

The Library of America Interviews Andrew Hudgins on James Agee

In connection with the publication in October 2008 of [*James Agee: Selected Poems*](#), edited by Andrew Hudgins, in The Library of America's [American Poets Project](#) series, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*James Agee may be best known for his prose masterpiece about Alabama tenant farmers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, or perhaps for his Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, *A Death in the Family*, or for his film criticism or screenplays (most notably, *The African Queen* and *The Night of the Hunter*). His poetry is much less familiar (although six of his poems do appear in The Library of America's [American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, volume 2](#)). How would you place his poetry among his other work?*

The majority of readers now come to Agee's poetry from his prose, as I did, and it's startling to find that the man who wrote the excruciatingly self-lacerating sentences of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the piercing sensitivities of *A Death in the Family* began as a poet with an Elizabethan bent and a metaphysical mind. The poetry helps us understand the influences on Agee's prose, as well as the fierce moral vision that grew out of his strict Christian upbringing. In some ways poetry disciplines his sentences and his thought in ways prose doesn't. Only by reading both do we get a sense of the range of Agee's mind.

Selected Poems includes some 100 poems James Agee wrote between 1929 and 1950, years dominated by the Depression and World War II. As we now seem to be entering our own economic downturn in the midst of two wars, is James Agee perhaps a poet for our time?

Hmmm, I'd never thought of it that way. Some Agee poems touch on eco-

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nomics as a product of his time, at least in the soft Christian Marxism of his early poetry. But you're right. Take a poem like "Dedication," in which he exco-riates "merchants, dealers and speculators," and instructs them to

examine curiously, and honestly into their own hearts, and see how surely and to what extent they in themselves are blood-guilty; and how and in what manifold ways they are more subtly and ter-ribly and vastly accountable than for life blood alone: and that they repent their very existence as the men they are, and change or quit it: or visit the just curse upon themselves.

But for contemporary relevance, I'm more compelled by the anger and sharp power of poems like "Home Again Blues," written in 1931 or '32. In the poem, demobilized vets question "the Things We Fought For," including a family in which Mom is consumed with fashion, Dad's a bore, and home cooking is something they "had too much before":

And that, we guess, is what it means
To be a U.S. Veteran.
We'll never fight another war
Until they start a better one.

To me, the poem steps out of its time and snarls at us with maybe even more power, given the intervening wars, than it originally had.

We find Agee experimenting with almost every imaginable kind of poetry: narrative poetry, lyrical poetry, complex language, simple language, slang, mountain dialect, satire, polemic, sonnets, cabaret songs. His influ-ences are also quite varied: seventeenth-century Elizabethans, John Donne, Shakespeare, and also Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Robert Frost. What was Agee trying to do in his poetry and who were his strongest influences? Did he see himself as part of any movement?

I think he saw himself as doing what Crane and Eliot were doing. He wanted to participate fully in the English literary tradition and he wanted to write about the modern world. But he was far from the political and theological conservative that Eliot was. Unlike Eliot but like Crane he wanted to write in a distinctively American style, which was very much a project of that time. I'm not sure that he ever succeeded in that as a poet, except in fits and starts. But he did produce wonderful poems.

Shakespeare and the British seventeenth-century poets were his domi-

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nant influences, but Agee had such love for literature that I hate to call them “influences” because that suggests that he read them in order to form himself more than out of love for their writing. He absorbed them the way we do a lover’s patterns of speech and habits of mind. Agee cycled through influences quickly—absorbing, discarding, altering—all out of a loving engagement that led inevitably to the ongoing development of his style.

In reviewing The Collected Prose of James Agee (1969) in The New York Review of Books, Wilfred Sheed noted that Agee “never quite gave up religion but never re-embraced it either.” In your introduction to this volume, you note that “Agee’s poetry is strongest when he still grips, however frantically, his faith.” Did Agee use his poetry more than his prose as the arena for his struggles with his Anglo-Catholic faith?

Yes, absolutely. His first poems were the product of his young manhood, when his deep immersion in the faith of his mother and stepfather, a priest, was strongest, and when he had most recently been under the influential instruction of Father Flye at St. Andrew’s School in Sewanee, Tennessee.

In the devotional tradition of the sonnet from Dante to Donne, Agee found the perfect form to express and examine his beliefs and to work them out against the background of modernity. The tension between spirit and mind is quite taut in his sonnets. He clings to an instinctive (and carefully inculcated) faith even as his sharpening intellect erodes it, reshapes it, and ultimately, in poems outside the sonnets, undermines it. He was a man who knew how to think about feelings, with feeling advancing thought and thought advancing feeling, and a sonnet sequence is the perfect vehicle for this kind of meditation. Reading the sequence as a whole is a powerful experience—much more than reading any one sonnet in it.

Do you have any favorites among the poems?

The sonnet sequence can stand up to any sequence of sonnets written in America, I think, in both accomplishment and vision. “Sunday: Outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee,” in superb free verse, is a chilling and ultimately heart-breaking poem. Every time I go through the book, I find a pleasure I’d missed before or rediscover one that had slipped my mind—“To Walker Evans” for instance (“Still, comrade, the running of beasts and the ruining heaven/Still captive the old wild king.”) and “Christmas 1945” (“The Magi’s gifts are subtle bribes:/The shepherds worship clock and wage:/In rattling arms, roared diatribes,/Wakes the new Age.”)

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Agee seems obsessed with sonnets. He includes a remarkable 25 sonnets in Permit Me Voyage (1934), the only book of poems published during his life, and he continued to write sonnets until 1947. In his introduction to The Collected Poems of James Agee (1968), his friend the poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald wrote: “As to the sonnets, Agee’s best, notably his fifth, sixth, and twentieth, can stand comparison with any but the greatest in our language.” Do you agree and how does he fit into the grand tradition of American sonnet writing?

The sonnet is a durable challenge for any poet and for one enthralled with English poetry—and as fascinated with Frost as Agee was—it was as natural to try as the door handle to the library. Fitzgerald’s assessment is judicious and cagey—it avoids saying bluntly what I’ll say for him. Agee’s sonnets are not in the same class as the best of Shakespeare, Wyatt, Surrey, Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, or Frost. But his best ones stand up to their second best admirably—not faint praise. For some reason, they don’t appear in the American Poets Project volume, [American Sonnets](#), but to my mind they are certainly worthy of being included. I suspect that space limitations cost him his place—that, and the fact that the early half of the twentieth century is crowded with superb sonnets by Robinson, Frost, Millay, and others.

You’ve included a portion, some 14 pages, of Agee’s ambitious long poem, “John Carter,” an epic satire written in ottava rima, in the manner of Byron’s Don Juan. Agee worked on this poem for years and at one point, in 1932, even petitioned the Guggenheim Foundation for funding so that he could finish it. In his application he stated that one of his goals was to “bring back into poetry a sense of dramatic and narrative (as well as lyrical) vigor and resourcefulness” and to “establish a proper sort of pride in American civilization.” How well does he succeed?

He achieves a lot in this extraordinary poem but not everything he wants. The poem contains wonderful moments of self-satire, literary satire, and serious and lovely landscape poetry. That’s what the selections in this edition include.

Agee’s goal in “John Carter” was just too big and various for anything but the most sustained poetic attention, attention he didn’t have to give at the time. The kind of expansiveness he was aiming for he ended up achieving in his prose. The goal, I think, was to find a poem that could be both episodic and cohesive, one that could contain a lot of voices and yet have the off-the-cuff bril-

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liance that came naturally to Byron in *Don Juan* but has come to no one so naturally since Byron. Even Auden couldn't out-Byron Byron. There's a heart-stoppingly awful passage in "John Carter"—one not included in this edition—in which Agee attempts to don his Lordship's anti-Semitism as an edgy homage. But the effect is to show the trouble Agee had in breaking free from the constraints of his influences and his concept of the poem. If he'd focused on what he'd written, he'd have seen that he was writing some very fine poetry and that he should have been listening more to what he was doing instead of what he wanted to do.

It's hard to believe that Agee could write a poem as bleak and as accomplished as "Ann Garner" while he was still in high school. In fact, he wrote more than half the poems collected here while in his twenties. What was it about that period in his life that made it so fertile?

It is hard to believe, isn't it? It's an odd and compelling mixture of Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers, propelled by his own reading of myth and novels. He was an astoundingly precocious writer, and it's thrilling, really, to see him absorb his reading and then work out the assimilation of voices, subjects, tones, and styles as he writes. But more than that, for all its obvious influences, the early work has a haunting force. It stays with you.

In person, Agee was apparently a spell-binding storyteller and someone who loved all-night benders. Do we see any of that zestful playfulness in his poems?

Oh, yes. As he moved past the high seriousness of adolescence, he let his more rollicking side into the poems. Agee was famous as a dazzling talker, a brilliant man who could keep listeners spellbound into the early morning hours. We see that playful side more in the poems after *Permit Me Voyage*, like "Three Cabaret Songs":

These sultry nights, dear
 Pour me some gin
Turn down the lights, dear
 (Now we begin)
We've got our rights, dear
 (Some call it sin)
And you've Nothing to Lose.

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It's also on display in "Lines Suggested by a Tennessee Song" (in which he tells the nativity story in hillbilly dialect) and the "Draft Lyrics for *Candide*." They're a hoot. They make me wish that he and Lillian Hellman had been able to work together and finish the job. Here, from the first page of the draft, is what the governor sings as he strolls through his art collection:

Landscapes tire me, just to see;
Nudes are so explicit.
The child on the Madonna's knee
Is overweight (or is it?)
To walk through that would be a bore,
And this, one hardly could adore,
And her, one cannot visit.

Now, that's cheeky, in all the best possible ways!

What has James Agee's writing meant to you? How did you become the editor of this volume?

I imagine I was selected to edit the book because I am, like Agee, a Southern poet with a long immersion in Protestant Christianity and a passion for metrical verse. I know these issues from the inside out.

I'm one of those readers who came to Agee's poetry through his prose, and in some ways I feel like I grew up with him. In college, in Montgomery, I read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and was stricken by lives that had been lived out less than a hundred miles from me. Those tenant farming families were much like the lives the families of my mother and father lived in rural Georgia. Agee helped me understand where I'd come from—something my parents wanted, mostly, to shield me from. I spent hours in the Huntingdon College library between classes, reading Agee's movie reviews, wrapped up in his enthusiasm for movies as art, movies that then I had no way of seeing. For years, I foolishly resisted reading *The Morning Watch* and *James Agee's Letters to Father Flye* because a friend had urged them on me so insistently that my constitutional obstinacy kicked in. When I finally read them I was enthralled. The poems I knew only from a few anthologies and "To Walker Evans," which was included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. So it was a joy to sit down and read the totality of his poetry.

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There seem to be more poems about death than love, yet most of these poems were written while Agee was in one of his three marriages. Do you think it's significant that there aren't any poems from the three years when he was single?

A heavily church-ed Southern boy hears about death early and often. Christ's lovingkindness is never (or seldom) as powerfully inhabited as God's wrath and judgment. And of course Agee's life was shadowed by the early and traumatizing death of his father in a car accident, probably caused by his drinking. So it's no surprise that death is such powerful subject matter for Agee. The other side of his romantic vision, love, didn't really make it into his work. It's not present all that much in the modern poets he was most drawn to either, except for Yeats. Just off the top of my head, I imagine that Agee, like a lot of folks who lead disordered existences, needed a woman around to organize his life for him. And when he was between wives, he was spending (or maybe *investing* is the better word) his poetry-writing time looking for another.