WILLIAM TODD SCHULTZ

Off-Stage Voices in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Reportage as Covert Autobiography[1]

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While speaking to a class at Harvard just two days before his death, photographer Walker Evans mentioned that, although he was in "close sympathy" and "impressed" with the writer James Agee's mind, he nevertheless "disapproved of a whole lot too." As to artistic aim, Evans felt that Agee was "very subjective. He used to shock me. I have inhibitions about exposing the personal ego and feelings, and he seems to think that is *the* material and that that is one of the functions of an artist—exposing obscure and hidden parts of the mind and so on" (Caplan 1976, 25).

Evans went on to call *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—Agee and Evans' portrayal of 1930s Alabama tenant farmers—"a very big and large and daring undertaking" (25). Many others agree, especially about the book's "daring" qualities. For instance, Dwight Macdonald said of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (abbreviated *FM* hereafter) that "there's more of Agee in that book than anything else he did" (Spears and Cassidy 1985, 115). Robert Fitzgerald, Agee's college roommate and life-long friend, evidently shared Macdonald's opinion, adding that Agee was well aware of the extent to which writing a book on the disadvantaged would "electrify a great deal of his nature that had not been given an opportunity for full expression" (Spears 1985, 56). To Fitzgerald *FM* represented the "centerpiece" in Agee's life and writing (Introduction to Agee 1970).

Those are impressive, emphatic sentiments which, partly because of their emphasis, seem oddly suggestive. After all, what made the writing of a book about (of all things) tenant

farming so signally important for Agee? Why were his experiences in Alabama so intense? Did reportage truly metamorphize for some reason into covert—and sometimes not-so-covert—autobiography?

I begin with a consideration of context. What exactly was *FM,* under what terms did Agee write the book, and how did the writing of it affect him psychologically?

Preparation, Purpose, Process

What became *FM* began as an assignment for *Fortune* magazine, luxurious track record of the noteworthy rich, with Agee and Evans travelling to Alabama in search of an article on tenant farming. Neither Agee nor Evans felt comfortable with what Agee called this "curious" arrangement, and so from the beginning publication—in any form *Fortune* could use—seemed only a distant possibility. The magazine had in fact considered a similar proposal several years earlier by photographer Horace Bristol and John Steinbeck, but Steinbeck eventually vetoed the arrangements due to *Fortune's* clear and shameless celebration of capitalist ideology (Sacramento *Bee.* April 5, 1989), a style in direct contradiction to the spirit of the project.

In planning his work on *FM,* Agee set himself an almost life-absorbing task, writing to Father Flye that to do the job correctly and conscientiously he would finally have to address "the whole problem and nature of existence" (Agee 1962). The highly unconventional character of the book—stridently idiosyncratic and subjective, confessional, hyper-realistic, philosophical, moral—provided Agee with a forum in which to outline his feelings about, really, almost anything. The book consists of sections on the question of art and the artistic process, journalism, the nature and function of words and meaning, photography, religion, and, of course, on the lives of the tenant farmers themselves, their work, their shelter, their education, their love life, their clothing, their land, their beds, their crops. *FM* also includes a three page free-association at the end of the book over what Agee calls "Anglo-Saxon monosyllables," as well as a satiric reprinting of a newspaper

article on photographer Margaret Bourke-White, whom Agee apparently held to be morally and artistically despicable. Maybe more than anything else, what the book amounts to a fiercely thorough investigation of what it means to portray reality. In his now famous application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Agee described the book as

> scientific, but not in a sense acceptable to scientists, only in the sense that it is ultimately skeptical and analytic. It is to be as exhaustive a reproduction and analysis of human experience, including the phases and problems of memory and recall and revisitation and the problems of writing and of communication, as I am capable of, with constant bearing on two points: to tell everything possible as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing. It involves therefore as total a suspension of 'creative' and 'artistic' as of 'reportorial' attitudes and methods, and it is likely therefore to involve the development of some more or less new form of writing and of observation. (Agee 1970, 150. Agee did not get the fellowship)

With intentions like that, it comes as little surprise that the book elicited a mixed, and occasionally exasperated, critical response. On the positive side, Lionel Trilling (1942) in the *Kenyon Review* called the book the most realistic and the most important moral effort of that American generation. Many years later Robert Fitzgerald said much the same thing, comparing the book to Joyce's *Ulysses* (in Agee, 1970). Granville Hicks named it "one of the extraordinary, one of the great books of our time" (Ohlin 1966, 51). Dissent rang just as loudly, if not louder. George Baker, writing for *The Nation,* one of Agee's eventual employers, characterized the book as an "appalling inventory of the irrelevant, the incidental," while Harvey Breit, in the *New Republic,* felt that it wagged "too many tongues" in striving to represent "too many attitudes, too many awarenesses . . . Even the sincerity is too much, too prostrate" (For a helpful summary of reviewers' responses, see Ohlin 1966, 51).

The process through which Agee eventually came to write *FM* was painful, full of doubts, postponements, and resistances. Once he thought he had finished it, got in a car with several friends to deliver the manuscript to its publisher, but then somewhere along the way ordered the driver to turn back because he had come up with a new style of approaching the book and therefore wanted to rework it yet again (Spears and Cassidy 1985). As to the actual physical act of writing, Agee found it unusually difficult. He felt guilty about betraying his subjects, the tenant farmers themselves, several of whom he had come to "love." He second-guessed himself over and over again, regularly conceiving of newer, more honest ways to do the book, such as writing it so that the people in it could understand what was being said.

In a series of letters to Walker Evans written during the period Agee was at work on *FM* (see Agee Collection, University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Humanities Resource Center—HRHRC hereafter), concern with the writing process is a constant, pessimistic theme. Agee mentions having had a "very sterile and constipated three weeks 'work' "; he writes of being "petrified with work," and of feeling unable to "write another sentence." Often he has the idea he is "doing [the book] all wrong," and even goes so far as to tell Evans, "I wish you were writing the book." But the most revealing disclosure has to do with the role of the unconscious. Agee writes:

> Besides ignorance and lack of discipline, there are lots of tricks and unconscious blockades, exhausting and sickening me, paralyzing the word-mechanized in proportion to the seriousness and verticality of the would-be attack, and in general more frustrating and diluting me than I can get at to rectify. All I can do at present is to violently and strictly attack every deterrent within conscious reach: and even that is for some again sinister reason made to seem harder and more painful to do than I can describe. Several times a day it becomes physically impossible to sit and write even through another sentence. . . . It is very annoying and disturbing to me that I shouldn't manage to be fully and mentally

> eager to take hold of the work. Something is damned seriously wrong that I'm not. (July 1, 1938)

Clearly, Agee's experience while writing *FM* really was unique, discontinuous relative to his other writing experiences. It was, as he himself said, one of the best things that ever happened to him, and as we have seen, according to his friends it represented, more than any other of his books, the purest portrait of Agee himself, a portrait that was, in the minds of some, even too candid. Such candor apparently was hard for Agee to sustain. Something at the level of the unconscious was paralyzing him, making it painful to sit down and write. But what?

The Primal Scene

Aspects of the form and content of *FM* can be rewardingly read in light of what Edelheit (1971) once called the "primal scene schema," an unconsciously applied paradigm which preselects perceptual data, and determines the imagery of certain socially pervasive fantasies. Adler liked to refer to how a person's "spectacles" determine what he sees. In this case, Agee's spectacles led him to imagine in the squalor of the tenants' lives a constellating metaphor or "script" best described with reference to primal scene imagery. Before making the case for the usefulness of such a script for illuminating *FM*, two preliminary theoretical questions need attention. First, is it possible, or necessary, to establish the material and/or psychological reality of the primal scene? And second, how might the primal scene schema express itself in a work of imagination, and in a life?

It's no secret that Freud's primal scene concept is generally held in low esteem—much like the death instinct, a similarly speculative hypothesis, likewise rooted in "inherited endowment" and "phylogenetic heritage." Considering how the idea has been invoked to explain everything from insomnia to asthma, from pseudostupidity to mathematical genius, it is hard not to agree with Esman when he writes, apropos of the

concept's promiscuous overapplication (and reminiscent of Popper): "One is moved to wonder whether we are here confronted by one of those situations in which a theory, by explaining everything, succeeds in explaining nothing" (1973, 65). Freud himself in the "Wolfman" case, when he hesitantly veers off into considerations of the role of primal scene trauma, worries, only half-rhetorically, that "the reader's belief will abandon" him (1918, 194). Consequently he hastens to add: "But I can assure the reader that I am no less critically inclined than he towards an acceptance of this observation of the child's, and I will only ask him to join me in adopting a *provisional* belief in the reality of the scene" (1918, 196; original italics). In what follows, I suppose I would ask the same of the reader. Like I do here, Freud ultimately perseveres because of how "after a certain phase of the treatment, everything seemed to converge upon [the primal scene], . . . not only the large problems but the smallest peculiarities in the history of the case were cleared up by this single assumption" (210). Like always, the question seems to be: Does the case warrant the assumption, does making the assumption illumine the case? The question is an empirical one. Its answer follows from the cogency of the argument.

In the "Wolfman," Freud prefers to think of the primal scene as a "construction" (like some modern memory researchers, he purposely avoids the term recollection), possibly arising, if not out of actual observation, then out of infantile fantasy. He also for various reasons proposes rooting it in the perception of animal intercourse, which gets displaced on to the parents, as though the child "had inferred that his parents did things in the same way" (i.e., coitus *a tergo*). Aaron Esman (1973) in his review of the primal scene accepts a similar sort of fundamental uncertainty, and quotes Stern to the effect that "whether the primal scene is an actual occurrence or belated elaboration of sexual experiences and fantasies or dreams or a conglomeration of all these, can probably never be fully cleared up" (see Esman 1973, 64). In other words, one observes a set of behaviors or preferences which together point towards the influence of a primal scene schema, a special

model for viewing certain aspects of the world, the origin of which, however, must be uncertain.

Esman (1973) describes numerous sequelae of primal scene trauma. Among other things, the "special role of looking" in scopophilic perversions and some types of voyeurism are thought to result from primal scene fixation. Such patients may even "develop a hunger for screen experiences and attempt to master the original trauma by repeating the frightening scenes in slightly altered form" (56). Observation of sexual intercourse also strikes some children as both immensely uncanny and incomprehensible, and often gives rise to sadistic interpretations of the sex act which extend into adult life. Sound comes to take on added significance, to such a degree that a kind of sound-sensitivity or sound-phobia coupled with demands for quiet or even silence may occasionally develop.

What does all this mean for Agee, and for *FM*? I want to argue that a surprisingly large amount of the book's most peculiar content, and the form which dictates Agee's approach to the material, the way he imagines himself as some kind of "spy" or "burglar" prying into the lives of the tenants (see below), can be read as expressing obvious primal scene themes. Walker Evans describes how "Agee worked in what looked like a rush and a rage. In Alabama he was possessed with the business, jamming it all into the days and the nights. He must not have slept" (Agee and Evans 1941, xliii). One of Agee's artistic projects was to expose obscure and hidden parts of the mind. Lionel Trilling (1942) writes that Agee lost control of the book. Why? Maybe because it served a function Agee himself failed to recognize, but did, however unintentionally, reveal.

"A Special Sort of Burglar"

Throughout the course of *FM* Agee repeatedly returns the action to a collection of moments (perhaps, phenomenologically, the same moment) inside the Gudger household, during which he grows acutely sensitive to sounds and movements

taking place in the Gudger bedroom. At one point Agee writes that "if I were but to section and lift away a part of this so thin shell and protection of a wall, there they would be as in a surgery, or a medical drawing, the brain beneath the lifted, so light helmet of the skull, the deep-chambered, powerful and so vulnerable, so delicately ruined, emboweled, most vital organs" (69). Other times Agee speaks of "shuffling; and a twisting in beds, and grumbling of weak springs" (58); of further "twisting on springs and extension of a body" (72); and of having a "not quite sensory knowledge of a sort of suspiration . . . as if I were in each 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). Weirdly enough, Agee spends an extraordinary amount of time establishing a commitment to, as he puts it, "meditating those who sleep just beyond the wall" (422) in order to, somehow, from a protective distance, discover the "nearly holy mystery" of their so often silent, even wordless lives.

When Agee meditates over the next room, he always places himself behind the "protection" of the partition of a wall, blocked off from too close contact: He needs to know what is happening there, but not too directly. The medical metaphor makes sense, in that it distances Agee from the emotional impact of what he considers. His investigation is compared to surgery, to a medical drawing. Nevertheless, the wall remains a "great tragic poem" (204), a whole universe unto itself, with condensed emotional significance. Agee is "in" each of these bodies behind the wall, but, gratefully, they are untouchable, out of any reach save that of the imagination.

At length Agee comes to explicit consideration of the nature of intercourse in such a squalid and tight-spaced environment. In a sub-section named "The beds," Agee presents a discouraging portrait of tenant lovemaking:

> The beds are insecure enough in their joints that motions of the body must be gentle, balanced, and to some extent thought out beforehand. The mattresses and springs are loud, each in a different way, to any motion . . . the whole family sleeps in this one room . . .

> the partition is very thin. . . . Even if there were no children, such parents are limited enough that they are deeply embarrassed and disturbed by noises coming of any sexual context and betraying it. . . . On these beds, however, and among their children, they get whatever sexual good they ever have of each other, as noiselessly and with as little movement as possible. (175)

Later in the same larger section on shelter, Agee returns to the topic of intercourse, remarking that "the beds, the bedding, and the vermin are such a crime against sex and the need of rest as no sadistic genius could much improve on" (210). Read in light of Agee's brooding fascination about the "next room," that holy mystery transacted on the opposing side of the partition wall, these considerations of tenant intercourse take on added meaning, for it would seem that they may conceivably constitute the focal point of Agee's earlier imaginings. In fact, in a section of the book entitled "Colon," devoted to a detailed analysis of human form from conception to death, Agee, in discussing the role parents play in a child's ultimate constitution, writes of the "ghastly influence of their lovelessness, their lack of knowledge, hope or chance, how to love, what is joy, why they are locked together here: his repeated witness of the primal act, that battling and brutality upon a bed which from his pallet on the floor of the same room he lifts his head and hears and sees and fears and is torn open by. . ." (109). The "he" of this passage refers to the generic tenant child. Or does it? In an earlier section of the book Agee strongly identifies with these children, writing not only that he preferred sleeping on a pallet "because the children were sleeping on pallets" (225), but also that, as Agee puts it, "it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it . . . so that I know almost the dreams they will not remember" (58).

Agee recalls elements of his own childhood too, some anxious and shameful, all elicited by the environment of the

Gudger home. Once, "while the house is left alone," and Agee is "being made witness to matters no human being may see" (136), he remembers how "in hot early puberty, realizing myself left alone the whole of a cavernous and gloomed afternoon in my grandfather's large unsentineled home, I would be taken at the pit of the stomach with a most bitter, criminal gliding and cold serpent restiveness, and would wander from vacant room to vacant room examining into every secrecy. . ." (136). That adolescent afternoon, Agee "permitted nothing to escape the fingering of [his] senses nor the insulting of the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire" which was upon him (137). "It is not entirely otherwise now," Agee remarks while alone inside the empty Gudger house, save for the fact that Agee now feels "no open sexual desire, no restiveness, nor despair: but the quietly triumphant vigilance of the extended senses before an intricate task of surgery . . ." (137), as well as "complete casualness." Again, the distancing metaphor of surgery. Yet his demurral is unpersuasive, for a similar, maybe even identical recollection occurs later, while Agee finds himself pulled towards the Gudger home. He fantasizes listening

> hours long in the terrible space and enlargement of silence, . . . and I, this eleven-year-old, male, half-shaped child, pressing between the sharp hip bone and the floor my erection, . . . sullen and sick, nearly crying, striking over and over again the heel of my bruised hand against the sooty floor and sweating and shaking my head in a sexual and murderous anger and despair: and the thought of my grandfather, whose home this now was, and of his house itself, and each member of his family, and of all I knew so keenly and could never say and of those I did damage to, . . . all at once had me so powerfully by the root of the throat that I wished I might never have been born. . . . (380)

In several obvious respects, then, writing *FM* led Agee to reflect on early sexuality and childhood, usually while meditating over the Gudger home. Coincidentally, while working on

FM Agee also made plans to write "a new type of sex book" devoted to "as complete as possible a record and analysis of personal experience from early childhood on, and of everything seen heard learned or suspected on the subject; analyses and extensions of the significance and power of sex and of sexual deception; with all available examples" (Agee 1970, 158). Since that book was never written, at least in the above form, and considering how the idea was on Agee's mind while writing *FM*, it seems possible that much of his planned analysis of early childhood sexuality found its way into the tenant book instead, in relatively free-associated fits of recollection like those quoted above.

In the final section of *FM*, "On the porch: 3," the theme of the primal scene becomes even more evident. At this point Agee is alone in Birmingham, having taken a few days off and gone his separate way from Evans, yet he finds himself inexplicably pulled back to the country and the Gudger home. Here the writing is for once uninterrupted, and the entire section is filled with self-horror, desire, and sexual shame. Agee realizes he is attracted to Louise, the Gudgers' ten-year-old daughter. He describes the "intense sleaziness" of her dress's cloth, the "animal litheness" of her country body. He notes how he is "liable to trembling" when in the same room with Louise, and writes that he finds the whole experience to be "scary as hell, and even more mysterious than frightening" (367–368). Later, Agee confesses that he is in love with Louise—"with such a vibration increasing between us as drove me half unconscious"—and that although he needs her liking, he nevertheless feels as if he ought to protect her from himself (400–401).

Next, Agee recognizes that he needs, more than anything, a "piece of tail," and recalls a whore whom he had spoken with earlier during the trip. He imagines taking her to a "squeeling," "iron," "discouraging" bed, much like the tenants', and finding her body heavy and sour, while she grunts lines like "got it in good, honey, and, sock it to me . . ." (376).

Agee drives towards the Gudgers', still "thinking of the girl," and asking himself: "Who the hell am I." He writes that "I could put my foot to the floor right now and when it had built up every possible bit of speed I could twist the car off the road,

if possible into a good-sized oak, and the chances are fair that I would kill myself, and I don't care much. . ." (384). (The similarities to his father's death, by car wreck, are obvious.) He speaks of his "tragic, bitched" family, curses Genius and Works of Art, and tells the reader who in response to this tirade diagnoses a "bad case of infantilism": "And fuck you, too" (385).

At last, aided by Ricketts (another farmer) and his children, Agee reaches the "holy" Gudger home, quiet as a "bull waiting the hammer" (394). He is tremendously concerned that he is disturbing them, that he has no right there, that they "must likely be in bed," and becomes aware of "a vigilant and shameless hope that—not that I shall move forward and request you, disorder you—but that something shall happen" (411). He moves to the porch "shamefacedly," "feeling disgusted." He says, "I have lost hold of the reality of all this" (414). Even so, it is here, after finally finding his way back into the Gudger home, that Agee achieves his fundamental insight: ". . . the feeling increased upon me that at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long as it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home . . . these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents . . . and all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing on earth." As this recognition concludes, Agee speaks "of a brief truancy into the sources of [his] life" (415).

Mrs. Gudger cooks Agee some food which he shamefully eats, and the children are roused from sleep so Agee can use their pallet. He "buttons" his door that leads into the Gudger bedroom, and looks at the light under their door and through the seams in the wall, and listens to the rustling of cloth and the soundings of bedsprings. For the final time Agee imagines intercourse in the bedbug-infested beds. He cannot sleep because of the sharp piercings of the bugs all along the surface of his body, and so he walks, entirely naked, to the outside of the house, where he feels "lawless and lustful to be naked, and at the same time weak": "like a special sort of burglar" (426). Finally, when morning comes, Agee observes how the wall of

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The Primal Scene

Aspects of the form and content of *FM* can be rewardingly read in light of what Edelheit (1971) once called the "primal scene schema," an unconsciously applied paradigm which preselects perceptual data, and determines the imagery of certain socially pervasive fantasies. Adler liked to refer to how a person's "spectacles" determine what he sees. In this case, Agee's spectacles led him to imagine in the squalor of the tenants' lives a constellating metaphor or "script" best described with reference to primal scene imagery. Before making the case for the usefulness of such a script for illuminating *FM*, two preliminary theoretical questions need attention. First, is it possible, or necessary, to establish the material and/or psychological reality of the primal scene? And second, how might the primal scene schema express itself in a work of imagination, and in a life?

It's no secret that Freud's primal scene concept is generally held in low esteem—much like the death instinct, a similarly speculative hypothesis, likewise rooted in "inherited endowment" and "phylogenetic heritage." Considering how the idea has been invoked to explain everything from insomnia to asthma, from pseudostupidity to mathematical genius, it is hard not to agree with Esman when he writes, apropos of the

concept's promiscuous overapplication (and reminiscent of Popper): "One is moved to wonder whether we are here confronted by one of those situations in which a theory, by explaining everything, succeeds in explaining nothing" (1973, 65). Freud himself in the "Wolfman" case, when he hesitantly veers off into considerations of the role of primal scene trauma, worries, only half-rhetorically, that "the reader's belief will abandon" him (1918, 194). Consequently he hastens to add: "But I can assure the reader that I am no less critically inclined than he towards an acceptance of this observation of the child's, and I will only ask him to join me in adopting a *provisional* belief in the reality of the scene" (1918, 196; original italics). In what follows, I suppose I would ask the same of the reader. Like I do here, Freud ultimately perseveres because of how "after a certain phase of the treatment, everything seemed to converge upon [the primal scene], . . . not only the large problems but the smallest peculiarities in the history of the case were cleared up by this single assumption" (210). Like always, the question seems to be: Does the case warrant the assumption, does making the assumption illumine the case? The question is an empirical one. Its answer follows from the cogency of the argument.

In the "Wolfman," Freud prefers to think of the primal scene as a "construction" (like some modern memory researchers, he purposely avoids the term recollection), possibly arising, if not out of actual observation, then out of infantile fantasy. He also for various reasons proposes rooting it in the perception of animal intercourse, which gets displaced on to the parents, as though the child "had inferred that his parents did things in the same way" (i.e., coitus *a tergo*). Aaron Esman (1973) in his review of the primal scene accepts a similar sort of fundamental uncertainty, and quotes Stern to the effect that "whether the primal scene is an actual occurrence or belated elaboration of sexual experiences and fantasies or dreams or a conglomeration of all these, can probably never be fully cleared up" (see Esman 1973, 64). In other words, one observes a set of behaviors or preferences which together point towards the influence of a primal scene schema, a special

model for viewing certain aspects of the world, the origin of which, however, must be uncertain.

Esman (1973) describes numerous sequelae of primal scene trauma. Among other things, the "special role of looking" in scopophilic perversions and some types of voyeurism are thought to result from primal scene fixation. Such patients may even "develop a hunger for screen experiences and attempt to master the original trauma by repeating the frightening scenes in slightly altered form" (56). Observation of sexual intercourse also strikes some children as both immensely uncanny and incomprehensible, and often gives rise to sadistic interpretations of the sex act which extend into adult life. Sound comes to take on added significance, to such a degree that a kind of sound-sensitivity or sound-phobia coupled with demands for quiet or even silence may occasionally develop.

What does all this mean for Agee, and for *FM*? I want to argue that a surprisingly large amount of the book's most peculiar content, and the form which dictates Agee's approach to the material, the way he imagines himself as some kind of "spy" or "burglar" prying into the lives of the tenants (see below), can be read as expressing obvious primal scene themes. Walker Evans describes how "Agee worked in what looked like a rush and a rage. In Alabama he was possessed with the business, jamming it all into the days and the nights. He must not have slept" (Agee and Evans 1941, xliii). One of Agee's artistic projects was to expose obscure and hidden parts of the mind. Lionel Trilling (1942) writes that Agee lost control of the book. Why? Maybe because it served a function Agee himself failed to recognize, but did, however unintentionally, reveal.

"A Special Sort of Burglar"

Throughout the course of *FM* Agee repeatedly returns the action to a collection of moments (perhaps, phenomenologically, the same moment) inside the Gudger household, during which he grows acutely sensitive to sounds and movements

taking place in the Gudger bedroom. At one point Agee writes that "if I were but to section and lift away a part of this so thin shell and protection of a wall, there they would be as in a surgery, or a medical drawing, the brain beneath the lifted, so light helmet of the skull, the deep-chambered, powerful and so vulnerable, so delicately ruined, emboweled, most vital organs" (69). Other times Agee speaks of "shuffling; and a twisting in beds, and grumbling of weak springs" (58); of further "twisting on springs and extension of a body" (72); and of having a "not quite sensory knowledge of a sort of suspiration . . . as if I were in each 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). Weirdly enough, Agee spends an extraordinary amount of time establishing a commitment to, as he puts it, "meditating those who sleep just beyond the wall" (422) in order to, somehow, from a protective distance, discover the "nearly holy mystery" of their so often silent, even wordless lives.

When Agee meditates over the next room, he always places himself behind the "protection" of the partition of a wall, blocked off from too close contact: He needs to know what is happening there, but not too directly. The medical metaphor makes sense, in that it distances Agee from the emotional impact of what he considers. His investigation is compared to surgery, to a medical drawing. Nevertheless, the wall remains a "great tragic poem" (204), a whole universe unto itself, with condensed emotional significance. Agee is "in" each of these bodies behind the wall, but, gratefully, they are untouchable, out of any reach save that of the imagination.

At length Agee comes to explicit consideration of the nature of intercourse in such a squalid and tight-spaced environment. In a sub-section named "The beds," Agee presents a discouraging portrait of tenant lovemaking:

> The beds are insecure enough in their joints that motions of the body must be gentle, balanced, and to some extent thought out beforehand. The mattresses and springs are loud, each in a different way, to any motion . . . the whole family sleeps in this one room . . .

> the partition is very thin. . . . Even if there were no children, such parents are limited enough that they are deeply embarrassed and disturbed by noises coming of any sexual context and betraying it. . . . On these beds, however, and among their children, they get whatever sexual good they ever have of each other, as noiselessly and with as little movement as possible. (175)

Later in the same larger section on shelter, Agee returns to the topic of intercourse, remarking that "the beds, the bedding, and the vermin are such a crime against sex and the need of rest as no sadistic genius could much improve on" (210). Read in light of Agee's brooding fascination about the "next room," that holy mystery transacted on the opposing side of the partition wall, these considerations of tenant intercourse take on added meaning, for it would seem that they may conceivably constitute the focal point of Agee's earlier imaginings. In fact, in a section of the book entitled "Colon," devoted to a detailed analysis of human form from conception to death, Agee, in discussing the role parents play in a child's ultimate constitution, writes of the "ghastly influence of their lovelessness, their lack of knowledge, hope or chance, how to love, what is joy, why they are locked together here: his repeated witness of the primal act, that battling and brutality upon a bed which from his pallet on the floor of the same room he lifts his head and hears and sees and fears and is torn open by. . ." (109). The "he" of this passage refers to the generic tenant child. Or does it? In an earlier section of the book Agee strongly identifies with these children, writing not only that he preferred sleeping on a pallet "because the children were sleeping on pallets" (225), but also that, as Agee puts it, "it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own shape and weight and self, but that of each of them, the whole of it . . . so that I know almost the dreams they will not remember" (58).

Agee recalls elements of his own childhood too, some anxious and shameful, all elicited by the environment of the

Gudger home. Once, "while the house is left alone," and Agee is "being made witness to matters no human being may see" (136), he remembers how "in hot early puberty, realizing myself left alone the whole of a cavernous and gloomed afternoon in my grandfather's large unsentineled home, I would be taken at the pit of the stomach with a most bitter, criminal gliding and cold serpent restiveness, and would wander from vacant room to vacant room examining into every secrecy. . ." (136). That adolescent afternoon, Agee "permitted nothing to escape the fingering of [his] senses nor the insulting of the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire" which was upon him (137). "It is not entirely otherwise now," Agee remarks while alone inside the empty Gudger house, save for the fact that Agee now feels "no open sexual desire, no restiveness, nor despair: but the quietly triumphant vigilance of the extended senses before an intricate task of surgery . . ." (137), as well as "complete casualness." Again, the distancing metaphor of surgery. Yet his demurral is unpersuasive, for a similar, maybe even identical recollection occurs later, while Agee finds himself pulled towards the Gudger home. He fantasizes listening

> hours long in the terrible space and enlargement of silence, . . . and I, this eleven-year-old, male, half-shaped child, pressing between the sharp hip bone and the floor my erection, . . . sullen and sick, nearly crying, striking over and over again the heel of my bruised hand against the sooty floor and sweating and shaking my head in a sexual and murderous anger and despair: and the thought of my grandfather, whose home this now was, and of his house itself, and each member of his family, and of all I knew so keenly and could never say and of those I did damage to, . . . all at once had me so powerfully by the root of the throat that I wished I might never have been born. . . . (380)

In several obvious respects, then, writing *FM* led Agee to reflect on early sexuality and childhood, usually while meditating over the Gudger home. Coincidentally, while working on

FM Agee also made plans to write "a new type of sex book" devoted to "as complete as possible a record and analysis of personal experience from early childhood on, and of everything seen heard learned or suspected on the subject; analyses and extensions of the significance and power of sex and of sexual deception; with all available examples" (Agee 1970, 158). Since that book was never written, at least in the above form, and considering how the idea was on Agee's mind while writing *FM*, it seems possible that much of his planned analysis of early childhood sexuality found its way into the tenant book instead, in relatively free-associated fits of recollection like those quoted above.

In the final section of *FM*, "On the porch: 3," the theme of the primal scene becomes even more evident. At this point Agee is alone in Birmingham, having taken a few days off and gone his separate way from Evans, yet he finds himself inexplicably pulled back to the country and the Gudger home. Here the writing is for once uninterrupted, and the entire section is filled with self-horror, desire, and sexual shame. Agee realizes he is attracted to Louise, the Gudgers' ten-year-old daughter. He describes the "intense sleaziness" of her dress's cloth, the "animal litheness" of her country body. He notes how he is "liable to trembling" when in the same room with Louise, and writes that he finds the whole experience to be "scary as hell, and even more mysterious than frightening" (367–368). Later, Agee confesses that he is in love with Louise—"with such a vibration increasing between us as drove me half unconscious"—and that although he needs her liking, he nevertheless feels as if he ought to protect her from himself (400–401).

Next, Agee recognizes that he needs, more than anything, a "piece of tail," and recalls a whore whom he had spoken with earlier during the trip. He imagines taking her to a "squeeling," "iron," "discouraging" bed, much like the tenants', and finding her body heavy and sour, while she grunts lines like "got it in good, honey, and, sock it to me . . ." (376).

Agee drives towards the Gudgers', still "thinking of the girl," and asking himself: "Who the hell am I." He writes that "I could put my foot to the floor right now and when it had built up every possible bit of speed I could twist the car off the road,

if possible into a good-sized oak, and the chances are fair that I would kill myself, and I don't care much. . ." (384). (The similarities to his father's death, by car wreck, are obvious.) He speaks of his "tragic, bitched" family, curses Genius and Works of Art, and tells the reader who in response to this tirade diagnoses a "bad case of infantilism": "And fuck you, too" (385).

At last, aided by Ricketts (another farmer) and his children, Agee reaches the "holy" Gudger home, quiet as a "bull waiting the hammer" (394). He is tremendously concerned that he is disturbing them, that he has no right there, that they "must likely be in bed," and becomes aware of "a vigilant and shameless hope that—not that I shall move forward and request you, disorder you—but that something shall happen" (411). He moves to the porch "shamefacedly," "feeling disgusted." He says, "I have lost hold of the reality of all this" (414). Even so, it is here, after finally finding his way back into the Gudger home, that Agee achieves his fundamental insight: ". . . the feeling increased upon me that at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long as it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home . . . these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents . . . and all that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing on earth." As this recognition concludes, Agee speaks "of a brief truancy into the sources of [his] life" (415).

Mrs. Gudger cooks Agee some food which he shamefully eats, and the children are roused from sleep so Agee can use their pallet. He "buttons" his door that leads into the Gudger bedroom, and looks at the light under their door and through the seams in the wall, and listens to the rustling of cloth and the soundings of bedsprings. For the final time Agee imagines intercourse in the bedbug-infested beds. He cannot sleep because of the sharp piercings of the bugs all along the surface of his body, and so he walks, entirely naked, to the outside of the house, where he feels "lawless and lustful to be naked, and at the same time weak": "like a special sort of burglar" (426). Finally, when morning comes, Agee observes how the wall of

the Gudger bedroom is "slit with yellow light, only with a deep and gentle sorrow, in some memory out of childhood which now seemed restored like the ghost of one beloved and dead" (428).

It's difficult to read content like the above and *not* wonder about primal scene imagery. Agee at several points strongly identifies with the tenant children, imagining himself inside their bodies, dreaming the dreams they will not remember; he fantasizes the Gudgers to be his "own parents," their home his own home, packed with ghostlike memories out of his own childhood. When Agee writes of the hypothetical tenant child experiencing and being "torn open by" that "battling and brutality" upon a bed, he is writing, at least in terms of his various identifications, of himself: He is those children, those are his parents, that "pallet" is his bed, his place for the night. This interpretation also accounts for Agee's insistence upon the primal mystery of the next room, the "tragic poem" of the partition wall which "protects" him, and for his repeated and interruptive ruminations regarding the shame of his early sexuality, always elicited by the rich stimulus of the Gudger home. More evidence exists, as well, and will be considered in turn below. The gist of this section, however, has been to demonstrate how portions of the book's content can, in detail, be traced to the primal scene schema, and to Agee's various projective identifications arising out of it.[2]

Agee's letters to Walker Evans (HRHRC) reveal the fact that he was reading Freud at the same time that he wrote *FM*. Given the similarities between Agee's description of the primal scene—that "battling and brutality upon a bed" that the child "fears and is torn open by"—and the Freudian depictions outlined above, it's worth pausing to ask whether Agee's inclusion of primal scene imagery is intentional (conscious), and thus more or less intellectual, or spontaneously chosen and unconscious. While one can't answer with any degree of certainty (Agee writes that he was reading Freud, but neglects to mention which book), it nevertheless seems unlikely that Agee, in order to get some understanding of Freud, would tackle the case of the "Wolfman." That book, the primary source for Freud's ideas concerning primal scene phenomena,

was made available in English in 1925, through Freud's *Collected Papers.* Of course, other superficial primal scene references are scattered throughout Freud's writings—such as "The Interpretation of Dreams"—so Agee may have picked up ideas from books other than the "Wolfman" case history. He lists Freud as an "unpaid agitator" (along with Blake, Jesus Christ, and others) at the beginning of *FM,* thereby telling us, at the very least, that the book is fueled to some degree by thoughts relating to sexuality and the revealing of the unconscious. Which thoughts? Again, it's hard to say. Most of the textual evidence to follow is based on primal scene writings that postdate *FM* by nearly twenty-five years, so the entire question might be pointless. In any case, regardless of the degree of consciousness or unconsciousness involved in Agee's invocation of primal scene allegory, the allegory is there, in his work and, as we shall see later, in his life as well. If the insertion of this allegory were entirely intentional, my thesis would go unchanged: The primal scene served as an active construct in Agee's mental life.

Sound and Silence, Pain and Pleasure

FM is also notable for its painstaking analyses of qualities of sound and silence. In fact, in a book called *American Silences* J.A. Ward argues that all of Agee's works express an "aesthetic of silence," and that the notion of silence, so persistent and occasionally even obtrusive, is "integral to [Agee's] most fundamental purposes as a writer" (1981, 80). As Ward sees it, *FM* organizes itself around a pattern of "originary" silence, silence painfully disturbed, and silence at last restored.

Agee himself might very well agree. He speaks of dividing the book up into four planes, the first of which depends on a theme of "silence under darkness" to which from time to time the action may return.[3] Moreover, he insists in the preface to the book that the text was written with reading aloud in mind, and that the reader attend with his ear to what he takes off the page, because otherwise much of the sensory significance of the book will go unappreciated. *FM* seems as auditorily based

as a book can be, with many of its subtler dynamics being, as Agee puts it, "particularly unavailable to the eye alone" (Preface, xlvii).

Perhaps the most provocative paper on the influence of primal scene trauma is William Niederland's (1958) examination of early auditory experiences and beating fantasies, and their possible later relation to primal scene exposure. In Niederland's view, beating fantasies have at their core latent primal scene trauma; the primal scene and the beating fantasy often merge in the psyche with very early, "bad," chaotic sounds left over from a primitive stage of ego development during which noise was something material, threatening, devouring (see also Kohut and Leverie 1950).

To Niederland (1958), then, sounds come to represent physical disruptions, things entering the body; hearing them is tantamount to being beaten, a theme Niederland refers to as the regressive "substantiality of sound" (500). In cases of primal scene trauma, one might expect to encounter in the writer evidence of heightened auditory vigilance, and an equation of sound with pain and/or physical threat or disruption. The soothing of silence ought to be emphasized in contradistinction to the ego-threatening substantiality of "bad" sound.

Just as Agee intended it, *FM* is packed full with sound. As he professes in a letter to Father Flye (1962), he wants more than anything else to "write symphonies" (47), to inject into his writing the tonal nuance of symphonic arrangement, every "instrument" contributing to an overall experience exceeding the contributions of its constituent parts. "Prose holds you down from the possibility of such music," Agee declares in 1930. But, ironically, in the melodious prose of *FM* Agee seems to realize his so to speak "symphonic" aims. Repeatedly he explores the musicality of things. Words at Mass are "thrilling brooks of music" (89). There is more beauty in the spacings of furniture on a floor than in "any music ever made" (134). Patterns of wood are like "curled music" (143) and "wild fugues" (145). The four rooms of the Gudger house are balanced "in a chord" which arrests the heart (184). At one point Agee goes so far as to assert that "It could also be said of

'problem' art that severe and otherwise insolvable human and spiritual problems are solved in every performance of, or for that matter in the silent existence of, Beethoven's Quartet Opus 131" (231).

John Hersey, in introducing the 1988 edition of *FM*, also notices Agee's intensified relationship to sound. When Agee spoke, according to Hersey, "No one else got many words in. He talked with both his tongue and his hands. It seemed that for this person words had not only sound and meaning but physical weight, volume, and shape" (vi). Later, Hersey remarks that "tones of light and dark in the visible world had always seemed to his delicate sensibility almost audible, and in [*FM*] he strove through the sounds and meanings of words to mimic—no, more than mimic, achieve—photography" (xxviii).

But sound is, for Agee, much more complicated than just this. Mixed in with Agee's synesthetic sensibilities, and with his holy reverence for silence (he disliked the talkies and worshipped the aesthetic purity of still photography; see Agee 1969), is a sometimes startling equation of sound with harshness, pain, or even physical violence. In fact, *FM* is riddled with this eerie conflation; passage after passage works its way towards detailed considerations of sound and its tendency to shock, harm, and injure.

To begin with, Agee concludes his introduction to *FM* with what Hersey (1988) describes as this "spooky" admonition to the reader:

> Get a radio or phonograph capable of the most extreme loudness possible, and sit down to listen to a peformance of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or of Schubert's C-Major Symphony. But I don't mean just sit down and listen. I mean this: Turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there, breathing as lightly as possible, and not moving. . . . Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it. As near as you will ever get, you are inside the music; not only inside it, you are it; your body is no

> longer your shape and substance, it is the shape and substance of the music.
>
> Is what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? or acceptable in polite or any other society? It is beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life as human life is; and nothing can equal the rape it does on all that death. . . . (16)

Agee uses this example to illustrate how true art differs from what we call and conceive of and "absorb" as Art. The former is dangerous, shocking, subversive; the latter is tame, sterile, acceptable and, as Agee puts it, "castrated" (15). Castration follows from acceptance, in fact. Once "furies on earth" become Art, Agee claims, they lose the power of their true intention—to challenge, provoke, disarm. Therefore, get a phonograph and experience what Beethoven is truly about, what savagery and danger drive his music. Only then will you know the truth.

The passage also brings to mind Niederland's (1958) notion of sound as substance, as material disruption. The music pains you. It is savage and dangerous and murderous. Your body is not your own, but the shape and substance of the music itself. "You won't hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it."

In "Colon," one of the odder sections of the book, Agee examines sensation. As to the "five or twenty known human senses," Agee writes that their "taking" is "titanic beyond exhaustion of count or valuation," and that even those impressions which we do not recognize, nor hold in focus, are "nevertheless and continuously and strengthfully planted upon our brains, upon our blood" (105). Agee regards sensory impressions as "sharp" or "fierce" "lacerations," "damagements," "equations of destruction," "bonebiting traps" (106–107). He writes: "Each blown leaf of a woodland a quarter-mile distant registers, cuts its mark . . . and with each iteration the little cut is a little distincter, a little deeper, a little more of a scar" (106). Sound (or, for that matter, any conspiracy of sense impression) inflicts severe pain. Even the smallest impressions "cut their mark."[4]

Agee begins this "Colon" section with the statement: "There must be an end to this ["this" being a lengthy discussion of the tenants' work]: a sharp end and a clean silence" (99). Silence, in other words, is "clean" and calming. It brings an end to the pain of experience. The section immediately preceding this beginning sentence is, less parenthetically, devoted to a detailed account of lumber work. Here again Agee sustains a focus on sound: a work whistle turns the air into "one rich reeking shriek," and the whistle is then "cut off like a murder," leaving the clearing "weak with silence" (94). Passages like the above serve as the book's leitmotif, so to speak. As Ward would have it, piercing sound tends to elicit soothing silence.

One final section deserves mention in this context. Early on in *FM* Agee and Evans encounter a group of negro singers who, after being cruelly cajoled by their white boss, sing a song. Agee describes their voices as "jagged, tortured, stony, accented as if by hammers and cold chisels . . . , the harmonies constantly splitting the nerves" (29). The tenor is "screeching," his hands "clenching and loosening" in reaction against his own horrible sound. Then the group is "abruptly silent, totally wooden" (29). Shortly thereafter, while Agee asks an asthmatic for directions, the man rushes suddenly up behind him, "fiercely" calling "awnk, awnk," tugging at Agee's sleeve, "cradling his head like a piece of heavy machinery, while grinding passionate noises run in his throat" (36). Agee looks back to find the man "on the dirt on his hands coughing like a gorilla" (37). A little while later, as one of the tenant daughters leaves to marry an older man whom the family is unsure about, the quiet goodbye gets disrupted by the sound of a car's engine, which "snaps and coughs and catches and levels on a white hot moistureless and thin metal roar, and with a dreadful rending noise that brings up the heads of cattle a quarter of a mile away" (68. One finds a similar passage on a car starting up in Agee's *A Death in the Family*. It's worth recalling that Agee's father died in a one car accident after driving off in the middle of the night). Mixed within and around all this, dogs bellow balefully (75), roosters call in "rending" triumph with the brusqueness of an epileptic seizure (86), whistles vibrate the

sunlight with their "rending" shrieks (94), shuffling feet are scrapes on silence (380), voices are embarrassingly loud and sick to hear (380), and the world seems one bitter cacophany, piercing and inescapable. All these blistering sensations get answered by what Agee at one point calls "the utter scorn and denial of silence" (84), a "holiness of silence" which he feels he can succeed in not disturbing by being utterly quiet. Unsurprisingly, Agee in the last pages of the book finally becomes "one hollow and listening ear."

Statements of Intent

Various analyses of *FM* make much of Agee calling himself a "spy," a "special sort of burglar," a "disembodied consciousness" invading the homes of the tenant families (see Bergreen 1984; Spears and Cassidy 1985). Bergreen (1984) finds the metaphor particularly meaningful, indicative of underlying moral concerns about the project, and of a "cunning" and "prying" investigative bent. Others disagree. Spears and Cassidy (1985), for instance, diminish the importance of the spy characterization. In their view, it isn't at all "sinister"; it ought not be taken literally; and it probably represents just one more example of Agee's tendency towards melodramatic overstatement. In other words, it isn't worth interpreting. Since this debate goes to the core of the book—the question of how Agee saw himself as researcher of tenant life—coming to some decision about the significance of the spy metaphor seems necessary. Is it *really* rich in connotation, a sort of overdetermined, saturated signifier, or is it utterly unsinister, yet another example of Agee's tending for going "over the top?"

FM is sprinkled with "manifestos," each rooted in questions of truth and falsity, in the idea that the artist is obligated to portray the world as it is. At one point Agee writes:

> When, in talk with a friend, you tell him, or hear from him, details of childhood, those details are perhaps even more real to you than in your solitary memory; and they

> are real and exciting to both of you in a way no form of art can be, or anyhow is. He is accepting what you say as truth, not fiction. . . . The centrally exciting and important fact, from which ramify the thousand others which otherwise would have no clear and valid existence, is: that was the way it was. What could be more moving, significant or true: every force and hidden chance in the universe has so combined that a certain thing was the way it was. (241)

To Agee, truth is more important, more moving, more monumental than any fiction the writer might see fit to invent. He aims to write of nothing which did not in physical actuality or in the mind happen or appear. He does not wish to make art or journalism of his perceptions, but to "give them as they were and as in my memory and regard they are" (242). Towards those ends, and in order to, as Agee puts it, "get the damned [book] done with," he suggests handling the experience from the vantage point of four planes: (a) that of recall, reception, and contemplation, for which Agee uses "silence under darkness" as a fore-stage in relation to which the action of the book is organized, (b) as it happened, (c) by recall and memory from the present, and (d) as the product of an intricate, multi-layered writing process which presents numerous organic obstacles to relating the experience as it truly was or is (see *FM*, 243).

On the heels of this proclamation, Agee writes:

> the "truest" thing about the experience is now neither that it was from hour to hour thus and so; nor is it my fairly accurate 'memory' of how it was from hour to hour in chronological progression; but is rather as it turns up in recall, in no such order, casting out its lights and associations forward and backward upon the then past and the then future, across that expanse of experience. (244)

Compare the above to Freud's thoughts on reconstructing primal scenes:

> It does not necessarily follow that these previously unconscious recollections are always true. They may be; but they are often distorted from the truth, and interspersed with imaginary elements, just like the so-called screen memories. . . . [Primal] scenes, like this one in my present patient's case [the "Wolfman"], which date from such an early period and exhibit a similar content, and which further lay claim to such an extraordinary significance to the history of the case, are as a rule not produced as recollections, but have to be divined—constructed—gradually and laboriously from an aggregate of indications. (Freud 1918, 51)

In the very next paragraph Agee speaks again in terms clearly Freudian, writing that "this experience" of living with and becoming close to the tenant families is deserving of unique respect because "going through, remembering, and trying to tell of anything" is of itself always especially significant. In a section devoted to the importance of chance in the creation of art, Agee proclaims: "The difference between a conjunction of time, place, and *unconscious* consciousness and a conjunction of time, place, and *conscious* consciousness is, so far as we are concerned, the difference between joy and truth and the lack of joy and truth" (226, italics mine). To Agee the unconscious apparently makes all the difference.

Read in light of the primal scene schema, other elements of *FM*'s formal intent acquire unexpected meaning. For instance, in his introduction Agee spells out the cruel irony of the project—two men being sent by a wealthy mouthpiece of the rich to "pry into" the squalid, undefended lives of the rural poor. He reports on how the tenants were "dwelt among, investigated, spied upon, revered, and loved, by other quite monstrously alien human beings" (12). He calls his work here "obscene," "thoroughly terrifying," "extremely corrupt." He admits that "it is in some fear that I approach these matters at all, and in much confusion. . . . All of this, I repeat, seems to me curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious" (8). At one level Agee seems to be referring to the kind of heartless, shameless, blameless prying which constitutes the

essence of journalism, reportage being, in Agee's mind, nothing but a "broad and successful form of lying" (235). But beyond just that, the extremeness of Agee's language suggests an unconsciously-motivated guilt. His final description ("All of this, I repeat, seems . . . ") reads like a literal reconstruction of a child's reaction to a primal scene—curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious.

To Agee there is no question but that he and Evans "acted as spies, guardians, cheats." The tenants were "dwelt among, investigated, spied on," the effort being to "perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is" (11). Elsewhere Agee employs an alternate spy metaphor, referring to himself as a "disembodied consciousness" or a "bodyless eye." In a section of the book titled (suggestively) "In the Front Bedroom: The Signal," a wasp floats around a room where, only the night before, Agee had listened to the dialogue of "two creatures of darkness" (187). This wasp reappears later in yet another sexual context, spreading its "nervous noise" above a bed on which Agee fantasizes screwing a "heavy, sour, and wet" whore (376). The wasp observes sexual episodes—he hovers unseen in the rooms of lovers.

And so a need to see, that "appetite for looking," clarifies Agee's use of the spy motif. He speaks of a "method of research" characterized by guilt, stealth, and danger, which recalls the styles of investigation Freud depicted in his book on Leonardo, the first modern psychobiography. One such type takes the form of "compulsive brooding, naturally in a distorted and unfree fashion, but sufficiently powerful to sexualize thinking itself and to color intellectual operations with the pleasure and anxiety that belong to sexual processes proper. Here investigation becomes a sexual activity, often the exclusive one, and the feeling that comes from settling things in one's mind and explaining them replaces sexual satisfaction" (Freud 1964, 30). This drive to know—the urge to explain, understand, settle—lends meaning to the "unfathomable mystery" lying at the heart of *FM*, informing the sexual eruptions that occur throughout the book, its shameful recollections of adolescent sexuality, its fantasies of making a whore. Agee's relentless investigation seems sexual in origin, rooted in the

infantile researches of childhood, where the primal scene plays such a centrally significant role.

Love, and Sex, and the Shotgun

At points Agee goes out of his way to speak on the topic of love. Sometimes he focuses on what he sees to be the damaged, tortured love of the generic tenant worker, the bodily sort approached as just another form of labor. Other times he speaks in more intimate terms, as though he were expressing his own personal ideas, idiosyncratic recollections of love as it occurred in his own life. In either case, love, in Agee's eyes, most often gets represented as a visceral "damagement," a wound—as, quite often, does life itself. Agee most certainly was capable of honest, spontaneous, even religious reactions of love and care—towards people and the world itself. He was, to all who knew him, unusually empathic, caring, generous, and constitutionally incapable of cruelty. Yet in the pages of *FM*, his vision of love in the abstract seems painfully ambivalent, tremendously pessimistic. Perhaps out of pity, or out of the hope that things might be otherwise, Agee describes love as the ultimate pain, cruel and bitter beyond the scope of words to capture.

His first direct reference to love is in relation to the camera. Like in early phases of love, Agee writes, the camera traps, possesses, and fertilizes "in shyness and leisure" (39). This notion of possessive love re-emerges during one of the book's few truly clumsy passages, erupting out of nowhere, the reader unprepared for the violence of the wording. While documenting the mundane loneliness of modern life, Agee declares: "small wonder in what dry agony of despair a mother may fasten her talons and her vampire mouth upon the soul of her struggling son and drain him empty, light as a locust shell" (54).

Life itself is understood similarly. Every soul, according to Agee in *FM*, is a "new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enor-

mous assaults of the universe" (56). In defense, in self-pity, a man and woman, "in a loneliness they are not liable at that time to notice, are tightened together upon a bed" (56). But even this purely bodily defense against the inherent pain of living courts danger and violence. Agee imagines one of the tenant wives' dreams—"She is dreaming now, with fear, of a shotgun: George [her husband] has directed it upon her; and there is no trigger" (77). Love may not literally kill. But it incites fear and a sense of danger, as does any gun, even when triggerless.

People in love do damage to each other. In the fraught "Colon" section, Agee speaks of the unceasing "crucifixions" required in living even the most casual life. "Here we have two," Agee writes, "each crucified, further crucify one another upon the shallow pleasure of an iron bed and instigate in a woman's belly a crucifixion of cell and whiplashed sperm . . . in this instant already his globe is rounded upon him and is his prison, which might have been his kingdom. . ." (103).

As the book reaches its finish the reader overhears a daydream recitation of Agee's fantasies as he drives to the Gudger home. At once, Agee desires a whore, a bitch, a piece of tail or "head-cheese" to anonymously and discouragingly screw. At yet another point Agee fantasizes lying in the cool shade with a tentative new girl, lazily drinking weak drinks. "This girl would have a good body in a thin, white cotton dress, and her flesh would have a talent for being cool no matter how closely you touched it. . . . And if, putting my forehead against her cold throat and feeling against my face through her dress the balance and goodness of her breasts . . . I should almost in silence cry the living blood out of myself, [and] this girl would not only know what it was about but would know that in the only way I would stand for anyone to know it, and we would still be companions in the fall of the afternoon. . ." (383). The point is to show the split in Agee's view—the bad girl whore, and the good girl who understands. He desires both, needs both in different ways, yet in the end can't seem to escape the fact that, with either, the only outcome is pain. As he writes on the very next page, "You never live an inch without involvement and hurting people and fucking yourself everlastingly. . . .

I wish there was no one in all my life I had ever come close enough to to harm. . ." (384). He speaks of running his car off the road and killing himself (referred to earlier), but feels that would "do Via [Agee's first wife] some bad damage, just as continuing to live with her is bound to, and just as leaving her is bound to" (384).

The pain of love and sex is intrinsic. In a three-page free-association Agee includes in the book's appendix, the following linkages occur: "taste, serve, deserve, fault, father, mother, mummy, mumsy, mumpsypum, daddy, daddyboy, chickabiddy, comfy, cute, satisfactory, congratulations, congratters, sexual intercourse, fearful, dreadful, awful, godawful, nasty, nastiness, snotty, ghastly"; also, "mental health, decadent, depravity, amoral, amorist, unethical, act of kind, coitus, relations, been with, live with, sleep with, mistress, lover, pubes, curse, fall off the roof" (457).

Agee settles the question once and for all in *FM*'s final few pages. As he and Evans strain to hear a sound they have never heard before, originating from somewhere deep in the woods, Agee compares it to other sounds sometimes heard during a certain delicate phase of love, and then writes:

> And this phase of love, to anyone who holds love in the utmost esteem that is its due, must be beyond all comparison the cruellest and bitterest thing in human experience. Even within its own moments it draws you both irresistably into those desperate battlings of the body which only in their first few seconds seem the greater joy they are not, and which so soon blunt and blind the delicate munificence of your exchange into their own beautiful but violent, charcoal-drawn terms. (468)

The book ends soon after this declaration. As before, the primal scene schema suggests unexpected interpretive options. Agee's insistence upon sex as a "battling" (468, 109), as shameful, as an invariable producer of pain, reads like a virtual clinical illustration of the psychological effects of primal scene exposure. Obviously, much of what Agee describes above has a

wider meaning as well. His vision of love, the split in his image of Woman—each suggest conflicts extending far beyond the interpretive scope of the primal scene schema alone. Still, Agee's view of love as wound, of sex as battling, makes a primal scene based interpretation even more convincing.

An "Unlaid Ghost"

As if to underscore the psychological significance of the text, and to decipher its uncanny meaning, Agee towards the tail-end of his work on *FM* makes a very deliberate effort to put word into action. According to converging sources (personal interview, Helen Levitt 1988; Rathbone 1995; Neuman 1993; Bergreen interview with Alma Neuman—see Bergreen 1984, 238; Agee's letters to Walker Evans, HRHRC), somewhere in late 1939 Agee convinced Evans and Alma Neuman, Agee's wife at the time, to go to bed together while Agee watched and fumblingly participated, apparently intent on studying the processes of sex. Rathbone (1995) suggests that this particular "longing" may have had homosexual overtones: "At the time, [Agee's] and Evans' love for each other was perhaps stronger than either of them had for a woman, whether or not they confessed as much to each other or anyone else. Instead of consummating their relationship directly, they made their sexual connection vicariously, through women. . . " (168–69). She also notes how Agee's "incurable desire to observe while participating colored every aspect of his life and work and invaded his relationships with everyone he knew" (169). In Rathbone's opinion, this "obsessive" idea of witnessing Evans in bed with his new wife represents Agee's effort "to take a trend that had arisen unconsciously to its logical extreme" (169).

Helen Levitt (interview with the author, 1988) believes Agee arranged the match as a "poetic exercise": "It was part of his enormous love for people. He just wanted to see some evidence of two people he loved, loving each other." Agee says something similar, writing to Evans that

> I've so seldom seen any real friendliness or affection or regard, or even clarity, between people I was close to who were of opposite sexes, and have had such a damned amount of the opposite, that when it does happen I care a great deal for it. . . . All these shifts, enlargements, mutualities, and witnessings of whatever forms of desire or affection or love do such wonders for "one," meaning anyhow for me, and/or Alma, and between us, it would seem in its own way very much to substantiate and enlarge much I have already believed in or needed as important both of myself (sic) and in all relationships. (letters to Walker Evans, HRHRC)

The experience apparently left Agee guilt-ridden and emotionally devastated. Bergreen (1984) quotes an Agee letter to Evans: "I have caused each of you a certain amount of bother and am of course sorry and contemptuous of myself. . . . However much you happen to like each other, good: I am enough of an infant homosexual or postdostoevskian to be glad" (239). As Evans put it later, Agee "was blind in the heart and in the genitals" (Rathbone, 1995, 170).

Agee's peculiarly persistent effort to orchestrate this sexual event—which he apparently both watched and briefly participated in—suggests an attempt at mastery of psychological pain through the (very thinly) disguised repetition of traumatic experience. It recalls Freud's compulsion to repeat, whereby a person deliberately places himself in distressing situations, acting out an old experience without recalling the prototype (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973).[5] In this instance the unrecalled prototype—the "trend" which Rathbone (1995) feels may have arisen unconsciously—could derive from primal scene trauma which "seeks return in the present" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 78). Or, as Freud explained it: " . . . a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken" (see Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 79).

Repetitions like these typically emerge in the transference, assuming the form of behavioral re-enactments. Assuming Agee did organize portions of *FM* around models of

psychoanalytic process, it seems almost expectable that he would act out the core conflict as "treatment" drew to a close, action representing a kind of expression of memory. In the tight-spaced tenant environment, an environment that by all accounts affected Agee in a singular manner, trauma resurfaced and had reverberations which, through the content of *FM* (its investigativeness, its emphasis upon sound and silence, its descriptions of sex and love and tenant intercourse), found partial expression, and demanded real-life action.

Final Remarks

As I have implied throughout, a writer's intentions are always informed by what Barthes called "off-stage voices": that is, by the chorus of the unconscious. Agee's description of his aims jibes with certain trademark effects of a primal scene experience—he is a bodyless eye, a disembodied consciousness, a special sort of burglar prying intimately into the lives of a damaged group of human beings in order to parade their nakedness, as he put it. This prevailing self-image determined the form the book took and even drew attention to various features of content discussed above. One gets the sense that Agee felt as if he were walking on tiptoe, seeking the solution to a mystery which he only dimly recollected, and which did not in fact have anything at all to do with the tenants themselves. He brought the farmers into the fantasy, and the whole book fell in line. A prosaic account of life on the farm became, in Agee's hands, an achingly personal primitive drama. As Freud argued in the case of the "Rat Man": Fate called out a complex stimulus-word.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented before the Psychology Department at the University of California, Davis, in March 1994.

2. In another of Agee's books, the fictional *A Death in the Family*, he describes two different events that seem to have clear primal scene connotations. In one, the child Rufus, Agee's alter-ego, wakes one morning and runs down the upstairs hallway of his home, and "bursts through the open door into [his parents'] bedroom," where his mother lies alone, "propped up on two pillows as if she were sick. She looked sick, or very tired, and in her eyes she seemed to be afraid of [Rufus]." The other event takes place the day that a priest comes to the home following Rufus' father's death. The priest meets with Rufus' mother in his parents' bedroom, while Rufus listens to the conversation from outside the shut door: "[Rufus] could not conceive what was being done to his mother, but [he] was sure it was something evil, to which she was submitting almost without a struggle. . . . Rufus repeatedly saw himself flinging open the door and striding in, a big stone in his hand, and saying, 'You stop hurting my mother'" (Agee 1969, 278–79).
3. Interestingly, in a later footnote, Agee writes that night is, for some, the shaded room of the psychoanalyst, in which people talk of themselves to themselves in silence. This correspondence will be discussed in detail below; see section called "Statements of Intent."
4. It is perhaps meaningful that, while writing *FM*, Agee developed an extremely painful boil in his left ear (see letters to Walker Evans, University of Texas).
5. Erikson (1958) prefers to call this process "re-enactment," since, in his view, repetition compulsion does not allow for any sort of creative resolution. That is, for Erikson, re-enactment can represent a creative and potentially successful way of overcoming past trauma, particularly when practiced by creatively-inclined people.

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