Part Three
IX • Singing about Suffering

One of the most curious omissions, perhaps, in both Bruegel’s canvas and Auden’s poem is that no writers, readers, or painters are apparently on the scene. Bruegel is painting it and Auden is writing about it, but no one within the frames is doing any such thing. And yet, whether one regards such activities as a turning away from suffering or a facing of it, unquestionably a most enormous quantity and quality of human effort has been devoted to them. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the single most common subject of art is some form of human suffering. It is possible also that the single most recurrent image in all of Western art is the one of that single sufferer who did presumably take upon himself the pain of all mankind. One hesitates to imagine in how many churches and museums, by how many roadsides, on how many warm breasts that figure has gone on writhing in metal, wood, or paint, on crosses large and small, or in how many poems, stories, plays, tracts, and sermons that figure has been invoked. One hesitates even to think of the number of styles that have been used to contain that suffering and to render it near or distant.

It is possible also that one or another form of tragedy has been turned to even more often than athletics for what has variously been labeled catharsis, instruction, and delight. Even if we exclude all myths, folk tales, poems, novels, plays, operas, movies, soap operas, and comic strips that contain material that might be considered tragic by the man, woman, or child in the street and consider only those works that would fall under a strict definition of the term, the attention given such sufferings is staggering to contemplate. The man- and woman-hours that have been given over to witnessing the pain of Oedipus or Hamlet alone must number in the many millions—in the billions perhaps—if one includes all the schoolchildren and others who have only read the plays. Willy Lohman of Death of a Salesman and Blanche DuBois of A Streetcar Named Desire paraded their pain for 1,600 per-
performances on Broadway alone, and something close to a million separate people thought to gather there to watch their suffering and in some form to share it. I doubt the most rabid French terrorist would blow up a statue of Corneille or Racine. Far from turning leisurely away, generation after generation have paid admission to place themselves in formal rows to face reproductions (imitations? reenactments? beautifications?) of one or another dreadful martyrdom or forsaken cry. I want to leave them there for a while, unexplained, unjudged, and turn to a much smaller victim and a single human response.

The victim is a dog (for not all “dogs go on with their doggy lives”), and the response is that of William Carlos Williams in a poem entitled “To a Dog Injured in the Street.” It is not a poem I feel I understand as well as I should. But that is probably as good a way as any of entering a territory about which too many—poets as well as critics and aestheticians—have been overconfident. And about which Grecian urns have been overconfident, if one is to assign to the urn the final line of Keats’s poem: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” This poem directly quotes Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” but I think it is also meant to echo as well against the “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

**IT IS MYSELF**

not the poor beast lying there
    yelping with pain
that brings me to myself with a start—
    as at the explosion
    of a bomb, a bomb that has laid
all the world waste.
    I can do nothing
    but sing about it
and so I am assuaged
    from my pain.
A DROWSY NUMBNESS drowns my sense
    as if of hemlock
    I had drunk. I think
of the poetry of René Char
    and all he must have seen
and suffered
that has brought him
   to speak only of
sedgy rivers
   of daffodils and tulips
      whose roots they water,
even to the freeflowing river
   that laves the rootlets
      of those sweet scented flowers
that people the
   milky
   way.
I REMEMBER Norma
   our English setter of my childhood
      her silky ears
and expressive eyes.
   She had a litter of pups one night
in our pantry and I kicked
   one of them
      thinking, in my alarm
that they
   were biting her breasts
      to destroy her.
I REMEMBER also
   a dead rabbit
      lying harmlessly
on the outspread palm
   of a hunter’s hand
      As I stood by
watching
   he took a hunting knife
      and with a laugh
thrust it
   up into the animal’s private parts.
      I almost fainted.
WHY SHOULD I think of that now?
   the cries of a dying dog
      are to be blotted out
as best I can.
   René Char,
      you are a poet who believes
in the power of beauty
      to right all wrongs.
      I believe it also.
With invention and courage
    we shall surpass
    the pitiful dumb beasts,
let all men believe it,
    as you have taught me also
    to believe it.¹

I choose this poem in part because it haunts me but mainly because its complexity and allusiveness seem adequate to that of the issue it addresses. For whatever else is true of the poem, its conversion of suffering into beauty is no simple translation of exploded Ethiopian horsemen into the unfolding of a rose, nor does the narrator’s singing seem to go very far toward assuaging his pain. And whatever it does with the cries of the dying dog, it can hardly be said simply to blot them out—for either the narrator or reader.

It may be that it is the narrator’s self that brings him to himself with a start, in any of the senses one wishes to give to self, but there is much that compels us to attend to the dog. The title is directed to him, the “not” that precedes “the poor beast lying there yelping with pain” does more to sharpen than negate our awareness of the suffering of the beast, “the cries of [the] dying dog” are still audible late in the poem even as he speaks of blotting them out, and “pitiful dumb beasts” make up the final image in the poem.

The narrator is singing to assuage his pain, but it is he who has imagined for himself and us that bomb which has laid the world waste, he who is remembering the violences of the hunter toward the “harmless” rabbit and the watching boy.

The reverberations of the “drowsy numbness” with Keats’s poem are too extensive to confine in any reasonable space, but it is worth remarking that Keats’s drowsy numbness also seems more of a wish than a reality and that his poem too is full of reminders of the suffering world that lies on this side of the nightingale’s song. In the final stanza, he concludes that “the fancy cannot cheat so well as she is famed to do.” With Williams the drowsy numbness is belied not only by the ugly memories but by his immediate thought of René Char’s suffering and his certainty that it was the suffering that led that
poet to his deep immersion in beauty. I do not know what to make of the fact that my own limited knowledge of the poems of René Char reveals a far less beauty-immersed poet than Williams suggests. I do not think that Williams means to be ironic, but neither can I believe that he was blind to the ugliness and harshness of some of Char’s images.

The beginning of the final stanza is open to at least three opposed, though perhaps not entirely irreconcilable, readings. When the narrator asks himself, “Why should I think of that now?” (referring to the hunter’s brutality and perhaps his own kicking of the pup as well), one can read the lines that follow as an answer to the question. That is, he is thinking about (singing about) those memories and pain in order to blot out the suffering immediately before him. Or one can read the lines as a part of a question, in effect—Why should he think of that now when the cries of the dying dog, after all, are to be blotted out as best he can. Or one can read the lines as a sort of floating introduction to the leap back to René Char; that is, since one is to blot them out as best one can, he will blot them out with a willed acceptance of the beliefs of René Char. Perhaps Williams is content with such multiplicity. I am not entirely so. But however one reads the lines, they do not suggest that the narrator is doing too good a job of blotting out the cries, nor do they reduce the disturbing quality of the remaining lines of the poem.

In part those lines seem a non sequitur, for the poem has not been concerned with the power of beauty to right wrongs or of man to surpass beasts. Nor does it seem to have had much to do with the value of all mankind’s believing such things. It helps a little if we remember that the narrator early in the poem emphasized all that René Char must have seen and suffered and read the last three lines as expressing a wish for all men to believe it in the same way (through the same experience) that he has been taught to believe it rather than to believe it just as he has come to believe it. But this still does not resolve the extent to which we are to see the ending as a necessary leap or an evasive one, and to the extent it seems the latter, whether the evasiveness is Williams’s or that of a narra-
tor whose evasiveness he wishes us to recognize. I cannot
decide also how much, if any, importance to attach to his
capitalization of his memories and lower-casing of his belief
(“I REMEMBER . . . I REMEMBER . . . I believe”).

My greatest discomfort, however, is that I am unable to
blot out a Robinson Jeffers-like perspective that would seem
to force a savage irony into the expression of belief that we
shall surpass the pitiful dumb beasts, we who kick them while
they are nursing, shoot them and then happily fuck them
with a knife. And surpass “dumb” beasts? When the poem
has been about a beast “yelping with pain” and “the cries of a
dying dog.” Surpass them by singing! I do not think Williams
intends such a reading or that the poem can support it, for it
too deeply undermines a narrator who in too many other
ways is shown sympathetically and seems to be a close rela-
tion of Williams himself. Perhaps he intends to say that we
should surpass the beasts with “invention and courage” as
opposed to kicking, shooting, and knifing them. And I can
believe, if not what he has asked me to, that both Williams
and his narrator have surpassed the dumb beasts—not by
their invention and courage or even primarily by their singing
but by their capacity for sympathy and self-examination. Still
this does not quite blot out my memory of those happy
hunters of Jeffers’s who surpassed the beasts with invention
and courage by trapping a mammoth in a pitfall, by thinking
to use fire when their sticks and stones could not hurt him,
and watched happily as they “roasted the living meat slowly
to death.” Nor does it quite blot out that other image of man’s
invention that Williams himself has put in my head at the
beginning of the poem—the image of “a bomb that has laid
all the world waste.” I am quite sure he means us to under-
stand that he can do nothing but sing about that too and
thereby assuage his pain. I wish I were more sure that he
meant me to notice the full extent of the narrator’s difficulties
as he tries to sing away his pain, and the extent to which his
song does finally both begin and end as a song about himself.

Having said all this, I am still uneasy about my own read-
ing of the poem and feel there is something I have missed, per-
haps a note of bitterness and self-contempt, something that would reduce the ambiguity a little. Only a little though, for there should be ambiguity and confusion when one sings about suffering and listens to such songs.

I must add a final note, one that helps me feel better about some of the possible evasiveness in the poem. William Carlos Williams was a doctor as well as a poet, and René Char between 1940 and 1945 was "Captaine Alexandre," the regional head of a partisan group in the Resistance movement in France during World War II. That should not make a difference, and I think I can give all the arguments why it should not. But it does. It matters to me that those singers were not—shall we say—stool pigeons, experimental vivisectionists, or Lord High Executioners.

What is to be said about the pleasure I take in reading, and wanting others to read, the passages I am about to present. They are all descriptions by D. H. Lawrence of crucifixes along the old imperial road from Munich across the Tyrol, through Innsbruck and Bozen to Verona, over the mountains. If it can happen without reducing their important specificity, I would like them to represent as well all the aesthetic transformations of suffering performed by art. Here is one:

It was an old shrine, the wood-sculpture of a Bavarian peasant. The Christ was a peasant of the foot of the Alps. He had broad cheek-bones and sturdy limbs. His plain rudimentary face stared fixedly at the hills, his neck was stiffened, as if in resistance to the fact of the nails and the cross, which he could not escape. It was a man nailed down in spirit, but set stubbornly against the bondage and the disgrace. He was a man of middle age, plain, crude, with some of the meanness of the peasant, but also with a kind of dogged nobility that does not yield its soul to the circumstance. Plain, almost blank in his soul, the middleaged peasant of the crucifix resisted unmoving the misery of his position. He did not yield. His soul was set, his will was fixed. He was himself, let his circumstances be what they would, his life fixed down. (P. 5)

And another:
And in a little glass case beside the road sat a small, hewn Christ, the head resting on the hand; and he meditates, half-warishly, doggedly, the eyebrows lifted in strange abstraction, the elbow resting on the knee. Detached, he sits and dreams and broods, wearing his little golden crown of thorns, and his little cloak of red flannel that some peasant woman has stitched for him.

No doubt he still sits there, the small, blank-faced Christ in the cloak of red flannel, dreaming, brooding, enduring, persisting. There is a wistfulness about him, as if he knew that the whole of things was too much for him. There was no solution, either, in death. Death did not give the answer to the soul's anxiety. (P. 10)

And another:

. . . In the cold gloom of the pass hangs the large, pale Christ. He is larger than life size. He has fallen forward, just dead, and the weight of the full-grown, mature body hangs on the nails of the hands. So the dead, heavy body drops forward, sags, as if it would tear away and fall under its own weight.

It is the end. The face is barren with a dead expression of weariness, and brutalized with pain and bitterness. The rather ugly passionate mouth is set forever in the disillusionment of death. (P. 12)

And another, “very elegant, combed and brushed and foppish on his cross” yet with something “brave and keen in it, too . . . the pride and satisfaction in the clean, elegant form, the perfectly trimmed hair, the exquisite bearing . . . more important than the fact of death or pain” (p. 14). And several others, more “weak and sentimental,” in which “the carved Christs turn up their faces and roll back their eyes very piteously, in the approved Guido Reni fashion. They are overdoing the pathetic turn. They are looking to heaven and thinking about themselves, in self commiseration” (pp. 14–15). Others are “beautiful as elegies. It is dead Hyacinth lifted and extended to view, in all his beautiful, dead youth. The young, male body droops forward on the cross, like a dead flower. It looks as if its only true nature were to be dead. How lovely is death, how poignant, real, and satisfying!” (p. 15). Still others are “ordinary, factory made Christs . . . null as the Christs we see represented in England, just vulgar nothingness. But these figures have gashes of red, a red paint
of blood, which is sensational” (p. 15). And there are some “with great gashes on the breast and knees of the Christ figure, and the scarlet flows and trickles down, till the crucified body has become a ghastly striped thing of red and white, just a sickly thing of striped red” (p. 15) Then one sitting by the grave whose “naked, strong body has known death, and sits in utter dejection, finished, hulked, a weight of shame. . . . What remains of life is in the face, whose expression is sinister and gruesome, like that of an unrelenting criminal violated by torture. The criminal look of misery and hatred on the fixed, violated face and in the bloodshot eyes is almost impossible” (pp. 16-17). And one more, a fallen Christ

armless, who had tumbled down and lay in an unnatural posture, the naked, ancient wooden sculpture of the body on the naked living rock. It was one of the old uncouth Christs hewn out of bare wood, having the long, wedge-shaped limbs and thin flat legs that are significant of the true spirit, the desire to convey a religious truth, not a sensational experience.

The arms of the fallen Christ had broken off at the shoulders, and they hung on their nails, as ex-voto limbs hang in the shrines. But these arms dangled from the palms, one at each end of the cross, the muscles, carved sparely in the old wood, looking all wrong, upside down. And the icy wind blew them backwards and forwards, so that they gave a painful impression, there in the stark, sterile place of rock and cold. Yet I dared not touch the fallen body of the Christ, that lay on its back in so grotesque a posture at the foot of the post. I wondered who would come and take the broken thing away and for what purpose. (Pp. 18-19)

I had hoped by now—in this book, in my life—to have some answers to the questions raised by these renditions of suffering; but essentially the questions remain. Does Lawrence’s rhetoric seduce us too far from the suffering and too much into the loveliness of his language? Does that final line I have quoted—“I wondered who would come and take the broken thing away and for what purpose”—do enough to remind himself and us that the agony is not yet finished and that we have some relation to it?—a relation Margaret Atwood has defined in this single awesome equation: “Anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ.”3 He says he
dared not touch it. I did not want him to, nor would I have dared touch it myself. I have let it touch me. For what purpose? I can comfort myself (and Lawrence) by thinking of the extent to which the writing and reading of such passages require the exercise of sympathy, exercise in all senses, and even of that in some ways closer bond, empathy. I can turn for support to the tidy formula of Yeats's "Easter 1916"—"A terrible beauty is born." Still, I think my pleasure as I read the passages is too great, though obviously I do not think so enough to give it up.

How shall I regard that special distance granted because, like Auden's poem, Lawrence's art is a depiction of other works of art that are themselves depictions of legendary or mythic suffering? Does he sufficiently cross that distance by his continual reminders of the living inhabitants of the valleys and mountains whose postures, spirits, and burdens are rendered in the images of Christ that line their roads? To what extent does a passage like this cross that distance and take us with it to confront the peasants in their own skins, and to what extent does it co-opt peasant and readers alike into a rhetoric of alliterative language and repetitive rhythm, to say nothing of Lawrentian philosophy?

[The peasant] and his wife and the children worked on till dark, silent and intent, carrying the hay in their arms out of the streaming thunder-rain into the shed, working silent in the soaking rain. . . . The body bent forward towards the earth, closing round on itself; the arms clasped full of hay, clasped round the hay that presses soft and close to the breast and the body, that pricks heat into the arms and the skin of the breast, that fills the lungs with the sleepy scent of dried herbs: the rain that falls heavily and wets the shoulders, so that the shirt clings to the hot, firm skin and the rain comes with heavy, pleasant coldness on the active flesh, running in a trickle down towards the loins, secretly; this is the peasant, this hot welter of physical sensation. And it is all intoxicating . . . almost like a soporific, like a sensuous drug, to gather the burden to one's body in the rain, to stumble across the living grass to the shed, to relieve one's arms of the weight, to throw the hay on the heap, to feel light and free in the dry shed, then to return again into the chill hard rain, to stoop again under the rain, and rise to return again with the burden.

It is this, this endless heat and rousedness of physical sensation which keeps the body full and potent, and flushes the mind with a
blood heat, a blood sleep. And this sleep, this heat of physical existence, becomes at length a bondage, at last a crucifixion . . . at last it drives him almost mad, because he cannot escape.

(Pp. 5-6)

In a moment I want to turn again to that most strenuous effort to render peasant suffering into language, the one by the man who descended from the boy we earlier watched as he struggled on Good Friday to keep his mind on Christ rather than upon his own dreams of saintliness—and who, incidently, said of Lawrence, “He seems to me somewhat crazy all right, and certainly a man of genius, and I am at present convinced one of the greater and more nearly saintlike of people”—James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. But first—and this seems a necessity rather than an indulgence—we must read in its entirety one more description of Christ and one more response, the one by the sickly and despondent Ippolit in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*.

The picture represented Christ who has only just been taken from the cross. I believe artists usually paint Christ, both on the cross and after He has been taken from the cross, still with extraordinary beauty of face. They strive to preserve that beauty even in His most terrible agonies. In Rogozhin’s picture there’s no trace of beauty. It is in every detail the corpse of a man who has endured infinite agony before the crucifixion; who has been wounded, tortured, beaten by the guards and the people when He carried the cross on His back and fell beneath its weight, and after that has undergone the agony of crucifixion, lasting for six hours at least (according to my reckoning). It’s true it’s the face of man only just taken from the cross—that is to say, still bearing traces of warmth and life. Nothing is rigid in it yet, so that there’s still a look of suffering in the face of the dead man, as though he were still feeling it (that has been very well caught by the artist). Yet the face has not been spared in the least. It is simply nature, and the corpse of a man, whoever he might be, must really look like that after such suffering. I know that the Christian Church laid it down, even in the early ages, that Christ’s suffering was not symbolical but actual, and that His body was therefore fully and completely subject to the laws of nature on the cross. In the picture the face is fearfully crushed by blows, swollen, covered with fearful, swollen and blood-stained bruises, the eyes are open and squinting: the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a sort of deathly, glassy light. But, strange to say, as one looks at this corpse of a tortured man, a peculiar and curious question arises; if just
such a corpse (and it must have been just like that) was seen by all His disciples, by those who were to become His chief apostles, by the women that followed Him and worshipped Him, how could they believe that that martyr would rise again? The question instinctively arises: if death is so awful and the laws of nature so mighty, how can they be overcome? How can they be overcome when even He did not conquer them, He who vanquished nature in His lifetime, who exclaimed, “Maiden arise!” and the maiden arose—“Lazarus, come forth!” and the dead man came forth? Looking at such a picture, one conceives of nature in the shape of an immense, merciless, dumb beast, or more correctly, much more correctly speaking, though it sounds strange, in the form of a huge machine of the most modern construction which, dull and insensible, has aimlessly clutched, crushed and swallowed up a great priceless Being, a Being worth all nature and its laws, worth the whole earth, which was created perhaps solely for the sake of the advent of that Being. This picture expresses and unconsciously suggests to one the conception of such a dark, insolent, unreasoning and eternal Power to which everything is in subjection. The people surrounding the dead man, not one of whom is shown in the picture, must have experienced the most terrible anguish and consternation on that evening, which had crushed all their hopes, and almost their convictions. They must have parted in the most awful terror, though each one bore within him a mighty thought which could never be wrested from him. And if the Teacher could have seen Himself on the eve of the crucifixion, would He have gone up to the cross and died as He did? That question too arises involuntarily, as one looks at the picture.  

Although the passage surely speaks for itself, I must make a few observations: first, far from being a “torturer’s horse rubbing his innocent behind against a tree” as it is in Auden’s poem or a pitiful creature to be surpassed by man’s invention and courage as it is in William’s, here the “dumb beast” so far surpasses man as to become that merciless universe of Bertrand Russell; second, that of all those Christ-lovers we have seen, only Scobie envisioned some such punch-drunk, swollen-faced figure; and finally, that my own response to this ugly Christ in his garment of ugly prose contains more aversion or disgust than sympathy or even pity. Where Lawrence draws me toward the tortured figure, this passage makes me want to turn away, though not “quite leisurely.” I am not sure what conclusions should be drawn from this. Suffering in actuality is ugly, repulsive, not attractive. It is too easy to
empathize with the suffering of beautiful figures and to let beauty blot out pain. Yet ugliness can produce numbness and a turning off of feeling; revulsion too can blot out pain. And though beauty may not have the power, as William Carlos Williams and René Char would like to believe, “to right all wrongs,” it can soften and offer a way of remembering.

Now to what seems to me one of the most wonderful and maddening books ever written—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I give it as much attention as I do here not only because it so deeply illustrates—and confronts as well—the problems of turning suffering into beauty but because it also illustrates and confronts so many other of the issues I have been worrying about, especially those of voyeurism and self-indulgence of both writer and reader, and the autonomy of the subject of their scrutiny. It is also one of the few instances where a romantic has confronted his subjects in the flesh and has had to face the problem of his own relation to them and their sufferings, in his life as well as in his imagination and his art. For Agee lived among the tenant farmers he writes of for about six weeks, in the home of one of the families, sharing its food and bedding and vermin, though not its labor, and came to care for some of the people very much, as they did him.

Even more than most books, this one resists description, and it is almost impossible to convey to someone who has not read it more than the crudest idea of its nature, much less of its full ranges and complexities of content and tone. In a prefatory attempt to say what the book is, Agee writes that 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.” He goes on to say that the authors are trying to deal with the subject “not as journalists, sociologists, politicians, entertainers, humanitarians, priests, or artists, but seriously” (p. xv) and that “it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is
no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell” (p. xv).

The book opens with sixty-one untitled photographs by Walker Evans of tenant farmers and their children, individually and in family groups, of their houses, outside and inside, and of the surrounding countryside and nearby villages. They include close-ups of the faces and bodies of most of the people and, among other things, of their beds, bureaus, stoves, privies, porches, shoes, and gravestones. Since the photographs precede the prefatory material and even the title page, one encounters them before anything else, and they take on a special autonomy and weight. Agee explains in the preface that the “photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative” (p. xv). They are quiet pictures that resist the kind of drama, pathos, and blatancy that Agee hates so much in the photographs of a similar world by Margaret Bourke White in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. Perhaps they are best described in the terms Agee uses in his “Notes for a film of Andre Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*, when he says that the “various head groupings, faces, etc., would not be ‘composed’ and romantic but literalness intensified to become formal out of its own substance.”  

And in the terms he uses in an early story to describe a “form and rhythm and melody of existence” out of which emerges “an enormous clear chord” through which “the whole commonplaceness of existence is transfigured—becomes monstrously powerful, and beautiful, and significant.” He supposes “the essentials of which this music is compounded are the facts as they are, tempered by sternness and pity and calm.” These three qualities go far toward defining the special quality the pictures have; and if one omits the juvenile straining of “monstrously,” one can say they do reveal a power, beauty, and significance by which the commonplaceness of existence is transfigured. But they reveal at the same time a poverty so awful and so awful an injury in the eyes and mouths of most of the people that one wonders by what right one looks at the pictures and wants to go on looking at them.
The remainder of the book, which is dedicated "To those of whom the record is made. In gratefulness and in love," is composed of hundreds of fairly short sections in which Agee uses almost every method he can think of to convey the truth and meaning not only of the lives of the three families but of his own relation to them and of his own writing about them. There are lists of persons and places; outlines for sections of the book both written and unwritten; Whitman-like catalogues; precise factual descriptions of people, houses, rooms, furniture, foods, clothing and other objects and exquisitely lyrical descriptions of many of the same things; ruminations about nearly every aspect of the tenant farmers' lives from the most individual and specific to the most generic and general (as in the passage on families quoted earlier on page 120). There are poems, biblical passages, and quotations from Blake, Shakespeare, and other writers; there are tirades against intellectuals, fashionable radicals, professional revolutionaries, bureaucrats, publishers, and others. There are endless apologies for doing what he is doing and plea after plea to the reader to understand that he is writing about actualities and not to view his work as art. There are infuriatingly long, circuitous, and self-conscious explanations of what he is about to attempt and why; there are moments when he falls so deeply under the spell of his own rhetoric that the effect is nearly comical; but there are also pages and pages of prose whose power and loveliness are unsurpassed anywhere. The book as a whole, I believe, despite all its self-consciousness and posturing, leaves us with a profound and indelible sense of the lives of the tenant farmers. I think it is true for the reader, as Walker Evans says was true for those who knew Agee, that "after a while, in a round-about way, you discovered that, to him, human beings were at least possibly immortal and literally sacred souls" (p. xi). I even think Agee's friend and teacher Father Flye may not be going too far when he writes to Agee after reading the book: "I find in it a sympathy, a love, a care for human beings, which make me think of our Lord; and I call it in a true sense deeply religious" although I must at the same time share some of
Scobie’s distrust of a Lord who permits such atrocities and comment that if Agee is often too mindful of his own suffering, Christ can be viewed as God’s way of calling attention to his.

But I am pounding these chords too soon. First we must listen further to Agee’s music. For despite his insistence that we must not view his work as art, he has transposed that “portion of unimagined existence” essentially into music. I am thinking not only of the large number of passages that sing with the rich lyricism of the two compositions I am about to present. (I shall offer them and those that follow at considerable length in the hope that along with their music they will give the reader who has not read it something of the substance and burden of the book. If that length seems excessive I can say only that to skim here is to do a further kind of violence to some people who have already been desperately hurt.)

Just a half-inch beyond the surface of this wall I face is . . . another room, and there lie sleeping, on two iron beds and on pallets on the floor, a man and his wife and her sister, and four children, a girl, and three harmed boys. Their lamp is out, their light is done this long while, and not in a long while has any one of them made a sound. Not even straining, can I hear their breathing; rather, I have a not quite sensuous knowledge of a sort of suspiration, less breathing than that indiscernible drawing-in of heaven by which plants live, and thus I know they rest and the profundity of their tiredness, as if I were in each of these seven bodies whose sleeping I can almost touch through this wall, and which in the darkness I so clearly see, with the whole touch and weight of my body: George’s red body, already a little squat with the burden of thirty years, knotted like oakwood, in its clean white cotton summer union suit that it sleeps in; and his wife’s beside him, Annie Mae’s slender, and sharpened through with bone, that ten years past must have had such beauty, and now is veined at the breast, and the skin of the breast translucent, delicately shrivelled, and blue, and she and her sister Emma are in plain cotton shifts; and the body of Emma, her sister, strong, thick, and white, tall, the breasts set wide and high, shallow and round, not yet those of a full woman, the legs long thick and strong; and Louise’s green lovely body, the dim breasts faintly blown between wide shoulders, the thighs long, clean and light in their line from hip to knee, the head back steep and silent to the floor, the chin highest, and the white shift up to her divided thighs; and the tough little body of Junior, hardskinned and gritty,
the feet crusted with sores; and the milky and strengthless littler body of Burt whose veins are so bright in his temples; and the shrivelled and hopeless, most pitiful body of Squinchy, which will not grow:

But it is not only their bodies but their postures that I know, and their weight on the bed or on the floor, so that I lie down inside each one as if exhausted in a bed, and I become not my own weight and shape and self, but that of each of them . . . [and know] the soul and body of each of these seven, and of all of them together in this room in sleep, as if they were music I were hearing, each voice in relation to all the others, and all audible, singly, and as one organism, and a music that cannot be communicated: and thus they lie in this silence, and rest.

Burt half-woke, whimpering before he was awake, an inarticulated soprano speaking through not quite weeping in complaint to his mother as before a sure jury of some fright of dream: the bed creaked and I heard her bare feet slow, the shuffling soles, and her voice, not whispering but stifled and gentle, Go to sleep now, git awn back to sleep, they aint nothin agoin to pester ye, get awn back to sleep, in that cadence of strength and sheltering comfort which anneals all fence of language and surpasses music; and George's groused, sleepy voice, and hers to him, no words audible; and the shuffling; and a twisting in beds, and grumbling of weak springs; and the whimpering sinking, and expired; and the sound of breathing, strong, not sleeping, now, slowed, shifted across into sleep, now, steadier; and now, long, long, drawn off as lightest lithist edge of bow, thinner, thinner, a thread, a filament; nothing: and once more that silence wherein more deep than starlight this home is foundered. (Pp. 54-56)

These fields are workrooms, or fragrant but mainly sterile workfloors without the walls and with a roof of uncontrollable chance, fear, rumination, and propriative prayer, and are as the spread and broken petals of a flower whose bisexual center is the house.

Or the farm is also as a water spider whose feet print but do not break the gliding water membrane: it is thus delicately and briefly that, in its fields and structures, it sustains its entity upon the blind breadth and steady heave of nature.

Or it is the wrung breast of one human family's need and of an owner's taking, yielding blood and serum in its thin blue milk, and the house, the concentration of living and taking, is the cracked nipple: and of such breasts, the planet is thickly and desperately paved as the enfabled front of a goddess of east india.¹⁰ (Pp. 116-17)

Nor when I say transposed into music am I thinking only of the extent to which he leaves scarcely anything untouched by
some kind of song: whether a spring—"not cowled so deeply under the hill that the water is brilliant and nervy, seeming to break in the mouth like crystals, as spring water can: it is about the temper of faucet water, and tastes slack and faintly sad, and as if just short of stale. It is not quite tepid, however, and it does not seem to taste of sweat and sickness, as the water does which the Woods family has to use" (p. 118); or Mrs. Ricketts’s dress:

It is made of a coarse tan cotton I will speak of later. It is shaped like a straight-sided ball, with a little hole at the top for the head to stick through, the cloth slit from the neck to below the breasts and held together if I remember rightly with a small snarl of shoe-lace; the bare arms sticking through the holes at the sides, the skirt ending a little below the knee, the whole dress standing out a little from the body on all sides like a child’s youngest cartoons, not belted, and too stiffened perhaps with dirt to fall into any folds other than the broadest and plainest, the skirt so broad away from her at the bottom that, with her little feet and legs standing down from inside it, for all their beauty they seem comic sticks, and she, a grievous resemblance to newspaper drawings of timid men in barrels labeled John Q. Public. (P. 251)

or the objects on the bureau in the Gudgers’ front bedroom:

An old black comb, smelling of fungus and dead rubber, nearly all the teeth gone. A white clamshell with brown dust in the bottom and a small white button on it. A small pincushion made of pink imitation silk with the bodiced torso of a henna-wigged china doll sprouting from it, her face and one hand broken off. A cream-colored brown-shaded china rabbit three or four inches tall, with bluish lights in the china, one ear laid awry: he is broken through the back and the pieces have been fitted together to hang, not glued, in delicate balance. A small seated china bull bitch and her litter of three smaller china pups, seated round her in an equilateral triangle, their eyes intersected on her: they were given to Louise last Christmas and are with one exception her most cherished piece of property. A heavy moist brown Bible, its leaves almost weak as snow, whose cold, obscene, and inexplicable fragrance I found on my first night in this house. (P. 146)

I am thinking also of the rhythmical spareness of passages like this one:
From March through June, while cotton is being cultivated, they live on the rations money.
From July through late August, while the cotton is making, they live however they can.
From late August through October or into November, during the picking and ginning season, they live on the money from their share of the cottonseed.
From then on until March, they live on whatever they have earned in the year; or however they can.
During six to seven months of each year, then—that is, during exactly such time as their labor with the cotton is of absolute necessity to the landlord—they can be sure of whatever living is possible in rations advances and in cottonseed money.
During five to six months of the year, of which three are the hardest months of any year with the worst of weather, the least adequacy of shelter, the worst and least of food, the worst of health, quite normal and inevitable, they can count on nothing except that they may hope least of all for any help from their landlords.
Gudger—a family of six—lives on ten dollars a month rations money during four weeks of the year. He has lived on eight, and on six. Woods—a family of six—until this year was unable to get better than eight a month during the same period; this year he managed to get it up to ten. Ricketts—a family of nine—lives on ten dollars a month during this spring and early summer period.
This debt is paid back in the fall at eight percent interest. Eight percent is charged also on the fertilizer and on all other debts which tenants incur in this vicinity. (Pp. 106-7)

Even when he is trying desperately to make us feel how unbearable it is to pick cotton, he is incapable of not singing (the passage is long and I have already hurt it by some deletions; to skim further would be to turn leisurely away from a martyrdom that most of us who can afford to read this book have special reason to witness):

It is simple and terrible work. Skill will help you; all the endurance you can draw up against it from the roots of your existence will be thoroughly used as fuel to it: but neither skill nor endurance can make it any easier.
Over the right shoulder you have slung a long white sack whose half length trails the ground behind. You work with both hands as fast and steadily as you can. The trick is to get the cotton between your fingertips at its very roots in the burr in all three or four or five gores at once so that it is brought out clean in one pluck. It is easy enough with one burr in perhaps ten, where the cotton is
ready to fall; with the rest, the fibers are more tight and tricky. . . . You would have to try hard, to break your flesh on any one burr, whether on its sharp points or its edges; and a single raindrop is only scarcely instrumental in ironing a mountain flat; but in each plucking of the hand the fingers are searched deep in along these several sharp edges. In two hours’ picking the hands are just well limbered up. At the end of a week you are favoring your fingers, still in the obligation of speed. The later of the five or six times over the field, the last long weeks of the season, you might be happy if it were possible to exchange them for boils. With each of these hundreds of thousands of insertions of the hands, moreover, the fingers are brought to a small point, in an action upon every joint and tendon in the hand. I suggest that if you will try, three hundred times in succession, the following exercise: touch all five fingertips as closely as possible into one point, trying meanwhile to hold loose cotton in the palm of the hand; you will see that this can very quickly tire, cramp, and deteriorate the whole instrument, and will understand how easily rheumatism can take up its strictures in just this place.

Meanwhile, too, you are working in . . . sunlight that stands and stacks itself upon you with the serene weight of deep sea water . . . so that it can seem you are a diving bell whose strained seams must at any moment burst, and the eyes are marked in stinging sweat, and the head, if your health is a little unstable, is gently roaring, like a private blow-torch, and less gently beating with aching blood: also the bag, which can hold a hundred pounds, is filling as it is dragged from plant to plant . . . the sack heavier and heavier, so that it pulls you back as a beast might rather than a mere dead weight: but it is not only this: cotton plants are low, so that in this heat and burden of the immanent sun and of the heaving sack you are dragging, you are continuously stooped over even if you are a child, and are bent very deep if you are a man or a woman . . . but not even the strongest back was built for that treatment, and there combine at the kidneys, and rill down the thighs and up the spine and athwart the shoulders the ticklish weakness of gruel or water, and an aching that is increased in geometrical progressions, and at length, in the small of the spine, a literal and persistent sensation of yielding, buckling, splintering, and breakage. . . .

. . . There are sometime shifts into gaiety in the picking, or a brief excitement, a race between two of the children, or a snake killed; or two who sit a few moments in their sweat in the shaded clay when they have taken some water, but they say very little to each other, for there is little to say, and are soon back to it, and mainly, in hour upon hour, it is speechless, silent, serious, ceaseless and lonely work along the great silence of the unshaded land, ending each day in a vast blaze of dust on the west, every leaf sharpened in long knives of shadow, the day drawn down
through red to purple, and the leaves losing color, and the wild blind eyes of the cotton staring in twilight, in those odors of work done and of nature lost once more to night whose sweetness is a torture, and in the slow, loaded walking home, whose stiff and gentle motions are those of creatures just awakened. (Pp. 306-11)

The book, both in its parts and as a whole, is organized more like a musical composition than any other formal structure, and Agee continually uses musical terms, references, and images to express both his own progressions and the qualities of the tenants' lives. Opening nearly at random I note "sonata," "syncopations," "orchestration," "chord," and "counterpoint." He speaks of "the hearing and seeing of a complex music in every effect and in causes of every effect and in the effects of which this effect will be part cause, and the more than reasonable suspicion that there is at all times further music involved there, beyond the simple equipment of our senses and their power of reflection and deduction to apprehend" (p. 208). On one occasion he seeks to resolve the essential elements of the Gudger house into a "chord," "the full bodily recognition" of which can "arrest the heart" (p. 166), and then explains if one can examine precisely how such a house is made and let all its relations and substances "be, at once, driven upon your consciousness, one center . . . there is such an annihilating counterpoint as might be if you could within an instant hear and be every part, from end to end, of the most vastly spun of fugues" (p. 166). On another occasion he says he hopes "the book as a whole will have a form and set of tones rather less like those of narrative than like those of music" (p. 220).

Perhaps his most astonishing and revealing use of music is one that closes the Preamble, in which he has tried to explain why the whole endeavor in which he has been engaged seems to him "curious, obscene, terrifying, and unfathomably mysterious" and to persuade the reader to think of the work as something more than one more book. "Above all else," he urges the reader, "in God's name don't think of it as Art"; and he goes on to argue that the "deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake,
Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not been thus castrated” (p. 14). To start on a cure for this “disease,” he suggests a test to see how respectable Beethoven is and “by what idiocy Blake or work even of such intention as mine is ever published and sold.” He admits that the test is “unfair,” “untrue,” “stacks all the cards,” and “is out of line with what the composer intended,” and then with the deliberate sort of irresponsibility that characterizes much of the Preamble, says “all so much the better” (p. 14). The test is this:

Get a radio or a phonograph capable of the most extreme loudness possible, and sit down and listen to a performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony or of Schubert’s C-Major Symphony. But I don’t mean just sit down and listen, I mean this: Turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there, breathing as lightly as possible, and not moving, and neither eating nor smoking nor drinking. Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won’t hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it. As near as you will ever get, you are inside the music; not only inside it, you are it; your body is no longer your shape and substance, it is the shape and substance of the music.

Is what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? or acceptable in polite or any other society? It is beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life as human life is; and nothing can equal the rape it does on all that death; nothing except anything, anything in existence or dream, perceived anywhere remotely toward its true dimension.

Beethoven said a thing as rash and noble as the best of his work. By my memory he said: “He who understands my music can never know unhappiness again.” I believe it. And I would be a liar and a coward and one of your safe world if I should fear to say the same words of my best perception, and of my best intention.

Performance, in which the whole fate and terror rests, is another matter. (Pp. 14–15)

There is some silliness here, but also a profound sincerity beneath the fuss and fanfare. Both reality and the properly furious responses to it, I believe, do sometimes blast upon and surround Agee with such music, and he would wish to reach for it at times in his performance. He is not such a fool,
of course, as to think he can gain that kind of impact by always keeping his own volume turned on loudly, and, as we have already seen, his own music moves through many modulations. On a few occasions, I think, it lapses into that sort of “thin sad music of humanity,” which helps Wordsworth into “the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering.” More often it could be described as the kind of music Agee wants to accompany some of the horrible scenes in the film he planned of Man’s Fate: “a kind of formal music made only of the muted, swarming noise of suffering.” At his best, I believe, and through his total effort in the book, he removes enough of our padding and his own to let us hear something of that squirrel’s heartbeat and of the sound of the grass growing, and something of that roar (a kind of music) on the other side of silence that George Eliot says we could die of if we had a keen enough vision and feeling. Dan McCall puts it marvelously well when he says with reference to Agee’s descriptions of a mule, a cow, and a kitten: “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men insistently enforces a kind of demented lucidity; Agee gets so close to helplessness, that both he and it are naked. ‘Naked’ is not really right, or enough, for the skin has been peeled away; the surface of the world has been rubbed raw. Animals are animals—accurately, patiently, and copiously described—and they are also immortal souls in pain. This is true not only of cats and cows but of trunks, beds, and bureau drawers as well.”

How can it be proper to turn such a “swarming noise of suffering,” such a “roar,” into music, to transpose such things into beauty? What right do we have to listen? By what right do I eagerly assent when he insists that much of what he sees is, in fact, beautiful:

that a house of simple people which stands empty and silent in the vast Southern country morning sunlight, and everything which on this morning in eternal space it by chance contains, all thus left open and defenceless to a reverent and cold-laboring spy, shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful holiness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shall every rightly perceive, far less impart to another; that there can be more beauty and more deep wonder in the standings and spacing of mute fur-
nishings on a bare floor between the squaring bourns of walls than in any music ever made; that this square home, as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven, is, not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence: that this beauty is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time, and is inextricable among these, and as impossible without them as a saint born in paradise. (P. 121)

Is it enough to share his verbal guilt and self-awareness as he himself wrestles with the issue:

To those who own and create it this "beauty" is, however, irrelevant and undiscernible. It is best discernible to those who by economic advantages of training have only a shameful and thief's right to it: and it might be said they have any "rights" whatever only in proportion as they recognize the ugliness and disgrace implicit in their privilege of perception. The usual solution, non-perception, or apologetic perception, or contempt for those who perceive and value it, seems to me at least unwise. In fact it seems to me necessary to insist that the beauty of a house, inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself: but that one is qualified to insist on this only in proportion as one faces the brunt of his own "sin" in so doing and the brunt of the meanings, against human beings, of the abomination itself. (P. 182)

He himself remains troubled about this, for he tells us immediately to consider the above "merely as a question raised: for I am in pain and uncertainty as to the answers, and can write no more of it here" (p. 182); and sometime later he felt impelled to add a footnote stating that "the 'sin,' in my present opinion, is in feeling in the least apologetic for perceiving the beauty of the houses" (p. 182).

Is it enough to share his anguish and accept his exquisitely fashioned burden of guilt when he wonders how he can possibly make clear the arduousness and repetitiveness of Mrs. Gudger's work and the effect of it on her body, mind, heart, and being:

How is this to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is
what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers: but only by consuming all that is in you into the never relaxed determination that this shall be made different and shall be made right, and that of what is "right" some, enough to die for, is clear already, and the vast darkness of the rest has still, and far more passionately and more skeptically than ever before, to be questioned into, defended, and learned toward. There is no way of taking the heart and the intelligence by the hair and of wresting it to its feet, and of making it look this terrific thing in the eyes: which are such gentle eyes: you may meet them, with all the summoning of heart you have, in the photograph in this volume of the young woman with black hair: and they are to be multiplied, not losing the knowledge that each is a single, unrepeatable, holy individual, by the two billion human creatures who are alive upon the planet today; of whom a few hundred thousands are drawn into complications of specialized anguish, but of whom the huge swarm and majority are made and acted upon as she is: and of all these individuals, contemplate, try to encompass, the one annihilating chord. (Pp. 290-91)

Even if I can thrust enough against the music here to let that "deepest and most iron anguish and guilt" take painful and personal form, I cannot take on the never relaxed determination to make it all different and right. Especially because, as Agee is fully aware elsewhere, neither he nor I know any way of making it right.

Obviously it is not "enough"; and yet it seems something more than self-indulgence to write, read, and pass on such passages—and even this one from the Preamble:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be 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. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust the majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.

As it is, though, I'll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I'm not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly bear to live. (Pp. 12-13)
He exaggerates, of course. No matter how well he wrote or how much he was capable of, we are padded well enough to go near it and still bear to live, just as most lovers manage to live without the lovers they have sworn they could not live without; just as Agee himself did, in fact, live with the flesh-and-blood sufferers and certainly came back to tell the tale. Yet I like the passage and resist the part of me that is smirking at how easily I accept the exaggeration, how eagerly I join him in taking on the burden of guilt in place of some other burden. I resist even the less smirking knowledge that it is usually easier to carry a burden than to give up a part of oneself. Resist it in part with the knowledge that giving up parts of oneself, even whole limbs, does not necessarily heal another’s mutilation.

In some respects it seems of very great significance that Agee was writing about the lives of actual rather than fictional people, and he himself places great weight on this. “In a novel,” he says in the Preface, “a house or person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer,” whereas here “his true meaning is much huger. It is that he exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist. His great weight, mystery, and dignity are in this fact” (p. 11). And he goes on throughout the book trying to make us know that the most important thing about his characters is that they exist, that George Gudger “is a human being, a man, not like any other human being, so much as he is like himself . . . that he is exactly, down to the last instant, who, what, where, when, and why he is . . . living right now, in flesh and blood and breathing, in an actual part of a world in which also, quite as irrelevant to imagination, you and I are living” (p. 210).

I understand that passionate desire to make himself and his reader apprehend the flesh-and-blood reality of the suffering, and I can remember the way I once desperately pounded that note in an effort somehow to convey the enormity of what I was witnessing as a soldier in World War II. I called the poem “More Terrible Than All the Words” and over and over again felt compelled to repeat “the reality, not the words, remem-
ber.” Now I think the distinction matters less. It is true that when real people are observed, to say nothing of photographed, the voyeurism takes on further ugliness, an ugliness qualified but not removed, by the reverence and sense of guilt with which he performs the act and by his frequent acknowledgments that his invasion was “spiritual burglary.”¹⁴ In fact, some of the people in the book are reported to have felt resentment at having been so invaded and exposed.¹⁵ And it always matters terribly, of course, to the sufferers whether they are real or not, for fictional characters do not experience their own pain. But for the reader, whose encounter is only with the words, I do not see why it matters very much whether his compassion (or voyeurism) is directed toward a Scobie or a George Gudger, or a Jesus Christ, for that matter. Unless he knows some way to alleviate the real sufferer’s pain, which is most unlikely. This is not to negate the weight of reality but rather to attest to the power of art to give to the fictional much the same “weight, mystery, and dignity” that comes from being real and to the promiscuity of our compassion, which is not as far from Scobie’s as we sometimes think. I am not sure one’s guilt should be greater in the face of the real suffering since it is only a single instance pulled from oceans of torment and these same oceans lie beneath the fictional instances as well.

I know I have for too long kept skittering away from the question of action—those possibilities that range all the way from saintliness to the writing of checks—and I must stay put with it for at least a few moments, even though I do not think I have anything to say directly that is either correct or useful. Virginia Woolf complains about novels that leave one feeling one ought “to join a society, or more desperately, to write a check.”¹⁶ I am a little upset by the ease with which she dismisses those possible functions and consequences of art, as I am by any who would define art’s proper purposes, but surely she is right that there is something limited about portraits of the human condition that imply a cure by check. After reading Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, one probably feels more directly involved or implicated than Woolf would
approve, but one does not feel like writing a check and would not know where to send it if one did, any more than one does after reading the most astonishing of all transformations of suffering into beauty—Dante’s “Inferno.” In fact, the poverty Agee depicts is so profound and so deeply spiritual as well as material as to make me ashamed of the checks I do send to agencies like the Highlander School and Southern Poverty Law Center that are sufficiently hopeful or foolish to attempt actions. So deep is the deprivation that it is hard to imagine what a saint could do. At the same time, the book forbids absolutely the luxuries either of complacency or despair.

With respect to the possible effectiveness of social or political action, Agee is usually tormentingly ambiguous. Although he sometimes speaks of himself as a Communist and sometimes implies that only revolution could significantly improve the tenant farmer’s lot, he deeply distrusts both the Communist party and the Soviet Union and has this to say of revolutionaries: “Though there are revolutionists whom I totally respect, and before the mere thought of whom I hold myself in contempt, I go blind to think what crimes others would commit upon [the tenant farmers], and instill into them; and by every appearance and probability these latter, who for all their devotion and courage seem to me among the most dangerous and hideous persons at large, are greatly in the majority, and it is they who own and will always betray all revolutions” (p. 285). Nor is he any more hopeful about the New Deal reforms that were being attempted at the time. In general, whenever he gets close to the question of whether anything helpful can be done and if so what, he begins to vacillate nervously and often runs in several directions at once. But I am hardly the one to blame him for that. Nor do I, in fact, either for him or myself, know what other behaviors are appropriate. In the face of certain kinds of concern, no action can ever be commensurate.

I will go on sending checks, however, although I doubt they are of any more use than my guilt. I go on sending them because of what it would feel like not to send them—to acquiesce to that distance. And because they do reduce my
sense of guilt a little, which may not be such a bad thing. For if the absence of guilt turns humans not into innocent beasts but monsters, too much can turn into profitless self-laceration and rage; even murderous rage as it does in this passage where Agee’s answer to the murder he detests seems to be only a murderousness of his own.

... I believe that every human being is potentially capable, within his “limits,” of fully “realizing” his potentialities; that this, his being cheated and choked of it, is infinitely the ghastliest, commonest, and most inclusive of all the crimes of which the human world can accuse itself; and that the discovery and use of “consciousness,” which has always been and is our deadliest enemy and deceiver, is also the source and guide of all hope and cure, and the only one.

I am not at all trying to lay out a thesis, far less to substantiate or solve. I do not consider myself qualified. I know only that murder is being done, against nearly every individual in the planet, and that there are dimensions and correlations of cure which not only are not being used but appear to be scarcely considered or suspected. I know there is cure, even now available, if only it were available, in science and in the fear and joy of God. This is only a brief personal statement of these convictions: and my self-disgust is less in my ignorance, and far less in my “failure” to “defend” or “support” the statement, than in my inability to state it even so far as I see it, and in my inability to blow out the brains with it of you who take what it is talking of lightly, or not seriously enough. (P. 279)

I do not want to go on quoting Agee, for no quotes can convey the ranges of either his seriousness or his rage, or the extent to which his book demonstrates the possibilities of consciousness as deceiver and cure. I want everyone who can to read his book, and however irritated they become at its excesses, to read it to the end. I can imagine a reader deciding then that language is the deadliest enemy of the oppressed—that one bandage, one gift of a mule, yes, even one horrid standardized prefabricated house or one revolutionary gesture, however futile or self-inflating, would be more decent and valuable than all of Agee’s exertions, than all the humming of all the poets. I can imagine a reader thinking this and then remembering it was Agee’s words that led him to feel so, and not knowing how to get beyond that paradox. I
can imagine a reader who decides from it to become a writer or a teacher of literature. I can even imagine a reader who somehow is left with all those responses whirling around in his mind, doing little more than jostling one another. As is true for me until I remember to read again a passage like this one in which he tells of the photographing of the Ricketts family, and know without question that, whatever its harmfulness, the translation of suffering and sympathy into music can sometimes be a sufficient way to bear witness.

You [Mrs. Ricketts] realized what the poor foolishness of your husband had let you all in for, shouting to you all to come out . . . all to stand there on the porch as you were in the average sorrow of your working dirt and get your pictures made; and to you it was as if you and your children and your husband and these others were stood there naked in front of the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitiableness to be pried into and laughed at; and your eyes were wild with fury and shame and fear, and the tendons of your little neck were tight, the whole time, and one hand continually twitched and tore in the rotted folds of your skirt like the hand of a little girl who must recite before adults, and there was not a thing you could do, nothing, not a word of remonstrance you could make, my dear, my love, my little crazy, terrified child; for your husband was running this show, and a wife does as she is told and keeps quiet about it: and so there you stood, in a one-piece dress made of sheeting, that spread straight from the hole where the head stood through to the knee without belting, so that you knew through these alien, town-dressed eyes that you stood as if out of a tent too short to cover your nakedness: and the others coming up: Ivy, blandly, whom nothing could embarrass, carrying her baby, her four year old child in a dress made of pillowsack that came an inch below his navel; he was carrying a doll; Pearl, with her elegant skin, her red-brown sexy eyes; Miss Molly; and Walker setting up . . . the camera; stooping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel: and at least you could do, and you did it, you washed the faces of your children swiftly and violently with rainwater, so that their faces were suddenly luminous stuck out of the holes of their clothes, the slightly dampened hair swept clean of the clear and blessed foreheads of these flowers; and your two daughters, standing there in the crowding porch, yielding and leaning their heads profound against the pulling and the entanglements, each let down their long black hair in haste and combed and rearayed it (but Walker made a picture of this; you didn’t know; you thought he was still testing around; there you all are, the
mother as before a firing squad, the children standing like columns of an exquisite temple, their eyes straying, and behind, both girls, bent deep in the dark shadow somehow as if listening. . . .): and we, the men meanwhile, Woods and George and I (Fred was in the lineup, talking over and over about being in the funny papers and about breaking the camera with his face, and laughing and laughing and laughing), we were sitting at the roots of a tree talking slowly and eating one peach after another and watching, while I was spreading so much quiet and casualness as I could; but all this while it was you I was particularly watching, Mrs. Ricketts: you can have no idea with what care for you, what need to let you know, oh, not to fear us, not to fear, not to hate us, that we are your friends, that however it must seem it is all right, it is truly and all the way all right: so, continually, I was watching for your eyes, and whenever they turned upon me, trying through my own and through a friendly and tender smiling (which sickens me to disgust to think of) to store into your eyes some knowledge of this, some warmth, some reassurance, that might at least a little relax you . . . but your eyes upon me, time after time, held nothing but the same terror, the same feeling at the very most, of “if you are our friend, lift this weight and piercing from us, from my children” (for it was of them and of your husband that you had this care, at all times; I don’t believe one could ever persuade you such a thing can exist as a thought for yourself); and at length, and just once, a change, a softening of expression; your eyes softened, lost all their immediate dread, but without smiling; but in a heartbroken and infinite yet timid reproachfulness, as when, say, you might have petted a little animal in a trap, beyond its torn toothed fierceness, beyond its fear, to quiet, in which it knows, of your blandishments: you could spring free the jaws of this iron from my wrist; what is this hand, what are these kind eyes; what is this gentling hand on the fur of my forehead: so that I let my face loose of any control and it showed you just what and all I felt for you and of myself: it must have been an ugly and puzzling grimace, God knows no use or comfort to you; and you looked a moment and withdrew your eyes, and gazed patiently into the ground, in nothing but sorrow, your little hand now loosened in your dress. (Pp. 331-33)

I suppose there may be some who can dismiss such a passage with a phrase like “elevated pathos,” and others who will feel Agee is still too absorbed in the deliciousness of writing exquisitely about pain. And I have known moods of distance and coldness that can resist its music. But mostly it seems to me a magnificent illustration of what Eudora Welty must mean by parting that curtain, that “veil of indifference
to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight," and I would like to begin my final chapter by remaining with it for awhile.