

Imagining the Real

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WHAT DO YOU DO?

Like most adult Americans, I am often asked that banal but basic question. To keep the small talk from getting too big—this might be at a dinner party, in a doctor's office, or at four a.m. in passport control—I answer that I am a writer. Descriptive things grow much more complicated, though, if the conversation goes any further. "What do you write?" "What kind of writer are you?" Then it takes a certain weary restraint not to blurt out that I'm the kind of writer who envies novelists, critics, reporters, poets, memoirists, historians, librettists, playwrights, restaurant reviewers, advice columnists, script doctors, and even pornographers the luxury of a succinct, not to mention serene, response to that should-be-ho-hum query.

What kind of writer *am* I? There is no agreed-upon word for it, which may sound precious but in fact is just a fact. Which is why I tend at this point (at least in the dinner-party version of the conversation) to launch into a fairly neurotic excursus on the subject: I write nonfiction, this often begins, which is literary, I mean its surface feels like fiction, but it's all based on the real—that is, not just based on the real, but grounded deeply in it. Yet it's not journalism or scholarship that I write; my work is essentially imaginative, though I never make things up. . . It's all true! (By now, I realize, I'm beginning to sound a bit desperate as I try to explain myself. My interlocutor may be starting to fidget and look away, a little embarrassed for me, or perplexed that someone so seemingly engaged with what she does doesn't even know its name.)

I've called myself, at times, an essayist and/or a biographer, but that's more convenient than it is precise. It's true that I do sometimes write essays. (I am, as it happens, writing one now.) Yet however much I admire and even aspire to the exploratory impulse that drives the essay (which *essays*, as Montaigne framed it, to try or test a

subject), I tend to conceive of my books as wholes, and an essay is or has been, historically—with the exception of certain seventeenth- and eighteenth-century polemics—almost always short. I have also written biography, but to announce oneself a biographer suggests a compulsion to research and produce big, fat, foursquare volumes about illustrious dead people—presidents, tycoons, movie stars, queens. For better or worse, I'm neither capable of offering, nor inclined to offer, a straight womb-to-tomb narrative, and I am pulled precisely to figures (some still alive) who've been overlooked by others. Meanwhile, my fascination with a particular person tends rarely to stop at the edges of that single life: I am drawn to the rich, messy stuff of context—so that, for instance, the book I wrote about the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali is not just the story of one exceptional man (though it certainly is that), it is also, or so I'd like to think, the saga of a family and a village and in some not entirely direct way the tale of the Palestinian people in a larger sense. One could take a cue from the Victorians and describe it as a life and times, though again, what does one call the author of a life and times? An old-fashioned biographer? A lifer and a timer? That has the unfortunate ring of someone counting the months until she's up for parole.

The question is hardly specific to me. I am also asking how we should account for the job description of someone like M. F. K. Fisher. I'm far from the first to note that "food writer" somehow doesn't do justice to the exquisite prose fabric she evolved by weaving the otherwise disparate threads of sensual autobiography, historical investigation, travel account, subtle social satire, and highly eccentric cookbook. (For her part, she declared that "I do not consider myself a food writer," and opted on at least one occasion for the more compelling if distinctly weirder self-designation "professional ghost." Try that at passport control.) Lawrence Durrell is best known as a novelist, the author of the sometimes inspired, sometimes indulgent *Alexandria Quartet*, but to my mind his most lasting books are those quieter, scrappier, real-life narratives of place—*Bitter Lemons*, *Prospero's Cell*, and *Reflections on a Marine Venus*—that animate

with an immediate, sketchpad-like freshness Durrell's experience of his beloved Greek islands. But what should we call the author of such books? "Travel writer" is the unsatisfactory contemporary term that would most likely be used to pin down Durrell in this mode—though to dub him that is to reduce these beautifully observed, finely wrought, blessedly idiosyncratic meditations on landscape and friendship, ouzo and empire to the disposable fluff of an in-flight magazine.

But does it really matter, you may ask, what literary label we assign to M. F. K. Fisher or Lawrence Durrell? How does tagging a writer an X or a Y add anything substantive to an understanding of their words? The more relevant question may be *why* it is that there is no term to describe these writers and what they create. The hybrid nature of books like Fisher's *Serve It Forth* and Durrell's *Marine Venus* seems almost deliberately to defy neat categorization and so may unsettle readers who prefer clear-cut borders between their forms. (The same is true of Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Joseph Mitchell's *Joe Gould's Secret*, Dilys Powell's *The Villa Ariadne*, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Taha Hussein's *The Days*, Gerald Brenan's *South from Grenada*, Joseph Roth's *What I Saw*, Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*, Kate Simon's *Bronx Primitive*, to name just a few other marvelous books composed in this mongrel mode.) The notion that a work may be both literary *and* documentary—that is, rooted at once in the realms of art and actuality—capsizes a whole raft of tightly held ideas about prose writing and its relation to the imagination.



When one of my books is praised as being "almost like a novel," I admit that my heart sinks just a bit. Like most writers, I take readerly enthusiasm where I can get it, so I tend to grin and bear what somehow feels like an inadvertent put-down. No matter how well-intentioned, this endorsement seems to carry with it the inherent assumption that fiction exists at the pinnacle of the formal totem pole, as the most evolved of all the prose arts, and that, deep down,

it is what every good biographer, essayist, and narratively inclined historian secretly aspires to create. Exaggerated rumors of the death of fiction notwithstanding, it's worth noting that, for instance, the editors of the *New Yorker* aren't creating a blizzard of buzz by crowning the twenty best nonfiction writers under forty.

But this is not really a new or merely a popular prejudice: of the 108 Nobel Prizes for Literature awarded since 1901, I count only three winners—Winston Churchill, Bertrand Russell, and Henri Bergson (!)—who did not write novels, poems, or plays. And it is often nonfiction writers themselves who partake of this self-defeating snobbery or sneaking sense of doubt, the mistaken belief, in other words, that their own superior travelogues, portraits of people, political allegories, childhood memoirs, and critical works are not inspired enough, and that literary salvation will only come when they realize their talents in fictional form. For starters, consider Martha Gellhorn, James Baldwin, Simone de Beauvoir, and Edmund Wilson, four supremely talented writers who each frittered time, if I may say so, writing novels that were not even a close match for their masterful nonfiction.

To resist the voices urging one to abandon the purported provinces of nonfiction for the so-called capital of fiction demands a certain mulish willpower. Take, for instance, the case again of M. F. K. Fisher, one of the most original and powerful American writers of the last hundred years, who herself seems to have felt no burning desire to write fiction. In 1943, after publishing what is probably the best book of her many exceedingly good books, *The Gastronomical Me*, a singular and impeccably written memoir of hunger, nourishment, love, illness, war, and the most wrenching sort of loss—which unlike so many modern memoirs conceals as much as it reveals—she was, her biographer tells us, badgered by a close friend who urged her to leave behind “the sort of stuff you’ve been doing” and “move on to something bigger,” by which he meant—a novel. This was an opinion shared by the well-respected gentleman reviewer for (there it is again) the *New Yorker* who bestowed on this remarkable work of nonfiction the ultimate backhanded compliment when he declared,

“It makes more evident than ever the fact that Mrs. Fisher was born to write novels and it’s about time she did.”

After ample coaxing both public and private, Fisher did try her hand at fiction, even as she kept protesting, “I am not a novelist.” As she explained, “I’ve been reading novels all my life, and I don’t want to write one.” Luckily, after a few underwhelming attempts, she stopped denigrating and dodging her strengths and recognized the self-evident though somehow hard-to-grasp fact that different writers have different callings. (We all understand that not every world-class novelist is also a world-class poet, and vice versa; it seems somehow harder for many readers to fathom that a serious literary writer’s vocation might be nonfiction, full stop.) Fisher’s gamble, it seems obvious now, paid off: no less a reader than W. H. Auden mused in 1963 that “I do not know of anyone in the United States who writes better prose.” He was not, of course, talking about her fiction.

While Auden’s words carry real weight, they still don’t help us decide what to call M. F. K. Fisher’s precise line of work. Part of the problem is that “nonfiction” is the de facto term affixed to all books in this zone, though that gray appellation gives little sense of the role that *sensibility* plays in the kind of work I am trying to name. And it is a writer’s sensibility—in its most stubborn, fingerprint-like particularity—whose palpable presence is, it seems to me, the defining marker of all such writing. (Besides fingerprints, DNA is certainly involved, as sensibility asserts itself at the molecular level of syllables and syntax; even the tiniest prose sample will contain its trace.) Meanwhile, that generic designation—“nonfiction”—covers far too sprawling and indistinct a field to be of any real use, blanketing as it does everything from journalism to self-help to history to sexual tell-all to political screed to—well, almost any kind of writing that is prose but isn’t fiction. And now we may be inching closer to identifying the problem: the term “nonfiction” itself is construed in negative relation to the novelizing or short-story-telling impulse. It is *not*-fiction—and fiction remains the scale against which all prose works are somehow always (if unconsciously) being judged. Fiction is the elephant that lives in nonfiction’s room.

Pushy pachyderms aside, the nay-saying construction “nonfiction” really points to the perception of a basic absence or lack. Consider, for a moment, the possibility of a reversal of this polarity, and imagine describing, say, William Faulkner as a writer of—to coin a phrase—*nonfiction*. That sounds peculiar, and unsatisfactory, which is perhaps why the compensatory adjective “creative” has been crudely glued to “nonfiction” in the catalogues of so many contemporary MFA programs. That qualifier, however, feels not only clumsy but wrong. It seems to protest too much—or settle for less than it should. In the very journal whose title is *Creative Nonfiction*, for instance, the editor sets out to describe the tricky category he aims to honor and sketches what he sees as the “real demarcation points between fiction, which is or can be mostly imagination; traditional nonfiction (journalism and scholarship), which is mostly information; and creative nonfiction, which presents or treats information using the tools of the fiction writer while maintaining allegiance to fact.”

But why consign that which is “mostly imagination” to the realm of fiction? And why confine “information” to mere journalistic or scholarly fact? The imagination is capable of working in so many startling and various ways, and information is so much more than neatly bundled bunches of newsworthy matter. In a good piece of writing, information pulses from every word and from the tension between words: it is conveyed by—it is in fact synonymous with—the shape of a sentence, the turn of a thought, the arc of an argument, or the way of perceiving and attempting to describe on the page a genuine street, an actual falcon, or an authentic hospital room, to say nothing of the absolutely unfabricated presence of another entirely real human being. What could be more *imaginative*—the word comes from the Latin for “a likeness”—than that?



Let us agree, then, that “nonfiction” is too vague and grudging a term to describe the literary category under discussion. What other designation might be found to account for the place where

information and imagination meet in works like Fisher's, Durrell's, and, perhaps, my own?

Suspending for now a certain nagging awareness that any term I adopt is likely to buckle under the weight of all I'm asking it to bear, I'd like to propose that, at least for the sake of argument, we go back to the hypothetical notion of Faulkner as the author of nonfiction and lop off the negative—which leaves us with “faction.” True, that has the unfortunate overtone of partisan conflict, but it also embodies in a concrete way the basic building block of the genre, fact, and leaves the rest to the individual writer.

And maybe the notion of division or dissent isn't the worst thing: the point about “faction”—however tentative and even preposterous that sounds—is that it shouldn't be any one thing at all or be bound by the rules of some monolithic preference for a single way of perceiving and relating what one has perceived; rather, faction should open up an almost endless range of formal, topical, and tonal possibilities. The only common denominator between works created in this mode should be their reliance on—and fervent belief in—reality as it is poured or rushes through the filter of a writer's unique sensibility. Which is a slightly florid way of saying that, as even novice philosophers know, the very idea of what is real varies a great deal from person to person. There are as many realities as there are writers. A convincing work of faction shouldn't sound, in other words, as though it could have been written by anyone but its author. Its “facts” can and should be checked—but not its “action.” And it's here that faction parts ways with certain high-concept works of journalism, memoir, and popular history—bona fide “nonfiction” books whose subject is their *raison d'être* (hence those nifty six-figure book contracts, signed before a single word has been set to paper). The tempo and tenor of these books are designed to match the tempo and tenor of other high-concept works of journalism, memoir, and popular history. There is no shame in following such formulas, if such formulas are what you want, but they also have nothing whatsoever to do with the deliberately distinctive (far less lucrative) rhythms and pitch of a dyed-in-the-wool work of faction, which is fundamentally

a *made* thing that takes meaningful shape only in the course of its being written.

Although he might be horrified to hear himself quoted in this avowedly documentary context, Henry James's words about the house of fiction apply here (I am substituting my own faction for his fiction): "The house of faction," he wrote, or almost wrote,

has. . . not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; "fortunately" by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the "choice of subject"; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the "literary form"; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist.

"The posted presence of the watcher": it is what all the best prose writing demands. And would anyone really bother to argue that this most sublimely Jamesian of paragraphs—written for the preface to the 1908 New York Edition of his 1880 *Portrait of a Lady*—is any

less enduring than a paragraph from that novel itself? James's fiction and his faction both emerged from the need to register in the most subtle and minutely shifting manner his vision of the real as it impressed itself on his imagination.

As should be obvious by now, when we talk about imagination we are talking about so much more than just invention from scratch, which is fiction's purview. The kinds of imagination are almost endless, and different writers possess different sorts of imagination in different measure, degree, and combination. There is, for starters, the *inquisitive* imagination, which leads the writer to the subjects she wants and needs to probe and compels her to ask which questions demand posing in the first place; the *investigative* imagination grants the writer a sharp sense for how and where to dig, truffle-hound- or gumshoe-like, for answers to those questions. The *cartographic* imagination maps the expanses and limits of the realm she sets out to explore in a given piece of writing—and sometimes, when she reaches the end of the known world (or world she thought she knew), leads her to lay in extra provisions, hoist sail, and head out for previously unforeseen climes. The *architectural* imagination allows the writer to sketch the outlines of a structure that will not only look good in blueprint, but will—once it's built of the steel and beams and bricks of words, sentences, paragraphs, and chapters—withstand both wind and rain. The *historical* imagination affords the writer the ability to envision the vanished Greek temple that once stood in the place of today's parking lot, or recreate what a journey between Hartford and Providence might have felt like (how the minutes and hours would have passed) when everyone traveled on horseback. The *associative* imagination reveals unexpected connections between seemingly disparate events, people, and ideas. The *comic* imagination uncovers humor in improbable situations or juxtapositions. . . . But we could play this game almost forever and unpack, too, elements of the *narrative* imagination, the *political* imagination, the *spatial* imagination, the *sensory* imagination, the *religious* imagination, the *social* imagination, the *musical* imagination, the *psychological* imagination, the *metaphorical* imagination and . . .

Everyone will have their preferences—or, since the choice isn't necessarily a rational one, their obsessions. Of these many imaginative modes, three have proven the most important to me—three, that is, that I try to attend to most vigilantly in my own writing and that I seek in the work of others. The three are in many ways so inextricably tangled up with one another it is difficult to pull them apart; perhaps they amount to the same thing. They are what I'd call the *verbal* imagination (the fierce attention to words and to the power, possibility, and responsibility they carry, singly and in combination); the *sympathetic* imagination (the compulsion to try to grasp—in however imperfect or tentative a fashion—something of the textured complexity of the lives of others, or at least a few minutes in the life of another); and the *moral* imagination. The most elusive and the hardest to define of the three, this fraught term has been bandied about by writers from the sensitive reactionary Edmund Burke to Lionel Trilling, yet another born critic who persisted perversely in seeing himself as a novelist manqué.

When I, for my part, use that highfalutin term, I admit I am standing on tiptoe and straining to reach for a phrase that might help me describe, as succinctly as possible, the imaginative capacity that allows the writer to see every thing and person, every word and deed as profoundly—if not always obviously—linked. And besides affording awareness of this linkage, the moral imagination also points to the critical (even existential) necessity of each of these elements in its radical particularity, as if they were all—as if *we* were all—bugs and beasts, blooms and bacilli, living together in a somehow mutually dependent arrangement in a vast cosmic ecosystem.



But perhaps it's wise to pause for a minute, catch our collective breath, and admit that while the possibilities that fiction presents are thrilling in their complexity, variety, and poignancy, also lurking within this urge to "imagine the real" are some very serious hazards. The risks are especially pronounced when we're talking about the moral imagination of the real as I've just outlined it. One who is alert to and

feels himself linked to *all* of being *all* the time—and who devotes himself to accounting for it *all* in words that somehow mirror the enormity and *allness* of it *all*—does so at his peril.

I am thinking, right now, about James Agee—one of the most extravagantly gifted and arguably most chronically frustrated American writers of the last century and a man whose work ranged furiously across forms and concerns as he wrote and wrote and wrote: he wrote poems and screenplays and short stories and reportage. He wrote about everything from the Tennessee Valley Authority to orchids, Hiroshima, cockfighting, and smoke. He wrote a devastating autobiographical novel based on his childhood memories of his father's death in a car accident. He wrote film criticism and book reviews, and he wrote hundreds of extraordinary letters to his life-long mentor, a genial Episcopalian priest named Father Flye. He also wrote the spiritual autobiography/field report/tone poem/testimonial that was his first prose book and remains his unclassifiable masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Created together with the photographer Walker Evans, this sui generis work began to take shape in 1936 as a straight journalistic assignment for *Fortune* magazine, about tenant farming in Depression-era Alabama; it later evolved into an almost indescribably complex scramble of profane and sacred things. Anticipating the "larger piece of work" to which he hoped it might one day belong, Agee described the book this way on its opening pages:

The title of this volume is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

The title of the work as a whole, this volume included, is *Three Tenant Families*.

The nominal subject is North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families.

Actually, the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense. More essentially, this is an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity.

From “three representative white tenant families” to “certain normal predicaments of human divinity” in less than a paragraph: the steep pitch of Agee’s ambition is impressive (or ironic), though you can see why *Fortune’s* editors ran the other way, “killing” the piece—that awful expression—when they realized what Agee was up to. The article’s later incarnations met even harsher responses. Rejected by the first publisher that commissioned it in longer form, the material was finally published as a book by Houghton Mifflin in 1941—with the deletion of “certain words . . . which are illegal in Massachusetts”—and it was treated to an almost universally hostile critical response, with the *New York Times* reviewer snidely lambasting Agee as “arrogant, mannered, precious, gross,” scolding him for sentences for which “a freshman could be exiled from English 1-A,” and skewering the whole book as “the choicest recent example of how to write self-inspired, self-conscious, and self-indulgent prose.” The critic for *Time* offered the only slightly more equivocal opinion that it was “the most distinguished failure of the season.” One need not be so dismissive and can even admire the work intensely, as I do, and as hundreds of thousands of others have come to with time (a year after its publication, the imaginative moralist Lionel Trilling announced that “I feel sure that this is a great book”) and still see in just this snippet of a quotation both the dazzling and doomed potential in Agee’s way of seeing. As Trilling’s assessment continued, “Agee has a sensibility so precise, so unremitting, that it is sometimes appalling.” Or as Agee’s close friend, the distinguished translator, poet, and essayist Robert Fitzgerald described that sensibility and its strivings in one of the most eloquent memoirs of Agee that exists: “He was after the truth, the truth about specific events or things, and the truth about his own impressions and feelings. By truth I mean what he would chiefly mean: correspondence between what is said and what is the case—but what is the case at the utmost reach of consciousness.”

Agee was fully aware of the impossibility of the task he had set himself. In one of his letters to Father Flye, written while he was still laboring over the article-that-had-swollen-into-a-book (though it was, in Agee’s own words, “a *book* only by necessity,” which he

preferred to refer to, okay, rather pretentiously, as “an effort in human actuality”), he described the Sisyphean nature of the project and his desire to write his way into a subject that “cannot be seriously looked at without intensifying itself toward a center which is beyond what I, or anyone else, is capable of writing of: the whole problem and nature of existence.” In the book itself he outlined his goal, “that this record and analysis be exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched, no relevancy avoided, which lies within the power of remembrance to maintain, of the intelligence to perceive, and of the spirit to persist in.” To put it more concretely and take just one detailed example of the thousands of detailed examples that crowd this teeming book, here is Agee, squinting hard at the pine planks that make up the façade of the house of the “Gudger” family (only the name is a fiction) and writing in his typically microscopic if bruise-purple way about all he sees, registering that “each nail-head is distinct: each seam and split; and each slight warping; each random knot and knothole: and in each board, as lovely a music as a contour map and unique as a thumbprint, its grain, which was its living strength, and these wild creeks cut stiff across by saws; and moving nearer, the close-laid arcs and shadows even of those tearing wheels: and this, more poor and plain than bone, more naked and noble than sternest Doric, more rich and more variant than watered silk, is the fabric and the stature of a house.” Though just a few pages after declaring his aspiration to make this record “exhaustive,” he concedes the woeful inadequacy of his approach and declares, “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here.” He would rather offer up “photographs. . . fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement.”

The posted presence of this particular watcher, in other words, entailed a frantic clawing toward what Agee called “the cruel radiance of what is” and what we might call a nearly death-defying receptivity, an unquenchable thirst to drink in every last drop of being and seeing and feeling: one imagines a perception-craving James Agee craning so far out his window in Henry James’s *House of Fiction*,

desperate to get a better, closer, *truer* look at some passing figure, that he tumbles right over the ledge. (Odd how this falling-man image seems to recur with regard to Agee: in one especially black letter to Father Flye in 1934, he describes himself “balancing over suicide as you might lean out over the edge of a high building, as far as you could and keep from falling but with no special or constant desire not to fall.” And fiction-writer John Hersey describes the “self-loathing and suicide” that had haunted Agee for years, and that finally caught up with him when he died of a heart attack—Hersey calls it a broken heart—in a New York taxi cab in 1955, at age forty-five. “In the end, as it turned out, he jumped to his death by indirection; he was defenestrated from the upper stories of life, as if in slow motion, by alcohol, nicotine, insomnia, overwork, misused sex, searing guilt, and—above all, we can guess—by his anger and want and despair at finding that with all his wild talent he had never been able to write the whole of the universe down on the head of a pin.”)

Nevertheless. There is more to the story than that falling man. It's easy enough to fixate on the reckless dare that lies at the heart of Agee's vatic vision and to see in him nothing but a “failed” genius, whose obstinate need to perceive and record everything and anything stretched him so thin that he wound up snapping like a too-taut rubber band. One finds confirmation of this perspective in his notorious 1937 application to the Guggenheim, possibly the most scatter-shot appeal ever mailed in to the illustrious foundation. This was a document that proposed with a disarming blend of utter earnestness and seeming parody no less than forty-seven different “projects” he might attempt if awarded a grant. These ranged from “A Story about homosexuality and football” to “A study in the pathology of ‘laziness’” to “Pieces of writing whose rough parallel is the prophetic writing of the Bible” to “A true account of a jazz band” to “A dictionary of key words,” and so on and absurdly—or tragically—on; his friend Robert Fitzgerald later described this application as “maverick and omnivorous as a prairie fire, ranging in every direction for What Was the Case and techniques for telling it.” The first—and least outwardly goofy—of the proposed projects was called “An Alabama Record,”

which would evolve into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and which Agee described in the application as “bearing on two points: to tell everything possible as accurately as possible: and to invent nothing.” (He did not, for the record, get the grant.)

While with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee claimed to be engaged in an undertaking that was neither journalism nor art (“Above all else:” he howled on the book’s early pages, “in God’s name don’t think of it as Art”—not, it seems, really raging against art itself but against the insidious “respectability” that society bestows on certain art works: “official acceptance,” he fumed, “is the one unmistakable symptom that salvation is beaten again”), I would argue that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is indeed an art work of the very highest order in all the multifarious factional senses I have described above. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an art work of the very highest order because it not only illuminates brilliantly the world it holds between its two covers, but because it also shines a searing light on the world *beyond itself*. That is what great art does, or should try to do, and James Agee knew this—he aspired to this—which is why I prefer to picture him not losing his balance and plummeting from that Jamesian window in faction’s rambling house, but stretching his neck out of it and reveling at his view of every last nesting bird and fluttering leaf and passerby, whether a pretty girl or tattooed construction worker. As he explained it himself, “In a novel, a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer. Here, a house or a person has only the most limited of his meaning through me: his true meaning is much huger. It is that he *exists*, in actual being, as you do and as I do. . . . His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact.”

To be sure, James Agee is not an example for a young writer to follow too literally; his work is both phenomenal and phenomenally flawed. It isn’t hard to conjure the reams of unspeakably dreadful writing that might emerge if one were to mimic his no-holds-barred, enraptured pitch. While I happen to love his prose, I know others who loathe it, or consider it little more than a postured emblem of its long-gone time and temper: his work divides readers more starkly

than most, and while *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is now considered a strange sort of classic and has generated a great deal of strong opinion over the years (whatever such opinion is worth), it is not, I think, a book that most people these days actually bother to read.

And that is a genuine shame, since it seems to me that all writers who aspire to give life in their prose to some small slice of the world as it is *in fact* would do well to read Agee closely and heed him—wonders, warts, and all. Why? First because his ability to bear down on all that we mean when we invoke “the real”—to bear down, that is, with the full force of his verbal, sympathetic, and moral mind—is unsurpassed.

Second, because his voracious hunger for knowledge and sensation and meaningful communion with other human beings—while no doubt self-destructive and even outlandish when taken to such cranked-up extremes—remains a model for the often-maniacal curiosity, desire, intellectual daring, openness, and emotional rigor toward which every writer should aspire. This is not to imply that one must live hard to write well, or that the James Deanish cult that sprang up around Agee’s anguished image after his death is what matters. If anything, the Romantic heroic patina that eventually attached itself to his name may have obscured somewhat the power of the work itself. The point is that hunger of the sort that growled in Agee’s gut is key—and that any serious writer must have it, even if she rarely gets up from her desk chair, drinks nothing stronger than lukewarm tap water, and tucks herself serenely into bed each night by nine fifteen.

Third, because he demonstrated an unstoppable urge to push against the limits of a given form—and even forge new or hybrid forms as he searched for the ideal vehicle to convey the full freight of his thinking. He told Father Flye that he aimed to create an “amphibious style” of writing—a fish-and-fowl mixture achieved with flamboyant distinction in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. This entailed no small measure of risk; however open they claim or want to be, most readers and most editors, to say nothing of most *New York Times* reviewers, feel, as I’ve said, a certain unease when faced

with unfamiliar or crossbred forms. Agee flirted with a kind of professional suicide in eschewing tidy literary categories. He did not make his own life any easier by choosing to write as he did. And it is probably worth pointing out that acclaim came to him only posthumously; at the time of his death, none of his books were in print.

Fourth, he captured with more delicacy and honesty than almost any other writer I know the dilemma at the heart of the impulse to write about real people: that is, the simultaneous compulsion to record every single detail—and the recoil one experiences at the act of doing just that. Throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* he refers to Walker Evans and himself as “spies” (which may make them cousins to M. F. K. Fisher’s professional ghost), and he admits his shame at invading the homes of his subjects. Yet as he metaphorically and literally rifles through closets and table drawers, Agee’s feelings of mortification don’t stop him from trying obsessively to get it all down and so honor it—rendering each filthy patchwork quilt, chipped Woolworth’s cup, and bar of lye soap a nearly holy relic. “I am,” he admitted with a blend of horror and pride, “being made witness to matters no human being may see.”

Fifth, and finally, as should be clear from everything above, because no one but James Agee could possibly have written this book. To reduce it—as certain sociologically inclined readers have done over the years—to an unnecessarily overwrought historical document about tenant farming during the Depression is completely to miss the point. This is to assume that Agee’s main allegiance in the book is to the “who, what, where, when, and why (or how)” that he describes as the “primal cliché and complacency of journalism.” He had, he wrote, “never yet seen a piece of journalism which conveyed more than the slightest fraction of what an even moderately reflective and sensitive person would mean and intend by those inachievable words.” While the book does take up in fanatical economic, anthropological, and tactile detail the subject of Southern sharecropping, its true concern is the sharp impression made by a very particular set of human beings on a very particular sensibility—James Agee’s. And while that sensibility is on full display in each and every

consonant and vowel of the book, this is not—as other detractors have claimed—a mere exercise in self-absorption. Rather, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* emerges white hot from the furnace of Agee's encounter with the universe at large, with something much bigger than himself and the topical demands of this specific book.

All of that is well and good, but what about the much more modest predicament that set me wandering through the House of Faction in the first place? I was trying to figure out how to describe what I do for a living. What kind of writer am I? And what kind of writer was, and is, M. F. K. Fisher? Lawrence Durrell? James Agee? The term "faction writers" does indeed feel, in the end, strained, silly, even downright factious—still too reliant on an echo of "fiction writers," perhaps, or too confining and literal in a way that the very nature of the form seems to defy. So where does that leave the writer of this slippery, hybrid thing I'm trying to characterize? Call us ghosts or spies or even amphibians, or maybe admit that there is no name for us at all. Keats celebrated Negative Capability as occurring when man—and specifically what he calls a Man of Achievement—is capable of "being in uncertainties." While I can't exactly claim to be a man of achievement, I can agree to relish that uncertainty.

And that, to answer the question with which I began, is what I do.

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