

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### The drama of promise

by [David Yezzi](#)

A review of *James Agee: Selected Poems*, edited by Andrew Hudgins (American Poets Project).

Two mid-twentieth-century American poets died of heart attacks in New York City taxi cabs. The more recent was Robert Lowell in 1977, who expired en route from JFK. Having left his third wife, Caroline Blackwood, he was returning to his second, Elizabeth Hardwick, with a Lucian Freud portrait of the young Blackwood in his arms. The other, lesser-known, was James Agee (1909–1955), who died at the age of forty-five on his way to the doctor, leaving his only novel, *A Death in the Family*, unfinished. The book appeared posthumously, after a substantial editing job, winning a Pulitzer in 1958.

Agee is best remembered as a prose writer, perhaps most notably for his turgid account of Depression-era sharecroppers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (featuring Walker Evans's extraordinary photographs), but his first love was poetry. His sole collection, *Permit Me Voyage*, received the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, chosen by Stephen Vincent Benét (at the instigation of Agee's colleague at *Fortune* magazine Archibald MacLeish), and a forgettable clutch of his verses appeared in Louis Untermeyer's *Modern American Poetry*. Agee made his mark as a literary man both at Exeter and at Harvard, but, despite early success, his poetry failed to live up to its considerable promise.

Much that Agee might have accomplished was lost to the heavy smoking and drinking that ruined his health. Frequently given to extravagant, self-lacerating doubts, Agee worried that he would be remembered as nothing more than a minor poet. Based on *Selected Poems*, I would say that he should be so lucky. This comparatively slender volume—part of the Library of America's American Poets Project—follows hard on the heels of two ample collections of Agee's prose in the Library's main series. As those books make clear, Agee's early enthusiasm for poetry got pushed to the margins to make room for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *A Death in the Family*, as well as for the film scripts and film reviews that make up *Agee on Film*.

At their best, Agee's poems combine the density and ambiguity of the New Criticism with a supercharged self-scrutiny, inflected by Agee's boyhood Anglo-Catholicism and the Bible. I. A. Richards made a strong impression on him at Harvard ("a sort of fusion of Hamlet and some Dostoevsky character"), as did the poems of Eliot and Crane—particularly "Permit Me Voyage," which answers the eros of Crane's "Voyages" with God-sent agape. To their credit, Agee's poems are rarely dull: even when he failed, he failed big, as in his aborted satire "John Carter" with its nod to *Don Juan* ("Like Byron, I'll begin at the beginning./ Unlike that better bard, my lad's a new one" [rhymes with "Juan"]).

Agee's true Penelope was Auden, whom he admired and emulated, but the work of other writers

often left him feeling not inspired, but second-rate:

I have a fractional idea what poetry is or ought to be and do honestly try to live up to it as well as I can—but these poems and all my others, and even more myself, do nothing but make me embarrassed of myself for a fake pretender. [I have] a feeling of having an essentially inert, cagey, and cautious mind which I will not possibly grow above since those are my only tools for growing above it. . . . I have got to use every kind of force & relaxation to quit talking, writing, or thinking about myself—and to break out of poetry-consciousness as well as my self-consciousness.

Agee's acute self-quarreling lent an urgency and drama to his writing, both poetry and prose. He could be fierce with himself, pronouncing his early "Epithalamium," for instance, "redolent of mothballs":

The day departs: Upreared the darkness climbs  
The breathless sky, leans wide above the fields,  
And snows its silence round the muttering chimes:  
The night is come that bride to bridegroom yields.

The poem later won Harvard's Garrison Prize, but Agee was not wrong in his estimation. Lincoln Kirstein, writing of Agee's poems in *The New Republic* in 1935, noted that "his readings in seventeenth-century prose and eighteenth-century verse had been wholly absorbed into his own unique gifts." True: but along with a good deal of tortured syntax—"I nothing saw in you that was not common," "My heart and mind discharted lie," "Let this new time no natural wheel derange"—not to mention such woolly poeticisms as "lo" and "O" and "Ah." Even Thomas Hardy, who wrote his last poems in the late 1920s, arrived at a more pliable modern idiom than this.

Agee manages to affect a humble earnestness in questioning the value of his work, while remaining rather grand (or grandiose) at the same time: "I don't give a damn whether I'm a genius or not: but I do want to write great poetry: I can't possibly content my mind with 'good' poetry (which God knows is probably above me)." Here's the same alternating hesitation and headlong charge in poetic terms:

This fire that lances me about,  
This thunderous benumbing doubt,  
This ocean-rooted sheer of rain  
That brims the dark with smothering pain—  
  
This wrack of murderous storm shall melt  
Clean from the sky, and on the sky  
The long-arranged stars have spelt  
A fate no storm can set awry.

Agee's characteristic combination of sweetness and hauteur also came over him when contemplating the divine, as in the prose poem "Dedication":

Not one among us has seen you, nor shall in our living time, and may never. We fumble all blind on the blind dark, even who would know you and who believe your name. Our very faith and our desire, which are our whole and only way in truth, they delude us always, and ever will, into false and previous visions, and into wrong attributions. Little as we know beyond the sill of death do we know your nature: and the best of our

knowledge is but a faith, the shade and shape of a dream, and all pretense.

Nevertheless, have mercy on us O great Lord God... .

This is fine as far as it goes, but it's not particularly compelling either as prayer or as poetry. Agee worked out much of his thinking about God in letters to his former teacher Father Flye, but, as his mother pointed out, Agee's piety too often smacked of vanity. Before long, his faith receded, and he turned his attention to more worldly matters.

The woe that is in marriage became a recurring subject. Agee had three wives—Via, Alma, and Mia—not to mention numerous girlfriends. Take as only one measure of Agee's complicated love life the fact that two of his wives had sex with Walker Evans, and, in the case of Alma, while Agee was watching. Among his finest and best sustained poetic achievements is the twenty-five-sonnet sequence from *Permit Me Voyage*, Agee's anxious rumination on connubiality:

What curious thing is love that you and I  
Hold it impervious to all distress  
And insolent in gladness set it high  
Above all other joys and goodliness?  
Ignorance and unkindness, aspiration,  
The weary flesh, the mind's inconstancy,  
Even now conspire its sure disintegration:  
Be mindful, love, of love's mortality.  
Be mindful that all love is as the grass  
And all the goodliness of love the flower  
Of grass, for lo, its little day shall pass  
And withering and decay define its hour.  
All that we hold most lovely, and most cherish  
And most are proud in, all shall surely perish.

Agee returned to the theme in a bitter updating of Marlowe's passionate shepherd ("Come live with me and be my love"):

Provided you can smoothly be  
Wife, mother, and nonentity  
As Metamorphic moods require;  
Provided, also, you admire  
  
Nor ever dare to criticize  
Each syllable that I devise,  
And shall apprise me (though I know it)  
Of my majority as a poet... .

If every joke contains a grain of truth, then this all-too-true-to-life burlesque contains more than a grain of dark humor.

As the editor Andrew Hudgins points out in his excellent introduction, "Agee's early fixation on death—a tendency to which his growing alcoholism could have contributed—led him almost inevitably to appreciate the virtues of failure." *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Hudgins rightly suggests, "remains heavy with a self-absorption that approaches hysteria." Agee was one of

literature's walking wounded, during an era that saw so many poets succumb to drink and madness. A word that came up often in his film criticism (among the wittiest and most well-turned writing he ever did) was the word "healthful." He admired, for example, Olivia de Havilland's "healthful-seeming" temperament. Given to wild rages and acts of violence, Agee must have wished such a condition for himself. Always elusive in life, it was something he continued to look for in his art:

The late year lies down the north.  
All is healed, all is health.  
High summer hold the earth.  
Hearts are whole.

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