X ♦ With Respect to Voyeurism

If I were Mrs. Ricketts (I cannot say “in her shoes,” for she wears no shoes in her picture and Agee says he never saw her in shoes—the other women normally wear their husbands’ cast-off work shoes), I think I might be glad to have been written of so, to have been recognized once in my life as a creature whose feelings were worth careful acknowledgment, even though it meant a further awful exposure. I say “think” and “might” in part because Mrs. Ricketts could not read the passage. She “can neither read nor write. She went to school one day in her life and her mother got sick and she never went back” (p. 276). Even if she knew how to read at the best level attained by any of the tenant farmers, most of the passage would be beyond her understanding. I also say “think” and “might” because Agee has made so uncompromisingly clear that I am not, and never could be, her and that even my effort to put myself in her shoelessness is a mark of my own privilege and infinite distance from her. Still, if she could have read and understood, I think she might have been glad—even though some of the ways I am about to look at the passage involve luxuries far beyond her means.

Whatever the self-concern in the passage, Mrs. Ricketts has the same kind, and even degree, of reality for Agee that he has for himself. Perhaps he patronizes her a little, perhaps should have resisted his “my dear, my love, my little crazy terrified child.” But he has not been guilty of that nearly universal blindness that someone once measured as the difference in the way it feels to pick one’s own nose and the way it feels to watch another do so. A nicer and fuller definition is this one by Josiah Royce: “What, then, is thy neighbor? Thou hast regarded his thought, his feeling as somehow different from thine. Thou hast said, ‘a pain in him is not like a pain in me, but something far easier to bear.’ He seems to thee a little less living than thou; his life is dim, it is cold, it is a pale fire beside
thy own burning desires. . . . So, dimly and by instinct hast thou lived with thy neighbor, and has known him not, being blind. Thou hast made [of him] a thing, no self at all." Agee makes perfectly clear that Mrs. Ricketts's pain hurts her just as much, more perhaps, than his hurts him.

At the same time, he recognizes and makes us know that she is a distinct, separate person from himself, with her own space, gravity, and laws of being. His sympathy is directed not only toward her circumstances but toward what one writer on sympathy has called "the center of self-awareness and self-respect in the other's personality." Perhaps his sympathy is enough to allow the word "love," which the same writer has said "calls explicitly for an understanding entry into the individuality of another person distinct in character from the entering self, by him accepted as such, and coupled, indeed, with a warm and whole-hearted endorsement of 'his' reality as an individual, and 'his' being what he is." That the "other" is both equivalent to oneself in degree of reality and yet a distinct and different self may seem too obvious to belabor and buttress with such weighty pronouncements, but most preaching and much loving, including Scobie's and even Mrs. Ramsay's, has leaned one way or the other. (Perhaps Shylock would have done better to plead his differences as well as his identity in breath and bleeding.) Agee seems most rare to me in the extent to which he seeks both to treat (and feel about) others as he would wish to be treated (and felt about) himself and to cherish them for what they are in and of themselves. It is, in part, this combination of recognitions that makes Agee so cautious about action and social reform, so tears him between a wish somehow to repair the damages done to others and to celebrate them as they are in all their crippled glory, between feeling that much of what he has witnessed is an "abomination" that we should have a never-relaxed determination to make different and right, and believing in those lines of Blake with which he ends the penultimate section of his book: "Everything that is is holy" (p. 418).

Although it means moving even further from anything
Mrs. Ricketts has the means to understand, I want to turn to a rather fancy way of talking more about the quality of Agee's compassion for her, and the other tenant farmers as well, and about his sense of responsibility in relation to them.

In some respects I can understand him best as the “attentive man” described by Martin Buber, whose description of our normally padded condition has such echoes of George Eliot’s “roar,” Auden’s hardness of hearing, and Agee’s “annihilating chord” that he must have meant it to be used here. Each of us, he writes,

is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us, the soundless thunderings seem to threaten us with annihilation, and from generation to generation we perfect the defence apparatus. All our knowledge assures us, “Be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but nothing is directed at you, you are not meant; it is just the world. . . . Nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is quiet.”

Each of us is encased in an armour which we soon, out of familiarity, no longer notice. There are only moments which penetrate it and stir the soul to sensibility. And when such a moment has imposed itself on us and we then take notice and ask ourselves, “Has anything particular taken place? Was it not the kind I meet everyday?” Then we may reply to ourselves, “Nothing particular, indeed, it is like this every day, only we are not there every day.”

The signs of the address are not something extraordinary, something that steps out of the order of things, they are just what goes on time and time again, just what goes on in any case, nothing is added by the address. The waves of the aether roar on always, but for most of the time we have turned off our receivers.

Whatever else is true of him, Agee is one of those who has presented himself and feels something is required of him. What that requirement is, however, is most difficult to know, for when something is “really said” to someone in Buber’s terms, the sayer is not an “object” merely to be denoted or described. The listener has “got to do with him. Perhaps I have to accomplish something about him; but perhaps I have only to learn something, and it is only a matter of my ‘accepting.’ It may be that I have to answer at once, to this very man
before me; it may be that the saying has a long and manifold transmission before it, and that I am to answer some other person at some other time and place, in who knows what kind of speech, and that it is now only a matter of taking the answering upon myself” (p. 10).  Even to know what has been said is terribly difficult to define or reveal, “for it has never been said before nor is it composed of sounds that have ever been said . . . it is not a what at all, it is said into my very life; it is no experience that can be remembered independently of the situation [“the reality not the words, remember!”], it remains the address of that moment and cannot be isolated, it remains the question of a questioner and will have its answer.” It “remains the question” because the “speech” never gives “information or appeasement.” The “emergency structures of analogy and typology are indispensable for the work of the human spirit, but to step on them when the question of the questioner steps up to you, to me, would be running away. Lived life is tested and fulfilled in the stream alone” (p. 12). Or again, “the attentive man would no longer, as his custom is, ‘master’ the situation the very moment after it stepped up to him: it would be laid upon him to go up and into it. Moreover, nothing that he believed he possessed as always available would help him, no knowledge and no technique, no system and no programme; for now he would have to do with what cannot be classified, with concretion itself” (p. 16).

I think now of Agee’s first effort within the photographing scene to “answer” with that deliberate “friendly and tender smiling” (which sickens him to disgust to think of) that he hopes will give Mrs. Ricketts some little reassurance but does nothing at all to reduce her terror, and of his second letting of his face loose of any control so that it showed her “just what and all I felt for you and of myself,” what “must have been an ugly and puzzling grimace,” but one that does relax her fear a little and her twitching hand. I think also of his response to her renewed pain when she sees a neighboring family, the Gudgers, arrive for their pictures to be taken with their children all washed and in their best clothes, a pain that remains,
so that as Evans and Agee are leaving at the end of that first day, they see "the unforgiving face, the eyes, of Mrs. Ricketts at her door: which has since stayed as a torn wound and sickness at the center of my chest, and perhaps more than any other thing has insured what I do not yet know: that we shall have to return, even in the face of causing further pain, until that mutual wounding shall have been won, and healed, until she shall fear us no further, yet not in forgetfulness but through love" (p. 337). I think, finally, of the kind of effort to "answer"—to them, to himself, to us—that the whole book is, an effort so thoroughly informed and unformed by his knowledge of the inadequacy of his "answer" that it becomes very much what Buber suggests it may when we venture a serious response—a stammer. "We are likely to stammer," he says, "—the soul is but rarely able to attain to surer articulation—but it is an honest stammering, as when sense and throat are united about what is to be said, but the throat is too horrified at it to utter purely the already composed sense. The words of our response are spoken in the speech untranslatable like the address, of doing and letting—whereby the doing may behave like the letting and the letting like a doing" (p. 17).

Perhaps this makes more understandable the structural stuttering of a book like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, the syntactical strainings of a writer like James Baldwin, and the literal stammer of a Stevie Verloc, whose simple mind believes that even the suffering of horses requires an answer, even the suffering of cabdrivers and charwomen who seek to ease their pain with liquor. Perhaps it would be better if Auden's humming turned sometimes into more of a stammer.

And perhaps the difficulty I am having now in knowing how to proceed is a kind of stammer induced by the seriousness of both Agee's and Buber's address. For nothing I am able to think of seems adequate to the question posed by that picture-taking and by the writing about it and reading about it, and by my asking others to do so: by Agee's exquisite tenderness and terrible ruthlessness; by his very real pain and sense of guilt and his obvious pleasure in being able to write of it so deliciously; by the sincerity of his wish to heal his and
Mrs. Ricketts's mutual wounding through “ultimate trust, through love,” and my knowledge that the gap between those two people can never be so bridged for more than a moment, if at all; by my feeling that in reading such a passage I am performing something ugly and evasive and self-indulgent and am doing one of the best and least harmful things I know how to do.

I had planned to use (exploit) the passage to say something first about the particular quality of Agee’s tenderness and to wonder whether it did not bear some relation to the “melting moods” of saints described by William James and then about the balance of pity and self-pity in the passage and the book in general and to show off some of the thoughts I have had about the relations between the two in other works, most notably Bellow’s *Seize the Day* and Tolstoi’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych.” I had planned to ruminate (hmm?) a bit about the effect on readers of whether and how much authors seemed to trust and care for them and to wonder about the effects of the distances and even hostilities toward the reader of some modern authors, Beckett, for example. And I had planned to move, very cleverly, from the question of how we could know whether Agee had correctly reported Mrs. Ricketts’s state of mind to ruminate about the extent to which we can ever know others without sympathy or their self-disclosure and how much it really matters whether in the role of voyeurs we know precisely what they are thinking and feeling, so long as we are imagining with care.

Now the only response that seems decent is to withhold such verbal consolations, to refuse to turn so leisurely away from Mrs. Ricketts, that lady who was forced to have her picture taken, in a dress made of sheeting, before she could properly clean her children, that lady with her eyes “wild with fury and shame and fear,” the tendons of her little neck “tight, the whole time,” and one hand continually twitching and tearing “in the rotted folds of [her] skirt like the hand of a little girl who must recite before adults” (p. 331). As I look at her, I am sharply aware that my looking, however much my tenderness for her or severity toward myself, does not help her
one bit. Neither her nor any of her descendants or equals in suffering anywhere in the world. While looking at her, it is nearly impossible to take the usual comfort of feeling that reading about suffering, or writing about it, is somehow valuable. It is hard to take much beyond the comfort of believing that the looking is not doing her any harm. That, and knowing that though it is a kind of voyeurism, it is neither experimental nor cold-blooded. Neither on Agee’s part, nor my own. I do not think we have been guilty of the kind of violations of the “sanctity of a human heart” Hawthorne so powerfully warns of in *The Scarlet Letter* and elsewhere or even of that prizing open like an oyster that the voyeur of Woolf’s “The Lady in The Looking-Glass” rejects as something “impious and absurd.” Perhaps in a world where manipulation and soul shucking have become so commonplace that Ethan Brand is nearly everybody’s analyst and social engineer, such voyeurism is not so bad a thing. Not as bad as some of the possessings and engulfings I wrote of earlier. This is easier to say as I am writing down my thoughts than while I am confronting her portrait and letting myself be present at her and Agee’s address. And yet even then, when her need demands that I offer something, there is a space around her and a sanctity within that makes absolutely clear the terrible presumption of venturing closer, even if I thought I knew how to help, which I do not. With her face in front of me, I remain stuck in the distance of my voyeurism and guilt. The only way of moving is to force myself to turn away from her, at least for a few moments.

Having done so, I can afford to ask some questions that can never be asked in her presence. Is there an armor, perhaps, and a deafness that blocks off an apprehension of joy. If Vittorio Mussolini is so deaf and padded that he can see in the blood and guts of exploding men and horses the unfolding of a rose, is there not a black veil or selective receiver that can prevent one from regarding a rose, even a whole garden, without tuning into the canker or the worm. When the roar becomes too loud, should there not be a little man or woman with a flower to remind one that there are happy people, that
however unhappy one may be, life will sooner or later withdraw its claws, that the earth is a farm and a garden and even a playground as well as a hospital and a cemetery.

I would like to have such a person behind my door. Even if I cannot believe in a resurrection, for either Jesus or Icarus, and cannot settle for the willed optimism of a Whitman or Shelley which pretends that springtime is ultimately less far behind than winter; even if I refuse to blot out the images of those—the Ethiopian horsemen, Leda, Mrs. Ricketts, Hiroshimans—who have been fucked from the sky, or those savage images at the ends of Gravity's Rainbow and Dr. Strange-love where the nearly ultimate bomb is falling as we all sing sentimental songs, I can remember that sunshine and rain also come from above. I can remember that the same George Eliot who knows so much about the roar could write this poem—which asks the awful question but refuses to be transfixed by it:

You love the roses—so do I. I wish  
The sky would rain down roses, as they rain  
From off the shaken bush. Why will it not?  
Then all the valley would be pink and white  
And soft to tread on. They would fall as light  
As feathers, smelling sweet: and it would be  
Like sleeping and yet waking, all at once.14

At the risk of appearing foolish to those who never heard Al Jolson sing this song or whose sentimentalities do not embrace popular lyrics, I must also remember how it feels to listen to him celebrating these blessings of the sky:

Tho’ April showers may come your way  
They bring the flowers that bloom in May  
So when it’s raining have no regrets, regrets;  
Because it isn’t raining rain you know,  
It’s raining violets.  
And when you see clouds upon a hill  
Then soon you’ll see crowds of daffodils,  
So keep on looking for the blue-bird  
And list’ning for his song
Whenever April showers come along.
Whenever April showers come along.\textsuperscript{15}

Although I am unable to gain or give solace through visions like those of Dante and T. S. Eliot that absorb all pain into one unearthly rose,\textsuperscript{16} I can remember Mrs. Dalloway's view that we can at least "decorate the dungeon with flowers"\textsuperscript{17} and think of the great bunch of roses Richard brings her on their anniversary, buying them because he is feeling it a miracle that he is married to her and is going home in the middle of the day to tell her that he loves her: "setting off with his great bunch held against his body . . . to say straight out in so many words (whatever she might think of him), holding out his flowers, 'I love you.' Why not? Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half-forgotten; it was a miracle" (p. 174). No more than ever before does he manage to say the words although he believes she understands and sits holding her hand thinking "happiness is this" (p. 180). And she does understand, so well that when he is about to leave for some committee on Armenians or perhaps Albanians and stands for a moment as if he were about to say something, she wonders "What? Why? There were the roses." It is then that she has those thoughts I quoted earlier and want to quote again about the necessary distances between people: "And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching him open the door; for one would not part with it oneself, or take it against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect—something, after all, priceless" (p. 181). Before he leaves, he brings her a pillow and quilt and settles her on the sofa, "looking at his roses." And she thinks how she "cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again)—no she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses
(didn’t that help the Armenians?)—the only flowers she could bear to see cut” (p. 182). A bit later she thinks that the reason she likes giving parties so much is that what “she liked was simply life” (p. 183). And then:

But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgements, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? Oh, it was very queer. Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say in Mayfair. And she felt continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom?

An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance; could not think, write, even play the piano. She muddled Armenians and Turks; loved success; hated discomfort; must be liked; talked oceans of nonsense: and to this day, ask her what the Equator was, and she did not know.

All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough. After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant . . . (Pp. 184–85; author’s ellipsis)

I can remember, along with the slaughterhouses and Agee’s flayed steer who comes back to tell his tale, this poem of Robert Frost in which he ascends a little further than he did as a swinger of birches where he climbed “toward heaven” only till the tree could bear no more and set him down again, unlike Icarus, on earth.

Two LOOK AT TWO

Love and forgetting might have carried them
A little further up the mountain side
With night so near, but not much farther up.
They must have halted soon in any case
With thoughts of the path back, how rough it was
With rock and washout, and unsafe in darkness;
When they were halted by a tumbled wall
With barbed-wire binding. They stood facing this, 
spending what onward impulse they still had
in one last look the way they must not go,
on up the failing path, where, if a stone
or earthslide moved at night, it moved itself;
no footstep moved it. "This is all," they sighed,
"Good-night to woods." But not so; there was more.
a doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
across the wall as near the wall as they.
she saw them in their field, they her in hers.
the difficulty of seeing what stood still,
like some up-ended bowlder split in two,
was in her clouded eyes: they saw no fear there.
she seemed to think that two thus they were safe.
then, as if they were something that, though strange,
she could not trouble her mind with too long,
she sighed and passed unscared along the wall.
"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"
but no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
a buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
across the wall, as near the wall as they.
this was an antlered buck of lusty nostril.
not the same doe come back into her place.
he viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
as if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
i doubt if you're as living as you look."
thus till he had them almost feeling dared
to stretch a proferring hand—and a spell-breaking.
then he too passed unscared along the wall.
two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
"This must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
a great wave from it going over them,
as if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
had made them certain earth returned their love.¹⁸

I notice that the wave of love is of the earth and not the sky
and only an "as if." And I am quite sure that had the proffering hand actually been stretched, the spell would in fact have been broken. There is, however, in such a mutual voyeurism about as much as I can imagine wishing for.

I must place one more poem on the side of cheerfulness
even though few others may find it so, and even though, like
Virginia Woolf, its author took away her own life. The poem is the final one in Anne Sexton's volume *The Awful Rowing toward God*. The volume begins with a poem simply called "Rowing," in which the narrator has been rowing and rowing toward God, who "was there like an island I had not rowed to," and most of the poems describe how torturous a journey she found it. I do not think she would mind if I think of her as rowing out past Mr. Ramsay and his children, who are battling at once to preserve and cross the spaces between one another; out past the lighthouse keepers to whom they are bringing supplies, the supplies Mrs. Ramsay had always sent them while she was alive because she asked herself and her children "How would you like to" live with such isolation and danger; out past the open lifeboat in which Louise Rolt lay for forty days clutching her stamp album along with that orphaned six-year-old child whose survival and death Scobie finds so hard to reconcile with the love of God; out past Icarus, perhaps, and perhaps even past that "narrow raft" of Bertrand Russell which supports us on "the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour." In the final poem, the rowing ends.

**THE ROWING ENDETHT**

I'm mooring my rowboat at the dock of the island called God. This dock is made in the shape of a fish and there are many boats moored at many different docks. "It's okay," I say to myself, with blisters that broke and healed and broke and healed— saving themselves over and over. And salt sticking to my face and arms like a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca. I empty myself from my wooden boat and onto the flesh of The Island.

"On with it!" He says and thus we squat on the rocks by the sea and play—can it be true— a game of poker,
He calls me.
I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because He holds five aces.
A wild card had been announced
but I had not heard it
being in such a state of awe
when He took out the cards and dealt.
As He plunks down His five aces
and I sit grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
the laughter rolling like a hoop out of His mouth
and into mine,
and such laughter that He doubles right over me
laughing a Rejoice-Chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh, the fishy dock laughs.
The Absurd laughs.

Dearest dealer,
I with my royal straight flush,
love you so for your wild card,
that untamable, eternal, gut-driven ha-ha
and lucky love.

(Pp. 85-86)

I do not know what Icarus and some of the other highfliers
in this book would make of such a horizontal ascension. I
imagine they and others would find the poem too flippant
and find flippant my observation that, for serious poker
players like myself, five aces against a royal flush provides a
far from unserious way of contemplating God’s omnipotence. If the laughter, acceptance, and love at the end are
shaken with more than a touch of hysteria, that seems to me at
least as appropriate a response to such omnipotence as the joy
or fear or trembling that other more apparently sacred souls
have voiced.

I do not suppose that such rememberings as these will glad-
den the hearts of any but those for whom a little gladdening
goes a long way. And yet I cannot quite come to rest even
with them. Mrs. Ricketts and her descendents are still
there—and here. And so are the truths in these two rather
old-fashioned sounding paragraphs. Both are taken from an
essay called "Is Life Worth Living," by William James, that sad and hopeful man I quoted earlier when he celebrated as one sea in which we can swim all those "unifying states of mind, in which the sand and grit of selfhood tend to disappear and tenderness to rule." The first paragraph is in his own voice.

When you and I, for instance, realize how many innocent beasts have had to suffer in cattle-cars and slaughter-pens and lay down their lives so that we might grow up, all fattened and clad, to sit together here in comfort and carry on this discourse, it does, indeed, put our relation to the universe in a more solemn light. "Does not," as a young Amherst philosopher (Xenos Clark, now dead) once wrote, "the acceptance of a happy life upon such terms involve a point of honor? Are we not bound to take some suffering upon ourselves, to do some self-denying service with our lives, in return for all those lives upon which ours are built. To hear this question is to answer it in but one possible way, if one have a normally constituted heart."

In this paragraph he is quoting John Ruskin. It helps explain, perhaps, why that gentleman had to rely so particularly much on art to make the world habitable.

"If suddenly in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightness of heart of a London dinner-party [yes, even one of Mrs. Dalloway's], the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap the nearest human beings who were famishing and in misery were borne into the midst of the company feasting and fancy free; if, pale from death, horrible in destitution, broken by despair, body by body, they were laid upon the soft carpet, one beside the chair of every guest,—would only the crumbs of the dainties be passed to them; would only a passing glance, a passing thought be vouchsafed to them? Yet the actual facts, the real relation of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by the intervention of the house-wall between the table and the sick-bed,—by the few feet of ground (how few!) which are, indeed, all that separate the merriment from the misery." Once again the "address" of the sufferers makes me acutely aware that my attention and sympathy are of no help to them. No help to Mrs. Ricketts or to those for whom Ruskin has just removed the wall, or to any of those suffering people I
have invited to the gathering within the pages of this book. Is there nothing then to justify or excuse such attentiveness apart from the fact that it does not hurt them, and the bare possibility I am sometimes able to believe in, that the mere exercise of compassion is a good in and of itself. I think there is, and that it is of great weight even though it is still a negative of sorts. It is the injury done to them, and to ourselves, when we are too little attentive "to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight." One cannot say that all suffering is caused by the hardhearted or those who sit too comfortably within their armor or look down from too great a distance, but such complacencies do much to compel the roar and to define the shape of the cross. I have been insisting that Auden and his old masters are not quite right about the extent of our indifference. Many more of us are respectful voyeurs than they think, and that distance is not like the distance on the look of death.