

concentration camps. Hesiod chronicled a way of life; Agee and Evans, a way of death.

D.M.

## II. "Sociological Poetry"

Dear Dwight:

I approached Agee's book with very definite expectations and needs in mind: From what you said when you gave it to me, I thought I might get some answers to a problem that has been consciously bothering me for six or seven years:

How can a writer report fully the "data" that social science enables him to turn up and at the same time include in his account the personal meanings that the subject often comes to have for him? Or: How can the writer master the detaching techniques necessary to modern understanding in such a way as to use them to feel again the materials and to express that feeling to the readers?

I put this question in terms of "social science" because every cobbler thinks leather is the only thing, but it is a problem faced by any writer on social and human topics. Social scientists make up a rationale and a ritual for the alienation inherent in most human observation and intellectual work today. They have developed several stereotyped ways of writing which do away with the full experience by keeping them detached throughout their operation. It is as if they are deadly afraid to take the chance of modifying themselves in the process of their work.

This is not a merely technical problem of analysis or of exposition. It is part of a much larger problem of style-as-orientation. And this larger issue, in turn, seems to arise from the bewildering quality and pace of our epoch and the unsureness of the modern intellectual's reaction to its human and inhuman features. We are reaching a point where we cannot even 'handle' any considerable part of our experience, much less search for more with special techniques, much less write it within the inherited styles of reflection and communication.

I bring all this up, because on the surface, Agee's text is a report of a field trip to the South during the middle thirties; but underneath, it is an attempt to document his full reactions to the whole experience of trying as a reporter to look at sharecroppers. As a report on the sharecropper south, it is one of the best pieces of "participant observation" I have ever read. As a document of how a man might take such an experience big, it is something of a stylistic pratfall.

We need some word with which to point, however crudely, at what is attempted here and at what I have tried to describe above. Maybe we could call it sociological poetry: It is a style of experience and expression that reports social facts and at the same time reveals their human meanings. As a reading experience, it stands somewhere between the thick facts and thin meanings of the ordinary sociological monograph and those art forms which in their attempts at meaningful reach do away with the facts, which they consider as anyway merely an excuse for imaginative construction. If we tried to make up formal rules for sociological poetry, they would have to do with the ratio of meaning to fact, and maybe success would be a sociological poem which contains the full human meaning in statements of apparent fact.

In certain passages, Agee comes close to success. Observe

## LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

by James Agee and Walker Evans

Originally published at \$3.50, this book is now available to our readers at \$2 a copy. Order direct from "Politics."

how he reports in a sentence or two the human significance of authority between landlord and tenant, white and Negro. Observe how he handles associations in descriptions, never letting them get in the way of the eye which they guide to the meanings. I think the best things in the volume are the sections on work (320ff) and on the summer Sunday in a small southern town (375ff). In some of these pages imagination and painstaking reporting become one and the same unit of sharp sight and controlled reactivity: they are visions.

But of course the quality about Agee that is best of all is his capacity for great indignation. Printed less than a decade ago, the book in its fine moral tone seems to be a product of some other epoch. For the spirit of our immediate times deadens our will very quickly, and makes moral indignation a rare and perilous thing. The greatest appeal of this book comes from Agee's capacity for indignation.

The motive and the frustration that lift his work above the plain sociological report is his enormous fury at the whole arrangement that sent him to the south and his crying terror at being personally estranged from the sharecroppers. This fury is what makes him take it big. He is furious with the magazine people who sent him into the south "to spy," and he is furious at himself for not being able to break through into the human relation he wants with the sharecroppers he is studying, or rather whom he is trying to love.

If I ask myself, why on the whole it just doesn't come off, the only answer I can find is that in taking it all so big, Agee gets in his own way. Instead of easing himself into the experience in order to clarify the communication of how it really is, he jumps into it, obscuring the scene and the actors and keeping the readers from taking it big. And underneath this is the fact that Agee is overwhelmed and self-indulgent; almost any time, he is likely to gush. He lacks, in this book, the self-discipline of the craftsman of experience: When you get through, you have more images of just Agee than of the southern sharecroppers, or even of Agee in the south among the sharecroppers.

This failure is most apparent when we contrast the magnificent Walker Evans photographs with Agee's prose. These photographs are wonderful because the cameraman never intrudes in the slightest way upon the scene he is showing you. The subjects of the photographs . . . family groups of sharecroppers, individuals among them, children, a house, a bed in a room . . . are just there, in a completely barefaced manner, in all their dignity of being, and with their very nature shining through. But Agee often gets in the way of what he would show you; and sometimes, romantically enough, there is only Agee and nothing else.

Given the difficulties of sociological poetry, however, I think that what is important about the book is the enormity of the self-chosen task; the effort recorded here should not be judged according to its success or failure, or even degree of success; rather we should speak of the

appropriateness and rarity of the objective, remembering that Agee has himself written: "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor."

If you can think of any other examples of sociological poetry, let me know of them.

Yours,  
WRIGHT MILLS

**EPITAPH ON NUREMBERG.** By Montgomery Belgion. London: The Falcon Press, Ltd. Three shillings.

The thesis of this grave and closely-reasoned little essay is contained in the quotation with which it concludes. "We conceal from ourselves," wrote Mr. T. S. Eliot in 1939, "the similarity of our society to those we execrate." This is given concrete illustration in Mr. Belgion's analysis of the Nuremberg trials. To call the conduct of those trials by the name of international justice, Mr. Belgion argues, is to accept the notion voiced by Thrasymachus and refuted by Socrates in one of the earliest books of the *Republic* of Plato, namely that justice is "whatever serves the interest of the stronger," a definition, ironically enough, reiterated by one of the Nuremberg defendants who hanged himself on the eve of his trial.

Thus what Mr. Belgion is concerned with proving is that, under the principles accepted by the International Military Tribunal, the Nazi crimes in Europe would have been fully justified if Germany had won the war. The Nazis would have been equally justified in hanging, on the pretext of war guilt, whomever they pleased among the vanquished, including of course those whom the opposite turn of the fate made judges at Nuremberg. His argument is based, first, upon the obvious point that there can be no real justice where the purposes of prosecutor and judge are identical. Second, the governments or armies of the nations whose representatives served as judges were themselves demonstrably guilty of crimes of the same character as were charged to the defendants. Mr. Belgion cites of course the instances of mass deportations, exterminations of minorities, imprisonments without judicial process and similar "crimes against humanity" by the Russians, surpassing in magnitude and horror even those of the Nazis. Indeed, crimes of this character were being perpetrated in the Russian zone of Germany while the Nuremberg trials were in progress.

As for the "war crimes," which included wholesale massacres of civilians and noncombatants, Mr. Belgion recalls the saturation bombings of German cities and towns and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima. As for the looting of occupied territories, there was the example of all four armies of occupation in Germany, before and during and after the trials, and of the "displaced persons" who looted with the encouragement and protection of the military. In the British army, says Mr. Belgion, looting, although forbidden in the regulations under the sternest penalties, was nevertheless "actively encouraged in all ranks." Mr. Belgion says, dryly, he has no specific information about the conduct of the American armies in Germany in this particular, but supposes that he can make a safe inference from what he observed of the conduct of American soldiers in liberated France. As for forced labor, there are, besides the deportations to the Russian slave camps, the examples of German war prisoners in France and Britain, many of them supplied from the United States under pretext of repatriation. As for the inhuman treatment of prisoners,

there is the testimony of Julius Streicher at his trial that his American guards had beaten him, obliged him to kiss the feet of Negro soldiers, offered him urine when he asked for water, forced him to drink spittle by placing wedges in his mouth, kept him for four days naked in his cell. There is the case of Mr. Ezra Pound, the poet, now plausibly described as insane, who for nearly two months was kept in unsheltered solitary confinement without bed or other furniture, exposed by day to a fierce Italian sun and by night to the glare and heat of spotlights. There were the women members of the S. S. who were tortured by British guards. As for the "conspiracies against peace," on which Mr. Justice Jackson placed so much emphasis, Mr. Belgion had only to cite the Russian record in relation to Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland.

J. M. LALLY

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**ON WAR, SEX AND NEUROSIS.** By Sigmund Freud. Edited by Sander Katz; preface and glossary by Paul Goodman. Arts & Science Press, 61 Dey Street, New York 7, N. Y. \$3.00

These nine early essays by Freud, written between 1905 and 1918, are published here for the first time in one volume. One of them—"Dora, an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria"—has been cut: two sections, "The Second Dream" and "Postscript," are omitted. This omission is not mentioned in the text. "Dora" is printed in full in "Collected Papers," Vol. 3, Hogarth Press, London, 1936.

Paul Goodman's simple and well-expressed preface makes the excellent point that although the present-day physician, unlike Freud writing in 1905, need not apologize to the public for inquiring into the sexual habits of a patient, still we are all not so much freer in sexual matters. "Now we have learned also to repress our hypocrisy and timidity!"

Freud is a true radical; he strikes at the roots of our culture's hypocrisy. His patient, tolerant, modest objectivity—he never seems to propound, only to suggest—perhaps arises from this fact, that he is not a reformer. "We cannot predict," he writes in one of these essays, "whether other, perhaps greater, sacrifices, may not result from other institutions." Yet his inferences are often so logical and reasonable that the remedies seem to follow of themselves. Who now questions the proposition, so revolutionary for its time, that to practice deception on a child seeking sex information leads him to distrust his parents, to associate sex with guilt and shame, and even, in some cases, to discourage his intellectual curiosity in other fields of knowledge? ("The Sexual Enlightenment of Children," 1907.) But Freud could place little value on this "success"; in this same essay, he asserts the "impossibility of carrying through a reform in one particular without altering the foundations of the whole system." It is the essence of his teaching—and this may be his special "contribution" to social theory—that psychoanalysis, far from making things clearer, seems only to demonstrate how deeply complicated they really are!

The essays can be, in a general way, divided into two groups: those on neurosis as it is expressed in specific sexual behavior, and those concerned with our social in-