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"Poor Naked Wretches" : The Wound of the Ordinary in James Agee and Robert Penn Warren

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In 1930 a group of twelve Southerners, in a collection of essays entitled *I'll Take My Stand*, tried to establish in their region a set of agrarian principles that were, on the face of it, counter-historical and utopian. The conservative metaphysics of the soil that underlies these essays was hardly restricted to these Nashville Agrarians. Such a metaphysics may be found, in less theoretical language, in works of Southern modernism ranging from Faulkner's paean to the mule in *Flags in the Dust* (1927) to Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's photo-essay *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). One consequence of this conservative metaphysics was, as may be seen in Ransom's poem "Antique Harvesters" (1923), that the "harvester" (Ransom's archaic term for the tenant or small farmer) became abstracted from the mechanisms of the market. It does not really matter that Ransom's harvesters raised a crop that was only a "meagre hill of kennels, a runnel of juice" (Ransom 1952, 50) because the aim of the harvester was to turn labour into a "form", a form that was comparable to the aesthetic forms of literature and manners (Ransom 1938, 30). Similarly, Andrew Lytle observed in "The Hind Tit", his contribution to the Agrarian anthology, that: "A farm is not a place to grow wealthy: it is a place to grow corn" (205). But as the Depression continued into the mid-1930s this key figure in earlier Agrarian aesthetics—the Southern farmer—began to unravel and to turn into the cotton tenant depicted in James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) or, further down the socio-economic scale, the tramp who walks off in Robert Penn Warren's short story "Blackberry Winter" (1946). Robert Penn Warren was later to say that the project of Agrarianism that began in 1930 with *I'll Take My Stand* "seemed irrelevant" by the late 1930s and he and some other Southerners now placed the farmer within the framework of an international economic crisis and chose rougher naturalisms to describe him (Warren 1980, 22).

The intention of this essay is to track this process of transmutation of "harvester" to impoverished tenant or tramp in Agee and Warren: from figure of natural or autochthonous wealth to one who was emptied out by the historical processes at work in the Depression South. Agee's strange angle of vision on agricultural life in Alabama seems especially subversive of the conservative metaphysics of the soil that prevailed in the discourses of southern modernism. Agee dissented from the Agrarian adaptation of T.S. Eliot's notion of the tradition to the South and his radicalism brought him close to being a Marxist writer. But in the end his sensuous receptiveness to creaturely life—or, put more philosophically, his overwhelming phenomenalism of the object and its "cruel radiance" (Agee 1966, 11)—prevented easy short cuts to the ideological formula. The result was a type of Southern literary radicalism that was unique to Agee, although it had certain affinities to Georges Bataille's theory of the sacred community in interwar France.

Agee came to his work on *Praise* with a certain bias toward documentary naturalism that was common in the 1930s. In this decade the appropriate mode of representation for the dispossessed "harvester" seemed that of quasi-photographic exactitude ("the camera seems to me ... the central instrument of our time", Agee said [Agee 1966, 11]). The assumption lying behind the works of the writers associated with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Farm Security Administration (FSA) was that a scrupulous documentation of poverty could be the foundation for effective state intervention. When Agee was commissioned in 1936 to undertake the cotton tenants' project by the business magazine *Fortune* he perhaps first intended to follow this path: he initially described what he was going to do to his friend Father Flye as

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“a study of Farm Economics in the South” (Agee 1962, 92). But as the project protracted itself over five years Agee found the subject matter became as sticky as a lime twig and undermined all complacencies of neutral observation. He discovered that he could no longer see the object of poverty and keep a serene liberal distance. As his epigraph in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* from *King Lear* suggests, his stance became closer to that of Lear on the heath, who saw for the first time “poor naked wretches” and was appalled by “the thing itself”, the “poor, bare, forked animal” (Agee quotes from Act 3, Scene 4 [Agee 1966, xvi]). In Agee’s description of this “thing itself” in the three tenant families of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—the Gudger, Woods, and Ricketts families—it is as though an extra protective layer has been stripped off the natural, leaving the narrator stricken, blinded, and co-opted by the sight of sacred or “wounded” poverty. It is “obscene”, Agee begins his account by saying, for the liberal reader to pry “into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings” (Agee 1966, 7). For Agee, in short, there is a difference between the neutral “thing” of naturalistic documentation and the “thing itself”, in which perception wounds the beholder. This is why mimesis always has an edge of pain in Agee’s work. He compares the effect he wants in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to that of having one’s ear jammed next to the phonograph while a record of Beethoven is playing at full volume: “You won’t hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it” (Agee 1966, 15). The power to hurt means that Agee sees the tramp or the tenant as emanating a sacred poverty rather than as belonging to a sociological classification. The tramp, Agee wrote, is the “most nearly complete among the religious figures our time has evolved” (Agee 2005, 303).

Warren’s “Blackberry Winter”, in turn, criticizes the naïve anthropology of the New Deal discourse of the “Common Man” and discloses an image of the ordinary citizen that is stained and complicit. “Blackberry Winter” is an ironic pastoral set in the Kentucky of Warren’s boyhood (around 1910) and concerns the intrusions of a sordid maturity upon the pastoral consciousness of a young farmer’s son, Seth (one lesson of the story is that the lyric, static mind of the young Seth has to grow into an involvement in plot, replacing time as simultaneity with time as succession). The principal intrusion is the figure of a nondescript tramp who turns up at the family farm after a flood and who is employed by Seth’s mother to pick up drowned chicks from the yard. Sullen and disdainful in his work, the tramp is later preemptorily dismissed by Seth’s father. Seth follows the tramp off the premises but the tramp suddenly turns on him and threatens to cut his throat if he continues. The narrator concludes: “That is what he said, for me not to follow him. But I did follow him, all the years” (150). That is to say, the narrator is held for a lifetime by a common bond with the tramp. In his exposition of the story in “Blackberry Winter: A Recollection” Warren says that Seth as narrator now recognizes that this “this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless, bitter being” is “somehow a man” (381). Although the tramp is “a creature altogether lost and pitiful”, he is “a dim image of what ... our human condition is” (379). As with the unlosable companion in Warren’s poem “Original Sin: A Short Story” (1942), it is the banality of the tramp that is his chief characteristic: it is as though in him guilt has been levelled out into a collective and insidious ordinariness.

It is clear that Warren’s story is given a special focus by being recollected in 1946, just after the end of the Second World War. One might, indeed, see the tramp of 1910 as a distant anticipation of the disintegrated mass being of the interwar years on both sides of the Atlantic: the figure that Hannah

Arendt was to call in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* the "superfluous" man (296) or the person who, lacking the mediating structures of class and institution, possesses only a bare biological life. Warren said that when he wrote the story just after the end of the Second World War he was thinking of Melville's Civil War poem "The Conflict of Convictions" (1860-1), in which Melville states that the coming conflict, regardless of the rights of each side, will reveal "the slimed foundation" of the world (Warren 1979, 378). Warren's story takes place during the flooding of a river and his tramp figure is—as it were—disinterred by the action of the river, together with carcasses of cattle and with the trash from the underside of houses. The tramp is part of the unredeemable sludge that gets stirred up by historical change. Hence the narrator's saying that he has followed the tramp for thirty-five years is Warren's admission of his lifelong possession, over the critical years 1910-1945, by figures of exposed being and that these have been now revealed, by recent world war, at the "slimed foundation".

At the time Warren was writing "Blackberry Winter" he was also composing *All the King's Men* (1946) and this novel supposedly originated in Warren's meeting with another tramp figure, a battered old Louisianian hitchhiker that Warren picked up in 1934 on the way to a position at Louisiana State University and who turned out to be an uncritical panegyrist of Huey Long (the radical governor of Louisiana that Warren felt had some similarities with the European dictators) (Warren narrates the story in "*All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience*"). For Warren, there are totalitarian possibilities in the presence of so many "superfluous" citizens akin to this hitchhiker in the Depression South, since they were potentially amenable to demagogic influences of populists such as Long. Just because the hitchhiker has no common *polis* or ground of "acting and speaking together" with others, he looks to regain the lost immanence of community in the idea of "one" leader and in the novel Warren tries to show the dark implications of this identification, and its parallels with the European dictatorships, in his creation of a Long-figure, Willie Stark (Arendt 1998, 220).

What makes Warren's tramp or Agee's tenants different from the documentary representations of the New Deal writers is that Warren and Agee place their figures of poverty within a larger trans-Atlantic context. One of the earliest reviews of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that by the novelist Anna Kavan in 1943, recognized this and aligned the tenants with the "damaged and helpless human beings" produced by the war (Kavan quoted in Davis 57). Perhaps the fact that Agee and Warren were classically-educated Southerners—with a strong sense of their region as an offshoot of a Latin or Catholic Europe—meant that they could look outside the strict boundaries of the South in understanding its economic and political difficulties: their meta-geographic imaginations were capable of seeing the "space" of the South in other countries. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* or *All the King's Men* they strove to construct a discourse of global modernism or of the global South within which to situate the poverty of the Depression. "[T]he economic source" of the tenants' plight, Agee writes, "is nothing so limited as the tenant system but is the whole world-system of which tenantry is one modification" (Agee 1966, 186). Within this discourse of global modernism, the extremities of southern poverty in the 1930s do not constitute a unique stigma of the region, but can take on the power of representing zones of non-synchronicity within the international economy as a whole. Within the global totality that Ernst Bloch called the "Now" (97) both archaic and modern elements coexist within

a simultaneous moment (the sharecropper South being an embedded archaic zone within the world market). Agee recognized that it was just this disparate co-existence or non-synchronicity of the South that inserted it within the modern political consciousness of the 1930s (Bloch, who came up with the concept of non-synchronicity in 1932, referred to late Weimar Germany as a composite of pre-modern agrarianism and an advanced financial state). In driving to Alabama for the first time, Agee said in a draft note for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that the South appeared to him “basic, generic, primal” and yet “in every detail it has edge, and participation, and involvement in what we think of as the present” (quoted in Davis 133).

What gave Agee his primary orientation toward Europe was not only his sensitivity to the web of economic and political interconnections within which the Depression South was placed. In a more basic sense this orientation was provided by his classical education at Harvard University and is seen in the way his first major work, the book of poems *Permit Me Voyage* (1936), taps into the Elizabethan and Virgilian roots of the idea of a historic Europe. Although Agee was too close to Communism ever to be an Agrarian (his poem “Dixie Doodle” [1938] is a satire of Agrarianism), he nevertheless had at the back of his writing a Catholic model of community derived from his Episcopalian upbringing. It is indeed quite plausible that Agee considered *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as an Alabama version of Virgil’s *Georgics*, a work that he thought had reached “absolute mastery and beauty” in the genre of “agricultural poetry” (Agee 1962, 171). One might ponder, for example, why Agee gives the fictional name George Gudger to Frank Burroughs, the father in the principal family that Agee visits (George means “farmer” and is derived from the same Greek etymon as Virgil’s *Georgics*). Agee also suggests that the tenants have the Virgilian virtue of *pietas*, a virtue that originates in a literal piety toward the earth as sacred site. He observes, in allusion to *Georgics* (Book I, lines 424–460), that the Alabama tenants are like Latin farmers “constant readers of the sky” in their lookout for weather that might destroy their cotton crop—a sky that is “the lodestone of their deepest pieties” (Agee 1966, 304). For Virgil, it was Jupiter himself who gave mankind the divine gift of labour and substituted an age of iron for the ease of Saturn’s age of gold (Book One, line 121). The adherence of the tenants to the debt-ridden monoculture of cotton, a persistence that lodges a “dark knotted iron of subnausea at the peak of the diaphragm”, is not a rational way of bestowing their labour, but it recognizes this necessary Virgilian ligature between labour and pain (Agee 1966, 296).

The coming to the surface of an ancient Latin world in Alabama sharecropper country comes out in the tenants’ instinctive classical feeling for “exact symmetries” and explains why the Gudgers’ house, although only built in 1928, already seems “timelessly ancient” (Agee 1966, 141, 187). The Virgilian perspective goes with a pronounced aspect of Agee’s work: his need to return to genetic roots, to the earth as *sacer*. Hence despite Agee declaring in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that he is a “communist by sympathy and conviction” and despite his being a contributor to such Marxist journals as *New Masses* he veers away from sociological explanations of the tenants’ poverty and ontologizes their suffering as a permanent condition (Agee 1966, 225). This is why Agee is critical of New Deal intervention such as that provided to the feckless three “clients of Rehabilitation” whom he meets in the “At the Forks” section and why he quotes Roosevelt’s claim to be “a farmer myself” with sarcasm (Agee 1966, 33, 105). Liberal “talk as if tenantry as such were responsible”, Agee writes, is “dishonest” and “dangerous” because it persuades

one that a "cure" is possible (Agee 1966, 185). If the documentary method of the 1930s writers wants to lessen the gap that separates the viewer from the poor, Agee wants to widen this gap and he emphasizes the sacred in its archaic Latin sense of that which is kept apart — Georges Bataille's sacred of what is untouchable, bleeding, abject (Leigh Anne Duck is perhaps the first critic who points out similarities of Bataille's work to Agee's). In the "Preamble" of the book Agee wishes that he can do no writing, preferring to put before the reader "fragments of cloth ... lumps of earth ... plates of food and of excrement". The final example is that of a raw wound: "A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point" (Agee 1966, 12–13).

It is not known if Agee knew of Bataille's writing, although he was certainly aware of the surrealists and thought their avant-garde work should be incorporated into Communist practice ("Art for What's Sake?" [1936]). It could be argued that Agee and Bataille were both drawing on the late nineteenth-century sociological "discovery" of the ambivalence of the sacred found in such thinkers as Emile Durkheim. But this ambivalence in fact had far older origins in Latin religion and the agricultural sacred of Virgil's *Georgics*. It was a fourth-century commentator on Virgil, Servius, who first pointed out the two meanings—purity and pollution—in the concept of *sacer* (Lennon, 52). As has often been remarked by critics, Agee frequently applied the category of the right or pure sacred to the tenants: he says, for example, that he finds in them "predicaments of human divinity" or compares the "gestures" of the Gudger family as they prepare for daily life in the morning to the ritualism of early mass at his boarding school (Agee 1966, xiv, 84). So deeply lodged is this equation of the tenants and divinity that Agee even absolves them of their "cruelty in relation toward extra-human life and toward negroes", saying that it is not meant in malice but in "innocence" (Agee 1966, 194). Less remarked on than Agee's evident use of a right-hand sacred, however, is his use of the left-hand variant and its emphasis on the repulsive and the tabooed. Official religions work hard to transmute the left-hand sacred into its right-hand counterpart, just as the village church builds over the bones beneath its floor (Bataille 1988a, 122). Agee is aware of, and sometimes reverses, the direction of this process of transmutation: for example, he says that the Gudger Bible gives out "a strong and cold stench of human excrement" (Agee 1966, 385).

The word which best encapsulates Agee's use of the left sacred is "wound". The wound is pervasive in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. At one moment Agee says that every sense impression in the lives of the tenants "cuts its little mark"; at another he observes that the lamplight that pours from the windows of the homes of the tenants is like "wounded honey"; later he mentions "the ultimately mortal wound which is living" (Agee 1966, 97, 52, 206). All of this means that the scene of Golgotha is central to Agee's book. Agee and Bataille agree that the chief example of the right-hand sacred emptying into the left is the Crucifixion, the emptying out of the high God through the material gap of the wound. Hence Agee's insistence on the Crucifixion as the symbolic cornerstone of Alabama tenantry: he even says that "those three hours upon the cross are but a noble and too trivial an emblem" for the ordeal of the three families (Agee 1966, 92).

The families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are torn apart from each other; each family, Agee says, is isolated behind its "shell and carapace" (51). They are like, in Agee's comparison, prisoners at Andersonville prison camp, starved Union soldiers who prefigure the war survivors of the total wars of the next century. Each family, therefore, is very far from the organic

community that is put forward in *I'll Take My Stand*. Nevertheless as an ex-Anglican Catholic Agee sees that experience must relate to non-individual being, to a community of sorts even if it is "the community of those who have no community" (in Bataille's formulation quoted in Blanchot 25). In fact the only way part of this broken community may communicate with another broken part is through the wound. Agee would concur with Bataille, who writes: "the wound of incompleteness opens me up.... What is required is the overlapping of two lacerations, mine and yours" (Bataille 1988b, 27, 30). This is why Agee so assiduously cultivates an art of the wound: "I shall touch nothing but as I would touch the most delicate wounds" (Agee 1966, 124). The wound is an emptying out of the subjective self and its false lure of immanent being, a turning to the outside and a loss of self. In *Praise* Agee is constantly trying to invent new ways to crucify himself. In one episode he is forced to stay overnight at the Gudgers and is consumed by bed-bugs; he crushes some of them and smells the rank odour of his own blood, but realizes that getting rid of them is a hopeless task and finally welcomes their "pricking and munching away", even feeling "a certain amount of pleasure in it" (Agee 1966, 388). This urge to self-laceration in Agee is usually castigated by his critics as a psychological weakness but perhaps it is rather a mode of political rhetoric; it is Agee's overlaying of his sensibility upon the very way the broken community communicates from wound to wound.

Praise belongs in the trans-Atlantic context of the 1930s not so much for its direct reference to the European dictatorships (Agee only went once to Europe when he was sixteen) but because it comes into the interwar context, shared by Bataille in the France of the late 1930s, of failed versions of the organic or utopian community. Bataille attempts to re-think the community as what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "inoperative" community. Agee's rejection of political "cure" leaves him, as a notional communist, in a difficult place in 1941: the place of failed revolutions, or, as Richard Wright was to say in 1949, of a God that failed. That is why Agee, like Bataille in the 1930s, tries to replace this communist vision of community with another, one that leans toward a sociology of the sacred and toward seeing the tenants as members of a sacrificial community.

Agee, as a consequence, perhaps goes deeper than Warren in his understanding of the southern poverty of the 1930s. Warren is ultimately an existential individualist who believes in a core of subjectivity that can resist immanent shapelessness or the mud that lies at the bottom of history (as he shows in his later essay "Knowledge and the Image of Man" [1955]). In inner dramas like that of Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* Warren tries to withstand the lure of the fused community that the Stark type of dictator represents and he does this by means of an existentialist definition of the self (the word "definition" has a unique place in Warren's lexicon). With this Jack can finally go out "into the convulsion of the world ... and the awful responsibility of Time" (438). But for Agee it is this very subjective self that is suspicious, that needs to be excoriated (to use Jean-Luc Nancy's term) or turned inside out in the name of the would-be community.

One might offer here a brief coda, like that of Agee's own final statement in "(On the Porch:3". In this conclusion to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Agee sits on the porch at night and hears two eerie fox voices up in the hills, each answering to each. What Agee hears in these voices is the world talking to itself and its "grief of incommunicability" (Agee 1966, 426). One might say that these fox voices are the model of the strange kind of community that

Agee has discovered among the cotton tenants of Alabama. Its basis is not speech, which would allow the voice to be turned into knowledge (for these are examples of animal *phone* and convey only "the grief of incommunicability"). It is rather exposure to, and incorporation of, an alien presence that is outside one and excludes one (Blanchot 12). One way of trying to describe this voice is to use the language of the left-hand sacred and Agee does indeed say that these voices are "as cold and as chilling as the pupil of a goat's eye" (Agee 1966, 421). What these fox voices give expression to is Lear's "thing itself", the thing that is embodied in the naked wretch; and this wound of the ordinary can send the old King on the heath, also known as James Agee, mad. Or, put less dramatically, it can exscript him, turn him outside himself onto the dark hillside of the inoperative community.

The question of the literary representation of the cotton tenant and farmer belongs primarily to the period of the 1920s and 1930s (by the 1960s the cotton tenant who picked by hand had all but disappeared in the South). In this interwar period Ransom and Lytle gave powerful articulation to the figure of the "harvester" and of the regenerative earth; and many southern modernists made similar references. One could even say that the very idea of the South in this period was founded on these figurations of the organic or whole life. But other southerners, notably Agee and Warren, were more sceptical about the autochthonous potential of the "harvester". Agee in particular matched his scepticism with innovative modernist form in *Praise*: a form that put the conservative logic of agricultural substance into "exscription". The result in *Praise* was a type of boundary-less writing that through this externalizing process brought out the "incommunicability" of the tenant community ("This is all one colon:" he said in *Praise* [101]). In Agee one can see a new type of southern literary radicalism or avant-gardism that has similarities with the sociology of the sacred in Bataille and the inoperative community in Blanchot, both products of trying to envisage a third way between liberalism and Communism in pre-war France.

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