berger’s “Correspondence with Subcomandante Marcos,” in *The Shape of a Pocket*, 219-242, in which the Zapatista leader quotes from and muses on *Pig Earth* as a means of transatlantic communication and solidarity between writer and reader.

<sup>232</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 195.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96.

<sup>234</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* (1967; New York: Pantheon, 1981), 164-65.

<sup>235</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>236</sup> Berger and Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, 285-86.

<sup>237</sup> Appearing immediately after the book’s opening story, “An Explanation” is a revised version of Berger’s essay “The Storyteller,” which is also reprinted in *The Sense of Sight*, 13-18. While some might contend that his cutting of this section from *Pig Earth*, like his reworking of its afterword as the introduction to *Into Their Labours*, tightens the esthetic unity of Berger’s trilogy, these alterations detract from its ethical dimension by reducing its discursiveness and muting the authorial persona which had initially questioned itself.

<sup>238</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 5.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 7.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 11.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>242</sup> John Berger, Introduction to *Into Their Labours* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), xxix.



## CHAPTER TWO

### ABASHED AMBITION: INTENTIONS VERSUS PERFORMANCE IN *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

In 1933, wishing he could quit journalism to concentrate on his incipient literary endeavors, Agee confided in Father Flye: "If I had as much confidence about writing as I have intention, everything might be much easier."<sup>1</sup> Because of his vacillating confidence, however, Agee remained on the staff of the magazine which three years later would give him opportunity to test his intentions in full. "Best break I ever had on *Fortune*," he wrote to the priest in June 1936, just after receiving the assignment to do an article on Southern sharecropping. "Feel terrific personal responsibility toward story; considerable doubts of my ability to bring it off; considerable more of *Fortune*'s ultimate willingness to use it as it seems (in theory) to me."<sup>2</sup> Agee's prognostications would prove correct. Not only were his editors unwilling to publish the idiosyncratic piece he submitted but, after getting the material released to him, he wavered between doubt and faith in his ability to expand it into a book.

Never at a shortage for ambition,<sup>3</sup> Agee nonetheless felt he could barely begin to live up to his writerly responsibilities, especially with this subject. Hence the end of his "Preamble" sets up a pivotal juxtaposition:

'Beethoven said a thing as rash and noble as the best of his work. By my memory, he said: "He who understands my music can never know unhappiness again." I believe it. And I would be a liar and a coward and one of your safe world if I should fear to say the same words of my best perception, and of my best intention.

Performance, in which the whole fate and terror rests, is another matter.'<sup>4</sup>

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Alan Spiegel observes incisively, "is born of the drama

in the space between these two paragraphs. This complex imbroglio of slated intentions and mottled motives, of effortful flights of idealism teetering against calculated arias of impotence, makes this book perhaps the most uninhibited and self-reflexive of modern American epics: at once a tragic-heroic saga of the sanctity of agrarian life, as well as a new-fangled, 'postmodernist' rumination on the personal and philosophical impossibility of ever realizing such a project."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Agee's entire text is a spasmodic, mutable, ceaselessly backtracking, meta-nonfictional send-up of the intentional fallacy,<sup>6</sup> as it repeatedly interrogates the disparity between what he intends and how he performs. Pitting ambitiousness against abashment, audacity against cowardice, belief against terror, will against fate, the lines that conclude his "Preamble" foretell the many antinomies embedded in his lengthy meditation. Agee organizes his narrative and assessment of his and Evans's experiences in Alabama around a host of related conflicts: image versus word, writer versus reader, art versus life, beauty versus utility, success versus failure. Striving to communicate the excitement and transcend the sorrow of sojourning among tenant farmers, Agee defends the nobility (even as he upbraids the rashness) of authorial perceptions. Esthetically ambitious albeit ethically abashed, his ways of seeing the rural poor are forever in flux throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, continually requiring him to hold up the literary equivalent of corrective lenses, lest his prismatic vision of the truth be impaired. I aim to understand the value of the "versus" stitched into this self-combative work, which resounds with the polyphonic fierceness and tenderness of Beethoven's best music.

Stimulating my approach, in *The Singularity of Literature* (2004) Derek Attridge criticizes the academic tendency to select topics, utilize theories, and assemble arguments with professional advancement foremost in mind. This attitude he labels *instrumentalism*,

a procedure “crudely summarized as the treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce that usefulness.”<sup>7</sup> Literary instrumentalism, remarks Attridge, is symptomatic of the “general, globally experienced increase in the weight given to the values of the market-place, to the success ethic, to productivity as a measure of worth.”<sup>8</sup> For him, worth still dwells within the distinctiveness—the *singularity*—of a text (or other artwork) and thus within its resistance to utilitarian methodologies. “Literature may be a cultural product,” he maintains, “but it is never simply contained by a culture.”<sup>9</sup>

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* exemplifies such artistic resistance to cultural containment. While useful analyses have been—and remain to be—executed on Agee’s handling of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other issues germane to cultural studies, his flouting of stylistic orthodoxy calls for special attention to formal matters, which Attridge prescribes “as an antidote to an overemphasis on instrumental approaches.”<sup>10</sup> Tracing the esthetic tradition and the study of form from Plato and Kant through the Frankfurt School and the New Criticism, he concedes that an exclusive focus on beauty (a major obsession for Agee) hazards abandonment of ethical concerns (a competing obsession for him). “In the twentieth century,” Attridge nonetheless notes, “a number of thinkers—among them Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida—have attempted to understand artworks in ways that challenge this separation between the domain of the aesthetic and the search for truth.”<sup>11</sup> Attridge heralds their challenge through his celebration of literary singularity. Drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “alterity,” he puts forward the notion of readerly responsibility toward otherness. More demanding than responsibility *to* the other, posits Attridge, responsibility *for* the other entails support for the creative impulse to take risks,

to be unpredictable, to engage in formal innovation as a type of ethical experimentation. Responsibility for the other is inherently emotive as well as cognitive, though he clarifies that it “is not so much a feeling I experience as a situation I find myself in.”<sup>12</sup> Faced with a creation’s vulnerability, we must choose whether to greet it with hospitality and sustain it with generosity, or merely to treat it “as historical evidence, moral lesson, path to truth, political inspiration, or personal encouragement.”<sup>13</sup> Of course a text may provide these latter features, just as it may distort or debase them, but only, contends Attridge, if the reader first welcomes and nurtures it, accepting that “its power lies in its weakness.”<sup>14</sup>

The same could be said of Agee’s purport toward the tenant families. His book, after all, revolves periphrastically around ethical and esthetic predicaments of witnessing and speaking for vulnerable otherness, as he and Evans venture “to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense” (xiv). Agee’s effort to honor the tenants’ actuality stipulates that we honor his text’s autonomy. Reacting against what might be thought of as journalistic instrumentalism, he seeks to perform in the manner that Attridge counsels for us to receive: “Responding responsibly to a work of art means attempting to do justice to it as a singular other; it involves a judgment that is not simply ethical or aesthetic, and that does not attempt to pigeonhole it or place it on a scale of values, but that operates as an affirmation of the work’s inventiveness.”<sup>15</sup> In spite of its brash belligerence toward the reader, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* incites us to affirm its singularly inventive clash of ethics and esthetics.

Although my appraisal of Agee’s internal agonistics focuses on his dramatization of intentions and performance, as stated and played out *in* the text rather than in external commentary by him or his voluble critics, a few excerpts from his notes and drafts may

help to indicate just how deliberately he incorporated self-contestations. “Confusion, conflict, schism, and the tensions sprung between, are integral and intentional parts of this organism,” Agee wrote in one version of the “Preface,” added when his manuscript was nearing completion.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a polymorphous textual organism, of a living thing that might continue to grow and change, accords with his published characterizations of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as “a book only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality” (xvi), and as the first installment (even though no further ones appeared) of a larger work titled *Three Tenant Families*. “Ultimately,” Agee projects his aspirations, “it is intended that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in,” only to confess his inability to achieve these goals: “Of this ultimate intention the present volume is merely portent and fragment, experiment, dissonant prologue” (xiv-xv). As he says plainly in a deleted sentence, “The surface is hardly scratched.”<sup>17</sup> So too, in another eliminated passage, the writer denies “making some graceful literary gestures of humility” when admitting the difficulty of his desire “not only to give a complete and true account, but to give it in terms which shall be understandable, and unmistakeable, and inescapable, to any human being who can read this language.”<sup>18</sup>

Given the slipperiness of language no less than of truth, such intents are unlikely to be availing, so Agee resolves to scale back the scope of his representation of tenant farmers. “The shadowiness and slight use of the people is deliberate,” he avers, as are his prose’s “perversities, violations, insults and mutilations ... [;] deliberate above all are the incompleteness and the dissonance.”<sup>19</sup> Swearing allegiance to both “the authority, and fallibility, of individual human consciousness,” he trumpets that his book “is a record of

blindness as well as of perception.”<sup>20</sup> Instead of ignoring his failures to see the rural poor clearly and credibly, Agee therefore winds up questioning the authoritativeness of what he earlier hailed as “the avid, watchful, trained, economical eye partly of the artist and partly of the human being.”<sup>21</sup> And as if foreseeing critical complaints that his writing is smug, narcissistic, and “maddeningly tiresome” in its self-consciousness, Agee avows, “What I am interested in is infinitely less myself than what by chance I saw,” but realizes, “And yet that requires—how much?—my presence and my feeling.”<sup>22</sup> The answer to his interjected query about how much to include himself turns out to be: a great deal. Agee is always cognizant, though, of his collaborator’s more objective photographic contribution, prompting him to reconceive his own observational method: “The device is or should be chiefly the constant presence of a thinking & feeling camera.”<sup>23</sup> If only he could borrow Evans’s equipment and infuse it with subjectivity, dreams Agee, his staged confrontation between intentions and performance might be unnecessary after all. This impossible hope percolates throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

### **Image vs. Word**

With his usual ardor undercut by self-laceration, Agee describes his travels with Evans across the rural South in the summer of 1936 as “the virulent, insolent, deceitful, pitying, infinitesimal and frenzied running and searching, on this colossal peasant map, of two angry, futile and bottomless, botched and overcomplicated youthful intelligences in the service of an anger and of a love and of an undiscernible truth, and in the frightening vanity of their would-be purity” (9). Of the work they coproduced, the writer concocts a far soberer pronouncement: “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative” (xv). While the verbose straining

offers a fair specimen of Agee's style, the blunt proclamation mirrors Evans's technique: detached, minimalist, unsentimental. Albeit often chockfull of circumlocutory frenzy, Agee's sentences can sometimes be as disarmingly direct as Evans's portraits.

We do not read these (or any other) words, however, until we have perused all the photographs. Before being told of their dual functions, or of anything else, our encounter with Evans is already over. Opening the cover, we are denied, Bruce Jackson comments, the "order of access" customary of a nonfiction book, in which a blank page followed by a title page, a copyright page, a dedication, an epigraph, a preface, and a table of contents prepare us for the experience of absorbing the primary material.<sup>24</sup> Such front matter (not omitted, just delayed here) will do more to preclude than to prime our receptivity once it arrives; but *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* presents us straight off with Evans's images, none of which—in keeping with his preferences elsewhere and in contrast to most other Depression-era photo-textual documentaries—is accompanied by any sort of caption with authorial glosses that might predispose us toward their interpretations, nor even with any identifying information as to who and what we are looking at, or to where and when these pictures were taken.<sup>25</sup>

This tactic, then, destabilizes our introduction to the people featured in the book. Although Agee's subsequent list of "Persons and Places" supplies pseudonyms for the individuals photographed, his roll call reverses the succession of family groups arranged by Evans, so that we see in turn members of the Gudger, Woods, and Ricketts households but learn of their aliases as Ricketts, Woods, Gudger.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, if this lack of visual and verbal correspondence were not enough to confound us, all of the tenants are named prior to their landlords but the first plate shows George Gudger's landlord Chester Boles. Sporting a rumpled seersucker jacket, he appears relatively rich, sufficiently rested, and

deceptively deadpan, repressing a smirk, just before the fatigued, careworn, unsmiling Gudgers, who, as we cannot yet know but will eventually discover, are beholden to him for their meager necessities and bonded to him for their livelihood by inexorable toil in his fields. Evans thus implicitly establishes that the socioeconomic inequity of this agricultural system is enforced by landowners and endured by farmers, while Agee quietly repositions them to signal that the tenants, those “whom we love and intend well toward” (9), are the unsung, deservedly famous men whose sufferings he will chide us for inadequately sympathizing with and whose beauty amid poverty he will urge us to praise.

Compounding the volume’s stark partition of image from word, these examples of disconnectedness between pictorial and textual sequencing seem to ratify the authors’ declaration of mutual independence, as though they might never have traveled together. Agee’s recollections, however, of the discomposure routinely caused by Evans’s camera, along with his scattered references to specific pictures, remind us not only that the text was written with awareness of the photographs’ compositional antecedence but also that our reading has been subtly preconditioned by what we have already viewed. Mutuality, not in the sense of reciprocal agreement but of representational exchange, rides uneasily with their announced freedom from one another’s vehicle. “The aestheticizing separation of Evans’s images from Agee’s text is not, then, simply a formal characteristic,” argues W. J. T. Mitchell, “but an ethical strategy, a way of preventing easy access to the world they represent,” of rhetorically resisting unearned comprehension of their subject.<sup>27</sup>

Their claim of coequality, meanwhile, is reasserted via the spare “Contents” page, which (belatedly) notifies us that “Book One” comprises the unnumbered photographs, that we are now in the midst of “Preliminaries” paginated with Roman numerals, and that “Book Two” will start on Arabic page one. Each contributor given a “book” of his own,



each solely responsible for his own form of expression, neither of which is adulterated or dominated by the other, Agee and Evans share equally in authorship, or so they would have us believe. Should we be dubious, if only because the number of textual pages (471, excluding the extensive preliminaries) far exceeds the number of photographic plates (thirty-one in the first edition) and therefore puts a greater demand on our absorptive stamina, the cast of characters includes James Agee, “a spy, traveling as a journalist,” and Walker Evans, “a counter-spy, traveling as a photographer” (xxii), suggesting that they play roles of like significance and essentially cancel out each other’s modes of espionage.

For the second edition Evans boosted his credentials as coauthor by doubling the photographs to sixty-two, dropping some, inserting many new ones, re-cropping others.<sup>28</sup> In addition he breached the divide between the two mediums by penning a foreword of homage to his deceased friend. Characteristically self-effacing, Evans does not mention his own involvement in the undertaking that became *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>29</sup> His ways of recalling Agee’s ways of seeing the rural poor counterbalance the writer’s “Verses” (punning on “versus”) at the outset of Book Two: an orphic injunction on their project,<sup>30</sup> dedicated to the man whom he deemed “the best photographer in the world.”<sup>31</sup>

If coequal and mutually independent, how can their exertions likewise be fully collaborative? Since their words and images do not mingle formally, how can they still cross-pollinate? Scholars have demystified the illusion that Agee and Evans worked together on a level footing, seeing each other’s media as perfectly parallel means of representation in their harmoniously unified opus.<sup>32</sup> While Evans did not look back wistfully on taking up photography after his unsuccessful foray into literature, Agee was envious of the camera’s ostensibly superior power to transmit actuality. Obviating this anxiety, he retained reverence for artistic practices (particularly music and poetry) that

appeared to privilege inborn talent over mechanical intervention.

In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee's inner conflict emerges after one of his paeans to perceptiveness:

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

This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time; and is why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so nearly universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen alive whose eyes I can trust even so much as my own.’ (11)

Sounding a recurrent theme, Agee holds almost nothing in higher esteem than the ability of consciousness—not just anybody's, he qualifies, but that of “him who can discern”—to perceive reality without embellishment, neither supplementing it with the imagination nor revising its intrinsic qualities. Whether by slicing it into bits or by churning it through some creative process, by dissecting or digesting it, both science and art misrepresent the world's “cruel radiance”: its basic ontological and phenomenological paradoxes.

But photography, implies Agee, occupies a middle ground between scientific and artistic branches of knowledge. Naively overlooking elements such as framing, cropping, and retouching, he celebrates the camera's capacity to approximate the ocular dimension of unmediated consciousness. If photographed as perceived, the aspect of a sunlit street, so goes his synesthetic comparison, can “roar” with more intensity and integrity than the most fantastic symphony. Agee thus indirectly muses on Evans's shot of the main street of Centerboro, county seat for the tenant farmers, surveyed from a slight elevation, awash with sunlight. (Later he refers explicitly to this street, recounting his drive along its sun-blistered business block.)<sup>33</sup> In this instance photo and text, while remaining isolated from

one another, collaborate in the discernment of actuality. Evans furnishes visual evidence of an everyday scene; Agee lavishes a verbal analogue on its resonant properties. Picture and simile are not directed toward or dependent on each other for their discrete meanings, yet they are enriched by their coexistence. Similar subliminal transactions occur between Evans's views of the Gudger house and Agee's descriptions of it. Separately catalogued but jointly fortified, both attest that the commonplace may shine forth with extraordinary radiance.

Images and words, since they do not interpenetrate, in these cases might be better related as corroborative than collaborative.<sup>34</sup> Kept strictly apart, they nonetheless confirm the validity of their distinct methods of witness through visual and verbal manifestations of a shared subject. How fully they corroborate one another is less certifiable, however,<sup>35</sup> as insinuated in the above quotation by Agee's sudden twist in mood toward the camera's contemporary centrality. In a familiar about-face for him, his excitement over potentiality transmutes rapidly into fury at failure. He fulminates about the malpractice of unspecified photographers and the concomitant degeneration of sight caused by reliance on a machine instead of innate sensory endowments. Having granted the camera an aura of authenticity, he withdraws it in favor of the innocence of his own eyes, unpolluted by technology.

Agee grapples repeatedly with assessing available tools for reproducing the real. He had hoped his embryonic "Alabama Record" might serve as "a skeptical study of the nature of reality and of the false nature of re-creation and of communication," in which pictures "should be used profusely," not to "illustrate" the text but rather to elicit "a strict comparison of the photographs and the prose as relative liars and as relative reproducers of the same matters."<sup>36</sup> While he maintains his skepticism toward all attempts to re-create and communicate reality, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee expresses optimism

that a photographic way of seeing may abet his effort to pierce and perhaps overcome the relativity of truth. “One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this,” he remarks. “So far as it goes (which is, in its own realm, as absolute anyhow as the traveling distance of words or sound), and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth” (234). Here the camera is on an even keel with words—at least spoken if not written language—and is both more limited than eyesight, because it cannot shift so swiftly, and more capable, because it can take in so much at once. Like other mechanisms, and more like science than art, the camera, if handled properly, cannot avoid recording the unvarnished truth.

Nevertheless, Agee’s inclusion of the adjectives “dry” and “ice-cold” intimates that photographs, for all their candidness, lack warmth and vitality. In contrast therefore to “weaponless” consciousness, he brands the camera “a weapon, a stealer of images and souls, a gun, an evil eye” (362), especially in the opinion of black people, who catch on quicker than whites, he observes, to its malevolent technical manipulations, such as the angled viewfinder which enables Evans to take snapshots unbeknownst to his subjects.<sup>37</sup> During the first photo session with the white farmers, Agee likens him to a dark demon: “Walker setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback, of the camera; stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel” (364). Prying insensitively into the tenants’ “shame and pitiableness,” as if stripping them (ill-clad as they already are) completely naked, this “cold absorption of the camera” becomes an agent of betrayal (363).

It preys as cruelly on objects and buildings as on humans, implicating not only its operator but his collaborator too. For example, awestruck by the vernacular architecture of a wooden church they happen upon, Agee helps Evans ready the camera. While the photographer waited for the light to trigger “the keen historic spasm of the shutter,” the writer “watched what would be trapped, possessed, fertilized, in the leasures and shyness which are a phase of all love for any object: searching out and registering in myself all its lines, planes, stresses of relationship, . . . examining merely the ways of the wood” (39). Agee’s mere examination of the church runs on in such minute detail that he apparently wants to compete on the spot with the camera—metaphorically equated to a rapist—by registering with his loving heap of phrases everything that would be “possessed” within a photographic print of the building. Indeed, since no picture of the church appears in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his wordy sketch stands in for any likenesses Evans may have made. The same comes to pass with Agee’s detailed renderings of family portraits not printed in the book.<sup>38</sup> As for the published plates, he so intricately inventories some of them that the text might be considered illustrative of the photographs (if they are not after all totally independent) rather than the other way round.<sup>39</sup> When words fail him, on the other hand, Agee is not above deferring to the images for their graphic verification or emotional impact.<sup>40</sup> In a futilely assertive gesture of protectiveness, he excises the names of local businesses advertised in calendars despite their pictorial visibility.<sup>41</sup>

Agee’s concurrent enthusiasm for and rivalry with the camera<sup>42</sup> are instigated by his frustration with the heaviness and clumsiness of language, which thwart his desire to “impart the deftness, keenness, immediacy, speed and subtlety” of life (236). Words, he rues, no matter how “beautiful and powerful,” approach their referents “by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would

fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence” (236). Furthermore, whereas writing, by its serial nature, is poorly outfitted to limn reality with any semblance of simultaneity, arts such as photography and cinema are better equipped to apprehend the multifarious components of a single instant or a certain location. Hence Agee’s frequent wish that he could co-opt some sort of camera for his purposes.<sup>43</sup> He sees the farmers hard at work “on the clay in the grave mutations of a dance whose business is the genius of a moving camera, and which it is not my hope ever to record,” except for “a few crude sketches” (324). Wondering how to convey the poetic sublimity of a city street “in its flotation upon time and space,” he bemoans: “Your medium, unfortunately, is not a still or moving camera, but is words. You abjure all metaphor, symbol, selection and above all, of course, all temptation to invent, as obstructive, false, artistic. As nearly as possible in words (which, even by grace of genius, would not be very near) you try to give the street *in its own terms*” (235). Agee’s veneration for the street’s singularity collides with his *métier* as a poet. If he sedulously accumulates bulks, textures, colors, noises, odors, “all this gathers time and weightiness which the street does not of itself have: it sags with this length and weight: and what have you in the end but a somewhat overblown passage from a naturalistic novel: which ... is at the opposite pole from your intentions, from what you have seen, from the fact itself” (235-36).

Any piece of writing, Agee realizes, can all too easily get out of hand and wind up evincing the opposite effect of what the writer planned. Although well aware that he must ground his reproduction of actuality in a scrupulous documentation of factuality, he frets that, “written, these facts lose so much of their force and reality” (241). Striving to craft authentic, buoyant language, Agee explicates his dilemma of aspiring to capture yet also exalt whatever he describes:

... if you share the naturalist's regard for the 'real,' but have this regard for it on a plane which in your mind brings it level in value at least to music and poetry, which in turn you value as highly as anything on earth, it is important that your representation of 'reality' does not sag into, or become one with, naturalism; and in so far as it does, you have sinned, that is, you have fallen short even of the relative truth you have perceived and intended. (238)

Not one to take intentions lightly, Agee worries that his performance will, in the religious parlance he often adopts, "sin" against the true nature and value of "reality," which to his mind has less to do with literary movements like realism or naturalism (and still less with mixed-media trades like journalism or documentary) than with more ancient arts such as music and poetry. Agee lays a trap for himself by insisting that words at once befit the things they represent and consecrate those things to higher usages. His apprehensiveness that prose falls short of adequate representation leads him to reflect that he is not shaping a narrative anyway: "The forms of this text are chiefly those of music, of motion pictures, and of improvisations and recordings of states of emotion, and of belief" (244). Auditory as well as visual ingredients garnish yet threaten to taint his verbal recipe, thus causing him to resist even as he arrogates extra-literary techniques.

Agee's resolve to go beyond description and attain something nearer embodiment of the lives of tenant farmers puts him on the verge of forswearing his medium altogether. In order to transcend what "would only be a 'book' at the best," he fancies that, after the images, words might yield to more palpable substances:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live. (13)

Clashing self-abnegation with arrogant adumbration, authorial effacement in deference to found objects with reluctant reinsertion of Agee's aggressive impetuosity, this microcosm of internal tensions in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* not only points up the formal one between photographs and text but also points toward those between writer and reader, art and life, success and failure, which ignite or prolong the textual battle between intentions and performance.

Here a disingenuous statement of intent is merely performed, since it cannot be acted upon hereafter but must be retracted. Agee relies on the conditional tense to spell out what he would like to do and to differentiate it from what he will have to do. Even without words, his ideal contents would maintain coequality with Evans's section, as the semicolon following "photographs" indicates. The "book" would fully engage its users' sensorium—sight, smell, hearing, touch, even taste. Although Agee's notion that true art is "savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium" (16) may have underlay his Grand Guignol proposal to dismember a tenant, in fact his threat of violence was strictly theatrical. He well knew that words would have to compose his volume and not sensory effusions, much less body parts.

Abandoning his charade of verbal renunciation, Agee admits he will do some writing after all, with the grudging caveat that "it will be very little." This stipulation becomes a refrain throughout the text, portended by a phrase from "Verses" prodding himself and Evans to "describe a little" of the vast canvas they have seen (5). Bearing witness with a plethora of details, Agee regularly makes the disclaimer that he can only set down a small portion of them, only to wear his pencil out scribbling incessantly about the farms.<sup>44</sup> "I am hoping here only to tell a little, only so well as I may," he precedes his thorough scrutiny of the Gudger home, "about an ordinary house, in which I lived a little



while” (134). Of bareness and spacing inside this house, he comments, “I shall not even try to write seriously or fully of them. But a little, applying mainly to the two bedrooms” (155). Prior to his diffuse description of overalls, he hesitates, “Perhaps little can be said of them, after all: yet something” (265). Loath “to qualify so much as a little the little” he has already suggested on education (289), Agee acknowledges that any attempt to explain his objections to modernized grade-school textbooks will surely fail, but nonetheless begs us to “see only a little” of the fatuousness he finds between their covers (299). In practice, regardless of his modest pretenses, “a little” usually amounts to a lot in Agee’s writing,<sup>45</sup> although he expresses as little confidence in our reading of his longwinded performance as he does in his capability to fulfill his ambitious intentions.

### **Writer vs. Reader**

If he were capable, postulates Agee, of accomplishing his objectives for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, we would not dare approach it, for it would crush our will to live. Such querulous pugnacity typifies the narrator’s early tone. Never at a loss for ways to annoy or offend us, his very first words are an affront: a parenthetical suggestion that “serious readers” only finish the start of the “Preface” before proceeding to the “book-proper,” with supercilious reassurance that “a later return will do no harm” (xiii). How should we react to this off-putting advice? As though testing our seriousness, it goads us, of course, to read more than just the few fairly straightforward opening paragraphs about his project with Evans. In one of these, wherein Agee defers delineating why their initial book publisher rejected the manuscript, he erased his explanation that “speaking as truly, the authors withdrew it, rather than make certain required changes through which it might become less unpalatable to the general reader.”<sup>46</sup>

The remainder of the preface, like much of the text, is indeed decidedly distasteful for readers accustomed to pampering. Having informed us that his “nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families,” Agee expounds the actual (recognition of unimagined existence), essential (inquiry into human divinity), and ultimate (exercise in exhaustive analysis) aims of his volume (xiv). “Since it is intended, among other things, as a swindle, an insult, and a corrective,” he hastens to admonish, “the reader will be wise to bear the nominal subject, and his expectation of its proper treatment, steadily in mind” (xv).<sup>47</sup> Agee thus alludes to and distances himself from his era’s sentimental fascination with the rural poor, from the simplistic or sensational images of agricultural abjection glimpsed in many documentary works, government reports, political pamphlets, journalistic exposés, sociological studies, and artistic depictions of the 1930s. Even if only through trickery and travesty, he intends to amend such one-dimensional views.

His imperious recommendations, however, may do less at first to enlighten than to leave us feeling preemptively swindled, insulted, and corrected. Accused of visual apathy and impotence for our presumed response to the photographs, we are also ordered to read his text both aloud, so as to attend to its “variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics,” and “continuously, as music is listened to or a film watched” (xv). Sticking to words yet yearning to surpass them, he seeks to fashion a quasi-multimedia complement to Evans’s pictures, a nonstop reel of language spooling out in explosive undulations. After bullying us into engagement with their enterprise, Agee then asserts our central involvement in its realization. Should we “wish actively to participate in the subject, in whatever degree of understanding, friendship, or hostility,” he invites us to write them (xvi). Despite making it difficult to feel friendly toward him, Agee anticipates Attridge’s notion that the reader

must be hospitable toward the text's thorniness in order for it to bloom. This overbearing, underhanded writer implores us to help while dictating that we heed his singularity.

Notwithstanding Agee's invitation to join him in an effort to actualize "actuality," his next address to the reader does not encourage our active participation but rather holds us at bay. It occurs in a footnote to the second of two juxtaposed epigraphs, which set the stage for ensuing tensions between ethics and esthetics. Introducing his verbal adaptation of musical counterpoint, on opposite pages he lays out unattributed quotations from *King Lear* and the *Communist Manifesto*.<sup>48</sup> The Shakespearean selection runs as follows:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this 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)

Spoken by Lear midway through the tragedy (3.4), this passage contains parallels to both the action and the message of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Like the king's epiphany amid a "pitiless storm" that he has cared "too little" for the suffering of his impoverished subjects and so must cure himself of his indifference by experiencing their wretchedness, Agee's heightened concern for the poorly clothed, housed, and fed tenants comes to him while sheltering with one family during a thunderstorm, after which he is more intent on exposing himself to their privations, on solidifying their fellowship, on empathizing with them, on writing (however "little") about them with greater care. His way of shaking the superflux, of righting the imbalance in their social stations, is not to dispense his material advantages—in fact, the Gudgers share their scanty provisions with him, though he later becomes a paying guest in their home—nor even to argue for a "more just" economy, but

to represent such lives more justly, that is, more richly and complexly, than has ever been done before. Gauging the bounds of responsible estheticization could double as an ethical intercession, he implies.

Nevertheless, lest privileged writers and readers too glibly suppose that their mere readiness “to feel what wretches feel” will actually aid anybody, Agee’s paired quotation paraphrases the Communist motto spurring the world’s wretched workers to rally against their oppressors and cast off the chains of class domination. Despite floating this radical stance, his linked footnote berates “the average reader’s tendency to label,” disavows the authors’ ideological commitments, and dislodges the slogan from party politics and from immediate relevance, pointing out that these words “mean, not what the reader may care to think they mean, but what they say. They are not dealt with directly in this volume; but it is essential that they be used here, for in the pattern of the work as a whole, they are, in the sonata form, the second theme; the poetry facing them is the first” (xix). Patterned on a form of musical composition in which two distinct motifs are initiated in different keys, the second then transposed into the first’s key during their recapitulation, Agee’s textual sonata bespeaks a political theme to be modified and enhanced by the tonality of personal experience and poetic representation. While he does not delve into the pragmatics of class struggle, Agee insists on incorporating it secondarily into his work’s metaphoric structure because he believes that revolutionary mandates must be shaken up and reshaped through deeper immersion in the conditions of those exhorted to fight for their economic freedom. Self-exposure to the poverty of workers, as *King Lear* testifies to movingly, precedes and guides Agee’s solidarity with the oppressed in their quest for liberation, as the manifesto calls for urgently. The writer thus enjoins the reader to rethink esthetic means and ethical ends for development of and variations on his two principal themes.<sup>49</sup>

No less than the preface and epigraphs, the “Preamble” is full of challenges to us and promises from him. Having chastised his audience, Agee ponders its constituents. He shifts to addressing readers in the second person, troubled by “the question, Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it; and the question, Why we make this book, and set it at large, and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end, or none” (9). Proposing a mutual obligation between writer and reader, a pact that would hold us, in Attridge’s thinking, “answerable *for him*” and vice versa,<sup>50</sup> Agee probes not only our purposes and qualifications but also his and Evans’s. He hectors us as to what we shall do after picking up *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, concerned that we have been too casually “actuated toward this reading by various possible reflexes of sympathy, curiosity, idleness, et cetera, and almost certainly in a lack of consciousness, and conscience, remotely appropriate to the enormity of what” we will find inside (13).

While Agee pricks our drowsy cognizance of his subjects’ humanity and foists an uneasy accountability upon our abruptly startled consciences, he stops short of agitating for political action on their behalf. Hence he cuts his asseveration that only a communist revolution might help them,<sup>51</sup> yet keeps an acid allusion to the New Deal, scoffing at its policies via his sarcastic claim to have written about sharecroppers “in the hope that the reader will be edified, and may feel kindly disposed toward any well-thought-out liberal efforts to rectify the unpleasant situation down South, and will somewhat better and more guiltily appreciate the next good meal he eats” (14). Agee *does* hope to inculcate guilt in readers for their relative comforts, in that way broadening their moral dispositions, but he does not thereby demand that they subscribe to the facile assurances of liberal politicians,

whose emphasis on economic rectification struck him as a reductive attempt to wipe out a regional unpleasantness and to devalue individuality through categorization. He dismisses any political resolutions as just the products of bad faith or useless good intentions, which could neither remedy nor comprehend the depth of Southern poverty.

In an earlier draft Agee remarks that even if these families do indeed “adequately represent white cotton tenants. . . . that is perhaps the least of the things that they represent to us,” since, he reasons, “the isolation of tenantry as a problem to be attacked and solved as if its own terms were the only ones, seems to us false and dangerous, productive, if of anything, chiefly of delusions, and further harm, and subtler captivity.”<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, he recognizes that his audience consists of people for whom “tenantry is becoming more and more stylish as a focus of ‘reform’” (208), with bestselling documentaries like *You Have Seen Their Faces* rolling off the presses in recent years. Infuriated that its authors strove “to avoid unnecessary individualization” of the Southern sharecroppers they pleaded for and often pictured sensationally,<sup>53</sup> Agee refuses to portray the tenants predominantly as representatives of a brutish or victimized class in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This refusal is based on his friendship with them and the undercurrent of vibrancy he discerns within their circumscribed lives. Amused by the Ricketts family’s naming of poultry, for instance, he regrets that this sidelight

would be merely tiresome to those whose intelligence is set entirely on Improving the Sharecropper, and who feel there’s no time to waste on petty detail. These same rapid marchers in the human vanguard will be equally uninterested in the fact that Mrs. Woods’ mother calls babies coons and baby chickens sings, or worse still will nod patronizing ‘howsweet’ approval or somehow manage to capitalize it politically or against landowners as the unvanquishable poetry of the oppressed, but I will put it on record all the same, and will venture to say that it is more valuable than they think it is, or, for that matter, than they are. (215)

Agee’s sardonic sally not only aligns him with the tenants through a tender affirmation of

their humorous idiosyncrasies but also concludes that such small expressions of humanity possess more fundamental worth than the liberal mania to better the sharecropper's lot, or (dropped in as an acerbic afterthought) than liberals themselves.

While his disdain persists for progressive-minded citizens who likely constitute most of his readership, over the course of the book Agee's tone generally becomes less brusque, even placatory. This variable tenor is closely tied to the text's ever-changing rhetorical strategies. His flip-flopping feelings of certainty and inadequacy sometimes coincide with asides to the reader. At the beginning of "A Country Letter" he relates his numinous transfixion via lamplight in the Gudger house where all others lie asleep late at night: "I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, ... I can tell you anything within realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you, and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it" (51). Here his surety comes across slyly, starting with a conditional, sliding to a universal, and winding up with a negatively phrased assertion. Soon thereafter, explaining his sudden shift ahead to an occurrence the next morning, he insists parenthetically, "(you mustn't be puzzled by this, I'm writing in a continuum)" (62). On a couple of occasions, when events or reveries along this continuum appear only tenuously connected, Agee begs us to excuse what may be judged needlessly self-indulgent digressions,<sup>54</sup> deliberating with himself, as usual, just "how can I dream to tell you" of their pertinence (389). Another propensity, similar to his dissemblance about doing "a little" writing, is to tell by not telling, that is, to take so long with his confession of limited understanding or his reluctance to report something that he tells it all (or something else) anyway.<sup>55</sup>

This conjectural mode, whether rude or conciliatory, not only emboldens Agee to say things he might otherwise, for lack of confidence, leave unsaid, but also develops a

complex relationship with the reader. In an unpublished portion of his chapter “Work,” he agonizes over the best language to send us on a vicarious guilt trip commensurate with his own for not having been born into a tenant farming family: “I wish I could write of a tenant’s work: in such a way as to break your back with it and your heart if I could ... in such a way that ‘innocent’ of them though you are, you might go insane with shame and with guilt” for not undergoing their “hard and hopeless work” and for not owning up that “every human advantage is a theft ... by which ... another is deprived.”<sup>56</sup> But Agee frets that words can never embody the countless gestures, let alone the pressures, of farmwork, all of which “should be transliterated into the bones of any one who reads” about it.<sup>57</sup> Its rhythms, if properly transcribed, “would compound such a driving symphony of gesture, pain, fury, and effort as has never been made ... and which ... might nearly kill a hearer with personal exhaustion, anger, guilt, and purpose.”<sup>58</sup>

As printed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, “Work” does not strain so hard to “nearly kill” its readers or to drive them insane. Toning down his address to these captive foils, Agee still aims to shame them for their comfortable complacency by impressing the cumulative effects on a tenant woman of the myriad recurring tasks she must carry out, in the barn and fields as well as the house:

... how conceivably in words is it to be given as it is in actuality, the accumulated weight of these actions upon her; and what this cumulation has made of her body; and what it has made of her mind and of her heart and of her being. And how is this to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers .... (321)

Agee halts his broodings and directs us to Evans’s portrait of Mrs. Gudger: “There is no way of taking the heart and the intelligence by the hair and of wresting it to its feet, and



of making it look this terrific thing in the eyes: which are such gentle eyes: you may meet them, with all the summoning of heart you have, in the photograph in this volume of the young woman with black hair” (321). Deemphasizing the wearisomeness in favor of the gentleness to be found in Annie Mae’s eyes, his textual summons to face both the gravity and the wonder of her existence is as heartbreaking as the induced experience of looking at her picture or at those of her kinfolks.

In this chapter, moreover, “which should be an image of the very essence of their lives” (319), Agee devises methods for conveying the stupefying quality of strenuous, reiterative manual labor, particularly as “undertaken without choice” by tenant farmers, so as to reveal such labor’s “complete awefulness” (320). A clever coinage, “awefulness” evokes the duality of awe, moving us to feel both marvel and dread at how awful, how physically overtaxing and psychologically debilitating, their work truly is. Describing how to pick cotton, he suggests readers try a repetitive hand exercise (touching all five fingertips into a point three hundred times in a row while palming loose cotton) in order to grasp the rheumatic destructiveness of such an onerous task. Acutely sensitive to the painful process of picking—exacerbated by the merciless heat, the need to hurry, and the ever heavier sack that must be dragged along seemingly endless rows of plants so low to the ground that even children are forced to stoop—Agee no longer bullies the reader but instead invents empathic ways to impart the arduous, monotonous round of chores done by the tenants,<sup>59</sup> for whom “neither skill nor endurance can make it any easier” (338).

Such attempts to involve us imaginatively in their way of life substantiate Agee’s avowal that his book is “a human effort which must require human co-operation” (111). Preparing us for that big part of his text modestly titled “Some Findings and Comments,” he requests that “if these seem lists and inventories merely, things dead unto themselves,

devoid of mutual magnetisms, and if they sink, lose impetus, meter, intension, then bear in mind at least my wish, and perceive in them and restore them what strength you can of yourself” (111). Lest he overload us with details, Agee leaves to us “much of the burden of realizing” the magnitude of what he only delineates haphazardly (110). His entreaties to our interpretive acumen, like his endeavors to activate our compassion, entail that we immerse ourselves as comprehensively and conscientiously in his subject as he has.<sup>60</sup> To crystallize this cooperative effort, Agee holds himself as accountable as he expects us to be. The book’s last lines recount how he and Evans lay on the Gudgers’ porch “thinking, analyzing, remembering, in the human and artist’s sense praying, chiefly over matters of the present and of that immediate past which was a part of the present; and each of these matters had in that time the extreme clearness, and edge, and honor, which I shall now try to give you; until at length we too fell asleep” (471). Shifting from one tense to another in a contemplative cascade of clauses, Agee reverentially encapsulates the past, present, and future of his experiences in Alabama. Resolved to recall them all with clarity and dignity, he pledges his best intentions and best perceptions in return for our diligent participation. From his early abuse to this tender farewell, he continually provokes engagement with his text. He concludes with the kind of generosity Attridge admires in readers. That Agee has already given us all he has to offer—and since this section was one of the first composed, his vow to “now try to give” us each matter actually retains chronological sense, even if it appears not to—is beside the point, or perhaps *is* the point, for this bond between writer and reader (eclipsing the animosity of writer versus reader) has been proposed through a daring performance and cemented by the gradual accretion of trust.

## Art vs. Life

Prayerfully wedding “the human and artist’s sense,” Agee’s final sentence allays, if not reconciles, the text’s central tension, expressed at its center: “I am in this piece of work illimitably more interested in life than in art” (242). So he proclaims, but he must exert profound restraint, often unavailing, in order to kick the habit of artistry. “Those works,” after all, he previously remarks, “which I most deeply respect have about them a firm quality of the superhuman, in part because they refuse to define and limit and crutch, or admit themselves as human” (11). Deficient in such disinterestedness, in spite of his artistic ambitions, Agee has no compunction about admitting his humanness. Indeed, he revels in it and shelters himself behind it, flaunting his moral faults and carnal fantasies while justifying his “only human” (11) effort to reproduce reality with “none of the close-kneed priggishness of science, and none of the formalism and straining and lily-gilding of art” (225). Believing that the power of superhuman creations is ruinously diminished by respectability, by “the emasculation of acceptance” (13), Agee admonishes readers of his text: “in God’s name don’t think of it as Art” (15). Artists, by his reckoning, should be motivated by furious antipathy toward officialdom and by compassionate identification with humanity. They should care as little about their works attaining canonical status as holy persons should about being canonized for their saintly deeds. But Agee laments, “Every fury on earth has been absorbed in time, as art, or as religion, or as authority in one form or another. The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor” (15). To preserve the purity of his fury—hence to rebuff the laurels of art—he would vanquish his imagination.

Explicating the “open terms” under which he feels impelled to write *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee sets paradoxically strict rules for his approach, distinguishing

it from fiction on these grounds:

In a novel, 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*, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact. As for me, I can tell you of him only what I saw, only so accurately as in my terms I know how: and this in turn has its chief stature not in any ability of mine but in the fact that I too exist, not as a work of fiction, but as a human being. Because of his immeasurable weight in actual existence, and because of mine, every word I tell of him has inevitably a kind of immediacy, a kind of meaning, not at all necessarily “superior” to that of imagination, but of a kind so different that a work of the imagination (however intensely it may draw on “life”) can at best only faintly imitate the least of it.’ (12)

This anti-artistic philosophy both deprecates and upholds the recorder of actuality. While appearing, by denial of authorial direction, to pull him off his pedestal, it reestablishes his eminence through the essential fact that no one can know about all this ponderousness of existence unless the witness reports it. In addition, nullifying the caveat that he has not constructed a hierarchy, Agee’s superlative phrasing (immeasurable weight, inevitable immediacy, true meaning) empowers the documentarian to a far greater extent than the imitative novelist. Depriving himself of imagination, he would set forth to record reality solely by means of his sensory afflatus.

Put into practice, however, this principle contradicts itself time after time. Lying on the porch in the dark, for example, Agee is “aware, not by sound, but by thinking of it, of the creek bending in the bushes” at the bottom of the hill (250). He and Evans have not explored much of this creek: “it lay only very lightly across our experience” (251). Agee nonetheless proceeds to ruminate on the creek’s meandering, its role in a local watershed, its organic connection to a larger river system, and its ultimate discharge into the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Mississippi. This cerebral feat is typical of his process of sinuously linking the provincial fabric of Alabama with the wider world (geographically, culturally,

politically) beyond it. “These things we knew in imagination,” he ascribes his musings on the creek to Evans as well, “and yet could be sure of” (251).

So sure is he, in fact, of his imagination, that Agee often envisages the tenants’ dreams or emotions, sometimes with the goal of getting them into alignment with his own. A thin wall partitioning him from the sleeping Gudgers does not prevent him from “seeing” them in their bedroom. “Not even straining, can I hear their breathing,” he says, yet with Whitmanian penetration Agee inhabits “each one of these seven bodies whose sleeping I can almost touch through this wall, and which in the darkness I so clearly see, with the whole touch and weight of my body” (57), “so that I lie down inside each one ... and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, ... so that I know almost the dreams they will not remember, ... as if they were music I were hearing, ... a music that cannot be communicated” (58). Agee’s imaginative entrance into the farmers’ dreamworld bridges much that is incommunicable between them. Projecting knowledge of the coy flirtatiousness and mutual attraction between Emma (Annie Mae’s unhappily married sister) and George, “a kind of man she is best used to,” as well as men like himself and Walker, who as interlopers from a higher social sphere (even with their lack of airs) possess “for her the mystery or glamour almost of mythological creatures,” Agee wishes that, before rejoining her reviled husband, “Emma could spend her last few days alive having a gigantic good time in bed” with all three of them (62). He must settle, though, for an awkwardly heartfelt verbal leavetaking, and then a crowded yet sensuous car ride with her, during which “we lay quietly and closely side to side, and intimately communicated also in our thoughts” (66).

Agee thus gives himself the formidable task of banishing his unruly imagination and restricting his record to pure observation, only to butt his head constantly against the

confinement. As overwhelming a temptation is embellishing his sensory perceptions with figurative language. Limning the land surrounding the Gudger home, he transforms it into a mass of metaphors: the fields are workrooms or flower petals; the farm is a water spider or a wrung breast. Coming upon three distressed clients of agricultural Rehabilitation, he cautions himself: "They were of a kind not safely to be described in an account claiming to be unimaginative and trustworthy, for they had too much and too outlandish beauty not to be legendary. Since, however, they existed quite irrelevant to myth, it will be necessary to tell a little of them" (33). Predictably overrunning his conceit to divulge just "a little," Agee disregards this reminder of these people's actuality and launches forthwith into an outlandishly mythic description. Two of them, a woman whose "features were baltic" and a man chiseled with "the scornfully ornate nostrils and lips of an aegean exquisite" (33), sit "as if sculptured ... or as if enthroned" in their chairs (34), watching him distrustfully "as if from beneath the brows of helmets, in the candor of young warriors" (33), keeping their eyes on him "while communicating thoroughly with each other by no outward sign of word or glance or turning, but by emanation" (34). The third, a physically undeveloped and mentally childlike man with "the thorny beard of a cartoon bolshevik," is likened to "a hopelessly deranged and weeping prophet, a D. H. Lawrence whom male nurses have just managed to subdue into a straitjacket" (34). When he tries talking to Agee, emitting "a thick roil of saliva that hung like semen in his beard," the woman reprimands him "as if he were a dog masturbating on a caller" (35). Extending his animalization, our parting glimpse of him is "on the dirt on his hands and knees coughing like a gorilla" (37).

What drives Agee to indulge in such figurative excesses? Subverting his pledge to faithfully depict unimagined existence, he lets artistic pretensions get the better of him on virtually every descriptive occasion. His outrageous portrayal of these three outraged, ill,

destitute persons sounds downright unethical. Yet he not only estheticizes them, carving their grotesque beauty into legendary figurations, but also pays heed to their adversities, sympathizing with their indebtedness to the government for inputs on their wilting crops. Furthermore, in spite of their unsavoriness, he strives ineffectually to befriend them. This episode, “At the Forks,” is sandwiched between two others, “Late Sunday Morning” and “Near a Church,” in which Agee likewise struggles to conquer the mistrust of strangers, primarily by trying to say more with his eyes than he can with his words. Unreciprocated, his earnest looks do not defuse these tense encounters. Crazily emotional and ultimately pathetic, Agee’s appeals for understanding embroil him “in a perversion of self-torture” (31), in a “horrid grinning of faked casualness” (42), making him appear (to them as well as to us) even more perverse than those he perversely describes. He has better luck with the Gudger, Woods, and Ricketts families, calming their initial fears of him and forming real relationships with them. While he does not refrain from estheticizing them, nor from comparing them to animals and imagining himself going to bed with their women, Agee strikes a finer balance through his sustained ethical regard for their complexities, for the poverty and richness, woe and wonder, hardships and hardihood of their lives.

Notwithstanding his irrepressible artfulness, in “(On the Porch: 2” he reiterates his wariness toward art and restates the rationale behind his preference for actuality. Divided into three interlinked installments, near the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of his text, “(On the Porch”—with its open parenthesis intimating its all-inclusive purpose and professedly unrevised state—is designed “as a frame and as an undertone and as the set stage and center of action, in relation to which all other parts of this volume are intended as flashbacks, foretastes, illuminations and contradictions” (245). Figuratively locating himself and Evans between their subjects and audience converts the Gudgers’ porch into

a proscenium for Agee's elaborately contradictory drama. Having already posted a roster of the performers, as an encore—foreshadowed by “the dialogue of those two creatures of darkness” (187)—he will trot out a pair of enigmatic foxes onto “a stage as enormous as the steadfast tilted deck of the earth,” whereupon, in the book's final metaphorical fancy, animating his third porch scene, it was as though “two masked creatures, unfortold and perfectly irrelevant to the action, had with catlike aplomb and noiselessness stepped and had sung, with sinister casualness, what at length turned out to have been the most significant, but most unfathomable, number in the show” (470). As changeful in meaning as the tones of his text, this theatrical call and response carries both “the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and the grief of incommunicability” (469). Symbolizing the mutually enhancing collaboration of writer and photographer, as well as their uncertain bond with the tenant farmers (signified by this sound's “participation in, yet aristocratic distinction from, that plebeian, unanimous ringing” (465) of a range of intermixed nocturnal noises), the conversation of these foxes—“if they were foxes” (469)—resonates far “beyond even the illusion of full apprehension,” amounting to “a work of great, private and unambitious art” (466), not unlike the authors' hopes for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

Before listening to this mysterious night music from his perch on the porch, while setting up this artistically contrived venue, Agee reformulates his argument against art:

... How many, not only of the salient and obvious but more particularly of the casual passages in our experience, carry a value, joy, strength, validity, beauty, wholeness, radiance, of which we must admit not only that they equal in their worthiness as a part of human experience, and of existence, the greatest works of art but, quite as seriously, that the best art quite as powerfully as the worst manages, in the very process of digesting them into art, to distort, falsify and even to obliterate them. (231-32)

Here his thinking is considerably more careful than in the earlier exhortations. First of all, he places actuality (not its reproduction but its immanence) on the same level with works



of art, emphasizing those moments of life that seem of the least significance, and then he excoriates the entire realm of art, good and bad, for destroying the integrity of experience through the merest act of creative distillation. Enraptured by his access to actuality on the porch, Agee asserts that each thing his “mind touched turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth” (225). By contrast, what he despises about art is “the killing insult of ‘suspension of disbelief,’ ... It is simply impossible for anyone, no matter how high he may place it, to do art the simple but total honor of accepting and believing it in the terms in which he accepts and honors breathing, lovemaking, the look of a newspaper, the street he walks through” (240). Agee wants us to forget that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a book because only then, perhaps, will we not do it the dishonor of suspending our disbelief before imbibing its contents. Posing the logical as well as practical impossibility that readers might absorb reality unmediated through his transparent reproduction of it, he presses on undeterred.

This attitude toward experience is both profoundly subjective and fundamentally cross-disciplinary. Vindicating his involvement in the text, he writes:

I would do just as badly to simplify or eliminate myself from this picture as to simplify or invent character, places or atmospheres. A chain of truths did actually weave itself and run through: it is their texture that I want to represent, not betray, nor pretty up into art. The one deeply exciting thing to me about Gudger is that he is actual, he is living, at this instant. He is not some artist's or journalist's or propagandist's invention: he is a human being: and to what degree I am able it is my business to reproduce him as the human being he is; not just to amalgamate him into some invented, literary imitation of a human being. (240)

Revering individuality as much as he reveres existence, Agee refuses to reduce Gudger to a representative sharecropper or an artificial figure, to a stereotyped character of regional or proletarian literature. Rather, in an endeavor “that depends as fully on who I am as on who he is,” Agee aims to be “as faithful as possible to Gudger as I know him, to Gudger

as, in his actual flesh and life (but there again always in my mind's and memory's eye) he is" (239). Not only an essential intermediary through the acts of remembering and telling, the author himself, since he stayed with the Gudgers for several weeks, is also integral to his subjects' representation despite his vain wish that nothing in the family's routine be altered because of his presence. The texture of their relationship, their human connection, matters more to him than any ulterior motives he might harbor as a reporter, a reformer, or a novelist. Hoping his "antagonism toward art" in favor of the "dignity of actuality" will catch on, Agee thus advocates an interdisciplinary way of seeing, acknowledging that "everything is most significant in proportion as it approaches in our perception, simultaneously, its own singular terms and its ramified kinship and probable hidden identification with everything else" (245). He therefore treasures both singularity and interdependence, striving to perceive and praise the distinctive attributes of particular lives, as well as their manifold but often veiled ties to the universe that surrounds them.

How, though, does he implement this way of reproducing living persons, and to what extent does he deviate from it by reverting to artistic preoccupations? In order "to get my own sort of truth out of the experience" that consumed him during the summer of 1936, in order, he quips, to "tell this as exactly and clearly as I can and get the damned thing done with" (243), Agee establishes four intersecting (somewhat redundant) planes for his prose. The first, consisting "of recall; of reception, of contemplation, *in medias res*" (243), contains the three sections of "(On the Porch)": conceived of as occasions to rest in the midst of his work, to reflect upon his ongoing experience within its spatial and temporal boundaries, to order his thoughts, to meditate on technique. The second plane is, meantime, "the straight narrative at the prow as from the first to last day it cut unknown water" (243). Belonging to this mold are the three vignettes of "July 1936," plus portions

of “A Country Letter,” “Shelter,” and “Inductions.” This plane keeps the action moving forward in contradistinction to the heftier introspection he reserves (though he is always self-reflexive) for others. The third plane involves “recall and memory from the present: which is a part of the experience: and this includes imagination, which in the other planes I swear myself against” (243). Because Agee did not directly observe every aspect of the tenants’ lives—for example, he remarks, “Of cotton farming I know almost nothing with my own eyes”—he sometimes relies on what others told him and decides to employ “my imagination a little, as carefully as I can” (328). Bringing in more recent circumstances as he reassembles certain events, Agee also realizes that he cannot just freeze his experience in the past but must embrace how it has been turning over in his mind ever since, leading to his fourth plane: “As I try to write it: problems of recording; which, too, are an organic part of the experience as a whole” (243). Besides “(On the Porch,” this mode is prevalent in the “Preface,” the “Preamble,” and “Colon,” along with many miscellaneous passages strewn throughout the text, in which he can be visionary and levelheaded, condescending and deferential, upbeat and defeatist, all at once. Ever conscious of his contradictoriness, Agee recognizes that his four planes of prose “are, obviously, in strong conflict. So is any piece of human experience. So, then, inevitably, is any even partially accurate attempt to give any experience as a whole” (243).

Nevertheless, some of his attempts to comprehend his “experience as a whole” do harmonize these four verbal levels, nowhere more seamlessly than in “Inductions,” which maintains equilibrium between action and reflection, observation and imagination, reality and reverie, past and present. This section narrates the climactic incidents of meeting and befriending the three families, of his euphoric yet disquieting “induction” into their lives. As he reconstructs Evans’s whirlwind photo shoot with them, however, Agee challenges

the concept of “climax” in its literary usage through a waggish aside on the opposition of art and life:

If I were going to use these lives of yours for ‘Art,’ if I were going to dab at them here, cut them short here, make some trifling improvement over here, in order to make you worthy of The Saturday Review of Literature; I would just now for instance be very careful of Anticlimax which, you must understand, is just not quite nice. It happens in life of course, over and over again, in fact there is no such thing as a lack of it, but Art, as all of you would understand if you had had my advantages, has nothing to do with Life, or no more to do with it than is thoroughly convenient at a given time, a sort of fair-weather friendship, or gentleman’s agreement, or practical idealism, well understood by both parties and by all readers. However, this is just one of several reasons why I don’t care for art, and I shan’t much bother, I’m afraid. There was an anticlimax. (366)

Addressed (as much of “Inductions” is) to the tenant farmers whose lives he later foresees himself defending (through his writing) against his own class, against those who share his educational advantages and artistic interests, Agee’s mordant attack on art is by extension an attack on any activity susceptible to elitism or fakery. Beyond his facetiousness, his decision to assimilate the anticlimax of the Gudger children arriving before the Ricketts kids are finished with their pictures is a defiant act of solidarity.

Yet for all his animadversions toward art, Agee, “being at least in part an ‘artist,’” frequently resorts to it, or to the use, anyhow, of “art devices” (242). Hence, as devoted as he is to revealing the authenticity of farm life, he is nevertheless an inveterate flaunter of artifice. In a paradigmatic swerve he declares, “There is no need to personify a river: it is much too literally alive in its own way,” only to let loose his linguistic floodgates via a rhapsodic personification of its mighty lifelikeness: “in what language it has written upon the genius forehead of the earth the name and destiny of water” (252). His own language, ordinarily dense with mellifluous diction, tortuous syntax, alliterative flourishes, oracular cadences, kaleidoscopic imagery, and unbridled synesthesia, is occasionally so obscure,

solemn, or liquid as to lose hold on the substances he seeks to embody: “the noises and natures of the dark had with the ceremonial gestures of music and of erosion lifted forth the thousand several forms of their entrancement, and had so resonantly taken over the world that this domestic, this human silence obtained, prevailed, only locally, shallowly, ... a star sustained, unraveling in one rivery sigh its irremediable vitality, on the alien size of space” (20). Mixing metaphors and fabricating symbols, Agee likens his most intense impressions to poetry or to music. His affinity with George and Annie Mae is analogous to a sonnet or to “soft, plain-featured, and noble music” (414); on her wedding day, as he visualizes after finding her old hat, “she was such a poem as no human being shall touch” (286); and “the partition wall of the Gudgers’ front bedroom *IS* importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem” (204). Enchanted by the knotty pine boards in their house, he avers, “the grain near these knots goes into convulsions or ecstasies such as Beethoven’s deafness compelled” (145). Having scrutinized every inch of this dwelling, Agee asserts, “there is here such an annihilating counterpoint as might be if you could within an instant hear and be every part, from end to end, of the most vastly spun of fugues” (184). For one who extols contrapuntal consciousness, who instructs us to jam our ears against a speaker blaring classical music at top decibel and delight in the bodily transport of becoming the performance, the silent house spins into a fugue, as a sunlit street roars into a symphony. Although these figurative reverberations betray an incorrigible knack for showering his artistry on whatever he witnesses, an imaginative willfulness contradicting his “effort to suspend or destroy imagination” (11), Agee’s habitual conversions of the mundane into the mystical are consistent with his ambition that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* might meld its assorted textual tunes into an organically musical structure.

### **Beauty vs. Utility**

Akin to the conflict between art and life is another between beauty and utility. Appalled at the functional insufficiencies all around him, Agee nonetheless compulsively estheticizes virtually every object he details, especially in his catalogues of housing and clothing. “Shelter,” for which he supplies an outline of subheadings scarcely hinting at everything he will enumerate, painstakingly probes the Gudger house while the family is away and their home has been “left open and defenseless to a reverent and cold-laboring spy” (134) who examines it with penitent yet maniacal meticulousness, heeding “the quietly triumphant vigilance of the extended senses before an intricate task of surgery, a deep stealthfulness, not for shame of the people, but in fear and in honor of the house itself” (137). Ethically he thus seems more mindful of this “holy house” (394) than its inhabitants, though he never loses sight of how they pursue their living within and around it. Agee proclaims: “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,” but then allows: “this beauty is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties of human existence in this uncured time” (134). This statement and qualification establish the critical tension between concealed charm and substandard shelter bedeviling his exploration of the Gudger house.

After exhaustively itemizing this home’s minutiae, as well as briefly accounting for those of the Ricketts and Woods families, Agee steps back to assess his discoveries:

It is my belief that such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary ‘beauty.’ In part because this is ordinarily neglected or even misrepresented in favor of their shortcomings as shelters; and in part because their esthetic success seems to me even more important than their functional failure; and finally out of the uncontrollable effort to be faithful to my personal predilections, I have neglected function in favor of esthetics. I will try after a little to rectify this (not by denial); but at present, a few more remarks on the ‘beauty’

itself, and on the moral problems involved in evaluating it. (202)

Mirroring the friction between success and failure generated by his intentions versus his performance, Agee submits three incentives for privileging form over function in his evaluation of these houses. First, their beauty has been overshadowed or disfigured by conspicuous utilitarian defects; second, to his mind the domain of esthetics trumps that of functionality; third, most revealingly, he cannot help but be loyal to his overmastering individual tastes. Without denying his tendentiousness, Agee thus plans to return to their drawbacks as habitations after hazarding further protestations of their beauty and gauging the morality of his penchant for estimating them esthetically.

Arguing that the houses, by means of their imperfect architectural symmetries and simplicity of construction, convey a “beautifully euphonious” classicism, he ponders,

... are things ‘beautiful’ which are not intended as such, but which are created in convergences of chance, need, innocence or ignorance, and for entirely irrelevant purposes? I can only answer flatly here: first, that intended beauty is far more a matter of chance and need than the power of intention, and that ‘chance’ beauty of ‘irrelevances’ is deeply formed by instincts and needs popularly held to be the property of ‘art’ alone: second, that matters of ‘chance’ and ‘nonintention’ can be and are ‘beautiful’ and are a whole universe to themselves. (203-204)

Glorifying unintended beauty, Agee riffs on the dichotomy between art and life. Artists, he thinks, do not so much will beauty into their creations as come upon it by accident or exigency. Nature, on the other hand, without any obligation to create beauty, does so instinctually. His theory is thoroughly Kantian, particularly in that Agee must use his mind to perceive “chance” radiations of beauty. Trying to collapse the binary, he later claims, “a contour map is at least as considerably an image of absolute ‘beauty’ as the counterpoints of Bach which it happens to resemble” (233). Only through his perceptions, though, does this resemblance exist, not to mention that the map, like a house, is made by humans rather than occurring naturally.

A moral quandary emerges from this implied consciousness. Notwithstanding his contention that the Gudgers' unassuming abode "is, not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence" (134), Agee is abashedly aware that the tenants do not look at their homes the way he does:

... To those who own and create it this 'beauty' is, however, irrelevant and undiscernible. It is best discernible to those who by economic advantages of training have only a shameful and thief's right to it: and it might be said that they have any 'rights' whatever only in proportion as they recognize the ugliness and disgrace implicit in their privilege of perception. The usual solution, non-perception, or apologetic perception, or contempt for those who perceive and value it, seems to me at least unwise. In fact it seems to me necessary to insist that the beauty of a house, inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself: but that one is qualified to insist on this only in proportion as one faces the brunt of his own 'sin' in so doing and the brunt of the meanings, against human beings, of the abomination itself. (203)

Ashamed of his privileged, well-trained, wordsmith's perceptiveness, which permits him to co-opt the houses for his own theoretical insights, Agee acknowledges that his esthetic airiness means nil to those dwelling under abominable economic conditions. Sculpted out of austerities enforced by impoverishment, the beauty he discerns should not be divorced from the outrage of human privation. Despite the disgrace he associates with his near criminal status as an adept plunderer of beauty, Agee's self-castigation dissipates in a footnote tied to the cryptic "sin," now redefined as "feeling in the least apologetic for perceiving the beauty of the houses" (203).

As if compensating, however, for being overly enthusiastic about this beauty, he hastily documents the dismal habitability of the tenants' houses and ethically tempers his earlier rhapsodies: "Since I have talked of 'esthetics' the least I can do is to add a note on it in their terms: they live in a steady shame and insult of discomforts, insecurities, and inferiorities, piecing them together into whatever semblance of comfortable living they



can, and the whole of it is a stark nakedness of makeshifts and the lack of means: yet they are also, of course, profoundly anesthetized” (210). The last clause indicates that this note is not really in their own terms so much as a projection of his consciousness upon them.

“As for the anesthesia,” he goes on, “it seems to me a little more unfortunate, if possible, to be unconscious of an ill than to be conscious of it; though the deepest and most honest and incontrovertible rationalization of the middle-class southerner is that they are ‘used’ to it” (210). The landlords who cheat them, alleges Agee, deflect accusations of injustice by suggesting that the tenants have consciously accustomed themselves to their situation. He disagrees, because they cannot fathom the beauty as well as the misery in their lives, their esthetic merits as well as their socioeconomic misfortunes.

Perturbed by his realization that the farmers do not apprehend the loveliness that he notices in them, Agee broods: “They live on land, and in houses, and under skies and seasons, which all happen to seem to me beautiful beyond almost anything else I know, and they themselves, and the clothes they wear, and their motions, and their speech, are beautiful in the same intense and final commonness and purity: but by what chance have I this ‘opinion’ or ‘perception’ or, I might say, ‘knowledge’?” (314). Sense of beauty, he surmises, is a privilege—even if normally corrupted—of class, education, opportunity. Whereas he speculates on beauty more than on utility, the tenants are perpetually caught up with survival. Thus Agee puts himself in their position: “Land is what you get food out of: houses are what you live in, not comfortably: the sky is your incalculable friend or enemy: all nature, all that is built upon it, all that is worn, all that is done and looked to, is in plain and powerful terms of need, hope, fear, chance, and function” (314). The farmers live so close to nature, their awe toward it mostly of a fearful variety, that he attributes no more (and maybe less) awareness of beauty to them than to beasts. With their crops at the

weather's mercy, "It is therefore not surprising that they are constant readers of the sky; that it holds not an ounce of 'beauty' to them (though I know of no more magnificent skies than those of Alabama)" (336). A passage dropped from the book but likewise playing upon this contrast between his and their attitudes toward nature does credit one tenant for detecting a measure of beauty in the sky: "The only esthetic remark I heard in the whole time was from Allie Mae [Annie Mae], who liked a given sunset. It was of the sort which has appeared over and over in the only 'art' she knows: calendar art."<sup>61</sup> Her esthetic sophistication hindered by unfamiliarity with what his class would call fine art, Mrs. Gudger, albeit having a sense of beauty slightly more developed than that which is by a rule so "limited and inarticulate in the white tenant class," still naively invokes and hankers after "the rotted prettinesses of 'luckier' classes" (314-15). As she rues tearfully in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in the sole comment by any of the tenants on their domiciles that Agee records: "Oh, I do *hate* this house *so bad!* Seems like they ain't nothing in the whole world I can do to make it pretty" (210).

Agee's esthetic fixations cause him either to want to trade places with the tenants or to keep them purely in their place for his private consideration. He hypothesizes "that there is a purity in this existence *in* and *as* 'beauty,' which can so scarcely be conscious of itself and its world as such, which is inevitably lost in consciousness" (315). But more serious than this loss of pure beauty to conscious refinement is these farmers' indubitable loss of "resourcefulness against deceit and against strangling," and their loss of "pleasure, and joy, and love: and a human being who is deprived of these and of this consciousness is deprived almost of existence itself" (315). In the excluded part of his "Work" chapter, positing that the hard work of all farming families "is intensified in proportion to poverty and the 'ignorance', 'simplicity', or 'primitiveness' of the family," Agee at first adjudges

it miraculous that so much “of gentleness and nobility” can “remain in those whose living is so skeletal of the capacity for thought and feeling.”<sup>62</sup> As usual, though, a footnote lets him dabble with second thoughts:

Not so very [much] a miracle; in a world where every advantage is starved and corrupted in the mortal sin of money wrung out of others, every excellence that accrues of it is more or less discolored; and a human being stands his chance of mere elementary purity only in proportion as he is sequestered of this syphilis: and how ever little he may become that was in him to, yet his hands are relatively clean of this particular blood and excrement: yet also: nearly as much horror, of a different order, is forced on him by its lack, as is forced on others by its having: and any beginning of morality, humble to be sure, must come of a use, not a starvation, of materials: but only of a use by which no other human being is in the least deprived. Meanwhile, “poverty” seems among the few possible personal approaches.<sup>63</sup>

In this exemplary nugget of Agee’s dialectical thinking, studded with the semicolons and colons by means of which he customarily weighs thesis against antithesis, his repugnance toward money as the root of all evil, staining even any redeeming accomplishments of an impure, diseased, grubby capitalist society, is mitigated by his proposition that in a more moral (vaguely communist) political economy, one ensuring that no person suffers from material deprivation, money might be used to foster instead of squelch human potential. Until such a new world order—under which it will no longer be morally horrible to have and physically horrible to have not—is instituted, Agee recommends voluntary poverty as the only honorable personal solution.<sup>64</sup>

While poverty may be an option for him, however, for the tenants it is inexorable. Moreover, the idea that the poor are more righteous or blessed (thus more beautiful) than the rich is not without ethical complications,<sup>65</sup> regardless of its biblical precedent, which he borrows by copying the Beatitudes after quoting samples of local middle-class gossip maligning the sharecroppers for their improvidence and immorality. In another notebook entry left out of the volume, Agee contemplates,

Certainly not all in “poverty” is bad. But its usefulness would be only to those who took it on by will and preference, in something like full understanding, or fully unqualified attraction towards it; as with chastity. And here, too, “understanding” is “inferior” to the intuitive attraction.

Yet you must count in such as Mrs. Tingle [Mrs. Ricketts] who has neither, and who has the total beauty, and virtuousness-irrelevant-to-will or wish, of a potato.<sup>66</sup>

Intuitively attracted to poverty, Agee again upholds the rectitude of those who take it on voluntarily, who strive to purify themselves by staying monetarily chaste. But he reminds himself that he must reckon with disadvantaged souls such as Sadie Ricketts, a victim of pellagra gone to the brain. As he points out in the excised part of “Work”: “The falling apart of her mind is hardly distinguishable from the falling apart, in living, of the whole family.”<sup>67</sup> In spite of her enfeebled consciousness, which prevents her from completely comprehending her household’s disintegration, she is extremely mortified by its penury, which is evident both in Evans’s portraits of her and in Agee’s account of her humiliation (for the sake of her children) during the picture-making. Mrs. Ricketts neither likes being poor nor grasps how poor she is. Yet she still cares unceasingly about their welfare, never her own. As such, according to him, she is virtuous beyond her conception of virtue and beautiful beyond mainstream definitions of beauty, which is why he compares her to a mindless, dependable vegetable. Agee not only pities but adulates Mrs. Ricketts, calling her, in the published text, “my dear, my love, my little crazy, terrified child” (364).

His cogitations on the costs and profits of consciousness<sup>68</sup> hinge on the collisions he choreographs between utility and beauty, affliction and fortitude, ethics and esthetics. While blasting the social injustice that results in constriction of consciousness among the tenants, Agee refuses to rein in the extravagance of his conceits. Like their houses, he estheticizes their clothes, though in both cases his figurativeness flows from ethicized observations of functional deficiencies. Indeed, one string of metaphors for the Gudger

home culminates in a linkage of his tallies of inadequate shelter and clothing, the former resembling the latter writ large, this holey house (for all its holiness to him) protecting its occupants from nature's harshness as poorly as a threadbare article of clothing protects a body: "a human shelter, a strangely lined nest, a creature of killed pine, stitched together with nails into about as rude a garment against the hostilities of heaven as a human family may wear" (137). This analogy presages numerous others Agee bestows on the farmers' garments, which again display his dual attentiveness to their serviceable and ornamental characteristics. Of the men cutting ventilation holes in their work shoes, he comments, "they differ a good deal between utility and art. You seldom see purely utilitarian slashes: even the bluntest of these are liable to be patterned a little more than use requires: on the other hand, some shoes have been worked on with a wonderful amount of patience and studiousness toward a kind of beauty ... that their durability was greatly reduced" (262-63).<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Bud Woods, as verified by photographs of him in a cotton-field, slices diamond shapes in his tattered felt hat, both ventilating it and endowing it with sportiness but thus rendering it flimsier. Agee approves of such sartorial alterations, no matter their instrumentality, so long as they augment the wearer's singular flair. Restlessly searching for esthetic inspiration even in the most utilitarian of objects, his mind dictates an ideal way of seeing for his eyes, which in turn discern beauty in the crudest of things.

As pictured by Evans and detailed by Agee (not always consistently), the tenants' clothing emblemizes a gap between urban modishness and rural improvisation. In spite of or perhaps because of their own citified lifestyles, the authors cherish the latter: to their gaze it connotes traditional authenticity rather than meretricious conformance. Although Agee maintains that "not one of the three men uses any form of the farmer's-straw which is popularly thought of as the routine hat" purchasable at crossroads stores, probably "in

reaction against a rural-identifying label too glibly applied to them” (271), Fred Ricketts does wear a straw hat in a view of him from behind hauling a wagonload of cotton to the gin, as well as in a few unpublished photos snapped outside the Hale County courthouse, including the lone image Evans made in which all three men appear together, Bud Woods and George Gudger attired in dark and light felt hats, respectively.<sup>70</sup> These are their dress hats, reserved for Sundays and for trips to town, since “an absolute minimum social and egoistic requirement of a man’s hat in this class and country is that it be ready-made and store bought” (272). Their working headgear, however, bears sharper disparities between country and city which fascinate Agee. In other unprinted photographs George sports “a handsome twenty-five-cent machinist’s cap”; such hats, like his equivalently priced belt instead of suspenders, a pullover sweater he covets, and the manufactured cigarettes that he does not prefer over self-rolled yet wishes he could afford, “are city symbols against a rural tradition ... drawing all possible elements of his square-chopped, goodlooking, and ineradicably rural face into city and machine suggestions” (271). Bud’s more ancient felt hat, albeit factory-made, has been both “worn ragged” in the field and personalized by his hole-cutting, making it symbolic of outdoor uses (271). Fred and his family, “of the most deeply rural class,” observes Agee, “all wear identical hats, which they casually exchange among themselves. They are made of cornshucks. ... plaited into a long ribbon; ... sewn against its own edges from center outward in concentric spirals” (272). These homemade head-coverings adorn a Ricketts boy and girl in facing plates of the reprinted *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Admiring this ingenious alternative to mass-produced commodities, he commends the Ricketts clan for their patent indifference to trends in apparel: “each hat is an extraordinary and beautiful object: but this is irrelevant to its social meanings, as are nearly all products of honesty, intelligence, and full innocence” (273).

For Agee, the readymade trappings of industrialism are signs not only of material ostentation but also of spiritual defilement. He therefore lauds homespun outfits, even if they look inferior at first glance. Fashioned out of a fertilizer sack, Bud's shirt impresses him for its rugged practicality and socioeconomic symbolism:

It is made in earnest imitation of store shirts but in part by heaviness of cloth and still more by lack of skill is enlarged in details such as the collar, and simplified, and improved, and is sewn with tough hand stitches, and is in fact a much more handsome shirt than might ever be bought: but socially and economically, it is of like but less significance with Ricketts' cornshuck hat. (274-75)

After acknowledging imitative intention and imperfect craftsmanship, Agee surprisingly contends that simplicity betokens improvement, that robust handiwork makes for a finer shirt than any stitched together by a sewing machine. Though not as glaring a departure from industrial conformity as shuck hats—gleaned straight from a field, never processed in a factory—sack shirts likewise signify both artisanal handsomeness and hardscrabble self-reliance.

Overalls, meantime, a garment on which Agee pours particular descriptive energy since they serve as “a blueprint” or “a map of a working man” (266), carry a multilayered esthetic appeal, occupying an ambiguous station between city and country, their cloth cut of urban design yet soon stamped with rural usage. While lovely when still new, having “begun with the massive yet delicate beauty of most things which are turned out most cheaply in great tribes by machines” (267), with “the functional pocketing of their bib” indicating human intelligence (266), “before the white seams of their structure have lost their brilliance” (265), they are even lovelier once “changed into images and marvels of nature” through the pressures of “age, use, weather” (267). Agee equates their straps to the harness of “a tired and hard-used animal” (266). Texture and color wrought anew “by sweat, sun, laundering,” their softly faded hues reminiscent to his artiness of “the blues of

Cézanne,” overalls shed their uniformity, their tint of machinery; sculptured and wrinkled by rigorous farmwork, every pair is naturalized and individualized, “each man’s garment wearing the shape and beauty of his induplicable body” (267). Shirts, too, are eventually so “patched and ruptured” that every farmer, beneath his singular suit of overalls, “wears in his work on the power of his shoulders a fabric as intricate and fragile, and as deeply in honor of the reigning sun, as the feather mantle of a Toltec prince” (268).

These men’s clothes are either made or mended by women, whose own homespun clothing also denotes their country origins and city yearnings, while also catching Agee’s fanciful eye for unconventional beauty. Like her husband Bud’s work shirt, Ivy Woods’s work dress is recycled from a fertilizer sack, the “faded yet bold trademarks” still visible through its palimpsest of grease and sweat and clay (277). Agee notes that since his visit “at least one company is making its sacks in calico patterns” (276), shrewdly capitalizing on the improvisational thrift of its customers. Sadie’s dress, made more prominent in her piteous portrait by Evans’s severe cropping of the frame, is molded out of cheap, coarse, unbleached cotton typically used for sheets or pillowcases. Bell-shaped and dirt-stiffened, fastened across the chest by safety pins, spreading unbelted below the knees, with slits for her head and arms and with her bare legs and feet protruding at the bottom so that “for all their beauty they seem comic sticks,” this dress is “the most primitive sewn and designed garment” Agee has ever seen (277). In his recollection of the Rickettses’ picture-taking, he apologetically addresses her from his problematic position as a meddlesome outsider, abashed because “you knew through these alien, town-dressed eyes that you stood as if out of a tent too short to cover your nakedness” (364). The same sheeting, patched with flour-sacks, wretchedly shrouds Sadie’s children. Her two oldest daughters, who are fast slipping past marriageable age, stand on the porch in their decrepit garb, hurriedly fixing



their hair and glancing anxiously at George, their nonchalantly virile neighbor, during the candid shooting Evans did with his Leica prior to the formal session. According to Agee, “Margaret has already the mannerisms and much of the psychic balance of a middle-aged woman of the middle class in the north,” whereas sister Paralee has not given up trying to attract suitors (284). Incongruous with her “deeply tanned, rural, strongly freckled face,” this late-teen’s gaudy jewelry and colorful getup, along with “the blend of confidence and terror” in her eyes, conspire to turn her into a hopelessly hopeful social-climber (284).

Annie Mae, shy of being seen in the sunbonnet Agee adores,<sup>71</sup> similarly entertains parvenu hopes for preteen Louise, whose pretty homemade costumes imitate readymade ones. Washed up and wearing her best dress, with a bowed sash at her back and a tawdry ribbon in her hair, she almost looks presentable enough for a party thrown by her peers in town. Her appearance, however, is merely a veneer. Shifting his address to Louise, Agee espies the “uncertain embarrassedness in which this whole sweet artifact set itself around the animal liveness of your country body,” since “your skin was a special quiet glowing gold color, which can never come upon the skin of nicely made little girls in towns and cities, but only to those who came straight out of the earth and are continually upon it in the shining of the sun, active and sweating, and toughening into work” (367). Despite her mother’s attempts to beautify her with “this precious imposture of a dress” (369), Louise will never be more beautiful to him than she is intrinsically as an industrious child of the earth and the sun (revealed in the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Evans’s photograph of her dutifully bending over in a cotton-field): an idealized farm girl whose mysteriously placid eyes (haloed by a readymade straw hat in her frontal portrait, which graces both editions) paralyze Agee into paroxysms of love.

### Success vs. Failure

Love, in fact, underlies an overriding tension—that between success and failure—in the text, expressed through two incompatible ambitions. Agee's love for the farmers, which he desperately wants them to return, makes him strive mightily to forge abiding relationships with them, to compensate for his many repulsed overtures before meeting the three families. Whether requited or not, his love for *these* tenants, as well as his love for language, propels him to write with feverish passion about their daily lives, to praise them through powerful prose. But his respect for their actuality causes him to despair of being able to render them successfully, to do justice to their complexity and singularity. Furthermore, his disrespect for the cultural institution that sent him to spy on them spurs Agee to sabotage his report, first as an article, then as a book. Even if his writing does not wholly fail them by his own standards, he does everything within his power to guarantee that the volume will not be a commercial (nor even a critical) success. In spite of several favorable reviews, its first edition did succeed in becoming a failure. Shortly remaindered after dreary sales, it flopped not only because of his intentionally unlikable performance as narrator but also because of its badly timed release in 1941, when most Americans were more worked up over the threat of war than the plight of Southern sharecroppers. Not until its republication in 1960, five years after the writer's death, did *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* procure a broader audience, thanks largely to a generation of ardent readers for whom social issues in the South (now through the Civil Rights Movement) had once again taken on urgency, and for whom love—of a more overtly political and less paradoxically literary sort than Agee's—for the underprivileged seemed like the most radical and reasonable path toward repairing society's failings.

Just as Attridge promotes responsible responsiveness, ethically and esthetically, to

distinctive literary undertakings as an extension of the responsibilities we should shoulder for unique human others, so too Agee advances an exacting sense of obligation—to be felt by us, he insists, no less than by him—toward his beloved subjects. Having saddled himself with this accountability, however, he often feels encumbered from writing about them at all, fearing that he may misrepresent their humanity. In like manner, considering his options and duties with regard to the possible onset of war, he confesses, “I am worst confused between ‘responsibilities’ as a ‘writer’ and as a ‘human being’; which I would presume are identical” (357). Whether or not differentiable, both kinds of responsibility are persistently invoked in his contentious text. The opening sentence of “Education” reminds us of “our terrific responsibility towards human life” (289), while the start of “Work” plumbs the writer’s frustrated effort to descend “devotedly into the depths of a subject, your respect for it increasing in every step and your whole heart weakening apart with shame upon yourself in your dealing with it: ... your unworthiness of it” (319). Not only does Agee deem himself unworthy of digging into his subject but he also, ensnaring his “exhausted conscience,” decrees that his excavations crumble, maintaining that failure “is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such work” (238).

Why should he so unequivocally enunciate his powerlessness, and thus preordain his enterprise to ruin? Why, by his own terms, should he have to fail in order to succeed? Throughout the book Agee seeks to clarify what he means by “such work.” Preceding his plunge into particularities, the aptly titled “Colon: Curtain Speech” calls for “a steep and most serious withdrawal: a new and more succinct beginning,” before his amplifications on the specific circumstances of these three tenant families (99). Temporarily subduing his love for them, which has already gushed out in “A Country Letter” and will again in “Inductions,” henceforth he “must screen off all mysteries of our comminglings,” so that

the middle portion of his text, while still emotionally charged, might “set in such regard as I can the sorry and brutal infuriate yet beautiful structures of the living which is upon each of you daily: and this in the cleanest terms I can learn to specify: must mediate, must attempt to record, your warm weird human lives each in relation to its world” (99). Agee figures himself as a mediator between the warmth of weirdness (living otherness) and the forces that impinge upon its vitality. This mediation, he adds, should not be embarked on “lightly, not easily by any means: nor by any hope ‘successfully’” (99). Why not? Why is he so obstinately opposed to success? His next sentence, formulated as an interrogation of himself in the third person (atypical for this first-person fiend), illuminates the crux of his predicament: “For one who sets himself to look at all earnestly, at all in purpose toward truth, into the living eyes of a human life: what is it he there beholds that so freezes and abashes his ambitious heart?” (99). His responsibilities as human and writer, witness and artist, reality-seer and truth-teller, ethicist and esthete, merge here into the same doomed purposefulness. Faced with the inviolability of an alien soul, he dares not transgress it in the vain or cocksure hope of disclosing its secrets or divulging its essential character. His ambition has been abashed. And yet Agee urges himself onward, with the foreknowledge of failure serving as both a comfort for his insecurities and a wound to his pride. Abashed though his ambition may be, he blunders toward the warmth of weirdness as the only way to unfreeze his heart, to unburden himself of his despairing love.

What *does* Agee behold in all those eyes he looks into so intently, so ambitiously? Livingness, sacredness, mortality, inscrutability—or at least the visible reflection of such abstract qualities—plus just about every plausible visceral emotion that might be felt by disadvantaged others under his disconcerting gaze, along with every one that he himself feels, since their eyes often mirror his own. The awkward ocular exchanges chronicled in

the three failed encounters of “July 1936” are parables on the ethics of looking, teaching Agee that all his earnestness in eyeing others does little to assuage their anxieties at being surveyed by this well-intentioned but unavoidably obtrusive stranger, not to mention his taciturn but unabashed sidekick with the camera, and that their ways of seeing him carry as many intricacies as his and Evans’s ways of seeing them. “The ‘spies’ find themselves continually watched,” comments Margaret Olin, who charts the authors’ ethical vexations and modernist maneuvers not only in beholding but also in being beheld, arguing of their verbal and visual testaments to these acts: “Both text and photographs are inscribed in an unresolvable conflict between the shared gaze, representative of a communal social ideal, and the isolated vision demanded by the aesthetics of autonomy.”<sup>72</sup>

“Late Sunday Morning,” the first “July 1936” episode, begins with the spies being spied on. “People in the street slowed as they passed and lingered their eyes upon us,” as Agee and Evans sit in a café with an unnamed landowner and a New Deal director called Harmon, who silently “watched us from behind the reflecting lenses of his glasses” (25). Albeit hospitably aiding the northern investigators in their search for sharecroppers, these southern gentlemen are just as suspicious as the loitering townspeople, especially when noting the photographic equipment in their car. After driving out to meet the landlord’s Negro tenants, Agee is sorely regretful to have interrupted a gathering of relatives at the foreman’s home, where “the eyes of the women were quietly and openly hostile,” while the male visitors, obsequiously observant of racial propriety, hover then retire “watching carefully to catch the landowner’s eyes, should they be glanced after” by this intimidating white man, whose cowed tenants sidle up with “their eyes shifting upon us sidelong and to the ground and to the distance” (27). His regret deepens when a trio of young men is held up from getting to church, having “been summoned to sing for Walker and for me,

to show us what nigger music is like” (28). Although he relishes and romanticizes their performance, Agee feels unintentionally incriminated in their cultural exploitation by the teasingly lewd landowner: nauseated by his own part in their coerced recital yet helpless to impart his simultaneous appreciation and disgust beyond what he can put into his gaze. “I looked them in the eyes with full and open respect,” he avers (29), finally giving them fifty cents while “trying at the same time, through my eyes, to communicate much more,” but they thank him woodenly and turn aside “not looking me in the eye” (31).

The next scene, “At the Forks,” finds him just as spied on while spying and leaves him just as stymied from communicating his muddled feelings. Stopping to ask directions from the three miserable white croppers whom he depicts as fabled grotesques in spite of their non-fictitious existence, Agee is instantly aware of them glowering at him. He feels himself “relaxed to cold weakness of ignobility” upon marking “in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger ... as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude” (33). This paradoxical blessedness, radiating forth maliciously, “as if I was almost certainly a spy sent to betray them,” sends him into a state of imperiled hypnosis: “None of them relieved me for an instant of their eyes; at the intersection of those three tones of force I was transfixed as between spearheads” (34). Impaled by their acrimony, Agee struggles to blunt these optical daggers and reassure them of his kindliness. When the older, handicapped man, who “glared at me with enraged and terrified eyes,” accosts him incomprehensibly (35), he twice tries “to give him whatever form of attention could most gratify him” (36), at last accepting a farm magazine, “looking and smiling into his earnest eyes,” after which “he stayed at my side like a child, watching me affectionately” (37). But the interview ends gauchely, and when Agee looks back to wave goodbye, both men look away from him while the woman “smiled, sternly beneath her virulent eyes, for

the first time” (37). Heartened by this glimmer of friendliness, he looks back again to see “her eyes watching us past her shoulder” before she averts them, “whether through seeing that I saw her I cannot be sure” (37).

As the third vignette, “Near a Church,” reinforces, Agee so excruciatingly tracks such unmet or indecipherable glances because he stakes so much emotional value on the elusive quest for identification between people of divergent social or racial backgrounds, hoping that they might communicate better through their countenances than through their speech. In this case, though, the recipient of his fervent gaze is initially not a person but a building. Auguring his bashful facing of the Gudger house (personified as blindly facing him back),<sup>73</sup> Agee is astonished by the “goodness” of a sun-struck church, which “strove in through the eyes its paralyzing classicism” (38). But while feasting his esthetic vision on its luminous features and waiting for Evans to photograph it, his conscience is roused by a strolling Negro couple, who circumspectly “made thorough observation of us, of the car, and of the tripod and camera. ... They made us, in spite of our knowledge of our own meanings, ashamed and insecure in our wish to break into and possess their church” (39). To ask their permission Agee walks slowly after the pair, enjoying his perusal of “aspects of them which are less easily seen ... when one’s own eyes and face and the eyes and face of another are mutually visible and appraising” (40). He is not really spying on them, for they “looked at me briefly and impersonally, like horses in a field, and faced front again” without noticeable concern (40). Picking up his pace, however, he inadvertently frightens the woman and befuddles the man, then aggravates their uneasiness by stammering out an exaggerated apology. Neither trusting nor understanding him, they look at him so shakily that he barely checks his impulse to prostrate himself before them and kiss their feet. His hyperbolic contrition comes across visually, as he “looked into their eyes and loved them,

and wished to God I was dead” (42). Repeating how sorry he is, “with my eyes and smile wretched and out of key with all I was able to say,” Agee cannot mollify them: “they only retreated still more profoundly behind their faces, their eyes watching mine as if awaiting any sudden move they must ward” (43). In an inversion of his deportment and that of the black singers in this cautionary triptych’s opening tableau, this time he walks off without glancing back, his self-loathing love for the couple pitifully unexpressed.

These failures haunt Agee and prefigure his more successful but no less agitated efforts at engaging in meaningful affairs of the eye and heart, at overcoming fear, doubt, or embarrassment via reciprocally respectful gazes between persons of disparate classes, so that they might share his optimistic faith in “that regard of love we bear one another ... in the meeting of the extremes of the race” (392). During the “First meetings” subsection of “Inductions,” addressing members of the three tenant families by turns collectively and individually, he emphasizes the all-importance of eye contact in establishing rapport with them. Nervously loquacious, Fred Ricketts is easy to pick up talk with outside the county courthouse, where he, Bud, and George, in this slack season of midsummer, have come to inquire (unsuccessfully, since they are still technically employed by their landlords) about relief work, and where they meet Evans and Agee, whom they mistake (not altogether, as the photographer is on the payroll of the Resettlement aka Farm Security Administration) for government agents authorized to help them. While Evans furtively snaps profile shots of unsuspecting Fred, Agee listens to him jabber on, “watching me with fear from behind the glittering of laughter in your eyes” (361), watching fearfully, as the writer later notes, “for my true intention” (388), which is, at this point, simply to pacify his fear so as to get as much information out of him as possible. With the townspeople once more eyeballing them, observes Agee, “you gained a little confidence in us when I met these eyes with a



comic-contemptuous stare and a sneering smile” (362): enough confidence that Fred and the two other men agree to his offer of a ride back to their farms.

During the ensuing assemblage of all three families to have their pictures taken at the Ricketts home, Agee manipulates his demeanor more benignly, striving to lessen their trepidation and win their trust. Amazed in hindsight at “how relatively lightly we realized you then,” distracted as he was by the perplexing swirl of interactions, by its “strangeness of meaning and precariousness of balance,” he swears not to forget the Ricketts siblings in their raggedy beauty, inseparable from “your dreadful and unanswerable need” (363). Subsequently, encountering them hesitantly while seeking the Gudger place, he brackets his instantaneous pity when, “sure I had come to see them,” they swarm his car “with the grinning look of dogs, their eyes looking straight, hard, and happy into mine. (Jesus, what could I ever do for you that would be enough.) For a second I was unable to say anything, and just looked back at them” (386). As with his emotive certitude in recollecting his first impressions of these needy, eager, guileless boys and girls—that “even then we knew you were wonderful” (363)—Agee’s unvoiced intimate parenthetical address of them tumbles out unbidden, as though their eyes, full of puppy love, have looked straight into his heart, freezing its ambitious, covert intentions. After getting over his temporary speechlessness, his ethical abashment, all he can do for them, albeit far from sufficient, is speak caringly and listen attentively to each one, recording (despite his avowed loathness to do so) their answers to his questions in dialect, while continuing to meet their seemingly untroubled but nonetheless troubling gazes.

Equally dumbfounded during the impromptu photo shoot, he mostly looks at their mother Sadie, whose “eyes were wild with fury and shame and fear” (364) at the sight of her unkempt children (she swiftly scrubs their faces but cannot change their clothes) lined

up for the camera “as before a firing squad ... like columns of an exquisite temple” (365). This pairing of horrorstruck and worshipful similes, corroborated in the second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by a photograph of them standing rigidly around her as “the tendons of your little neck” tighten distraughtly (364), connotes the indivisibility of their dignity from their misery. Agee focuses on Mrs. Ricketts because she is the key, he reckons, to thawing the frozenness between them all. As he regretfully remembers:

... all this while it was you I was particularly watching, Mrs. Ricketts ... continually, I was watching for your eyes, and whenever they turned upon me, trying through my own and through a friendly and tender smiling (which sickens me to disgust to think of) to store into your eyes ... some warmth, some reassurance, that might at least a little relax you, that might conceivably bring you to warmth, to any ease or hope of smiling; but your eyes upon me, time after time, held nothing but the same terror, the same feeling at very most, of ‘if you are our friend, lift this weight and piercing from us, from my children’ ... and at length, and just once, ... your eyes softened, lost all their immediate dread, but without smiling; but in a heart-broken and infinite yet timid reproachfulness ... (365)

As manifested by the agonized tone not just of this passage but throughout his memories of the picture-making, for all his facial affectations laboring to reassure Mrs. Ricketts of his kindly intentions, to “store” a modicum of warmth in her frigid eyes, Agee himself is the one who needs reassuring. He accentuates their role reversal by likening the timorous reproof in her fleetingly softened expression to the gentle petting of a small furry trapped animal that she alone can release from its anguish. This self-portrait as a helplessly caged creature dissolves when Agee’s cagey face crumples into “an ugly and puzzling grimace” which reveals his genuine feelings and brings her no comfort: “you looked a moment and withdrew your eyes, and gazed patiently into the ground, in nothing but sorrow” (366). In fact, having failed to soothe her with his eyes for more than a moment, as hers revert to a fearsomely fierce aspect, he is actually the more sorrowful one. By the conclusion of this incident, which “has become so complicated and so shameful” that “it is now hard for me

to meet her eyes at all” (368), he forecasts the unlikelihood of his ever seeing any of these tenants again. But then, on departing, his heart is splintered by “the unforgiving face, the eyes, of Mrs. Ricketts at her door,” prompting his premonition: “we shall have to return, even in the face of causing further pain, until that mutual wounding shall have been won and healed, until she shall fear us no further, yet not in forgetfulness but through ultimate trust, through love” (370).

That Agee does succeed—at least by his own account—in healing their reciprocal wound of humiliation, in earning the trust and love of these farmers, is apparent from his eventual intimacy with another of the three families. While his inauspicious introduction to the Ricketts flock whets his appetite for commonality with them, he comes to identify most hungrily and fruitfully with the Gudgers. After a few more visits with the tenants, Agee and Evans, sanctioned by Woods,<sup>74</sup> arrange to stay with his son-in-law George. The writer fast becomes such a fixture at the Gudgers’ that, after reverently ransacking their house while they are away one morning, he absorbs “a strong shock at my heart” (188), unable to look them in the eyes on their return. “In some bewilderment,” he says, “they yet love me, and I, how dearly, them; and trust me, despite hurt and mystery” (189). Not content just to love them, he egregiously assumes that they love him.

What grants Agee the conviction to make this impudent claim? His sureness about their continued goodwill, unsurprisingly, is traceable to a play of the eyes. Agee’s gradual induction into the Gudger fold is accelerated by brazen gazing, in particular with Louise. Their complex ways of seeing each other are foreshadowed in the midst of an event—her aunt Emma’s leaving—that occurs well into his visit but is narrated early on so as to feed a bit of suspense into the book’s otherwise lean plot, to establish their familiarity while concealing until later how he came to be an honorary member of the Gudger household.

Driving Emma to Cookstown, where he will again be disturbed by a multitude of “eyes, eyes on us, of men, from beneath hatbrims” (67), Agee is cognizant of the children all crammed in excitedly on the backseat and “looking out of the windows like dogs, except Louise, whose terrible gray eyes met mine whenever I glanced for them in the car mirror” (66). Although the reader cannot yet know why he finds this girl’s eyes to be “terrible,” nor even why he should be caught up in catching them, this half-sentence gains a tincture of loaded foreboding from “Inductions,” read several hundred pages on.

Agee’s and Louise’s joint watchfulness commences the first time they meet, when she arrives tardily to have her picture taken in the homemade imitation of an off-the-rack dress. Shifting his narration from past to present tense for greater immediacy (as he does with Emma’s poignant parting from her family), Agee recalls how he is less preoccupied with uncovering Louise’s truly rural nature than with unwittingly losing his soul to “these temperatureless, keen, serene and wise and pure gray eyes of yours,” barely aware that “we have begun this looking-at-each-other of which I am later to become so conscious I am liable to trembling when I am in the same room with you” (368). Paradoxically frank yet tentative, scary yet irresistible, their silent, steady, mutual appraisal seems to occlude everything else in their field of vision, as Agee notes, “I can rarely tell where your eyes are focused, save when they look at mine” (368). Yet it is while watching Louise hold herself tidily still for the camera, “looking so soberly and so straight into the plexus of the lens through those paralyzing eyes of yours,” that he suddenly realizes “I am probably going to be in love with you” (369), taking his original sentiment about her—“here is a damned thoroughly good child” (368)—to a new level of fondness, spawning a wave of platonically amorous intentions which can only be fulfilled through a visual performance so mesmerizing that it jeopardizes him with paralysis.

Agee gets the opportunity to perform again with Louise, to succumb further to her spellbinding gaze, when he rides out a storm with the Gudgers in their rear bedroom. Her parents at first do not meet his eyes. Annie Mae's, hidden in her bowed head, are from fear of lightning "so tightly shut they must ache," while George "watches mainly at nothing" in waiting for the next peal of thunder (398). By contrast, Louise, evidently unafraid, engages Agee in what lengthens into an unbearable staring contest, at once thrilling and panicking him. Wanting above all to implant his respect and to obtain hers, he does not risk a warm smile that she might misinterpret or fail to return. Rather, in musing that certain shades of love and friendliness "are communicable not only without 'smiling,' but without anything denominable as 'warmth' in the eyes," he charily lets "all these elements, in other words all that I felt about her, all I might be able to tell her in hours if words could tell it at all, collect in my eyes, and turned my head, and stood them into hers, and we sat there, with such a vibration increasing between us as drove me half unconscious" (400). Unlike his earlier attempt to smilingly transmit "warmth" from his eyes to Sadie's, here Agee aims to match Louise's blankness, so he might communicate with her on her own "temperatureless" level. This communication is not emotionally neutral, however, since he yearns to "tell" her—wordlessly, for he believes that the eyes can impart far more far faster than the tongue—of his feelings, of the degree to which he has fallen in love with her, both with her exemplariness as a country child and with her radiant specificity. Most of all, Agee loves the enigma in Louise's ten-year-old eyes. As he quivers into a state of semi-insensibility while "looking at her, and she at me, each 'coldly,' 'expressionlessly'" (401), her unflappable composure confronts him with a riddle of wisdom unaccountably wiser than her age.

Notwithstanding the erotic overtones of their protracted gazing, with Agee's love

and lesser sentiments welling up in his eyes until he “stood them into hers” with vibratory force, this act of premeditated beholding, of intercepted voyeurism, is not really prurient, as is, on occasion, his lascivious looking at eighteen-year-old Emma, whom he does find sexually desirable. For all his tremors around Louise—heart throbbing and eyes standing into hers—they remain chastely seated, their visual consummation not of the flesh. Agee stresses, in fact, how protectively he looks at her, and how chastened he is, after her brief glance slantwise, by her renewed concentration upon him:

... I continue to watch her; and after a little, not long at all, she raises her eyes again, and an almost imperceptibly softened face, shy, as if knowledgeable, but the eyes the same as before; and this time it is I who change, to warmth, so that it is as if I were telling her, good god, if I have caused you any harm in this, if I have started within you any harmful change, if I have so much as reached out to touch you in any way you should not be touched, forgive me if you can, despise me if you must, but in god’s name feel no need to feel fear of me; it is as if the look and I had never been, so far as any harm I would touch you with, so far as any way I would not stand shelter to you: and these eyes, receiving this, held neither forgiveness nor unforgiveness, nor heat nor coldness, nor any sign whether she understood me or no, but only this same blank, watchful, effortless excitation; and it was I who looked away. (401)

Echoing the evanescent relaxation of Sadie’s face, this all but undetectable moderation of Louise’s finally flusters Agee: her softening (albeit not of the eyes) warming him in spite of himself, so that he once more mutely pleads with her to grasp his innocuous intentions, not to worry that he might violate her sacrosanct personhood. As with his contraction into “a bodyless eye” scanning the Gudger house (187), Agee bizarrely disembodies his gaze, desiring that, insofar as Louise may have taken offense from him, he might expunge both it and himself, “as if the look and I had never been.” At last looking away, he does not so much lose their staring contest as honorably forfeit his ambitions even to get figuratively under her skin.

Although ending nobly in defeat, this endeavor to persevere unabashed in the face

of marginalized otherness engenders a substantial victory. His eyes opened to a budding union not just with Louise but with her whole family, Agee observes that, with the storm passing and its resultant tenseness uncoiling, “they and I look at each other more casually yet shyly, much more sharply aware than before of the strangeness of my presence here,” which, he intuitively, puzzles yet gladdens them, promising their cautious acceptance of him (403). While he repeatedly desponds, feeling “no warmth or traction or faith in words,” of being able to convey their intensifying cordiality to readers, having had to dredge up this memorable experience from his ever receding memory, to pore over it “coldly as through reversed field-glasses” (403), Agee nonetheless carries on in recounting how he kindles closeness with the Gudger parents: how, after bashfully turning down George’s unfussy invitation to stay the night, he half-deliberately bogs his car in the mud; how, humbly and diffidently creeping back to their house in the dark, he harbors “a vigilant and shameless hope” (411) that they will welcome him into their sanctum despite his bothering them past bedtime; how, when they do offer succor, George waking Annie Mae to cook him supper, Agee ashamedly delights in “the experiencing of warmth and of intimacy toward a man and his wife at the same time,” as the weary Gudgers “warmed to talking” with him in what stretches into “an almost scandalously late-night conversation” for them, all three bodies “leaned toward each other in the lamplight secretly examining the growth of friendliness in one another’s faces” (418); how he senses that, closer than friends, they are by rights “my brother and my sister,” or perchance, in an oddly worded profession of propinquity, “not other than my own parents” (415), a heartwarming vagary bolstered when his hand receives “the last warmth” of their sleeping children whose bed is yielded over to him (424); how all of these moments and impressions, while “beautiful in my remembrance,” are well-nigh impossible to re-create through language (419).

Melting his frozen heart and reigniting his abashed ambitions to behold the truth of human actuality by “looking thus into your eyes and seeing thus, . . . the grand stature and natural warmth of every other” (100), Agee’s sacramental meal—his symbolic first communion—with the Gudgers, is the emotional pinnacle of his quest to find common grounds with a tenant family. Smitten with their unaffected hospitality, the writer rejoices in his long-lost kinship with the rural poor, even while resigning himself to its specious ephemerality: “this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right” (415). The Gudger haven, then, stimulates Agee to exult that he has reconnected with the agrarian heritage of his paternal ancestors: a birthright denied him after the boyhood loss of his father delivered him into the more sophisticated, middle-class orbit of his maternal relatives. “And so in this quiet introit,” he rhapsodizes over his initiation into the farmers’ realm, “and in all the time we have stayed in this house, and in all we have sought, and in each detail of it, there is so keen, sad, and precious a nostalgia as I can scarcely otherwise know; a knowledge of brief truancy into the sources of my life, whereto I have no rightful access, having paid no price beyond love and sorrow” (415). While no idle whim, Agee’s nostalgic jubilation at accessing his roots is tinged with melancholic impermissibility. (In corresponding months later with the tenant families, he would note that their letters “still carried some of the old aroma. I never had nostalgia in the form of nausea before.”)<sup>75</sup> As his imagined relation with the Gudgers warms from amiable to fraternal to filial, he does not iron out but ironizes the social hurdles and experiential incongruities unveiled by their class difference.<sup>76</sup> Leery that “I had mistaken their interest and their friendliness, that it was only a desperate and nearly broken patience in a trap I had imposed in abuse of their goodness” (418), he wryly tilts “the scale of all it could take to even us up” (417), so that his homesick imposition on



their lives, his masochistic enjoyment of their plain food and verminous bedding, his fetishistic valuation of their belongings, his quixotic payment of love and sorrow, appear calculatedly paltry.

Nevertheless, Agee is at pains to make us believe that he does feel legitimately—even if sentimentally—at home with this family of tenants and that, moreover, they have adopted him (along with Evans) in good faith, neither fearing the intentions nor disliking the personalities of these intruders. To authenticate their congeniality, the writer engraves yet another heartrending optical interchange. In one of the latest transpiring albeit earliest reported confluences of gazes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee and Emma lock eyes on the Gudger porch, where she bids him adieu prior to their silently intimate drive in the packed car. Whereas his presumption of fellowship with George and Annie Mae is mostly tacit, since it “has nothing to do with our talk” but only with “our tones of voice” and “glances of the eyes” (417),<sup>77</sup> his mutual affection with Emma does depend crucially on what they say to each other. Dressed up to go away even though she would rather stay with her kinfolks than reunite with her husband, she steps before Agee and, “looking me steadily and sweetly in the eyes,” openly tells him, “I want you and Mr. Walker to know how much we all like you, because you make us feel easy with you; we don’t have to act any different from what it comes natural to act, and we don’t have to worry what you’re thinking about us, it’s just like you was our own people and had always lived here” (64). Far better to Agee than any positive review of his as yet unwritten manuscript, Emma’s hailing him as a kindred spirit provides all the proof he requires that his project has been a success after all.

Despite the naturalness of behavior she vouches for, however, he not only realizes how difficult it is for Emma to utter this attestation but also finds himself tongue-tied in

mustering a suitable reply. As she continues “looking straight into my eyes, and I straight into hers, longer than you’d think it would be possible to stand it,” Agee is unguardedly seized by “the strongest love you can feel: pity, and the wish to die for a person, because there isn’t anything you can do for them that is at all measurable to your love” (64-65). In fact, to preserve her dignity, he sadly points out that “the very most I could do was not to show all I cared for her and for what she was saying,” though he regrets, “now as then,” not acting upon his instinct to take her in his arms and “kiss and comfort and shelter her like a child” (65). Instead, he merely has the nerve “to keep looking into her eyes (doing her the honor at least of knowing that she did not want relief from this)” and to fight back his tears while telling her—and us, via a few reaffirming parentheticals—“that there was nothing in my whole life that I had cared so much to be told, and had been so grateful for (and I believe this is so); ... and that I certainly felt that they were my own people, ... and that if they felt that of me, ... then there wasn’t anything in the world I could be happier over, or be more glad to know (and this is so, too); and that I knew I could say all of the same of Walker (and this, too, I know I was true in saying)” (65).

Throughout the text Agee exhibits this proclivity to asseverate that he (and Evans) really did (and still do, “now as then”)<sup>78</sup> experience a farrago of raw feelings in response to the farmers. Due to the picture-taking, for instance, “we kept you from your dinners an hour at least; and I was very sorry and ashamed of that then, and am the same at all times since to think of it” (362). Sorriest of all over his failure to alleviate the shame in Sadie’s eyes with his own, Agee remarks in retrospect: “(It occurs to me now as I write that I was as helpless as she; but I must confess I don’t want to make anything of it)” (368). In spite of his seeming discreetness, this confession, of course, refocuses the reader’s attention on himself. Likewise, when Annie Mae appears spruced up for Saturday, he boomerangs his

inspection, noticing that “her eyes, in ambush even to herself, look for what I am thinking in such a way that I want to tell her how beautiful she is; and I would not be lying” (259). As committed to honesty as he is appreciative of beauty in witnessing to and speaking for the tenants, Agee can never be too sure of his ways of seeing them—or, for that matter, of their ways of seeing him, in addition to their ways of seeing themselves through his eyes and his ways of seeing himself through theirs—and so he forever revisits his perceptions, convictions, intuitions, and infatuations, not just reminding, reiterating, and recapitulating but magnifying, modulating, even blatantly contradicting previous comments through his revisions, parentheses, or footnotes.<sup>79</sup> These textual reconsiderations ensure not only that esthetic romanticizing be done in tandem with ethical agonizing but also that the book be encoded with a fragmentary timetable of its composition, so that Agee’s intentions might be held to account against his performance, so that his ecstatic experiences as participant observer and transient Gudger might be revived by his gradually evolving, productively quarrelsome perspectives as rememberer, chronicler, evaluator, imaginer, creator.

While Agee’s ambitions are first abashed on looking into the eyes of living others with the purpose of ascertaining cardinal truths about “human divinity” and “unimagined existence,” the process of turning what he beholds into words, of telling about his usually paradoxical impressions, of unfreezing his heart by recapturing the warmth of weirdness—the process, that is, of writing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—abashes his ambitions all over again. As he marshals his four planes of prose, hoping to orchestrate them into a holistic musical ensemble, Agee conjectures that “the ‘truest’ thing” he can record about everything that happened to him in the summer of 1936 is not its precise “chronological progression,” unearthed by his memory and methodically pieced together as though still part of the present, “but is rather as it turns up in recall, in no such order, casting its lights

and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience” (244). Unlike the truths that Evans can tell through photographs, which, owing to his medium’s inbuilt constraints as well as to his scheme for the volume, are delimited spatially and temporally, Agee’s pursuit of truthfulness necessitates a wider lens on experience and an oxymoronic chaotic organization of material, as his raging, scattershot consciousness ranges across an “expanse” of memories, sensations, caprices, beliefs, imaginings. However, conceding that he has not yet attempted “proper treatment” of this knowingly “messy” approach to reality (244), he apparently (but unapologetically) recognizes that his mind may be too turbulent to channel through language, that the effort to make his thoughts cohere in print may be as predestined to failure as his efforts to look “truth” in the eyes and to communicate love without words.

By his own lights, then, Agee fails twice over, yet in each case with compensatory effects upon his responsibilities as human and writer. Failing in person—notwithstanding many encouraging signals—to earn the “ultimate trust” (love) of three tenant families, he thus feels motivated to portray them as truthfully and lovingly as his lexicon permits him to; failing on paper to meet his stringent demands for verbal representation, he falls back on the very notion of failure as his only guarantee of success. In “Shady Grove,” near the close of the text, his graveyard ponderings are crowned with an anticipatory elegy for the farmers that also incises an epitaph for his doubly abashed ambitions, as Agee calls out in sorrow to “you, my beloved, whose poor lives I have already so betrayed, and should you see these things so astounded, so destroyed, I dread to dare that I shall ever look into your dear eyes again” (439). Envisioning their probable bamboozlement by his well-meaning but unsatisfactory depictions of them, he once more scolds himself for being a bungling, traitorous informer on their actual existence.<sup>80</sup> Although immortalizing them in the world

of books, etching them into a singular artwork that mulishly evades yet flauntingly craves the glory of art, his daringly esthetic appropriation of their lives short-circuits his tenuous relationships with them. After writing this epitaph he never would look directly into their eyes again. Agee's guilt-ridden lamentation resonates, too, in the conscience of that other "you" he often addresses: we who read his words and view Evans's photographs, daring at secondhand to look these people in the eyes, at the risk of becoming complicit in their ethical betrayal. For even as it abashes its artistic ambitions, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* assails our critical sensibilities, so that perhaps the most responsible response to it—at least upon first contact—is that of a mere human being.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, ed. James H. Flye (1962; New York: Ballantine, 1971), 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. After two summer months in the South, Agee wrote to Father Flye: “The trip was very hard, and certainly one of the best things I’ve ever had happen to me. Writing what we found is a different matter. Impossible in any form and length *Fortune* can use; and I am now so stultified trying to do that, that I’m afraid I’ve lost ability to make it right in my own way” (96).

<sup>3</sup> Literary ambitions are expressed throughout the *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*. “One trouble with my failure to write more is, I’ve been too ambitious” (41), he wrote in 1929; the next year: “I’d do anything on earth to become a really great writer” (47). In his discarded preface to *Permit Me Voyage* (1934), printed in *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), Agee predicts that he “might just conceivably become a great poet” but worries that he is susceptible to “mediocrity or washout” (189). An exercise in automatic writing, also published in *James Agee Rediscovered*, includes his admission: “Pretension, sanctimony, ambition, are some of my faults” (199).

<sup>4</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 16. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter. Drafted in January 1938, before much of his manuscript was written, this passage marked, for Agee, “a new start on the Alabama book” (*James Agee Rediscovered*, 91), thus establishing its crucial tension between intentions and performance.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself: A Critical Study* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 49. Spiegel claims that while “we misconstrue his work greatly if we mistake Agee’s original aspiration for his achievement, . . . we make a more important error if we imagine that Agee himself also mistook what he aspired to do for what he actually did” (48).

<sup>6</sup> An anticipatory send-up, that is, since the New Critical attack on this mode of literary interpretation, codified by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in their essay “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), was not formulated until five years after *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>16</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Jackson, "The Deceptive Anarchy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Antioch Review* 57.1 (Winter 1999), 41-42.

<sup>25</sup> While this uncaptioned format is consonant with, and indeed more severe than, Evans's sparingly titled plates in *The Crime of Cuba* (1933) and *American Photographs* (1938), as well as in later books like *Many Are Called* (1966) and *Walker Evans* (1971), in printing his pictures entirely devoid of words for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he and Agee were also pointedly reacting to contemporary documentaries such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937; New York: Arno Press, 1975) by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White. Of their decision to match photographs with fabricated quotations, this pair of documentarians remark: "The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons" (4). Perhaps in response to that tactic, another photo-textual duo, Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor, state in their foreword to *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939): "Quotations which accompany photographs report what the persons photographed said, not what we think might be their unspoken thoughts" (6). As in both of these books, the captions in Herman Clarence Nixon's *Forty Acres and Steel Mules* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), which features many pictures from the Farm Security Administration files, do far more than identify place names, as the words cast an interpretive slant on the images. Nixon's captions to two photographs

by Lange, for instance, appropriate smiling faces to put a positive spin on conditions in the countryside. “It is false to assume that share croppers and share tenants are humanly hopeless,” he writes beneath a portrait of a white family in a wagon, while a snapshot of black boys in a swimming hole elicits his assurance: “There are health-giving elements in Southern rural life which even ignorance and poverty cannot nullify” (n.p.).

<sup>26</sup> While for the sake of consistency I will refer to Agee’s fictitious names for persons and places, Evans submitted their real names on his negative sleeves for the photographic file of the Farm Security Administration: Gudger is actually Burroughs; Woods is actually Fields; Ricketts is actually Tingle. The three families were closely related, in that Bud Woods was both the half-brother of Sadie Ricketts and the father of Annie Mae Gudger.

<sup>27</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Ethics of Form in the Photographic Essay,” *Afterimage* 16 (January 1989), 10.

<sup>28</sup> Although this expansion of the photographic section for the reissue of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was doubtless commercially determined by Houghton Mifflin’s willingness to invest more in the new edition in the wake of Agee’s posthumous fame, Evans was probably also keen to fortify his reputation by presenting more of his famous images from the 1930s. As John T. Hill points out in “The Exhibition, the Book, and the Printed Page,” in *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), asked late in life if another edition would call for further changes, “Evans suggested again doubling the number of pictures, indicating perhaps a revaluing of his work and ego relative to the whole” (34). For more on differences between the 1941 and 1960 versions, see, in Hill’s volume, Alan Trachtenberg, “Contrapuntal Design: The Sequences of Photographs for the First and Second Editions of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 222-33; plus John Rogers Puckett, *Five Photo-Textual Documentaries from the Great Depression* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), 111-35; and especially William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 267-89.

<sup>29</sup> Rather, evoking how Agee looked, talked, dressed, and worked in 1936, Evans paints the physical, emotional, and moral traits of this ragingly restless, imaginatively energetic, naturally performative writer, who, “possessed with the business” of investigating tenant farming, determined to “live inside the subject” in Alabama, “driven to see all he could of the families’ day,” won their trust, “perhaps too much” in fact, through a combination of diffidence, courtesy, and respect, “even though some of the individuals were hardbitten, sore, and shrewd” (xi). Of these “days with the families,” says Evans, “Their real content and meaning has all been shown” (xii), a statement that may momentarily make us think he is at least partly alluding to his photos, since they are all we have been shown thus far. But Evans actually has Agee’s writing in mind, dubbing it “the reflection of one resolute, private rebellion” that “was unquenchable, self-damaging, deeply principled, infinitely costly, and ultimately priceless” (xii). Punctuated by adjectives that alternately appraise the artistic worth and personal harm of his partner’s rebellion—against what?, we might reasonably ask at this point, for we have yet to learn of their defiance against those who sent them to spy on sharecroppers—Evans thus bestows a half-cautionary, yet in the end laudatory, encomium upon Agee.



<sup>30</sup> After an elaborate “design” for what follows, Book Two opens with several stanzas in which Agee calls Evans his comrade and again refers to them as spies. “Against time and the damages of the brain / Sharpen and calibrate,” summons Agee. “Not yet in full, / Yet in some arbitrated part / Order the façade of the listless summer” (5). His diction invokes their “immediate instruments” of photography and language, as well as their “governing instrument” of “individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness” (xiv). Both kinds of instrumentation must be sharpened and calibrated in order for them to preserve and create the singularity of their summer down south. Unless Evans calibrates his camera and Agee sharpens his words, the “real content and meaning” of their association with the farmers might be lost to the passing of time and the dimming of consciousness. Yet even with the soundest recording devices and sharpest mental faculties, Agee concedes, they will not be able to capture the fullness of their experience. Paradoxically “governed” or “arbitrated” by their insubordinate individuality, they can only provide a partial account.

<sup>31</sup> *James Agee Resdiscovered*, 46. Intriguingly, in this draft of an apparently unsent letter to Father Flye, which mentions Evans’s recent work “photographing flood camps” near Memphis in February 1937 and explains, “It was he I was south with last summer,” Agee remarks that Evans—besides his superb photography—“would have been & may become a first rate writer. Does no writing though.” As Evans’s foreword indicates, he was in fact capable of adroit writing, even if he seldom practiced this skill.

<sup>32</sup> See, among others, Carol Shloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); James Curtis, *Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Peter Cosgrove, “Snapshots of the Absolute: Mediamachia in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *American Literature* 67.2 (June 1995): 329-57; Janet Galligani Casey, “Focus Left: Modernist Angst and the Proletarian Camera,” in Paul Hansom, ed., *Literary Modernism and Photography* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 31-51; and William Stott, “Agee and Evans: ‘On the Porch: 4’,” in Caroline Blinder, ed., *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 165-73.

<sup>33</sup> See pp. 377-78 of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>34</sup> Before *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was published Lincoln Kirstein observed, in his afterword to Walker Evans, *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), that Evans possesses “a poet’s eye,” which “finds corroboration in the poet’s voice” of Agee (191). Presaging the opening line of Agee’s poem to Evans, Kirstein also likened the photographer at work to “a kind of disembodied burrowing eye, a conspirator against time and its hammers” (193).

<sup>35</sup> Occasional discordances between Agee’s tallies and Evans’s shots of the same subjects suggest that the writer, for all his exhaustiveness, sometimes missed a detail, and that the photographer, for all his scrupulousness, sometimes moved an object. Take their interiors of the Gudger house. Even allowing that these are not entirely static scenes, since family members may have added or removed certain items in between the times Agee and Evans recorded them, text and pictures do not fully corroborate one another. For instance, Agee

does not mention the ceramic churn resting on the counter of the cupboard in the kitchen, nor the white cloth hanging from a line in the opposite corner, nor a slender vase and an unidentifiable bundle on the table before the fireplace in the front bedroom, nor a small clock on the mantel above the fireplace in the rear bedroom. On the other hand, he does log many more things, such as the contents of drawers, than can be shown by the camera. As for the arrangement of furniture, conflicting with Agee's observation that beds are set parallel along the side walls, Evans pulls one out at an angle into the middle of the room so that it will fit better into his composition, making its fly-specked sheet more visible in his photograph. For the second edition he adds two exterior plates of this house, perhaps in recognition of its textual significance.

<sup>36</sup> James Agee, "Plans for Work: October 1937," *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 134.

<sup>37</sup> In "Late Sunday Morning" Agee records the feigned obligingness of a landowner who takes the authors to meet his guarded Negro tenants: "Walker said it would be all right to make pictures, wouldn't it, and he said, Sure, of course, take all the snaps you're a mind to; that is, if you can keep the niggers from running off when they see a camera" (25). In contrast to their understandably wary reactions to Evans's equipment, Fred Ricketts does not realize, when Agee first encounters him, that "Walker under the smoke screen of our talking made a dozen pictures of you using the angle finder" (362); and in a family lineup on his porch, this insecurely garrulous white man laughs "about being in the funny papers and about breaking the camera with his face" (365). To him the camera is a joke, whereas for the blacks it is a potential tool of surveillance. Getting ready for their photos, the rest of the Rickettses are also unaware of Evans taking candids of them with his Leica while they "thought he was still testing around" (364). Although George Gudger is included in some of these unposed snapshots, which are published in *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938*, introduction by Jerald C. Maddox (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), he is more cautious and deliberate about the backgrounds and arrangements for his official family portraits.

<sup>38</sup> See p. 369 of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* for Agee's account of an unpublished (and perhaps never developed?) Gudger family snapshot, which cannot be the same one that Evans printed for his 1971 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and that Stott then celebrated in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 284-87. The former, taken outside the Ricketts house, must have portrayed only George and his three oldest children, Junior, Louise, and Burt, whereas the latter, arranged beside the Gudger home, includes George's wife Annie Mae, her toddler Squinchy, and her sister Emma. Agee's descriptions of the Ricketts family portraits (see pp. 362-66) seem to be a composite of Evans's candid and posed shots. While Fred does not appear in the group picture showing his wife and children, reproduced for the second edition, he leads a hymn sing in another photo used but not described in the first edition.

<sup>39</sup> As mentioned above in note 35, compare Evans's photographs with Agee's inventories of the Gudger kitchen (pp. 177-82) and of the objects surrounding that house's front (pp. 162-69) and rear (pp. 171-73) fireplaces. See also, in the second edition, images of two fireplaces at the Ricketts home and Agee's corresponding depictions of them (pp. 197-

201). As he notes of his long catalogue of ornamented calendars, farm magazine covers, and other decorative papers tacked above one fireplace: "These are in part by memory, in part composited out of other memory [whose? Evans's?], in part improvised, but do not exceed what was there in abundance, variety, or kind. They are much better recorded in photographs for which there is no room in this volume" (201). Agee does not point out the presence above the mantel of a battered snapshot of a female ancestor, which Evans later shifted to a different wall beside another Ricketts family picture in order to make a visual allusion to his own medium, represented by two amateur samples.

<sup>40</sup> For instance, Agee cuts short his paragraph on the Woods kitchen by informing us that there are "on the walls, what you may see in one of the photographs" (192): a plate Evans mistakenly moved to the Ricketts section for the book's reissue. Although Agee's remark that Fred Ricketts, "in his photograph here," wears nearly new overalls (269), cannot be verified by his close-up portrait in the first edition, it does square with the three-quarter-length picture of him which Evans substituted for the second edition. Agee's deference to the photograph of Mrs. Gudger, discussed below, clearly appeals to our emotions (321).

<sup>41</sup> See pp. 164 and 200 for Agee's expurgation of the names of shoe and furniture stores.

<sup>42</sup> As small indications of Agee's passionate, competitive interest in the camera, note his use, even when not recalling photo shoots or referring to specific pictures, of what might be called photographic vocabulary, that is, of terms common to the medium. Thus Louise Gudger, as she looks at and listens to and learns from the grownup talk of her mother and aunt, is alluded to as "the child, the photographic plate, receiving" (72). Left alone in the sun, the Gudger house "is drawn into one lens" for Agee's observation (136). His verbal snapshots of Squinchy Gudger and Ellen Woods are not composed of words, he claims; "they are only descriptions of two images" (441). Seeking to transcribe the rich music of his strengthening kinship with the Gudgers as they shelter together during a storm, Agee fancifully mixes his desired media, noting that "the personality of a room, and of a group of creatures, has undergone change, as if of two different techniques or mediums; what began as 'rembrandt,' deeplighted in gold, in each integer colossally heavily planted, has become a photograph, a record in clean, staring, colorless light, almost without shadow" (404). In the Shady Grove graveyard Agee is fascinated by tombstones photographs of the deceased: "the last or the best likeness that had been made, in a small-town studio, or at home with a snapshot camera" (436). While Evans's *American Photographs* is listed among suggested items in one of Agee's appendices, the writer also reprints a glamorous profile of Bourke-White which makes that photographer's attitudes toward her work and her subjects inane and callous. Momentarily misleading, the title of this profile and thus of this appendix is "A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS"—meaning those not in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* but in *You Have Seen Their Faces* (450).

<sup>43</sup> In addition to the examples given below, see pp. 149, 245, and 251, as Agee strives to speed up the communication of details observed by his voracious eye or imagined by his far-reaching mind.

<sup>44</sup> Ironically, immersed in his researches, Agee reports that "from time to time I buy a ten cent automatic pencil, and use it little before I lose all track of it," just as he loses track of

time when his dollar watch stops (51). During the storm scene at the Gudger house, Agee supplies an understated motto for his method as witness, remarking—once his eyes adjust to the darkness of the shuttered room—“I begin to see around me a little” (396).

<sup>45</sup> For another such avowal, see Agee’s introduction (written in October 1940) to Evans’s subway photographs, taken with a hidden camera and later published as *Many Are Called* (1966; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). Although the essay is in fact brief, and never mentions Evans, as if to protect—since his activity was illegal—the photographer’s anonymity, Agee’s opening paragraph underscores the tensions between image and word, writer and reader, “a little” and a lot, which enliven their contemporaneous collaboration on the Alabama book: “These photographs were made in the subway of New York City, during the late thirties and early forties of the twentieth century. The effort, always, has been to keep those who were being photographed as unaware of the camera as possible. To anyone who understands what a photograph can contain, not even that information is necessary, and any further words can only vitiate the record itself. Because so few people do understand what a photograph can contain, and because, of these, many might learn, a little more will, reluctantly, be risked” (15). With typically deceptive reticence, Agee thus casts himself in the role of visual teacher, who must impart “a little” of his insight to the ignorant viewer, despite an attendant risk that the photographs will be debased by his use of words. In earlier drafts of this introduction, published in *James Agee Rediscovered*, the tensions are perhaps even more pronounced. “Photographs worthy of their existence need no words, and do better without them,” notes Agee, “so in writing of these, I am bound to feel apologetic” (301). Deeming it “barely conceivable that words and photographs might be so collaborated as to enrich and illuminate each other,” he goes back and forth: “I am writing of nothing here that is not self-evident in the photographs; I can say nothing that will add to them, nothing, indeed, that will not reduce them. ... Nevertheless I try, for this good reason: people are much less used to photographs than to words. ... There should be no words here at all; and if they manage to justify their existence they can do so only by becoming so transparent that they cease to exist; that only the photographs remain” (302).

<sup>46</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 152. Another excluded ending to this sentence claims that their manuscript was “withdrawn, in the interests of personal integrity as opposed to the comfort of the general reader” (360). For more on the rejection of *Three Tenant Families* by Harper & Brothers in 1939, see Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: Dutton, 1984), 233-36.

<sup>47</sup> In earlier drafts of the “Preface,” published in *James Agee Rediscovered*, he posits that “this nominal subject, and the reader’s conception of its proper handling, is our leverage” (144), since, he avers, “This volume was made in defiance of its nominal subject” (151).

<sup>48</sup> The practice of quoting without acknowledging sources continues throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, including the “Title Statement” and other verses taken from the Bible, as though Agee expects not just literacy but also a measure of literariness in his readers, or as though the quoted material, already in the public domain, has achieved such universality as to render citations superfluous. In 1940 he drafted a plan, printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, for a series of publications to be edited by himself and Evans. Quite a few of these proposals have some bearing on their Alabama project. Among them are “A

book of found-objects,” “A book on bad and good photography,” “A handbook of ethics: questions and answers,” “Traveling in America: text and photographs. 60 days traveling: as exactly as possible recorded and analyzed,” “Uncredited quotations (Blake, Whitman, New Testament, Thoreau, &c, mixed with newly invented ones.)” (159). Agee more than compensates for not giving due credit to those he quotes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by extolling their names elsewhere in the text. William Blake and Jesus Christ, for instance, are both listed among the book’s “unpaid agitators” and mentioned several more times. In *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, defending his deployment of words which the priest considered obscene, the writer states, “I feel just as chary and as self-suspicious of my over-frequent use in writing of the name of God or of William Blake” (123-24). As for borrowing from contemporary sources, such as the geography textbook he copies out of for another epigraph and the newspaper articles he co-opts for appendixes, Agee does take care to acknowledge the publishers. To reprint the interview with Bourke-White, he sought permission from the *New York Post* (see *James Agee Rediscovered*, 155, 161).

<sup>49</sup> For more on Agee’s juxtaposed epigraphs, see John Louis Lucaites, “Visualizing ‘The People’: Individualism vs. Collectivism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83.3 (August 1997): 269-288; and T. V. Reed’s chapter, “Aesthetics and the Overprivileged: The Politics and Ethics of Representation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” in his *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 22-57.

<sup>50</sup> Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 123.

<sup>51</sup> See *James Agee Rediscovered*, 25-26. Backpedaling as usual after a brief outpouring of revolutionary rhetoric, in this deleted passage Agee qualifies that “even the communists, in proportion to the relative strength and depth of their knowledge, suffer dangerously from over-confidence and from delusions of completeness.”

<sup>52</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> See Agee’s reasons for printing his admittedly “intemperate, inarticulate, and at times definitely foolish” answers to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire, which may lead readers to think that he is either “indulging in a literary quarrel” or “digressing from the subject of this volume” (350), as well as his excuse for an “apparent digression” (391) meant to link the tenants whom he loves to prisoners of war at Andersonville whose grievous suffering and patient waiting for deliverance had moved him via photographs.

<sup>55</sup> See, among other passages, pp. 183-85, 216-17, 242-43, and 370-72 for examples of this stripe, which is especially evident in “Education.” In that chapter Agee confesses, “All I have managed here, and it is more than I intended, is to give a confused statement of an intention which presumes itself to be good: the mere attempt to examine my own confusion would consume volumes” (294). Nevertheless, he then dilates on his muddled educational theories, before lashing out at himself even more than at us: “This is only a brief personal statement of these convictions: and my self-disgust is less in my ignorance,

and far less in my ‘failure’ to ‘defend’ or ‘support’ the statement, than in my inability to state it even so far as I see it, and in my inability to blow out the brains with it of you who take what it is talking of lightly, or not seriously enough” (307).

<sup>56</sup> Agee quoted in Victor A. Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.” *Texas Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1972): 33. Kramer notes that Agee was apparently compelled to shorten this chapter due to space restrictions imposed by his publisher. As Agee comments in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, “Money” was also truncated into “as extreme a précis as I can manage,” because his initial draft on that subject was “too long for inclusion in this volume without sacrifice of too much else” (115). He had to lobby as well for the reinsertion of “Clothing” if it would not inflate the book’s price (see *James Agee Rediscovered*, 161). In addition, as edited by Kramer, the omitted portion of “Work” suggests that Agee originally planned a separate chapter on food. In the unpublished version, that is, he says of the farmers’ work: “of its essential and few returns you have seen most: the houses they live in; the food they eat; the clothes they wear” (31), whereas he revises this address to the reader in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: “its essential and few returns you have seen: the houses they live in; the clothes they wear: and have still to see, and for the present to imagine, what it brings them to eat” (320). Most of his remarks on the tenants’ food thus occur later, during the account in “Inductions” of Agee’s first supper with the Gudgers (see pp. 413-17).

<sup>57</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 37.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> The excluded part of “Work,” after naming many more tasks than are mentioned in the published version, also recommends—less sensitively than Agee’s suggestion for a hand exercise to instill the damaging repetitiveness of cotton picking—that readers, if female, fix the same meals and wash the same dishes every day for a month; if male, do onerous manual labor (or, failing that, do sit-ups and lift weights) outside under a hot sun during their next vacation. Furthermore, in addition to doing these physical chores, he satirically instructs readers to imagine themselves being as mentally, emotionally, communicatively, artistically, socially, financially, politically, legally, sartorially, and alimentially limited or deprived as he believes the tenants to be (see *Ibid.*, 43-45).

<sup>60</sup> As quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” Agee characteristically admits his own hamstrung obsession with fulfilling even the initial “minimum requirements of one who would claim to write of the work of working people” (42), which prompts him to remind the reader “that none of this is a matter of mere personal fancy, conjecture, or emotion, but is existing fact, far beyond my power to state or to suggest the weight of: and as a body of fact, is quite as open to your consideration as to mine, and quite as much your obligation to consider as mine to write of. And so I earnestly suggest of this whole subject that, if only with such materials as I manage to give you, you make up your own mathematics and meditations on it, and your own problems of pity, understanding of cause, and conscience; trying to determine, for instance, whether you can ever get solidly enough into your body and into

your consciousness the full sum of the work each one of these persons has done and must do, ... and the full sum and depth of each person's responsibility not merely to write or read it, not merely to think of it now and then, but to be incapable of forgetting it, of not enlarging by your own intelligence my failures in telling you of it" (43).

<sup>61</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 126. Alluding to his brief return visit with the Gudgers in the summer of 1937, accompanied by his future second wife Alma Mailman, Agee adds: "Alma said the stars were beautiful. There was not even remotely contempt, or a feeling she was being affected (they were too far removed even from small-town 'culture' to assume that all this [sic] is 'beautiful' is affected and shameful: They simply did not know what she meant.)"

<sup>62</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., "The Complete 'Work' Chapter for James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," 47.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>64</sup> In the "Colon" section, just before the "Money" chapter of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee specifies the "globular damagements" (106) or interlocking disadvantages—physical, mental, emotional, economic—dealt a tenant child from birth onward, but then postulates that he might not be better off (at least morally or psychologically) if brought up under wealthy circumstances instead of financial duress: "Born otherwise, he would break his shell upon other forms of madness: he might, for instance, have sprung up in the sheltering and soft shame and guilt of money, which in this earth at present is had at the expense of other spirits and of human good, and which brings on its own diseases, so ghastly that one cannot in wisdom and honesty either envy or hate the image, say, of the landowner whom I suggest beside this child" (107). Having money, in other words, is so shameful and unenviable a condition that Agee would not wish it upon the tenants, even though their poverty clearly causes them a great deal of suffering. As Robert Fitzgerald reflects in a letter to Father Flye written not long after Agee's death and quoted in Hugh Davis, *The Making of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), the writer, after empathizing with the tenants' impoverishment, was wrapped in a "mystique of poverty and discomfort" for several years (48). More charitably, Fitzgerald remarks in "A Memoir," the introduction to his edited edition of *The Collected Short Prose of James Agee*: "For poverty and misery in general he had a sharp-eyed pity" (27).

<sup>65</sup> In a redoubtable study, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Gavin Jones takes Agee to task for his problematic ethics in estheticizing the tenants' poverty. "Agee's poor are blessed and beautiful not despite but because of their brutalization," contends Jones (125), since "the poverty *itself* is attractive and valuable from a literary standpoint" (129). For another acute analysis of Agee's convoluted ethics, arguing that he felt duplicitous compassion for the suffering yet sacred poor, see Jeffrey J. Folks, "Agee's Angelic Ethics," in *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 73-84. And see also Lionel Trilling's outstanding review of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "Greatness with One Fault in It," *Kenyon Review* 4.1 (Winter 1942): 99-102, which, while lauding Agee's text as "the most

realistic and the most important moral effort” of their generation, claims that it betrays “a failure of moral realism” via “Agee’s inability to see these people as anything but good,” a misperception instigated by the writer’s guilt and insistence on their beauty, falsifying “the truth that poverty and suffering are not in themselves virtue” (102).

<sup>66</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 128.

<sup>67</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 39. As a consequence of Mrs. Ricketts’s incapacitation, her two oldest daughters, Margaret and Paralee, have taken over most of the housework and the childrearing duties. Agee observes “that the mother, who cannot bear the indoor heat and closed air of the stove, does the more outdoor work in a frenzy of effort equal to her dim knowledge of her weakness, her unbegrudged disenthronement, and her guilt and grief of her inadequacy, a frenzy which tears her down almost into nausea within two hours, and is renewed as soon as possible whether or not there is need for it” (40). His description of her in the “Selection from Part I” published in the “Work” chapter of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* paints a comparable image of sickness: “Mrs. Ricketts, in that time of morning when from the corn she reels into the green roaring glooms of her home, falls into a chair with gaspings which are almost groaning sobs, and dries in her lifted skirt her delicate and reeking head” (324).

<sup>68</sup> See especially “Colon” and “Education” in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>69</sup> Black men, notes Agee, are likelier to enhance the beauty yet reduce the durability of their shoes through these slashes, though “by no means all of the negroes are ‘artists’ in this way” (263). While focusing on the clothing of white farmers, he is keen on that worn by blacks, among whom “the original predilections for colors, textures, symbolisms, and contrasts, and the subsequent modifications and embellishments, are much more free and notable” (263). Despite his gusto for their getup, Agee laments lacking “any time at all to talk of negro work and sunday clothing, which in every respect seems to me, as few other things in this country do, an expression of a genius distributed among almost the whole of a race, so powerful and of such purity that even in its imitations of and plagiarisms on the white race, it is all but incapable of sterility” (264). Unable to restrain his enthusiasm, he goes on to comment several more times on black styles, “speaking strictly of small towns and of deep country. City negroes, even in the south, are modified; and those of the north are another thing again” (264). Agee is specially interested in “an apparent reverence for the natural and symbolic dignities of the head (which is generally lost in the softer classes of white)” revealed by the choice of hats among them, leading him to ponder: “Certain of their sculptures in their native continent seem to me to habitually embody this reverence toward the head as other human work does only sporadically, and more confusedly: and this seems to give background and impulse to the beauty of headdress and head-bearing in american country negroes” (272). This reflection may have been influenced by Agee’s familiarity with Evans’s photographs of such sculptures for a 1935 exhibition on African Negro Art at the Museum of Modern Art. For examples, see *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 116-17.



<sup>70</sup> Agee may have confused the wearers of these hats. He records Ricketts as having “a very old and carefully kept dark felt hat with a narrow band and a delicate bow” (from visual evidence the one worn by Woods) and Woods as having “a hat of coarse-grained, strongly yellow straw, shaped by machine as felt hats are by the owner’s hands, with a striped band” (apparently the one worn by Ricketts), though his description of Gudger’s “very cheap felt hat of a color between that of a pearl and that of the faintest gold” does match up with Evans’s photos of it. Compare pp. 257-61 of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with several unused pictures in *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938*.

<sup>71</sup> When Annie Mae departs with her children prior to Agee’s reverent desecration of the Gudger house, he observes, “She wore the flowerlike beauty of the sunbonnet in which she is ashamed to appear before us” (135). Ever estheticizing, Agee also likens her work dress to a Chartres statue (276), as he likens Ivy’s to an ancient Greek garment (277).

<sup>72</sup> Margaret Olin, “‘It Is Not Going to Be Easy to Look into Their Eyes’: Privilege of Perception in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *Art History* 14.1 (March 1991): 100, 94. For two other penetrating analyses of intersecting gazes in the “July 1936” scenes, see Spiegel, *James Agee and the Legend of Himself*, 91-95; and John Dorst, “On the Porch and in the Room: Threshold Moments and Other Ethnographic Tropes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” in Blinder, ed., *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 41-69.

<sup>73</sup> “We stand first facing it, squarely in front of it, in the huge and peaceful light of this August morning.” Agee positions himself relative to the Gudger house. “And it stands before us, facing us, squarely in front of us, silent and undefended in the sun” (137). As though the house were a living person, abashing his ambitious heart, he timidly directs his gaze upon its wooden visage: “Now, raising the eyes, slowly, in face of this strength of sun, to look the house in its blind face” (140). One consequence of this personification is that Agee’s delineations of its structure and façade are not from his perspective facing it but from that of the house itself facing him, so that he places the wagon shelter (visible on the right-hand side to viewers of Evans’s photograph taken in front of the house) on its left, creating an apparent discrepancy. For more on the implications of Agee’s seemingly bizarre reversal of the house’s arrangement, see the opening chapter, “A Striking Instance of Disparateness,” in James Lowe’s *The Creative Process of James Agee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 1-15.

<sup>74</sup> Woods is not only a transitory surrogate father for them, who likes Agee and Evans “long before you ceased to mistrust us” (371), but also (as Annie Mae’s real father and Sadie’s half-brother) a patriarch binding all three family units into one extended network.

<sup>75</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 42. This remark, from a letter written to Evans on January 24, 1937, follows Agee’s guilty assurance to the photographer that letters from the tenant families “are as much yours & in your keeping as mine” and precedes the writer’s fretful curiosity about “whether (A) the money order got through to Burroughs [Gudger] and (B) whether he passed it on to Tingle [Ricketts] & Fields [Woods].” Far more interested than Evans was in maintaining ties with the farmers, Agee continued to correspond with them

and to send them small presents (as well as once visiting the Gudgers) over the next few years. For more on his broodings to Evans about the ethical nettles of staying in touch with the families while estheticizing their lives, see Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 197-98; and Stott, "Agee and Evans: 'On the Porch: 4'," in Blinder, ed., *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 168-70.

<sup>76</sup> For a judicious deliberation—albeit one that conflates too readily the contributions of Agee and Evans—on the book's "pragmatist aesthetic," its surmounting of "sentimental identification" through "intertextual irony," see Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, "The Work of Art: Irony and Identification in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34.3 (Summer 2001): 338-68.

<sup>77</sup> In both his first and second "introits" into the Gudger household, while holing up with them to wait out the storm and then while eating his supper under their "somerly sleepy" watch (414), Agee emphasizes this unspoken intimacy. During the storm, even though he has not yet met George's wife Annie Mae, there is "no foolishness of 'introductions,' nor any word spoken" (398); and even after it passes, "no kind of social talk at all, but as if a definite avoidance of any of these issues as too complicated to try to cope with" (403). At the table, albeit buoyed up by their "opening further speaking as often as I" (418), Agee likewise downplays the substance of their conversation in favor of its ambiance. In both cases he blames his failure to reproduce this dialogue, "or even the method and direction, the shape of the talk," on his faulty memory (405). Clearly, however, he wants to convey an impression that in achieving rapport with the tenants, their manner toward one another mattered far more than their exact speech. "Nothing that was said made any difference of itself," he notes, "but in each thing that was said there was all the difference in the world in the way I should meet or say it" (405), just as the way they look at each other shatters the ice between them more successfully than any words they exchange.

<sup>78</sup> See p. 469 for Agee's grief, "now as then," at his inability to communicate the joy of listening to the foxes, with the consolation that it neither can nor need be communicated, unlike the inexcusable failure to communicate the joy of romantic love.

<sup>79</sup> See the "Why not" footnote on p. 234 for an amusing example of contradictoriness, as well as the footnotes on pp. 243 and 357 for indecisiveness and obliqueness. For more on dynamic tensions between footnotes and body text in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a device that Agee may have adapted from André Gide's *Travels in the Congo*, see Davis, *The Making of James Agee*, 137-41.

<sup>80</sup> Members of the three tenant families later gave *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* mixed reviews: some of them extolling its truthfulness, others aghast at its representations of them. For their varied reactions to the book, as well as to its authors as visitors in their lives, see Ross Spears and Jude Cassidy, eds., *Agee: His Life Remembered* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985); and Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *And Their Children After Them: The Legacy of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: James Agee, Walker Evans, and the Rise and Fall of Cotton in the South* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

## CHAPTER THREE

### A CONTINUOUS CENTER: CENTRIPETAL AND CENTRIFUGAL TENSIONS IN *LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN*

Both in its recorded experiences and in its compositional gestation, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* dramatizes the deliberately unresolved, agonizingly detailed strife between Agee's ambitious intentions and his abashed performance. His self-warring text, held in tension with Evans's photographs, battens on germinative oppositions between image and word, writer and reader, art and life, beauty and utility, success and failure. While these conflicts grow out of the authors' efforts to document and communicate their encounters and relationships with three tenant families in Hale County, Alabama, during the summer of 1936, another set of ethical and esthetic dilemmas emerges from their visual and verbal endeavors to encompass the farmers' total environment. Looking into the tenants' eyes freezes Agee's heart and abashes his ambitions, forcing him to confront his paradoxical position as an artist who would forswear artistry so that he might bear truthful witness to the actual lives of vulnerable others. Surveying their surroundings, meanwhile, quickens his imagination, prodding him to envision them emplaced not just in their houses and land but across their county and state, region and nation, hemisphere and planet: grounded by albeit encircled beyond the backdrops Evans pictures, centered within earthbound particularities yet linked to the furthest reaches of the universe.

In an early draft of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee recalls his galvanizing, "strongly manic yet semi-controllable" rush of excitement—"like the release of a spring or the opening of a sluice"—when *Fortune* assigned him to write about sharecropping in the South: "I was within a few seconds as shifted in state of mind as I might have been if

I had changed personalities. Every sense cleared about three hundred per cent and stood up on its hind legs waving its feelers. My mind became capable of running all directions at once and of synchronizing its findings; it became at the same time hard and capable of analysis and of poetry. ... It was centrifugal.”<sup>1</sup> Anticipating a technique employed throughout the book, Agee’s figurative transmutation evokes surges of kinetic energy and heightened consciousness, outward and inward flows from and to a capacious source, as he likens himself to an anthropomorphic insect adjusting its antennae to receive far-flung signals for processing in a brain concurrently shrewd and sensitive, analytic and poetic.

Propelled by this hyperactive mentality, the writer soon headed southward to rendezvous with his photographic collaborator in search of representative sharecroppers. What Agee and Evans found would cause them to question the very terms of their task—the category of sharecropper as well as the concept of representativeness—but the words and images they put together to itemize their travels nonetheless offer an extraordinarily focused meditation on the experience of rural poverty, more specifically on the abysmal conditions endured by tenant farmers in one remote stretch of the Cotton Belt during the Great Depression.

The volume, however, is not only (indeed not even mostly) a joint photo-textual indictment of an abusive agricultural system. Both Agee and Evans (especially with his extensive alterations in the second edition) contributed material not plainly tied to the “nominal subject” to which they bore witness.<sup>2</sup> These subsidiary contributions—or, as the “Preface” declares, these essential, ultimate, serious intentions—are partly an outgrowth of the authors’ irrepressible esthetic impulses, their perception of and insistence upon beauty and dignity amidst destitution and squalor, which do not nullify but fructify their ethical commitments, expressed in the formal attributes of both photographs and text.

Tensions between ethics and esthetics, moreover, pervade their “mutually independent” yet “fully collaborative” attempts to define a center of attention and to connect it to wider inducements (xv). Before expanding to incorporate geographic, economic, artistic, cultural, political, and personal factors beyond their central focus on three tenant households, Agee and Evans zoned in on Hobe’s Hill, where the Gudger, Woods, and Ricketts families dwelt in honorable yet damaging poverty. That place and those people remained their abiding concern, even as their multitudinous far-ranging feelers radiated out to explore discords between global vistas and local knowledge, national uniformity and regional distinctiveness, urban preconceptions and rural realities, middle-class affectations and working-class priorities, impetus toward social reform and integrity of individual consciousness.

Such seemingly stark dualities actually impelled rigorous attentiveness to nuance and complexity in Agee’s and Evans’s collaboration. Orbiting around a fixed point in time and space, their words and images tap into a productive tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Whereas the centripetal tendency is magnetized by an ethical awareness that pulls the authors in toward the tenant families and their dwelling places, its centrifugal counterforce is catalyzed by an esthetic objective that pushes out from this nucleus to grasp the imaginative potential of “unimagined existence” (xiv). Furthermore, to convey all the dynamics (near and far) impinging upon the farmers’ marginalized lives, the text—whether harmonizing with or diverging from the photographs—proceeds along “open terms” (12), suspending instead of synthesizing a dialectic between inner and outer spheres, thus escalating the book’s dominant friction between ethics and esthetics. Both visually and verbally, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* maintains what Agee, wondering “where, if anywhere, is its center,” paradoxically hits on as a “continuous center,”<sup>3</sup> for it

fastens on numerous nodes spun out simultaneously in a gyre from the earth to the stars, targeting not just one bull's-eye but the myriad lodestones of omnipresent actuality.

Agee's journals for his Alabama project disclose his obsession with centrality. At one moment, striving to home in on his subject while keeping his imagination at bay, he succinctly identifies unmovable temporal and spatial pivots: "the centre of all our centres was, in time, July and August 1936, in space, the middle south of this nation." At another point, mapping out "very sketchily" the entire enterprise, he proposes overlapping nuclei: "At the centre, every recapturable instant of those eight weeks spent in the middle south. ... At the centre again: our selves, and our instruments. ... Again at the centre, these three families, chosen with such pain to 'represent' their kind."<sup>4</sup> Prefiguring Agee's reminder to himself in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* "that the centers of my subject are shifty" (10), his nascent center is geometrically elusive. In addition to chronicling his two-month odyssey across the South, he already aspires to provide a record of these "representative" tenants as well as an evaluation of his struggle to perceive them, which would become a notable dual feature of the book. By contrast, Evans excludes the only visual evidence of unambiguous authorial involvement in their lives, omitting an image of his shadow on the ground as he photographs Paralee Ricketts and cropping out Agee in conversation with Bud Woods.<sup>5</sup> The text, of course, more than compensates for these pictorial eliminations by presenting a self-consciously self-referential account of participant observation.

Creative consciousness is, crucially, the book's controlling device. Having placed the authors and their instruments among its multiple cynosures, Agee spells out a strategic distinction between "immediate" and "governing" (xiv)—or, as in an earlier outline, "secondary" and "primary"<sup>6</sup>—instruments. Tools requiring handlers, "motionless camera" and "printed word" must play second fiddle to the ruling primacy of "individual,

anti-authoritative human consciousness,” which, he interposes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, “is also one of the centers of the subject” (xiv). Not unlike Evans’s later claims that mind trumps machine in the practice of photography, Agee reemphasizes the supremacy of “governing” cognizance over “immediate” instrumentation through his somewhat backhanded contention that the camera is, “next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time” (11). In a notebook entry he similarly qualifies the centrality of his own medium, distraughtly acknowledging his “ruining need for tension between words, and the procession of all out of one core.”<sup>7</sup> That core, out of which he seeks to construct a continuously tensional linguistic center, is his own bristling alertness to whatever passes before his field of vision or registers the slightest impression upon him, deserving treatment via photography or language. Evans’s camera and Agee’s words, then, are merely means to an end, but consciousness, as transmitted through these channels, throbs at the heart of their subject itself.

While both authors deploy consciousness to apprehend the consciousness of others, writing about such an intangible entity likely seems easier than photographing it. Nevertheless, Evans manages to reveal haunting psychological depth in his portraits of the tenants, who are usually posed frontally at the center of his compositions: if not quite centered in his negatives, often made so in his cropped prints.<sup>8</sup> Their direct gazes cannot help but abash the viewer much as Agee felt abashed on looking earnestly into their eyes only to behold some profoundly ineffable quality of their livingness. Seeing each of these persons as a sacred center of existence, in a 1938 letter to Father Flye the writer despaired of ever being able to focus closely enough on their individual and communal intricacies:

My trouble is, such a subject cannot be seriously looked at without intensifying itself toward a centre which is beyond what I, or anyone else, is capable of writing of: the whole problem and nature of existence. Trying to write it in terms of moral problems alone is more than I can

possibly do. My main hope is to state the central subject and my ignorance from the start, and to manage to indicate that no one can afford to treat any human subject more glibly or to act on any less would-be central basis: well, there's no use trying to talk about it. If I could make it what it ought to be made I would not be human.<sup>9</sup>

Ponderously pleading ignorance and forecasting failure, as he would do throughout the book, Agee aims to amplify his scrutiny centripetally, but then, in an abstract gloss on the breadth of actuality, throws up his hands at the impossible burden of comprising “the whole problem and nature of existence.” Although his hazy reference to “such a subject” apparently restricts his difficulties to those centering on the rural poor from his outsider’s perspective, he adds that “any human subject” must be studied just as centrally, that is, as intensively as he insists on studying these farmers. Honoring his subjects’ humanity therefore demands, ironically, a superhuman effort, a superabundant consciousness never weary of gathering minutiae but always replete with sweeping insights, a supple mindset continuously concentrated yet continuously extensive, an outlook at once particularizing and generalizing. Even before setting off for a region both familiar and mysterious to him, Agee had felt, “through an extension” of his avidity to ply “any detail of the south for its own sake,” drawn as well toward “the farthest and commonest, most unanswerable questions of human and earthly and universal destiny.”<sup>10</sup>

In deference either to its universality or particularity, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is only discussed sporadically as an example of regional literature.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, though, the work’s Southern dimensions are central to its mediation between the global and the local. Indeed, to a greater extent than the text’s final version illustrates, Agee’s journals suggest that a return to his native region especially inspired him. He recounts his nighttime train ride from New York to Chattanooga, for instance, with heady, passionate, hyperbolic diction:



In all the ways in which the South is peculiar to itself and distinct from all else it lay out there ahead of me faintly shining in the night, a huge, sensitive, globular, amorphous, only faintly realized female cell, towards which in determined speed, winding and gliding upon rails ... carrying my little mind and its hungers and intentions, this sperm-shaped, strong-headed, infinitesimal train was traveling to pierce and, in my infinitesimal yet absolute terms, to fertilize.<sup>12</sup>

Presaging other intellectually libidinous passages retained in the volume, Agee unleashes a lustful, self-indulgent metaphor for his “infinitesimal” penetration of the South. A puny yet indomitable train sinuously transports his puny yet voracious mind across flickering, shadowy terrain for an imaginative tryst with this enormous, nebulous region seductively awaiting his arrival. Only through fertilization by his creative faculties will the dim land assume a coherent shape and fulfill its “peculiar” promise. Prior to pinpointing his ethical center at Hobe’s Hill, he gravitates toward whatever aspect of the Southern milieu could satisfy his eroticized esthetics.

In Chattanooga nostalgic memories mix with fresh sensations as Agee reacquaints himself with “the smell of a city I knew in my childhood,” then picks up a car and drives southwest past Lookout Mountain, “one of the most hackneyed postcard views in all the South,” across the Tennessee River into Georgia and finally Alabama, “through country that was a certain, poor, kind of twentieth century South and yet that was of no century but was the misused property of the sun and sky,” round curve after curve exerting upon him “the centrifugal pull” away from the “magnet-influences” of his destination: in this case industrial Birmingham, where he meets up with Evans preparatory to launching their agrarian adventure.<sup>13</sup> Fretful that Thomas Wolfe had exhausted reveries by railroad, Agee ultimately cut the train scene<sup>14</sup> along with his automotive trip to central Alabama, but he preserved “the whole memory of the South in its six-thousand-mile parade and flowering outlay of the façades of cities, and of the eyes in the streets of towns, and of hotels, and of

the trembling heat, and of the wide wild opening of the tragic land ... this colossal peasant map” on which these journalistic spies pursued their “infinitesimal and frenzied running and searching” for the average white tenant farmers they had been sent to find (9).

Why did he so feverishly dive into their assignment yet apprehensively belittle his qualifications? Both men, after all, had recently been working in and motoring about the region. Since the previous fall, as an “Information Specialist” for the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), Evans had been crisscrossing Southeastern States from Louisiana to Virginia, taking many first-rate photographs, some of which he would insert a quarter century later into the second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, thereby substantially enlarging its regional element. Agee, too, while on sabbatical from *Fortune* to concentrate on his own writing, had spent much of the past half year in the South, mostly in Anna Maria, Florida, followed by a brief excursion to New Orleans and several weeks with Father Flye at St. Andrew’s School, the writer’s alma mater, near Sewanee, Tennessee. He had reported back at his Manhattan office only a month before his editors dispatched him south again to hunt out sharecroppers, largely on the strength of his two pieces for the magazine on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).

The first, a professional breakthrough published three years earlier, had renewed Agee’s enthusiasm for the mountains around his birthplace of Knoxville, where he had not set foot since leaving for prep school in New England at age fifteen. Most impressive about this essay is its geographically embrative rhetoric:

The Tennessee river system begins on the worn magnificent crests of the southern Appalachians, among the earth’s oldest mountains, and the Tennessee River shapes its valley into the form of a boomerang, bowing it to its sweep through seven states. Near Knoxville the streams still fresh from the mountains are linked and thence the master stream spreads the valley most richly southward, swims past Chattanooga and bends down into Alabama to roar like blown smoke through the floodgates of Wilson Dam, to slide becalmed along the crop-cleansed fields of Shiloh, to march

due north across the high diminished plains of Tennessee and through Kentucky spreading marshes toward the valley's end where finally, at the toes of Paducah, in one wide glass golden swarm the water stoops forward and continuously dies into the Ohio. The watershed encompasses some 44,000 square miles, a valley about the size of England and within a day's journey of all between Boston, Duluth, Key West, ... a valley which is the heart of the Southeast.<sup>15</sup>

Albeit palpably evocative of Southern landmarks (historical as well as topographic), this headlong introduction to the regionally transformative New Deal program rushes along as though caught up in an undammed descriptive current that glides “continuously” beyond the watershed itself, appointing it a transatlantic likeness and linking its heart to adjacent sections through implied arteries of rail or asphalt.

The paragraph paves the way first for an article Agee turned out the next year on opportunism popping up along the sprawling American roadside. Ranging all across the country trying to keep pace with the prototypical motorist's insatiable wanderlust, this piece scans the psychological as well as economic impact of the untold “neatly exploited ... minor lodestones that finally draw the traveler to a halt and his silver from his pocket” by the side of the nation's “900,000 miles of hard-fleshed highway.”<sup>16</sup> Paul Ashdown argues that in this reportorial ramble “Agee's journey was still essentially outward, or centrifugal,” whereas his further broodings on travel “would have to await the interior, or centripetal, journey to Alabama.”<sup>17</sup> Although such a differentiation is mainly valid, both journeys in fact exhibit oscillating centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, so that neither is paramount. Agee's yen for “minor lodestones” along the proliferating roadside pulls him back toward small centers that he feels perpetually driven away from, while his focus on the farmers in their solitary location nonetheless propels him to connect them to as many distant points as he can fathom. Rather than simply letting either centrifugal or centripetal stimuli carry him away, he thus strives to center his reactions continuously.

Not only, then, does Agee's initial portrait of the Tennessee Valley prepare the ground for his subsequent journalism but also for a likeminded passage in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: his restive ruminations on the "innumerable growth of a river system" from nearby springs to faraway tributaries, from the little creek below Hobe's Hill to "that unknown place where at length it continuously smiled into some stronger stream" (251). Agee's metaphors for the river system draw on both centrifugal and centripetal imagery, on the flow away from its headwaters and toward its mouths. Hence, "by a continual sagging in all parts of its immense branched vine," water is always running downhill away from wherever he is stationed, "so that in the least creasing of the land sucked into scars between two stalks of corn you are seeing an organic part of the great body of the Mississippi River" with its mile-wide "high-breasted sliding" and eventual expulsion into the Gulf of Mexico (252). This interlaced "sinking away of its energy toward the center" is not really seeable from his vantage point in an Alabama backwater (251), but Agee, spellbound by the magnitude of the Mississippi,<sup>18</sup> delights in "the knowledge that such actions, going on intimately in every yard of thousands of miles of land beneath the hoverings and discharges of the sky, are all of one thing" (253), that is, all one continuous, attenuated center.

Damming a river, however, as the TVA was doing to develop navigation, stem flooding, conserve soil, promote improved agricultural methods, spur decentralized industrial manufacturing, and above all generate cheap hydroelectricity, drastically alters its shape and regulates its flow, clotting the slender watery vine with stout concrete walls, inundating farmland and impounding reservoirs upstream from these humming new centers of activity. Notwithstanding his assiduous research into such contemporary changes, Agee downplays them during the course of his riverine reflections in *Let Us*

*Now Praise Famous Men*. Choosing to emphasize the minutest beginnings and the unchecked swellings of a river, he avers that “the whining of dynamos, the artifactual hearts of our civilization, ... the dams and the helmeted brains of generators thrown across it ... are small, irrelevant, not even noticed incidents in its more serious career, which is ... by a continual searching out of weakness, the ironing flat and reduction to dead sea level of the wrinkled fabric of the earth” (252).

Agee’s preference for natural forces over manmade designs<sup>19</sup> is an outcome both of his euphoric immersion in the Alabama countryside, which rouses primitivist instincts steering him away from anything auguring modernization, and of dissatisfaction with his coverage of the TVA. “Some half-good prose,” he appraised his 1935 *Fortune* follow-up on the agency, but otherwise “glib, superficial & limited.”<sup>20</sup> Ambitiously compiled, this update indeed combines stylistic fervor, statistical overload, hasty reasoning, and social glibness. “The mountains and blue lapsing hills are encysted with time-wrought wealth,” he floridly commences, going on to explain that the valley’s rich mineral resources await the concerted channeling of its “silver rivers yellowing and widening with weight of clay, ... a linkage and veinage of moving waters ill-kempt for navigation, capable of apoplectic flood, but muscled with a munificence of power that man has scarcely touched.”<sup>21</sup> Tinged with the grandiloquence of massive dams being built to harness this untapped power, his prose sharpens when it hovers over submarginal fields gullied by the disastrous, visually stunning erosion Evans was soon to document in Mississippi for the FSA.<sup>22</sup> “Steep land planted to corn, runneled and ruined with rain,” writes Agee, “flat land planted to cotton, worn and warped like a wrecked heel.”<sup>23</sup> Even with a few slick phrasings and fastidious aperçus, though, he cannot disguise his incomplete knowledge of and patronizing attitude toward the South, shortcomings he surmises sharing with *Fortune*’s businesslike readers.

Addressing these “gentlemen, in broad and charcoal strokes,” he therefore points up how his reassessment of the TVA, as with much of his journalism, has sacrificed human depth for the sake of geopolitical and socioeconomic breadth, leading him to disdainfully crude observations: “Cities that you would describe as provincial; towns you would describe as rube; farms so pitiable you would be sure to laugh at them.”<sup>24</sup>

Agee’s desultory 1937 notebooks again reveal his still uncentered condescension. Grasping at foreign analogies for the region he had moved away from more than a decade ago, he unconvincingly contended: “The South is generic, basic, primal, like my idea of what China must be or of what Czarist Russia must have been. And yet in every detail it has edge, and participation and involvement in what we think of as the present.”<sup>25</sup> In the end he would respect the edge of these details, as well as the fragile continuity between past and present, made more tenuous by an accelerating shift in economy from agrarian subsistence to industrial capitalism. The TVA’s experiment with instituting a harmonious “farm-factory balance” by guiding “a social-industrial-agrarian creature” would push the South toward the modern age.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, as a consequence of Agee’s propensity to generalize, or unwittingly overgeneralize, hence allowing his nonspecific centrifugal bent to occlude his particularized centripetal ethics, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* betrays traces of his earlier fuzzily “primal” parallels for the region.

For example, echoing his exotic comparisons for Dixie, he claims that overalls are

the standard or classical garment at very least (to stay within our frame) of the southern rural American working man: they are his uniform, the badge and proclamation of his peasantry. There seems to be such a deep classicism in ‘peasant’ clothing in all places and in differing times that, for instance, a Russian and a southern woman of this country, of a deep enough class, would be undistinguishable by their clothing: moreover, it moves backward and forward in time: so that Mrs. Ricketts, for instance, is probably undistinguishable from a woman of her class five hundred years ago. But overalls are a relatively new and local garment. (265)

Estheticizing “peasant” apparel, Agee belies his parenthetical intention to stay within a Southern frame by linking the Alabama tenant farmers to a timeless, worldwide class of agricultural laborers. He views overalls as their identifying emblem, though this garment represents a modern (not to mention native) contribution to the outfitting of a classicized peasantry. All across that outsized “peasant map” (viz. the South) he searches for cultural connections to “the whole world-system of which tenantry is one modification” (207-08), relating these present-day Southerners to “the most ancient peoples of the earth” (325). In opposition to the haughtiness of “middle-class literacy,” he thus ponders whether Mrs. Gudger’s word “nest-es ... a common pluralization in the south ... is not Scottish dialect,” then thanks an anonymous copyeditor for jotting a note on his proof-sheets apprising him that this idiom derives from “the Middle-English plural” used by Chaucer (344).

Disgusted by the smug, materialistic, ungenerous mores of middle-class American consumerism, Agee lauds the tenants’ unpretentiousness, the unhesitating hospitality they extend to him “without any affectation of social grace,” since “people plain enough take a much more profoundly courteous care of one another” (412). As a result of his allegiance to plain people, he readily accustoms himself to and occasionally romanticizes their privations.<sup>27</sup> “I cannot unqualifiedly excite myself in favor of Rural Electrification,” he comments, no doubt with his TVA essays in mind, “for I am too fond of lamplight. Nor in favor of flush toilets, for I despise and deplore the middle-class American worship of sterility” (211). While conceding that such conveniences would in fact ease daily living for the three families, who lack not only indoor plumbing but also outdoor privies, he cannot resist a parting shot at the gospel of modernization, sneering: “whether or not The Bathroom Beautiful is to be preached to all nations, it is not to [the tenants’] advantage in a ‘civilized’ world to have to use themselves as the simplest savages do” (211). Agee’s

reflexive distaste for “civilization” is part and parcel of an unreflective predilection for primitivism, which overshadows his recognition of the indignity and even insalubrity of the farmers’ disadvantaged circumstances.

More than once, this soft spot again sends him down a perilous path of ahistorical, stereotyped overgeneralization. Estimating, for example, the ages of the three houses he examines, Agee avers that the Gudger cabin, notwithstanding its newness, “is already, in the sense of scale that country imposes, timelessly ancient,” because “from the beginning the tenant types have held a primitive common denominator which has had no reason to change” (208). Although the Gudgers buy soap rather than rendering it from pig’s fat, he conjures up the homemade process by observing that they hold on to “one of those very heavy and handsome black iron kettles in which people one remove more primitive still make their own soap” (130). And after this family hurries “beneath the blackening air to shelter among company” at the Woods home as thunderclouds loom overhead, he chalks up their panicky haste to “the deep stormfear which is apparently common to all primitive peoples” (336). Most primitive of all three families are the Rickettses, as Agee deduces not just from their filthy tattered clothing (particularly Sadie’s dress) and the “insanely or completely dirty” unsanitariness of their living quarters (197), but likewise from some uncommon habits that charm him, such as their homemade cornshuck hats and the names they give to their hens and roosters,<sup>28</sup> which, while signifying their “relative ‘primitivism’ ... also indicates less sociological and more attractive things about them; though these in turn are more difficult to define, or even to understand” (215).

Agee’s difficulty in comprehending what attracts him to the tenants mirrors his larger struggle to define and understand their part of the South, which differs appreciably, he comes to recognize, from his own home ground in East Tennessee. While in Florida



the winter before, he had started several creative pieces set in the region, “projecting all I could from the mountain stuff I knew,” but failed to get very far, as frustrated by these halting exertions as by the rushed shallowness of his TVA stints.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, despite his recent reportages on Southern topics, Agee confessed upon embarking on this latest commission from *Fortune* that

though I knew the south, the Tennessee mountain-city-valley aspects of it, I knew little or nothing about the cotton country, beyond a rough idea of the look of it and an even sketchier idea of just what the situation was there, beyond what I had got out of Tobacco Road, some passages in Faulkner, and a few meetings of the Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers, the purpose of which, raising money, was all right enough, but which leaned pretty tiresomely on such words as terrorism and fascism and which by the cheap uses of the word had already made me unable to hear, say or think “sharecropper” without a certain amount of nausea.<sup>30</sup>

Agee’s frank admission not only of ignorance but also of influence reappears in the first appendix to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, wherein he recommends the writings of Faulkner, Twain, Wolfe, and Caldwell, plus Southern newspapers, postcards, road maps, and contour maps, all of which helped orient him in his gradual rediscovery of the region, even though his centripetal expedition into the middle South—eventually concentrating on Hobe’s Hill—prompts him to proclaim that literary learning, journalistic forays, and absentee social activism are insufficient substitutes for sustained firsthand experience of a specific place.

To purge his queasiness, meanwhile, at expedient overuses of “sharecropper”—a problematic word he himself had not just leaned on but split into two when skimming the human interest angle in his second TVA survey<sup>31</sup>—by Northern communists, with whom he had sympathized until traveling to Alabama,<sup>32</sup> in another appendix Agee constructs a mordantly extended definition, aiming to differentiate categories of cotton tenants. They range from those owning mules and farm implements who would therefore be required

by the landlord to relinquish between a third and a fourth of their crops in rent, to those without chattels who forfeited as much as half their yields to pay back (at eight percent interest) everything they were furnished (animals and equipment in addition to land, buildings, rations, and fertilizer) each season. In the South these poorest farmers were classified as sharecroppers, or halvers-hands, whereas the majority of renters were simply called tenants. "In the north, however," notes Agee, "... where most of the writing and printing and reading of the United States is carried on, sharecropper has ... become the generic term" (455). In an ingenious gesture of political satire and regional solidarity cutting across class and racial lines, he rather dryly avows: "the word we heard used least frequently throughout our investigation, by landowners, storekeepers, townspeople, small farmers, tenants, sharecroppers, and all local human beings white or black, save only new dealers, communists, and various casts of liberal, was the word sharecropper" (455). This label is so irritating to him that, in introducing the heads of all three households, he refers to George Gudger, legitimately a sharecropper, as "a one-mule half-cropper" (xxi), while designating Bud Woods and Fred Ricketts respectively as one-mule and two-mule tenant farmers. Being back in the South, feeling centered again in his indigenous territory, Agee gains newfound respect for sectional peculiarities and idiomatic expressions, inciting his vituperative backlash against educated Northerners who carelessly appropriate dialect. He thus estranges himself from his acquired caste, acerbically regretting that "sharecropper" has swiftly "absorbed every corruptive odor of inverted snobbery, marxian, journalistic, jewish, and liberal logomachia, emotional blackmail, negrophilia, belated transference, penis-envy, gynecological flurry and fairly good will which the several hundred thousand least habitable and scrupulous minds of this peculiarly psychotic quarter of the continent can supply to it" (455-56).

Seeking to reclaim his roots and reinforce his bona fides, Agee's precise regional imagination connects the remote spot where the tenants live to outlying points throughout the South. Under "Persons and Places" he zeroes in and whirls out again, listing Alabama localities by lessening size from the "large Southern industrial city" of Birmingham to the "low plateau of clay" he protectively renames Hobe's Hill, before reversing his trajectory to tally distances from the latter place: "It is two miles to the highway; three to Madrid; seven to Cookstown; seventeen to Centerboro; twenty-seven to Cherokee City; eighty to Birmingham. . . . This is not far from the geographic center of the North American Cotton Belt" (xxii).<sup>33</sup> Having zoomed in centripetally to the rural core of the Cotton Belt, Agee pushes out centrifugally to its more developed perimeter. Hence he acutely reconfigures the exploitative industrialist paradigm of foregrounding a metropolis as the center of all activity and reducing the hinterland to little more than a peripheral zone for the provision of raw materials. In doing so, however, he produces an illusion of linear progression from the very smallest to the very biggest place. Without fabricating mileage, that is, he makes it appear as if the tenants, whose transportation was by mule or wagon or on foot, could only travel in one direction from Hobe's Hill. Beyond the crossroads of Madrid, though, the nearest hamlet of Cookstown is not on the way *first* to their county seat at Centerboro, *then* to the more bustling county seat at Cherokee City. Cookstown, where they gin their cotton and deal with their landlords, is in fact *in-between* these county seats, offering two almost equidistant options to the next largest locus. Strung out in a list rather than plotted on a map such as one of those he recommends for the reader's convenience but does not reproduce, all these places apparently lie along some sort of cartographic continuum that renders Hobe's Hill even farther from the trappings of civilization than it actually is.

Agee's account of the cotton harvest similarly joins this isolated location to others

across a wide swath of the South. At the start of picking season in late August he senses a “quickenings, as if deep under the ground, of all existence,” not just on farms but in small towns and county seats, “where it is going to mean money,” with the atmosphere even of big cities “subtly changed” by tense expectancy of another year’s climax, as more than a million tenant families wait until enough cotton has burst its bolls to prod them, “for their own harm and another’s use” (337), into gathering it in, until, “in every field in hundreds of miles, black and white,” these families begin the “simple and terrible work” of picking (338). Upon accumulating a bale’s worth, they load and haul it to the closest town. Agee visualizes a solemn parade of wagons “on all the roads drawn in, from the utmost runners and ramifications of the slender red roads of all the south and into the southern highways, a wagon every few hundred yards, crested this with a white and this with a black family, all drawn toward those little trembling lodes which are the gins” (345). As though reeling in hooked tenants who will be “sucked dry at a metal heart,” these noisy machines digest each one’s alienated labor, “his bale of cotton, depersonalized forever now, identical with all others” (347). Having critiqued this unrewardingly extractive industrial practice, Agee redistributes the farmers via a homeward “exodus . . . even more formal than the parade in was,” imagining them “sown once more at large upon the slow breadths of their country” (347)—an in-and-out movement repeated continually through the end of ginning season. As with his tabulation of distances between places, this delineation enacts a broad-based, magnetic attraction toward one center of his subject (the cotton economy) both undercut and stabilized by a concomitant withdrawal into smaller centers, like Hobe’s Hill, where the daily exigencies of an oppressive system are sweated out by individual families.

The photographs likewise depict these centripetal and centrifugal forces, although not as sedulously (verging on obsessively) as the text. Whereas the first edition of *Let Us*

*Now Praise Famous Men* only contains four pictures not taken on Hobe's Hill, the book's reissue—for which Evans seized an opportunity to expand his purview, not necessarily to make his contribution consonant with the local and global spheres that preoccupied Agee, but certainly to evoke the broader regional scope that interested both artists—quintuples the number of photographs made elsewhere. After three sections centering on the tenant households, Evans provides another grouping of nineteen shots from Southern towns and surrounding countryside, including outside of Hale County, even of Alabama, with four prints of Mississippi. Because they anticipate the fourth photographic section's widening compass, the final images in each family sequence—demarcated by blank pages after the sixteenth, twenty-sixth, and forty-third plates—deserve consideration together.

The first series, on the Gudgers, concludes with Annie Mae walking across their scrubby backyard carrying a pail of milk, her toddler Squinchy by her side. Positioned at middle distance, near the barn from which she is returning, the camera freezes them from behind as they pass between the henhouse and the smokehouse toward the shadowed open hallway at the farmhouse's rear. Secluded by a thick stand of trees, the house and the outbuildings seem to be drawing the human figures inward, somewhat dwarfing their bodies, which are rendered ghostlike by sunlight on the backs of their white limbs and clothes. The movement is centripetal, back toward their abode, where a ladder propped against the lean-to kitchen squarely in Annie Mae's path offers the only possible (albeit extremely unlikely) escape route, as though, if not encumbered by pail and child, she might just climb up—as Evans must have done to snap an unpublished shot facing the opposite direction<sup>34</sup>—and over their roof away from her housework. Instead she will go on in to skim the milk obtained by her hands from the underfed, low-producing cow he also photographed but did not put in the book.<sup>35</sup>

The last picture in the Woods sequence presents a contrasting implication. In the foreground is an unkempt garden, around which a fence to keep out animals has partially fallen down. Beyond it, cottonfields slope up to the cloud-laden horizon punctuated by a straggly hedgerow. Of all the images on Hobe's Hill, this is the sole one looking outward. Evans made many interiors (as well as porch and yard scenes) *of* the tenants, but here he supplies the view seen *by* a farm family when going out to work. His closing print for the Ricketts unit carries the centrifugal perspective even further, not just hinting at exterior movement but dramatizing it, by bringing the camera down off the plateau onto a road leading away from the three farms. Perched atop a mule-drawn wagon filled with cotton, Evans again displays the outlook of tenants themselves, whose hats and backs crowd the frame's lower right. Its upper left, however, shows the bare road ahead, which runs on to Cookstown, where he took a half-dozen serviceable photographs of wagons lined up to be unloaded at the gin, none of which was used in either edition.

While Evans's image of Mrs. Gudger taking in the milk epitomizes the centripetal concentration of his three family sequences, his views looking out over the land from the Woods house and ahead along the road from the Ricketts wagon betoken the centrifugal inclination predominant in his fourth section. Roaming beyond their locale, not confining himself to a single county or state, Evans explores various places, intimating connections and incongruities between the tenants' insular bounds and a wider social ambit: a biracial Southern society both yoked to the past and partaking of the present, exemplified by dirt roads and paved streets, mule teams and automobiles, hand-painted signs and brand-name advertisements, gourd birdhouses and telephone poles, a dilapidated plantation house and a fantastical minstrel poster. Among public establishments in different degrees of use or disrepair, he exhibits stores, schools, a mayor's office, a barbershop, a railroad station: all

augmenting the regional texture of his portfolio.

Evans's selections of one photo over another from variations on the same subjects suggest that he approached his material with an eye for both its centripetal and centrifugal properties. Although often picturing buildings in a level, frontal format corresponding to that in which he typically posed people, Evans nonetheless recognized that shooting at an angle to a given structure or row of structures enabled him to record more than one face, plus more of the background. Coming across the post office at Sprott, Alabama, in Perry County, southeast of Hale, he tried out both methods. The photograph included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a tightly focused vertical composition of its wooden façade, with a motley group of black and white men standing on the porch under a large Coca-Cola sign beside a Pan-Am gas pump and motor oil cart. Bulging above them is a gabled overhang with symmetrical eyelike windows that appear to be blinking due to broken louvers in their lidlike shutters. In contrast to this centripetal arrangement, Evans selected a horizontal variant as the cover image for the catalog to his 1971 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Showing a side wall, empty porch, dirt road vanishing round a corner, and wires stretching out of sight against the sky, this version additionally makes readable a signboard indicating that Sprott's post-office-cum-gas-station serves, too, as a ticket agency for Greyhound buses. Angled beyond the unpeopled edifice rather than aimed straight at it, here the camera stresses its centrifugal function, as a site not to loaf but to drop by for the mail, a cold drink, a bus ticket, or a refill of fuel on the way someplace else.<sup>36</sup>

Evans and Agee passed through many such crossroads during the early stages of their travels. While searching for archetypal farmers, they found themselves psychically disoriented: "far enough thrust forward between towns that we had lost intuition of our

balance between them, ... for we were somewhere toward the middle of one of the wider of the gaps on the road map” (32). Agee tends to idealize these gaps of true country, with their “archaic” features and “gracious” inhabitants (37), even when they do not harbor tenants, whom he is supposed to be tracking down. Traversing “new country to me, still totally poor, yet with something loosened and pastoral about it and as if self-sufficient and less hopelessly lonesome and abandoned” than comparable land occupied by tenants, he logs an admittedly unreliable impression that life on “small, privately owned farms,” though not “any richer-looking than tenant farms,” might be “a little less pointless,” with “a little more of the sense of a family planted in one place and coming up like a tree, even if it was a starved tree” (429). Land ownership, regardless of equivalent poverty, helps a family feel more securely rooted and therefore centripetally invested in its destiny instead of centrifugally bounced from place to place. Yet as Agee also demonstrates, indebted tenant farmers whose hold on a particular plot of ground is constantly unstable may work just as hard and should have just as sound a right as any landowning family to make it into a human center.

Striving to center himself, meanwhile, his “pastoral” proclivities keep pulling him back toward the blankest spaces on his road map, even as he continues to spin out strands of attachment to less sparsely populated districts around the regional web. In a foul mood on a Sunday afternoon he coasts through small towns enervated by the boiling sun, which casts deathly torpor across the entire “damned south” (383), depressing him because for “hundreds of miles all around me in any direction I cared to think, not one human being or animal in five hundred was stirring” (378). At night Agee fancies that, actively as well as passively, “the land, in its largeness: stretches: is stretched,” from darkened fields and woods to “rare and inexpiable cities” with “late lamps in the central streets” (85) belying



his statewide nocturnal incantation: “All over Alabama the lamps are out” (17). The page of purple prose preceding the centripetal slant of “A Country Letter” brandishes his mind moving rapidly and centrifugally beyond the sleeping rural areas, prim towns, and county seats of Alabama, to stony Birmingham “void before eternity,” then seedy New Orleans, even its jazzy sleepless haunts subdued by “the tender desolations of profoundest night,” yet “the infested genitals of that city” stimulating him to dream further, as if licentiously poring over an atlas, beneath the Gulf of Mexico all the way down to where “that woman, that id, the lower American continent, lies spread before heaven in her wealth” (45).

Such ravenously roving passages point toward a pervasive tension between rustic and urbane temperaments in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Despite their adoration of the countryside, Agee sometimes and Evans especially chafed under its insularity. After meeting the tenants but before living with them, the authors retreated<sup>37</sup> for a couple days to a hotel in Birmingham, “whose provincial slickness we could simultaneously rest upon and ridicule” (373). Although ostensibly seeking information, “involved to suffocation in the inanities of the ‘contacts’ and obligations” their employers had heaped on them (372), they had really “prescribed ourselves a medicine,” a dose of metropolitan enjoyment that might cure their rural restlessness: “we might walk in the dynamic and heartening streets of a populous city, a relatively condensed and sophisticated civilization, whose ways we might stroll by the hour without the pressure upon us, the following, the swerving, of the slow blue dangerous and secret small-town eyes” (373). Sick of unabated suspicions that hounded these Northern investigators down Southern byroads, Agee and Evans hankered after the anonymity and disinterest of an urban center. Fulfilling this role, besides slaking their thirst for entertainment, Birmingham morphed into a mini-Manhattan:

... we ate bloody foods in chilled rooms and drank liquors, we ate up the streets, their façades, their show-windows, the distributions of traffic and

people along these troughs, their lights at night, their odors of soft coal and auto exhausts, the faces and forms of their women, as men starved or dried to husks in a desert might eat and drink, and this cruel great spread-out country town was so grateful a metropolis to me as I had never known since New York was virgin before me at fifteen, and I first walked in the late brilliant June dusk into the blinding marvel of Times Square, watching the Covered Wagon cross the river Platte in electric lights, over and over and over, my heart nearly breaking for joy here where all the shows of every kind on the otherwise rural round planet were spread at once before me, a giant tray of choiring diamonds. (373-74)

Agee's associational leap from a mid-sized city to a mammoth one, each boasting cultural wonders unimaginable to the world's predominately backwoods populace, is all the more astonishing for the specificity of his ebullient reminiscence. Encountering Times Square as an adolescent yokel, what does he see but a synthetic reenactment of a quintessentially bucolic scene: a wagon fording a river out on the Great Plains, as pioneers of the previous century push the frontier westward on a billboard in the Big Apple.

In the second edition Evans adds one image from Birmingham: the ornate façade of a weathered boardinghouse advertising furnished rooms.<sup>38</sup> Two men relax on the porch in the frame's lower left, while through a window in the upper right a woman mends her clothes. The photograph imparts the simultaneous proximity and loneliness of urban life: dual motifs also conveyed in his FSA pictures of this city's industrial vicinities, as well as in his architectural studies of residences and businesses (mainly in Negro neighborhoods) in other Southern cities, from large ones such as New Orleans and Atlanta to smaller ones like Vicksburg and Selma, the latter two both represented in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>39</sup> Evans juxtaposes the Birmingham boardinghouse with a sharecropper's cabin set amidst profuse vegetation. As with the Gudger home, a dense wall of woods hems in this vernacular structure. Vines envelop its dogtrot entryway, giving it a deserted appearance, while its tin roof and irregular weatherboards have, as Agee describes the Gudgers' yard, "a look of fire in sunlight" (139). These paired plates embody the book's urban and rural

counterpoints, its pictorial and textual responsiveness to built and natural environments.

Agee at length deems their respite in “the hard flat incurable sore of Birmingham” to be unsatisfactory (220). Temporarily leaving Evans behind, he takes off on his own for Hale County, relieved at being alone after the strain of continuous company. Scorning the lassitude that settles over Centerboro and feeds his recurrent, self-contemptuous fantasies on this sweltering Sabbath, he nonetheless reckons himself “a part once more of the pace and nature of this country” (378). In spite of the devitalizing heat and his indecision about revisiting the tenants in the wake of their uneasy photo shoot with Evans, Agee rekindles his familiarity with the fields while driving on toward Hobe’s Hill. His centripetal return to the farmers’ out-of-the-way environs is all the more meaningful to him because of his centrifugal reversion to the metropolis. Even though he can hardly fathom his motives in seeking out the Gudger house, Agee intuitively feels that it may be able to nourish him, answering to his inquiries and fortifying his consciousness, restoring “the heart and heart’s blood of my business and my need” (389). Hence he feels “the bone center of my chest ... beating with haste and hope” (410) each time he approaches “the front center of the house” (411). After having been (spiritually as much as bodily) “delivered in suddenness” (394) into its holy light,<sup>40</sup> then brought inside where the Gudgers “are drawn into a rondure” shielding them from a ferocious storm (398), Agee departs and drives away only to half-purposely maroon his vehicle so that he might rejoin their family circle. Letting his car slide into a ditch so he is “stationary in the middle of a world of which all members were stationary,” he worshipfully peers out at the gloaming, ironically sensing, even with a wheel sunk to its hub, “an exact traction with this country in each twig and clod ... in the plain rhythm of a human being in his basic relation to his country” (409).

As soon as the sedan mires, Agee resultantly savors “a smile all over the bones of

my face as strange to me as greasepaint,” for, albeit still in the driver’s seat, “a sour odor of the earth and of night strengthened into me steadfastly until” he discerns his inchoate, continuous centeredness in the countryside, “not as it stood past me from a car, but to be stood in the middle of, or drawn through, passed, on foot” (409). Before testing his surer footing, he sanctifies the distinctiveness of everything outside: “Each plant that fluted up in long rows out of the soil was native to its particular few square inches of rootage, and held relationship among these others to the work and living of some particular man and family, in a particular house, perhaps whose lamp I saw beneath this field; and each tree had now its own particular existence and personality” (409). Exchanging dress shoes for sneakers, he renegotiates the darkening landscape, “careful that I should not so much as set my foot in this clay in a cheapness of attitude” (410). In contrast to his veneration of agrarian singularity and of the earth’s age-old resilience, Agee mocks his mass-produced, “vanquished engine” (409), glancing back and laughing at the car—emblematic of much he disdains about highbrow, top-down, professionalized modernity—“as if it were a new dealer, a county dietician, an editor of *Fortune*, or an article in the *New Republic*” (410).

To gain a firmer foothold on this slice of his homeland, he thus allegorically sheds his mechanized armor and treks back semi-hangdog to the Gudgers’, thereafter grounding himself in their habitat<sup>41</sup> by cultivating silence and stillness, vigilance and perceptiveness, patience and humility. Deepening the irony of his effort to get an earthier purchase on the countryside, Agee repeatedly compares it to an ocean. Awash in its vastness, “foundered as stone in sea in deepest Alabamian rurality” (137), he would surely drown if not for the anchorage of this house. He reverently sees it “lifted before the approach of darkness as a boat and as a sacrament” (220), himself buoyant within its protective shell “as if it were a little boat in the darkness, floated upon the night, far out on the steadiness of a vacant sea,

whose crew slept while I held needless watch, and felt the presence of the country round me and upon me” (421). Straying away when bugs drive him out naked into the yard, his bare feet slip in the mud “as if I trod water in a sea whose floor was drooped unthinkably deep beneath me, and I was unsafely far from the wall of the ship” (426). In “continuous excitement” on another evening, moored on the porch with Evans, he realizes the land’s “continuance was enormous as if we were chips or matches floated, holding their own by their very minuteness, at a great distance out upon the surface of a tenderly laboring sea” (228). Agee recycles oceanic metaphors throughout his centripetal voyage to Hobe’s Hill, centrifugally associating this landlocked place with romantic mysteries of the deep.

During his sojourn with the Gudgers he also unites their humble dwelling with the cosmos, forging a mystical bond by extending outward from “the darkness of the peopled room that is chambered in the darkness of the continent before the unwatching stars” (72-73). Darkness unfailingly rejuvenates his imagination. Agee always puts the house to sea at night, when it might figuratively ride at anchor in a flotilla whose “lamps are out” not just “all over Alabama” but across the titanic Western Hemisphere. Both telescoping and lengthening his “nocturnal-pastoral” lens (470), he observes “how the home was squared on us, and beyond on all sides the billion sleeping of the natural earth” (422). Along with countless other creatures, animal as well as human, from “all the branched tribes of living in earth and air and water upon a half of the world,” the Gudgers lie “stunned with sleep” (19), while Agee stares alertly at the globelike reservoir of a coal-oil lamp<sup>42</sup> whose flame seems to suspend “all on earth” in “the middle and pure height and whole of ... a summer night, the held breath, of a planet’s year” (51), luring his senses into a “universally shared withdrawal to source” (52).

In a parallel vein, envisaging the sky “withdrawn from us with all her strength”

(21), he fears the tremendous gulf of the firmament yawning above the frail roof “straight to the terrific stars”—the thought of intergalactic nothingness thrusting his consciousness desperately inward in a keen Rilkean contemplation: “Small wonder how pitifully we love our home, cling in her skirts at night, rejoice in her wide star-seducing smile, when every star strikes us sick with the fright: do we really exist at all?” (53). His existential anxiety is not self-centered. Rather, correlating this “little country settlement” with solitary spots the world over,<sup>43</sup> he meditates on “these families, not otherwise than with every family in the earth, how each, apart, how inconceivably lonely, sorrowful, and remote!” (53). Agee may intentionally magnify the tenants’ remoteness and overly estheticize their setting in order to engage the reader and to provide traction for where his book takes place,<sup>44</sup> but he equally ethicizes his geographical cogitations through a double focus on their tiny rural community and its interstellar coordinates. Situating Hobe’s Hill both within and beyond a tessellated Southern landscape, beneath and amidst the starry mosaic of the Milky Way, he furnishes a multidimensional imaginative emplacement of the three farms that would flummox the most hi-tech, twenty-first-century global positioning system, compelling it to recalculate its whereabouts again and again until it would at last go haywire.

The regional—and indeed planetary—reach of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* might be best summed up by a paragraph originally intended to introduce the volume:

The following is a short record of the lives of three families of cotton tenants. They live on Mills Hill [Hobe’s Hill], about seven miles from Moundville [Cookstown], in Hale County, in west central Alabama, in the fourth decade of the twentieth century. They represent nine million other human beings, white or black, who are cotton tenants in similar houses, wearing similar clothes, eating similar food, working in similar fields, responsible to similar landlords, living similar lives, and dying similar deaths, all over a stretch of land sixteen hundred miles wide and three hundred miles deep. And they have much more than they lack in common with all but a very negligible fraction of the two billion human beings who at present carry human existence on the surface of this planet.<sup>45</sup>

Making his hub where the three families live, Agee widens his realm concentrically to encompass not only all Southern farmers likewise enmeshed in cotton tenantry but also most of the planet's population, implicitly excluding the affluent. He refrains, however, from dilating on the suffering of the poor. Instead of treating them as social problems by harping on their burden of overwork, malnutrition, sickness, and impoverishment, the writer uses studiously neutral language to portray their conditions. He probably scrapped this passage (and others like it) due to its excessive generalization, its universal avowal "that what you are seeing and reading here: is one thorough and entirely authentic record of one contemporary expression of an old and plain matter: the human predicament."<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, he kept some of its centrifugal gist, dispersing fragments from these discarded introductory sentences in his text. Relating the three houses to tenant averages across the South, for instance, Agee delineates—like an urban planner straining to wedge this monocultural countryside onto a Procrustean grid—"an enormously populated yet as enormously attenuated one-trade and monotone city: i.e. a city of nine million, stretched thin against a cottonfield which in turn is drawn over earth three hundred miles one way and sixteen hundred the other" (205). Arguing rather flimsily that tenantry itself is not to be blamed for Southern inequities and therefore that economic reformers are deluded, he alleges: "by nearly all that is held to be 'disgraceful' or 'disadvantageous' in the tenant homes, these homes have any amount more than less in common with the homes of the whole poorest class of the *owning* cotton farmers, and with the whole tribe and twinned race of the poorest human beings in the rural and small town and in considerable degree in the urban south" (207). The more instructive contrast, he claims, is between Southern and Northern housing: the former appearing more backward on account of the latter's zeal for upkeep. As for comprehending the debilitating effects of unremitting manual

labor not just on rural Southerners but on most of the world's people, aside from the "negligible fraction" of an implicit elite, Agee, after summoning readers to look at Mrs. Gudger's portrait, into her tired yet "gentle eyes," insists that "they are to be multiplied, not losing the knowledge that each is a single, unrepeatable, holy individual, by the two billion human creatures who are alive upon the planet today; of whom a few hundred thousands are drawn into complications of specialized anguish, but of whom the huge swarm and majority are made and acted upon as she is" (321).

As indicated by his admonition (to himself as much as to readers) not to neglect individuality among the multitude required to work hard with their hands, Agee writes most movingly when combining his sporadic, centrifugal generalizing about "the human predicament" with the reverential, centripetal particularizing he favored. This mode is typified by his "Two Images" of "human divinity" offered in affectionate parting from the youngest tenants (442). Placed just before the long-deferred "Title Statement," with its praiseful affirmation that the goodness of unsung men "shall continually remain" via their progeny's remembrance (445), these verbal snapshots celebrate the irrepressibility of the life-instinct through arresting descriptions of childhood innocence yet precocious sexuality. Squinchy Gudger, "the Madonna's son," breastfeeds beatifically—his divine stature humanized by the "partly erected" penis at "the heart and leverage" of his frame—while Ellen Woods sleeps peacefully with "her blown belly swimming its navel" and her vagina "blown full broad with slumbering blood into a circle," so that "this center and source, for which we have never contrived any worthy name, is as if it were breathing, flowering, soundlessly, a snoring silence of flame," putting Agee in mind of an inborn light "so strong, so valiant, so unvanquishable ... it shall at length outshine the sun" (442). Through his continuously centered consciousness, an infantile procreative organ is thus



rendered brighter than a stupendous cosmic body, forming an infinite spectrum on which centripetal and centrifugal coexist, each burning and pulsating with life.

To maintain such continuous centeredness and instill it in readers, Agee hones his powers of sensory discernment by continually connecting the near and the far, amplifying sentience of whatever is close at hand with exalted consciousness of its concealed ties to invisible phenomena. Eugene Chesnick points out that this authorial omnipresence, allied with Whitman's "standard verse technique," enhances the lyrical qualities of Agee's text, while dissuading him from using fictional devices like plot and character development.<sup>47</sup> Simultaneously microscopic and macroscopic, his catchall pattern of perception triggers both emotive and cognitive overtones, receptive and acquisitive tendencies. On his first night at the Gudgers', albeit barely cognizant of the reasons for his unexpected happiness, Agee exults because "my senses were taking in nothing but a deep-night, unmeditable consciousness of a world which was newly touched and beautiful to me" (427-28); during his subsequent daytime inspection, even though cautioning that "consciousness has no residence in nor pertinence to" all that "is intimately transacted between this home and eternal space," his stealthy senses and meditative sensibilities nonetheless permit him to perceive and symbolize these secret transactions between near and far, as when a rod of sunlight lancing through a knothole infuses a vase on the mantel (187).

Agee both extols and disparages the "five or twenty known human senses" (105), the "wondrous fivewindowed nerve and core" of each person's existence (102). Despite the inadequacy of sensory receptors at capturing all of life's multifarious immediacy, he hypothesizes that "that which we receive yet do not recognize, nor hold in the moment's focus, is nevertheless and continuously and strengthfully planted upon our brains" (105). This unrecognized, "continuous impingement upon the naive and defenseless senses," he

bemoans in his journal, is as challenging to implant in readers as it is to appreciate in the first place.<sup>48</sup> Yet throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee continues to consider “each blown leaf of a woodland a quarter-mile distant while I am absorbed in some close exactitude” (106), not to mention almost every “minute disturbance on the far side of the thick planet” (85).

A quarter mile or so is the customary distance his auditory consciousness ranges, but his imagination roams much further. Although unable—for “the ear always needs the help of the eye”—to pinpoint precisely where in the woods the first fox calls from as he and Evans listen intently on the porch in the dark, Agee soon determines that the sound originates “between an eighth and a quarter mile away,” which seems “remarkable to us because even at that considerable distance we could nevertheless hear, or rather by some equivalent to radioactivity strongly feel, the motions and tensions of the throat and body, the very tilt of the head, that discharged it” (464). Like his efforts to clarify the geometry of whatever he hears,<sup>49</sup> this imaginative ornamentation of the unseen caller energizes his radioactive consciousness, which ordinarily winds up surpassing the preliminary quarter mile, intensely visualizing what is going on outside the range of his senses. When Emma parts from her family to rejoin her husband in Mississippi, Agee envisions (after noting that the cacophonous truck “brings up the mild heads of cattle a quarter of a mile away”) that for the rest of the day it will creep along “by force alone of its outward growth, like that long and lithe incongruous slender runner a vine spends swiftly out on the vast blank wall of the earth, like snake’s head and slim stream feeling its way, to fix, and anchor, so far, so wide of the strong and stationed stalk” (68-69).

Doggedly, metaphorically, verbosely sending out mental runners from his fixed station in Alabama, centrifugally entwining his consciousness around far-off sites even

while centripetally rooting it in one place, Agee persists in a twofold emphasis on local matters and global underpinnings. Often he is most effectual when curbing his esthetic incentives and highlighting his ethical concerns, sometimes through structural design. Juxtaposed with the roster of tenants is a page from *Around the World with the Children*, Louise Gudger's third-grade geography textbook, which—conjuring a fairy queen as a benevolent provider granting wishes to needy children—facilely associates Americans with their “world brothers and sisters,” who must procure food, shelter, and clothing<sup>50</sup> through lightly stressed exertion: “The lives of most men on the earth are spent in getting these things” (xx). Counteracting such a simplistic platitude is the awful truth that those listed on the facing page do indeed spend almost all of their energy, as Agee documents, struggling to ensure basic necessities. Every morning, he reports, awaking unrefreshed, wrenching up to bear “the weight of the day ... in utter tiredness” (88), they must brace themselves by bolting their breakfasts, after which “the houses are broken open like pods in the increase of the sun, and they are scattered on the wind of a day's work” (91).

Before the sun can rise over Hobe's Hill, though, Agee envisages it coming first to Europe then across the Atlantic to Labrador and Brazil, as the earth rotates on its axis so that “the glistening land drives east,” while westward from “the brim of the continent” one rooster after another begins crowing, until “in a stripe, a few miles wide, straight up through Canada, and down the Andes,” dawn gradually arrives in Hale County (83-86). Mindful of latitudinal and longitudinal positioning, Agee's hemispheric consciousness—rehearsed in poems he wrote prior to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*<sup>51</sup>—permeates the book's descriptions of natural events. Focusing concurrently on near and far while “the country is taking shape ... emerging like a print in a tank,” Agee extends his lens from centripetal observation to centrifugal visualization: “I see distinctly the walls of the room,

and on the earth the medallioned cities” (87). By late morning, having consecrated the sunbeam filling the vase, he watches the light slowly shift on a pine wall of the Gudger house, which reminds him that it is only now just daybreak out on the West Coast, for the sun “slides, in the torsion of the engined firmament, while the round rind of the planet runs in its modulations like a sea, and along faint Oregon like jackstrewn matches, the roosters startling flame from one another, the darkness is lifted, a steel shade from a storefront” (188). Agee subsequently expands this diurnal notion of the planet’s surface twisting toward and then away from solar light into a moody assessment of seasonal cycles<sup>52</sup> in the Americas: “As Canada is retired out of summer, the Argentine is restored into summer, as simultaneously, as literally, as the edge of night is balanced by the edge of day, midnight by noon” (248). But he broods that humans are mostly too insular to appreciate this hemispheric difference: “we are so blindfold by local fact that we cannot even imagine this simultaneity” (248). Centripetal preoccupations habitually blinker us, in other words, to centrifugal undertows. Conceding the comfort and occasional wisdom of localism, he asserts the importance of outgrowing it in the political theater.

Writing during a globally volatile era, Agee, while remaining closely concentrated on the three tenant households, is attentive to pressing international issues. In passing he criticizes Soviet policies, stays apprised of the Spanish Civil War, and alludes to the onset of World War Two. Among other “anglosaxon monosyllables” unfurling in a centrifugal stream-of-consciousness after the caustically defined buzzword sharecropper, he includes (all uncapitalized, as if to contest which nouns are proper) such politically potent terms as fascism, communism, anarchist, loyalist, franco, hitler, duce, trotskyite, stalinist, liberal, leftist, nationalism, jingoism, munich betrayal, rape-of-czechoslovakia, battle-of-britain, class-consciousness, fifth-column, reactionary, demagogue, and blitzkrieg (456-58). Yet

for all his awareness of contemporaneous affairs on the global stage, Agee's consistently contradictory thinking about politics shunts these words to his volume's periphery, to a chaotic note tacked onto an appendix, tantamount to a branch line distracting him from the main circuit of his domestic subject. And even at home, he pays little heed (except in a scoffing manner) to prospective political solutions for the endemic problem of tenantry, nor to its dependency on economic markets abroad, apart from glancing shots such as that the farmers' individual bales of cotton "shall be melted indistinguishably into an oblivion of fabrics, wounds, bleedings, and wars" (347). Portended by his privileging of *King Lear* over the *Communist Manifesto* in the paired epigraphs that inaugurate this verbal sonata, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* subordinates politics—most relevantly, revolutionary action on behalf of exploited agricultural workers—to poeticized empathy with the rural poor, heralding their praiseworthiness as well as their wretchedness.

For the bulk of the book, therefore, centrifugal political developments give way to centripetal personal episodes, even as Agee adroitly mines the artistic possibilities created by their coincidence. In a cubist suturing of local and global, for example, he copies a "scissored hexagon of newsprint"—both sides legible held to the light, with bits of stories near and far, from Alabama to China—discovered in a table drawer of the Gudgers' front bedroom (166), thus whirling readers around the world while taking them in even closer to one family's private possessions than can be pictured by Evans, who photographed this table before a fireplace and mantel which, because "centered one upon another and at center of their square-spread partition wall," Agee christened "a shrine and altar" (162). In the rear bedroom, where Evans trained his lens on a whitewashed fireplace, Agee again goes in closer, enumerating the objects inside a mug visible on the mantel, besides counting a comb's teeth and a cushion's pins. Incapable of ignoring a scarred vertical

board, he regrets that it hazards “between its structural dominance and the centrality of the fireplace a not wide yet sharp dilemma of symmetries” (171).<sup>53</sup> Commenting on the fireplace itself, he cannot withhold noticing that it “is sprung a few inches off center within its large white framing; yet, since it still has so strong a central focus in its wall, a powerful vibration is set up between the two centers” (171). Obsessed with centripetal motion while examining each room of the house, Agee stipulates that “all these things, each in its place, and all in their relationships and in their full substances, *be, at once*, driven upon your consciousness, one center” (184).<sup>54</sup>

In step with this continuously centered consciousness, the text vacillates between inner and outer flows as its author parleys ethics with esthetics. Agee refuses to resolve the dialectic he establishes between near and far because to do so would not only erode the creative tension between his actual experiences in Alabama in 1936 and his ensuing labors to reproduce them elsewhere that he sets such store by, but would also falsify his conception of his subjects’ complexity. Lamenting his esoteric strangeness and suspect motives while yearning to be accepted and trusted by three poor rural families, Agee’s ethically precarious intrusion into their domain—his determination to render himself less alien and to overcome their mutual cultural and dispositional disparities—both stymies and fosters his esthetically spirited representation of their lives. Having unwillingly taken leave of their hillside to return north, he takes pains (as if he were the first writer ever to ponder seriously on an earlier experience from afar) to reach back south toward this now continuous center of his consciousness. Memories of ethical abashment spar productively with spurts of esthetic ambitiousness as he struggles to convert witness into artistry, to translate intentions into performance. Just as he willfully holds that clash in abeyance, however, so too Agee suspends the dialectical conflict between inner and outer forces

which by his understanding pulses at the heart of tenant existence.

“Colon”—a textual pause to extrapolate generalities from his observations of the farmers’ particularities—comes closest to offering a philosophical synthesis of Agee’s centrifugal and centripetal penchants. This section proffers a distinct rhetorical strategy, mediating these “warm weird human lives each in relation to its world” (104), revealing how, individually, “each is a life, a full universe” (110), delineating what, collectively, “inward and outward, is their manner of living” (111). He proposes a globular structure of interlocking spheres, at the center of each one a nerve or seed welded to the cosmos albeit chained to a mean locale of depleted land. While still in the womb, this creature (male in Agee’s sample) is already “globed round” (105) or encaged by both internal and external circumstances: both genealogical inheritances and socioeconomic impediments molding his capabilities and constricting his future. “Never relaxing the simultaneity of his ancestral and brotherly stars,” the writer demands of himself, “we bring his sources into a more near convergence in local place of time” (102). Agee categorizes the newborn as being “of the depth of the working class; of southern alabamian tenant farmers,” then specifies that “certain individuals are his parents, ... they are living in a certain house, ... they are farming certain shapes and strengths of land, in a certain exact vicinity, for a certain landholder,” all these instances conspiring to “qualify this midge, this center, a good deal” (107). A helpless child of the earth and the stars,<sup>55</sup> “he stands at the center of his enormous little globe” (109). Such oxymoronic surroundings open grandly before him the hugeness of potential experience only to be shut firmly by his family’s plight. By age six he is incurably crippled, physically and psychologically damaged by witnessing the primal act in a home without privacy, vying against siblings for the harsh love of harried parents, eating food scarcely more nutritious than garbage, starting too young to do work

that increasingly dictates the defenseless character of his life. Thus he will be “from all sides streamed inward upon, bombarded, pierced, destroyed by that enormous sleeting of all objects forms and ghosts how great how small no matter, which surround and whom his senses take ... transfixed as between the stars’ trillions of javelins” (110).

Breaking off both the astral bombardment and a more mundane encapsulation of this model tenant’s likely course,<sup>56</sup> Agee quits these concentric histrionics, paralyzed by his inability “so to sustain its intensity toward this center human life, so to yield it out that it all strikes inward upon this center at once” (111), imparting the synchronous impact of numberless vectors on a single terminus: a concurrence impossible to achieve in writing. Inconclusively concluding his conjectures on how to communicate everything shaping an individual tenant child, he wraps up “Colon” with a plea for the reader’s cooperation and a hope (uncharacteristically enunciated in first-person plural) that for the remainder of his text “the whole of that landscape we shall essay to travel in is visible and may be known as there all at once: let this be borne in mind, in order that, when we descend among its windings and blockades, into examination of slender particulars, this its wholeness and simultaneous living map may not be neglected, however lost the breadth of the country may be in the winding walk of each sentence” (111). Although his medium only enables him to register one facet at a time (hence the appeal of Evans’s photography), Agee can yoke the intimate and the vast within an integrated expressive unit, syntactically binding centripetal and centrifugal currents together. In accord with his cartographical parallel, he seeks to superimpose a large-scale map on a small-scale one, plunging into the core of his subject while unrolling it to scrutinize its outermost margins. To accomplish this overlay without losing sight of either scale, Agee continuously centers himself, his consciousness riveted on one set of coordinates yet “spread on all quarters, the simmering dream held in



this horizon yet overflowing it” (219).

This centripetal and centrifugal flux is temporal as well as spatial. Agee settles as solidly in one time as he does in one place, but his liquid mind often flows away from the present that he narrates, backward to the primordial past or forward toward the illimitable future. Pointing up the chronological instability of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, on occasion he notes when certain sections (not organized sequentially) were written;<sup>57</sup> and he calls attention to his attempt to resurrect a single season of a single year by remarking rather dissemblingly: “The ages given, and tenses throughout, save where it is otherwise obvious or deliberately ambiguous, are as of the summer of 1936” (xxii). The book does indeed center on that narrow timespan, but it also spirals out to suggest that its subjects are “intimately connected with the bottom and the extremest reach of time” (56). As the Gudgers drift deeper into sleep, Agee lies wide awake on their porch, envisioning them as disembodied and ageless, in “a region prior to the youngest quaverings of creation” (21). Their descent into an unconscious state smacking of prehistory recurs with a twist in the volume’s last lines, when he and Evans, after dwelling on the present and the immediate instead of the distant past, finally fall asleep too. Agee similarly reaches out toward the boundless future when likening his dismay over the widespread inertia on a hot Sunday to the thought of “returning several thousand years after the end of the world, when nothing but the sun was left, faithfully blasting away upon the dead earth”—apocalyptic imagery he rescinds by retracting to the present, feeling even more disheartened that “this was not the end of the world, it was contemporary, the summer of nineteen-thirty-six” (380-81).

Notwithstanding his fixation on this historically brief, inescapably modern period, Agee looks both behind and ahead along a perpetual timescale to ponder the propagation of the species, the continuity of human existence through the formation of family centers,

which, he points out puzzlingly, “has been happening for a long while: its beginning was before stars,” and, in all probability, “will continue for a long while: no one knows where it will end” (55). What is knowable, though, is that each new generation is sustained in its upbringing by a centripetal bond which, as the generation matures, is loosened under the influence of a centrifugal countercurrent. Musing on an ordinary household, Agee writes, “While they are still drawn together within one shelter around the center of their parents, these children and their parents together compose a family,” which will only last so long as “the children are held to a magnetic center” (55). Inevitably “the magnetism weakens, ... against the strength of pulls from outside,” until “the children are drawn away” in the course of creating their own impermanent centers (56).

Farm families, moreover, are “drawn-round with animals” (213), domestic and wild. While some animals have little bearing on people’s daily living, others exert such formative ties with farmers that each one becomes a “kind of center and leverage” (213). Evans omits his pictures of a pig and a cow, but in the second edition he acknowledges the centrality of mules to the South’s agricultural economy<sup>58</sup> with a frontal composition of a harnessed team, wittily given a human foil by the facing plate of two pale-faced, nattily-dressed old men conversing in chairs before a shop window advertising a local dance.<sup>59</sup> Even though Agee, trying to do his part, hurriedly tallies all the flora and fauna on the three farms, he despairs of properly accounting for the layered richness of plant or animal or human life, “for, taking even a single center, the human animals alone, they live in an immediate and most elaborate texture of other forms of existence, of the whole need and fear and spread of nature on their part of the surface of the earth” (213).

The family, then, is just one type of center, encircled by many others. Centripetal controls that bind family circles are constantly threatened by disruptive centrifugal forces.

For tenant families struggling to subsist on land they do not own, the pressures exerted by their environment (social as well as natural) are chronic and overwhelming. Therefore, while admiring the farmers' tenacious will to survive, Agee nonetheless reflects on their ineluctable mortality: "The sphere of power of a single human family and a mule is small; and within the limits of each of these small spheres the essential human frailty, the ultimately mortal wound which is living and the indignant strength not to perish, had erected against its hostile surroundings this scab, this shelter for a family and its animals: so that the fields, the houses, the towns, the cities, expressed themselves upon the grieved membrane of the earth in the symmetry of a disease" (229). The simplest manifestation of this disease is insentient being; its most malignant complication is human consciousness. In proportion to its complexity, contends Agee, the unpreventable sore of existence scabs over with a substance interchangeable with the original wound itself. Consciousness, that is, both harms and heals human beings. Strategies for survival are forever bound up with knowledge of death's unavoidability. Albeit crushable with one kick from a mule's hoof, a skull still shields, and fashions itself around, an infinitely more fragile brain. Although a windstorm might level a house or ravage a field at any moment, the house's (deficient) sanctuary and the field's (doubtful) fecundity are all that tenant families can count on for protection and sustenance.

Agee's broodings on adversity and mortality are murkiest when he foregoes such tangible illustrations of the farmers' vulnerability as their ineligibility for home insurance or crop subsidies or relief work and either indulges in far-fetched analogies or resorts to sentimental, metaphysical abstractions. Fanciful jaunts away from Alabama in 1936 make him more susceptible to emotionalizing his union with those at the center of his narrative. Hence, gazing back six decades yet asserting the contemporary relevance of his "apparent

digression” to the unreconstructed tragedy of “this vast continental sorrowful clay” (391), he compares Southern tenants to prisoners of war at Andersonville: “each in your pitiably decorated little unowned ship of home, ten million, patient, ignorant, grievous, ruined, so inextricably trapped, captured, guarded” (392). Agee entertains only the vaguest hopes, however, for their political or economic liberation. His odd Civil War excursus gestures noncommittally toward a rescue that might free not only figuratively imprisoned tenant farmers and other maltreated peoples but all humankind.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, he overstresses his faith in the possibility of achieving personal rapport between members of different classes: his affinity with the three families on Hobe’s Hill meant to serve as a centripetal exemplar which might centrifugally inspire readers to rethink their attitudes toward less fortunate persons. Ultimate deliverance, though, leveling all sectors of society, can only come through death, as he underlines in ruminating on the Shady Grove cemetery: “one by one we shall all be drawn into the planet beside one another; let us then hope better of our children, ... let us *know* there is cure, there is to be an end to it, ... let us most quietly and in most reverent fierceness say, not by its captive but by its utmost meanings” ... the Lord’s Prayer (439).

Mirroring the centripetal then centrifugal movement but muting the bathos of this graveside supplication, Evans caps off his pictorial revisions to the reprint of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with photographs looking down at a sharecropper’s grave, then up at gourd houses hanging from a pole. Grounding the eye before lifting it skyward, these two shots complement (minus any rhetorically strained entreaties) Agee’s dual concentration on terrestrial and celestial realms. Despite the practical use of hollowed gourds as nesting boxes for martin swallows that decrease the prevalence of mosquitos in the South, Jeff L. Rosenheim argues that the final image of the second edition marks an overall vitiation of

the book's ethical effect: "With his view of a gourd tree stark against the cloud-filled sky like a rustic cross, Evans both heroicized and aestheticized the world of ordinary farmers. In so doing he overturned the grave specificity that occupied the ideological and artistic center of his original sequence of photographs," producing "an unfocused recapitulation" of the first edition's "single poignant statement about the lives of cotton tenant farmers in Hale County."<sup>61</sup> Although Rosenheim correctly emphasizes the de-specified center of the reissued portfolio, especially its fourth section, he does not consider that Evans may have been seeking to create more complex tensions between ethics and esthetics by expanding his geographic coverage and letting his centrifugal interests tug him gently away from his centripetal focus.

His first three sections also depict continual friction between the nuclear family's centripetal strength and centrifugal weakness. Evans generally proceeds from pictures of parents to those of children and a few group shots, along with those of their indoor and outdoor surroundings. In the second edition he reorders the Gudger series so that George and Annie Mae are followed by their bed, on which Agee imagines them conceiving their children, four of whom have survived. Opposite it is Evans's midrange frontal image of the Gudger house with the kids, their mother, and her visiting sister on the porch. While everyone else clusters unposed near the center, preadolescent Louise sits conspicuously apart, her decorous posture, frilly dress, and exposed legs boding imminent suitability as a bride. Emma, vexed by her father Bud's remarriage, had (against his advice) married at sixteen a stingy, jealous man more than three times her age. Despite threatening to leave him, she can no longer bear being home due to the presence of her slatternly stepmother, so she is about to be torn away (perhaps for good) from all her kinfolds on Hobe's Hill by reuniting with her contemptible husband in another state. Prior to her reluctant departure,

Emma posed with the Gudgers for a photograph that Evans did not use in either edition of the book but brought out for his 1971 MOMA exhibition. Arrayed in their Sunday clothes and arranged to comply with George's request, they are gathered on the dry dirt before an exterior wall of their pinewood house: a setting struck strongly by morning sunlight. The four children sit or stand with differing demeanors—Louise prim, Junior wry, Burt sulky, Squinchy downcast—on a bench behind which stand the three adults. In the middle, hair combed, face shaven, shirt clean (thus utterly unlike his weary aspect in a solo portrait), a confident George squints levelly at the camera, his arms draped about the shoulders of his wife and sister-in-law. On one side Emma smiles awkwardly at their contact; on the other Annie Mae grins proudly, her hands clasping Squinchy's to prevent him from wandering. The family is tenuously cohesive. "Its members are a copious source of energy," observes William Stott, "each radiating a self, and all together radiating a harmony of kinship. But they cover less than a quarter ... of the image.... Though they shimmer with consciousness and life, their bereft environment has the upper hand. The people actually seem to huddle together for companionship in an alien world."<sup>62</sup> In other words, as Agee recognizes, they must gravitate toward an ephemeral center to protect themselves against their unforgiving milieu. Owing to their evident contentedness, Stott speculates, this esthetically gratifying, compact portrayal of the Gudgers could have undermined the ethical tenor of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which primarily sought to inculcate compassion for its subjects.

Evans does find uses, however, for grouped Woodses and Rickettses. The former congregate in a bedroom as an intergenerational unit: Bud and his much younger second wife Ivy; their children Thomas and Ellen; Ivy's daughter Pearl, from an earlier common-law union; and Ivy's mother Miss-Molly, who is nearer Bud's age and, by her placement next to him, might be momentarily mistaken for his wife.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to the spruced-up

Gudgers, the Woodses are grimy and ill-clad. Save for a bandana covering his splotches of skin cancer, Bud is naked from the waist up, while rambunctious Thomas, held still by his father, is naked from the waist down. Pregnant once again, with baby Ellen asleep in her lap, Ivy wears a loose dress handy for nursing. Eight-year-old Pearl, in whom Agee detects an incipient wantonness handed down from her mother and grandmother, gazes off wistfully above the lens. Miss-Molly, the only person not barefooted, has on, below her smudged apron, a pair of castoff men's work shoes poorer even than George's, which Evans photographed against bare earth in homage of Van Gogh's *Les Souliers*. All three grownups in the Woods household stare shrewdly at the camera; its flash accentuates the family's dirtiness and nakedness. This is Bud's second go-around at forming a center; he has already reared several children now older than Ivy. In another portrait, only included in the first edition, husband and wife (with Ellen likewise asleep) sit side-by-side, divided by their bedrail, behind which Miss-Molly peeks into the frame from a dim doorway. Her position relative to them connotes, as Agee remarks in the excised portion of his "Work" chapter, "what happens when a family is broken: she lives among her married children. The old and widowed are thus taken care of, automatically. Quite as automatically, they are (usually) dropped out of existence," hardly noticed anymore.<sup>64</sup> Yet by usefulness and sheer weight of personality, "Mrs. Woods' mother is much luckier: strong, fierce and full of comedy; able to help powerfully with the work: she has, even, a loquacious and almost living companionship with her daughter and son-in-law: as if through a thin and perfectly transparent but unbreakable membrane of glass,"<sup>65</sup> a relationship aptly represented by the way she looks curiously over their shoulders from the depths of Evans's image, as though reasserting her central role in this ménage in spite of her apparent marginality.

As for familial roles and groupings in the third series of pictures, the photographer

both verifies and belies the haphazardness that the writer discerned at the Ricketts home. Agee comparatively notes, in a passage cut from “Work,” that “whereas there is method, plan, constancy and clarity of action, consciousness and purpose, in all that goes into the running and living of the Gudger family, and all this only a certain amount loosened and apathetic in the Woods family, there is in the Ricketts family almost nothing of the sort,” principally because its mother, Sadie, is too incapacitated to attend to its needs, “so that it is constantly uncertain and casual who is its cook the next meal, who is to do the milking, what vegetable will be planted, when a washing will be done, who is watching out for the safety of the children.”<sup>66</sup> Evans reveals something of this disorder via his quick studies on their untidy porch of the seven disheveled children, who often appear baffled or troubled, seeming to confirm the countywide stigmatization of them “as ‘problem’ children” (303). The second edition, though, substitutes more neutral images for the most pathetic ones in the first.<sup>67</sup> Among other improvements to this section, Evans replaces a shot of the eldest daughter, Margaret, nervously biting her nails in a wretched dress wet from dishwashing, with one of her in ampler garb, composedly preparing food at the cluttered kitchen table: it signifies how she has become, “next to her father the physical head and central magnet of the family.”<sup>68</sup> Regarding Fred’s patriarchal magnetism, the 1941 edition discloses him, as he never is beyond his family, securely in command, wearing spectacles and holding a hymnal as he leads Margaret and his sons, John and Richard, in Sunday singing<sup>69</sup> outside their house. Because its negative had gone missing by 1960, Evans “regretfully” removed this picture from the reprinted volume.<sup>70</sup> *American Photographs*, the catalog for his 1938 MOMA show, incorporates a complementary depiction of the hymn-sing featuring family members (Paralee, Sadie, Katy) on Fred’s other side. Spliced together, these halves of the same scene would have made for a more complete portrait of the Rickettses engaged in a



vigorous activity. The closest Evans comes to representing the whole household in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a composition in the reissue in which only the voluble father is absent. Surrounded by her glum brood, their humiliated mother, still “the spiritual head and the centre of love” among them,<sup>71</sup> clutches her smallest child, Clair Bell, who in both editions appears twice by herself: first slumped dispirited in her diminutive chair and then squeezing a sister’s elbow while confronting the viewer with a mesmerizingly vulnerable countenance. Agee foresees her joining eight siblings who all went to early graves, as the Rickettses have spiraled into debt, illness, and malnourishment.<sup>72</sup> The text thus qualifies a sly, self-allusive photographic gesture at generational continuity: a close-up of two family snapshots that Evans rearranged to juxtapose an old woman and a passel of babies.

“The family exists for work,” says Agee (322), since work is “the heart and centre of living.”<sup>73</sup> Surprisingly, notwithstanding this centrality, the photographs—as well as the words, if this topic is considered in proportion to others that the writer covered—do not much portray people actually working. The first edition, in fact, does not contain a single image of anyone at work on the farms. As is demonstrable throughout his archive, Evans prefers portraits taken in repose, along with studies of architectural façades and interior furnishings. The second edition, however, makes some effort at picturing the lineaments of agricultural labor. He supplies glimpses of its accoutrements (a pair of boots) and its handmaidens (a pair of mules); of its environment, both for raising crops (Woods’s land) and for marketing them (Ricketts’s wagon); of its domestic chores (Annie Mae taking in the milk and Margaret getting the dinner ready). As for fieldwork, Evans adds two plates that convey its criticality to the tenants’ livelihood. Among five photographs of Louise picking cotton—or rather, pretending to for his benefit, since she is shown posing in a field not yet mature enough to harvest—he selects one of her stooped over amidst the

plants, all but swallowed up by their luxuriant leafage; a patch of woods and touch of sky are cropped out above her, formally immersing the girl more deeply in her task by hiding this fringe of shade suggestive of respite from the sunbaked field.<sup>74</sup> Between two pictures of Bud not actively working but sitting and standing in a cottonfield that has just begun to bloom, Evans rejects a seated profile in favor of a frontal stance in which he looks boldly into the lens with legs splayed, arms akimbo, clothes threadbare, an inimitable hat slanted jauntily atop his rigid head, a long sack strapped across his torso to be dragged alongside. Bud's defiant comportment in this image—like his heroic carriage in the head shot that opens the Woods sequence—contradicts his downtrodden conditions, so that he seems to be master of his dominion. Nevertheless, his aging and weakening body has unfit him for the work and made him bitterly dependent on his female family members.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the car parked blurrily behind him at the cotton's edge serves as an antithetical token that Bud is a one-mule tenant farmer contractually bound to landowners whose vested interest in this crop entails importunate supervision of its progress, a persistent watchfulness that Agee evokes<sup>76</sup> through his recollection of the “long, sweeping drivings of a car between these spangling fields” during the run-up to picking season (337), though the auto in this photo is most likely his own, rather than one belonging to the Margraves brothers.

Evans's subtle enhancement of his portfolio's coverage of labor begs speculation about whether Agee, had he been alive for the book's republication, would have insisted upon reinserting the full text of “Work,” since he was reportedly obliged to pare it down shortly before his overlong manuscript went to press.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps not, as he confesses near the end of this chapter's omitted part: “I myself am so dizzied, and so disturbed over my lack of proper space, that I do not know quite where or how to anchor: or whether I had better not discard all I have written on this subject, and try to make some more clean and

succinct start.”<sup>78</sup> Although Agee therefore jettisoned most of what he had already drafted, anchoring himself around the specifics of cotton farming, his deleted passages provide a fuller consideration of how consumed the tenants are by manifold varieties of repetitive bodily toil, “so that work and need and continuousness and hopelessness and knowledge of infinitely meagre reward are all blended in every day in every grown brain and body in a sort of tension, ... and this tension, a kind of central spring at the heart, involving every muscle and every faculty, ... is the whole tone or key of living.”<sup>79</sup> Manual labor, in other words, composes the continuous tonal center of agrarian existence. The excluded portion of “Work” elaborates on Agee’s comments in the “Selection from Part I” printed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that a tenant family is “a cooperative economic unit” (322), with division of labor, excepting when responsibilities are “overlapped and collaborated,” between the man, who is “the servant of the year,” the woman, who is “the servant of the day,” and the children, who are “the servants of their parents,” boys apprenticed to their fathers and girls to their mothers (325). While allowing for deviations from this pattern among the three families, he contemplates whose work is routinely more demanding, the man’s or the woman’s. Agee at first submits that “the woman’s work is the harder, both by its continuousness from day to day, as against the seasonal intensities and relaxations of the man’s work, and by the fact that it is she who is, most essentially, ... the centre of all psychologic and physical vicissitudes among the children”; but he grants that there is “no real way of measuring,” for manly labor, even if it “breathes in and out more slowly, as the year does itself, ... during the months in which it is required of him is profoundly heavy and arduous, ... continuous from early morning into the late dusk,” on top of the “literal and symbolic weight of his situation as centre, king, and provider of his family.”<sup>80</sup> These gendered continuous centers persuade Agee to give up the comparison: “it would

be foolish to say that either is the more difficult: one can only say of each, that it totally fills and absorbs and exhausts the whole substance of each life, of whatever sex.”<sup>81</sup>

Tenant families, as servants of their landlords, must work together for one special, paradoxical purpose. Although Agee, resolute to reveal individual lives of the rural poor as rich in spite of hardships, is wary about denouncing tenantry as an unjust system, his intertwining fury and empathy are keenest with regard to “the cultivation and harvesting of cotton” (325), which is more psychologically than physically continuous, albeit more punishing on the body than any of the farmers’ assorted everyday jobs. In the published “Work” he angrily and compassionately delineates it as “the center of all their existence, the central work, . . . that which they cannot eat and get no money of but which is at the center of their duty and greatest expense of strength and spirit,” all their exertions pinned “between a sterile earth and an uncontrollable sky in whose propitiation is centered their chief reverence and fear, and the deepest earnestness of their prayers” (325). Assuming—as they never do—that the elements are merciful, and that neither weeds nor pests wreak havoc on the cotton, all the able-bodied hands (irrespective of age) in these families, who fatigued themselves during chopping season by repeated hoe strokes “multiplied into the many hundreds in each continuously added hour” (333), must then channel their vitality, at the hottest time of year, into the even more onerous process of picking, which, forcing them to be continuously bent over, further debunks every pastoral notion of husbandry<sup>82</sup> and reinforces the terrible paradox that though cotton is the least useful crop for farmers aspiring to attain self-sufficiency, it is the sole one convertible into badly needed cash. It is, consequently, “the central leverage and symbol” of their exploitation (326), “a strong stale magnet” attracting them helplessly to its production, “as if the plant stood enormous in the unsteady sky fastened above them in all they do like the eyes of an overseer” (327).

Under the vigilant regulation of their landlords, virtually enslaved tenants<sup>83</sup> must dedicate themselves to the maintenance of an inequitable economy. “To do all of the hardest work of your life in service of these drawings-apart of ambiguities;” Agee rages, “and to have all other tasks and all one’s consciousness stained and drawn apart in it: I can conceive of little else which could be so inevitably destructive of the appetite for living, of the spirit, of the being, or by whatever name the centers of individuals are to be called,” such that, “at the center of these meanings and their directed emotions,” he designates, reanimating a trite phrase, “the literal feeling by which the words a broken heart are no longer poetic, but are merely the most accurate possible description” (327). This empathic concern for human degradation touches the core of each life in the book.

Ever conscious that words can do but little to embody experience, and hence that his ventures to impart the devastating centrality of labor for tenant farmers will fall short of the real thing, in the cut part of “Work” Agee challenges readers by admitting himself “aware that like one in a snowstorm I have been going in circles; and that has pleased rather than dismayed me, for ... I kept on with the circlings: in the hope that by the slowly wound inane and earnest brutality and boredom of their reoccurrence a little might be set upon you of the unspeakable weight, and monotonies and cumulations, of the work itself: and in the hope that no task or process named or described could seem as merely one but as one of thousands in each person and of billions in the millions of them.”<sup>84</sup> Centrifugal reiterations thus compound centripetal precision, as Agee’s circular (or rather, in keeping with his multidimensional vision of reality, his spherical or globular) accounts mirror the continuous center of thankless labor undertaken not just by the farmers on Hobe’s Hill but by legions of others far afield. Lamenting the impact over a lifetime of such work, to perform which, he says, “a consciousness beyond that of the simplest child would be only

a useless and painful encumbrance” (320), Agee constantly circles round this one delicate center as both inhibitor and promoter of personal integrity.<sup>85</sup> In his chapter on education, ruing that the intelligence of tenant children “becomes hopelessly bewildered, drawn off its centers, bored, or atrophied” by their backcountry schooling (310), yet declaring that his “Harvard education is by no means an unqualified advantage” (311), he asserts: “the discovery and use of ‘consciousness,’ which has always been and is our deadliest enemy and deceiver, is also the source and guide of all hope and cure” (307). To be effective, to shatter bondages of insensitivity to injustice and imperceptiveness, education—he has in mind the informal sort one might receive by reading books such as his own or by living with the poor—should comprise “the whole realm of human consciousness, action, and possibility; it has above all to try to recognize and continuously to suspect and to extend its understanding of its own nature” (308). *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which Agee projected himself as “writing in a continuum” (62), and which he wished would “be read continuously” (xv), might be understood, indeed, as an ardent albeit skeptical continuous endeavor to extend the reader’s consciousness from its focal point of three tenant families to the recognition that every individual occupies a central place in the universe.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Agee, *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and Other New Manuscripts*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), xiv. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 148, 145.

<sup>5</sup> The former picture, a variant of one included in the second edition, appears on the cover of Victor A. Kramer's *A Consciousness of Technique in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Albany: Whitston Publishing Company, 2001), while the latter photograph, used in both editions, is reproduced with Agee visible on the left edge in Jeff L. Rosenheim's "'The Cruel Radiance of What Is': Walker Evans and the South," in Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund, and Mia Fineman, eds., *Walker Evans* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, in association with Princeton University Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>6</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>8</sup> "I would cut any number of inches off my frames in order to get a better picture," says Evans in Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59.2 (March-April 1971), 86. Indeed, many plates in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, when set alongside uncropped prints struck from the same negatives, show that Evans trimmed the edges—most severely in his portrait of Sadie Ricketts—in order to center more closely on certain persons, objects, or buildings. This tactic is especially conspicuous in the more informal group shots, since he could not completely cut out some human figures, parts of whose bodies remain visible behind or beside the central subject. See, for instance, his pictures of individual Ricketts children surrounded by arms, legs, or other partial features of their siblings, in addition to his close-ups of Burt and Squinchy Gudger. Even though an image of Burt looking engagingly into the lens was available, Evans (perhaps to connote stunted consciousness) chose to use one of him caught at a weak moment with an almost moronic expression, while cropping all but an overall strap over the shoulder of his father George, who stares keenly at the camera on the right-hand side of the full frame. As for Squinchy sitting in the dirt, his brother Junior's left leg intrudes on the photograph's left-hand side. For more on these depictions, see Edna Boone Johnson, "The Photographs of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Truths in Tandem," *Alabama Review* 44 (July 1991): 184-203.

<sup>9</sup> James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, ed. James H. Flye (1962; New York: Ballantine, 1971), 106-107.

<sup>10</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Noteworthy exceptions include Earl Fitz, “William Faulkner, James Agee, and Brazil: The American South in Latin American Literature’s ‘Other’ Tradition,” in Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, eds., *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 419-45; Richard King, “From Theme to Setting: Thomas Wolfe, James Agee, Robert Penn Warren,” in *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 194-241; Jeff L. Rosenheim, “‘The Cruel Radiance of What Is’: Walker Evans and the South,” in Hambourg, Rosenheim, Eklund, and Fineman, eds., *Walker Evans*, 54-105; Ronald E. Seavoy, “Portraits of Twentieth-Century American Peasants: Subsistence Social Values Recorded in *All God’s Dangers* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *Agricultural History* 68.2 (Spring 1994): 199-218; Christoph Irscher, “‘Muscles of Clay’: James Agee’s Southern Landscapes,” in Tony Badger, Walter Edgar, and Jan Nordby Gretlund, eds., *Southern Landscapes* (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996), 127-41; Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Trouble on the Land: Southern Literature and the Great Depression,” in Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, eds., *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 96-113; Angie Maxwell, “Feeling Burdened: James Agee, W. J. Cash, and the Southern Confession,” in Michael A. Lofaro, ed., *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 187-98; George Brown Tindall, “The Lost World of Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” in Michael A. Lofaro, ed., *James Agee: Reconsiderations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 21-31; Sylvia Jenkins Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66: The Southern Poor White in Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976); Ted Ownby, “Three Agrarianisms and the Idea of a South without Poverty,” in Richard Godden and Martin Crawford, eds., *Reading Southern Poverty between the Wars, 1918-1939* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 1-21; Stuart Kidd, “Dissonant Encounters: FSA Photographers and the Southern Underclass, 1935-1943,” in Godden and Crawford, eds., *Reading Southern Poverty*, 25-47.

<sup>12</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 58, 60, 61.

<sup>14</sup> “An accounting of the train,” he admits in another journal entry printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, “in no way advances the narrative and indeed obstructs it,” even though he recognizes that a multi-planed approach to reconstructing his journey “is bound to break the rules of narrative time” in order “to give an account of things for their own sake” (8). Against the sagging or confusing of occurrences in his memory, he thus strives to convey how his experiences in the South “were continuously intense, exciting, full of suspense” (9). In spite of his anxiety that “Wolfe has pretty thoroughly covered the subject,” Agee attempts “to write a little about this train trip” since it signified the start of his personally electrifying Southern sojourn (3). While cutting these passages helped to tighten a book that became bloated with seemingly ancillary digressions, Agee’s endeavors to recapture his ride on a “continent-eating train” (4), over rails stretching out “continuous a thousand miles” (5), do involve some novel features, such as his cinematic panning and adoption of the land’s point of view as “a rumor of iron” bears down on it and bruises its integrity (6).



<sup>15</sup> James Agee, "The Project Is Important," *Fortune* 8 (October 1933), reprinted as "Tennessee Valley Authority" in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, ed. Paul Ashdown (1985; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>16</sup> James Agee, "The American Roadside," *Fortune* 10 (September 1934), reprinted in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, 60, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Ashdown, Introduction to *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, xxvii.

<sup>18</sup> Musing on Alabamans' use of the word "levee" to denote terracing against erosion of farmland situated "the width of a state and still more from the river," Agee marvels at its centrifugal influence: "So the Mississippi has such power that men who have never seen it use its language in their work" (329).

<sup>19</sup> Like his emphasis on the river's eternal course rather than its industrial transformation, Agee's account of the "room" beneath the Gudger house stresses that this "cold plaque of earth . . . which might have been field, pasture, forest, mere indiscriminate land," has only been—in a long historical view—fleetinglly altered by the structure above it: "At a bright time in sun, and in a suddenness alien to those rhythms the land had known these hundred millions of years, lumber of other land was brought rattling in yellow wagonloads and caught up between hammers upon air before unregarding heaven a hollow altar, temple, or poor shrine, a human shelter, which for the space of a number of seasons shall hold this shape of earth denatured: yet in whose history this house shall have passed soft and casually as a snowflake fallen on black spring ground, which thaws in touching" (147).

<sup>20</sup> *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye*, 75.

<sup>21</sup> James Agee, "T.V.A.: Work in the Valley," *Fortune* 11 (May 1935), reprinted in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Dating from March 1936, Evans's pictures of soil erosion in the vicinities of Jackson, Edwards, Oxford, and Tupelo, Mississippi, are viewable in *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938*, introduction by Jerald C. Maddox (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973). This series was prompted by a directive early that year from Evans's boss Roy E. Stryker, who, as quoted in *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), had written to him at Vicksburg with instructions for his movements while in the South: "Put quite a little effort in getting us good land pictures, showing the erosion, sub-marginal areas, cut-over land. These should be taken wherever possible, showing the relationship of the land to the cultural decay" (118-19). As with Stryker's other suggestions, photographic publicity for government projects, including land reclamation, was his first priority, but Evans used the opportunity to produce rather striking visual studies of abstract forms and multilayered depths of field on eroded land. None of these photographs, however, was reprinted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

<sup>23</sup> Agee, "T.V.A.: Work in the Valley," *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 87, 61.

<sup>25</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Agee, "T.V.A.: Work in the Valley," *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, 86, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Agee does not consider the farmers deprived due to their relative dearth of household goods. In fact, as he observes in a notebook entry printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, "The possessions even of the almost most impoverished: say, of all, nearly, who are not wandering: so accumulate that their number at its most sparse seems monstrous, and the people deceptively rid" (127). In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* his reflections on the tenants' belongings, not just on their lack thereof, thus show him straining for solidarity with them against the crass materialism imposed by snobbish middle-class standards of taste. The Gudgers' bureau, albeit presently in poor shape, "was at some time a definitely middle-class piece of furniture," or rather, as Agee corrects himself, "it would have been a lower-middle-class imitation of a middle-class piece, mimicking weight, bulk, gloom, ornament, and expense" (160). Their cupboard—glowingly suffused with sunlight in an Evans photograph looking into the kitchen—"has a sort of middle-class lovenest look to it which connects it to advertisements in women's magazines and to the recipe voices of radio women, so that it is here peculiarly insulting and pathetic; and already it has picked up tenant-kitchen redolences for which it was never intended" (179). As throughout the rural South, this cabinet is called a safe by its owners, provoking Agee's wry comment "that farm families, whose most urgent treasures are the food they eat, use for its storage-box the name used among middle-class people for the guardian of money, ledgers, and 'valuable papers'" (179). Utensils for eating, meanwhile, "are of that very cheap, light, and dull metal which seems to be almost universal among working-class families, and in the more charitable and idealistic kinds of institutions, and which impart to every ounce of food they touch their peculiar taste and stench, which is a little like that of a can which has contained strong fish" (181). Equating the tenants' silverware with that of hospitals and asylums, he indirectly bestows unpleasant gustatory and olfactory sensations upon a picture centering on shabby cutlery stored against a wall in the Woods kitchen: the plate which Evans shifted to the Ricketts section in the book's reissue. As Agee reveals in his account of eating supper at the Gudgers', however, such implements could actually be as appealing as they were revolting to him, whereas he only affixes negative adjectives to an innocuous lunchtime tableau at a Birmingham hotel: "Two sunday-clothed middle-class southerners and their adolescent daughter ate at a hard black table in the dead middle of the room, talking very little. When they spoke it was as if they were embarrassed at the loudness of their quieted voices; and their silver was sharp and loud in the brittle cold of ugly air" (375). His contempt is palpable for the staid, inhibited character of middle-class urban existence, in contrast to his revitalizing fellowship with the working rural poor.

<sup>28</sup> Agee perhaps finds it especially endearing that some of these chickens are named after the Rickettses' neighbors and kinfolk: Tom and George are two of the roosters, while Ivy and Annie Mae are two of the hens.

<sup>29</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 13. In addition to sketching a play and drafting a few movie scenarios, Agee mentions having begun a novel, which he would work on intermittently

over the next two decades, leaving an unfinished manuscript at the time of his death. As published posthumously in 1957, *A Death in the Family* contains for its prologue a short piece written in Florida early in 1936 and first printed under the title “Knoxville: Summer of 1915” in *Partisan Review* 5 (August-September 1938): 22-25.

<sup>30</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> In “T.V.A.: Work in the Valley,” reprinted in *James Agee: Selected Journalism*, Agee quips that the TVA’s thorny task of buying land to be submerged upstream of scheduled dams “from farmers and of helping them move elsewhere and of removing the graves of their forefathers involves what people who have no interest in human beings like to call human interest” (69). He remarks that those who do not own their land—accounting for 95,000 of the valley’s 230,000 farmers: “Not enough, perhaps, to balk TVA’s program; but enough to lift them beyond mere sentimental discussion” (75)—present a particular problem for the agency, since they will not be compensated for losing their acreage. As with another contentious issue, racial tension in the valley, Agee broaches but does not delve too deeply into the situation of “The Share Cropper,” seeming to encapsulate his own superficial treatment when he concludes that “the share cropper and the Negro are two profoundly painful problems that TVA, by no fault or oversight of its own, has no constitutional power either to solve or to get far under the skin of” (75).

<sup>32</sup> In his journals Agee recalls attending several meetings of the Communist-affiliated Committee for the Defense of Southern Workers (which was absorbed into the League for Southern Labor during his leave from *Fortune*), including a fundraiser (whose female attendees and overall ambiance he brutally satirizes due to his depoliticizing mood upon returning from Alabama) in Greenwich Village on June 19, 1936, the night after getting his sharecropping assignment. See *James Agee Rediscovered*, 19-21.

<sup>33</sup> As with the identities of most persons in the book, these place names are Agee’s aliases for actual communities in Alabama. Hence, Hobe’s Hill is Mills Hill; Madrid is Havana; Cookstown is Moundville; Centerboro is Greensboro; Cherokee City is Tuscaloosa. He never mentions Hale County by name, and Birmingham is too big to hide.

<sup>34</sup> For this elevated view of the Gudgers’ backyard, looking down on their smokehouse, henhouse, barn, fields, and woods, see John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 185.

<sup>35</sup> “She has never been much good for milk,” Agee remarks of the Gudgers’ cow, which, “tethered from spot to spot in the green stretches” beside the barn, as he describes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (214), can be seen in two images printed in *Walker Evans: Photographs for the Farm Security Administration, 1935-1938*.

<sup>36</sup> The paired photographs preceding the Sprott plate in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* likewise depict conflicting centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Evans offers a frontal view of Glean Hill School; its open doorway gives onto a slash of shadow within, both attracting the viewer’s eye and stopping it on the threshold at this composition’s center. By contrast, his picture of the railroad station in Edwards, Mississippi, invites viewers to

extend their imaginations outward, beyond the parked cars at left and the vacant platform at right, along the empty tracks curving into the distance.

<sup>37</sup> While Agee was abashedly delighted to stay on Hobe's Hill for several weeks, Evans, as a more urbane, private, detached man less rapturous about their temporary rustication, retreated again to sleep most nights at a hotel in Centerboro, even though certain sections of the book—notably the tripartite "(On the Porch"—contribute to a mistaken impression that they lived equally with the Gudger family during their research.

<sup>38</sup> Since the locations of Evans's photographs are not identified in the book, knowing that this shot comes from Birmingham (or that several others come from Mississippi) requires "outside" information.

<sup>39</sup> In the second edition Evans adds two photographs taken on the outskirts of Selma, both of country stores with false fronts: one an unpeopled shack plastered with advertisements, the other a larger establishment doubling as a gas station and harboring a handful of men on its porch. This second plate, a frontal view, is juxtaposed with an angled picture (thus paralleling Sprott's contrasting centripetal and centrifugal images) in Vicksburg of a row of ramshackle storefronts. Sitting outside a café at the far end of the row, a single person is balanced in stature by a fire hydrant at the near end, above which a wooden overhang has partly collapsed. Another Vicksburg photo comes from an intensive set of variations Evans made outside a barbershop, where several black men sit on a bench or lean against the beat-up building which itself leans off plumb to the left. For the book he selected the version that incorporates a car parked curbside with a white man in the passenger seat. A study in intersecting gazes, the shot displays how Evans centers the viewer's eye even in a composition with multiple figures. While the shadowed white man glowers from right to left, two of the sunlit black men glance down the street in the opposite direction as the one in the middle stares at the camera. Since the sideways looks, though not engaged, in effect cancel each other out, viewers are drawn toward the man at center, who redirects their gaze back to the photographer. The next plate, likewise in Vicksburg, is of a ruined plantation mansion, its chipped columns and shattered windows a grim reminder not only of the South's former grandeur and current dilapidation but also of the defunct slavocracy replaced by a corrupt structure of absentee landlordism and cotton tenantry that oppressed whites as well as blacks.

<sup>40</sup> Agee underscores that the Gudger domicile serves as his spiritual center by borrowing parts of the Anglican Mass (e.g. "Gradual" and "Introit") to subdivide his recollections of admission into this "holy house" (394), by describing a family Bible he finds in the front bedroom, and by quoting from Psalm 43 at the start of "Shelter" and "Inductions." The former chapter is introduced with a single verse: "I will go unto the altar of God" (123), while the latter section is headed by the entire psalm, including an apt appeal for divine guidance: "O send out thy light and thy truth that they may lead me, and bring me unto thy holy hill and to thy dwelling" (360).

<sup>41</sup> Even when, with George's help, Agee retrieves his car the next morning, he stresses his baptismal-like rootedness in the land on and around the Gudger farm. Hence, walking up a muddy path across the hill field, he notes, "In some parts it was packed hard enough to

be slippery, the rest of the time it let our feet down as deep as plowed dirt itself and we lifted them out in each step with one to three inches of clay hung on them. The cotton plants brushed us at the knees so that in no time we were drenched there" (428-29).

<sup>42</sup> Agee's sensual description of this lamp, with its base like a fluted skirt and its reservoir like a flattened globe through which his nocturnal consciousness ranges centrifugally out over the world into outer space before retracting centripetally to focus again on the tenant family asleep in the adjoining room, is later reiterated when he limns the Gudgers' table set for dinner, with all the objects on the worn oilcloth "surrounding the unlighted lamp which stands in the bare daylight in the beauty of a young nude girl" (182). The picture Evans took looking into the kitchen presents the lamp in a comparable pose.

<sup>43</sup> Gazing out centrifugally over the globe at its human inhabitants everywhere contracted centripetally into their homes, Agee broods on them: "All over the whole round earth and in the settlements, the towns, and the great iron stones of cities, people are drawn inward within their little shells of rooms, and are to be seen in their wondrous and pitiful actions through the surfaces of their lighted windows by thousands, by millions" (54).

<sup>44</sup> In addition to amplifying the isolation of Hobe's Hill when reporting distances between it and other Alabama locales, Agee positions himself in "a house set deep and solitary in the country" (49), delineating the Gudger farm as "suspended and emplaced in solitude out at the end of a mile of dwindled branch road, and not within sight nor within a half-mile's walk of any other inhabited house" (127). In "A Country Letter" he tries to give readers traction on his whereabouts by directing them on a night walk along the plateau, starting at the Gudger homestead and passing by their Negro neighbors before descrying the Woods house "shrunk against its centers under the starlight" (76) and then arriving at the Ricketts place. As with his listing of localities, Agee again reverses his trajectory to introduce each member of the Ricketts and Woods families by first name before returning to the Gudgers, whom he has already named: all these persons, he envisions, "spreaded in high quietude on the hill" (77). As for estheticizing the tenants' milieu, Agee indulges in some obscure poetic cartography prior to conducting this night walk, fancying that they have boarded the world's "richly peopled" ark, which steers soberly under the stars but "finds no ararat" (74). More compellingly, his string of metaphors for the Gudger place splices centripetal and centrifugal imagery. Hence, the fields are "the spread and broken petals of a flower whose bisexual center is the house" (129); the spring gurgles up from underground "at the end of a slim liana of dry path running out of the heart of the house, a small wet flower suspended" (131); the entire farm is "the wrung breast of one human family's need and of an owner's taking, yielding blood and serum in its thin blue milk, and the house, the concentration of living and taking, is the cracked nipple: and of such breasts, the planet is thickly and desperately paved as the enfabled front of a goddess of east india" (129). Agee thus emphasizes the house's centrality—and its corporeality, as heart, nipple, sexual organ—on multiple metaphorical levels, while suggesting, through the efflorescence of one metaphor into another, that such exploitation is widespread, that the world is as rife with these prostituted human centers as a many-breasted goddess from the far side of the planet. He later retracts his observation that the house resembles a barn or a box-car, not wanting to misrepresent its ordinary universality, since it is, after all, "a human house, of a sort stood up by the hundreds of thousands in the whole of a country"

(421). And on the porch in the dark with Evans, visualizing architectural resemblances but attenuating the thickness of settlement, Agee remarks that the land is “scattered with houses, most of them more like than unlike the house on whose front porch we lay; thinly scattered with houses; much more thinly with towns; very remotely with cities” (229).

<sup>45</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Another excised paragraph published in *James Agee Rediscovered* similarly universalizes (and sacralizes) the tenants by centrifugally asserting what they stand for to the authors: “These families were chosen with no little care, fairly to represent all cotton tenants of the white race in the United States. They also represent, or are, or are living, embodied symbols of, other things, not less important, in our esteem. They are not tenants merely but are of the working and ill-used people of the world; not working people merely but members of the human race; not human beings merely but sons and creatures of God; not merely creatures of God but themselves divine, themselves divinity. In our study we hope to hold these facts in regard, however seriously that may impair the work as a sociological tract” (148).

<sup>47</sup> Eugene Chesnick, “The Plot Against Fiction: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *Southern Literary Journal* 4.1 (Fall 1971): 61. “Like his model, Whitman,” contends Chesnick, “Agee understands consciousness as a comprehension of what is near and what is far, but he achieves only a kind of stasis because his identification with people is at once too near and too far to produce action” (67).

<sup>48</sup> *James Agee Rediscovered*, 127. This entry, which Agee expatiates upon in the “Colon” section of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, begins with him pondering how to make “the pure physical driving and implanting power of the environment ... weigh the life out of a reader” (126).

<sup>49</sup> Having by intense listening narrowed the fox’s location to “within say twenty degrees of the ninety on the horizontal circle which at first it could have occupied any part of,” he and Evans are thence “helped in locating it (as a second point in any geometry always is helpful, whereas one point alone can run you crazy) by the opening-up of a second call” (464), after which they fluctuate over identifying more closely with the nearer or farther caller. Agee carries out a similar geometrical exercise when hearing the sawmill whistle; in the wake of its shriek the clearing is left “weak with silence from all sides of which are reflexed in diminishment the noise like a weltering, withering flat of the contour waves from a center: they are spread on the hills like the explosive sudden flowering of a steel rose and it is retracted to the root” (94). Relying on both ear and eye, meanwhile, when surveying the Gudger farm, he perceives, linking him to outlying locales, “Now and then a faint windy noise of speed or a noise of grinding, sweeping a western crescent beyond the trees and through one thin sector of trees, for two seconds, the uncertain glimpse of a gliding bulk: and these are the thinly spaced sedans and trucks which use a minor artery between two county seats profoundly distant to a walking man” (128).

<sup>50</sup> Agee adapts this concept of common needs to organize his “Findings and Comments” into subsections on money, shelter, clothing, education, and work. In “Education,” having

listed and ridiculed the contents of other textbooks found at the Gudger home, he refers to his quotation from Louise's geography text as being so revealing of the inane curricula in country schools "that this chapter is probably unnecessary" (301).

<sup>51</sup> One such poem, "Sun Our Father," was first published in *The Forum* in February 1937 and later included in *The Collected Poems of James Agee*, ed. Robert Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), where it appears as follows:

Sun our father while I slept  
 You lifted like a field of corn  
 The smiling and the peaceful strength  
 Of those that are the race new born:

The infant future waked in you  
 Once more, and at the world's rich breast  
 Drank the day's courage and lay down  
 In fearless and refreshing rest:

And while the russian field you raised  
 Dreams in the starflung shadow's keep  
 You wake these backward lands to work:  
 Good work to do before we sleep. (154)

Not only exhibiting Agee's simultaneous appreciation of day and night across different sectors of the planet but also revealing his communist sympathies, this poem envisions the newborn race of Soviet Russians working contentedly and intrepidly in the sun while the American speaker sleeps, then renewing themselves under the stars as the "backward lands" of the non-socialist United States wake to work. Another contemporaneous poem, printed in *James Agee Rediscovered*, more acridly imagines Americans, who have not yet learned to combine "The love of Jesus and the mind of Marx," daily ingesting the poisons of capitalism, moving Agee to petition for them at rest: "O might their dreams like water from deep wells / Wash them awake and wiser to their living" (231). Before they can be purified, however, he puts them to bed via a tenderhearted opening stanza foretelling his hemispheric consciousness in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*:

Now the steep and chiming coasts  
 Alaskan lose the final light:  
 Greenland and Bermuda still  
 Sleep in the watches of the stars:  
 And like two leaves upon a lake  
 From ice to ice along the sphere  
 Float the Americas in the damp  
 Complete renewal of the night. (230)

<sup>52</sup> This expansion of his consciousness from diurnal to seasonal occurs, unsurprisingly, at night, with Agee lying on the porch looking out over the darkened countryside, lamenting that it has been misused by land-grabbers and imagining it temporarily relieved (except in

urban centers) from the harmfulness (even if unintentional) of human activity: “But now, in the short yet extreme winter of that shadow of itself through which a continuous half of the earth twists its surface, this fragile and shallow colonization was reduced to its least, the few chilled embers which cities, thanks to their intense concentration of life, manage steadily fainting to sustain clear into the relief of daybreak, and, on the face of the open earth, only the infinitesimal and starlike infrequent glints of sickness here, death and love there. All normal human life was drained away; all creatures of the day time, under the passage and influence of that shadow, were shriveled as unanimously into sleep as when, in the leaning of the northern tracts of the globe away from the sun, all vegetable nature faints like the fading of a blush, the bees are stunned, and on the cold air in glittering swarms the tribal birds drain southward. This whole area of the planet itself, quite as literally as a weary human head, was loosened on its neck, was nodded and yielded over to the profound influences and memories, unknown to its sun-blind daytime, of its early childhood, before man became a part of its experience” (246-47).

<sup>53</sup> Agee expresses complicated, often contradictory ideas about symmetry. At one point he heralds “a symmetry sensitive to so many syncopations of chance” that “it is in fact asymmetrical, like Oriental art,” yet nonetheless, “because it is so pliant, so exquisitely obedient before the infinite irregularities of chance, it reachieves the symmetry it had by that docility lost on a ‘higher’ plane” (230-31). Applied to the Gudger house, the exterior of which is “almost perfectly symmetrical” when seen from the front (139), his esthetic craving for symmetry and fondness for “the particular quality of a thing hand-made” lead him to excuse imperfections of form: “this exact symmetry is sprung slightly and subtly, here and there, one corner of the house a little off vertical, a course of weatherboarding failing the horizontal between parallels, a window frame not quite square, by lack of skill and by weight and weakness of timber and time; and these slight failures, their tensions sprung against centers and opposals of such rigid and earnest exactitude, set up intensities of relationship far more powerful than full symmetry, or studied dissymmetry, or use of relief or ornament, can ever be” (144). Agee’s admiration for the house, seeing as it “is rudimentary as a child’s drawing, and of a bareness, cleanness, and sobriety which only Doric architecture . . . can hope to approach” (144), prompts him to declare that “all really simple and naïve people incline strongly toward exact symmetries,” and then to append a footnote that so do “many of the most complex, and not many between” (156). Since he considers himself to be a complex person, this sly remark unites him with simple people against the middling sort.

<sup>54</sup> With consciousness—whether active or passive—as the receptacle or catchall for his examinations, Agee personifies the rooms shyly looking back at him, so that “the floor, the roof, the opposed walls, the furniture, in their hot gloom: all watch upon one hollow center” (220). Stressing the compulsiveness of his centripetal observations, instigated by his centrifugal subconscious, on his first night in the front bedroom he suddenly realizes, “without my knowledge or will, my left arm has slowly extended, the lamp in the hand at the end of it, as far as I can stretch, and I turn upon the center of the room” (420).

<sup>55</sup> Poetically expounding the evolutionary biology of this generic tenant seedling, Agee muses on both its astral and terrestrial bonds: “We should first meditate and establish its ancient, then more recent, its spreaded and more local, history and situation: how it is a



child of the substance and bowels of the stars and of all space: how it is created forth of an aberration special to one speck and germ and pollen fleck this planet,” that aberration being human life (101). He anticipates this meditation in “A Country Letter,” noting that every single human being, while endowed with the uniqueness of individuality, is made of the same essential matter found not only on this planet but throughout the universe: “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). Awestruck that each person, each “new and incommunicably tender life,” will go on “sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe,” Agee is thus boggled by “how it can be that a stone, a plant, a star, can take on the burden of being; and how it is that a child can take on the burden of breathing; and how through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another, does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to fragments of nothing: these are matters too dreadful and fortitudes too gigantic to meditate long and not forever to worship” (56-57).

<sup>56</sup> The start of “Education” similarly evokes this centripetal barrage of countless forces on the consciousness of any child (not necessarily one in a tenant family) from birth onward: “Every breath his senses shall draw, every act and every shadow and thing in all creation, is a mortal poison, or is a drug, or is a signal or symptom, or is a teacher, or is a liberator, or is liberty itself, depending entirely upon his understanding: and understanding . . . is the one weapon against the world’s bombardment, the one medicine, the one instrument by which liberty, health, and joy may be shaped or shaped towards, in the individual, and in the race” (289). As for Agee’s centrifugal summation of everything a tenant child endures in growing up and going out into the world, he piles up “all new burdens taken on, the early laboring, subservience, acclimation to insult and slendering of forms of freedom, the hideous jokes of education and their sharp finish into early worse, the learning of one’s situation relative to the world and the acceptance of it, the swellings and tremblings of adolescence, the bursting free from home into wandering, the fatal shining and sweet wraths of joy in love and the locked marriage and the work, the constant lack of money, need, leanness, backbroken work, knowledge of being cheated, helplessness to protest or order this otherwise, clothes worn, landlords imposed on one, towns traded in——” (109-110). Invoking this section’s title, Agee cuts short his long list of indignities by declaring: “This is all one colon:” (110). Elsewhere in the text, as though to suggest that words can no longer amplify his subject, that he has reached the point of descriptive exhaustion, he likewise breaks off passages or chapters with an extended dash or a rapid recapitulation. See, for example, the denouements of “A Country Letter,” “Shelter,” and “Work.” After one dizzying stream of details and metaphors for the Gudger house, Agee interrupts his cataloging and speculating with the blunt self-injunction: “But enough” (146).

<sup>57</sup> “(On the Porch,” for example, dates to 1937, and Agee claims not to have revised it, even though the footnotes he later added (mainly to its second part) sometimes contest the text proper. His answers to a *Partisan Review* questionnaire, printed as “Intermission: Conversation in the Lobby,” come from 1939, with notes appended in 1940 and 1941. The exact order in which he wrote all the other sections is impossible to trace, perhaps fittingly, considering that the narrative is exceedingly nonlinear.

<sup>58</sup> Agricultural mechanization occurred more slowly in the South than in other parts of the country, thus prolonging the reliance on mules—plus delaying the eviction of tenants—across much of the Cotton Belt. For a useful overview, tying this uneven development to FSA photography, see Stuart Kidd, “The Cultural Politics of Farm Mechanization: Farm Security Administration Photographs of the Southern Landscape, 1935-1943,” in Badger, Edgar, and Gretlund, eds., *Southern Landscapes*, 142-54. Agee, meanwhile, endeavoring to articulate “the causes and kinds of sadism in the South,” notes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that whereas cows are treated fairly kindly so as not to harm their udders, mules are handled cruelly by both black and white farmers, especially by whites, since “this farmer is liable to be an expert within the whole range of bullying, battering, and torturing this particular animal, and to have peculiarly urgent egoistic and sexual need to exert full violence and domination over something living, preferably something at least as large and strong as himself. It should be added, in further suggestion, that the mule stands readier victim than any other animal because he is used in the main and most hopeless work, because he is an immediate symbol of this work, and because by transference he is the farmer himself, and in the long tandem harness wherein members and forces of a whole world beat and use and drive and force each other, if they are to live at all, is the one creature in front of this farmer” (216).

<sup>59</sup> For variant images of their conversation, see the series of eight pictures reproduced in *James Agee Rediscovered*, which also contains previously unpublished photographs that Evans made of black tenant farmers.

<sup>60</sup> Thus he prophesizes that “on the stone of this planet there is a marching and resonance of rescuing feet which shall at length all dangers braved, all armies cut through, past, deliver you freedom, joy, health, knowledge like an enduring sunlight: and not to you alone, whose helpless hearts have been waiting and listening since the human world began, but to us all, those lovable and those hateful all alike. And whether this shall descend upon us over the steep north crown I shall not know, but doubt: and after how many false deliverances there can be no hopeful imagining: but that it shall come at length there can be no question” (392). In spite of his oblique allusion to the potential deliverance of communism descending from “the steep north crown” of Soviet Russia, Agee characteristically doubts any sort of political salvation for economic victims.

<sup>61</sup> Jeff L. Rosenheim, “‘The Cruel Radiance of What Is’: Walker Evans and the South,” in Hambourg, Rosenheim, Eklund, and Fineman, eds., *Walker Evans*, 105.

<sup>62</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 287.

<sup>63</sup> The first edition, due to the preceding picture (discussed below) of Bud and Ivy sitting side-by-side with their baby Ellen in the foreground and Miss-Molly barely visible in the background, does not create this momentary confusion. In neither edition, though, is the Woods section’s opening portrait of its patriarch followed with one of his wife, as is the case with the Gudger and Ricketts family sequences. By not giving Ivy the same stature in relation to her husband that Annie Mae and Sadie are accorded through solo plates of them next to those of George and Fred, Evans may be hinting at the resentment that Agee

discerns among Bud's older children over his remarriage. In the second edition, however, Evans does add, later in the Woods series, a shot of Ivy tending maternally to disgruntled Ellen, juxtaposed with a shot (discussed below) of Bud standing in his cottonfield.

<sup>64</sup> Agee quoted in Victor A. Kramer, ed., "The Complete 'Work' Chapter for James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." *Texas Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1972): 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. As one indication of Miss-Molly's robustness, Agee recalls her, in the "Selection from Part I" of "Work" included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "chopping wood as if in each blow of the axe she held captured in focus the vengeance of all time" (324). By contrast, Woods is so hampered by age and sickness that he must rely, against his will, on the industriousness of his wife and her mother. Already aided by Pearl, these women are such vigorous and steady pickers that Bud does not need a hired hand to get him through the cotton harvest. In the excluded portion of "Work" edited by Kramer, Agee explicates that whereas the Gudgers "follow the classical family pattern," with division of labor by sexes and ages, the Woodses are "hovered between this and a still more antique pattern, ... In mountain and primitive families, with the tradition of the man as the hunter, it still persists, though not in full force, that the woman does the plowing and cultivating. Mrs. Woods, young and tirelessly strong, is a natural primitive, or parallels it in her anarchic lack of embarrassment before custom: she ... likes all the work tenant men are supposed to do. Her husband forbids her doing it. It goes against his own tradition of what is right: still more, he dislikes it because he is older and weaker than he wants to appear to himself or to others, these others [particularly his grown daughters Annie Mae and Emma] being critical of his having remarried at his age" (38-39).

<sup>66</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., "The Complete 'Work' Chapter for James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," 39.

<sup>67</sup> Although still omitting his cheeriest images, favoring scowls or pursed lips over toothy grins, Evans removes a candid profile (snapped with his Leica) of Katy Ricketts in which she—rather like Burt Gudger in the unflattering picture of him (see note 8) used in both editions—has a doltish expression: a misleading representation belied by her surly visage in another plate (likewise retained) beside her brother Richard, who smiles faintly in two additional solo shots inserted into the reissue. Evans also adds a warm portrait of Paralee appearing half-wary and half-friendly in the entryway to the barn. And besides switching his views (discussed below) of Margaret, he similarly substitutes a respectful photograph of Fred taken from middle distance for a grainier close-up accentuating the unbecoming facial features that Agee describes: "long matted hair on the low forehead, flashing, foxy, crazy eyes, a great frowning scoop of dark mustache" (273).

<sup>68</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., "The Complete 'Work' Chapter for James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," 40.

<sup>69</sup> Agee characterizes Fred as "piteously insecure" (271) when among strangers, a trait he disguises with his vociferousness. Even at home, "the father talks continuously" (91), as if to maintain his centrality in the Ricketts household. His horn-rimmed spectacles, Agee comments, "are worn only on sunday and are perhaps mainly symbolic of the day and of

his dignity as a reader in church” (261). Despite only going to school through fifth grade, Fred is quite haughty about his ability to read not only language but also music: talents he flaunts by looking intently at the battered hymnal with his family gathered round him. In further proof of their religiosity as practiced on their own premises, Agee mentions that a handwritten sign of welcome hanging above the derelict fireplace in their disused room—all visible in a picture added to the second edition—“is the relic of a religious effort I will speak of later” (197), though he never does.

<sup>70</sup> See Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 278.

<sup>71</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 40.

<sup>72</sup> Even with the Ricketts family’s multiple calamities, this survival rate seems extremely low, so perhaps some of these siblings did not die but grew up and moved out of the nest. Agee never mentions any of the deceased by name; he simply reports that “a number” of the children died (119), and that number is presumably eight because he also reports that those living in the house comprise “a man and his wife and seven of the fifteen children they have brought into existence” (195). As for Agee’s prediction of four-year-old Clair Bell’s impending death-knell, he does not specify a malady but says that “it will only be by a fortune which cannot be even hoped that she will live much longer” (438).

<sup>73</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 34. Discounting the actual value of leisure for tenant farmers and dismissing the common accusation that they are shiftless, Agee oddly asseverates, “I am not speaking falsely but truly when I say that nearly all conscious existence here (of these people) is focused on and poured into work, very hard work, without hope, beyond the plainest expectations between staying scarcely and a little less than scarcely alive, and certainly without any choice or question of not working.”

<sup>74</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, in her “‘Two Pricks’: The Colon as Practice,” in Caroline Blinder, ed., *New Critical Essays on James Agee and Walker Evans: Perspectives on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), astutely calls attention to the likelihood that Louise is performing for Evans. “Collaboration implies complicity,” writes Rabinowitz, “the two are in this together” (130). Inexplicably, however, Louise’s sack appears half full in one of the five pictures. Did she and Evans stuff it with material that would approximate the bulge of freshly picked cotton? Another shot from the series, the only one in which she faces the camera, complements Agee’s sketch of her at work in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: “Louise, lifting herself to rest her back, the heavy sack trailing, her eyes on you” (324). As for the photograph that Evans selected and cropped for the second edition, while Rosenheim uncharitably waves it aside as “an ineffective study” in “‘The Cruel Radiance of What Is’: Walker Evans and the South,” in Hambourg, Rosenheim, Eklund, and Fineman, eds., *Walker Evans*, 90, T. V. Reed offers a sensitive analysis of its esthetic and ethical significance in “Aesthetics and the Overprivileged: The Politics and Ethics of Representation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” in his *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). “Reminiscent of Jean-François Millet or

Camille Pissaro,” remarks Reed, “it pictures a young woman stooping amidst a sensuous sea of cotton leaves. Her spine is bent into the shape of a question mark, the elegant straw hat we’ve seen before [haloing Louise in a frontal portrait] now bent nearly to the ground in labor. The beauty of the composition immediately strikes us, draws us into the scene. But then it holds us until we begin to feel that beauty dash up against the aching coil of the girl’s spine and the question punctuated by her body becomes a political one” (48). Yet another of the five images estheticizes Louise’s hat by looking directly down on it, under which her twisted body is hardly visible as she crouches among the cotton plants.

<sup>75</sup> In accord with Evans’s photos of Bud idle in the field, Agee observes that during the picking season “Woods is badly slowed by weakness and by the pain in his shoulder; he welcomes any possible excuse to stop and sometimes has to pause whether there is any excuse or not” (342). He is likewise “too old and too sick” to pursue the wage-work at a sawmill that Gudger and Ricketts, tiding over the inactive season between chopping and picking, are lucky to take up this summer with grudging permission from their landlords (121). For more on how the Woods household compensates for Bud’s flagging strength, with Ivy and Miss-Molly taking up the slack, see note 65.

<sup>76</sup> Agee acknowledges that working conditions are more unrelentingly severe on large plantations, “where a good deal of the picking is done by day labor and is watched over by riding bosses,” but he contends that oversight of tenant farmers is almost as relentless: “A man and his family working alone are drawn narrowly together in these weeds even within themselves, and know they are being watched: from the very first, in town, their landlords are observant of which tenants bring their cotton first to gin and of who is slow and late” (341).

<sup>77</sup> See Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 27.

<sup>78</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 48. The unanchored writer did indeed dispense with most of his foregoing material for this chapter. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* he preserved just four pages, labeling them a “Selection from Part I.” As for the three pages preceding that selection and opening “Work,” they constitute the more concise beginning that Agee felt was imperative before his detailed scrutiny of cotton farming.

<sup>79</sup> Agee quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” 34.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> “There is much of the black pastoral in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” Stott points out in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (309). While approving of Dwight Macdonald’s contention (from his eulogy for Agee’s and Evans’s volume in the Spring 1948 number of *Politics*) that, like an anti-*Works and Days*, it is “‘a chronicle of decay

instead of growth, where the land does not nourish those who labor on it but destroys them,” Stott argues that Macdonald “overstates the morbidity of farm labor in the book” when he claims that “‘Hesiod chronicled a way of life; Agee and Evans, a way of death,’ ... To call the book an antipastoral ignores its religious dimension, and also—and much more serious—its fierce skepticism about its ability to communicate the reality it treats” (309). Agee’s “Work” chapter validates Stott’s nuanced understanding of the volume’s vexed adaptation of pastoral motifs. Although in other sections, when limning his own ecstatic absorption in the countryside, Agee occasionally falls prey to sentimentalizing pastoralism, to an enraptured celebration of rural life that overlooks its downsides, his treatment of the tenants’ labor is far less sanguine. For instance, sketching their midday dinner break during cotton-picking season, he admonishes, with a sarcastic allusion to the *Georgics*: “It is of course no parallel in heartiness and variety to the proud and enormous meals which farm wives of the wheat country prepare for harvest hands, and which are so very zestfully regarded by some belated virgilians as common to what they like to call the American Scene” (341). And with the tenants back at work under the hot sun, he freezes their tedious actions when seen from afar and wraps them in figurative religious imagery: “They seem very small in the field and very lonely, and the motions of their industry are so small, in range, their bodies so slowly moving, that it seems less that they are so hard at work than that they are bowed over so deeply into some fascination or grief, or are as those pilgrims of Quebec who take the great flights of stairs upon their knees, slowly, a prayer spoken in each step” (342). Agee’s reconfiguration of pastoral tropes, moreover, balances centripetal and centrifugal imaginings, as he concentrates on the labor of three families yet strives to encompass that of all tenant farmers. At the end of winter, when it comes time to get the land into condition for a new season, he thus details the tasks of a representative tenant, “which of the three or of the millions I do not care” (328). While sweating in ashamed anticipation of rummaging through the Gudger home, Agee recalls both “his labor, George, at this instant, hard, in the strenuous heat, and upon the tanned surface of this continent, this awful field where cotton is made, infinitesimal, the antlike glistening of the sweated labors of nine million” (136). Likewise, as quoted in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” Agee, in an antipastoral vein, centripetally then centrifugally ponders the shriveled roots of “this simple family flower: ... this one living generation of even this one shallow city of such flowers who in their grand and sterile field on this southern country are dedicated ... into the raising of the cotton plant, that they may by incidental hold the frayed string of existence together within each of them: and these unfolded backward upon all past generations into the sources, and spread in horizontals such that the planet and its cities are one glittering membrane of these unpaid agonies” (38).

<sup>83</sup> Intimating that the tenants are hopelessly resigned to their lot, in Kramer, ed., “The Complete ‘Work’ Chapter for James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” Agee says that, for them, “quiet, unquestioned, fatal is the knowledge of enslavement” (34).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48. Highlighting the hostility he foments between writer and reader, Agee takes pleasure in his verbal circling because “each of the circles, such as it is, has been turned in obedience of an intense need and wish to make clear, however blind, and if as each has rounded past remembered landmarks any sense of dead and heavy weight and of oppressiveness has added itself upon you, then I am grateful” (47).

<sup>85</sup> “Because Agee’s consciousness is so forceful and rich,” Stott says in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, “his most persuasive propaganda against the tenant system was exactly that it diminished consciousness” (311).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A SENSE OF MEASURE: IMAGE AND WORD IN *A FORTUNATE MAN, A SEVENTH MAN,* *AND ANOTHER WAY OF TELLING*

A few years after the republication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* attracted considerable attention in the United States, a British writer dwelling in France knocked on the door of a Swiss photographer from Geneva with the hope of learning how to use a camera. John Berger and Jean Mohr quickly became friends and then collaborators. With Agee's and Evans's volume serving as a "wonderful example" of how images and words could work in tandem ethically and esthetically to represent the rural poor,<sup>1</sup> the European pair undertook a series of projects about similar subjects. From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, Berger and Mohr produced three unclassifiable books that might best be termed, somewhat oxymoronicly, "imaginative documentaries."

The formal or representational paradox implied by this phrase, which the writer himself suggested to characterize *A Fortunate Man* while it was still being put together,<sup>2</sup> applies just as well, albeit with shifting emphases, to his next two collaborations with the photographer. *A Seventh Man*, while highly imaginative in execution, adheres primarily to the documentary mold, whereas *Another Way of Telling*, while in part documenting a way of life, dissociates itself from the factual basis of this genre and makes greater claims to be interpreted as a work of the imagination. In form as well as content, all three books demonstrate the coauthors' "shared sense of measure" in combining text and photographs to express empathy and solidarity with specific experiences of the working classes.<sup>3</sup>

As Berger and Mohr investigated the economic conditions and social dimensions of various groups of marginalized others, they came increasingly to identify with subjects



hailing from the countryside. Unlike the journalistic assignment that precipitated *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, their books originated as private endeavors, even if influenced by broader public debates. Taken together, the three volumes move from a geographically narrow focus to a much wider one and then back to narrow again, from assessment of an extraordinary individual's role in a rustic community (*A Fortunate Man*), to scrutiny of the transcontinental migration of manual laborers (*A Seventh Man*), to illumination of the peasants' vulnerable yet persevering culture (*Another Way of Telling*). While each project followed a unique impetus and trajectory, which I will briefly outline to summarize their major points before delving into deeper analyses, all three remained autonomous ventures in witness and artistry, verbal and visual experiments aiming to unite theory and practice, mixed-genre works circumventing the typical linearity and tautology of illustrated texts, passionate and compassionate explorations of the lives of poor rural people unvalued, exploited, or eclipsed by modern, urban, industrial capitalist society.

The titular subject of *A Fortunate Man* is not, however, a working-class person but a general practitioner of medicine. Nevertheless, since the 1967 volume is less a biography than an examination of this country doctor's practice among foresters and villagers in an impoverished area of southwestern England, the setting and its inhabitants are as important to the authors as to their protagonist. Although Berger changes the physician's name to Sassall, never specifies where he works, and concentrates on his professional activities, the book in fact emerged from the writer's close attachment to him and his environs.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1950s Berger was living in the Forest of Dean in rural Gloucestershire near the Welsh border; he befriended the local village doctor after consulting him for a minor medical problem.<sup>5</sup> A decade later Berger returned to the region with Mohr. They stayed with Sassall for several weeks, shadowing him wherever

he went, collecting verbal and visual portraits and landscapes as markers of his dedication to this place and its residents.<sup>6</sup>

To preserve the doctor's privacy, *A Fortunate Man* neither discusses his wife and children nor his friendship with the writer. Hence its text's ethical dimension differs substantially from that of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, except in the matter of using pseudonyms. Whereas Agee insists on elaborating the tenants' relationships among their kinfolks as well as with the authors, Berger occludes family dynamics and authorial involvement in order to shed light on Sassall's rapport with his patients and his position in the community. If Agee's ethics revolve around exhaustive disclosure, Berger's are rooted in tactful restraint. Consequently, while both writers abjure any deviation from actuality, their narrative stances evoke contrasting tensions: Agee's obsessive subjectivity encumbers his goal of reproducing reality without artistic mediation; Berger's detached objectivity disguises his witnessing function and affinity with his subject.

Yet the writer's esteem for and resemblance to the title character of *A Fortunate Man* are unmistakable. Sassall, proclaims Berger, is fortunate because he "believes that his work justifies his life."<sup>7</sup> The doctor is frequently albeit guardedly likened to an artist. Akin to Berger, Sassall "has an appetite for experience which keeps pace with his imagination" (*FM* 78), quests after universal rather than specialized knowledge, scorns "the syntax of common-sense" as a passive ideology (*FM* 108), takes on a weighty commitment to social responsibility but feels hindered by a sense of his individual inadequacy, "suffers the doubts and enjoys the reputation of a professional idealist" (*FM* 133). Just as Sassall, according to Berger, "cures others to cure himself" (*FM* 77), Berger, according to Geoff Dyer, "writes about Sassall to write about himself."<sup>8</sup> Berger obliquely draws a parallel between himself and his protagonist by noting that a reclusive writer

living nearby the doctor is the only other person in the district “whose mode of thinking is comparable” (*FM* 108). Though suggestive of his own writerly situation, this cryptic comparison is probably not meant to be a self-reference, not only because Berger was no longer living in the Forest of Dean (and never mentions that he once did live there) while working up his observations into a book but also because he has always sought to avoid reclusiveness in relation to his subjects.<sup>9</sup> Sassall, too, not least by virtue of his vocation, is not a recluse. Seconded by Mohr’s sensitive photographs of the busy doctor, Berger clearly admires his conduct toward his patients, his refusal to separate their diseases or despondencies from their total personalities, his conscientious treatment of their psychological disturbances over and above their physical ailments, his fraternal recognition and skillful alleviation of suffering, “his imaginative ‘proliferation’ of himself in ‘becoming’ one patient after another” (*FM* 143).

Moreover, Berger admires—and even seems to envy—Sassall’s active role (apart from his occupation) and special standing in the community. In spite of being typed a gentleman, the doctor has managed to muddle his class status through his unpretentious deportment and social intimacy with the much poorer villagers. For instance, he spurs a communal enterprise to transform an overgrown castle moat into a public garden, yet he mostly assigns credit for it to volunteer laborers. By working alongside these men Sassall earns the right to “qualify for their conversation ... [and] to share a language which was a metaphor for the rest of their common experience” (*FM* 100). But his manner of speech, indicative of a reflective cast of mind honed by higher education, is still locally peculiar. Although he is accepted and trusted by his neighbors, they consider him their superior. At once proud of and protective about the doctor, they intuit that symbolically “he represents their lost possibility of understanding and relating to the outside world” (*FM* 109). His

privilege is thus not one of wealth but of disposition, insofar as “they have been brought up to settle for a minimum,” making them “tough, uncomplaining, modest, stoical” (*FM* 142), whereas, emotionally and intellectually, “Sassall expects the maximum from life” (*FM* 143). He laments their unfulfilled potentialities but is disquieted by his realization that their “backwardness” confirms his authority, or, stated “more crudely,” that he “can strive towards the universal because his patients are underprivileged” (*FM* 144). Yet this “bitter paradox” (*FM* 143), after all, enables him to serve as “the growing force ... of their self-consciousness” (*FM* 111), as “the objective witness of their lives ... [and] the requested clerk of their records” (*FM* 109). As though he were a foreigner welcomed to keep track of the community’s history and daily affairs, Sassall’s honorary rank among the foresters foreshadows, as Dyer observes, Berger’s actual relationship with the Alpine peasants fictionalized in his trilogy *Into Their Labours*.<sup>10</sup>

However, Berger identifies so intensely with Sassall’s unorthodox mentality and his humble albeit privileged station as unofficial keeper of communal records that the writer does not respond as sensitively to the doctor’s patients. Upon finishing his trilogy over two decades later, Berger would declare his solidarity with all those categorized “as *backward* (i.e., as bearing the stigma and shame of the past) ... because it is such women and men who have taught me the little I know.”<sup>11</sup> But in *A Fortunate Man* he himself does some incautious categorizing, for he is not ready to grant that country people have much to impart. Even if they possess local knowledge, Berger regrets their unsatisfactory introspection and impersonal talk, leading him to condescending pronouncements not plainly verified by the book’s pictures. “There are large sections of the English working and middle class who are inarticulate as the result of wholesale cultural deprivation,” he generalizes (*FM* 98), and then asserts that the volume’s unspecified locale is especially

deprived. As with Agee isolating Hobe's Hill from "civilization," Berger overemphasizes the Forest's insularity, claiming that "the subjective feeling of remoteness has little to do with mileage" (*FM* 103) and more to do with the concentration of power under monopoly capitalism. Politically static and economically depressed, this heavily forested district is not a center of agriculture or of industry. Its working population therefore forms "neither a proletariat nor a traditional rural community" but has "something of the character once associated with wandering traders like tinkers" (*FM* 89). Beyond this wistful association, Berger does not say much particularly or positively about them. There may be stronger family ties, "a greater sense of continuity" (*FM* 133), smaller materialist appetites, and "less loneliness in the Forest than in many cities" (*FM* 134), but its denizens nonetheless are "unfortunate compared to what they could be—given better education, better social services, better employment, better cultural opportunities" (*FM* 135).

Berger's next documentary endeavor scrutinizes manual workers who try to better their fortunes by migrating from poor agricultural societies to prosperous urban ones. If his attitude toward the working class borders on patronizing pity in *A Fortunate Man*, it alters to furious solidarity in *A Seventh Man*. His tone partakes of two linked emotions: anger at the global economic system that necessitates and exploits migrant labor, and empathy with the exploited who are seeking to remake their lives by sending industrial wages back to their families. Not having, as with Sassall, someone of his own sensibility to identify with, someone else who witnesses and cares for the rural poor, Berger himself (along with Mohr) gets closer to the experiences of this class, not just representing but vehemently standing up for it. The nemesis in both books is capitalism, with the first's hero a fortunate man succoring the unfortunate, and the second's collective hero all the displaced masses of underprivileged men sustaining the lifestyle of the privileged.

But what made Berger become so sympathetic to migrant workers? And how did *A Seventh Man*, as he reassessed it in 2010, cultivate an “intimate address ... to those who have experienced the uprooting and separation of families” by emigration?<sup>12</sup> A possible clue may lie in the writer’s own voluntary expatriation from Britain in the sixties. Yet Berger downplays this correlation. While allowing that certain aspects of “living abroad, no longer speaking every day in my mother tongue, ... made it easier for me to identify with their experience,” he finds “no real equivalence” between “the poverty that forced them to emigrate, to look for work,”<sup>13</sup> and the host of less easily defined factors that prompted his self-imposed exile.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, residing on and traveling around the Continent did increase his firsthand observation of its approximately eleven million migrant laborers.<sup>15</sup> “Most people didn’t notice them,” he reflects, “but to me they were so evident.”<sup>16</sup>

In his 1972 speech accepting the Booker Prize for *G.*, Berger fervently announced his intentions for his new project. Migrants, he rued, “leave their own places and culture and come to do much of the dirtiest and worst-paid work in the industrialised areas of Europe,” which made him wonder: “What is their view of the world? Of themselves? Of us? Of their own exploitation?”<sup>17</sup> To answer these questions, Berger and his photographic collaborator would need to travel, often with interpreters, to many countries. Although he said the prize’s cash award could begin to fund this costly research, Berger alleged that the money was tainted by the Booker McConnell Corporation’s long history of exploitive trading activities in the Caribbean, which had impoverished West Indians and driven legions of them to migrate to Britain for menial jobs. To militate against the appalling irony that his “book about migrant workers would be financed from the profits made directly out of them or their relatives and ancestors,” he thus resolved “to turn this prize

against itself” by sharing it with a movement dedicated to fighting against neocolonialism in the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup> “The half I give away will change the half I keep,” averred Berger, who stressed that his donation was not prompted by guilt, bad conscience, philanthropy, or even politics, but by “my continuing development as a writer: the issue is between me and the culture which has formed me.”<sup>19</sup> Framing his receipt of the prize around personal and cultural ethics, around his revulsion at industrialism’s inequities and inhumaneness, helped him to clarify his aims for future work, specifically for his study of migrants.

Berger and Mohr likewise clarified their focus as their investigation evolved. They limited it to male migrant laborers in northwestern Europe’s metropolitan hubs, while urging a parallel inquiry into the experiences of migrant women.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, making an admittedly “artificial” distinction “in order to define as sharply as possible the new phenomenon of millions of peasants migrating to countries with which they have had no previous connection” (*SM* 12), the authors eliminated from their consideration those who came from onetime overseas territories and concentrated on internal European migrants from six southern nations: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey. *A Seventh Man*, resultantly, does not examine Britain, where the majority of foreign workers were former colonial subjects, and it ranges widely across continental Europe. Other than in Geneva, Berger and Mohr collected their material separately, in contrast to their earlier joint documentation of the Forest of Dean. Often traveling on assignments for various United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization and the International Labor Office, Mohr accumulated a sizable file of photographs from which he and Berger later made selections to suit the latter’s developing text.

In the economic realm, “developing” is a dirty word in *A Seventh Man*, or, rather, a sanitizing euphemism that has recently replaced the undiplomatic “underdeveloped” as

a descriptor for economies producing migrant workers. That politically obsolescent adjective, observes Berger, is useful (though rarely used) as a belittling verb: “An economy is underdeveloped because of what is being done around it, within it and to it. There are agencies which underdevelop” (*SM* 25). That is, governmental and commercial entities from “developed” northern European states ally to perpetuate underdevelopment on their periphery, so as to meet their labor shortages with a ready pool of unemployed foreigners. Hence Berger excoriates the capitalist contradiction between championing domestic productivity and encouraging stagnation externally. He also censures the urban romanticization of the countryside, the false assumption that the land always yields more than enough for its tillers while leaving a surplus for city dwellers, the concealment of modern rural poverty’s social basis, the collusion of wealthy merchants and semi-feudal landowners with Western capitalists in blocking local development and discouraging political reform. “Without the example of a revolutionary party,” the writer insinuates his Marxist standpoint, “the economic and social relations which create and maintain rural poverty, appear to be unchangeable. Therefore those with the most initiative do the one thing which seems to offer hope: they leave” (*SM* 37).

The movement of impoverished peoples from village to metropolis—and their transformation from a peasantry into a proletariat—is by no means unique to Europe in the third quarter of the twentieth century when Berger is writing. On the contrary, it has been an ongoing, progressively globalized feature of the industrial world. The migration that concerns him and Mohr is distinguished, however, by its largely temporary nature. Although this circumstance would modify after the book’s publication in 1975, at that time permanent resettlement, at least legally, was seldom an option. Work contracts, as a rule, were for one year, with obligatory release months and without accommodation for



family members. Host societies bore minimal responsibility for guest workers' welfare. Such workers are ostensibly "immortal because continually interchangeable. They are not born: they are not brought up: they do not age: they do not get tired: they do not die. They have a single function—to work" (*SM* 68). Temporary migration, in other words, divests a migrant of manhood and converts him into an automaton. Berger therefore deplores a quandary at the root of his subject's experience: "To re-become a man (husband, father, citizen, patriot) a migrant has to return home. The home he left because it held no future for him" (*SM* 62), because of its apparently eternal underdevelopment.

Alluding to the photographs of *A Seventh Man*, Berger plays further on the varied connotations of "develop"<sup>21</sup> to elucidate the migrant worker's internal fragmentation and disorientation. Degraded by his labor and alienated from his leisure, his reality alternates between exertion and fatigue. When not working, he feels disconnected from his sense of purpose, with nothing to do, even if relaxing in the company of his workmates, besides "withdraw into personal anticipations and memories" (*SM* 171): a paradoxical separation despite togetherness exemplified by Mohr's nearby picture of a barracks bedroom with several migrants staring absently downward while one strums a guitar. Lamenting the psychological "consequences of economic underdevelopment," Berger argues that the worker's present, when off the job, is "reduced to a series of fixed images relating to past and future, to his values and hopes. These images are the landmarks of his life, but they remain static; ... They cannot develop because they are beyond the reach of his energy" (*SM* 175). While each image is itself motionless and undeveloped, collectively they are volatile, seeming, in relation to the migrant's self-image, to be "hurtling through space, like stars travelling in different directions, so that the distance between them is always increasing" (*SM* 175). Only by pouring his energy back into work does the migrant ever

rid himself of this eerie impression, “for he believes that by saving his wages he will be able to rejoin these images and animate them” (*SM* 175). Ultimately he dreams of making such mental images, like the photos of loved ones in his pocket, superfluous by returning to his homeland and reclaiming his life.

But going home (at least for good) is harder than expected. The economy there has likely remained stagnant or declined. Although the temporarily returned migrant is accorded prestige for his successful foray abroad, lasting reintegration usually proves chimerical. “The village behaves like a beggared king” (*SM* 225). While it has become dependent on his wage-earning capacity, it nonetheless lords over him its old-fashioned judgments. It cannot truly fathom the bewildering effects of his metropolitan experience. “Unchanging as the village is,” even so “he will never again see it as he did before he left. He is seen differently and he sees differently” (*SM* 224). Outwardly citified but still a peasant at heart, the migrant is excited but chagrined every time he comes back to his birthplace. Each annual return is a rehearsal for his ultimate one, when he has achieved his savings target. But his estimates are illusory. As Berger declares, “The final return is mythic. It gives meaning to what might otherwise be meaningless. It is larger than life. It is the stuff of longing and prayers. But it is also mythic in the sense that, as imagined, it never happens” (*SM* 220). There is no livelihood for him at home now any more than before, and so he will soon feel the pressure to depart again. Berger rebuffs normalizing apologetics that would lump the migrant worker’s displacement under abstract headings: “The Road to Development: The Unification of Europe: The History of Capitalism: even The Oncoming Revolutionary Struggle” (*SM* 225). None of these categories adequately subsumes or compensates his essentially homeless experience.

Shortly after charting this migratory homelessness, Berger, who had been moving

restlessly for much of his career, finally made a long-term home for himself in the French Alps. A direct result of his book on migrant workers, his relocation to a small peasant community in the Haute-Savoie set the stage for *Into Their Labours*, the major writing project that would occupy him over the following fifteen years. While *A Seventh Man* presents engaging glimpses (visual as well as verbal) of village life, it principally tracks working and living conditions in the metropolis. To understand more fully the world that migrants leave behind but stay tenuously attached to, Berger decided to inhabit it before its age-old features and values were completely obliterated by “modernization”: another euphemism, in this case for “systematic elimination,” as he trenchantly points out.<sup>22</sup> The writer was determined to render peasants “before they were gone from the earth.”<sup>23</sup> Yet to do so, he had to learn “how to tell stories in a way that could hold and embrace their experience,”<sup>24</sup> since their range of choices differed so drastically from those of the urban characters he had previously written about. Scaling back his modernist esthetics—which had reached a pinnacle in *G.*—while drawing on oral history and participant observation, Berger’s trilogy fuses traditional narrative forms with selectively experimental techniques to concoct, in James Clifford’s oxymoronic phrase, “ethnographic fictions” that chronicle the survival, marginalization, and disappearance of poor rural dwellers.<sup>25</sup>

Berger’s immersion in an Alpine village also supplied the groundwork for his third collaboration with Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, published in 1982. Developing concurrently with the trilogy’s shifted focal point, this “book of photographs about the lives of mountain peasants” is meant, as its title indicates, to devise an alternative mode of storytelling that might encompass their experience pictorially instead of literarily.<sup>26</sup> Its longer gestational period, relative to *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*, signifies both the authors’ collaborative patience and their deeper absorption in one region. When Mohr

began taking pictures of Berger's new neighbors and environs, the writer initially told the photographer that his images would have to await "another, more general book" to be put together after the first volume (*Pig Earth*) of *Into Their Labours*.<sup>27</sup> Mohr did not mind the delay: "It is not a central concern of mine to get my photographs published straight away for some specific project. When I have a good subject, or rather, when a good subject has me in its power, I wait for the fascination, or at least my sense of interest, to die down."<sup>28</sup> This avowal accords with Berger's notion that he and Mohr "share a sense of measure."<sup>29</sup> Balancing enthusiasm and discipline, Mohr's sense of measure emanates from a stoicism born of the contradiction between his awareness of "the dangers of excess" and his "habit of being startled" by everything that passes before his lens,<sup>30</sup> while Berger's own sense of measure similarly stems from a process of correcting (word by word and step by step) the reckless exaggerations with which he ordinarily sets forth on artistic ventures.

This process of continual correction, creating a sense of measure, guides not only their independent and collaborative practices as writer and photographer but also—most significantly in *Another Way of Telling*—their collaboration with their subjects. Pressed about whether they really capture the interior life of those they portray, Berger and Mohr both emphasize the importance of establishing trust through working relationships. Mohr talks about striving "to be in close connection with the people you are taking pictures of, and even to correct the way you have been approaching them," which sometimes leads to an almost unsolvable situation, "because after a few days living with peasants ... you get so involved that you are tempted to leave aside your camera," to forgo picture-taking and pitch in with more urgent tasks such as haymaking or cleaning a stable.<sup>31</sup> Corroborating this unassuming, participatory method, Berger affirms "that it is only constantly living with people for quite a long time that one can perhaps begin to suggest something with

photographs, of the subjective experience.”<sup>32</sup>

But does it matter how long? What about Mohr’s pictures of migrant workers, mostly taken when he was hurriedly passing through places? Or his shots of English foresters with whom he only came into contact during the country doctor’s rounds? Do those briefer encounters negate the possibility of conveying subjectivity? Although both authors would surely stress that the length of time spent with their subjects should be measured qualitatively, not quantitatively, their firmer rootedness in the Haute-Savoie and their abiding identification with the French peasantry amount to an ethical imperative about correcting preconceptions toward disadvantaged people or places via longstanding partnerships. “During seven years the men and women from our village and in the nearby valleys have collaborated with us,” Berger and Mohr state at the start of *Another Way of Telling*. “What we show is in the most profound sense their life’s work” (*AWT* 7). Local persons collaborated by asking or agreeing to be photographed, as well as by contributing their opinions about how to compose and interpret images. Hence while *A Seventh Man*, like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, interrogates authorial rights to represent “the lived experience of others” (*SM* 11), *Another Way of Telling* attempts to communicate more transparently “the way peasants look at themselves” (*AWT* 84).

Is not the book necessarily mediated, though, by the way its creators look at peasants? Notwithstanding their active participation, peasants are not in fact its sole subject. Berger and Mohr additionally aimed “to produce a book about photography,” delineating how the photographic image is an ambiguous “meeting place where the interests of the photographer, the photographed, the viewer and those who are using the photograph are often contradictory” (*AWT* 7). While *Another Way of Telling* is in some respects more concrete and concentrated than its predecessors, inasmuch as it depicts a

particular way of life in great detail, in other respects it is more abstract and wandering, as invested in constructing theories around photography as in practicing them.<sup>33</sup> Unlike *A Seventh Man*, its arguments are not chiefly economic or political, since these dimensions of peasant culture are analyzed incisively in the “Historical Afterword” to *Pig Earth*, but semantic and narrational, directed toward crafting a visual grammar that could serve as the foundation for a visual form of storytelling comparable to memory. Without veiling their socialist outlooks,<sup>34</sup> the authors just as keenly explore how photographs might be marshaled to express their subjects’ own way of looking at the world: a communal vision informed by agrarian traditions, vigorous work routines paired to the seasons, recognition of scarcity rather than presumption of plenty, improvisational endurance, acceptance of contradictions, and a cyclic model of time. The peasant worldview appeals to Berger and Mohr not least because it opposes the way that images are typically deployed in modern society, as vessels of factualness or as consumerist goads: public uses that deny both “the innate ambiguity of the photograph” and “the social function of subjectivity” (*AWT* 100). Even though “a photograph isolates the appearances of a disconnected instant” (*AWT* 89), enabling it to be used (frequently, as in advertising, with deliberate mendacity) apart from its original, living, temporal context, photos occasionally preserve “instants of revelation” which seem, like memories, “to withstand the flow of time” (*AWT* 280). Berger and Mohr seek to restore interconnectedness and approximate lifelikeness by configuring revelatory photographic sequences, “to use images of reality in a way that stops them being framed, stops them being isolated; therefore stops them being objects, or ... commodities.”<sup>35</sup> Their holistic determination “to unframe the image ... to un-isolate ... particular experiences or experiences of one class” (in this case the peasantry) is also a determination “to un-isolate the experience of specialists, that is to say a photographer, or a writer, or the viewer.”<sup>36</sup>

Berger's most radical effort to inculcate unspecialized understanding of visual experience and promote oppositional uses for reproduced images is *Ways of Seeing*.<sup>37</sup> Its form, perhaps even more than its arguments, is dedicated to those ends. The same might certainly be said for the "imaginative documentaries" he and Mohr fashioned before and after that polemical watershed. Content is likewise inextricable from if not subordinate to design in *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling*. Indeed, to no negligible extent, their form *is* their argument. While the precise manner of interweaving words and pictures varies from book to book, in retrospect Berger refers to all three of his collaborations with Mohr as "narrative dialogues" in which they sought to converse with a mutual sense of measure so as to avoid mere repetitiveness.<sup>38</sup> By their lights, creating measure is not a matter of weighing out visual and verbal portions in accordance with "any preordained schema" or "conceptual plan"<sup>39</sup> but rather of orchestrating a measured rhythm or suitable gait for pages to be turned. A sense of measure thus fosters the flow of photo-textual representations, so that neither medium is likely to dam or trip up the other. "An illustrated book has to advance on two legs," asserts Berger, "one being the images, the other the text. Both have to adapt to the pace of the other ... and to walk together, in step with the story."<sup>40</sup> In purely verbal stories "steps are not only between narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word. Every step is a stride over something not said" (*AWT* 284-85). Analogously, in illustrated tales omitted images invisibly litter the narrative's footpath. A sense of measure requires just as sure a sense of what to leave out as to put in. The art of measuring is above all an art of selecting, of pruning as well as compiling the items that might be printed on page after page.

Furthermore, in such interdisciplinary collaborations, a sense of measure entails symbiotic appreciation for each contributor's strengths. Berger and Mohr both recollect

that assembling their books always proceeded flexibly by trial and error, as they sampled potential combinations of words and images, cutting one if the other better expressed an intended point or more authentically exemplified an experience. Berger mainly took the lead in these sessions. Each project, remarks Mohr, taught him humility, since he had to accept that many of his best pictures were “somehow distracting.”<sup>41</sup> At times he felt more like a brick-maker than a mason,<sup>42</sup> providing Berger the material to mold into finished structures through his ideas about imagistic motifs and techniques. When Mohr disputed the choice or placement of photographs, however, Berger respected his objections, so that their cooperative creativity more often resembled table tennis.<sup>43</sup> The writer also recalls bouncing possibilities off each other, covering the floor with pictures and rearranging them to test for a desired effect, juxtaposing textual passages with pictorial sequences, then revising and reordering them.<sup>44</sup> He and Mohr thus virtually merged into a unified creative consciousness.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Berger cautions against “romantic confusions” as to who is responsible for which parts.<sup>46</sup> To fine-tune their organization and layout, they customarily solicited additional assistance,<sup>47</sup> since, as he comments, “two is not quite a collective, it’s a bit like a marriage, and ... one can trade off the other and one can do deals. ... It is necessary to work collectively because so many levels of experience, so many levels of ways of seeing, are involved. No one person, perhaps no two people, can accommodate all those levels by themselves.”<sup>48</sup> They tried to consider their audience’s perspective, too, nurturing a silent “complicity of the eyes of the viewer with those who are, not making the images, but arranging them into a story.”<sup>49</sup>

“Story” is Berger’s preferred nomenclature for his photo-textual inventions with Mohr, probably because, among all the literary genres this versatile artist-witness has experimented with, he regards himself primarily as a storyteller.<sup>50</sup> Yet while all three



works do contain stories of one kind or another, and while the authors strive ingeniously to expand definitions for the conceivable forms a story might take, the term nonetheless does not adequately comprise everything in these books. Although Berger's usage could be passed off as a casual taxonomic bid to accommodate readers and viewers with diverse interests and disciplinary backgrounds, the writer's careful thinking about how stories operate demands that these mixed-media assemblages be examined more rigorously, not for classification but to explicate how their unclassifiable essence generates innovative formal tactics. Even solely within their verbal components, they appraise the efficacy of storytelling under differing circumstances and draw up blueprints for how stories might be told. The wider story unfolding in each book is leavened by a measured incorporation of sundry genres (essay, poetry, biography, memoir), disciplines (economics, sociology, history, art criticism), and devices (metaphor, symbolism, dramatization, point of view shifts). Tensions within the written sections equally enhance the visual dynamics. Word and image collide with and build upon one another to tell the whole story without lapsing into redundancy. While interdependent with the text, the photographs also educe ethical dilemmas and exude esthetic richness by themselves. The role of pictures, never simply illustrative, becomes more pronounced from one work to the next, as Mohr and Berger communicate to viewers and readers chiefly via complementarity in *A Fortunate Man*, juxtaposition in *A Seventh Man*, and montage in *Another Way of Telling*.

### **Taking the Measure of *A Fortunate Man***

Berger vacillates in *A Fortunate Man* about the book's genre. True to its humble subtitle, *The Story of a Country Doctor*, it opens (after a pithy consideration of its mise-en-scène) with six short narratives portraying the as yet unnamed physician tending his

patients. Delicately and movingly detailed, these vignettes are related from a third-person point of view, intermittently omniscient but mostly free indirect discourse privileging the doctor's perceptions. It is not evident whether Berger observed these encounters, whether they were recounted to him by the doctor, or whether they are entirely or in part fictitious. Their dialogue, imagery, characterization, and figurative language display a restrained abundance of novelistic dexterity. Because their content is so measuredly poignant it seems immaterial whether they were witnessed or fabricated. What matters is that, succinctly yet affectingly, they evoke a sense of place, establish personality traits of doctor and patients, and show him treating them under varying degrees of distress with varying degrees of success, from stark emergencies or serious illnesses that reveal his composure in moments of crisis to quotidian checkups during which he tries to gain their confidence so as to treat their repressed sources of unhappiness. Prior to finding out his name or views, readers are gradually brought closer to the protagonist by watching him at work—verbally, not visually, since thus far the photos are all landscapes. The opening stories validate Berger's hindsight that he sought to illuminate, "as a storyteller, a life's practice."<sup>51</sup>

Most of the remainder of *A Fortunate Man*, however, abandons plot in favor of analysis, as the story of this country doctor gives way to an essay about him. Berger himself calls the text an essay several times, and to be sure, its predominant shape and style are essayistic. But is it a biographical essay, a sociological essay, a personal essay, a political essay, or something else? Indubitably the book in its entirety is a photographic essay, to borrow W. J. T. Mitchell's designation for this hybrid mimetic form.<sup>52</sup> The indeterminacy of its textual genre, meanwhile, is highlighted in its final pages, after Berger admits his inability to write a conclusion evaluating the doctor's work. So that

readers might not notice the inconclusiveness, he “could end with another story about Sassall,” just as he began, but he considers it more pertinent “to analyse why the essay cannot be concluded” (*FM* 158). Part of his difficulty is that, unlike a fictional character, Sassall is a real person whose life story is still evolving. Sounding very much like Agee valorizing the randomness of actuality over the intentionality of art, Berger contends that “fiction seems strangely simple now. In fiction one has only got to *decide* that a character is, on balance, admirable. Of course there remains the problem of making him so: and the effect you achieve may be the opposite of what you intended. But still—outcomes can be decided. Whereas now I can decide nothing” (*FM* 158). Berger likewise distinguishes his position from the autobiographer’s, who, determining the shape of his own account, “is even freer than the novelist” since “not even a created character can reproach him” (*FM* 158). By contrast, he rather portentously states, “I am entirely at the mercy of realities I cannot encompass” (*FM* 159), the biographer struggling to render truthfully an actual living man whom he knows well yet whose deepest complexities and future directions remain unknowable. Biographies about famous or dead individuals logically conclude with the attainment of fame or the finality of death, but this subject is neither famous nor dead. If the doctor had already died, Berger would have written “a more precise memoir of him, to preserve his likeness” (*FM* 160). But as with Agee’s continuous consciousness of Gudger’s ongoing existence, Berger is hyperaware that “Sassall is alive and working,” therefore obviating any conclusive certitude<sup>53</sup> yet prompting feverish speculations about the mysterious “process of his continuing life” (*FM* 160).

The generic instability of *A Fortunate Man* is linked to its unstable voice, which in turn is tied to Berger’s ambivalence about the extent to which his authorial persona should pervade the text. In its main essayistic vein, point of view wavers between a

disinterested third-person and an impassioned first-person itself wavering between singular and plural. Having bestowed the doctor's epithet as "clerk of the foresters' records" (*FM* 97), Berger issues a caveat:

I am very well aware that there is a certain clumsiness in my metaphorical devices. And what do they matter? ... What I am saying about Sassall and his patients is subject to the danger which accompanies any imaginative effort. At certain times my own subjectivity may distort. At no time can I prove what I am saying. I can only claim that after years of observation of the subject I believe that what I am saying, despite my clumsiness, reveals a significant part of the social reality of the small area in question, and a large part of the psychological reality of Sassall's life. (*FM* 110)

As both witness and artist, observer and ruminator, documentarian and imaginer, Berger thus must carry on "clumsily" (a deceptive self-deprecation common to his parlance) with a twofold approach. While granting that a statistical analysis or "a sociological survey of medical country practice might be more useful" in gauging the effectiveness of treatment (*FM* 110), he half-apologetically insists on probing interpersonal mysteries of the doctor-patient relationship from his own observational viewpoint.

As against Agee, though, Berger hardly ever shows himself observing his subjects or their surroundings in *A Fortunate Man*. Consequently, the rare occasions when he does mention his own presence in the Forest are all the more conspicuous. For instance, noting Sassall's self-control when faced with agony, Berger comments, "Nevertheless, when he was unaware of my presence, I saw him weep, walking across a field away from a house where a young patient was dying. Perhaps he was blaming himself for things done or left undone. He would transform his pain into a painful sense of responsibility, for that is his character" (*FM* 112). Albeit swiftly slipping back into his speculative mode, Berger, who has been so discreetly ardent in identifying with the doctor, divulges the illicitness of this haunting observation, making readers cognizant, as Dyer points out, "of how much about Sassall is still unknown, of the distance between them that cannot be honestly bridged."<sup>54</sup>

The gap between the authors and “foresters” is even less bridgeable. Aside from those quoted in the opening narratives, Berger seldom reports their opinions directly and never depicts himself in conversation with them, though he does relate one incident when he and Mohr partook in a local man’s diversion. Having discerned that the doctor’s usual tense demeanor momentarily relaxes whenever he focuses on a minor procedure, Berger perceives an equivalent relaxation on the face of a farmer who leaves all his vocational troubles beneath him and indulges in a passion for speed by flying his plane. The writer catches this “same look of relief” (*FM* 88) before the farmer and the photographer, settled in the cockpit, take off from a sheep pasture. The episode is memorable not only because it suggestively connects the farmer and the doctor but also because it marks Mohr’s lone appearance in the text.

Berger’s wary use of the first person unwittingly calls special attention to itself. While his explanation of why the duration of feeling anguish diverges for adults and children is delivered in an impersonal scholarly tone supported by citations, reassertions of the “I” voice sporadically enunciate his own doubts and convictions: “at least that is what I believe as a result of my own observation and introspection” (*FM* 119); “I wonder whether I begin to make myself clear” (*FM* 123); “Again I am forced to use what may be a clumsy metaphor in the attempt to define a hidden, subjective experience” (*FM* 126). Very little, in fact, is unclear or clumsy in Berger’s examination of anguish, except for these first-person interjections. What impels him to make them? It is almost as if, having apologized for his subjectivity, Berger needs to remind himself (and his readers, whom he sometimes envisions arguing with him) that his is nonetheless the sole consciousness penning this text. He alone is accountable for its faults and merits,<sup>55</sup> notwithstanding the book’s collaborative nature. His fluctuations between first-person singular and plural are

not meant to differentiate his views from those held jointly with Mohr. Rather, they are seemingly arbitrary. “So far I have tried to describe something of Sassall’s relationship with his patients,” writes Berger, transitioning a few lines on: “We must now consider his relationship to the local community” (*FM* 88). At other stages, the “we” voice presumes a societal condition or consensus: “we in our society do not know how to acknowledge, to measure the contribution of an ordinary working doctor” (*FM* 165). The alternations, by their suddenness, can be awkward. Endeavoring to grasp Sassall’s periodic depressions, for example, Berger shifts from “one” to “I” to “we” in three successive sentences: “Yet if their origin is mysterious, their maintenance—if one may use the word—is revealing. By maintenance I mean the conscious material which his depressions requisition in order to justify and perpetuate themselves. With the fatal a-historical basis of our culture, we tend to overlook or ignore the historical content of neuroses or mental illness” (*FM* 144). Maybe so, but Berger—at once an individual and a spokesman—tends to overlook the ungainliness of his inconsistent point of view.

Striving for objectivity yet unable to suppress his subjectivity, Berger’s variable voice is evinced in assertively abrupt swings from particularized scrutiny to generalized declaration, from personal beliefs to political principles, from contemporary commentary to historical meditation. Derived from his Marxism as well as from fierce identification with his subjects, this forceful stylistic attribute—salient not only here but throughout his writings<sup>56</sup>—engenders a moral vision in the closing pages of *A Fortunate Man*, when he wrestles with “another factor which makes it almost impossible to conclude this essay” (*FM* 161). Chary of making societal generalizations that deviate from the central topic, Berger admonishes himself: “I must try to be simple” (*FM* 161). Yet he conjectures why it is challenging for him to encapsulate the “historic role” of someone who has not lived

through a national or social crisis of such gravity that it contains “moments of truth” in which “every man has to choose for himself,” thus uncovering undeniable facets of his character (*FM* 161-62). Bringing his socialist ideology to the fore without proffering specific recommendations, Berger asseverates that postwar Britain has undergone “an exact and prolonged antithesis to a moment of truth” (*FM* 162). Its citizens have been exempted from political decisions at the cost of deferring crucial economic problems. “Unaccustomed to choosing, unaccustomed to witnessing the choices of others,” he argues, his countrymen are incapable of judging one another objectively (*FM* 163). In spite of being able to envisage Sassall’s actions during a national crisis such as a popular revolution or a foreign occupation, Berger regrets “that any standards for assessing the choice I believe he would make—the choice which may confirm the purpose of his life—are bound at this moment to be subjective, formulating themselves as intimations rather than proper measurements” (*FM* 163). Upholding even while mistrusting the emotional liabilities of subjectivity, Berger feels that any imaginative predictions he might put forth about Sassall’s ultimate purposiveness will be understandably unconvincing.

But why should the writer be fixated on the doctor’s future place in history when he could assess his current function and accomplishments to date? Anticipating readerly irritation that he has already reached “the furthest outskirts of the subject” (*FM* 163), Berger pulls back toward its center only to demonstrate that a tighter evaluation will similarly run aground. Accounting statistically for Sassall’s practice of medicine is just as absurd, he reckons, as trying to do so comparatively by posing questions about the social value of his work versus that, say, of an artist: “How does making a correct but extremely difficult diagnosis compare with painting a great canvas?” (*FM* 164). There really is “no scale of measurement possible,” thinks Berger, “... when we imaginatively try to take the

measure of a man doing no more and no less than easing—and occasionally saving—the lives of a few thousand of our contemporaries. Naturally we count it, in principle, a good thing. But fully to take the measure of it, we have to come to some conclusion about the value of these lives to us now” (*FM* 165). And therein resides not only the true futility of attempting to evaluate Sassall’s work but also the heart of Berger’s morality. According to him, the cynicism and disillusionment of many physicians is bred not by callousness but by acquiescence in the capitalist ethos of “a society which is incapable of knowing what a human life is worth” (*FM* 165-66). Although Berger then utters a sly disclaimer, stating and restating that he himself does “not claim to know what a human life is worth,” his subjectivity rhetorically drives home his peroration: “All that I do know is that our present society wastes and, by the slow draining process of enforced hypocrisy, empties most of the lives which it does not destroy,” so that the genuine value—not monetarily, nor even medically, but nearer to metaphysically—of a doctor like Sassall, who persists in treating his patients holistically and in working as hard as they suffer, is in the end unmeasurable (*FM* 167).

Yet Berger’s unresolvable ending is not quite over. He offers one last deceptively modest paragraph, again sliding between singular and plural first-person point of view:

The conclusion is inconclusive and simple. Sassall practises medicine. His practice perhaps corresponds a little to my description of it. Since we have as yet scarcely begun to establish a society which can assess his contribution socially, since we can only judge him, at best, by empirical standards of convenience, I can only end by quoting the logic by which he himself has to work, a logic which for all its stoicism has in it the seed of a great affirmative vision: “Whenever I am reminded of death—and it happens every day—I think of my own, and this makes me try to work harder.” (*FM* 168)

Getting in a parting shot at the humanly valueless society whose socialist transformation he implicitly calls for,<sup>57</sup> then giving Sassall the stoic yet motivating (and, as it transpired



when he died, the tragically ironic) last word,<sup>58</sup> Berger at length wraps up his ineluctably “inconclusive” text. Like Agee disingenuously telling just “a little” about tenant farmers, he cunningly remarks that Sassall’s practice of medicine “perhaps corresponds a little to my description of it,” provoking readers to contemplate just how much it does.

Furthermore, because this concluding paragraph is set across from a concluding photograph, Berger’s false modesty about his descriptive precision provokes a matching question about the degree of correspondence between his subject and Mohr’s pictures. Do they, too, impart “a little” (or, if the photographer’s even more insistent modesty<sup>59</sup> is set aside, a lot) about the life’s work of this country doctor? Or, to look at the issue formally and collaboratively, to what extent are they compatible with Berger’s delineation of that life’s work? Preceding the final pairing of word and image are ten pages of uninterrupted text, as the writer struggles to “take the measure” of Sassall’s commitment. Caught up in this struggle, the reader is unlikely to be bothered by the lack of photos. And besides, the ten pages prior to this foiled assessment are taken up by ten pictures of the doctor wholly concentrated on his vocation. Hence while the authors cannot properly measure Sassall’s achievements, their textual and photographic sections are representationally measured or balanced. Reciprocally affirming the doctor’s work ethic, Berger’s culminating paragraph is offset by Mohr’s photograph of him striding tirelessly up a grassy slope toward what is doubtless yet another patient’s house.

This image of a man against the land harks back to those at the outset of the book, where text and photographs are even more closely coordinated. Not counting two double-spread frontispieces, which both reappear later in reduced formats, the first ten pictures of *A Fortunate Man* are all landscapes. Although Berger culled many of Mohr’s shots of the English countryside for manifesting an enthrallment with exquisite natural forms that the

writer deemed tangential to their purposes, he was nonetheless amenable to incorporating these ones. By their camera angles, soft focus, and depth of field, they indeed exhibit this photographer's fondness, in contrast to Evans, for the esthetically enchanting atmospheric qualities of nature photography.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, alongside Berger's prose, Mohr's landscape photographs simultaneously forge and defamiliarize a sense of place, vividly evoking the Forest while imbuing its terrain with inscrutable strangeness.

This dual aspect is brought immediately into relief with the opening two pictures, the first taken in bright daylight, the second in dim twilight, both printed as double-page spreads. Each composition is geometrically ordered by horizontal planes which, receding upward into the distance, create an effect of depth yet also, due to the medium's inherent two-dimensionality, simulate a layer cake. Divided roughly into six levels, the first image looks across a river in the foreground to cleared bottomland, a narrow band of trees in the middle, a wooded hill paralleled by a higher ridge behind it, and a cloudless sky along the upper edge. The second shot, presenting a slightly lower and flatter horizon, peers down on scattered dwellings in a darkened valley that fills the bottom two-thirds of the frame, above which the sky is split into three tonal stripes: lightest where the sun is either rising or setting, grayest in a thin ribbon of stratus, and darkest under thicker cloud cover at the top border. Bled to the page margins, each of these photographs literally contains several lines of text, not as captions—since *A Fortunate Man*, unlike the two books that followed it, has neither any captions nor lists of illustrations—but rather as aphoristic insights that harmonize with the multilayered pictorial fields. In black type against blank sky at the top right of Mohr's leading image, Berger muses, "Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place" (*FM* 13). In white type on

dark ground at the bottom right of the next picture: “For those who, with the inhabitants, are behind the curtain, landmarks are no longer only geographic but also biographical and personal” (*FM* 15). Without providing specific information about this unidentified place, Mohr and Berger render it enigmatic and nearly impenetrable. Photographically stratified landscapes hide its populace from the reader’s full view, as underscored by two indistinct human figures fishing from a tiny boat in the initial image and by the barely discernible specks of houses in the succeeding frame. Only those who actually inhabit this locality can legitimately internalize its landscape. But with the authors as intermediaries, peeking under if not pulling back the natural curtain, the lives of those behind it may be at least partly revealed.

Nevertheless, no people appear in the next eight photographs, seven of which (all single-page prints) are placed beside the six stories of encounters between the doctor and his patients. These landscapes do not illustrate the vignettes so much as they corroborate pivotal details or overall moods. Although image and word are so intimately aligned here that they hazard the tautological relationship the collaborators always aimed to avert, the interdependence between them operates complexly and mysteriously. In *Another Way of Telling*, recalling why he sought out Mohr’s tutelage with the camera in the early sixties, Berger explains that he wanted to take “a series of photographs which would accompany, and be interchangeable with, a sequence of love poems,” in such a fashion that “it should remain uncertain whether the image inspired the text or vice versa” (*AWT* 83).<sup>61</sup> A similar intent lies behind these pairings of photographs and text in *A Fortunate Man*. Details and moods developed in the stories may have been inspired in some instances by what Berger gleaned from Mohr’s pictures, instead of the former having been completed first and then the latter selected to match them. But there is no way of knowing for sure. As throughout

the book, verbal and visual associations are highly suggestive yet deliberately ambiguous. Whether directly juxtaposed or counterpoised via discrete sequencing, words and images complement, enrich, reinforce, and, infrequently, contradict one another.

As for particular correspondences between these seven landscape photos and six textual scenarios, the three-page opening sketch—probably prioritized because, of all the tales, this is the most dramatic—is bracketed by two shots evocative of the calamity and rescue it narrates. Behind nature’s curtain an accident has befallen one of the foresters, a woodman whose leg is crushed beneath a tree. The doctor quickly gathers a few supplies and races off in his Land Rover through misty country lanes to find and save the trapped man. “As often up there above the river,” writes Berger, “it was a very white mist, a mist that seemed to deny all weight and solidity” (*FM* 17). Confirming this detail, such a mist shrouds a hillside in Mohr’s photograph opposite the text. And jutting up from the dense whiteness, a pole with electric wires stretching to either side is analogous to what, at last, the doctor describes during his urgent drive: “After one more field he saw a figure waving behind the mist—as if he were trying to wipe clean a vast steamed-up window” (*FM* 17). Berger looks ahead in the midst of the narrative by pointing out how this waving figure, a companion of the injured man, will later shift roles from auxiliary character to narrator: “The man would tell the story many times, and the first would be tonight in the village. But it was not yet a story. The advent of the doctor brought the conclusion much nearer, but the accident was not yet over: the wounded man was still screaming at the other two men who were hammering in wedges preparatory to lifting the tree” (*FM* 17-18). After the story ends with the doctor assuring the other woodmen that the hurt man will not lose his leg, readers turn the page to be confronted with a picture singling out what caused his mishap: a tree’s upper reaches looming up darkly in the foreground (appearing, from this

perspective, about to topple over) against a fainter backdrop of bunched treetops.

As with the next two photographs, this elevated view of the forest sparks curiosity about where Mohr positioned his camera. Again contrary to Evans, he has never worked with a large-format camera affixed to a tripod, always preferring a handheld apparatus.<sup>62</sup> Despite not wishing to be too distanced from his subjects, on occasion Mohr has shown a penchant for aerial photography.<sup>63</sup> Was his high-angled shot of the woods, like his views overlooking a curve in the river and a winding country road, thus snapped from a plane, perhaps the one in which he flew with the farmer? Or was Mohr simply standing on high ground? This prospect becomes apparent when his single-page print gazing down on the road is compared with its double-spread version as the first frontispiece. While the right-hand side, which is reproduced within the book, could conceivably be a bird's-eye photo zooming in on the land below, the left-hand side is dominated by an out-of-focus branch just a few feet away from the camera. When the image reappears, this half is cropped out to make space for the start of a story: "English autumn mornings are often like mornings nowhere else in the world. ... Outside, there is sunlight which is simultaneously soft and very precise. Every leaf of each tree seems separate" (*FM* 24). This seasonal impression, which contrasts with the blurred masses of leaves in all the arboreal pictures, is repeated later in the narrative. Although it touchingly relates an old man's grief as his wife rapidly succumbs to a sickness, Berger's attempt to conjure up geographic distinctiveness is not totally successful. As in the photographs, the written landscape remains a curtain behind which the inhabitants are not fully visible,<sup>64</sup> regardless of the authors' perceptiveness.

Visual and verbal affinities illustrate that the doctor, too, labors to penetrate to the core of his patients' problems, especially when emotional torment underlies their physical suffering. Mohr's overhead shot of the bending river complements Berger's observation:

“There is a bend in the river which often reminds the doctor of his failure” (*FM* 23). This sentence concludes a vignette about a woman who, “timid of anything outside the cage of her illness” (*FM* 21), refuses to confess that it can be traced to her abandonment after an affair with the manager of a dairy where she once worked. Another story, about a girl the doctor promises to assist because she is depressed by her job at a laundry, ends on a note of uncertainty, with him watching through the window as she walks back “up the lane to the common, to the house in which he had delivered her sixteen years ago. After she had turned the corner, he continued to stare at the stone walls on either side of the lane. Once they were dry walls. Now their stones were cemented together” (*FM* 33). The reader has been prepared for this textual image by a picture—which, like the view of the bend, may have triggered the detail—looking over a wall with cemented stones toward a house and distant rolling fields. Brooding on the stone walls, the doctor, no matter his longevity of service to the village, cannot ensure positive change for its residents.

The last two stories, both about women more willing to confide in the doctor, are accompanied by photographs that convey a fitting ambiance for tenuous ties to this place as well as fragile well-being. A nightscape of a moody sky towering over silhouettes of a tree, pole, and roofline correlates to shadowy gossip surrounding a newcomer to the area: a rundown mother of three rumored to be a prostitute, shackled up with a man possibly in hiding. They have been “living like squatters” (*FM* 34) in a dilapidated cottage where the doctor, who offers to secure them a sounder abode, comes for a consultation. Her anxiety about heart trouble is a cover for wanting to talk with him about figurative troubles of the heart. Rarely aroused anymore, she hankers after her romantic ecstasy with an ex-lover, a lost happiness she communicates to the doctor by telling him about their mutual bliss and showing him a picture of them on a beach in Cornwall. Likewise not native to the Forest,

the elderly couple in the final sketch retired there from Birmingham, having been smitten with the bucolic view a decade ago. Albeit still only partway acclimatized to the country, the loquacious old lady, who is constantly worried about her husband's health, maintains that they have never regretted their move. When the doctor checks on them he pauses by their gate, where she was once delightedly astonished to see a badger staring at her, and "looks down at the view with which they fell in love, and then he remembers her saying in a more intense, more sibilant voice than her ordinary one: 'All we've got is each other. So we have to be very strict. We watch over each other carefully when we are ill, we do'" (*FM* 41). The attendant photograph is complementary twice over. In an obvious way it is meant to signify the view that enamored the couple: a tranquil stretch of river with trees on either bank. And in a subtler way it also invites a symbolic construal, transmitting their bodily precariousness in spite of reciprocal vigilance. The trees on the far bank, casting two reflections on the water, might be likened to the husband and wife looking after one another, with the solitary tree on the near bank, situated between these fuzzy mirrored outlines, standing for the doctor who keeps an attentive eye on them.

The next photograph, last of the landscapes, is transitional. Like the first two, it is a double-spread containing text on its recto: four sentences detailing the size and location of the doctor's clinic: "It is on the side of the hill which overlooks the river and the large wooded valley. From the other side of the valley it is almost too small to be visible" (*FM* 43). Berger's laconic description accords with Mohr's grainy image, taken at a low angle from middle distance, the hillside more prominent than the building. The following page spread, verbally and visually imbalanced by the verso's almost total blankness under two lines of text giving Sassall's name and degrees, juxtaposes this scant information from the doctor's sign with a photograph inside his office, looking out from the dispensary

window into the waiting room at a patient by the counter. Evening out the imbalance, visual and verbal helpings are inverted on the succeeding page spread. Above blank space on the left is a small picture (the first one not bled to the margins) looking in the reverse direction across the waiting room toward the dispensary, while on the right is a full page of writing<sup>65</sup> about equipment and furnishings in Sassall's office. These are the first shots (other than the miniscule fishermen in the inaugural frame) that portray people. After the ten initial landscapes, the book's remaining sixty-five photographs consistently feature human beings, as the authors gradually draw aside this setting's natural curtain to reveal more about the inhabitants behind it.

Mohr's portraits of the doctor and his patients mainly work together with Berger's text to depict the simultaneous intimacy and detachment of their relationships. Although Sassall "does not believe in maintaining his imaginative distance" from those he treats, instead convinced that "he must come close enough to recognize the patient fully" (*FM* 113), they nonetheless remain partially inaccessible to him. By the same token, although "acknowledged as a good doctor because he meets the deep but unformulated expectation of the sick for a sense of fraternity" (*FM* 76), Sassall is not only somewhat underrated by the foresters but fundamentally unfathomable to them. The blurriness in certain images of him caring for his patients pictorially captures their concurrent closeness and remoteness, as well as the dual activeness and sedentariness of medical treatment. Mohr's completely unfocused double-spread of Sassall at work in his surgery, grasping sterilized instruments with steel tongs in front of an anesthetized, supine patient, imparts both the violence and exactitude of the doctor's task—in this case a hand operation, as evidenced by a smaller, sharper picture on the next page. Under this shot, Berger relates Sassall's sympathy with another patient who, revolted upon receiving an injection in his chest, explained, "'That's



where I live, where you're putting that needle in," to which the doctor replied, "I know what it feels like. I can't bear anything done near my eyes. ... I think that's where I live, just under and behind my eyes" (*FM* 50). Substantiating how vital hand and eye are to the medical profession, the full-page photograph opposite is a close-up profile of Sassall wielding a probe while peering through a magnifying lens to scrutinize some microscopic subcutaneous detail.

"It is as though when he talks or listens to a patient," Berger later comments, "he is also touching them with his hands so as to be less likely to misunderstand: and it is as though, when he is physically examining a patient, they were also conversing" (*FM* 77). This twin analogy is preceded by a series of ten images of Sassall touching or talking to (mostly female) patients. Half of these shots show him conversing with the same woman. The text is especially concerned with explicating how the "emphasis in medical ethics on sexual correctness is not so much to restrict the doctor as to offer a promise to the patient: a promise which is far more than a reassurance that he or she will not be taken advantage of" (*FM* 68). Permitted access to the body during illness, the doctor becomes an honorary family member, "an ideal brother" who might "reaffirm the social content of the invalid's aggravated self-consciousness" (*FM* 69). Mohr's pictures of Sassall's patients looking to him for comfort indicate that he does indeed offer them a pledge of brotherly recognition. But while his authority arises from "answering an unmade demand for fraternity," Berger stresses that "this fraternity is *not* mutual: it is an imaginative projection on Sassall's part, as true, but also as artificial as a work of art: nobody fraternally recognizes Sassall" (*FM* 111). Presaging this nonreciprocal distinction, Sassall does not appear in full in the earlier set of photos. Even though some part of his body is visible in each frame, he never faces the camera, which instead looks over his shoulder to focus from his perspective on those

under the care of his adept hands and kind words.

Mohr does, however, supply sensitive studies of the doctor's face. Four close-up portraits of him either lost in thought or engaged in conversation accompany a discussion of his mindset and prefigure Berger's observation about how Sassall's eyes differ: "his right eye knows what to expect—it can laugh, sympathize, be stern, mock itself, take aim: his left eye scarcely ever ceases considering the distant evidence and searching" (*FM* 84). This remark occurs around twenty-five pages after the four facial images, thus provoking readers to flip back and reexamine them for the discrepancy between Sassall's two eyes. Other photographs of the doctor, more proximate to textual correspondences, testify that he is "always waiting to know more—at every surgery, on every visit, every time the telephone rings" (*FM* 81). Beneath this passage is a straightforward shot of him on the phone, rather redundant relative to the text, but the next page spread more mysteriously conveys his almost Faustian quest for knowledge.<sup>66</sup> On the left a car driving down a dark lane overhung with foliage encourages viewers to ponder whether it is the doctor—"at heart," as Berger later notes, "he welcomes being called out at night" (*FM* 131)—on his way to a pressing home visit, his incongruous eyes symbolized by the imperfectly round headlights shining at the camera, piercing through the dimness of what is not yet known. On the right a cropped interior looks down a bare corridor to where Sassall, framed by a doorway, stands in profile, his pensive face suffused with light from an unseen source. As with the paired picture, this one does not explicitly verify the text but stimulates trains of contemplation. In his left hand he carries his doctor's bag: is he at a patient's house, at his own, or at the clinic? His right hand grips the door: is he shutting or opening it, departing or arriving? Like much of Mohr's work, this image of Sassall induces such questions but cannot answer them. It epitomizes photographic ambiguity, anticipates the book's textual

inconclusiveness, and recapitulates the beginning. Filling only the lower half of this page midway through the volume, the print is a squared reduction of its second double-spread frontispiece, one side of which also constitutes its title page, superimposing *A Fortunate Man* over the doctor pausing at the door as if on the threshold of knowledge.

Albeit just as delicate, Mohr's pictures of the foresters do not always complement Berger's less than flattering epithets for them. "They are suspicious, independent, tough, poorly educated, low church," attests Berger (*FM* 89), after which come seven solo shots presumably chosen to suggest such traits. But while a few straight-faced individuals do seem to possess toughness if not suspiciousness, warm smiles from several others only connote their trustful amiability. Furthermore, because most of these frontal portraits are tightly composed or closely cropped, not enough of the background is shown to transmit much about socioeconomic circumstances, let alone about religion or education. The sole outdoor photograph from this batch, of a lean man holding a bucket in a field, is also the book's sole photograph of anyone (besides the doctor and his nurse) at work, but without a caption viewers are left wondering what exactly the man is doing and whether he is the landowner or a hired hand. Two bunches of group shots—Mohr's weakest compositions esthetically—likewise do not altogether fulfill their functional role in relation to the text. Five images of a community meeting in a crowded public hall, with maps of the world's continents on the walls, present the villagers (Sassall among them) debating and voting, participating in a measure of civic activity which controverts Berger's categorization of the Forest as one of England's "remote backwaters ... a country area, where the average level of political consciousness is very low" (*FM* 104). Similarly, six images of younger people enjoying each other's company at a recreation building and a local dance, though displaying the awkward postures common to such gatherings, counter the textual labeling

of this “backward” district as culturally deprived and socially inhibited.

Some of Mohr’s finest—as well as his ethically most perilous pictures—are more rewardingly connected with Berger’s commentary. Plumbing the impact on the doctor of “facing, trying to understand, hoping to overcome the extreme anguish of other persons ... the anguish of dying, of loss, of fear, of loneliness, of being desperately beside oneself, of the sense of futility” (*FM* 113), the writer delineates how the aspect of an adult sobbing is disturbingly reminiscent of a child, while the photographer furnishes five candid shots of a distressed middle-aged couple: the woman crying and the man consoling her. Although unexplained in the book, they came to Sassall because the wife had a mental breakdown and the husband was unsure how to help her. To Mohr, the moment seemed “too private,” so much so that “I didn’t want to take pictures but it was the doctor who reminded me of my duty,” admonishing him: ““this belongs also to my practice. I don’t have only to cure physical things.””<sup>67</sup> Adroitly utilizing his Leica’s differential focus, these disconcertingly confidential photographs, which nearly resulted in a lawsuit,<sup>68</sup> alternately concentrate on the man and the woman to capture both her despair and his powerlessness to support her. As Berger goes on to distinguish the experience of anguished adults from that of children, Mohr provides four intimate portraits of a troubled young woman whose face is so close to the camera that her features are somewhat blurry and her agitation appears intensified. Like the foregoing photographic series on an older woman and on the distraught couple, these multiple images of the same patient confiding in the doctor arrest swiftly or subtly changing expressions, thus revealing more complex personalities than a single shot could in such unposed and unsettling contexts.

The final photograph in *A Fortunate Man*, of Sassall treading up a hillside path, is not only complementary to the final paragraph about his indefatigable work ethic and his

unassessable practice of medicine corresponding “a little” to Berger’s judicious account. It also reverberates with many earlier pictures,<sup>69</sup> yokes together hitherto discrete motifs, and encapsulates the book’s subtitle. Whereas the two frontispieces show the country and the doctor separately, now they are integrated, as the country doctor whose story has been scrupulously albeit inconclusively told through measured doses of image and word is last shown taking another stride in continuation of his calling. Having begun with landscapes and then shifted to portraits, Mohr fittingly (in step with the textually unfixed genre) ends with this compromise between these photographic genres: a low-angled view centered on the protagonist united with the land. As with lots of shots homing in on Sassall’s patients, here his back is to the camera, for the viewer need not see his face again but must see him in action, not walking offstage but plunging once more behind nature’s curtain where yet another forester might be aided. Without the accompaniment of any words, a fragment of the full-page image is repeated on the otherwise blank closing spread: a format analogous to a cinematic iris, severely cropped around the doctor’s body, offering a parting glimpse of him joined to this patch of country he so diligently if unmeasurably serves.

### **Finding a Form for *A Seventh Man***

Berger and Mohr refine their shared sense of measure following *A Fortunate Man*. Whereas that text never refers to its copious use of photographs, even *A Seventh Man*’s subtitle foregrounds its formal hybridity: *A Book of Images and Words about the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe*.<sup>70</sup> “A Note to the Reader” instructs users how to apprehend the photographs: “Only occasionally is an image used to illustrate the text. The photographs ... say things which are beyond the reach of words. The pictures in sequence make a statement: a statement which is equal and comparable to, but different

from, that of the text” (*SM* 11). Echoing the prefatory note to *Ways of Seeing*,<sup>71</sup> as well as Agee’s prescription about how Evans’s photographs should be read vis-à-vis the text in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Berger and Mohr thus establish a basic guideline for interpretation of *A Seventh Man*. Yet while coequal and fully collaborative, their contributions to this volume are not always, as in its American prototype, mutually independent. Rather, as in their story of the country doctor, images are sometimes sequestered from words, at others intertwined with them, alternating autonomous statements with potent juxtapositions. Moreover, even though organized into three sections—Departure, Work, Return—the book, according to Berger, is not “linear” but “a concoction” of visual and verbal fragments meant to mirror the displacement experienced by migrant workers.<sup>72</sup>

In his preface to the 2010 reprint, Berger underscores the creative flux he and Mohr underwent in trying to find an appropriate form for *A Seventh Man*. While never deviating from their political commitment to reveal the extent to which Europe’s wealthy nations had become dependent on its poorer ones for cheap labor by the early 1970s, the collaborators mulled over various non-formulaic formal approaches without ever settling on a definitive mode. They considered making a movie<sup>73</sup> but—in retrospect, “perhaps fortunately”—could not fund one, and so instead “set out to make a book of moments (recorded in either images or words)” that would be arranged in a manner resembling film sequences (*SM* 9). In his Booker Prize speech, with *A Seventh Man* still in gestation, Berger said that in spite of not yet arriving at the shape it would take—maybe a novel or an uncategorizable study—he was sure that some of the people it treated should “speak through and on the pages of this book.”<sup>74</sup> In its finished form, migrants (along with their destitute families) indeed speak intermittently, albeit anonymously, but more often, in

keeping with their confused or intimidated silence when working abroad, their constant struggle to orient themselves amidst unfamiliar languages and cultures, the authors must speak for them. Recollecting both the esthetic and ethical challenges of representing “the experience of millions of people, an experience which was voiceless,” Berger says that he and Mohr first had to cast aside the “idea that art or literature is universal. It’s never true. There’s always a great deal of experience which is excluded, normally, by art.”<sup>75</sup> Artists and witnesses who are determined “to include experiences that have no image, no voice,” must therefore, by necessity, “find a new form.”<sup>76</sup>

What form, then, did the writer and photographer finally discover for *A Seventh Man*? In his recent preface Berger suggests that, unbeknownst to them, for they were “too engrossed with the immediate difficulties” of their documentary task to be prescient of their long-range effects (*SM* 7), they wound up creating “a little book of life stories ... such as one finds in a family photo album” (*SM* 8). The album, in this case, consists of verbal as well as visual images, and the family comprises all those millions affected by emigration from villages to metropolises: both those who sought work and relatives who stayed behind. In contrast to the ritual events—weddings, birthdays, holidays, reunions—most commonly depicted in traditional albums, here “the instantly recognisable moments refer to different experiences: the continual dream of the return home, the shared tears ... that this dream can never come true, the courage of the departure, the endurance of the journey, the shock of arrival, ... the deaths far away, the black foreign nights, the proud obstination [sic] of survival” (*SM* 9). Berger admits that in coming near these moments, adopting a strategy akin to Mohr’s predilection for close-up photography,<sup>77</sup> they failed to foresee certain political and economic transformations that would influence the future of migration on a global scale. Published three-quarters of the way through the twentieth

century, the book—in the twenty-first century—is statistically if not topically outdated. “Factories now are becoming as migratory as workers,” the former as likely to be built in poor countries as the latter are to be imported to rich ones (*SM* 7). Meanwhile, observes Berger, poverty becomes ever more endemic and economic power ever more oligarchic. As with his earlier redefining of terms like development and modernization, he again demystifies a fashionable euphemistic label (neoliberalism) for a new world order, renaming it, “more accurately, economic fascism” (*SM* 7). Notwithstanding these changes—and hence the volume’s possible outdatedness<sup>78</sup>—he claims that *A Seventh Man* has grown younger in the thirty-five years since its birth. “The album is alive,” he asseverates, its vitality a testament both to its protagonists’ heroism and to its authors’ refusal, regardless of their shortsightedness, “to eliminate the ambiguities, the friction or the recalcitrance of the real” (*SM* 9).

Berger’s retrospection that the book, intimately addressing its subjects, is a family photo album—its meanings changing over time but its enduring aliveness linked to the recalcitrant reality of emigration—assumes an audience narrower than that which was originally targeted. Gratified by its reception (often in translated editions) among migrant workers, he hopes that its 2010 reissue will be read by new migrants who, not yet born when it initially came out, will bear up under their own hardships by identifying with those of their parents’ generation. But what about readers with less obvious ties to its subject? What about the relatively comfortable, who may be blind to the truth that their comforts are upheld by exploited foreigners? Was not *A Seventh Man* made in part to discomfort apathetic beneficiaries of consumerism? How might it continue to address them, as well, even though they are outside its ostensible family circle? Berger embraces this wider readership in his preliminary note. Announcing that the volume “concerns a



dream/nightmare,” he expatiates on this key metaphor:

In a dream the dreamer wills, acts, reacts, speaks, and yet submits to the unfolding of a story which he scarcely influences. The dream happens to him. Afterwards he may ask another to interpret it. But sometimes a dreamer tries to break his dream by deliberately waking himself up. This book represents such an intention within a dream which the subject of the book and each of us is dreaming. (*SM* 11)

Not only, then, have migrant workers, in pursuing their dream of betterment, been forced to surrender their volition and endure nightmarish adversities, but “each of us” (more privileged members of society) is likewise dreaming that prosperity can be sustained indefinitely, without paying heed to concomitant injustices. Berger prods everyone (migrant and non-migrant alike) to wake up and abandon these dreams.

But he and Mohr are less intent on oppressing “us”—whether we be indisputable exploiters or indirect beneficiaries—with factual evidence that European affluence relies on immigration than in getting us to look at actual workers and at signposts of their lived experience. To do so, of course, the authors use photographs plenteously but measuredly. They distinguish between how readers will probably respond and the purpose the pictures will serve for their subjects. Beneath Mohr’s self-reflexive snapshot of a Belgrade street photographer, Berger embroiders on the dream conceit by relating one of his own. In it he’s visited by a friend and asks the apparently nonsensical question: ““Did you come by photograph or train?”” (*SM* 17). Photographs, says Berger, are both “a form of transport and an expression of absence” (*SM* 17). They transport viewers, that is, back to the place where the pictured person may still reside, thus preserving an “empty space which the sitter’s presence will, hopefully, one day fill again” (*SM* 20). To illuminate this notion, Berger imagines one migrant showing another a cherished photograph of a woman or child: “In handing it over, he imprints his thumb on it. Almost deliberately, as a gesture of possession,” a protective mentality confirmed when he receives it back and secures it

straightaway in his jacket pocket “without glancing at it. As if there were a need for it in his pocket” (*SM* 20). Its possessor has so internalized the photo that it need not even be looked at but must be kept near his heart, especially since looking at it will only increase his longing for the missing loved one. In *A Seventh Man*, however, photographs “work in the opposite way” (*SM* 21). Mohr’s portrait of a boy smiling in the rain, reflects Berger, is “a boy unknown to you or me. Seen in the dark-room when making the print, or seen in this book when reading it, the image conjures up the vivid presence of the unknown boy. To his father it would define the boy’s absence” (*SM* 21). Readers are only brought into the boy’s presence through a photographic likeness which would paradoxically express his absence if seen by one to whom he is dear.

Accessibility to this family album’s photos is further complicated by its irregular captioning procedures. While every picture is given a caption, only some are printed beside the images; others are withheld until an appendix listing all of the illustrations. Hence the boy in the rain, albeit vividly present to readers, remains unknowable, at least on first glance, because they are not informed straight off of where he is from. But why should that matter? There are no captions, after all, in *A Fortunate Man*. Yet its subjects all inhabit the same small geographic region. By contrast, the persons portrayed in *A Seventh Man* have numerous national identities and migrate to many different countries. Since the book emphasizes dislocation, should not readers be privy to migrant workers’ origins and destinations as they appear on its pages? On the other hand, since temporary migration partially erases their individual roots and cultural heritages, the dearth of immediate singularizing information reinforces the sense of migrants’ anonymity and homelessness. Attempting to stem readerly puzzlement, Berger spells out the rationale behind this captioning strategy—anticipated in *Ways of Seeing*<sup>79</sup>—at the beginning.

“When documentary information makes it easier to look into a picture,” he explains, the caption is adjacent; when “not immediately necessary,” it is relegated to the appendix (*SM* 11-12). On the surface, this reasoning seems straightforward enough. Certain images may be more comprehensible (or less likely, anyway, to be misinterpreted) if viewed in conjunction with selective orienting details. Other images may resonate more powerfully without accompanying words (the text mainly refrains from referring to the photographs). Captioning, in the authors’ conception, is a necessary tool throughout *A Seventh Man*, but the captions need not necessarily be proximate to the pictures.

As actually carried out, mostly under Berger’s direction,<sup>80</sup> this tactic is sometimes sensible, sometimes little more than arbitrary. Wherever they appear, captions are by and large limited to basic information, such as “Migrant talking to villager, Calabria, Italy” or “Clocking-in at factory in Lyon, France.” Occasionally a supplementary detail is added: “Turkish worker being measured, Istanbul. He failed examination because he was not tall enough.” A couple of the captions placed alongside the photos are quite lengthy, running to as many as six sentences, either because the image is the only one of its kind—that is, not exactly a portrait, landscape, street scene, or depiction of working/living conditions—or because it hints at something so specific and unmentioned in the text that it cannot be glossed with a short phrase but requires an extended explication.<sup>81</sup> In a few cases captions accompany juxtaposed pictures to differentiate between contemporary shots and older ones from unnamed sources. For example, to illustrate the persistence of rural poverty, Mohr’s “Family living in a cave, Andalusia” is seen with impoverished “Swedish country children, 1913” (*SM* 29). And to indicate migratory labor’s historical antecedents, under his “Twentieth-century road gang of migrant workers, Switzerland” is a reproduction of “Nineteenth-century railway navvies in England, many of whom were Irish immigrants”

(*SM* 114). To avoid historical confusion, neighboring documentary information is helpful in these instances. Captions are deferred, conversely, in a twenty-page report on migrants constructing a tunnel beneath Geneva, since photographs align closely with text.<sup>82</sup> But in other instances the logic breaks down. Why is “Father and son in Anatolia, Turkey” (*SM* 32) flanked by its caption, whereas, four pages later, “Father and son in Sicilian village” (*SM* 36) is not? Or why is a landscape with a road leading to a Spanish village captioned on that page (*SM* 99), whereas one with a road curving out of an Anatolian village is not (*SM* 38)? Any justification for these disclosures or deferrals is unapparent.

Another curiously subdued (but studiously undisguised) aspect of *A Seventh Man* is that not all of its photographs are Mohr’s and not all of its text is Berger’s. Aside from several images copied out of textbooks, guidebooks, magazines, brochures, and the like, “a few” (in fact eleven) pictures were taken not by Mohr but by Sven Blomberg, “who also contributed much to the design and visual structure of the book” (*SM* 12) but who, despite this upfront acknowledgment, is only credited for particular photos in the list of illustrations.<sup>83</sup> The omission of Mohr’s or Blomberg’s name beside their respective shots parallels Berger’s decision to leave a dozen or so quotations textually unacknowledged, only citing them at the end.<sup>84</sup> He makes this maneuver—experimented with before, too, in his novel *G*.—“not out of disrespect” for the authors quoted but “because, at those moments, the quotations hopefully acquired a universality; and to have insisted upon authorship would have been to divert attention from a larger truth” (*SM* 239). Like the captions’ irregularity, this postponement of attribution heightens the text’s readability as well as its mystery. Since the quoted extracts (usually not even within quotation marks) are not singled out from but interwoven with Berger’s own paragraphs, the entire text flows smoothly, as if penned by some anonymous godlike commanding intelligence: an

anonymity irreconcilable with that of the migrants it represents. The writer is suggesting that what he has read and deemed worthy of quoting rather than paraphrasing should be put on the same plane with whatever he has observed or envisaged. But this construction of a universal truth-telling consciousness rather dubiously moderates the polemical or at least ideological assertions that Berger sometimes draws on. In spite of his vaporous wish to avert distractions about authorship, upon catching on to slight variations in a passage's tone or style, the reader is likely to leaf ahead to discover whether it comes from Berger's own literary fount or one of his disparate sources. While a brief excerpt from Joyce's *Ulysses* might credibly supply a "universal" truth, expository selections from leftist articles attacking capitalism, sociological casebooks on immigration, and *The Country and the City* by Raymond Williams clearly abet Berger's Marxist bias.

The interpolation of provisionally unattributed quotations also mirrors his overall textual method in *A Seventh Man*, which jarringly intersperses sociopolitical commentary and bits of narrative. Although the text swings back and forth from one mode to the other without any warning, space breaks between every paragraph provide regular hiatuses that help the reader adjust to these sudden shifts. Story and analysis are equally indispensable, he contends, for the book's chief theme of "unfreedom can only be fully recognized if an objective economic system is related to the subjective experience of those trapped within it" (*SM* 11). But for those who enjoy, if not luxury, economic security and the consequent (albeit frequently specious) freedom to choose their own destiny, efforts toward accessing the unfree subjective experience of migrant workers may lead to impassés imaginatively.

The writer thus challenges himself and his readers to reorient their worldviews:

To try to understand the experience of another it is necessary to dismantle the world as seen from one's own place within it, and to reassemble it as seen from his. For example, to understand a given choice another makes, one must face in imagination the lack of choices which may confront and

deny him. The well-fed are incapable of understanding the choices of the under-fed. The world has to be dismantled and re-assembled in order to be able to grasp, however clumsily, the experience of another. To talk of entering the other's subjectivity is misleading. The subjectivity of another does not simply constitute a different interior attitude to the same exterior facts. The constellation of facts, of which he is the centre, is different. (*SM* 96-98)

Ethically cognizant of class schisms, Berger posits the possibilities as well as the limits of empathizing with others. To comprehend—even, as he routinely interposes, “clumsily”—the migrant's inner constriction and supposed marginality but actual centrality to modern experience,<sup>85</sup> those accustomed to living in comfort and seeing workers orbit round them must reshuffle their own social status and reconceive themselves bereft of choice.

Berger's wariness about “entering the other's subjectivity” dictates his approach, meanwhile, to the fragmented narrative segments in *A Seventh Man*. Instead of telling the story of one protagonist or various characters who can be specifically identified, the book charts the departure, work, and return of a representative migrant—merely denominated by the pronoun “he”—whose identity and origins have been stripped from him due to his experience of going abroad. The text's closing lines seal this condition: “To be homeless is to be nameless. He. The existence of a migrant worker” (*SM* 233). Born a poor peasant, the man only loses his name when he leaves his home, lured away from his village by the economic opportunity, cultural stimulation, and technological advancement of urban life. “Every day he hears about the metropolis,” writes Berger. “The name of the city changes. It is all cities, overlaying one another and becoming a city that exists nowhere but which continually transmits promises” (*SM* 27). This city's namelessness, nonexistent location, and myriad enticements tally with the everyman's anonymity, rootlessness, and multitude of aspirations upon seeking it out. Just as his personal circumstances cover an assortment of scenarios—“He has a fiancée. He is married. He has no children. He has six children”

(*SM* 212)—he might hail from any of the half-dozen underdeveloped nations profiled in the book. After a baffling interlude in its chaotic, overcrowded capital, he sets out on a longer journey, traversing one of countless routes across the frontier, which “may or may not have coincided with the geographical frontier of his country. . . . the frontier is simply where he is liable to be stopped and his intention to leave thwarted. On the far side of the frontier, when he has crossed it, he becomes a migrant worker” (*SM* 47-48).

Notwithstanding Berger’s circumspection, he delves deeper into the homeless, nameless migrant’s subjectivity once over the frontier. And the writer’s own subjectivity, more muted herein than in *A Fortunate Man*, emerges briefly but conspicuously near the end of the “Work” section. Consistent with its downplayed authorship, *A Seventh Man* is almost wholly in the third-person, oscillating between omniscient exposition and fictive windows into the migrant’s consciousness. Yet after specifying how confined the average worker is by exterior metropolitan realities, Berger unpredictably declares from his own perspective, “But I believe the full measure of the violence being done to him is revealed by what happens within him” (*SM* 200). This interior change links subject to reader:

What has happened within him is not distinct from what happens within millions of others who are not migrant workers. It is simply more extreme. He experiences suddenly as an individual, as a man who believes he is choosing his own life, what the industrial consumer societies have experienced gradually through generations without the effort of choosing. He lives the content of our institutions: they transform him violently. They do not need to transform us. We are already within them. (*SM* 201)

Moving from first-person singular to plural, as he often had in *A Fortunate Man*, Berger again denies, as he had in that volume’s vexed conclusion, that anyone who conforms to consumerist standards can retain the ability to make choices of any significance. Earlier in *A Seventh Man* he remarks that “the indigenous worker has been made a consumer in the hope that the latter will console the former for the unfreedom of his work” (*SM* 103).

As for the foreign worker's own unfreedom, his violent transformation from peasant into proletarian (from an agricultural producer into an industrial operator whose wages will be spent on commodities he now manufactures) obliges him to weather his metamorphosis without the consolation of an inherited class tradition. In spite of his and others' craftily competing calculations,<sup>86</sup> subjectively his experience of "our" societal institutions turns him into both a victim and an accomplice of capitalism, stuck along with "us" in the only world "we" have ever known.

"To see the experience of another," Berger asserts in his more usual third person, "one must do more than dismantle and reassemble the world with him at its centre. One must interrogate his situation to learn about that part of his experience which derives from the historical moment. What is being done to him, even with his own complicity, under the cover of normalcy? Is what is being done to him new?" (*SM* 108). To answer such questions, Berger plies interdisciplinary channels, though not without reservations. "History, political theory, sociology can help one to understand that 'the normal' is only normative," he allows, but typically they just "sanctify the norms as absolutes" and thus bolster hierarchies (*SM* 104). Berger not only invokes these disciplines with contrariness but also eschews academic jargon. The valuable but overly abstract insights of economic theory, demonstrating both how chronic impoverishment precipitates emigration and why neocolonial capitalist societies depend on the labor of foreigners, must be anchored by or measured against concrete examples, rendered in literary or metaphorical terms. Berger avers, however, that metaphor should only be substituted temporarily for theory. Hence he cuts short a reiteration of his initial oneiric analogy. Having once more visualized that the worker's "migration is like an event in a dream dreamt by another," Berger suddenly curtails his figurative elaboration: "Abandon the metaphor. The migrant's intentionality



is permeated by historical necessities of which neither he nor anybody he meets is aware” (*SM* 47). With characteristic terseness, the writer drops his potentially misleading simile in favor of encapsulating the migrant worker’s circumscription historically.

Berger may abandon this particular metaphor, but he toys with many others while chronicling a peasant’s transformation into a migrant. During the bus ride to his country’s capital the man passes “the last of some species of animal or bird that he will not see for months” but will come to recognize on his annual return home “as a kind of sentinel” welcoming him back (*SM* 40). In the capital he becomes another dot in a crowd “like a map of the whole country’s villages dramatically shifted so that the distances between them have been reduced to a few yards” (*SM* 44). This cartographic contraction is forever in motion. Timorous yet resolute villagers keep repositioning themselves on teeming city sidewalks as they seek to perform needless services in exchange for money, at first just enough to buy food each evening, but with the eventual hope of purchasing a ticket to someplace more promising. Opposite Mohr’s photograph of a working-class passenger sitting stolidly in a congested railway corridor, Berger personifies the trip abroad: “He is listening to the noise of the train in the throat of the journey. The noise is as regular as the lines. Over this, irregularly, rising to crescendos and falling away, are the noises of what the train is passing: the fields murmur, brick walls pound fists on metal, a station throws gravel against the windows” (*SM* 68). Tellingly, the ride is more active and audible (with a hint of malevolence) than the rider. For an emigrant embarking toward the unknown, the writer envisages, “the future about to begin is a wall, not a space: a wall not unlike the wall of an ancient city, except that its surface is not time-honoured and hand-cut but time-defying and like the surface of a television screen behind which random images appear, yet which, when empty, is an opaque cloud that nothing can penetrate” (*SM* 64). Berger’s

reverence for the antique wall and disdain for the newfangled screen imbue this simile with his anti-modernization sentiments. He recycles its latter half when the man at last arrives in the metropolis, where, despite his pride at having crossed the frontier, he feels disoriented by the unintelligible language and all the other strange phenomena assailing his senses: “Once more he is under the grey cloud-coloured wall like a television screen on which bright images flicker, and from which new unfamiliar sounds are emitted” (*SM* 70). Now the wall divides, admitting him to his industrial job and urban transmutation.

Berger keeps on peppering his ethical documentation and historical analysis of the migrant’s experience with esthetic devices and metaphorical conceits. While infusing the entire book, his literariness is most obvious (yet least effective) in the poems that open its three sections. The first (and best) was written not by him but by Hungarian poet Attila József, whose name, unlike most of those Berger quotes, accompanies the poem within the text. József’s “The Seventh” not only furnishes the title for *A Seventh Man*—which denotes, too, that one out of seven manual workers was an immigrant in certain western European countries during the early seventies<sup>87</sup>—but also sets the tone for the volume’s “Departure” section, exhorting readers to personal exertion in order to survive battles and attain dreams. “If you set out in this world, / better be born seven times,” begins József, who in each of five stanzas runs through six options for proving one’s mettle before the concluding refrain: “you yourself must be the seventh” (*SM* 15).

Poetically strained by comparison, much as Agee’s “Verses” for Evans strains to match up to the moving lines he copies from *King Lear*, Berger’s disjointed verses at the outset of “Work” rely heavily on simile, synesthesia, and impressionistic imagery to limn the metropolitan environment’s bizarre verticality and to summon “the glacier of justice” (*SM* 86). Inserting references to contemporary political struggles, he envisions different

cities disguised or liberated: “With immunity Marrakech / can put on the clothes of Paris / Madrid can imagine itself free / Trinidad blow up the Bank of England” (*SM* 84). At the start of “Return” his somewhat more coherent poem about “the traveller’s homecoming” alludes to Suleiman, Albuquerque, and Alexander as archetypal conquerors, pointing up in a footnote that all but one of the six southern European nations that currently export migrant workers were colonizers in bygone centuries (*SM* 208).<sup>88</sup> Not content merely to imply links between anonymous migrants and their legendary cultural forebears, Berger requisitions his poetic fancy to play on this historical irony. These samples of verse may be thematically suitable to precede each section, but they are rhetorically heavy-handed and artistically second-rate. Although he subsequently composed more lyrical and less didactic poems about emigration,<sup>89</sup> the two in *A Seventh Man*, as Berger reflects in its republished edition, were largely dismissed as “obscure attempts at poetry” (*SM* 8), a critical appraisal he does not gainsay and would be hard put to refute if he did.

More transparent are a couple snippets of imagined dialogue. Borrowing a technique from Agee—his ventriloquizing scurrilous gossip about tenant farmers—Berger makes up a string of vilifying utterances by haughty Europeans resentful and fearful of migrant workers: “They take our money, they take our jobs, they take our houses. ... Do you know they all eat out of the same plate? They are barbarians. ... Do you know what they are used to where they come from? Backstreets are like palaces to them. They don’t know how to live in a modern city. It’ll take them a hundred years to catch up. ... All of them carry knives. No woman is safe” (*SM* 118-19). And just as an unidentified tenant in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* baldly sums up the local attitude toward his lot: “I reckon we’re just about the *meanest* people in this whole country,”<sup>90</sup> so too a nameless migrant in *A Seventh Man* punctuates the widespread prejudice against his

class: “You could call us the niggers of Europe” (*SM* 119). More compelling than many of the words Agee puts in the tenants’ mouths—particularly in the “How was it we were caught?” portion of “A Country Letter”—is the conversation that Berger invents at the end of “Return” between a migrant temporarily back in his village and a younger cousin who asks him about life in the city, not only about jobs and wages but also cars, food, clothes, and women. “You have much to learn, boy cousin,” says the returned worker, gently chiding his naïve admirer for being overeager to go abroad himself (*SM* 229). While their shared country upbringing gives them a common frame of reference, the cousins’ exchange reveals a huge gulf produced by the older one’s urban experiences. Affectionately admonitory, the worldly-wise migrant tells his would-be protégé: “All over the world it is the same and different” (*SM* 231).

This cryptic remark crystallizes the book’s effort to illuminate certain similarities yet fundamental differences in the lived experience of sometimes overlapping, sometimes divergent groups: villagers and emigrants, peasants and proletarians, foreign and native workers, rural and urban dwellers. Juxtaposition is the principal device, verbally and visually, for elucidating how lifestyles as well as livelihoods are partly the same albeit mostly different for these groups. Whether juxtaposing one paragraph with another, one photograph with another, or words with images, Berger and Mohr pointedly measure life in the country against life in the city. While the documentarians are not at all neutral or reticent about which way of life they prefer or which people they stand in solidarity with, their juxtapositions are seldom crude or dogmatic. The twin dilemma they faced was how to uphold the village over the metropolis without understating the poverty that crippled the former and without undervaluing the opportunity promised by the latter. How, then, to neither idealize nor disregard? How to paint both dream and nightmare, to denounce an

abusive economic system without reproaching migrant workers for tenaciously chasing their ambitions and thus becoming complicit in their victimization? “In dreams separate, even contradictory, truths can be entwined,” notes Berger (*SM* 141). He and Mohr seek to juxtapose text and pictures so that clashing yet interlocking truths might be recognizable simultaneously, so that readers might respect both the Turkish migrant who leaves home on account of his frustration: “For six months a year in the countryside you sleep because there is no work and you are poor” (*SM* 47); and the French peasant who stays home due to his satisfaction: “Nobody wants to live in the country any more. In the city they dress like princes; they drive their cars; and they see nothing and they understand nothing. My system is to study everything: nature, plants, animals (including us) and the climate” (*SM* 71). Only by comprehending both viewpoints can readers truly perceive why some poor peasants remain in the country while others depart for the city.

Berger’s narrative snapshots of rural and urban life embed his concern to neither romanticize the one nor libel the other. An early vignette delineates a destitute family’s living conditions in a remote forest, seven hours by mule from the nearest market village, to which the father journeys in the hope—harbored by a hundred impoverished peasants from this high plateau—of selling wood. For warmth the family lives among its animals in a one-room, earth-floor house. At night seven persons sleep on a platform above a pen holding seven sheep, while a baby lies swaddled in a wooden cradle on the ground beside an emaciated ox. As Berger describes these arrangements, he parenthetically comments: “(Neither the story of the stable in Bethlehem, nor the fact that the cradle is hand-painted with flowers like one in a museum, redeem this scene)” (*SM* 24). Cautioning against either religious or anthropological sentimentalizations of poor people, he feels oddly constrained to point out that nothing is redemptive about his imagined tableau of rural

poverty. Yet such fictionalized portraits are esthetically redeemable, which makes them ethically suspect in light of the book's documentary aura. Even though Berger does not wholly renounce fiction in it, as he does in *A Fortunate Man* and as Agee does in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *A Seventh Man* treads a fine line between witness and artistry. While Berger insists that this family's imaginary cradle should not be appropriated as if it were a specimen of folk art, he elides his own imaginative appropriation of a photograph containing an actual cradle in a stable (*SM* 107).

The writer issues but overrides another self-caution against sentimentality in the midst of sketching an illegal immigrant's search for work and lodgings in a strange city, where he cannot get around the machinations of middlemen trafficking information about jobs and unscrupulous "sleep-dealers" letting out wretched rooms. Berger interrupts this engaging storyline to contrast village and metropolis, with the latter mainly a straw man:

Peasants are hard, cunning and often two-faced. ... The village is vindictive. The feeble are mocked. The powerful are flattered. There is no need to idealize the village. But sometimes something happens on an ordinary day in a village which never happens in a city. (Revolution or siege may confer this possibility upon the city.) A man or a woman acts altruistically. A spontaneous action, quite uncalculated. A protest against an injustice suffered by somebody else. An offer which is really a sacrifice. And this action provokes an echo, becomes resonant. An echo from where? The sky? The fields? Ancestors? The village tower? The echo is inaudible but it completes the act. The one who acts feels it, and some who witness the action feel it too. In the metropolis no action can be completed in this way. (*SM* 94)

Notwithstanding his self-admonition not to idealize the village, Berger's aside about only peasants—never urbanites (except under extraordinary circumstances)—being capable of spontaneous altruism amounts to, if not an idealization, at least a commendation of small rural places where, no matter their faults, everyone knows everyone else, where selfless actions resonate individually and communally because those who act and their witnesses (not to mention their progenitors) are never strangers. By contrast, the metropolitan stage,

in his blunt derogation of its public life, only plays host to “The Theatre of Indifference,” as he titled a closely related essay published the same year as *A Seventh Man*.

While tracking the representative migrant’s odyssey from country to city and back again, Berger juxtaposes rural and urban preconceptions and experiences in many subtler ways, neither idealizing the village nor writing off the metropolis but clarifying rifts and bonds between them. A peasant departs from his home, taking a road “across the plain or through hills. After a few kilometres the village is out of sight; the sky continues over the land. He is far more aware of the phenomenon of the horizon than most city dwellers. Yet it is openness that the metropolis represents for him” (*SM* 27). Upon arrival, though, this anticipated openness soon closes. Living in standardized company barracks, performing repetitive tasks on an assembly line, handling materials that “must be different” but “look the same,” he senses that all constituents of his existence, in and out of the workplace, are mere cogs in a vast mechanism: “All the bits are parts of the same thing which he is now in, and in which, if he makes a wrong movement or a false step, he will be crushed; there is just enough place in it for him to do what he is told how to do, but there is no room for anything else, except in his bed to sleep” (*SM* 91-92). His labor is so monotonous, tiring, and cut off from the whole that he cannot really conceive of it as embodied, as enlivening his present sentience, or as connected to an end product. Rather, he interprets everything through the lens of his past experience, as “liquids ooze out of the machine like the liquid that gathers round a fish’s mouth when it has been taken out of the water and has stopped thrashing. He knows that what he is doing is separate from any skill he has. He can stuff a saddle with straw. He has been told that the factory makes washing machines” (*SM* 103). At a supermarket he is astounded by the bounty but dismayed at the prices, perplexed by other shoppers while apprehensive about being accused of theft. “The extent of what is

there, mysteriously there—for most of it is packaged and since he cannot read the labels he is by no means certain of the contents—is far greater than the goods in all the houses of the village if they were assembled together in a single place and put on shelves” (*SM* 95). Having fled the village’s penury, he will only chase the city’s riches in vain. “To a man from a village the fact that people live in the same place is primary,” writes Berger. “He is living now in a city in which he is the witness of luxury. . . . Between the wastes of poverty and the wastes of affluence, he works,” dreaming of the day he will be able to go back home with enough money in his pockets to change his life (*SM* 136). Standing in the street one morning after his night shift, he is pleased to spot two ducks alighted on a roof above a neon sign, “a sight he never expected to see in the city. The pleasure compresses, reduces in his mind the months before his annual return to the village” (*SM* 205).

Some migrants go home sooner than planned, overwhelmed by the incongruities between country and city. Berger’s most complex, haunting, enlightening opposition between them—his longest (a little over four pages) unbroken slice of narrative in *A Seventh Man*—registers the rapid disillusionment of a meatpacking worker stunned by the contrasting scale and pace of his small-town abattoir and a big-city slaughterhouse where he at first feels lucky to be taken on. At the former, only operational half the week, it would stir up local interest “if more than ten animals were to be slaughtered at a time,” whereas at the latter, “eighty cattle are slaughtered in an hour: 150,000 a year” (*SM* 136). Although underemployed at home, the man had felt fully in touch with his labor there, as he and a coworker, “bent over the animal together, would dress and skin and eviscerate it, talking while they did so or working silently and taking a pride in their deftness with the knife,” so that “he thought of what he was doing in terms of meat to be bought and eaten. The better he worked, the less would be wasted” (*SM* 136-37). In the highly mechanized



metropolitan abattoir, where carcasses “hang like tree trunks” from automatic hoists until the “bled forest opens on to a highway” lined with laborers struggling to keep up with the tremendous speed at which animals are cut apart, his job is to wash severed heads, push a truck full of hoofs, and lug steaming hides (*SM* 137). Ceaseless repetition of these tasks, combined with his unease that animals are hardly ever seen in the streets through which he aimlessly wanders during his time off, makes him doubly delusional: “The machines were multiplying the carcasses. The meat would never be eaten” (*SM* 140). Distribution of the assorted cuts and viscera in fact reflects social hierarchies: “For the well-fed who work with their brains: the best muscles of the animal from the backbone to the rump. For the unskilled manual workers: head trimmings, heart, stomach, lungs, spleen, udder, shins and tail” (*SM* 138). Disgusted by the native workers’ huge appetite for meat, rejected in his request to switch duties to hosing down the live cattle, and increasingly deluded that all the carved-up body parts are being magically reattached while “between the buildings an invisible herd grazed each night,” after just a month he stows away in a livestock van heading south, back toward his village, where he cannot very well explain himself to his disappointed family (*SM* 140). Foreshadowing certain stories—particularly those dealing with the slaughter of animals—Berger would craft in *Into Their Labours*,<sup>91</sup> this vignette’s masterful blend of precise observation and social critique is not buttressed by pictures, as words alone do all the work here of communicating his acute juxtaposition. He and Mohr nonetheless would go on to propose and compose the inverse technique (a narrative form made up exclusively of images) in *Another Way of Telling*, but the verbal medium is best suited to convey causality among this story’s intricate actions and hallucinations.

Throughout much of *A Seventh Man*, however, the village and the metropolis are juxtaposed via photographs, sometimes with textual passages, sometimes in independent

sequences. A few paired images dramatize striking contrasts in the physical environments of countryside and cities. The book's first two photos, on the same page (*SM* 14) without captions, present high-angled compositions of rural and urban modes of transportation: a vertical view of peasants behind pack animals on a Bosnian mountain road, and beneath it a horizontal view of automobiles gliding along a New York City overpass. Although the American location of the second picture (not itemized until the appendix) may seem anomalous, the authors assert that while their "subject is European, its meaning is global" (*SM* 11). What they call the "unfreedom" of migration from poor agricultural societies to rich industrial ones, hastened by the unevenness of capitalist development, affects people everywhere, still more in this era of accelerating globalization.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, New York's stature as the zenith of twentieth-century capitalism warrants its pictorial inclusion. As photographed and laid out together, the metropolitan expressway and the mountain road equally entice the eye to trace elegant manmade curves snaking through tight spaces. The steep switchbacks and the concrete flyover are both triumphs of civil engineering. These shots thus evince an uncannily attractive similitude as abstract esthetic forms. Not until viewers mull over the very different ways of life being pursued by the peasants and the motorists does the force of this photographic juxtaposition start to weigh on the historical consciousness with the potentially crushing heaviness of the boulders and pillars looming over and propping up these dissimilar roadways. Near the end of the volume Mohr again calls attention to the "development" gap by supplying another image of Manhattan<sup>93</sup>—a nightscape with skyscrapers, bright lights, and busy traffic—which is reproduced twice, first offsetting Blomberg's picture of village children and farm animals in a Kosovo field (*SM* 215), then heading Berger's made-up conversation between two cousins about life in the big city (*SM* 228).<sup>94</sup>

Other juxtaposed photographs of developed and underdeveloped nations likewise spotlight environmental disparities that impact how inhabitants, permanent or temporary, live and work. A full-page shot of old houses in a southern Greek village appears across from a half-page shot of a bustling highway cloverleaf (*SM* 26-27), connoting rural stasis versus urban mobility, plus the incentives (outlined in the accompanying text) to migrate from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* communities. A blurred shot of a hard-hatted Spanish worker moving materials at a Frankfurt jobsite appears with a sharper shot of farm fields being harvested by hand near Salamanca (*SM* 31), conveying the hectic pace of industrial manufacturing versus the slower tempo—albeit no less strenuous labor—of agricultural production, as well as the dissonance between modernity and tradition. Several pairings of Blomberg’s pictures from Yugoslavia with Mohr’s from wealthier countries emphasize societal discords: a bicycle contest at a rustic fair versus a sleek car showroom (*SM* 204); a disordered outdoor bus stop versus a gleaming Stockholm subway station (*SM* 123); a smiling mother crouching between her cradled baby and her cow (the image that Berger draws on for his fictional diorama of rural poverty) versus a masked, goggled migrant in a Swiss soldering factory (*SM* 106-07). At the beginning of “Return” Mohr’s juxtaposed photographs (*SM* 207) of tourists wielding cameras in Greek ruins and children playing skittles in a Sicilian town precede Berger’s verses alluding to the erstwhile grandeur of impoverished Mediterranean civilizations. As with those curving roadways commencing “Departure,” here the formal similarity of ancient columns and skittle pins momentarily forestalls an ethical recognition of how profoundly daily life and cultural opportunities differ for the two groups of persons gathered round them. Such differences are further underlined in other opposed images: a man napping outside and a migrant sleeping in barracks (*SM* 88-89); disheveled men clutching guns at an Istanbul shooting-booth and

smartly dressed professionals gripping briefcases on a Geneva street corner (*SM* 128-29); bootblacks on an Athens sidewalk and burros on a Peloponnesian dirt road (*SM* 222-23); a Turkish carpet-seller peddling his wares to displaced compatriots by a German roadside and a German magazine advertisement picturing a stylish female hitchhiker (*SM* 226-27).

*A Seventh Man* sometimes makes self-contained visual statements with more than just pairs of images. For instance, it exhibits four photographic triptychs: two with three horizontal shots stacked one atop another on a single page; two with three vertical shots set side by side over a double-spread. Illustratively functional if artistically unremarkable, the horizontal triptychs compare immigrant lodgings (*SM* 87) and village construction (*SM* 211). More noteworthy esthetically, the vertical triptychs show migrants employed in factory labor (*SM* 96-97) and the service industry (*SM* 134-35), the two sectors in which most work. The factory pictures, all from Switzerland, display mass-produced commodities (shoes, sausages, dairy products) arrayed in orderly rows behind which the workers stand confined, belittled and emblematically buried by what they are churning out with such homogeneity. Migrants are even more precariously positioned and less pictorially accessible in the tripartite layout with two photos made in the Vienna airport and one in a Swiss hotel. Depicting a window-washer working on a tall ladder and a porter descending an escalator, these narrowly cropped prints feature found props or backdrops that accentuate their verticality. In addition to this artistic touch, Mohr elicits an ethical qualm by deliberately obscuring their human subjects. On the right-hand panel, halfway down the escalator, the overladen porter is a hurrying blur, his face as indistinct as his uniform badge and the luggage he juggles. In the center, on the extension ladder, the window-washer is seen at considerable distance, minutely framed within the pane he is cleaning, high above people milling at an airport exit. The arrangement of these figures

subtly suggests the crucifixion, the central image in many triptychs. The left-hand panel, meanwhile, zooms in on this same worker leaning off the ladder and scrubbing the glass. Ironically, though his task is to make it transparent, the soapsuds swirling off his brush make it fleetingly opaque, so that only his silhouette can be made out. Both hotel porter and window-washer are paradoxically hidden in plain sight, as concealed from viewers as they are unnoticed by the privileged travelers around whom they are hovering.

The book's most potent discretely visual testimony—its most fully realized effort to communicate things “beyond the reach of words”—presents four images on successive pages (*SM* 176-79). Berger and Mohr later remarked that this grouping was “intended to speak about a migrant worker's sexual deprivation” on a profounder level than the bare fact that migrants often live without women (*AWT* 281). The sequence follows Berger's key contention that, away from work, the men's reality is diminished to a jumble of fixed or undeveloped images, as static as the economies from which they come. This series of pictures, then, is meant to insinuate how their thoughts about women, whether triggered by memory or fantasy, have become hopelessly removed from their everyday experience. The four representations of women, organized in two shockingly inharmonious pairs, embody clashes between real and ideal facets of femininity (first of maternity, then of sexuality) as seen through masculine eyes. Mohr's photograph of an old woman sitting in a market, “the kind of picture that one of those workers might have carried round with him,”<sup>95</sup> faces a reproduction of a Perugino Madonna. Formally the two images, printed with identical dimensions, encode some superficial resemblances in background, raiment, posture, and tonal balance. Yet as incarnations of motherhood in the mind of a migrant, they are utterly unlike. Whereas the Blessed Virgin, hands tented in prayer, gazes down adoringly at the Christ child, the old woman, hands resting in her lap, stares impassively,

as if unseeingly, at a point just below the camera. Perhaps she is dwelling on a son gone abroad, as he, in looking at her likeness, might be dwelling on her absence. The Holy Mother's painted propinquity amplifies his mother's authenticity and mortality. This juxtaposition prepares the viewer for a far more shocking one: a photograph of three migrants lounging in a barracks bedroom plastered with pornographic images, beside a photograph of a peasant girl standing in a field. Berger later reimagines the influence of such nudes, "taken from posters or magazines published in the metropolis," on the man whose bed they surround: "The women are unlike any he has ever spoken to. They have instant breasts, instant cunts, which propose instant sex: the proposition as rapid as the action of the press that printed them" (*SM* 191). As for the modestly clad peasant girl, like one who might be betrothed to him back in his village, nothing is propositional or instantaneous about her sexual being. She is nubile yet discreet, virtuous but not prudish, open to love and full of dignity. Recalling all that is familiar to but now distant from his desire, she is for marrying, not masturbating. Mohr's portrait honors rather than idolizes her, while the sequence as a whole contextualizes the statically despairing lust of these sexually deprived migrant workers.

In *Another Way of Telling* Berger and Mohr reprint and reconsider this series to dilate on the narrative intent (ethically as well as esthetically) behind their photographic practice and distinguish it from photojournalism. Reportage photo-stories, points out the writer, "narrate descriptively from the outsider's point of view," a photographer serving as (ostensibly impartial) eyewitness to circumstances in a given place, with the goal of fashioning an irrefutable account of whatever newsworthy event is happening there (*AWT* 279). Furthermore, photographic news reports "depend on words in order to overcome the inevitable ambiguity of the images. In reports ambiguities are unacceptable; in stories

they are inevitable” (*AWT* 279). Seeking “to break the journalistic convention,” to narrate not from the outsider’s perspective but “directly about the experience of those” reported on, Berger and Mohr thus “introduce pictures of other events and other places, because subjective experience always connects” (*AWT* 279). This type of visual storytelling does not, in fact, speak “directly” so much as imaginatively about the internal experience of others. In the sequence on denied sexuality there are no direct (as in factually verifiable) connections among the four images. The old woman is Greek; the Madonna was painted during the Italian Renaissance and hangs in a British museum; neither the nationalities of the migrants in the Swiss barracks, nor of the nude women on its walls, nor of the peasant girl, are identified. Yet in how the pictures have been sequenced to tell a more complex story about these men’s experience, a story that does not simply condemn them as sexists or pity them for their deprivation, possible connections are both manifold and mysterious, made provocatively available albeit kept intentionally ambiguous because devoid (minus brief captions) of explanatory words.<sup>96</sup>

Such sequences notwithstanding, *A Seventh Man* does include more conventional photo-reportage, although its presentation of text and photos tends to be unconventional. A tightly knit case study inserted into the “Work” section delivers findings for one of the few worksites Berger and Mohr inspected together. Their “Report from under Geneva” conscientiously documents the working and living conditions of migrants building a tunnel under this rapidly growing city: not an industrial center but “a capital of words: words written in reports and on cheques: spoken words, interpreted and recorded” (*SM* 157).<sup>97</sup> Proceeding in “dialogue” with meticulous textual documentation, photographs capture the claustrophobic spaces of the tunnel and barracks. To highlight the workers’ confinement and environmental dinginess on and off the job, the authors print a number

of contact sheets, allowing viewers to process each negative as the film was exposed. From two strips sandwiched between two paragraphs, Mohr and Berger selected one frame for enlarging into a double-page close-up portrait of a tunnel worker's face with haunting chiaroscuro effects (*SM* 162-63), epitomizing the pensiveness in much of the book's portraiture. Picking out this image for repetition and enlargement—techniques they would employ more thoroughly in *Another Way of Telling*—not only half-reveals, half-conceals this particular subject's physiognomy, but also offers a window into their measuredly inventive strategies for re-presenting the real-life features they record.

In the "Departure" section of *A Seventh Man* they exhibit even greater originality. Berger relates how Portuguese men trying illegally to enter France protected themselves against duplicitous smugglers who would abandon them to die in the Spanish mountains. Migrants came up with the idea of getting their pictures taken and tearing each photo in half so that they could give part of it to their guide and hang on to the other part. After arriving in France, they sent their half back to their family, who would only pay the guide his fee when he showed the other half to prove that he had escorted them faithfully. To imitate this clever manipulation of their own images, Mohr's photograph of a Portuguese migrant appears torn in half on one page (*SM* 49), with text printed in between the two halves. While the jagged edges cut into this man's face symbolize his riskily clandestine journey across the frontier, black borders around some photos on the succeeding pages stress the official organization of legal crossings. Most Turks hoping to go to Germany had to pass medical and trade tests at a recruitment center in Istanbul. Even though Mohr and Berger act as photojournalists or eyewitnesses in their coverage of this process, they do not just aim to authenticate its existence but to represent subjectively the experience of those submitting to its indignities, with both images and words imparting the "in-turned



look” of these aspiring migrants: “not a look of calm or prayer” but rather a look brought about by the “rigid geometry of the room” where they are examined, by the “humiliating demand to be naked before strangers,” by the “numerals written on their bodies with felt pens,” by the “incomprehensible language spoken by the officials in command,” by their apprehensions about whether they will pass the tests (*SM* 56). Above Mohr’s photograph of a group of men anxiously awaiting the results, Berger writes, “The expression on many faces is reminiscent of another situation: the expression of a father waiting outside whilst his child is being born. Here he awaits his own new life” (*SM* 61). Although this analogy has lost much of its force over the past generation, as fathers are now more likely to be in the delivery room than outside it, such an expression might be characterized as a volatile mixture of hope, fear, futility, and uncertainty, which aptly parallels these men’s faces as they anticipate being born anew as migrants.

Just as a picture of such countenances clearly induced this comparison, so visual evidence incites verbal ruminations throughout the book. While the authors insist that the photographs hardly ever illustrate the text, they do not bother to disavow the inverse, that the text may in some cases be “illustrative” of the photographs. Practical factors could lie behind that possibility. Berger did not personally investigate all the places photographed by Mohr or Blomberg, and so the writer’s material grasp of certain migratory experiences may be beholden to his scrutiny of their images, as well as to what he was told by other witnesses. But as with harmonizing photographic and textual details in *A Fortunate Man*, in most cases it cannot be ascertained if Berger’s inspiration for written passages in *A Seventh Man* stemmed from specific pictures or if he first wrote the passages and then found complementary pictures. In forging a sense of measure between the two media—whether juxtaposed on the same page spread or reverberating at distant points across the

volume—it was therefore less a matter of one illustrating the other than of frequent cross-fertilization between them.<sup>98</sup> Photographs supplied a stimulus for Berger’s strongly visual imagination, while his verbal fragments supplied a basis for the placement of photos. He and Mohr may not have known precisely what they were making when putting together this album or scrapbook about emigration, but their creative flexibility enabled them to shape a form as resilient as the workers with whom they empathized.

### **Building the Story in *Another Way of Telling***

The culmination of a collaborative practice launched almost twenty years earlier, *Another Way of Telling* is more playful yet more prescriptive, more anecdotal yet more theoretical, more exploratory yet more decisive, than its precursors. These paradoxes arise from its twofold aim to reveal a human subject (peasants) and interrogate an artistic medium (photography). Unlike *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*, it does not have a subtitle delimiting it as “the story of a peasant woman” or “a book of images and words about the life’s work of mountain peasants,” although both of those phrases describe important attributes of it. Rather, like *Ways of Seeing*, the title *Another Way of Telling* stands alone, subtly indicating that it privileges form over content and signaling a mode of narration applicable to other subjects. By proposing that photographs offer “another” way to tell stories, the title differentiates their genius for narrative from that of verbal methods. Without words to pinpoint the meaning of images, photographic ambiguity might be preserved, thus inviting interpretive multiplicity. If no longer subordinated to a dominant text, photography not only could take center stage (on the page) as a mimetic vehicle but also could foster an experimental narrative form comparable to the highly visual faculty of memory. Moreover, if operated by a photographer who is as much an

empathic witness as an emphatic ideologue or an appropriative artist, the camera, as these collaborators contend, could bring to light the experiences of marginalized people whose pictures might permit others to ponder the way they look at themselves.

In spite of images' weightier prominence in *Another Way of Telling*, words endow its structure with a keen, mature sense of measure. After its concise preface and before its concluding list of photographs (none captioned in the text), it consists of five parts. Mohr provides both photos and text for the first, "Beyond My Camera," in which he considers episodes from his career that point up the ambiguous nature of all photographic images, as well as the ubiquitous tensions between ethics and esthetics underlying his calling. Following Mohr's section is Berger's essay "Appearances." In it he expounds his theory that photographs, lacking their own language, must quote from the enigmatic language of appearances, and that the expressiveness of a photograph is contingent on the qualitative "length" of its quotation: "It is not time that is prolonged but meaning" (*AWT* 120). In the third part, after a brief "Note to the Reader," Mohr and Berger arrange a series of pictures over 140 consecutive pages. Entitled "If Each Time . . .", this sequence is meant to reflect imaginatively (not journalistically) on an old peasant woman's life. "No words redeem the ambiguity of the images" (*AWT* 284), Berger affirms in the next section, "Stories," wherein he elaborates on how purely visual telling can utilize montage to approximate the coexistent field of memory. Such "lucid commentary," remarks Dyer, unwittingly "undermines the ambitions of the photographic sequence which it accompanies," by leaving an impression that this wordless story, forming the book's core, "cannot convey what is intended without being bracketed between verbal explanations."<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the alternating textual and pictorial sections once again achieve the coauthors' signature sense of measure. Their final part, wittily designated "Beginning," pairs a Berger poem

with a Mohr portrait as a reciprocal “reminder of the reality from which we began: the life work of peasants” (*AWT* 7).

Mohr’s “Beyond My Camera” had begun in a similar manner: a single photograph juxtaposed with a page of text, centering on the livelihood of peasants in the French Alps. A superb product of differential focus, the picture blurs both foreground and background while focusing on the shrewd visage of a middle-aged cattle-dealer standing between several cows and other men not facing the camera. Discussing his ethical as well as esthetic “angle of approach” in getting this shot, Mohr recounts that he snapped it at a cattle market on an afternoon of “violent sunlight” which shone with “no half-measures” on all the persons and animals in front of his lens (*AWT* 11). He not only had to surmount the technical obstacles brought on by this brightness but also the moral predicament of carrying out his task without hiding his intentions. Though he often regards photography as a kind of noncompetitive sport, an exercise testing the photographer’s sleight of hand (in addition to the boundary between playfulness and subterfuge), in this instance Mohr denies resorting to stratagems. “I wasn’t playing any games,” he avers, “... In any case it’s not easy to trick a Savoyard peasant” (*AWT* 11). One herdsman, to amuse his peers, jestingly confronted the photographer for ““helping himself to my cows”” free of charge (*AWT* 11). However good-naturedly, this cattle-seller broaches serious conundrums of possession and remuneration. He owns the cows and has the prerogative to price them, but who owns their images and the right to use or place a value on them? Laughing away the challenge, Mohr, whose recollection of this incident echoes one in Cartier-Bresson’s *The Decisive Moment*,<sup>100</sup> “went on *taking* my photos ... without paying and without asking permission” (*AWT* 11). While his friendships with other Haute-Savoie peasants sometimes led to them requesting him to take their pictures, thus reversing the thorny

issue of payment,<sup>101</sup> on this sunny day, in this country town, he was just an interloper “stealing” these photographed moments.<sup>102</sup>

The organization of Mohr’s vignettes may seem aleatory, but their order unveils him probing gradually deeper into the intricacies of photographic ethics. Hence his next subsection relates a more ethically complicated encounter in which the photographer and another anonymous subject intrude on each other. Despite having just professed that he prefers not to play games when out photographing, this occurrence hinges on a friendly game between himself and an unsuspecting, disabled person. Visiting his sister in India, Mohr was warned by her that a curious neighbor, a young blind girl, might wake him in the morning. When the girl does indeed rouse him by tapping on his mosquito net, he spontaneously responds by making animal noises.<sup>103</sup> Although at first freezing in alarm, she quickly takes on a cast of “recognition and complicity in my play-acting” (*AWT* 13), as her expression keeps changing to suit the moods of sounds he emits. “Her face was so beautiful,” recalls Mohr, “that, without stopping our game, I picked up my camera and took some pictures of her” (*AWT* 13). Five are reproduced in the book. In two full-page prints her beauty and blindness are both strikingly visible through the netting, with her long hair falling around her fine facial features and framing her eerily milky eyes, open but unseeing. Three smaller images—stacked together to foreshadow the fluid montaging of “If Each Time ...”—dramatize the girl’s mutable delight in the photographer’s antics. Mohr’s responsiveness in capturing her marvelous expressions does not efface an ethical vexation, even though he exculpates himself for his dissemblance. Unashamed of having coaxed her into disporting herself for his camera, for his aural artifice is unpremeditated and brings her a healthy dose of enchantment, Mohr is nonetheless troubled by what he cannot share with her, on account of her disability and their passing acquaintance. “She

will never see these photographs. For her I shall simply remain the invisible stranger who imitated animals” (*AWT* 13). Obliquely in these opening reminiscences (and more overtly in later ones), Mohr raises fundamental difficulties about how to establish an appropriate relationship between photographer and subject. Does the photographer have an obligation to show his or her subjects their pictures, and, if so, do subjects have the moral right to demand that any shots they do not want others to see be destroyed? Leaving categorical imperatives to the medium’s theorists, this practitioner intimates that such questions are only answerable case by case, thus perpetually concretizing his craft’s ethical riddles.

While his anecdote about the blind girl envisions photography as a game between himself and his subject, subsequently Mohr turns it into a game between himself and his viewers: a quiz—dubbed “What Did I See?—experimentally fulfilling “a photographer’s quest, the desire to know how the images he makes are seen, read, interpreted, perhaps rejected by others” (*AWT* 42). Mohr hands five photos (each containing some especially puzzling element) from his archives to nine random individuals. Without giving them any clues, he records their impressions of and conjectures about the unknown photographic situations, comparing these speculations with each picture’s actual circumstances. “The image is like a springboard,” he points out, in that inevitably, when interpreting it, “the spectator projects something of her or himself” (*AWT* 42). Mohr hints at his interpreters’ projective responses by noting their occupations along with their guesses, suggesting how the work they do or the position they hold might color their ways of seeing.<sup>104</sup> Reactions to one photo, of a smiling factory worker with his arms outstretched, rotate around his apparent happiness and viewers’ conflicting attitudes toward industrial manufacturing. Whereas a banker and a hairdresser presume that his cheerfulness must be transitory due to the onerousness of toiling on a production line, a clergyman and an actress admire him

for his unabashed gesture of pride. A working-class viewer, meanwhile, excited that his factory has rolling conveyors identical to those pictured, wishes the happy laborer a good weekend. Often surmising wrongly about what is going on in the other four shots, Mohr's interpreters fasten on different details and symbolic properties which say as much about themselves as about the photographed persons.<sup>105</sup> In an echo of how this guessing game confirms the ambiguity of photographic images, Berger flirts with "a game of inventing meanings" at the start of "Appearances" (*AWT* 86), musing on a picture about which he likewise knows nothing.

Mohr's two most involved, cooperative interactions with his subjects in "Beyond My Camera" conceive of photography not as a game but as a conduit to communicate authentic aspects of lived experience. In both he takes pictures of someone who is also the primary viewer, setting conditions and critiquing results. Each subject—a cowherd named Marcel and a woodcutter named Gaston—is an Alpine peasant who works alone and whose life story dovetails with certain hardy, solitary characters from Berger's *Into Their Labours*.<sup>106</sup> Just as the writer balances on a tightrope between witness and artistry in fictionalizing his neighbors' tales for his trilogy, so too the photographer plumbs the ethical and esthetic counterweights of being entrusted by these two men to render their likenesses genuinely and determining how to register them most memorably in *Another Way of Telling*. Mohr is therefore suspended between artless and artful exposures in his engagements with Marcel and Gaston. Striving to portray the authenticity of spirited yet heretofore unrecorded lives, he must navigate responsibilities not just to them but to the heterogeneous audience that will view their portraits when looking through the book.

Mohr's series on Marcel catalogs his visits with this plucky dairyman who spends summers high in the *alpage* pasturing his herd of fifty cows. After developing a few rolls

of film, Mohr gives Marcel a pile of prints to peruse. Objecting to a close-up of a cow's eye, the farmer exclaims, "'That's no subject for a photo!'" (*AWT* 22). His insistence that things should be shown whole<sup>107</sup> also "'applies to pictures of people. If you take a head, you should take the whole head,'" he reproves Mohr (*AWT* 23). Nevertheless, positioned above these criticisms and opposite each other are the zoomed-in image of the cow's eye and another close-up of only a part of Marcel's face, from the middle of his creased brow to the middle of his stubbly chin. Mohr thus publishes the close-ups despite his subject's demurrals, partly in anticipation of the significant role close-ups will play throughout "If Each Time ... " but mainly because the cowherd's rebuke of this technique would be less pungent if unaccompanied by actual samples. To satisfy the book's logic and design, the verbal reproof must be measured against the visual offense. The photographer knowingly, paradoxically, commits an unethical act so as to make a keener point about photographic ethics. Though his reproduction of the close-ups violates his subject's trust, Mohr reprints many more photographs that Marcel approves of, showing whole entities that gratify him such as his herd, his dog, his grandson. While several pictures represent the old peasant in repose (lying on the grass, standing on a slope, sitting at his table), in most he is working spryly: herding his cattle, carrying a milking machine, stripping out an udder, scrubbing a tank, pushing a wheelbarrow full of manure.<sup>108</sup>

A last shot was taken at his request and according to his specifications. Preparing himself for a formal portrait on a Sunday morning, Marcel shaves, combs his hair, dons a clean, ironed shirt, and then stipulates that the camera record him only from the waist up. "Below this chosen line he was wearing his working trousers and his boots covered with cowshit," Mohr informs the reader. "Sunday or not, he still had fifty cows to look after" (*AWT* 36). Again for the sake of a better book, the photographer overrules his subject's



principles, this time by putting illicit words rather than images into print. Yet again the ethical breach at once augments the volume's esthetics and serves a countervailing ethical purpose. Mohr's revelation that beneath Marcel's spiffy torso in this half-length portrait was his usual grubby garb is not meant to humiliate but to honor the cowherd for his workaday practicality. Moreover, since the portrait was made on his behalf and then presented to him, it finds a place on his wall as well as on the page. Marcel is relieved that it preserves not merely his well-groomed appearance but perhaps something of his character for posterity. "And now my great grandchildren will know what sort of man I was," he says (*AWT* 37). Albeit less representative of his daily reality, the image pleases him because it "shows me as I imagine myself" and as he chooses to be remembered.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, Mohr's series on Gaston proceeds from a request and weighs heeding the subject's preferences against obeying authorial impulses. The woodcutter's wife asks the photographer to take her husband's picture so she'll have a memento of him in case he's killed in the forest. Gaston only agrees to have photos made "on condition that they show what the *work* is like" (*AWT* 62). And like much of Mohr's oeuvre, these shots—in layout as well as in composition—impart the physicality and dignity of a particular type of manual labor.<sup>110</sup> A full-page picture of Gaston robustly swinging his maul at a wedge in a tree trunk appears across from a smaller close-up of a trunk with a substantial chunk chopped out, representing the result of many such strokes. Ensuing juxtapositions depict a pine marked for cutting and Gaston sawing into one; his hands steadying the chainsaw and his eyes casting up along a trunk to study its top; a view upward into the treetops and sawdust coating his workpants; the chainsaw idle on a stump and Gaston kneeling on the ground to strip the branches off a felled tree.<sup>111</sup> Again constructing a dynamic sequence—as with those three images of the blind girl's swiftly shifting countenance—that captures

one continuous process and looks ahead to the narrational devices of “If Each Time ...”, Mohr arranges three consecutive shots over two facing pages to illustrate a pine falling. ““That’s the photo I’ve dreamt of since I began cutting down trees,”” Gaston remarks appreciatively, ““the moment when the tree crashes down and falls exactly where you wanted, so long as you know your job”” (*AWT* 67).

While these pictures strike him as true to his way of working, the portrait that his wife frames for their mantelpiece—a practice commonly followed by other villagers who treasure the photos of themselves that Mohr gives them<sup>112</sup>—catches Gaston in a moment of rest. In the book the shot printed opposite it shows him leveraging all his strength into rolling a log with a cant hook, whereas the portrait concentrates on his rugged, furrowed, handsome mien as he takes a rare breather. “There are no trees in it,” observes Mohr, “but the expression of his face is easier to understand if one knows something about the forest” (*AWT* 70). Comprehension of the simultaneous strain and poise emanating from this image, that is, rests on an assumption of knowledge (gained through hands-on or virtual experience) shared among photographer, subject, and viewer. As Berger claims, the woodcutter’s non-work portrait is imbued with “another kind of authenticity” from that demonstrated in the active shots, with emotional markers of his long days working by himself in the forest.<sup>113</sup>

To empathize more deeply with sitters like Marcel and Gaston, who pose for him with a degree of at least caginess if not distrust, Mohr turns the tables, becoming himself a subject vulnerable to the camera and a viewer wary about his image’s dissemination.<sup>114</sup> The photographer who aspires to make penetrating portraits must adopt the maxim, *Know thyself*, and submit to self-portraiture. “Otherwise, how is it possible to understand the embarrassment, the worry, even the panic, which often assails people when they know

they are being photographed?” (*AWT* 38). Confessing that his own looks long bothered him, Mohr explains how he again made a game of photography whenever taking self-portraits: “each time I ‘disguised’ my face because I rejected it totally. I grimaced, I played tricks with the light, I deliberately moved the camera” (*AWT* 39). One outcome of such tampering is reproduced in *Another Way of Telling*, with his face distorted by the shaken lens. Only after watching himself in a film about his work did he discover a “cure for this play-acting,” coming to accept that he could not always control his appearances (*AWT* 39). Nevertheless, having fancied that he might look like Samuel Beckett, Mohr’s whimsy is confirmed when another photographer making his portrait (also reproduced here) casually notes this passing resemblance. Mohr’s gradual progression from self-rejection to -acceptance heightens his sensitivity to the quandaries of being before as well as behind the camera. His willingness to publish portraits of himself<sup>15</sup> despite feeling unsettled about his own image ethically attunes him to the welter of emotions besetting his subjects.

Providing a final (exclusively verbal) measurement of Mohr’s ponderings on his visual medium, “The Subject Not Photographed” grapples with the moral scruples and pragmatic considerations that sometimes stop him from making photographs. Fear of violence is a deterrent. In postcolonial countries “a white photographer may draw upon himself all the hatred of that imperialism of which he has become, while taking pictures, the symbol” (*AWT* 78). Other times “an ethical hesitation” militates against documenting an event, such as a politically motivated execution, “unless, with the picture, one intends to denounce the oppressive regime” (*AWT* 78). Irrespective of the various sound reasons Mohr adduces for lowering the camera, “if you are a press photographer your employers will recognise none as valid” (*AWT* 78). Perturbed by the often antithetical instincts of

those who make and those who circulate photographs, he seems to be apologizing that his images, whether distributed by the press agencies for which he intermittently freelanced or the humanitarian organizations which regularly commissioned him, have ever been published in newspapers or magazines.<sup>116</sup> Republishing such photographs in this “art” book not only confers esthetic lastingness on them but also enables him to revisit their ethically torturous or diplomatically delicate contexts—for example, those he relates in the previous two subsections, “A Doubtful Exorcism” and “No Scoop”—and brood over whether he should have taken pictures in the first place.

Apart from the inhibitions encountered during his reportorial assignments, Mohr recounts a couple of nonprofessional occasions (coming across badly frostbitten climbers during a mountaineering expedition, recovering from surgery amidst other postoperative patients in an immaculate hospital whose spotlessness cannot rub out the pain it harbors) when he “began to think photographs” but, held back by his conscience or obliged to aid others urgently, had to answer in the negative to the question perennially nagging him: “To take or not to take?” (*AWT* 78-79). Sometimes, he realizes, especially if undergoing the same ordeal as his potential subjects, it may be better not to hide behind his camera<sup>117</sup> but “to live totally on their side, so that the experience should be indelibly printed, not on film, but in my memory” (*AWT* 79). Photography, even if practiced in a spirit of moral intercession, ultimately falls short of true empathy, and so must be subordinated at times to the very act (remembering) it can stimulate. On some level, every time a photographer decides not to click the shutter, ethics trumps esthetics by virtue of preventing experience from being instantaneously superseded by its representation. “Beyond My Camera” ends fittingly without any photographs, as Mohr expresses solidarity with his fellow sufferers by witnessing solely with his eyes and by storing what he sees in his mind.

The heart of *Another Way of Telling*, however, does not pit photography against memory; it aims instead to unite them. “If Each Time ...” is a story built only of images, arranged so that they might approximate the free interplay of reflections. Bookending this innovative pictorial narrative, Berger’s essays “Appearances” and “Stories” meditate on, among other things, the kinship between photography and memory.<sup>118</sup> “A photograph is simpler than most memories, its range more limited,” he grants. “Yet with the invention of photography we acquired a new means of expression more closely associated with memory than any other. ... Both the photograph and the remembered depend upon and equally oppose the passing of time. Both preserve moments, and propose their own form of simultaneity, in which all their images can coexist” (*AWT* 280).

Photographs, though, do not attain such coexistence as readily as memories. The former halt time, disclosing “a cross-section” of developing events (*AWT* 120), “whereas remembered images are the *residue* of continuous experience” (*AWT* 89). Removed from this continuity, the photographic image is innately ambiguous, its appearances isolated, its development short-circuited, its meaningfulness impeded, because it cannot narrate on its own. “Without a story, without an unfolding,” asserts Berger, “there is no meaning. ... An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself,” thus “lending it a past and a future” (*AWT* 89). Berger conceptualizes the photographic cross-section as a circle, its circumference expanding the better the viewer knows the subject and has access to memories or anticipations, beyond the picture itself, which might reconnect its frozen appearances to ongoing experience.

Yet in contemplating why photographs of unfamiliar subjects can be so affecting that they too seem to transcend the moment arrested by the camera, the writer celebrates “long” photographic quotations from appearances. Berger’s key precept that photography

substitutes quotation for the language it inherently lacks is coupled with his avowedly “clumsy and imprecise” formulation that “appearances constitute a half-language” (*AWT* 119). The theoretical imprecision can be ascribed to the peculiar factor that Berger never distinguishes here between “appearances” and “reality,” perhaps because he considers them all but synonymous for his purposes, but likelier because he’s more interested in distinguishing between what the eyes absorb directly of the visible world (appearances) and what they take in through some form of pictorial mediation (e.g. drawing, painting, photography). “Appearances cohere,” Berger argues, creating “a unity not unlike that of a language” (*AWT* 114) and an interpenetrative perceptual field always looked at with the seldom met hope of revelation. What passes before the eyes stimulates the mind both to recognize distinct entities or incidents and, through the engrained memory of many other sights, to apperceive visual resemblances. Whereas drawings and paintings translate from appearances to re-create them, photographs can only quote. Semantically, “quotation,” due to its selectivity, may be an unsuitable term for photography, since the lens must reveal everything in the light before it. If it quotes, it does so profusely, each quotation brimming with graphic information, with the multifarious ambiguities Berger prizes. Spatially and temporally, however, a photograph is indeed selective. It frames a small portion of the larger surrounding space and freezes a single instant from the passage of time, demarcating a set of appearances that can be transported elsewhere. Photographic quotations offer simplified records of appearances, cut off (as they would not be within consciousness) from meaningful interconnectedness to the past and the future.

Nevertheless, through a reading of several photographs by André Kertész, Berger propounds that if a photographer is acutely “receptive to the coherence of appearances” at one moment from one angle in one location (*AWT* 124)—receptive, that is, to elucidatory

elements in the composition that both enhance its particularity and dialectically equalize it with a general idea—the resulting image may extend its meaning by quoting “at length” from whatever appears in front of the camera. The photographed event, though unable to develop further, instigates the thought of other events with corresponding visual contours. An expressive picture’s circular cross-section accordingly widens regardless of whether the viewer has any personal ties to its content. “The exceptional photograph which quotes at length increases the diameter of the circle even when the subject is totally unknown to the spectator” (*AWT* 121). Albeit torn from time, the image might be lent “an *appropriate* past and future” (*AWT* 89), thus “turning the photograph’s discontinuity to advantage” by sparking the spectator’s memory of analogously revelational appearances (*AWT* 128).

Photographic discontinuity, Berger hypothesizes, need not preclude photographic narration. Although the images of “If Each Time ...” are mostly unlinked by temporal or spatial continuities, he and Mohr claim to have “constructed the sequence *as a story*”: a visual array “intended to narrate” about peasant experience, through which readers “can wander in any direction without ... losing a sense of tension or unfolding” (*AWT* 284). Crucial to this claim is Berger’s premise that all stories are really discontinuous, with their true tension elsewhere than in the mystery of their destination. He metaphorically visualizes them as akin to a walking creature rather than a rolling vehicle, the spaces between linguistic strides generating tensions about what they omit. “Every narrative proposes an agreement about the unstated but assumed connections existing between events” (*AWT* 284). This agreement is tacitly made among those who tell the story, those who listen to it, and those whom it is about. In spite of all its gaps, he contends, “when a story makes sense of its discontinuities, it acquires authority. ... the story invests with authority its characters, its listener’s past experience and its teller’s words,” fusing all

three into an amalgam that Berger calls “the story’s *reflecting subject*. The story narrates on behalf of this subject, appeals to it and speaks in its voice” (*AWT* 285).

Such a fusion, he believes, is still possible even when the story is nonverbal and consists entirely of images. Only the relative roles, not the intrinsic triangularity, of the three parties making up the reflecting subject are modified:

The spectator (listener) becomes more active because the assumptions behind the discontinuities (the unspoken which bridges them) are more far-reaching. The teller becomes less present, less insistent, for he no longer employs words of his own; he speaks only through quotations, through his choice and placing of the photographs. The protagonist (at least in our story) becomes omnipresent and therefore invisible; she is manifest in each connection made. One might say that she is defined by *the way she wears the world*, the world about which the photographs supply information. Before she wears it, it is her experience which sews it together. (*AWT* 287)

While especially germane to his and Mohr’s story, since their protagonist, an old peasant woman, spends her evenings knitting, Berger’s italicized figure of speech is applicable to any photographed subject clothed with indications of real-world experience.

The writer differentiates photographic narratives from filmic. “Photographs are retrospective,” whereas “films are anticipatory. Before a photograph you search for *what was there*. In a cinema you wait for what is to come next” (*AWT* 279). Nevertheless, he adapts Eisenstein’s montage of attractions to his and Mohr’s narrative of peasant life.<sup>119</sup> The cinematic technique, Berger remarks, cannot engender a perfectly reciprocal “energy of attraction” between edited cuts (*AWT* 288), because a film’s movement through time ineluctably propels its montages forward, even when the scene on the screen happens to be a flashback. Such an energetic imbalance does not exist with unmoving pictures that can be viewed at leisure. Mutual equality is maintained in the attraction between two still photographs in a sequence, so that their reciprocity mimics how one memory calls forth and harks back to another in living consciousness. This equalized energy, argues Berger,



“destroys the very notion of *sequences*,” activating photo-montages that verge on “a field of coexistence like the field of memory” (*AWT* 288). While montage is itself necessarily sequential, it might be unleashed as a revolutionary force against the standard logic that narratives need be.

Like his Hegelian idea that a singular photograph equalizes the particular with the universal, this dialectical synthesis of affinities and differences across a group of pictures exhibits the influence of Berger’s Marxism. His photographic theorizing, enthusiastically engaged with that of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag, adamantly resists the positivist construal of photography propagated by corporate capitalism, which fetishizes the truth value of photographic images and places them into one-way storylines whose conclusion (or dead-end) is always the selling of some commodity. Whereas the future-driven “metaphysic of capital” works “to destroy history, to sever every link with the past,”<sup>120</sup> often by disseminating images of the latest technological marvel as proof of cultural progress, Berger avows that “an alternative photographic practice” could fortify instead of withering “social and political memory.”<sup>121</sup> Whether the story revolves around a community’s collective struggle or a class’s historical struggle, photo-montage narrates radially, not linearly, newly vitalizing this mode of communication. Berger wants to use photographs publicly the way they are used privately, to build an imaginative framework which might reconnect them to subjectivity and temporality. The photographic narrative form, as he conceives of it, restores photos “to a context of experience. And there, *their ambiguity at last becomes true*. It allows what they show to be appropriated by reflection. The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable. The information they contain becomes permeated by feeling. Appearances become the language of a lived life” (*AWT* 289). The truth latent in photography—when the medium is deployed not as scientific evidence or

commercialized daydream but as another way of telling stories—emerges not from facts or objects fossilized in silver gelatin but from the mysterious lives lying behind them.

An apt title for the photo-montage Berger and Mohr narrate, “If Each Time ...” operates on several levels. Its three words begin the full sentence uttered by an unnamed “old Savoyarde peasant woman” that serves as the story’s first epigraph: “If each time I had milked a cow somebody had given me a penny, I’d be a rich woman today” (*AWT* 131). As a representative of her vanishing yet dogged class, she attests to the peasantry’s economic vulnerability despite sedulous devotion to farm chores. Her wistful hindsight signifies, moreover, that this visual story orbits around human understandings of time, comprising the many instants of daily experience preserved in the photographs. The title beckons spectators to ruminate on an accumulation of moments as if stored in a person’s memory over a lifetime and then relived each time one pores over these artfully arranged images. Like Agee’s countless colons, or his unclosed parenthesis in “(On the Porch,” the ellipsis in “If Each Time ...” suggests artistic openness to actuality, ingenious evasion of fixed meanings, and authorial encouragement of readerly participation and amplification as “part of its reflecting subject” (*AWT* 286).

Even though Berger and Mohr maintain that there is “no seat [as in a theater] supplied for the reader” of this narrative (*AWT* 284), their introductory note does offer some grounding if not guidance. “Far from wanting to mystify,” they nonetheless refuse to provide a written “key or storyline to this sequence of photographs,” in order to avoid imposing “a single verbal meaning” on such a multivalent visual experience (*AWT* 133). The ambiguous language of appearances, from which they extract “quotations” to build their story without words, should not hinder fathoming it, they insist, but instead should assist viewers in following “the mind of an old woman considering her life” (*AWT* 133).

Who is this old woman, though? If she, “like the protagonist of a story, has been invented” (*AWT* 133), might she have a counterpart, then, in Berger’s fictional trilogy? Indeed, his brief delineation of her—an unmarried peasant, born in the Alps, who once worked as a domestic servant in the capital and later returned to her village where she lives alone, still working outdoors most days—corresponds with fiercely independent female characters from *Pig Earth*: with Hélène, a widow who braves icy mountain paths to mate two goats just before a big snowfall hems in her home all winter; with Catherine, who worked in Paris when younger, never married but reared her nieces like daughters in the village, and now (with the help of her brother and her neighbor) digs for three days in nearly frozen ground to uncover a pipe and unclog a reservoir so her spring’s water will flow again; with Martine, a kindhearted dairywoman whose butter the villagers prize but who loses her best cow in a mishap in the *alpage*; and with Lucie Cabrol, a disinherited, resourceful, indefatigable scavenger who survives by marketing her wild goods in a city across the frontier. Yet unlike Berger’s full literary presentation of those life stories, in denominating *this* old woman by the sole initial J.,<sup>122</sup> and in only using Mohr’s pictures of her hands, the narrators are careful to keep their “invented” protagonist’s identity and appearances partly undisclosed.

One reason she remains nameless and faceless is so that “If Each Time ...” not be misconstrued as reportage or documentary. The prefatory note points out that some of the photographs show places or events such a French peasant woman would not have visited or experienced. While most of the rural scenes depict the Haute-Savoie in the late 1970s, more than a few do not. As with certain images in Mohr’s opening section, the locales pictured here include faraway countries he traveled to much earlier in his career, before Berger nudged him to explore this remnant of the peasant world in his own backyard, just

across the Swiss border. A creative compromise between the close documentation of one region in *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*'s wide-ranging geographies, *Another Way of Telling* is both firmly rooted in an insular Alpine community and flexibly incorporative of similar experiences elsewhere. As focused as the authors' story of a country doctor yet as extensive as their study of migrant workers, this book thus tenders their most thorough interrogation of photography's facility "to relate the particular to the general" (*AWT* 281). In distancing their efforts from photojournalism, Berger and Mohr are not condemning it, as Agee did, but cross-examining its ethics while occasionally co-opting its esthetics. The prerequisite to their alternative practice is that the photographer no longer be thought of "as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed."<sup>123</sup> Yet even if the outside photographer endeavors to become an insider, a faithful witness, and a sharer of pictures, there is still the possibility of esthetic appropriation if not ethical betrayal. Just as Marcel and Gaston, despite their stipulations, could not ultimately dictate their portraits' reproductions, so J. and the other participants in "If Each Time ..." could not have known how their likenesses would be montaged. In casting off the documentary mantle and hoping this assemblage of images "may read as a work of imagination" (*AWT* 7), its creators reassert their role as artists who do not merely record events for others but who bring their own sensibilities and inner visions to bear on this collaboration with their subjects.

Berger and Mohr build their story from photographed events that throw light on ordinary yet revelatory aspects of peasant experience. The old woman's reflections, they say, cannot be pinned down in words, but she is nonetheless "making sense of herself to herself" by calling up images that reverberate both individually and communally (*AWT* 133). While steeped in her particularities, "she reflects, like everyone who grows old, on

life in general” (*AWT* 134). In the list of topics the authors supply of J.’s musings, “work” dominates by repetition, an indication of how omnipresent it is in peasant life. Images of work, as well as of the other things (childhood, emigration, pleasure, solitude, the village, the mountains) she dwells on, are grouped loosely into thematic clusters throughout the sequence. Specific pictures sometimes reoccur, either in enlarged or condensed formats, to intimate their special albeit ever-changing grip on her consciousness. Harnessing the camera’s invitation to fabricate narratives from stilled glimpses of actuality, Mohr and Berger strive to break down the usual distinction between visual illustration and verbal articulation, as their photographic dialogue “speaks” the language of appearances “so as not only to illustrate, but also to articulate a lived experience” (*AWT* 134).

The chief organizing motif of “If Each Time ...” is its concentration on the old woman’s hands. At measured intervals from beginning to end, ten close-ups home in on them in sundry positions: thrice knitting, folded as in prayer, spread open before her face, spooning soup or coffee, clenched round a long-handled farm tool, pulling a weed, tying her scarf behind her head, clasped lightly. Weathered by and alacritous for work, J.’s hands are strong, nimble, callused, the palms lined and cracked, the wrists and fingers blocky yet pliable, the nails embedded with dirt. Mohr’s photographs of them are notable both ethically and esthetically. Obviously taken with her cooperation, perhaps as another sort of game between photographer and subject,<sup>124</sup> these pictures contravene Marcel’s admonishment about the peasant distaste for close-ups. Why, then, do Berger and Mohr use them? To start with, they pay tribute to this protagonist by spotlighting that part of her body most emblematic of her lifelong commitment to manual labor. Furthermore, by depicting only her hands, never J.’s portrait, they maintain a certain mystery about her, consonant with the conceit that she has been made up. Her timeworn hands bear witness

to this woman's actual existence, while her face's nonappearance—except hidden behind her outspread palms in the artiest of these shots (*AWT* 177)—deflects emphasis on her personal identity. To show J. at full length (or to divulge her name) might increase the likelihood that viewers, discounting the authors' caveat, would regard the sequence as documenting rather than as imagining her life. Both bringing her near and keeping her secret, the periodic studies of her hands prevent the narrative from becoming diffuse and underpin the fictive concept that she is conjuring up the other images.

As in *A Seventh Man*, not all of these images are Mohr's. Besides two snapshots by Berger of his daughter Katya,<sup>125</sup> "If Each Time ..." also contains a goodly number of photos from unidentified sources, as well as reproductions of other types of pictures. In light of the authors' explicit dissociation from the role of documentarians, they make an unintentionally ironic move by labeling each of these reproductions a "Document" in the list of illustrations at the end of *Another Way of Telling*. They resorted to this banal term so as to acknowledge without having to enumerate all these found images, "because some of them," admits Berger, "we didn't know where they came from."<sup>126</sup> The "documents" include knitting patterns, a leaf identification sheet, a railroad poster, a Parisian postcard, a sculpture, paintings both by renowned masters and anonymous folk artists, old photos of emigrants, soldiers, bandmen, and confirmands. Likewise speaking the language of appearances apropos of J.'s remembrance, such images supplement selections from the authors' own photo archives or family albums in part to fulfill their goal of transcending divisions between public and private uses of photography. Documents often play off of Mohr's pictures by reinforcement or discordance. The sculpture, for example, of wrinkly working trousers is matched with the pair (made prominent by the camera's low angle) worn by a peasant in the facing photo (*AWT* 208-09), correlating an artistic embodiment

of this piece of clothing with a trace of the real article. The humble architecture of a wooden chalet in the *alpage* clashes, on the other hand, with the ornate façade of an apartment building designed by an eminent architect in Paris (*AWT* 200-01).<sup>127</sup> Further underscoring incompatibilities between urban glitz and rural simplicity, a postcard of promenaders beneath the Eiffel Tower and a catalogue ad for a hot-water bathtub are juxtaposed, respectively, with shots of a shepherd-cum-entertainer parading goats through a Bernese hotel's luxurious ballroom and of spring water gushing from the mouth of a pipe (*AWT* 196-99).

The tumbling water of this mountain spring appears three times in "If Each Time ...". Fifty pages before Mohr's vertical detail of its bracing rusticity is set against modern bathroom *circa* 1900, a close variant is reproduced horizontally beside another document: a folk painting of a plainly clad woman breastfeeding a swaddled babe-in-arms (*AWT* 144-45). As Michael W. Messmer comments, the "stream of water signifies refreshment" if looked at by itself, but its associations "shift to those of sustenance, of water as the fountain of life," when viewed with the nursing mother.<sup>128</sup> And both of these images in fact transmit further overtones because they have already appeared, separately, a few pages earlier: the painting in a smaller copy next to knitwear that corresponds with the infant's, the photo in a more inclusive version of the whole pipe with its water pouring into a trough (*AWT* 136-39). Echoing a scrub brush that rests on a plank over this trough, an adjacent picture of another plank over another tank of water focuses on three brushes whose bristles, from worn down to nearly new, evince varying stages of use. The spring water's multiple significations as cleansing agent, cooling liquid, thirst quencher, pastoral symbol, and baptismal elixir therefore hinge on graphic considerations like print size, cropping, formatting, and collocation with other images.

Repetition is this photo-montage's most skillfully handled technique. Whereas *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man* rely mainly on complementarity and juxtaposition to ensure a seemingly sense of visual and verbal measure, the wordless nucleus of *Another Way of Telling* measuredly holds itself together more by the cumulative, kaleidoscopic effects of duplication, recombination, recropping, and reformatting. Enlargements or reductions of repeated images, as well as their manipulation to accent details segmented from full negatives, imply that memory, while scanning a host of visualizations, returns to certain ones, only from different angles or with altered emphases, as the mind reviews the past through imagistic recurrence and reflective concatenation. Printed thrice, for instance, are parts of a photograph that Mohr took from a slightly elevated vantage point at a summer festival in Yugoslavia. The first and fullest reproduction, taking up half a page (*AWT* 234), is so thronged with human figures (rather like a Breughel canvas) that the viewer's eye, not knowing where to settle, runs round and round the crowd of onlookers winding through a grove of trees and lining the perimeter of a space cleared for dancing. Most of these festivalgoers stand almost as primly as the confirmands in the document above. Only a handful of people occupy this middle ground, so perhaps the dance is just getting underway or is circular in nature. No musicians are visible (probably tucked out of sight under the trees), but the shot opposite of an accordion player furnishes the narrative with one. After ten pages of other pictures—some also bespeaking celebratory gatherings—the festival photo (recalled in the sequence's logic by the intervening images) recurs twice in cropped, smaller versions, each paired with a large close-up of an elderly person reveling at a reunion of "old ones" in the Haute-Savoie (*AWT* 244-47). Zooming in on the center of the clearing where a trio of dancers, arms out, gracefully whirl apart from the mass of bystanders, these compact reprises (the third more so than the second) of the Yugoslavian



scene thus direct the viewer's eye to the most kinetic activity in this busy composition.

While many other individual pictures are cleverly, non-tautologically duplicated, sometimes quite far apart,<sup>129</sup> "If Each Time ..." also exhibits multi-image repetitions and alterations in close proximity. Such interconnected replications strengthen the montage's narrative dynamics. On back-to-back page spreads (*AWT* 218-21) the relative sizes of a Millet painting of a nude bather on a riverbank and a Mohr photograph of a pair of aged peasants laughing together are inverted: the painting in its first appearance dwarfing the photograph, then vice versa. Might this amused man and woman be reminiscing about a youthful dalliance, visualizing a long-ago liaison when they too tarried at a bathing pool? Is the inversion of pictorial proportions, shifting the stress from smooth-skinned nude to furrow-faced peasants, meant to parallel the shift from prime of life to its twilight phase, from the remembered to the rememberers? Or is it meant to suggest (as does Berger's art criticism) that photographs can accommodate peasant experience more authentically than oil paintings, even those by an artist of peasant origins and sympathies such as Millet?

Provoking similar questions, a triptych of repeated photos begets narrative threads yet preserves ambiguity. As though popping into J.'s brain as she ponders her childhood, pictures of schoolmates in a rural classroom, of a barn wall (followed by a detail from it), and of little Katya outside appear on separate pages (*AWT* 150-53). Expressive in its own right, each shot hints at inscrutabilities about the process of learning or discovery. For the classroom: Why is a boy's head buried in his arm on the desk, while the girl next to him stares intently at her schoolbooks? Is he upset, bored, sleepy, or just camera-shy? Why is she better able to concentrate? And why are they seated facing *away* from their teacher, who is writing on a chalkboard out of focus behind them? Is it a multi-grade class, with another age-group receiving its lesson while the portrayed children work on some self-

directed project? How will the teacher react to their contrasting attentiveness? For the barn: How do the wall's motley materials and textures, as well as the objects propped against or hanging on it, relate to one another? What lies within the dark loft beyond the open doorway at the top of a ladder? Why is a clutch of grisly items—rabbit skeletons, which are identified in the list of illustrations and magnified in the reproduced detail—strung up beside the door? For Berger's daughter: Why is she glancing sideways over her shoulder? How does her form blend into yet emerge from the dappled light and shade of the woodland or arbor? Originally printed with disparate dimensions, all three shots (the barn wall as cropped) are then replicated on the same page (*AWT* 154) in the same square shape and reduced size: equalized miniatures surrounded by ample white space, as Katya seems to be looking back beyond the left edge of her picture at both the skeletons and the schoolchildren, hence puzzling over hard lessons learned on the farm and in class.

Unlike the proximity of these repetitions, across from this triptych a photograph of a door and window (*AWT* 155) only resurfaces 120 pages later as an enlarged double-spread (*AWT* 274-75). Bafflingly, the appendix does not supply any information about its first materialization, so that viewers skimming this end list to identify it are flummoxed. Not until its reappearance as the final image in the entire sequence are they apprised of its title, "Entrance to a farm, Haute-Savoie," though even that identifier is a partial omission or inaccuracy in designating this farmhouse's façade. The authors may have made these slips in hopes that narratively the photograph might retain as much ambiguity as possible. Following the last picture of J.'s hands and two other double-spreads (summer and winter landscapes of a grassy meadow and snowy valley) from the Haute-Savoie, this recycled shot of the farmhouse's entryway begs speculation about whether the story's "invented" protagonist supposedly lives here. Regardless of its make-believe role, the house boasts

evidence of its actual construction and inhabitation. A plaque over the door—to which a homemade letterbox is affixed and below which sits a worn doormat—bears the initials B. F. and the date 1912. A large pile of some unidentifiable organic matter is heaped up against the wall by the window, prompting curiosity about whether it has been amassed there for feed, fuel, insulation, or fertilizer. Notwithstanding the photo's enlargement and ultimate pride of positioning, it still harbors as many mysteries as it did earlier about what might be discovered within this dwelling place.

Although Berger and Mohr contend that “If Each Time ...” is not chronological, they nonetheless order their montage to suggest a progression through the stages of life, with J.'s hands a recurrent cue that the protagonist has attained a great age. Echoing the three sections of *A Seventh Man*, this story is built around a less clear-cut framework of three rough divisions—covering about forty-five (*AWT* 135-79), twenty-five (*AWT* 180-205), and seventy (*AWT* 206-75) pages—in turn mostly concerning her rural upbringing, impermanent emigration to the metropolis, and return to the village where she lives out a long, industrious, memorable life close to the earth and to kinsfolk, neighbors, ancestors. Moreover, since the old woman's reflections purportedly spin around common facets of peasant experience that reveal her class's livelihoods and community's customs, within these broader narrative units the images are organized in thematic constellations. In spite of a governing looseness of coordination that allows for the interpenetration of memories across clusters, they can be seen (like a map of the stars) as providing some purchase on the mind's contemplative unruliness by grouping together photographic renderings of places and activities that either are alike or appear to be, connecting them via implicit lines of narration as well as visual affinities.

The opening pictures of “If Each Time ...” connote that country children receive

more pertinent training at home than school, their principal teachers being their elders and the natural world. Numerous images of young people outdoors or among animals—such as paired photos of a village girl gripping a calf’s tail and a child’s hands stroking a rabbit’s ears (*AWT* 172-73)—convey the tactile, informal, experiential quality of agrarian education. One cluster (*AWT* 158-74), devoted to the dairy, links shots of children amidst cows, stainless steel cans and buckets, farmers pouring and weighing milk, curds being stirred in big vats, cheese wheels aging on cellar shelves. Another cluster (*AWT* 140-43) presents three views from a ground-floor window onto a rainy village street. Except for modifications in camera angle, the backdrop remains the same: wet wooden buildings, piles of stony rubble, stacks of lumber under a shed. But what passes before the window on the glistening pavement differs with each iteration. In the first, a gaggle of white geese ambles by. The second looks from behind the back of a woman leaning on the windowsill apparently conversing with another woman huddled in a shawl outside; a harnessed horse (probably hitched to a cart) has just entered the picture frame. In the third, with the view outside partially veiled by a curtain blowing inward, a man in a slicker pushes his bicycle past. One other photograph inserted amidst this triad shows a child’s hand and mother’s face half-obsured by shadows.<sup>130</sup> Everyday village scenes that might be glimpsed by such a pair from nursery or kitchen, all three of Mohr’s shots through this window thus offer transcendent lenses on the experience of growing up in a relatively changeless place where catching sight of moments that seem, as Berger postulates about photographs, “like windows looking across history towards the timeless,” is not uncommon (*AWT* 108).

After one premonitory “document” of “emigration”—a blurry nineteenth-century photo of a crowd on an embankment beside a steamboat (*AWT* 165)—J.’s remembrances of her years in the metropolis commence with Mohr’s remarkable transitional photograph

(the sequence's first full double-spread) conflating country and city (*AWT* 180-81). In a Geneva suburb a flock of sheep, with shepherds fore and aft, walks toward the camera on a slushy asphalt roadway banked with snowdrifts and lined with streetlights. Behind them are several automobiles, a factory, a modern high-rise, and a skirting of wooded land concealing other buildings. The picture betokens the collision of urban industrial and rural agricultural domains charted in *Once in Europa*, the second volume of Berger's trilogy.<sup>131</sup> Overleaf, cropped and reduced, this shot of the sheep navigating suburbia is juxtaposed with a railroad poster publicizing express transport to a half-dozen European capitals (*AWT* 182-83). The subsequent medley of photos from Paris, Istanbul, Palermo, and Berne fashions an esthetically dazzling composite visualization of metropolitan life, with its spectacles and sideshows, monuments and merchandise, glitter and gloom, plenty and scarcity, opulence and destitution. Counterpoints to the congestion of city streets and the sophistication of city living, a few pictures from the Haute-Savoie are interspersed in this mosaic to signify washes of homesickness for the countryside with its familiar cows, springs, chalets, mountains. The miscellany of urban images ends bleakly (*AWT* 204-05) with a slumped vagrant along a bank of the Seine, hemmed in by a wall of mortared concrete blocks as imposingly cold as his dismal fate and that of so many displaced, penniless people, such as the descendants of peasants who migrate to the allegorical city of Troy in *Lilac and Flag*, the third volume of *Into Their Labours*.

J. does not stay in the metropolis, however. Indicating that she eventually spurns it in favor of reuniting with and cultivating her native village's soil, a blank page—the only formal partition of images in all of “If Each Time ...”—succeeds the vagrant and sets apart Mohr's close-up of her right hand heroically clenching the wood handle of an implement (*AWT* 207). The ensuing photographic clusters showcase his gift for framing

the manual labor of mountain peasants limned so adeptly in Berger's trilogy. Inasmuch as both authors of *Another Way of Telling* (unlike those of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) assiduously partook in farm work while learning from their subjects, they bring empathic, semi-insiders' eyes to the composition and arrangement of these shots. Primary among the diversity of pictured tasks is midsummer haymaking, undertaken by hand (often in a rush against the threat of rain) on slopes too steep for machinery. "Forking hay, turning it, lifting it, can be like playing," Berger observes in *Pig Earth*, recounting the last day of a month's work and explaining how his participation in this dusty activity joins him to the place he writes about, "but on that heavy, treacherous, wasp-filled afternoon forking the hay down was like trying to carry a split sack."<sup>132</sup> Mohr's photographs capture both how exhausting and satisfying this job can be, spreading the scythed grass out to dry in the sun or gathering it into haystacks to be carted off the mountainside and packed away in mows, with intergenerational harvest crews hard at it in the heat (*AWT* 209-213).

Another communal ritual (one that permits participants more conversation) Mohr ably photographed is the midwinter pig-killing. Berger's tale "The Wind Howls Too," a complementary verbal rendering, is narrated by a boy whose father was crushed to death by a hay sledge, now used to restrain the pig, and whose grandfather, before himself dying of a heart attack, imparts local lore and agrarian knowhow while directing the butchering. Just as Mohr's gruesome yet winning close-ups of the pig's entrails and its hooked snout (*AWT* 251-54) serve as reminders that this festive occasion is intimately tied to death, so too his pictures of village celebrations are positioned nearby pictures of tree stumps, flowerpots on tombstones, skulls heaped up in charnel houses, and fancifully stuffed animals in a decorated café. The placement of such images concurs with Berger's affirmation that the peasantry's cyclic view of time, its acceptance of death as part of the

natural cycle of life, contributes greatly to its survival, however precarious, as a class.<sup>133</sup>

For all its creators' ingenuities, "If Each Time ..." elicits an inescapable question: Does it truly amount, as they assert, to a story? Dyer thinks not; rather, he says, "the photographs are a form of visual *poetry*."<sup>134</sup> This contention finds support within the sequence itself, or rather in its second epigraph, by Osip E. Mandelstam: "We want to describe the indescribable: nature's instantaneous text. We have lost the art of describing the only reality whose structure lends itself to poetic representation: impulses, aims, oscillations" (*AWT* 131). As adapted by Berger and Mohr, this statement crystallizes a paradox at their project's heart. They seek to speak the language of appearances provided by nature and quoted instantaneously by the camera, yet articulating visual lineaments of a world exterior to human consciousness is insufficient. They also want the descriptive lens to illuminate photographically indescribable interior realities by summoning forth the ambiguous presentiments educible from "long" photographic quotations. The art of transcribing such feelings is usually the province of poetic representation, especially of lyric poetry, but they endeavor to represent subjective experience purely through pictorial means. Acknowledging photographic ambiguity is the first step, they maintain, toward counteracting commercialism's misappropriation of reproduced images and negotiating the divide between photography's public and private uses, its capacity either to shore up ideological stances or kindle imaginative faculties. Furthermore, they believe that truthful experiences paradoxically preserved in every expressive photograph's ambiguity can be drawn out by placing it in proximity to other photographs that transmit a corresponding coherence of revelational appearances, thus evoking memories and implying connections in spite of each photographed moment's discontinuity as well as probable foreignness to the viewer. Berger and Mohr therefore profess that the photographic image, when given a

proper context with a subjectively plausible past and future, might lend itself not only to poetic montage but also to a narrative form. The question of whether “If Each Time ...” should be deemed a story can only be answered, then, by each individual’s response to it, by the degree to which each viewer is willing to become an active part of its “reflecting subject,” at once affirming the tellers’ techniques and accepting their silences.

Of course this experiment in visual storytelling is still encased in a verbal sheath. In some sense, as Berger argues that, almost numinously, “the camera completes the half-language of appearances” which “continually arouses an expectation of further meaning” in every cast of the eyes (*AWT* 128), so his essays in *Another Way of Telling* proffer an interpretive apparatus pivotal for gleaning meaning from what might be designated the half-narrative of photography. And in an extended sense, the half-story of peasant life told through pictures in “If Each Time ...” is completed by the stories (and the poems) of *Into Their Labours*. Indeed, in a subtle allusion to his photographic projects with Mohr, Berger notes in *Pig Earth* that its first few short stories about peasants “have a sharpness of foreground focus,” while its later longer ones “look more deeply into the subjectivity of the lives which they narrate.”<sup>135</sup> As in *A Fortunate Man* and *A Seventh Man*, Berger and Mohr do not aim to banish words or exalt images in *Another Way of Telling* but to employ both media with an esthetic and ethical sense of measure in order to speak with authenticity about the experiences of disadvantaged, marginalized others.

In a two-page coda indicative of the coauthors’ shared sense of creative measure and progressively intense identification with the rural poor, they cap off their culminating collaboration with a poem and a portrait collectively called “Beginning,” reminding them that this book—notwithstanding its overall title’s elevation of form over content—began less as a theoretical intervention regarding their instruments of communication than as a



tangible engagement with the life work of their subjects. Hence Berger's poem is about an old peasant man beginning each day of winter by waking in frigid darkness at five in the morning, resisting when "sleep solicits another visit to her summers," lighting a fire in the woodstove that will melt the "flowers of ice" on the windowpanes, and then going outside with his churn (*AWT* 292). Mohr's facing portrait, suitably, is of Marcel. Neither clean-shaven as in the bust he requested nor cut-off as in the close-up he rejected, his face here—near the camera but far enough to be seen whole, framed between a felt hat and the collar of a plaid shirt—is whiskered and wrinkled, ancient yet ageless, filled with wisdom as well as a bit of mischief.<sup>136</sup> The portrait befits the poem, for both radiate, above all, the authors' mutual reverence for their subjects' lived experience, a reverence reflected in the sense of measure with which these seasoned interlocutors converse throughout all of their photo-textual dialogues.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Berger introduces the term in the author's sketch he supplied for his *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), the first of his books to include photos by Mohr. Referring to his then-current writing project, provisionally titled *A Country Practice* and published two years later as *A Fortunate Man*, he called it an "imaginative documentary."

<sup>3</sup> John Berger, "Jean Mohr: A Sketch for a Portrait," Introduction to Jean Mohr and John Berger, *At the Edge of the World* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Sassall's real surname was Eskell. In contrast to Agee's altered roster of "Persons and Places" for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Berger neither mentions this change in *A Fortunate Man* nor indicates where the volume takes place. In my telephone interview with him on 14 October 2011, he claimed to have remained mum on these matters less to keep them secret than to avoid the impression of having made "a kind of promotional book for that particular doctor," which not only would have subverted the authors' intentions but also "would have been disapproved of by the medical profession" in Britain. Nevertheless, Sassall's true identity and the location of his practice were found out soon enough, and he was subsequently visited by medical students and young general practitioners interested in learning from him.

<sup>5</sup> In the acknowledgments for *A Painter of Our Time* (1958; New York: Pantheon, 1989), Berger includes John Eskell (aka Dr. Sassall) among those who contributed to this debut novel "by way of example, criticism, encouragement and quite straightforward, practical services of help" (3), thus alluding to the doctor's treatment of him.

<sup>6</sup> Berger's and Mohr's recollections differ about the precise length of time they followed Sassall around. According to my separate telephone interviews with the writer and the photographer on 14 October 2011 and 21 October 2011, they respectively remembered staying with the doctor for six or eight weeks and three or four weeks.

<sup>7</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor* (1967; New York: Pantheon, 1981), 147. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter as *FM*.

<sup>8</sup> Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 68.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *Pig Earth* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), his first collection of stories about peasants, in which Berger details his working relationship with an Alpine village and explains the effects of his family's decision "to live within the work and life of the community, and not in seclusion" (7). See also his afterword to the thirtieth anniversary reprinting of *A Painter of Our Time* (a substantial portion of which he wrote while living in the Forest of Dean in the fifties), wherein he describes his camaraderie with artists—many of them political refugees from European fascism—in Britain as the basis for that novel's characters. Reflecting on all the hours he spent with these exiled friends in their

studios and lodgings, Berger comments that writing the book and receiving reactions to it verified for him “that if you listened well enough, lent yourself enough to somebody else whose experience was totally different from your own, you could nevertheless speak for them and do so authentically” (197).

<sup>10</sup> See Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 67. Sassall himself also has a link to peasants. During the Second World War he worked in the Dodecanese as a surgeon in the British Navy. “In Rhodes,” notes Berger, “he taught peasants elementary medicine” and, impressed with their endurance in times of “very real distress,” came to believe “that those who lived simply, those who were dependent upon him, possessed qualities and a secret of living which he lacked. Thus, whilst having authority over them, he could feel he was serving them” (*FM* 54). This conviction probably influenced Sassall’s decision, after the war, to practice medicine in a remote country area, where, still reckoning himself a life-saver, he at first “tried to transform the foresters into Greek peasants” (*FM* 134).

<sup>11</sup> John Berger, Introduction to *Into Their Labours* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), xxix.

<sup>12</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: A Book of Images and Words about the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe* (1975; London: Verso, 2010), 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter as *SM*.

<sup>13</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011). “I wasn’t uprooted,” he said. “Mine was an incredibly privileged choice, and theirs was an extremely hard necessity.”

<sup>14</sup> In Geoff Dyer, “Ways of Witnessing: Interview with John Berger,” *Marxism Today* (December 1984), Berger remarks that, among his many reasons for moving to France in 1962, he felt an affinity with philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and Merleau-Ponty, whose ways of seeing the world were unmatched, in his assessment, by any thinkers in Britain at that time (38).

<sup>15</sup> While excluding the number of migrants in Britain, this 1970s estimate of northwestern Europe’s foreign-born industrial workforce includes roughly two million illegal laborers.

<sup>16</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>17</sup> John Berger, “Speech on Accepting the Booker Prize for Fiction at the Café Royal in London on 23 November 1972,” *Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York: Pantheon, 2001), 254.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Berger shared his prize money with the London-based Black Panthers.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Their call for another study focusing on female migrants was in fact soon heeded. See *Migrant Women Speak* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> In *At the Edge of the World*, relating a dream he had about Mohr, Berger discusses the French verb for “develop,” noting that the phrase *tirer les photos* translates as “develop the photos” but literally means “pull out the photos” (11).

<sup>22</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 209.

<sup>23</sup> Berger quoted in Gerald Marzorati, “Living and Writing the Peasant Life,” *New York Times Magazine* (29 November 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Berger quoted in his discussion with Teodor Shanin, “Can Peasant Society Survive?,” *The Listener* (21 June 1979): 847.

<sup>25</sup> Clifford quoted in Michael W. Messmer, “Apostle to the Techno/Peasants: Word and Image in the Work of John Berger,” in David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan, eds., *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 213. For another ethnographic assessment of Berger’s fiction about peasants, referring to anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s phrase “thick description,” see Harvey J. Kaye, “Another Way of Seeing Peasants: The Work of John Berger,” *Peasant Studies* 9.2 (Winter 1982): 97.

<sup>26</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (1982; New York: Vintage, 1995), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in this chapter as *AWT*.

<sup>27</sup> Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 130.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Berger, Introduction to Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Mohr quoted in Paul Willis, “The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr,” *Screen Education* 32-33 (1979/1980): 22. In Mohr’s *At the Edge of the World*, describing an early encounter with Père Nicoud, a peasant featured (by his given name, Marcel) in *Another Way of Telling*, the photographer recalls setting him at ease by walking alongside and preserving a “silent communion” as he herded his animals, so that by the end of the day “I had not taken a single photograph. It would have meant breaking the spell” (132). Later, on less magical, more conversant visits, Mohr took many photos of him, mostly trying to avoid set poses, unless Marcel insisted upon it. In my telephone interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, he similarly remembered feeling gratified on occasions when his subjects had to prod him into photographing them: “I’m very happy when I have my camera obviously on my desk or on my chest and I begin to speak with people, for instance Gypsies, and there comes a point where they ask me, ‘Why have you a camera and you don’t take pictures?’ So they nearly beg me to take their picture. ... It happens also in a factory, when people feel rejected when I don’t take them, so very often I take pictures which I know that I will not use but just to please them.”

<sup>32</sup> Berger quoted in Willis, “The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr,” 22.

<sup>33</sup> That is not to say that *Another Way of Telling* forsakes practice for theory. Rather, its theoretical investment in photography stems from experiments in practicing this form of expression. In an earlier version of its most theoretically minded section, Berger’s essay “Appearances,” printed as “Another Way of Telling,” *Journal of Social Reconstruction* 1 (1980): 57-75, he contends that “work done is more useful than theory, not only because it encourages rather than discourages (the critical spirit of theory is always negative), but also because practice never respects the limits of theory. The area staked out by theory is invariably too small and too pure. Practice complicates and enlarges it” (75). Privileging artistry over criticism throughout his career, in a later collaboration (combining uses of and reflections on different colors) with another artist, *I Send You This Cadmium Red ... A Correspondence between John Berger and John Christie* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2000), Berger again affirms, “Aesthetics are better practiced than discussed” (n.p.).

<sup>34</sup> As in several of his other books, including the three volumes of *Into Their Labours*, in *Another Way of Telling* Berger acknowledges the financial and intellectual support of the Transnational Institute, a socialist-oriented organization based in Amsterdam, with which he was affiliated from the mid-1970s through the 1980s. His “Appearances” also exhibits the influence of his Marxist interpretation of history on his theory of photography. While Mohr may be less vocal (in part due to his less outspoken temperament and in part due to his primary vocation as a photographer rather than a writer) about declaring his political allegiances, *Another Way of Telling* likewise reveals his socialist sympathies, particularly in the “No Scoop” subsection of his “Beyond My Camera.” On the whole, however, this third collaboration between Berger and Mohr is not as politically urgent or dogmatic as their previous two, especially *A Seventh Man*.

<sup>35</sup> Berger quoted in Willis, “The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr,” 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Like the television series on which it was based, and like many of his books, Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972) is also a collective enterprise, in this instance between himself, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis. Mohr receives credit, as well, for two photos in *Ways of Seeing*, just as he does for several in Berger’s *The Success and Failure of Picasso* and many in his *Art and Revolution*. Mohr’s contributions to Berger’s wide-ranging projects thus extend beyond the three works I examine. Moreover, their principal collaborations acknowledge the involvement of others. Blomberg and Hollis are listed along with Mohr and Berger as the makers of *A Seventh Man*, while *Another Way of Telling*, according to its title page, was made “with the help of Nicholas Philibert.” Prior to its second part, the essay “Appearances,” Berger additionally notes that his thinking about photography has been stimulated by Philibert, Gilles Aillaud, Anthony Barnett, Nella Bielski, Peter Fuller, Gérard Mordillat, and Lloyd Spencer. Although not also named here, Walter Benjamin,

Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag are the three thinkers who have exerted the strongest influence on Berger's critical conception of photography.

<sup>38</sup> Berger, Introduction to Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Berger, Introduction to Mohr and Berger, *At the Edge of the World*, 14-15.

<sup>41</sup> Mohr quoted in Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Telephone interview with Jean Mohr (21 October 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* "In that moment" of collaborative creation, says Berger, "in a certain sense, Jean Mohr and I are one."

<sup>46</sup> Berger quoted in Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 29.

<sup>47</sup> See note 37 for a listing of these other contributors.

<sup>48</sup> Berger quoted in Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 28-29.

<sup>49</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011). For him and Mohr to settle on these arrangements, Berger suggests, "it also depends upon the partner, because some way the reader is there too," accompanying them in advance. "Considering the listener of the story ... or the viewer," he comments, requires that they discern when to leave things unsaid or unpictured, when their tacit "complicity" with the audience will allow the story to be understood without further embellishment.

<sup>50</sup> Increasingly evident from midcareer on, from around the time he started writing stories about peasants, Berger's conception of himself as a storyteller owes a sympathetic debt to Walter Benjamin. Both writers have key essays called "The Storyteller." Berger's, which appears in a revised form as "An Explanation" in the first edition of *Pig Earth*, delineates the crucial function of storytelling in his adopted village's communal life. He recognizes "a certain look of complicity" in the eyes of a local cattle-raiser, as their shared talent for telling stories equalizes them despite many differences, since they "both see how events fit together" (12). In Dyer, "Ways of Witnessing," Berger reflects, "Perhaps I am like all people who tell stories—and I often think now that even when I was writing on art, it was really a way of story-telling—story-tellers lose their identity and are open to the lives of other people. ... This is perhaps why I use the term 'being a witness.' One is witness of

others but not of oneself” (38). Just as Berger thus subordinates his own personality and classifies his art criticism as another form of storytelling, in *At the Edge of the World* he remarks, “story-tellers, as distinct from novelists, aren’t very interested in autobiography” (7). To his mind, novelists—and he too has been one, notwithstanding his distinctions—are introspective inventors, whereas storytellers are more like self-effacing witnesses. In my telephone interview with Berger on 14 October 2011, he emphasized that storytellers are, above all, good listeners and observers: “Stories are not something that you invent; stories are given to you by life, all the time. Most of them even we storytellers ignore or fail to seize. But then sometimes, we catch on, and then we follow. We don’t invent, we follow. ... It is by somebody living something, and you have the opportunity to identify with that. And maybe that is the storyteller’s gift ... to place it into this huge reservoir of human experience.”

<sup>51</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011). Berger said he found the doctor’s “practice” remarkable “in all senses of the word,” thus gesturing toward his well-rehearsed communal role in addition to his conscientious medical practice.

<sup>52</sup> See W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Ethics of Form in the Photographic Essay,” *Afterimage* 16 (January 1989): 8-13

<sup>53</sup> In his novel *G.* (1972; New York: Pantheon, 1980), Berger similarly denies that he can conclude an account of a certain event if he aims to be honest to its complexity. “To stop here,” he writes, “despite all that I leave unsaid, is to admit more of the truth than will be possible if I bring the account to a conclusion. The writer’s desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way” (77).

<sup>54</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 71.

<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, Berger’s analysis of why he cannot conclude *A Fortunate Man* proceeds from his oddly stated assumption “that the obstacles are not purely within myself” (158), as though external factors, rather than his interpretation of them, are innately responsible.

<sup>56</sup> See most especially Berger’s two book-length studies (written just before and after *A Fortunate Man*) of individual artists: *The Success and Failure of Picasso* and *Art and Revolution*. Commenting on the latter work as representative of Berger’s basic critical method, Dyer expounds in *Ways of Telling*: “His prose is constantly bracing itself for abrupt intellectual leaps. He combines emotive language and metaphor with the grammar of assertion: hence his commanding suggestiveness. This style is absolutely central to Berger’s achievement. When he is looking at or reading the work of others he frequently manages to find another option, an alternative left unconsidered or hidden by the writer under consideration; his own writing, on the other hand, works by denying the reader access to an angle of insight other than his own. For exactly the reason that it sweeps objections aside so successfully, we must be suspicious of it” (75). Despite this suspicion of his prose style, Dyer affirms Berger’s subjective mode of inquiry: “Projecting your imagination into a work of art is not the same as imposing your prejudices on it. What is at stake is the *quality* of the imaginative projection. Criticism for Berger is the test of one imagination by another: he never ‘submits’ to the work of art under discussion, never

surrenders to the work of art's own image of itself. ... What is important for Berger is the *encounter* between artist and critic" (75). Similarly, in *A Fortunate Man*, Berger prizes his own imaginative encounter with Sassall, just as the doctor prizes every encounter with his patients, not least because these encounters feed the physician's insatiable hunger for knowledge by tempting this hunger "to compete with the intensity of suffering" (146).

<sup>57</sup> Berger argues that capitalist society "cannot afford" to know the value of a human life because if it knew "it would either have to dismiss this knowledge and with it dismiss all its pretences to democracy and so become totalitarian: or it would have to take account of this knowledge and revolutionize itself. Either way it would be transformed" (*FM* 166). His own transformative mandate, while characteristically vague, is broadly Marxist. After quoting Gramsci's musing: "Is humanity as a reality and as an idea a point of departure or a point of arrival?", Berger gestures toward revolutionary action: "I do not claim to know what a human life is worth—the question cannot be answered by word but only by action, by the creation of a more human society" (*FM* 167).

<sup>58</sup> Ever mindful of his own death, the logic by which Sassall works turned out to be tragically ironic because he wound up committing suicide. For more on coincidental forebodings of the doctor's fate within Berger's text, see Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 70-71.

<sup>59</sup> In the introduction to Mohr's *At the Edge of the World*, Berger reflects: "With Jean—as with most true artists—the relationship between modesty and pride is a complex one. Or maybe it's simpler than I think. He is modesty itself with those who are modest. And he is as recalcitrant as hell with those who are arrogant. ... Less modest than he, I will say that with the example of three books—*A Fortunate Man*, *The Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling*—we have considerably extended the narrative dialogues that are possible between text and images in book form" (14).

<sup>60</sup> Notwithstanding Evans's occasionally arresting landscape photographs, such as his 1936 series on soil erosion in Mississippi, in a talk delivered just before his death and published as Lincoln Caplan, ed., "Walker Evans on Himself," *The New Republic* (13 November 1976): 23-27, he reflected on his selection of subjects: "I am fascinated by man's work and the civilization he's built. In fact, I think that's *the* interesting thing in the world, what man does. Nature rather bores me as an art form. It doesn't bore me to walk through nature and let it play its forces and influences on me. It's restorative, but I don't use it creatively. In fact, nature photographs downright bore me for some reason or other. I think, 'Oh, yes. Look at that sand dune. What of it?' But if you're in love with civilization, as I am, you stick to that" (26). In his preference for manmade over natural forms—even shots of soil erosion, after all, depict the impact of human activity on the environment—Evans diverges not only from his collaborator Agee but also from Mohr, who, perhaps owing to his avidity for mountaineering, has exhibited a consistent interest in photographing the natural terrain. See, for instance, the opening series of pictures in *At the Edge of the World*, which focuses on the play of light and shadow on rocks and trees along the banks of the River Arve outside Geneva. And later in the book, a double-spread photograph of sand dunes in the Algerian desert imparts Mohr's captivation, contrary to Evans, with the "extraordinarily subtle form" of nature shaped, in this case, by "the wind, that great landscape computer, that card-shuffler" (107).



<sup>61</sup> The resulting group of nine poems paired with nine photographs, “At Remaurian,” was initially published in *Typographica* 11 (1965) and later reprinted in John Berger, *Pages of the Wound: Poems, Drawings, Photographs, 1956-96* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

<sup>62</sup> Whereas many of Evans’s outdoor photographs for the Farm Security Administration were taken with an 8 x 10 long-lens view camera mounted on a tripod, Mohr, according to my interview with him on 21 October 2011, believes that “a tripod introduces a kind of distance. And it may be welcomed in certain extreme cases, but usually it’s too difficult.” Early in his career he mostly used a 35 mm Leica (another camera favored by Evans) and later a Canon Reflex. Several years ago he switched over to digital photography (rather like Evans embracing Polaroid color prints late in life) and regretfully disassembled his darkroom. Mohr estimates that eighty percent of his archive (as with the vast majority of Evans’s) is in black and white. Color photography, says Mohr, allows him to experiment esthetically while indulging in nostalgia for the years he spent in Paris trying to learn how to paint at the Beaux-Arts. Evans, meanwhile, as quoted in *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), avowed at the age of seventy that while “a year ago I would have said that color is vulgar and should never be tried under any circumstances,” he was now excited by the possibilities it offered him to “extend my vision and let that open new stylistic paths,” since he disaffirmed “that the doors open to falsehood through color are any greater than they are through the manipulation of prints in black and white. You can distort that, too. I happen to be a gray man; I’m not a black-and-white man. I think gray is truer” (234-35).

<sup>63</sup> In *At the Edge of the World* Berger relates how in 1955, near the beginning of Mohr’s career, “he agreed to work with a couple of acquaintances who had thought up a scheme of taking aerial photographs in the countryside and then selling prints to the farmers and proprietors of the photographed land. ... In the little monoplane, Jean worked fast and under cramped conditions, but the business never got going, and the money ran out” (13). In my interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, he recalled “taking a lot of pictures in helicopters or in small planes,” sometimes at his own peril, since in his eagerness to get closer to what he was photographing on the ground he often stepped too near the edge or “forgot to close the door properly.” On a related note, Berger’s reprinting of the title story from *Once in Europa* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), which is narrated by a woman in a hang-glider, incorporates aerial, color photographs by Patricia Macdonald.

<sup>64</sup> Signs of human habitation and activity are not missing but muted in these photographs. As with the diminutive fishermen reflected fuzzily in the water in Mohr’s first landscape picture, his image of the river’s curve shows a pint-sized motorboat leaving a wake on the surface. And his view of the country road—along which one car (the doctor’s?) is driving away from the camera—displays it winding into the woods past a barn, a meadow, and a house (mostly hidden by trees) with smoke sleeving up from the chimney. Stone cottages similarly appear, with differing degrees of shadowiness, in several other photos.

<sup>65</sup> Another formal attribute of *A Fortunate Man* is its unaligned type on the right margin of each textual page, which creates an untidy appearance, as if its jaggedness is suitable for the avowed “clumsiness” of Berger’s writing. In *Ways of Seeing* and *A Seventh Man*

he again uses this unjustified format, playing around further with the font's graphic look by making it bold in both books and by leaving space breaks between every paragraph in the latter.

<sup>66</sup> "Like any Faust without the aid of the devil," remarks Berger, "he is a man who suffers frequently from a sense of anti-climax" (*FM* 81). The writer speculates that the doctor's "passion for knowledge is a passion for constructive experience with which to so fill his time that subjectively it becomes comparable with the 'time' of those in anguish. It is of course an impossible aim: to construct, to relieve, to cure, to understand, to discover with the same intensity per minute as those in anguish are suffering. Sometimes the aim, as it were, releases Sassall; but mostly he is its slave" (*FM* 131).

<sup>67</sup> Jean Mohr, "Ways of Working," *Camerawork* 10 (July 1978).

<sup>68</sup> In my interview with Jean Mohr on 21 October 2011, he mentioned that, in contrast to much of his work photographing hospital patients for the World Health Organization, he did not have Sassall's patients sign forms granting permission for their pictures to be used in *A Fortunate Man*. Although the doctor was later criticized by other physicians who felt that "it was unacceptable to publish pictures where everybody can be recognized," Mohr thinks that "it was the strength of the book to be able to do that." In spite of not receiving consent from their subjects, he and Berger were only threatened with a lawsuit in this one instance. Tempted by a lawyer to pursue the authors, the perturbed couple almost started a case but decided not to on realizing that it would ostracize them from their community.

<sup>69</sup> Its low-angled view of the slope with a stone wall at the bottom and a stone building at the top, for instance, recalls Mohr's earlier shots of a stone wall and of the hillside clinic, along with Berger's linked descriptions of them. And while clearly purposeful in striding up the path, Sassall's particular purpose (like that of the man with the bucket in the field) in this image remains a mystery. A tiny human figure waving beside the cottage (like the woodman waving through the mist) appears to be hailing the doctor's arrival, but why he has been called to this place is neither ascertainable from the photograph nor explained in the text.

<sup>70</sup> This is the full subtitle to the first British edition (London: Penguin, 1975) of *A Seventh Man*, as well as to the recent reissue (London: Verso, 2010) cited throughout this chapter. Other editions, however, have less prominently underlined the book's hybrid form, either by abridging its subtitle to *Migrant Workers in Europe* (New York: Viking, 1975) or by altering it to *The Story of a Migrant Worker in Europe* (Cambridge: Granta, 1989), thus resonating with the subtitle to *A Fortunate Man*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ways of Seeing* comprises seven numbered, untitled essays, alternating between four that consist of both words and images and three that employ only images. "These purely pictorial essays ..." notes Berger, "are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal essays" (5). As for his declaration about Mohr's photographic sequences making equal, distinct statements in relation to the text of *A Seventh Man*, in my interview with Berger on 14 October 2011 he commented that they made this assertion "with the confidence of having begun that process in *A Fortunate Man* but now wanting to carry it further."

<sup>72</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011). “All that counted was the eloquence of things observed, either in words or with a camera,” reflects Berger, and then his joint effort with Mohr “to put them together in a way that resembled the experience of those we were trying to speak for.”

<sup>73</sup> During the early to mid-seventies, around the time he was working with Mohr on *A Seventh Man*, Berger did collaborate as a screenwriter on three films with Swiss director Alain Tanner: *The Salamander* (1971), *The Middle of the World* (1974), and *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000* (1976).

<sup>74</sup> John Berger, “Speech on Accepting the Booker Prize for Fiction at the Café Royal in London on 23 November 1972,” *Selected Essays*, 254.

<sup>75</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Close-ups, however, are a less salient feature of *A Seventh Man* than of *A Fortunate Man* and *Another Way of Telling*.

<sup>78</sup> Yet in a topical sense *A Seventh Man* may not, after all, be all that outdated. Europe’s current economic crisis has exposed deep rifts within its Union, pitting wealthy northern countries (most vocally, Germany) against indebted southern ones (most conspicuously, Greece). Immigration, meanwhile, both within the continent and from former overseas territories, has continued to be a major feature of the social landscape and a contentious topic of political debate. For contemporary demographic data, see “Destination Europe” in the March 2012 issue of *National Geographic*, which sports a map (pp. 148-49) similar to—albeit considerably more sophisticated than—the one in *A Seventh Man* (p. 20), with arrows delineating the huge influx of foreign workers.

<sup>79</sup> While a complete “List of Works Reproduced” is likewise provided at the end of *Ways of Seeing*, titles and artists are not always supplied next to the images. Berger explains at the beginning: “Sometimes in the pictorial essays no information at all is given about the images reproduced because it seemed to us that such information might distract from the points being made” (5).

<sup>80</sup> According to my interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, Berger was responsible for deciding when to place captions beside pictures and when to defer them until the back of the book.

<sup>81</sup> The penultimate photograph in *A Seventh Man*, a high-angled vertical view of a hillside shantytown, appears above a detailed caption: “Villagers from Anatolia come to Ankara. On the city outskirts they build shacks to live in. The roof must be put up during the first night of building. If by morning there is a roof, the city authorities do not have the right to destroy the shack. The shacks are without sanitation or water. For many this is the first step towards emigration” (232). Amounting to a mini-narrative, the caption thus supplies

information that cannot be readily gleaned from the image and that is not featured in the text, though nearly 200 pages earlier Berger does imagine a prospective migrant arriving by bus “in the suburbs of the capital of his country. He sees an agglomeration of small improvised lean-to dwellings constructed from spare bricks, scrapwood and discarded corrugated iron. In these live the villagers who have reached the capital and have gone no further” (43). Another lengthy caption is printed under what, without it, would be a much more enigmatic shot of a smiling, white-coated gentleman standing before a display case. As the caption spells out, this photograph is of a “German doctor at Recruitment Centre, Istanbul, showing his ‘museum’. The collection consists of vessels, bottles, water pistols, confiscated from those applying for work in Germany. Outside the Recruitment Centre would-be migrants can buy ‘good’ urine on the black market; they do so because they fear their own may be unhealthy. They put the bought urine into vessels like the ones confiscated and try to substitute it for their own when asked for a specimen” (59).

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, text and pictures are so tightly bound together in this self-contained subsection that even the appendix only furnishes a single umbrella caption for these photographs.

<sup>83</sup> The title page of *A Seventh Man* also acknowledges that Berger and Mohr coauthored it “with the collaboration of Sven Blomberg.” As for his eleven photographs included in the book, they were all taken either in Yugoslavia or France, supplementing Mohr’s coverage of those two countries. For a personal homage to Blomberg, who was primarily a painter, see John Berger, “Room 19,” *Photocopies* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 164-70.

<sup>84</sup> Berger does, however, credit a few quotations on the pages on which they crop up. For example, he cites contradictory statements by Karl Marx and Henry Ford with regard to the bodily and spiritual effects of repetitive, mechanized, unskilled factory labor. And see below for a brief discussion of Attila József’s poem “The Seventh” (acknowledged where it occurs), from which the book’s title is in part taken.

<sup>85</sup> Printed on the cover to the 2010 reissue of *A Seventh Man* is a quotation (presumably by Berger) which does not appear in the book but sums up its aim to realign perceptions of the migrant’s experience: “Today the migrant worker experiences, within a few years, what the working population of every industrial city once experienced over generations. To consider his life—its material circumstances and his inner feelings—is to be brought face to face with the fundamental nature of our present societies and their histories. The migrant is not on the margin of modern experience—he is absolutely central to it.”

<sup>86</sup> While working abroad, expounds Berger, migrants must persist under the interplay of three calculations. The ruling class calculates that it will preserve a social hierarchy, keep wages down, meet fluctuating production demands, and suppress the growth of a radical proletariat by importing a significant percentage of the labor force only when needed and by encouraging indigenous workers to deem migrant workers justifiably unequal because intrinsically inferior, thus accelerating the fragmentation of the working class precipitated by consumerism. Trade unions, meanwhile, hold contradictory stances toward migrants, most of whom are not politicized and are rightly skeptical about the ability or willingness of unions to lobby on their behalf, since trade-union leaders are primarily concerned with safeguarding the living standard of indigenous workers, who accept the mystification that

migrant workers “belong” in their countries of origin, not where they work. Against these supposals, migrants themselves calculate that their health will hold out, that their women will remain faithful, that some of their family may be able to join them, and above all that they will “save enough soon enough” to return home for good (*SM* 151).

<sup>87</sup> This figure applies to Germany and Britain at that time. The ratio of foreigners was even higher in other nations, accounting for around twenty-five percent of the industrial workforce in France, Switzerland, and Belgium. By deriving his title from a statistic as well as a poem, Berger intimates that the book will be concerned both with documenting and imagining the conditions of migrant workers in Europe.

<sup>88</sup> Although mostly disempowered and impoverished in the modern era, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Turkey (all except Yugoslavia) once boasted mighty empires.

<sup>89</sup> See, for instance, John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), which surrounds “Eight Poems of Emigration” with prose meditations on this widespread form of modern homelessness (54-67). The set of poems is reprinted in Berger, *Pages of the Wound*, which also contains other verses from the eighties—such as “Separation” and “Migrant Words”—speaking to the experience of migrants.

<sup>90</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 79.

<sup>91</sup> See especially, from *Pig Earth*, the stories “A Question of Place” (about the slaughter of a cow at a family-run village abattoir) and “The Wind Howls Too” (about a communal pig-butcherer). See also the story “Boris Is Buying Horses” from *Once in Europa* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), plus the description of city tanneries at the beginning of *Lilac and Flag* (New York: Pantheon, 1990).

<sup>92</sup> Western Europe’s reliance on migrant workers from its poorer southern neighbors and from former overseas colonies is paralleled in the United States by its often hypocritical dependence on migrations of Mexicans and other Latinos to do much of its manual labor. As for Berger’s assertion that *A Seventh Man* has a global meaning beyond its European subject, he makes similar claims for *Into Their Labours*. In the “Historical Afterword” to *Pig Earth* he writes that “whatever the differences of climate, religion and social history, the peasantry everywhere can be defined as a class of survivors” (196), but that the late-twentieth-century penetration of corporate capitalism (via multinational agribusinesses) “into all corners of the globe is eliminating the peasant” (211). In a note preceding *Once in Europa* he observes that, aside from certain details, the mountain village fictionalized in the first two volumes of his peasant trilogy “could exist in a number of countries across the continents of the world” (xiii). Likewise, *Lilac and Flag* takes place in the mythic city of Troy, which, except for its location on the coast, could be almost anywhere in Europe, attracting emigrants not just from the French Alps but from across the continent. Berger’s encapsulating description of the cityscape puts it into a globalized context in step with the times (170). To further emphasize Troy’s conglomerate international nature, he gives its diverse zones, neighborhoods, and landmarks names taken from many places worldwide. This metropolis is thus as contemporary and cosmopolitan as it is ageless and allegorical.

<sup>93</sup> Compare Mohr's pictures of New York with Berger's essay "Manhattan," which, like his aforementioned "The Theatre of Indifference," was first published in the same year as *A Seventh Man* and later collected in John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (New York: Pantheon, 1985). In this piece Berger outlines Manhattan's environmental bleakness and its manifold abstract meanings as an embodiment of "opportunity, the power of capital, white imperialism, glamour, poverty" (61). Again utilizing the chief metaphor from his book on migration, he contends that all surfaces in this metropolis have been "prejudiced by hopes or their disappointment. The island is like a dream or nightmare being dreamt simultaneously by each of its inhabitants. ... Within the history of capitalism, Manhattan is the island reserved for those who are damned because they have hoped excessively" (66-67).

<sup>94</sup> In "Manhattan," from *The Sense of Sight*, Berger similarly envisages how a newcomer to this metropolitan apogee must have looked back longingly yet perplexedly toward his European homeland, until his perceptions at last changed so that he thereafter urged his whole family to emigrate and to accept their assimilation: "The newly arrived immigrant looked out to sea, beyond the lagoon, and imagined that the line of clouds just above the horizon was an outline of land. ... Again and again, he reminded himself that it could not be land, and that the eastern horizon held no promise. The impression persisted despite his logic. When finally he saw the clouds as clouds, and nothing but clouds—and if he never achieved this, his son would—he became an American and sent for his cousins" (65-66), much as the invented conversation in *A Seventh Man* hinges on the younger cousin's yearning to receive the family blessing before going abroad himself.

<sup>95</sup> John Berger and Jean Mohr, "Ways of Working," *Camerawork* 10 (July 1978).

<sup>96</sup> The captions appear alongside these four pictures in *A Seventh Man*, but not in *Another Way of Telling*, which bestows greater autonomy on all of its reproduced images by only identifying them in an appendix, thus preserving photographic ambiguity longer, at least on an initial viewing.

<sup>97</sup> Just as Berger commiserates with migrants straining "to see through the opaqueness of the words" that hamper their adjustment to the metropolis, where everything—especially the language—is at first alien to them (*SM* 122), so here he rues the calculated division of these tunnel workers into gangs which never consist all of the same nationality. "Whereas the town above specializes in international interpreting," the writer accentuates this irony, "the members of a gang have scarcely a dozen words between them. Misunderstandings have led to accidents. On the other hand—benefitting output—work proceeds with little talk" (*SM* 166).

<sup>98</sup> *A Seventh Man* contains many examples of this cross-fertilization between images and words, often leading the reader to wonder which medium instigated a common attribute. Even though most of the photographs were taken before the text was written, it is nearly impossible to determine whether certain pictures elicited certain passages or whether the pictures were chosen to be compatible with the passages. Some overlaps in photographic and textual details occur close together, while others are spaced far apart. The shot with a

swaddled infant in a cradle near an underfed cow is printed more than eighty pages after a similar description, as is the shot of a crowded rural bus stop after this fitting evocation of such a scene: “Those waiting sit or lie; others prepare to leave. The place is crowded too with the litter of the hours spent there. In the air a kind of residual cloud of sound, made up of words explaining and recounting journeys” (39). A few sentences about a departing migrant’s ride to catch the bus are both preceded and followed by pictures of horse-drawn carts traveling on country roads: “On the family cart to the nearest bus station there is not much left to say. They pass many people walking, riding, grazing cattle. The road itself is a passing of stories, with its listeners in the grass on either side” (37). Before the hopeful peasant leaves home, he is entranced by the stories of successful returnees from the city, “who take him aside as though inviting him into their conspiracy. They hint that there are secrets which can only be divulged and discussed with those who have also been there” (33). Overleaf is the double-spread photo with the caption “Migrant talking to villager, Calabria, Italy,” which depicts two men conversing while warming their hands over an outdoor fire. The chicly attired migrant may be beguiling the staidly dressed villager with tales of the metropolis. To limn conditions there, images and words continue to engage in a mutually augmenting narrative dialogue throughout the rest of the book.

<sup>99</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 116.

<sup>100</sup> In *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952) Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of Mohr’s biggest influences, comments on his photograph (the volume’s seventh) of a herd of cattle striding across dry, stark, mountainous terrain in Lucania, Southern Italy: “It was evening. The peasant who was herding his cows home said, ‘What does that man want with my cows? Why is he looking at them so?’”

<sup>101</sup> In *At the Edge of the World* Mohr recollects the “unpredictable events to which I was sometimes summoned: a burial, a baptism, an old folks’ reunion, even a wedding. And at these events, I was expected to show proof that I knew how to do my job well,” by taking pictures which pleased his subjects. “And of course, there was no question of being paid for my work with money. That would corrupt the relationship between us. But I would find rewards in the back of the car: a crate of plums, a salami, a bottle of home-distilled spirits. Good, old-fashioned payment in kind, for which I have a soft spot” (131).

<sup>102</sup> Although Mohr may have in effect “stolen” his images at this cattle market, he did not do likewise when photographing other peasants whom he knew well and who figure more prominently in *Another Way of Telling*. In Willis, “The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr,” balking at the interviewer’s suggestion that “you took the responsibility for ‘stealing’ a particular situation as it happened and then for using those stolen moments to reconstruct the experience as you saw it,” the photographer replies, “the words ‘stolen pictures’ in this case may not be the right one. I would not have been allowed to take pictures if the people didn’t know that I was a friend of John and if they had not trusted John completely and, later on, trusted myself also” (24).

<sup>103</sup> Mohr has made something of a habit of this eccentricity. In *At the Edge of the World* Berger recalls rather formal occasions when his friend spots a cat or dog and then “starts, without the slightest warning, to make animal or bird noises himself. His face absolutely

impassive, his mouth slightly pursed yet quite still, the focus of his very pale blue eyes very far away, almost at the world's end. If there are children present, they are delighted and adopt him immediately. The adults look uncomfortable" (9).

<sup>104</sup> While Mohr does not tell these passersby anything about the photos he shows them, in a recent book of his published for Reporters sans Frontières—*100 Images pour la Liberté de la Presse* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2010)—he uses very sparing captions, only noting the year and the place in which each picture was taken, thus refraining from his ordinary willingness to surround his photographs with more explanatory words. In my telephone interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, he commented on why he did not provide his own interpretive glosses for these 100 images: "I thought it would weaken the picture to say more about it, because to say just a few words wouldn't be enough, and then a whole page ... would weaken it, because the picture must have not only one interpretation but several sometimes. ... Often the person who is looking at the picture makes a mixture of his own experience and the picture he's looking at." Like Berger, Mohr therefore believes that preserving photographic ambiguity "makes the pictures richer" for the viewer.

<sup>105</sup> The second image is of a young man perched in a flowering tree. Mohr explains that he has climbed up to get a better view for taking pictures at a mass demonstration outside the White House against the Vietnam War. While three of the nine conjecturers express an inkling that the man (even though his camera is barely visible) is looking for a photo, most of them contemplate the symbolism around youth, spring, and nature. The banker, who considers the man "healthy, both physically and morally," somewhat backhandedly surmises that "he's an outdoor type who may nevertheless have brains" (*AWT* 50), while the actress alludes to her own profession by seizing upon his sexuality to be reminded of a Fellini film. A psychiatrist, incorrectly inferring that the man is a Spanish proletarian in an orchard, psychoanalyzes him: "He looks surprised but not guilty. Perhaps there's a girl sunbathing in the orchard" (*AWT* 51). The third shot, showing a group of Sri Lankan men on a tea plantation listening to a talk in favor of vasectomy, provokes curiosity as to what country they live in, what they are waiting for, and why they appear so solemn. Reacting in line with his calling, the clergyman discerns in it "all the problems of our Christianity. Am I going to offer them the usual *spiel*, or am I going to listen to them and share their waiting?" (*AWT* 52). Other viewers—besides those already mentioned, they include a market-gardener, a schoolgirl, and a dance-teacher—find the men to be frightening or pitiable. In *At the Edge of the World*, 111-17, Mohr prints other pictures and goes into greater depth about his documentation of this tense situation. His fourth and fifth images for the photographic guessing game depict a British girl playing with a doll and an Indian boy sleeping on a water pipe. Although not shown to his judges, Mohr's shot of a refugee boy at a reception center in Trieste mesmerizingly opens "What Did I See?" by prodding the viewer to ruminate on what the boy is seeing in this photographed moment as well as what he is seeing in his mind's eye.

<sup>106</sup> Despite Berger's disavowal in Marzorati, "Living and Writing the Peasant Life," that his characters usually have identifiable real-life models, since "all fiction is a complicated mixture of witnessing, retelling what you have heard, and fantasy," Marcel is clearly the prototype for Marius in "The Time of the Cosmonauts" from *Once in Europa*. This story, in addition to being about an old cowherd, also concerns a group of woodcutters who are



in part modeled on Gaston. Independent in personality and livelihood, Marcel and Gaston likewise contribute traits to several intrepid characters in *Pig Earth*. For Berger's elegiac remembrance of Marcel, see "A Bunch of Flowers in a Glass" in his *Photocopies*, 90-93.

<sup>107</sup> In Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," Berger notes that peasants "want to see a whole, they do not want to see arbitrarily cut detail," which, Mohr chimes in, "is, after all, quite natural, because close-ups are very often a kind of imposing the view of the photographer on a face, on a personality" (28). In his reminiscence of Marcel in *At the Edge of the World* (see note 31), Mohr similarly reflects that when showing his photos to his peasant subjects he always "needed to make a careful selection, to 'censor' the material so as not to offend the hidden sensibilities of country people" (131). As though to offset his umbrage at the close-up of his cow's eye, in *Another Way of Telling* the cowherd proudly identifies her in spite of the tight framing.

<sup>108</sup> For variants and further discussion of these working and resting pictures, see Mohr's section on Marcel, "Sommand, Haute Savoie, France 1979: Père Nicoud," in *At the Edge of the World*, 130-37, along with Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 25-27.

<sup>109</sup> Marcel quoted in a footnote to Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 25. On the same page Berger remarks: "if Marcel sees a picture of himself with his brothers all covered in cow shit, unshaven as he gets up at four in the morning, this picture doesn't really cause him offence. ... But it's not the picture that he wants finally to represent himself."

<sup>110</sup> Never keeping his distance from manual laborers, Mohr affirmed in my telephone interview with him on 21 October 2011: "I try to put myself in the place of the people working," sometimes by pitching in with their tasks and sometimes by reassuring them—"not with my words but with my behavior"—that his pictures will not "humiliate them ... that their work has a certain value."

<sup>111</sup> The image of Gaston cutting off branches appears above one of the denuded tree, its trunk (in relation to the page) lying vertical in the first shot and horizontal in the second shot, so that together they form a cross. Prior to assembling the book, Mohr and Berger had arranged the photos in this fashion for an exhibition. Discussing the layout in Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," Berger remarks, "It's a cruciform, ... and Gaston is in the centre. Now that's actually what happens when a tree falls. A tree falls and then you have to go into it. You have to cut off the bark and all those branches; you are completely surrounded by this tree. We have tried to re-construct that in the arrangement of those pictures on the panel" (24). For another evocation of the physical demands and subjective experience of felling trees, see Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 76-77.

<sup>112</sup> In his introduction to *At the Edge of the World* Berger reflects: "Every large family in the Alpine village where I live has its own collection of Mohr photos. Sometimes, there's one framed on the mantelpiece; others are in a box that is brought out when people start to reminisce. Frequently, these are photos they have asked him to take at a wedding, a

village gathering, a dance. Today, all the young people in the village have colour films and cameras and videos. But when Jean first started coming to visit, pictures were still rare, and a photographer was thought of as some kind of inspector or obscure State spy. If they quickly accepted Jean and then invited him to take pictures (in exchange for illicit *eau de vie*), it was because ... this man, unlike an inspector, was clearly and startlingly observant all the while, as they themselves had to be because they lived unprotected lives, and it was therefore necessary to observe everything. And then, later, they found that the photos he took and gave them were a kind of company .... The photos became in black and white the incarnations of certain names" (10).

<sup>113</sup> Berger quoted in Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," 21, wherein the writer elaborates on the photographer's various shots of the woodcutter: "So in showing the way that tree fell, the photograph was authentic. But the authenticity doesn't end there, because if the trees don't fall like that, if Gaston makes a mistake, especially because he's working by himself, he'll get hurt, perhaps badly hurt or even killed. And so he is a man who has to be continually anxious, continually watchful, careful and at the same time very energetic. That picture of that pine falling exactly how Gaston wanted it was one kind of authenticity; but it's also important, which that single picture could never show, that this experience of working year after year in the forest alone has marked Gaston's face. One can see the anxiety and the excitement which he gets out of that experience, which that experience inflicts upon him. And that can only be shown in a portrait of his face and his lived experience."

<sup>114</sup> In my telephone interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, he discussed his recently finished but not yet published book of portraits, entitled *Behind the Mask*, in which he tries "to go a little bit further" than in *Another Way of Telling* in recounting his sitters' reactions to their pictures, both their initial responses and their reconsiderations, which may have "quite drastically changed." Mohr says "the main theme of the book is that a picture is taken by the photographer at one moment and very often completely dismissed ... because people think it's un-right to them, it's untrue. But sometimes a few years later they come back to you and they say, 'You have had prophetic eyes, and now I accept the way you have seen me.'" To hone his prophetic eyes, Mohr talks about remaining "fresh in my approach" and accepting unexpected appearances. In contrast to the conscious self-scrutiny "when you look at the mirror in your bathroom," he points out, "sometimes you see yourself in the mirror of an escalator where you didn't expect it, and there you have the same shock, the same surprise, in seeing yourself differently."

<sup>115</sup> See Berger's introduction, "Jean Mohr: A Sketch for a Portrait," to *At the Edge of the World* for another instance of the photographer posing to have his likeness made, in this case for a drawing by the writer. "When you're trying to make a portrait of somebody you know well," comments Berger, "you have to forget and forget until what you see astonishes you. Indeed, at the heart of any portrait which is alive, an absolute surprise surrounded by close intimacy is registered" (8).

<sup>116</sup> In his introduction to *At the Edge of the World* Berger delineates how Mohr's "special freelance status" at the United Nations distinguished his career from that of "most press photographers," giving him fewer time constraints and greater personal freedom (13).

<sup>117</sup> See Mohr's subsection "A Doubtful Exorcism" (discussed in my first chapter) for an ethically agonizing incident—his observation from a train window of gaunt Indonesian children pleading for handouts from the mostly unnoticing passengers—in which, "at a five-hundredth of a second, hidden behind my camera," he answered in the affirmative to a question that likewise often hounds him: "how do you free yourself from an obsession, when you are a photographer, if not by photographing the object of the obsession?" (*AWT* 73). And see too Mohr's *At the Edge of the World*—especially his account of "Allahabad, India, 1977," 118-23—for some other knotty situations in which, as both a witness and a sympathizer standing in precarious relation to his subjects, he had to fight a battle within himself (as well as against others) between his reluctance and compulsion to take photos.

<sup>118</sup> In response to Susan Sontag's book *On Photography* (1977), Berger also dwells on the medium's affinity with and divergence from memory in his "Uses of Photography," *About Looking* (1980; New York: Pantheon, 1991), 52-67. And see also the essay "How Fast Does it Go?" in his *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), in which he writes, "The thrill found in a photograph comes from the onrush of memory. ... Memory is a strange faculty. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers; the more comprehensive the stimulus, the less it remembers. This is perhaps why black-and-white photography is paradoxically more evocative than colour photography. It stimulates a faster onrush of memories because less has been given, more has been left out" (192-93).

<sup>119</sup> In an introductory note to Willis, "The Authentic Image—An Interview with John Berger and Jean Mohr," Philip Corrigan likewise alludes to Eisenstein when glossing Mohr's notion of himself as a brick-maker mostly supplying raw material for Berger's masonry. Perhaps echoing the director's concept that film montages are made of "bricks," Corrigan points out, the photographer's sequences with the writer demonstrate "that the meaning comes not from accumulation (wall building) but from collision (the achieved architecture)" (19-20).

<sup>120</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 213.

<sup>121</sup> Berger, "Uses of Photography," *About Looking*, 60, 62. See also "The Political Uses of Photo-Montage," in John Berger, *The Look of Things*, ed. Nikos Stangos (1972; New York: Viking, 1974), 183-89.

<sup>122</sup> While this woman's real first name may well have begun with the letter J, the authors' assertion that she has been invented echoes Berger's humorous maneuver in his novel *G*, nearly halfway through which he supplies an initial for the up to then unnamed "principal protagonist of this book, whom I will now call, for the sake of convenience, G" (127).

<sup>123</sup> Berger, "Uses of Photography," *About Looking*, 62.

<sup>124</sup> Berger may have been in on the game, too. In my telephone interview with Mohr on 21 October 2011, he recalled that this series of close-ups "was mainly an idea of John's."

<sup>125</sup> The first shows her as a young girl, the second as a young woman. In addition to these snapshots from his own family album, Berger also uses his photograph of an olive tree in Provence (juxtaposed with a drawing by Van Gogh) during his essay “Appearances.” All three pictures exhibit Berger’s interest—likewise displayed in “At Remaurian” (see note 61)—in the photographic effects of dappled sunlight and shadow.

<sup>126</sup> Telephone interview with John Berger (14 October 2011).

<sup>127</sup> While Mohr photographed the chalet, an unspecified photographer took the picture of the Parisian apartment building, which was designed by Auguste Perret.

<sup>128</sup> Messmer, “Apostle to the Techno/Peasants: Word and Image in the Work of John Berger,” in Downing and Bazargan, eds., *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse*, 199. Although his essay later veers onto rather abstruse sidetracks, Messmer starts out with a superb comparative reading of such mutually enhancing reverberations among the visual and verbal components of *Another Way of Telling*, *A Seventh Man*, *Pig Earth*, and *Once in Europa*.

<sup>129</sup> Among the subjects of these once-repeated photographs (some discussed or mentioned again below), are a farmhouse’s entryway, a boy and girl walking to the dairy, a flock of sheep on a suburban street, a crucifix in a charnel house, a peasant with a load of hay on his back striding up a slope while reaching down to pick up a tool, an old portrait of a young man, a hand pulling apart a strand of pig intestines, and an uprooted tree stump.

<sup>130</sup> This alluringly enigmatic picture of the mother and child was taken in Great Britain, perhaps during Mohr’s work on *A Fortunate Man*. Since the list of illustrations for “If Each Time . . .” only identifies the places, not the years, in which his photos were made, such a conjecture cannot be verified from *Another Way of Telling*. The photos, however, for “Beyond My Camera” are labeled by date as well as place. Hence Mohr’s shot of the British girl playing with the doll, used in his guessing game with viewers (see note 105), was snapped in 1964, probably when he was photographing country scenes for the book about the doctor. The three shots out the window, meanwhile, come from a village in the Tatra Mountains of southwest Poland, most likely during Mohr’s trip there in 1958. For more on this photographic expedition, see his *At the Edge of the World*, 50-55.

<sup>131</sup> Messmer’s “Apostle to the Techno/Peasants: Word and Image in the Work of John Berger,” in Downing and Bazargan, eds., *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse*, 205, correlates this photograph with a moment from Berger’s story “Boris Is Buying Horses,” when the narrator visits the protagonist while he grazes his sheep on a mountainside above the factory. And just as germane is the title story of *Once in Europa*, in which the main character’s father intractably refuses to sell his land (or his patrimony, as he calls it) to the massive metallurgical factory which increasingly envelops the farm, so that every year he is “obliged to lead his four cows through an ever larger factory yard over more railway lines” out to pastures obscured by mounting slag heaps (97).

<sup>132</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 5. See also, from this volume, his poem “Hay” (102-103), as well as the opening stanza of his “Old Love Poem” at the outset of *Lilac and Flag* (3), a novel

narrated by an old village woman who scythes the tall grass of her hayfield while telling about the misfortunes of peasants who abandon the land for the city.

<sup>133</sup> See the “Historical Afterword” to Berger’s *Pig Earth* for his elucidation of how this cyclic view of time helps to uphold this class of survivors despite the precariousness of peasant economics. And see also “A Popular Use of Photography,” the central part of his essay “Appearances” in *Another Way of Telling*, for Berger’s contention that photographs can be used to combat the capitalist conflation of time and history.

<sup>134</sup> Dyer, *Ways of Telling*, 116. While in other respects more charitable to *Another Way of Telling*, Dyer credits Anthony Barnett, one of Berger’s closest intellectual comrades, for suggesting this critical judgment.

<sup>135</sup> Berger, *Pig Earth*, 13.

<sup>136</sup> In *At the Edge of the World*, nostalgically reflecting on the magic of being in “the company of this ageless man who blended in with the landscape,” an “untroubled and friendly” man who “seemed to be outside time, almost other-worldly,” Mohr describes Marcel, or Père Nicoud, as having “an apparently inscrutable face, whose mischievous expression actually tallied with the ‘kind’ wrinkles inscribed around his mouth and eyes and on his forehead. He did not have much to say, but the few words he did contribute to the conversation were not without shrewdness and humor” (131-32).

## EPILOGUE

### THE LOOK OF FACT AND THE FEEL OF FICTION: IN THE WAKE OF AGEE, EVANS, BERGER, AND MOHR

Who are the heirs of Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr? How have their ways of seeing the rural poor inspired or challenged others? How have their verbal and visual portraits of peasants and their nuanced celebrations of the country over the city resonated with likeminded artists and witnesses? How have their ideas about how to combine or sequester text and photographs provoked further interdisciplinary experimentation? From among the scores of independent projects and collaborative endeavors which have likewise navigated the ethics and esthetics of representing poverty, I conclude by spotlighting a handful of artist-witnesses whose books on marginalized people and places carry forward, enlarge upon, affirm, or contest the examples set in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *A Fortunate Man*, *A Seventh Man*, and *Another Way of Telling*.

The first two heirs might be more properly called peers. Eudora Welty and Wright Morris, exact contemporaries of Agee,<sup>1</sup> excelled as both writers and photographers, mostly focusing on poor rural subjects from their home states of Mississippi and Nebraska. During their long careers they each had occasion to reflect on their work in relation to Evans's and to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Moreover, struggling to determine how they might best use images and words—whether jointly or discretely—to access memories, tell stories, apprehend reality, and reveal truth, their photographic and literary projects bear instructive comparison with the imaginative documentaries or narrative dialogues created by Berger and Mohr.

Two contemporary books, produced by authors with transnational outlooks born

in the 1950s, acknowledge the direct influence of Berger and Mohr or Agee and Evans. Much as *A Seventh Man* traces the experiences of migrant workers across Europe, *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), a novel by American expatriate Timothy O'Grady with pictures by British photographer Steve Pyke, tells a more concentrated, fictionalized story of Irish emigrants working in England. And in his recent study *Poor People* (2007), prolific, versatile, globetrotting author William T. Vollmann, whose kaleidoscopically genre-flouting works have documented and imagined the lives of all sorts of persons ordinarily consigned to invisibility or condemned as immoral, positions his project of interviewing and photographing some of the world's poorest inhabitants against *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, bringing its esthetic ambitiousness and ethical abashment along with him into the twenty-first century.

Before Eudora Welty began writing fiction about her fellow Mississippians, she was taking pictures of them. Not until three decades, however, after the publication—in the same year that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* went to press—of her first story collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941), did she release her first volume of photographs, *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: A Snapshot Album* (1971). Tensions between verbal and visual means of expression animated Welty's creative intelligence as well as her conception of herself as an author. Despite having snapped hundreds of shots for herself while traveling around her state as a publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration (WPA),<sup>2</sup> in hindsight she averred that her mind took “a writer's direction from the start, not a photographer's,” that for all the camera taught her about thinking in images and framing vision, “there's so much more of life that only words can convey.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet during the mid-1930s she had, in fact, striven to unite these talents. Proposing a book called *Black Saturday*, she assembled a mockup with contact prints laid out in a

sequence as though to suggest a narrative and with written stories not specifically linked to the photos. Its rejection led her to concur later that “it was an amateurish idea” and that “such a book was unpublishable.”<sup>4</sup> But of course books joining text and pictures were being published at an unprecedented rate in that era. What perhaps would have made hers unique (too much so for the literary editors who passed on it)<sup>5</sup> was its intention to interweave them not for documentary purposes but as a form of imaginative storytelling, thus anticipating *Another Way of Telling*. As Nancy Shawcross observes, Welty’s proposed mixed-media volume may also have been incompatible with a paradox at the heart of her ethical and esthetic temperament. Whereas her photography stems from a self-effacing regard for the subject’s preeminence, “her stories derive from the modernist notion that the author is creator and not recorder of reality.”<sup>6</sup>

When her photographs finally did appear in *One Time, One Place*, Welty indeed remarked in her preface that “their merit lies entirely in their subject matter,” not in their maker’s abilities or methods, that they amount to “a record of fact,” not fiction, and that she put them together “not as a social document but as a family album.”<sup>7</sup> But what sort of family does she have in mind? Broader than the literal family sections pictured in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, yet narrower than the global family of emigrants in *A Seventh Man*, in Welty’s album the family circle (its members preponderantly black) embraces anyone she happened across with her camera while working for the WPA, a job that showed her “the real State of Mississippi, not the abstract state of the Depression.”<sup>8</sup> Welty neither denies nor accentuates the South’s racial divisions and economic hardships. Its ongoing poverty made it seem less dramatically changed by the Depression than other parts of the country were. She had been stirred by social consciousness on photographing “the faceless breadlines” in New York City, far away from home, but everything struck



her as “personal and particular”<sup>9</sup> rather than phenomenal in largely rural Mississippi.<sup>10</sup> Not facing the suspicions that hounded Agee and Evans in neighboring Alabama, Welty found she could move through the Southern milieu “openly and yet invisibly because I was part of it, born into it, taken for granted.”<sup>11</sup> As a shy white woman taking pictures of black persons in a segregated society, she felt attended by an angel of trust enabling her to achieve intimacy with her subjects.<sup>12</sup> Some had never been photographed before, in which cases she tried (as Mohr would do with Alpine peasants) to get them prints.<sup>13</sup> Loath to believe that such likenesses were “to these poverty-marked men and women and children a sad souvenir,” or to “think of those lives as symbols of a bad time,” Welty instead dwells on how they often exuded “the same high spirits, the same joy” that spurred her to photograph them.<sup>14</sup> Preoccupied with capturing their everyday activities and imagining their inner lives, she refuses to generalize from their images. “I wished no more to indict anybody, to prove or disprove anything by my pictures,” she avows, “than I would have wished to do harm to the people in them.”<sup>15</sup>

Although unaware in the thirties of Evans’s contemporaneous work in her region, in a 1989 interview Welty explicitly distinguished her approach to photographic subjects (as well as to presumed viewers) from his, somewhat misconstruing his intent and output. “*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” she claims, “was entirely different in motivation from my own photography,” for she thought of herself as simply recording “human beings because they were real life,” without “trying to exhort the public.”<sup>16</sup> Nor did Evans, however, conceive of himself as an exhorter, as he too—albeit with grander esthetic ambitions—sought to record reality for its own sake.<sup>17</sup> Overlooking his defiantly apolitical disposition, she conflates his individual motives with “those of professionals who were purposefully photographing for an agency, or a cause,”<sup>18</sup> with the mandates

directing him and his colleagues at the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In spite of her amateur standing and unpaid camerawork, though, Welty likewise made many of her best pictures while employed by a government agency and engaged in writing up journalistic accounts. Apparently considering such enterprises to be almost unavoidably exploitative (much as Agee frets over spying on the tenants), she upholds the resentment that certain survivors of the three families are reported to feel half a century after being photographed by Evans.<sup>19</sup> But in fact her ethical impetus was not all that dissimilar from his, for they both eschewed propaganda yet aimed to extend a moral vision through their lenses, proving themselves, in Bill Ferris's phrase, "artists as witnesses to folk culture."<sup>20</sup> Her blend of witness and artistry is less formally sophisticated or premeditated. She had no pretensions, as he did, to having practiced a transcendent style of lyric documentary.<sup>21</sup> Hence Welty makes a more valid distinction concerning compositional technique, in that most of Evans's subjects consciously posed for him, whereas most of hers went on with their doings while she took spontaneous snapshots of them.<sup>22</sup>

Welty's modest appraisal of her images as "snapshots" defines the limits of the medium to her mind, shedding light on why she shifted her focus from photography to writing. According to her, "a snapshot is a moment's glimpse (as a story may be a long look, a growing contemplation) into what never stops moving, never ceases to express for itself something of our common feeling."<sup>23</sup> Behind the lens she learned swiftly how to ready herself for those evanescent instants when feelings would reveal themselves through gestures, but gradually she realized that for her a deeper understanding of people's lives must be pursued through literature, and that "a story-writer's truth" must penetrate beyond what the camera could contain: "Insight doesn't happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly

and from nowhere but within.”<sup>24</sup> Wedding her sensitive eye for the outer world with an intensely introspective, intricately symbolic mode of narration, Welty would go on to compose complex fictions mining “that most wonderful interior vision which is memory” and probing truths about human existence which “will never be confined in any frame.”<sup>25</sup> Similar to Berger’s pursuit in his photo-textual projects and fictional peasant trilogy, Welty’s lifelong writerly objective became a reconstruction of the subjective experience of time and the communal experience of memory, the events of her characters’ pasts remembered not separately or chronologically but converging upon one another and spiraling around “the continuous thread of revelation.”<sup>26</sup> As Carol Shloss comments on the forces that impelled both of these storytellers and shaped their convictions about the narrative possibilities and constraints inherent in photography and writing, Welty and Berger were stimulated by vision but wound up favoring imagination “as sight was joined to insight, as observation gave way to identification.”<sup>27</sup>

More persistently than Welty, Wright Morris strove to link his gifts for the pen and the lens. Although his chief territory was the Great Plains, not the Deep South, his innovative “photo-texts” (as he referred to several of his volumes) are also more closely associated with Agee’s and Evans’s collaboration. Indeed, portions of his first such book, *The Inhabitants*, were initially printed together with selections from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in the 1940 annual issue of *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*.<sup>28</sup> That fall, embarking on a “photo-safari” around rural America,<sup>29</sup> Morris stopped in Washington, D.C., to show samples of his work to Roy Stryker, Evans’s ex-boss at the FSA, with the hope of obtaining an assignment, or at least a carton of film, from him. But Stryker was nonplussed by Morris’s “suggestively ‘arty’” intentions to combine words and images, and even more so by the lack of people in the latter, as he preferred to preserve objects

and buildings in his pictures, resolved “to celebrate the eloquence of structures so plainly dedicated to human use, and to salvage those that were on the edge of dissolution.”<sup>30</sup> His photographic esthetic—reminiscent of Evans’s for its crisp, frontal, sun-gleaming, and shadow-slashed qualities, likewise garnered (in contrast to Welty’s handheld snapshots) with a view camera on a tripod—did not square, therefore, with the FSA Historical Section’s mission to depict rural poverty predominantly as a means to redress social injustice. Even Morris’s images of dilapidation he deemed life-enhancing.<sup>31</sup>

During the forties he would have better luck seeking support for his photo-textual experiments from the foundation that had rejected Agee’s 1937 proposal to expand his “Alabama Record,” twice securing Guggenheim Fellowships that funded productive forays to Nebraska. And Morris continued, meanwhile, to admire the contrapuntal work of Evans and Agee, recognizing it as an inspiration for his own hybrid art. “I did not see through Evans’ eyes,” he says, “but I was captive of the same materials.”<sup>32</sup> Praising the sensory range and emotional charge of Agee’s pyrotechnic verbalizations, Morris hails him as a stylist “unsurpassed in his power to sense and explore a reverence for life,” to transmit a “mystic meaning proper to the commonplace.”<sup>33</sup> Consequently, Morris esteems the “conflict of imagery in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, where the words soar into the empyrean, but the photographs, happily, remain earthbound.”<sup>34</sup>

While commending the segregation of words and images in Agee’s and Evans’s masterwork, Morris integrates them in his own photo-texts. *The Inhabitants*, published in 1946 in a large format that hastened its remaindering,<sup>35</sup> comprises fifty-two double-page spreads with an uncaptioned photograph (usually an exterior architectural study) on each recto and two types of text (a boldfaced snippet at the top and a fragmentary prose piece in the middle) on each verso. Rather than presenting ekphrastic exercises or sustaining a

narrative, these lyrical headings and vignettes supply unrelated, densely detailed “verbal pictures of places, of time-stopped moments,”<sup>36</sup> plus the voices of unpictured inhabitants, whose folksy testimonials speak somewhat haphazardly to the volume’s principal theme that nothing is “so crowded, so full of something, as the rooms of a vacant house,”<sup>37</sup> that the look of an abandoned dwelling is forever imbued with the personalities of its former occupants.

Words and images are more rewardingly (yet often still obliquely) interleaved in Morris’s next photo-text, his novel *The Home Place* (1948), which again juxtaposes each page of written material with a photographic plate. Here point of view is not perplexingly unstable but, in a fictionalized account of the author’s own homecoming, consistently that of a prodigal Nebraskan, dubbed a “Creative Native,”<sup>38</sup> returning with his urban family to his relatives’ rundown farmstead, where Morris took most of the pictures. He hoped their smaller, cropped dimensions might encourage the reader to view them not as “artworks” but as “things” or “artifacts” providing a “visible ambience for the story, as if we walked about the farm while listening to the narration.”<sup>39</sup>

After reluctantly turning away from photo-texts for two decades to comply with his publisher’s insistence that “I stick to my ‘proper business’ as a novelist,”<sup>40</sup> Morris resumed the mixed genre—in the large format of a single paragraph opposite a single photograph—with *God’s Country and My People* (1968), “a very personal revisitation to both a real and an imaginary landscape.”<sup>41</sup> Reusing and re-pondering many of the earlier images, mainly his “own kind of unpeopled portraits,”<sup>42</sup> Morris’s unifying authorial consciousness plumbs the ambiguities always involved in interpreting photographs and offers complementary reminiscences on his actual family members and his created characters. Thus this book, as he glosses a story about the way his parents met, gives off

“the smell of fact and the ring of good fiction,”<sup>43</sup> or, to shift his analogy to other senses, the look of fact and the feel of fiction, yoking the camera’s sharply framed objectivity with the pen’s subjective flourishes.

In a more literal as well as more figurative fashion than Welty’s *One Time, One Place*, Morris’s photo-texts can be seen as family albums,<sup>44</sup> despite the dearth of people in them.<sup>45</sup> And in drawing upon his own family lore as a microcosm for his countrymen’s experiences, he underscores rifts between rural and urban sensibilities that also permeate the work of Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr. During the years when his “commitment to the promise of photo-text burned with a gemlike flame,”<sup>46</sup> Morris had dreamt of a whole series of books portraying familial and national migrations, from farm to village to town to city, “and then once more—as I had lived it—back to the open road, irresistibly drawn westward.”<sup>47</sup> The volumes he managed to publish hence waver between rootedness and restlessness. *The Inhabitants* attests that “little towns are mighty big places to be from,” even if “they never get big enough to hold all the men that leave them.”<sup>48</sup> Clyde Muncy, the disgruntledly citified narrator of *The Home Place*, complains that his wife and kids, accustomed to living in the metropolis, cannot fathom life on a dirt farm, where they feel bewildered and nauseated rather than revived and nostalgic. In *God’s Country and My People*, musing on the agricultural conquests and calamities of various forebears, Morris asserts that while some deserted the plains or inaugurated the dust bowl, this “landscape lies within me and proves to be a fiction that resists erosion.”<sup>49</sup> More naturally than Agee devises oceanic metaphors for Alabama’s soil, he internalizes and transforms Nebraska’s seeming featurelessness into a sea, for “where men find the least there they see the most,” for on the plains (as on the moon, where his ever mobile compatriots would soon set foot) “the tongue is dry but the mind is wet,” perennially provoking waves or flights of fancy.<sup>50</sup>

Like all of his work, Morris's photo-texts dramatize his wary endeavor to fuse his outer and inner fields of vision, to commingle fact and fiction, to re-create reality through imagination, to saturate memory with emotion, to apply technique to what he saw as the superabundant yet overprocessed raw material of American life. Although he aspired to merge the camera eye and his mind's eye even when writing novels without photographs, at times he felt vexed by incompatibilities between these ways of seeing.<sup>51</sup> Having begun as a writer, Morris, in his ardency to reclaim the past and possess the real thing,<sup>52</sup> tested out photography, adjudging its resources "considerable but limited. Reality is not a *thing* but a *conception*, and the camera cannot conceive," a limitation he tried to surmount in his books with pictures "by a marriage of sensations in the mind of the beholder."<sup>53</sup> To his chagrin, however, he discovered that the majority of those who beheld his photo-texts were either exclusively "readers" or "lookers," wanting only words or images, objecting to either visual or verbal distractions: "Each of these sophisticated specialists resents the parallel, competing attraction."<sup>54</sup> Notwithstanding his efforts, like Berger's and Mohr's, to overcome this "bizarre polarity" via interdisciplinary dialogues,<sup>55</sup> Morris devoted the bulk of his career to purely literary projects. And in reflecting on his chosen art forms, he himself came to resent the paradox that photography's rise in artistic status guarantees its supersession by writing. "Words now affirm the photographic image," he contends, "as photographs once confirmed reality."<sup>56</sup> Yet his grievance is with the realm of criticism, not creativity.<sup>57</sup> As with Berger and Mohr striving to narrate photographically, or with seldom speechless Agee redirecting reader-lookers to Evans's portrait of Mrs. Gudger, Morris still cherishes the capacity of photographs "to deal with impressions that words cannot," to "both reveal and enhance our shared awareness of the visible world around us and the invisible world within us."<sup>58</sup>

Fifty years after Morris took the pictures and wrote the text for *The Home Place*, Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke teamed up on *I Could Read the Sky*, also a first-person novel with photographs. O'Grady, who grew up in Chicago but has lived in Europe since his early twenties, gathered stories from Irish emigrants and distilled them into a fictional narrative about one spalpeen's journeys between his homeland and England,<sup>59</sup> where, as his kinfolks had done, he works a string of onerous agricultural and industrial jobs. Like the migrant workers in *A Seventh Man*, he is forever in transit, physically and mentally, between two places. O'Grady and Pyke acknowledge the influence of that photo-textual concoction on their own: "John Berger fathered this book through his collaborations with Jean Mohr and his writing about migrant labourers."<sup>60</sup> In addition to advising the authors on the volume's presentation, Berger contributed its preface. Oddly, given his role as its father figure, he calls it "a bastard,"<sup>61</sup> an epithet more complimentary than it sounds. He does not mean, of course, that *I Could Read the Sky* is inferior or inauthentic, but that its pages somehow appear as though built "in the dark, as photos are made in a darkroom," that it "wrings the heart" because it is really "a book of tunes without musical notes."<sup>62</sup> Describing its hybridity and evasion of tautology in terms comparable to those ensured by his and Mohr's mutual sense of measure, Berger comments that "the secret of living together" in two different mediums is that "they never say the same thing."<sup>63</sup> O'Grady's words and Pyke's pictures, he asserts, ironically enact "a fusion of the unsayable and the invisible ... all tattooed on the imagination, point by point, with a needle of longing."<sup>64</sup>

The copyright page of *I Could Read the Sky* issues a deceptively straightforward disclaimer about its dual contents: "None of the photographs in this book are intended to represent any of its fictional characters."<sup>65</sup> If accepted at face value, this statement begs a couple of questions regarding representational intentions: Who, then, are the photographs



meant to represent? And who, if anyone, are all the fictional characters representative of? The answer to both seems obvious: real people. Not printed, after all, is the more typical (and typically misleading) disclaimer—one that exasperated Morris due to his attempts at merging fact and fiction—about a novel’s characters being wholly imaginary.<sup>66</sup> Neither is there the inverse caveat, though, such as Agee’s in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that “none of the characters or incidents of this volume are fictitious,” nor his adulation of the actuality and particularity of the three families he befriends and his disavowal that cotton tenantry can be “justly represented” by them since they are “most nearly representative” chiefly of their own sacrosanct, unrepeatable, “unimagined existence.”<sup>67</sup> A novelist with the ear of an oral historian, O’Grady did scrupulous research for *I Could Read the Sky*,<sup>68</sup> intending its characters to speak both for themselves and for their class.<sup>69</sup> Hence they are composites of the many working men and women from Ireland whose stories he listened to,<sup>70</sup> much as the characters in Berger’s *Into Their Labours* are products not solely of his storyteller’s imagination but of his visits with longtime neighbors in his adopted village.

And meantime, interspersed liberally throughout the narrative, in the manner of *A Fortunate Man*, Pyke’s photographs (resembling Mohr’s for his artful landscapes, tightly framed portraiture, occasional blurred shots, and close-ups of hands) construct a parallel, composite visualization of Irish working-class culture.<sup>71</sup> Subtle correspondences between images and words—pictures of fields latticed with stone walls on the island of Inishmaan after a simile about “stone walls running over the land like the veins in my hand,” a shot of rollicking accordionists in County Clare opposite a description of dancers urged on by music “like an electrical current driving us all around the floor,” a visual portrait akin to a verbal one of “a lean islander’s face, the blue eyes full of sea and sky, the lines around his eyes and mouth receiving his laughter”<sup>72</sup>—signal that while they do not actually represent

the same persons or places, they might be seen as representing the same pool of collective lived experiences.

Like *A Seventh Man*, *I Could Read the Sky* tracks the effects on migrant workers of moving from a rural to an urban environment, of leaving behind an extended kinship network and pursuing manual wage labor where scorned foreigners can only seek solace in fading snapshots, fuzzy memories, drinking binges, and the transitory companionship of their fellow displaced compatriots. More than a few of O'Grady's scenes and details so closely echo those Berger fashioned that they seem derivative. Yet the crucial difference, besides cultural and geographical distinctiveness, is the first-person voice. In contrast to the economic analysis and the anonymous "he" who stands for millions of migrants in *A Seventh Man*, the narrator of *I Could Read the Sky* (who never reveals his given name but goes by a chain of aliases while bouncing from one jobsite to another) reports everything about himself and his comrades through his own terse, poetic, despairing, unvanquished perspective. On first departing from Ireland and arriving in Lincolnshire, where he lands work in muddy potato fields and lodgings above a pigpen, the feeling of having made an irreparable mistake overwhelms him: "I wonder have I the fare home and if I can find the way. I think of the bed I left in Labasheeda. Outside it is dark and the road full of twists I know nothing of. There is no way back now. I am to pick potatoes and lie down at night in this loft. I am to be in England living with pigs."<sup>73</sup> Although he left home to escape the countryside's poverty, his years abroad as an unskilled, unvalued toiler obscure his aims and incite aching for his rustic origins. "When I was young I had no future and no past," he reflects. "After that I had work. I paved roads, I broke up concrete, I dug under houses and I shifted muck. ... That was the time I got a past. The past was heavy, like the blocks used for ballast in a boat. Without a past I would have fallen. I thought I had a future too

but I could not see it.”<sup>74</sup>

Striving to right himself by means of memory, the narrator endures his travails by offsetting his dim future with his intermittently lucid past. The incongruence between his upbringing and his destiny is brought out in two dense paragraphs that play on the title’s concept of capability. “What I could do,” he looks back to his youth: “I could mend nets. Thatch a roof. Build stairs. Make a basket from reeds. Splint the leg of a cow. ... I could dance sets. Read the sky. Make a barrel for mackerel. ... Shear sheep. Remember poems. Set potatoes. Plough and harrow. Read the wind. Tend bees. ... I could frighten you with stories. I knew the song to sing to a cow when milking. I could play twenty-seven tunes on my accordion.”<sup>75</sup> These flairs fall by the wayside in his life overseas, where he never feels at home. “What I couldn’t do,” he tallies: “Eat a meal lacking potatoes. Trust banks. Wear a watch. ... Save money. Take pleasure in work carried out in a factory. ... Speak with men wearing collars. Stay afloat in water. Understand their jokes. Face the dentist. Kill a Sunday. Stop remembering.”<sup>76</sup> Remembering is thus the book’s painful burden and its saving grace. Its two epigraphs speak aptly to this duality: “I whispered: memory hurts wherever you touch it”; “In remembrance is the secret of redemption.”<sup>77</sup> And a poem by Peter Woods, reprinted between these epigraphs and Berger’s preface, contends: “Exile is not a word / It is shaving against / A photograph not a mirror / Exile is not a word / ... It is a continuing atrocity / It is the purgatorial / Triumph of memory / over topography.” A long life of hard work behind him, the widowed narrator, alone in a city flat, sifts through pictures and memories—the former sometimes a welcome aid, sometimes a frustratingly superficial replacement for the latter—of his friends and family members scattered round the globe or killed in workplace accidents. His constant struggle between remembrance and forgetfulness indeed sends him into exile’s wordless purgatory, where the mind, no

matter how triumphant over the map, cannot resurrect his lost loved ones or replicate the vibrant hues of his depopulated birthplace.

While O'Grady and Pyke carry on the collaborative spirit of Berger and Mohr in intermixing words and images to access memories and tell stories of marginalized others, William T. Vollmann both weds and cross-examines Agee's and Evans's intentions and performance through his text and photographs for *Poor People*. Mentioning the stimulus of several previous books on poverty, Vollmann calls particular attention to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which he designates, more admiringly than it seems, as "an elitist expression of egalitarian longings."<sup>78</sup> Tragically poised between success and failure, its greatness, he argues, is inseparable from its naiveté, "for despite its fierce intellectualism it is essentially an outcry of childlike love,"<sup>79</sup> of witness converted into worship. To read it, he adds, "is to be slapped in the face," to be confronted with riddles of approachability and perceptibility attendant to "two rich men observing the lives of the poor."<sup>80</sup> Vollmann prizes the volume's formal and attitudinal counterpoints. Whereas Evans, via "the tell-all taciturnity of photography," records "the poverty of those sharecropper families calmly, undeniably, heartbreakingly, inescapably," Agee, committed to rendering all that he can of their lives "using the sole means of an alphabet," despises himself and his readers for his inevitable shortcomings, "apologizing to the families in an abstruse gorgeousness of abasement that only the rich will have time to understand."<sup>81</sup> Not purporting "to sustain a meditation on any specific incarnation of poverty, as was so passionately attempted in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," Vollmann instead investigates its multiplicity by offering "snapshots of the ways in which certain poor people experienced their poverty at random moments."<sup>82</sup> As opposed to Agee centering himself on Hobe's Hill, he roams the planet asking people why they are poor and how they feel about the rich. In his next two works,

narrowing his scope from global to national to regional, Vollmann would in fact deepen his focus on specific groups or communities undergoing prolonged impoverishment: first the hobos and trainhoppers in his whimsical *Riding Toward Everywhere* (2008), then the undocumented farmworkers and other disadvantaged denizens of the California-Mexico borderlands in his magisterial *Imperial* (2009). His broad range of inquiry and scattershot speculations in *Poor People* are therefore a prelude to more sustained meditations.

Vollmann measures his book against *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in order to differentiate their guiding mentalities and methodologies.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the text of *Poor People* shares many aspects with its predecessor, not least its “confession of inadequacy,” even though its slightly less self-conscious author maintains that “unlike James Agee, I fear to give undue prominence to the joys of self-laceration,”<sup>84</sup> and that he does not feel guilty but grateful about never having been poor himself. No less agonized, however, are Vollmann’s efforts to overcome distrust and achieve rapport between persons of disparate socioeconomic and educational levels.<sup>85</sup> While he does not strive as hard to form lasting relationships with his subjects, most of whom also diverge from him in ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds,<sup>86</sup> Vollmann’s broodings (frequently expressed in a barrage of unanswerable questions)<sup>87</sup> on countless briefer encounters<sup>88</sup> allow him to display his own furious intellectualism, as well as his naïve love for destitute strangers.<sup>89</sup> His rhetoric and reasoning, like Agee’s, proceed by induction. He scrutinizes his interviewees’ individual circumstances not only to relate their life stories in their own words but to educe guarded generalizations about poverty from the phenomena they present.<sup>90</sup> To his mind, “poverty is not mere deprivation; for people may possess fewer things than I and be richer; poverty is *wretchedness*,”<sup>91</sup> an emotional as much as an economic state, among whose dimensions he delineates such “capricious, not to mention at times mutually exclusive” categories as

invisibility, deformity, unwantedness, dependence, accident-prone-ness, pain, numbness, and estrangement.<sup>92</sup> Redolent of Agee's standoffish front matter, contradictory footnotes, philosophical interludes, self-indulgent appendices, and deliberately chaotic organization of his findings, Vollmann's leapfrogging structure and recurring examples, along with his mostly meticulous, partly facetious source notes, income table, and dictionary of salient terms—including the caustically defined *false consciousness*, *normality*, and *respect*<sup>93</sup>—endow him with an elastic apparatus around which to weave his and others' reflections on the similarities and differences between being “poor” and “rich.” Although he claims not to have written this book “*for* poor people, or for anyone else in particular,”<sup>94</sup> Vollmann's conjectures about its subjects and asides to its readers (whom he supposes to be, like him, rich) turn his text, as with Agee's, into a vulnerably sincere, fervidly questing, ceaselessly self-reflexive undertaking in communication across class lines.

And just as many of his volumes assimilate documentary photographs,<sup>95</sup> here his one hundred and twenty-eight pictures—mainly portraits taken on the street or wherever Vollmann crossed paths with poor people, whether or not he succeeded in soliciting their sentiments on poverty<sup>96</sup>—serve as a sobering counterweight, like Evans's contribution in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, to the writing's idiosyncrasies. Likewise isolated from the words, in this case printed at the back of the book in a portfolio preceded by a list of captions,<sup>97</sup> these images nonetheless play a pivotal role within Vollmann's text. Not only are most of them arranged in order of their relevance to his chapters, so that they function as illustrations (referenced via bracketed, boldfaced numbers) of key points, but they also prod him to ruminate further on those he sought to connect with in person.<sup>98</sup> He describes copious pictures as precisely and searchingly as he retraces memories for which he has no photographic prompts. Berger and Mohr would doubtless approve that to an ample extent

*Poor People* thus reads like a one-man narrative dialogue or back-and-forth commentary between Vollmann's verbal and visual documentation. Poring over his photographs, even more than his notebooks, often leads him to ethical impasses, especially when he did not interview the photographed persons, when his closest form of contact with them occurred through his lens or his wallet. Without having their words either to confirm or belie their images, that is, Vollmann can only tentatively contemplate why they are needy and what might help them. "What is your *normality*?" he addresses the subject of one photo. "I will never know. You are a Congolese beggar-girl staring down at her blanket-wrapped knees **[photograph 29]**. Is your secret numbness, or estrangement, or simple pain? Do you tend toward acceptance, hope, escape, or none of the above? Whatever road I take, you exist unknowably beneath or above it; I cannot ever *see* you."<sup>99</sup> As his italicization intimates, Vollmann does not worry over what is visible in this picture but over that which remains concealed within it. No matter how hard he looks at the girl's portrait, he will never *see* inside her. Since he regretfully lacks "telepathy (or perfect empathy),"<sup>100</sup> such incomplete responses to his subjects continually haunt him. Addressing the reader near the outset, he wrestles with photographic ambiguity by alluding to an Evans portrait of one farmer: "A poor man stares out at you from a page. You will never meet him. Is he grim, threatening, sad, repulsive, determined, worn down, unbowed, proud, all of the above? What can you truly come to know about him from his face?"<sup>101</sup> While Vollmann implicitly denies that photographs can impart true knowledge, for that very reason he ponders at length on the beauty as well as the misery harbored in the faces and places his camera preserves.<sup>102</sup>

Of those numerous places he visits during his far-flung travels for *Poor People*, the majority are urban. Vollmann notes that he "had originally intended to incorporate a snapshot of rural poverty into this book," specifically of conditions on coffee plantations

in Guatemala, so as to compare the experiences of peasants and proletarians, but “decided that brevity was more important than inclusiveness.”<sup>103</sup> Although he does in fact supply a few glimpses of impoverished villages and refugee camps (and although *Riding Toward Everywhere* and *Imperial* would concentrate on vast stretches of simultaneously alluring and distressed countryside which have both cultivated and debunked agrarian fantasies), cityscapes constitute the prevailing backdrop in *Poor People*. Vollmann interviews and photographs homeless squatters under a Miami freeway, bottle collectors under a Kyoto bridge, talkative beggars beside a Petersburg cathedral, belligerent beggars in a Bogotá plaza, cleaning women in a Bangkok slum, prostitutes and panhandlers on San Francisco streets. Across the continents, he chronicles the movement, whether forced or willing, of poor people from the country to the city. His interrogation of poverty, coinciding with a period when the percentage of the worldwide population living in urban areas surpassed that in rural districts,<sup>104</sup> contains a host of intriguing observations about this conspicuous trend in human settlement. Yet just as he cautions against overreliance on statistical evidence in gauging relative normality,<sup>105</sup> so too Vollmann is chary of pronouncing or picturing moral judgments about the causes and consequences of rapid urbanization. And in this regard he differs markedly from Agee, Evans, Berger, and Mohr, in addition to their other peers and heirs. With a lesser reflex toward lamentation at the passing of rural livelihoods, this dual witness and artist looks at the multifarious face of poverty through an unsentimentally modernized lens. While maintaining due respect for the intricacies of each locality he reports on, Vollmann’s ways of seeing the poor vault interdisciplinary studies of poverty onto an irrevocably globalized stage. It must still be seen, however, if his centrifugal conspectus of the poor’s eternal centrality will have the same fertilizing influence as did the primarily centripetal approach of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Each born within less than a year of Agee (1909-1955), Welty (1909-2001) and Morris (1910-1998) both outlived him by about twice as many.

<sup>2</sup> In "A Visit with Eudora Welty," transcribed in Bill Ferris, *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans* (Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977), Welty explains that while traveling (mainly by bus) around Mississippi both distributing and gathering information about the state's WPA projects, talking to people and writing up reports for county newspapers, she brought a camera along "not in connection with my job, but for my own gratification on the side" (12). Although she was never a paid photographer for the agency, her pictures were sometimes used in its publications. For instance, as John Raeburn notes in his *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), the Mississippi guide produced through the WPA's series of state guidebooks included three Welty shots (333).

<sup>3</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Eudora Welty, *Eudora Welty: Photographs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), xviii.

<sup>5</sup> In the interview printed in Welty's *Photographs*, her second collection of pictures, she recalls that the editors who rejected *Black Saturday* in the thirties "were sympathetic to the stories, but weren't much interested in the photographs," because "that was not their department" (xviii). Yet she then points out that when Random House at last brought out the photographs (without the stories, all of which had long since been published) in *One Time, One Place*, her literary editor, Albert Erskine, saw the book through production.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy M. Shawcross, "Counterpoints of View: The American Photo-Text, 1935-1948," in Paul Hansom, ed., *Literary Modernism and Photography* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), 77. "Combined in the imaginary *Black Saturday*," Shawcross surmises, "the stories and photographs most likely would have worked to conflate these premises. In all probability, Welty's photographs would have been critiqued as more controlled and determined than they probably were, and her stories would have appeared more as the work of an ethnographer than that of a creative writer." Engagingly comparing the hybrid photo-textual endeavors of Welty, Morris, Agee, and Evans during the thirties and forties, Shawcross astutely contends: "The challenges these enterprises faced centered not on the fact that publications containing photographs and written material were unheard of, but that the connection each contributor tried to assert for his or her project was inherently paradoxical: a modernist's appreciation and understanding of literary art coequal with a sociologist's or historian's regard for objective reality" (77-78).

<sup>7</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression: A Snapshot Album* (1971; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> Even many of Welty's photographs from her hometown, the state capital of Jackson, have about them a nearly rural ambiance. As she reflects in the introduction to Eudora Welty, *Country Churchyards* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), "back then nothing was citified. There was no city look to Jackson. It was a country town" (8).

<sup>11</sup> Welty, *One Time, One Place*, 9. While "born into" and brought up in this milieu, Welty "came from a stable, sheltered, relatively happy home" (11), so that not until "sent about over the eighty-two counties of Mississippi" by the WPA did she "see widely and at close hand and really for the first time the nature of the place" (7). Reflecting on how a shared sense of place in a mainly rural setting with extended family ties helped her to understand the people she met and the characters she created, Welty remarks in Ferris, *Images of the South*, "You miss that in our urban life where you meet somebody cold, have no idea of his background. ... But just the ordinary acquaintanceship of life is so much easier in a place with continuity. I think not only Southerners but New Englanders and many other people feel the same way" (15).

<sup>12</sup> Trust between a white photographer and her black subjects, reflects Welty, dates these images more than the passing of time. In the 1989 interview in her *Photographs*, alluding to the social upheaval of the sixties, she remarks that such untroubled intimacy between the races—based on mutual politeness and connections via place—is no longer possible now as it was in the thirties, "before self-consciousness had come into the relationship or suspicion" (xxvi).

<sup>13</sup> "They had so little," Welty says in her *Photographs* of these subjects whom she tried to oblige with copies of their likenesses, "and a photograph meant something. ... It didn't matter that it showed them in their patched, torn clothes. They wanted the picture. They were delighted at the evidence of themselves here—a picture was something they could hold" (xxviii).

<sup>14</sup> Welty, *One Time, One Place*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Welty, *Photographs*, xvi.

<sup>17</sup> In "A Visit with Walker Evans," in Ferris, *Images of the South*, Evans wrestles with his unresolved purport and reputation as a photographer: "I'm a realist and I'm interested in the deepest reality of life and social life. The word 'documentary' puts me off a little bit, because it isn't what I really care about doing. And what I've done has fallen into that category, which dismays me a little bit. I'm interested in realism the way Flaubert was, and I don't think you would call him a social documentarian. I don't want to be called that either. I don't think that's art. What I'm really interested in is art and being an artist" (34). Although he does not deem himself to be exhorting the public in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Evans considers that Agee is, for the writer was determined "to shock and

scare people. He wanted to make people who were not poor, for example, really feel what it was like to be up against it. And he wanted to rub it in. ... He was very angry about the middle-class American society who buy their condition, buy security, by taking things for granted. Whereas these people, who were human beings whom he loved, were shut out of that. Not only shut out of it, but suffering deeply" (32).

<sup>18</sup> Welty, *Photographs*, xix.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xxviii. "My pictures were made in sympathy," Welty states by way of contrast, "not exploitation," for she did not "entice" her subjects to pose for her and did not intend to use their images politically or editorially (xxvi).

<sup>20</sup> Ferris, *Images of the South*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> For Evans's discussions of "documentary style" and "lyric documentary," see Leslie Katz, "Interview with Walker Evans," *Art in America* 59.2 (March-April 1971): 87; and John T. Hill, "Comments on Walker Evans' Lecture Lyric Documentary," in his *Walker Evans: Lyric Documentary* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006), 12-26.

<sup>22</sup> This distinction is not wholly valid, in that Welty did make a few exceptional portraits in which people knowingly posed for her, while Evans sometimes took snapshots without his subjects' awareness, as in his 35 mm pictures of the tenants preparing for their formal photo shoot on the Ricketts porch and his hidden camera shots of New York City subway passengers, collected in *Many Are Called* (1966). Welty either overlooks or is unfamiliar with this line of his work, which she likely would have considered even more exploitative than his posed portraits.

<sup>23</sup> Welty, *One Time, One Place*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 89, 90.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Shloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 262. While she perhaps overstates Welty's and Berger's "renunciation" of photography, Shloss effectively links their faith in the "confluence" of memory. She rather uncharitably concludes, however, that both writers' keenly subjective imaginations ultimately expose the vulnerability of their endeavors to fully identify with others.

<sup>28</sup> In pairing excerpts from these two projects under the heading "The American Scene," editor James Laughlin of New Directions prioritized Morris's work over Evans's and Agee's, printing twenty-seven pages from the still-embryonic *The Inhabitants* before fourteen pages from the nearly-completed *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. As David Madden remarks in "Mapping Agee's Myriad Mind: An Introductory Exhortation," in

Michael A. Lofaro, ed., *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), “Morris’s introductory note deals with the relation of technique to substance, of words to photographs, although without the agony of Agee’s passages on the same themes in his book” (19). In “Photography in My Life,” in *Wright Morris: Photographs & Words*, ed. James Alinder (Carmel, California: The Friends of Photography, 1982), Morris recollects that his introduction had “the tone of a Futurist manifesto, one of many that left the waiting world unchanged” (19). Welty, too, is represented in the 1940 issue of *New Directions*, which features her story “Keela the Outcast Indian Maiden.” Thus the work of these four creative peers—Agee, Evans, Morris, and Welty—appeared in the same pioneering publication.

<sup>29</sup> Morris’s trophy-hunting term for this self-directed photographic expedition—the most extensive of many long journeys he took across the country from the late thirties to the early fifties—is quoted in Joseph J. Wydeven’s “Biographical Sketch of Wright Morris,” in David Madden and Alicia Christensen, eds., *Wright Morris Territory: A Treasury of Work* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), xxvii. His discovery of the South, a region he had not previously explored except through pictures, such as those in Evans’s *American Photographs*, was especially memorable (and occasionally vexatious) for him on this 1940 trip. “The soul of the South,” he recalls in his *Photographs & Words*, “as I was privileged to perceive it, seemed to me more complex, and bizarre, than the reports I had read about it” (30). Attracted to the climate, the landscape, and the poor country folk along his rural route, Morris found himself envious of “writers fortunate enough to come from such places, still sticky with the pollen that clung to them. It seemed to me they need only close their eyes, open their pores and inhale deeply to possess their subjects. . . . I largely owed to these few weeks of Southern exposure my feeling that hardship, and hard times, if not destructively brutal or prolonged to the point of negation, are necessary to a density and richness of emotion that seems noticeably absent in happier situations. . . . I had discovered the emotion, but how to cultivate it would prove to be the work of a lifetime. A few years later when I had read James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and had seen Walker Evans’ accompanying photographs of the sharecroppers I would fully appreciate the wide range of impressions I had just experienced” (28). In spite of his efforts to keep a low profile with his camera, among Morris’s experiences as one who could be taken for “a Northern snooper out to disfigure the troubled, dilapidated Southern self-image” (22), he was arrested as a possible spy in South Carolina and shot at as he tried to photograph a barn in Alabama. While passing through Mississippi, where—as Evans had—Morris took a stunning picture of eroded soil which he used in two of his photo-texts, he met Eudora Welty but felt too shy to call on William Faulkner.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 21, 32.

<sup>31</sup> “The way I see what I photograph is to me life-enhancing,” Morris comments in his *Photographs & Words*. “Other ways of seeing are equally valid, but they are not mine” (21). While respecting Stryker’s compassionate determination to publicize FSA programs designed to alleviate “the sufferings of millions of Americans,” Morris’s chief attraction, in which he took a somewhat guilty pleasure after his parley in Washington, was always rather to “the *persona* behind the social abuses, one that would prove to be the same with or without them” (21).

<sup>32</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 19. While Evans's pictures of people can be fruitfully compared to Welty's, his images of objects and buildings—particularly via his devotion to capturing their material textures—can be likened to Morris's, who affectionately and possessively trained his lens on “spectacularly photogenic” relics of the Depression (19), “prepared to appreciate home-grown American ruins and to attempt to salvage what was vanishing” (18). Morris's essay “Photographs, Images, and Words,” in his *Time Pieces: Photographs, Writing, and Memory* (New York: Aperture, 1989), also acknowledges the enduring influence of Evans's way of seeing on his own: “What the image maker needs, in all forms of image making, is the confirmation of her or his own intuitions, and Evans provided me, as he did numerous others, with this reassuring shock of recognition. An Evans photograph mattered to all of us” (61-62). Ruining that “his ‘images’ will never be free of the aura of the Great Depression,” as their production for the FSA has meant that they frequently “do not speak to Americans of human realities but of social conditions to be remedied,” Morris nonetheless avers, “First and last, the photographs of Walker Evans have helped shape our image of what is real” (62).

<sup>33</sup> Wright Morris, *Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image-Makers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 161. Borrowing the second formulation from Henry James's *The American Scene*, Morris also used it as the epigraph to his novel *The Home Place* (discussed below), quoting James at greater length: “To be at all critically, or as we have been fond of calling it, analytically, minded—over and beyond an inherent love of the general many-colored picture of things—is to be subject to the superstition that objects and places, coherently grouped, disposed for human use and addressed to it, must have a sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves to give out: to give out, that is, to the participant at once so interested and so detached as to be moved to a report of the matter.” This notion of a participant observer latching on to the ordinary yet revelatory attributes of surrounding artifacts and atmospheres accords not only with Agee's writing and Evans's photography, but also with Berger's and Mohr's ideas about harnessing the camera to reveal the coherence of appearances in everyday life, the mystic connotations emanating from the commonplace.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *Time Pieces*, 62. Likewise discussing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in his *About Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Morris declares, “The photographs of Walker Evans, the revelations of Agee's prose, constitute an American testament of faith, a portrait of life that is transcendent. This book defies imitation but its example continues to make converts” (167).

<sup>35</sup> In his *Photographs & Words*, Morris recalls that despite receiving favorable reviews for *The Inhabitants*, the volume's unwieldy format and obscure hybridity inhibited its commercial appeal—as booksellers had to put it among the much perused but seldom purchased art books—so that a year after publication he bought up cheap remaindered copies of it, along with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which had also fallen out of print by the late forties (43-44).

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Wright Morris, *The Inhabitants* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), n.p. For a superb critique of this book in addition to its successors, see the section on Morris's work in Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: The Interaction of Twentieth-Century Photographs and Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 56-63.

<sup>38</sup> Wright Morris, *The Home Place* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 50.

<sup>39</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 51. *God's Country and My People* features eighty-four of Morris's photographs.

<sup>43</sup> Wright Morris, *God's Country and My People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), n.p.

<sup>44</sup> In his *Photographs & Words*, Morris reflects that he assembled *The Home Place* in the hope of hooking readers "who would browse through the book like an album" (49).

<sup>45</sup> In the title essay of *Time Pieces*, brooding on Stryker's disapproval of his depopulated pictures, Morris admits "that in the presence of truly humiliated people I was incapable of taking photographs, either of them or their meager 'possessions.' This 'failure of nerve' had much to do with my preference for the materials that took the blows of life with less bleeding, transforming them in both spirit and substance" (40). But notwithstanding his continued leaning toward nonhuman subject matter, Morris partly overcame his scruples about photographing people in 1947, when staying with his relatives at what he called the home place near Norfolk, Nebraska. As he recalls in his *Photographs & Words*, his Aunt Clara, for whom "the whole farm was a ruin, an accumulation of losses, a disaster that her protestant soul must accept" (45), did not want to be photographed herself, but she allowed him to make interiors of objects they both valued. Meanwhile, his Uncle Harry, at first "indifferent to the nuances of exposure" (45), was more than willing when Morris finally suggested some pictures of him, "the greatest ruin of all .... He had become, like the denims he wore, an implement of labor, one of the discarded farm tools. A personal pride, however, dormant since the Depression, reasserted itself .... Had he not endured and survived it all, like the farm itself?" (46). Accordingly, Harry appears in four of the eighty-nine photographs in *The Home Place*. In none of them, though, is his face visible. As with Mohr's and Berger's depiction of J. in "If Each Time ...", Morris thus maintains a certain chariness about representing this actual person, perhaps because the text placed beside the photos is ostensibly fictional. The book's only human faces look out of a few portraits that he re-photographed. Most notably—as Evans did with the Ricketts family snapshots—Morris pinned a fading family picture to a clapboard wall and preserved it with his own camera, instigating his characters' reflections on the people within it. Also pace Evans, echoing his shot of Guder's work shoes (although it was only included in the second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, published after *The Home Place*), Morris photographed, upon the seat of a wooden chair, a pair of shoes that had belonged to his recently dead Uncle Ed. In the novel this picture appears across from the narrator's

meditation that such worn “man-tired things” as old shoes or overalls harbor a neglected beauty, character, or passion that renders them holy: a holiness that he chalks up to their wearers’ “abstinence, frugality, and independence—the home-grown, made-on-the-farm trinity. Not the land of plenty, the old age pension, or the full dinner pail. Independence, not abundance, is the heart of their America” (141-43). Morris thus reveals his attraction to rural simplicity, if not exactly poverty, as well as his skepticism toward modernization, attitudes he shares with Agee and Berger.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, “The Romantic Realist,” *Time Pieces*, 30. While he was most committed to developing photo-texts during the 1940s, in a later period of enthusiasm for the hybrid form Morris published not only *God’s Country and My People* but also *Love Affair: A Venetian Journal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). As he remarks of the color plates—35 mm snapshots taken with a handheld camera, in a departure from his earlier practice—which appear opposite his prose fragments in this memoir of his amblings about Venice: “These photographs illustrate nothing, they seek to demonstrate nothing, but hopefully they reveal the intent to salvage something of a love affair with a wondrous city.” For Morris’s vexed opinions about color photography, see his interview with Jim Alinder, “Structures and Artifacts,” in *Time Pieces*, 145.

<sup>47</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, *The Inhabitants*, n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, *God’s Country and My People*, n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Morris, *God’s Country and My People*, n.p. “Both landscapes generate the illusions common to the inhabitants of dry places,” Morris declares of the plains and the moon. Published the year before Americans landed on the moon, this book (like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) is just as concerned with reconciling terrestrial and cosmic angles of vision as it is with transmuting the land into metaphors such as the sea. Often Morris achieves these imaginative leaps via well-thought-out conjunctions of word and image. “Moon-shooting has long been the custom of the country,” he observes across from his photograph of the Gano grain elevator, beaming in the sun and pointed toward the sky like a rocket about to blast off for the moon. In *The Home Place*, opposite his picture of another brilliantly sunlit white elevator, he likens “these great plains monoliths,” visible from the next town ten miles away, to the sails of ships or to “the whales of the great sea of grass,” reminding people that “the place is still inhabited” (76). *God’s Country and My People* opens with a similar musing on a derelict, photographed dwelling: “Is it a house or an ark? A scud seems to blow on the sea of grass and the land falls away like the sea from a swell. On the receding horizon waves of plain break like a surf. . . . The man who built the house had a whaleman’s eyes in a plainsman’s face.” Emphasizing photographic ambiguity, Morris pairs his close-up shot of a cracked, desiccated surface with his remark that “the nature of the place would remain a matter of opinion—a log drying in the sun or the dry bed of a river seen from space.” Imagining future generations looking down from space, he later ponders, “From that perspective the planet earth is a cosmic eye obscured by cataracts of cloud. The world concealed behind it is a science fiction, a metaphysical conceit. Is it a flaw in the planet or in the eye of the beholder that we prefer a far place to

a near one, the earth a pad floating in space for the launching of dreams?" Set across from a photo of rolling countryside, this question concludes a paragraph that starts out, "From the freeway does this plain still roll like the sea or is it more like the floors of amusement parks?" Despite claiming that "the landscape has not perceptibly changed" in the century since his ancestors homesteaded this territory, Morris is thus deeply invested in how his countrymen's perceptions alter over time, as their "recurrent dream" of flight sends them into orbit toward "the luminous fueling stop of the moon." His last image, a close-up of a honeycombed patch of parched soil that appears as if it could be a lunar surface, prompts his parting contemplation: "House or ark, sea or plain, shimmering mirages or figures of earth, God's country is still a fiction inhabited by people with a love for the facts."

<sup>51</sup> Throughout *Time Pieces*, Morris discusses affinities and discords between his writerly and photographic perspectives. In "The Romantic Realist" he remarks, "Through writing, through the effort to visualize, I became a photographer, and through my experience as a photographer, I became more of a writer. ... but I would make one crucial distinction. What I *see* as a writer is on my mind's eye, not a photograph. Although a remarkable composite of impressions, the mind does not mirror a photographic likeness. To my knowledge I have never incorporated into my fiction details made available through photographs. This is a mite singular, but not paradoxical. The mind is its own place, the visible world is another, and visual and verbal images sustain the dialogue between them" (26). In "Structures and Artifacts" he comments, "I do not give up the camera eye when writing—merely the camera," noting that his "novels are crowded with photographically vivid scenes and portraits" (148). Referring to John Dos Passos and other writers who adapt photographic techniques in literary contexts so as to project "a personal point of view with an impersonal objectivity," Morris's essay "The Camera Eye" contends that this eye often gets conflated with "the one in the middle of our forehead, combining how we see with what there is to be seen" (11).

<sup>52</sup> In "Structures and Artifacts," in *Time Pieces*, Morris reflects that *The Home Place* "grew out of my preoccupation with a past I had experienced as a child, but never fully possessed. Fiction was an act of repossession. In *The Home Place* I first staked out my claim on a landscape largely of my imagination. It was what I had *not* experienced that I found it necessary to experience" (143).

<sup>53</sup> Morris, "Letter to a Young Critic," in Madden and Christensen, eds., *Wright Morris Territory*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> Morris, "Photography and Reality," *Time Pieces*, 89. Shawcross restates his dilemma in her "Counterpoints of View: The American Photo-Text, 1935-1948," in Hansom, ed., *Literary Modernism and Photography*: "Morris overtakes the sense of sight in *The Home Place*, forcing his audience either to scramble from image to text or to choose between them" (85). In *Photographs & Words* he says that this novel with pictures "continues to find reader-lookers, but it was not bought at the time of publication and confused many reviewers about the author. Was he a writer, who took photographs, or a photographer who did a little writing? The public is ill at ease with the ambidextrous" (49).



<sup>55</sup> Morris, "Photographs, Images, and Words," *Time Pieces*, 63. In this essay Morris uses the phrase "bizarre polarity" to critique the absence of photographs in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977) and the absence of words in *Walker Evans: First and Last* (1978).

<sup>56</sup> Morris, *Photographs & Words*, 54.

<sup>57</sup> Several essays in *Time Pieces* evince Morris's wariness of criticism as applied to both literature and photography. In "In Our Image," for instance, he rues that "the apparatus of criticism ends in displacing what it criticizes" (6). In "Photographs, Images, and Words" he expatiates on this displacement of art: "All criticism is in the process of becoming a new genre of fiction, as fiction itself seems to be threatened. The overgrazed world of experience, appropriate to the novel, can be reappraised and reexperienced as criticism. In the same way, the overgrazed world of visible artifacts and events can be recreated as verbal images" (60). And in "The Camera Eye," lamenting the dominance of theory over practice, the analytical conquest of photography's "artlessness of communication" (20), Morris admonishes, "If the example of literature is instructive, the rise, influence, and ascendancy of criticism testifies to photography's coming of age. . . . The photographer might be cautioned, however, that the more advanced literary critics have put the reading of novels and stories behind them. What critics read is each other. And it pretty well takes up most of their time. Now that photography is of age, critically speaking, and criticism continues to expand and flourish, we may look to a movement among photographers to spend more time brooding in the darkroom. Taking the pictures the critic has in mind, or in words, can be inhibiting" (21).

<sup>58</sup> Morris, "Photographs, Images, and Words," *Time Pieces*, 64, 65. In an echo of Evans's assertion that the photographer must inject his personality into an impersonal mechanism in order to weld inner and outer fields of vision, Morris comments, "Those photographs that combine the impersonality of the camera eye with the persona of the camera holder will usually commingle the best of these hard-to-reconcile elements."

<sup>59</sup> For a nonfictional narrative of O'Grady's return trips around his own homeland thirty years after moving away from it, see his *Divine Magnetic Lands: A Journey in America* (London: Harvill Secker, 2008), a book replete with commentary on differences between living in the United States and Europe. Whereas his grandfather left Ireland for America in the 1890s, O'Grady's youthful curiosity took him in the reverse direction in the 1970s. "I had nothing else to do apart from looking at and thinking about Ireland," he recalls. "I loved being there. It excited and intrigued me. Everything about it was unprecedented for me—its traditions, its sense of time, its landscapes, speech, music, war. It was a seductive mystery" (7). Allowing himself to be utterly seduced, he soon became a citizen of Ireland by presenting his grandfather's birth certificate so that he could be listed in the Registry of Foreign Births, a seemingly paradoxical record established by what O'Grady refers to as "a sensible and a generous law," one "that acknowledges the cruelties in the country's history, and that if people emigrated it was more likely through necessity than by choice" (9), as is the case for those migrant workers whose travails he would later fictionalize. In contrast to his romance with all things Irish, O'Grady was initially turned off by England, which "both made me feel more American and drove me further towards Irishness" (10).

On a 1992 journalistic jaunt back to America, O'Grady met William T. Vollmann in San Francisco under rather bizarre circumstances related in *Divine Magnetic Lands* (271-73).

<sup>60</sup> Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky* (London: The Harvill Press, 1997), 163.

<sup>61</sup> John Berger, Preface to O'Grady and Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> O'Grady and Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, n.p.

<sup>66</sup> In "The Question of Privacy," a 1951 article revised and reprinted in Madden and Christensen, eds., *Wright Morris Territory*, Morris argues that such disclaimers at the start of novels merely confuse the writer's inevitable mixture of fact and fiction, as well as the use of private material for public purposes. Photography, he thinks, cannot evade this problem so casually, due to its immediate rather than imaginative presentation of the real world. "Has it been left to photography," Morris asks, "more than avant-garde art or the modern novel, to bring clearly to focus the abstract-seeming issue of privacy? On the ground glass of a camera, or in the dim light of a darkroom, esthetic dilemmas pop into sharp focus" (195). Relating one such dilemma from his own fieldwork, he recalls feeling that his camera eye overstepped the line of privacy, "the blurred gap between revelation and exposure," when he photographed a "pioneer fact—a nightpot polished by use, under a bed sagging with invisible sleepers," at his aunt and uncle's farmhouse (195). Morris's ambivalence about this picture prevented him from using it in *The Home Place*, though he erroneously claims to have included it in *God's Country and My People*.

<sup>67</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), xxii, xiii, xiv.

<sup>68</sup> In an earlier project, O'Grady collaborated with Kenneth Griffith on *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland's Unfinished Revolution* (1982; Dublin: Mercier Press, 1998), a book that emerged from a film of the same title, for which they traveled across Ireland and recorded interviews with many old survivors of the country's revolutionary period. O'Grady's role in assembling these testimonies and linking them by way of a historical narrative clearly prepared him for his fictionalization of oral accounts by Irish emigrants in *I Could Read the Sky*.

<sup>69</sup> Echoing Berger's contention in *A Seventh Man* that nameless migrant workers are seen as immortal by their host countries because they are so easily interchangeable, P. J., one of the smartest Irish spalpeens in *I Could Read the Sky*, whom the narrator can never best in an argument, angrily speaks for all of them after one of their number (an uncle of the narrator) is found dead in England: "We are the immortals. We have one name and we

have one body. We are always in our prime and we are always fit for work. We dig the tunnels, lay the rails and build the roads and buildings. But we leave no other sign behind us. We are unknown and unrecorded. We have many names and none are our own" (69).

<sup>70</sup> In a fittingly self-reflexive aside, one of O'Grady's characters in *I Could Read the Sky* broods: "The thing about a book is that the man who is writing it brings all the lives from all the different places and makes them flow together in the same stream. As they move down towards the end it's like they have loops and holes and shapes that all fit together just nicely so that they're just one big piece really. You can look back and see how all of them got where they are. That's the time the writer brings the book to an end and there's no seeing past it. I'd like to meet the man who wrote a book like that so I could ask him where he got those lives. I never met anything like that in all my time. I look back and I see a big field full of mud, people and animals sliding and me sliding with them. There's no end. There's just times when some are standing and some are fallen" (117).

<sup>71</sup> While the photographs of *I Could Read the Sky* are not captioned as they appear on its pages, a list of sparing "Picture Information" at the back of the book indicates the locales and years in which Pyke took them from 1981-1997. A few portray urban scenes in cities like Dublin or London, but most document rural counties in the West of Ireland.

<sup>72</sup> O'Grady and Pyke, *I Could Read the Sky*, 15, 144, 115.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>77</sup> The first epigraph is a quotation by George Seferis; the second is inscribed on a Holocaust memorial in San Francisco.

<sup>78</sup> William T. Vollmann, *Poor People* (New York: Ecco, 2007), xii. In addition to citing Marx's *Das Kapital*, Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*, George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Vollmann also praises John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, hailing it as "one of the best books about poor people I have ever read" (xii) and as "a more populist work" than *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (xiii). For Vollmann's further thoughts and protective feelings toward this less critically upheld writer, see his "Steinbeck: Most American of Us All," in *Expelled from Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader*, ed. Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004), 379-82.

<sup>79</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, xii.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., xiii, xii.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., xi, xv. Vollmann's tone and technique in *Poor People* are constantly meditative, even if he disavows meditating for long on any single instance of poverty. "The work is a meditation rather than a dissertation," as Michael Hemmingson accurately remarks in his *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2009), 69.

<sup>83</sup> Discounting the fact that Agee and Evans paid room and board while staying with the tenants, Vollmann, as if to dissociate his tactics from their ethically dubious espionage, their unwarranted invasion of privacy, appends this sardonically defensive, contentious footnote to his admission that he was paying for the interviews on which *Poor People* is based: "That's right! I was paying for them; I was rich! Didn't that give my invasiveness carte blanche? In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Evans and Agee inspected every inch of their subjects' houses while the latter were away at church. Only you, the reader, can decide whether such knowledge as you gain from reading that long passage of the book justifies its means" (16). And speaking of long, while *Poor People* is a fairly short work (just over three hundred pages of text) by Vollmann's standards, the stupendous length of many of his other volumes—above all, the three thousand, three hundred page *Rising Up and Rising Down* (2003), which he modestly refers to as "a longish book about violence" in the first sentence of his book about poverty (xi)—demonstrates that he shares Agee's incorrigible putter-inner mindset. For a few of Vollmann's impassioned, immodest, yet honest defenses of his wordiness to publishers, editors, and agents, see, in *Expelled from Eden*, his "Letter Against Cuts" (311-15), "Crabbed Cautions of a Bleeding-hearted Undelete—and Potential Nobel Prize Winner" (319-23), and "My Life's Work" (325-27).

<sup>84</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, 203.

<sup>85</sup> Like Agee's assertion in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that his "Harvard education is by no means an unqualified advantage" (311), Vollmann, who graduated from Cornell, ponders the gulf between his own literariness and the illiteracy of many of his subjects in *Poor People*, who will be unlikely either to buy or to grasp the book. "Whatever it thinks it knows about poverty," he admits, "they will know more truly, and more deeply if less broadly. As for the style, although I have striven to write simply, why *shouldn't* people who cannot afford my Ivy League education be discouraged by long sentences?" (288).

<sup>86</sup> In recognition of the help Vollmann received in surmounting barriers of language and culture, *Poor People* is dedicated to his interpreters, "without whom," he says, "I would have remained more deaf and ignorant than is already the case" (v).

<sup>87</sup> Vollmann's rhetorical questions sometimes strain to compensate for the imprecise or inconsistent information he receives from his subjects. "In appropriate contradiction of this book's hopes and pretenses," he laments, "poor people's answers are frequently as impoverished as their lives" (48). Hence, explaining "why this book cannot be simply a collection of oral histories," Vollmann sadly remarks, "Communication being, like other

skills, a skill of the rich, the poor people in this book sometimes failed to tell me what I longed to know” (102).

<sup>88</sup> In his introduction to *Poor People*, after frankly conceding that “my own interpretation of how this book’s heroes and heroines see themselves is damaged by the brevity of our acquaintance, which in most cases endured a week or less,” Vollmann postulates: “The impossibility of my gaining any dynamic understanding of these lives *over time*, my very lack of relevance to them, may enhance the truth of this presentation—for what do I have to prove? How could I be fatuous enough to hope to ‘make a difference’? I’m left with nothing to honorably attempt, but to *show* and *compare* to the best of my ability” (xv).

<sup>89</sup> Vollmann remarks that Agee’s fondness for the tenants is an expression of “the love which impels a child to embrace a stranger’s legs,” that “his heart went out to them, and he fought with all his crafty, hopelessly unrequitable passion to make our hearts do the same” (xii). Although *Poor People* is less overwrought, Vollmann similarly recounts a number of occasions when his heart broke with pity or distress for his interviewees. He, too, castigates himself for indulging in emotional excesses: “These prattlings of my heart might be thrown away, like all the individuals, including you and me, that they concern. Poor people and rich people, we have in common our mortal insignificance” (289).

<sup>90</sup> Coming across his subjects during various journalistic assignments and independent research trips for other projects, Vollmann explicates, “I tried to seek out poor people whose circumstances bore a degree of ordinariness, or at least of *pattern*, so that there might be something to generalize from. The drug addicts, street prostitutes, and criminals who appear in so many of my other books get smaller representation here. People who are poor but not in imminent danger of perishing have more of a chance of catching their breath and actually conceptualizing their poverty” (xiv-xv). He notes that while responses to his queries about poverty “vary by region, their particularities may well mean nothing. People can be poor in anything and everything, including meaning itself” (xiv).

<sup>91</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>93</sup> According to Vollmann’s glossary of keywords in *Poor People*, “false consciousness” is “a charge leveled against the perceptions and experiences of others whenever we wish to assert that we know their good better than they do”; “normality” is the always arbitrary therefore nebulous “local context from which relative poverty, individual well being and other such abstractions ought to be considered”; “respect” is “an expression of protective tenderness or self-effacing homage,” though it may transmute into “a thoughtless or even hypocritical strategy for consigning someone to invisibility” (xxi). Additional terms that Vollmann defines are “community,” “the market,” “poor,” and “rich.” He delineates the last two, respectively, as “lacking and desirous of what I have; unhappy in his or her own normality,” and “satisfied with one’s normality, and reasonably able to apprehend it.”

<sup>94</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, xiv.

<sup>95</sup> Vollmann's *The Atlas* (New York: Viking, 1996), a compilation of his travel writings, is bookended with some of his uncaptioned photographs, eight in the front and eight in the back. The unabridged version of his titanic study of violence, *Rising Up and Rising Down* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003), contains more than three hundred pictures, several of which are reprinted in *Poor People*. Following its form of grouping photos in a separate section at the end, *Riding Toward Everywhere* (New York: Ecco, 2008) features sixty-five shots snapped during his trainhopping adventures. For his massive borderlands project, Vollmann released companion volumes, each titled *Imperial* (New York: Viking, 2009; Brooklyn: powerHouse Books, 2009), one with more than a thousand pages of text and a few dozen interleaved illustrations, one with about two hundred photographs and an essay called "Subdelineations: Photoscapes," which provides insights on his photographic techniques, principles, and motivations. Vollmann, who considers his photographs to be "documentary" in nature, avows that he never requested special poses. "I photographed them how and where they wanted," he says of the people he met (217). His captions for these pictures—about half of which are printed from 35 mm negatives and the other half from 8 x 10 negatives shot with a view camera on a tripod—sometimes supply extended commentary on photographic conditions or subjects.

<sup>96</sup> While Vollmann typically photographed his subjects in conjunction with interviewing them, he occasionally took candid street shots or kept his camera discreet for reasons of cultural sensitivity. For instance, he ruefully notes in the "Invisibility" chapter of *Poor People*: "To show you how Afghan women look, I sometimes paid poor ladies to take their portraits, which felt to them and to me like the most sordid kind of prostitution, and sometimes from behind or from a distance, so that I'd not be seen, photographed burqa'd ladies walking down the street. In Afghanistan, to take a photograph of a woman was as illegal as photographing a secret defense installation" (121).

<sup>97</sup> These captions usually indicate the place and the year as well as the subject of each photograph. Excepting one shot taken in 1982, the dated pictures span the years from 1992-2005 and come from many countries: Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Congo, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Thailand, USA, Vietnam, Yemen.

<sup>98</sup> In an inversion of this cross-referencing system, Vollmann's book of photographs for *Imperial* similarly places boldfaced numbers in brackets after certain captions so as to tie these images to chapters in the companion text volume. As for his use of photographs—most often taken with a wide aperture for maximum depth of field—as a tool for further scrutiny of the people and places he encountered while researching *Imperial*, Vollmann comments, "I wanted to store them all in my mind's compartments, so that I could bring them out whenever I desired them. ... I hoped that the lens would see as much as possible, so that I could later improve my education" (217).

<sup>99</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, 246-47.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>102</sup> Although he is generally more judicious than Agee about praising the poor people he meets, Vollmann nonetheless asseverates, especially after dwelling on their photographs, that they radiate as much loveliness as abjectness. Of a Cambodian girl with a bafflingly deformed nose, “whose face earned my pity and money,” he avers: “Were she my lover, I could very easily find her beautiful” (123); of a middle-aged, alcoholic, epileptic Russian woman: “Natalia’s face is to me of all the people’s in this book the most beautiful” (289). On the other hand, while admiring and mourning “a certain crude handworked beauty,” a subtle rebuke to the standard “division between labor and art,” in the ornamental carvings on old houses doomed to demolition in Kazakhstan (250), in that same country Vollmann is horrified in hindsight by a Russian beggar-woman whom he found unremarkable in the flesh but whose portrait permits him to lavish his descriptive energy on her: “when I look at her image now, I’m appalled; her misery is monstrous” (124).

<sup>103</sup> Vollmann, *Poor People*, 35-36.

<sup>104</sup> According to the World Urbanization Prospects revised biennially by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations and posted on its website—<http://esa.un.org/unup/>—the number of urban dwellers eclipsed the number of rural dwellers by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

<sup>105</sup> Not only does Vollmann warn that his “numerical precision is surely spurious” in the income table he assembles for *Poor People* to compare his interviewees’ daily earnings, but he notes that official measurements of subsistence levels are often flawed due to their suspension of variable quantities: “Most considerations of poverty in our time bear our time’s particular blemish: they seek to convey a state of being only at a given moment, employing statistics and proportions worried down to preposterous distinctions” (35).

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