Vistas of Perfection
The self-dissatisfied life and art of James Agee
In September 1928, James Agee moved into his freshman dorm at Harvard—room B-41 in George Smith Hall, a building that is now part of Kirkland House. Decades later, after Agee had become a kind of legend—for his tormented life and early death, no less than for his great books, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and A Death in the Family—his roommate, Robert Saudek, remembered what it was like to catch a first glimpse of the 18-year-old Tennessean. Already, he wrote, Agee seemed somewhat larger than life, more like an apparition or a force of nature than a college freshman:

The door burst open and in strode the roommate—tall, shy, strong, long arms and legs, a small head, curly dark hair, a spring in his heels as he bounded past with a wicker country suitcase in one hand and an enormous, raw pine box on his shoulder. He turned his head suddenly, squinted his eyes in an apologetic smile, said softly, “Hello, Agee’s my name,” swept through an empty bedroom and deposited his belongings, bounded back through the gabled, maroon-and-white study, murmured “See you all later,” waved an awkward farewell and didn’t show up again for several days. Such was the magnetic field that had rushed through the room, that I didn’t even think to introduce myself. Now that I had seen him, heard him, and learned to pronounce his name, he was more of a stranger than before.

Saudek might have been even more surprised if he had known exactly where his roommate had disappeared to. According to his biographer Lawrence Bergreen, Agee “in all likelihood” spent his first days of college making a retreat at the monastery of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist—the Cambridge outpost of the Cowley Fathers, a religious order of the Anglican Church. The monastery, which still welcomes pilgrims at 980 Memorial Drive, was familiar territory to the young Agee. Even before coming to Harvard, he had spent some of his vacations from Phillips Exeter Academy with the Cowley Fathers. Their Anglo-Catholic ritual was a powerful link to his early childhood, when he attended an academy with the Cowley Fathers, a religious order of the Anglican Church. The rhythms of the Anglican hymnbook still echoed in the deep-stratum of his mind. In The Morning Watch, an autobiographical novella published in 1951, Agee conjured up his 12-year-old self:

The leaden melodies of the Lenten hymns had appealed to him as never before; lines in certain hymns seemed, during that time, to have been written especially for him. Jesus, I my Cross have taken, he would sing, already anticipating the lonely solace of tears concealed in public: all to leave and follow Thee; destitute, despised, forsaken, were words especially dear to him; Thou from hence my All shall be…he saw crowned God and Heaven shining and felt, in a humble kind of way, that he literally owned them.

Yet if Agee the child luxuriated in the mysteries and music of religion, by the time he got to Harvard, they had powerful rivals for his attention. The freshman whose first act at Harvard was to visit a monastery would spend the next four years exploring all manner of worldliness: sex and friendship, ambition and poetry, and of course, in those Prohibition years, drinking. His appetite for experience—any and all kinds of experience—was bottomless. Agee’s roommate recalled that “Jim did not especially love Harvard,” but “he did appreciate its people and its atmosphere of personal freedom.”

A few of those people were professors, like Theodore Spencer, a young English department instructor who became Agee’s mentor, and I.A. Richards, the great English literary critic, whose lectures struck him with the force of a revelation. “It’s perfectly impossible for me to define anything about him or about what he taught,” Agee wrote, “but it was a matter of getting frequent and infinite vistas of perfection in beauty, strength, symmetry, greatness—and the reasons for them, in poetry and in living…That sounds extravagant—well, his power over people was extravagant, and almost unlimited. Everyone who knew him was left in a clear, tingling daze, at the beginning of the summer.”

Yet looking back on his undergraduate education, Agee was skeptical about the value of the experience. According to Dwight Garner, a daily book critic for the New York Times who is at work on a new biography of Agee, he “was as conflicted about Harvard as he was about nearly everything else in his life. Clearly, he was proud to be there. Just as clearly, he loved to mock its sober and stuffy side. (In an unsigned editorial in the Harvard Advocate, he referred to ‘that high-falutin flub-drubbery which is Harvard.’)” Three years after graduating, he wrote that education means “everything which can open clear & sharpen one’s appetite and feed it, and I don’t know at all that that is best to be had at Yale or Harvard...Thinking of it now I would give anything to have...Portrait by Walker Evans, 1937. Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum

Harvard Magazine 20

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746
If Agee had been a better governor of his life and talent, he would not have written at the particular pitch of desperate sincerity and fearful compassion that makes him so beloved.

of journalism, his not-quite-chosen profession, or of uncontrollable alcoholism, or of the sheer impossibility of being an artist in America. The critic John Leonard ’60, writing about Agee, pointed out that the 1950s were “a time when postwar American culture conflated art with martyrdom and manhood with excess. Think of the poets lost to lithium, loony bins and suicide, the jazz musicians strung up and out on heroin, the abstract expressionists who slashed and burned themselves. Delmore Schwartz, Charlie Parker and Jackson Pollock pointed the way for Jack Kerouac, James Dean, Truman Capote, John Berryman, Elvis, Janis and Jimi.” Agee fit all too neatly into this tragic pantheon. Yet the poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald ’33, who was at Harvard with Agee and after graduation became one of his closest friends, offered a different verdict on his achievement. “Jim’s weakness and strength,” Fitzgerald wrote in a long, loving memoir of Agee, “were not so easy to tell apart...When you reflect on his life...weakness and strategy, instinct and destiny seem all one thing.” And it did not take long after Agee’s death for him to find the literary fame that largely eluded him in life. In 1957, his novel A Death in the Family was published posthumously, and won the Pulitzer Prize. In the 1960s, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, which had vanished without a trace when it first appeared in 1941, became enormously popular among a new generation of readers drawn to Agee’s concern with spirituality and social justice. Even the movie reviews that Agee produced as a columnist for the Nation in the 1940s are now considered a landmark in the evolution of serious film criticism. According to film critic and historian Michael Sragow ’73, Agee “established a new tone for criticism...I doubt Pauline Kael would have gone so far into a movie criticism based on personal sensibility if she hadn’t had Agee’s example. He forged more connections between high and low culture than any critic of his time.”

In the last few years, Agee’s status as an American classic has become clearer than ever. In 2005, the Library of America put out a two-volume edition of Agee’s work, edited by Sragow, making him a peer of Whitman and Faulkner; last year, the Library even included Agee’s poetry, the earliest written and least read part of his work, in its American Poets Project series. The University of Tennessee Press has begun to publish a scholarly edition of Agee’s works, complete with manuscript variants. In 2009, the centenary of Agee’s birth, he seems as securely ensconced in the American pantheon as all but a handful of twentieth-century writers. As Garner puts it, “when you look at what he did accomplish, in so many fields, it’s mind-boggling. There’s no one quite like him today. Agee is seen as an unfulfilled talent, in part, because we simply can’t get our arms around him. He contains multitudes.”

Agee was already a very ambitious writer during his years at Harvard. In the fall of his junior year he confided to Father Flye, “I’d do anything on earth to become a really great writer. That’s the pitch of desperate sincerity and fearful compassion that makes him so beloved. According to film critic and historian Michael Sragow ’73, Agee “established a new tone for criticism...I doubt Pauline Kael would have gone so far into a movie criticism based on personal sensibility if she hadn’t had Agee’s example. He forged more connections between high and low culture than any critic of his time.”

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Agee was already a very ambitious writer during his years at Harvard. In the fall of his junior year he confided to Father Flye, “I’d do anything on earth to become a really great writer. That’s as sincere a thing as I’ve ever said.” But it was poetry, not fiction or journalism or criticism, that initially called to him: “nothing else holds me in the same way.” Even before college, in fact, Agee had written a long poem that stands as his first substantial literary effort. “Ann Garner,” a narrative in blank verse, was finished during his senior year at Exeter; Agee liked it well enough to have it published in Hound and Horn, the avant-garde literary magazine edited by his fellow Harvard student Lincoln Kirstein ’30, and to include it in Permit Me Voyage, the book of poems he published in 1934.

While “Ann Garner” is far from a masterpiece—it is clearly derivative of the verse tales of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robinson Jefferes—it does show that Agee was already drawn to some of the central themes of his mature work. Ann is a farm wife, whom we first see struggling to give birth in the dead of
winter. Her baby is stillborn, but as a cosmic recompense, she is transformed into a kind of earth goddess, with the power to make crops grow:

Ann came to look upon herself as earth,
And lying strained against the earth, cried out
In joy at sweeping winds, at the warm sun,
At the black rain that plunged into the earth.
And thus, as the years passed, she lost the rhythms
That govern human life, and seemed to live
More like a tree, or like the earth itself.

This is a fairly literary conceit, but in its powerful, vague intuition of the intersection between life, death, and sex, "Ann Garner" suggests how early these themes preyed on Agee's mind.

Indeed, his childhood had made death an intimate presence to Agee, thanks to the early trauma that in many ways shaped his whole personality. When he was six years old, growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, his father, Jay, was killed in a car accident. At a stroke, Agee—then still known by his middle name, Rufus, which he came to despise—was deprived of the parent he associated with tenderness and adventure, and left with his mother, Laura, a strict and pious Episcopalian who became only more so in her widowhood. Laura moved with James and his younger sister to the grounds of St. Andrew's School, where the boy became a pupil and developed an intense adolescent faith. His friendship with Father Flye, which lasted until his death, began when Agee was a 10-year-old student and Flye a teacher at the school:

the priest remembered Agee as "very tender-hearted, touched to quick sympathy and pity at the sight or thought of suffering, human or other, and incapable of willingly causing it."

Such a childhood could hardly help incubating in Agee strongly contradictory feelings about religion. On the one hand, he associated Christianity with the order and security of his school, and with his mother's endurance in the face of tragedy. On the other, he inevitably questioned a God who could allow his father to die in such a random, pointless way; and he came to rebel against his mother's conventional sanctimony.

It is a sign of how deep this dilemma went that it was not until the end of his life that Agee was able to write about it directly, in the autobiographical A Death in the Family. Not yet completed when Agee died, the novel nonetheless feels quite finished, partly because it is based directly on experiences he had been ruminating over for decades. The novel's emotional power comes from its precise, unflinching narration of an unbearable tragedy—the random death of a young, good, beloved man. Rufus—the dead man's son shares Agee's childhood name—observes his father's corpse with the total absorption of a camera:

He could see the tiny dark point of every shaven hair of the beard.
He watched the way the flesh was chiseled in a widening trough from the root of the nose to the white edge of the lip.
He watched the still more delicate dent beneath the lower lip.

It became strange, and restive, that it was possible for anyone to lie so still for so long; yet he knew that his father would never move again; yet this knowledge made his motionlessness no less strange.

Like the young Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—a work that powerfully influenced Agee—Rufus reminds us of the absolute vulnerability of childhood, and its paradoxical ruthlessness. The morning after his father's death, for instance, Rufus wanders into the front yard so he can announce it to passing strangers and other boys—he wants to revel in the sense of distinction, the strange prestige, that tragedy brings.

Yet Rufus's failure to obey, or even to understand, the protocols of grief makes him a much more sympathetic figure than his mother, Mary, who insists on seeing her husband's death through the comforting, distorting lens of religion. When Rufus and his little sister eavesdrop on their mother praying—under the guidance of an odious, officious priest, Father Jackson—they are disturbed by the sound: "And they felt that although everything was better for their mother than it had been a few minutes before, it was far worse in one way. For before, she had at least been questioning, however gently. But now she was wholly defeated and entranced, and the transition to prayer was the moment of her surrender."

A Death in the Family is partly, then, a book about the perils of
belief; it can even be read as a book against belief. (In the very last scene, Rufus listens aghast as his uncle Andrew, a nonbeliever, rails against Father Jackson: “I tell you, Rufus, it’s enough to make a man puke up his soul.”) But it is also, very clearly, the work of a writer consumed with religious questions—with the proper relation of the individual to the divine.

The poetry Agee wrote while at Harvard is also saturated in religious language and imagery. In his senior year, Agee served as president of the Harvard Advocate, where he published a number of poems and stories, and he was a natural choice to write the class ode. Busy with other matters, he didn’t start working on the poem until the night before he had to deliver it, finishing the next morning and racing to Sanders Theatre in such a state of disarray that he forgot his mortarboard—he ended up borrowing one from a female student, so that he was conspicuous on stage for his long, red Radcliffe tassel. This might sound like typical undergraduate carelessness, and especially typical for Agee, whose work habits would only get worse with age. But the poem he wrote is remarkably somber and self-revealing, for all that it is meant to be sung to the tune of “Fair Harvard”:

> And all wisdom we wrung from our pain and desire
> On this field between devil and God
> Shall resolve to a white and unquenchable fire
> That shall cleanse the dark clay we have trod.

Only Agee, perhaps, of all the members of the class of 1932, viewed the college as a “field between devil and God,” a spiritual proving-ground. In fact, as he would discover very quickly upon graduation, the “real world” involved a much more trying combat, in which God and Mammon struggled for the young poet’s soul.

During his term as president of the Advocate, Agee had gained national publicity for the undergraduate literary journal by putting out a special issue parodying Time magazine. Henry Luce’s newsmagazine, then just nine years old, was a ripe target for mockery as it became more and more popular and profitable. Agee and his collaborators hit off the garishness and self-importance of “Timespeak,” by imagining Time correspondents covering famous events throughout history: the premiere of Electra in ancient Athens, for instance, in which the play is described as Aeschylus’s “latest nerve-shatterer.”

At bottom, however, the Time parody was more flattering than hostile. Agee even sent advance notice of the issue to Time’s editors, many of whom were Ivy League graduates not much older than himself. When it appeared, the March before he graduated, the Advocate issue served as a kind of job application for him; largely on the strength of the parody, he was offered a position writing for Fortune, Luce’s new business magazine. Graduating into the depths of the Great Depression, Agee felt himself extremely lucky to get the job.

Yet just months after moving to New York to work for Fortune, the idealistic young poet began to fear that he had made a terrible mistake. “I’m emotionally stupefied, and have very little and dull and unextensive imagination,” he told Father Flye. “If I am, as I seem to be, dying on my feet mentally and spiritually, and can do nothing about it, I’d prefer not to know I was dying.” Agee was trapped in an almost Greek-mythological kind of punishment: he had a job that allowed him to spend all day writing, but the only writing he was able to do was synthetic, impersonal, deadening. The critic Dwight Macdonald, a friend and fellow Exeter alumnus who had helped Agee land the job at Fortune, later wrote that “for a writer to be given the run of Time [was] like a collector of sculpture being offered his pick of wax figures from Madame Tussaud’s Museum.”

No wonder Agee was “always looking for a way out”: Guggenheim grants (he was turned down twice), leaves of absence, freelance arrangements. But he stayed at Time Inc., writing for Fortune and Time and Life, until after the Second World War—as it turned out, the majority of his adult life. Of course, working for Time was hardly a creative death sentence to all writers. Archibald MacLeish, L.L.B. ’39, Litt.D. ’55, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1933 for his long poem “Conquistador” while working as Fortune’s star writer. But while MacLeish helped Agee publish his own poems,
he could not teach the younger writer the secret of balancing art and commerce so resiliently. Nor, on the other hand, did Agee have the resolve to quit, as the radical Macdonald did when he got fed up with Luce’s conservative politics. Looking back, Macdonald decided that while Agee had been terribly grateful for his help getting a job on Fortune, “I didn’t do him a favor, really.”

Yet even here, Agee managed to snatch a kind of victory from the jaws of defeat. For if he hadn’t gone to work at Fortune, he would not have been assigned to write an article on the dire condition of white Alabama sharecroppers; and if it were not for that assignment, he would not have found the subject of his strangest, most important book, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Agee’s editor paired him with Walker Evans, the photographer, and while the two men were enthusiastic about the assignment, they drove south not knowing exactly what to look for or where they would find it.

Agee’s revelation came when he decided to spend three weeks actually living with the cotton-farming Burroughs family in their primitive shack, getting to know them and their neighbors, the Tingle and Fields families. Suddenly he was no longer writing a magazine article about a socioeconomic problem; he was undergoing something very like a spiritual ordeal, in which he was granted a vision of the infinite value of each individual human being, even or especially the poorest. It is no wonder that when Agee returned to New York and tried to write about the experience for Fortune, the draft he produced was immediately rejected by his editor.

This rejection liberated Agee to turn the article into a book. It would take five years before Let Us Now Praise Famous Men finally appeared, in August 1941—partly because of legal complications with various publishers, partly because of Agee’s own compulsive rewriting of the manuscript. The delay meant that Agee missed whatever commercial opportunity he might have had—the agricultural depression had given way to the war as the major issue of the day.

But while the book Agee produced is still usually referred to, even today, as an expose of agricultural poverty—a How the Other Half Lives for the Cotton Belt—that is true of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men only in the sense that Walden is a book about pond ecology. In fact, Agee’s book is a long meditation on the difficulty of capturing reality in language, on the incomparable uniqueness of the individual soul, on the prison of American materialism—much the same themes that inspired the transcendentalists a hundred years before. They are not themes that lend themselves to direct or shapely expression, and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is at times maddening to read—Agee meanders, elaborates, doubts, catalogs, quotes, and versifies, more or less as the impulse takes him. Yet there is a rare and radical religious spirit at work in the book, as Agee, far as he has traveled from his childhood faith, still tries to convince the reader that the poor in spirit are blessed: George Gudger [Agee’s pseudonym for Floyd Burroughs] is a human being, a man, not like any other human being so much as he is like himself. I could invent incidents, appearances, additions to his character, background, surroundings, future….The result, if I was lucky, could be a work of art. But somehow a much more important, and dignified,